

Season Three
Episode Fifteen: All The King's Men
By Tree

931 BC
Ancient Military Outpost of Tadmo

Cloistered in the flickering light from the nearby hearth, the group gathered around a small table in the dimly lit room. Beyond the door, a howling wind attacked the small desert outpost, precursor to the approaching storm that seemed to be born of something more than just the torrid Middle Eastern summer. Yet even as the wind buffeted the settlement, driving sand like millions of tiny daggers at every exposed piece of flesh of those foolish enough to be caught out in the tempest's fury, the men inside the little room still harbored a sense of trepidation despite the apparent safety of their accommodations.

Their voices held low for fear of detection, the group conversed nervously. With scores of battle-hardened years between them, recent events in the kingdom had turned their once-secure world on its end. Trusting few others outside their small fellowship, their clandestine meeting on this dark night was nothing more than one final mission in service to their liege.

"What shall we do now? The king is dead, the kingdom in turmoil. How can we possibly protect so vast a territory from being overrun by any of our enemies?" one of the men posed.

"We must stand firmly behind our new king. We are honor-bound to do nothing less."

"The prince is a weakling, a mere shadow of his father. In his hands the kingdom will fall. We can be assured of that."

"We are soldiers, it is not our place to decide the fitness of our ruler, merely to protect him and serve the good of the realm," another refuted.

"Can we do the one without the other? Perhaps the good of the kingdom does not include the protection of the king?"

"Treasonous words, we must be cautious."

"The son is not the father. We were entrusted with certain duties, certain responsibilities that did not end when the King drew his last breath."

Nadib listened to the men around him, but remained contemplative and quiet as he observed the worry scouring the faces of those around him. These were good men, battle-tested and true, their loyalty beyond question, yet the older soldier knew that recent events were weighing heavily on them. They spoke now not out of fear of anything, man nor beast, but of the unknown that threatened to swallow up the entire kingdom on the heels of the monarch's death.

"My men, my friends, calm yourselves," Nadib spoke gently, rising from his seat in the corner and stepping out of the shadows towards the table where the men clustered.

He ran his hand along the edge of the rough-hewn wood, his fingertips mere inches from the lengthy object that lay sprawled across the surface.

"We cannot panic, we must plan carefully and act wisely," he informed them. "Truly, our liege is gone, the realm is in turmoil, but we have a much larger problem at hand."

"You refer to the objects?" Kamir, his second in command asked, his eyes glancing nervously down at the two items on the table before them.

Nadib nodded solemnly. "Our king was a great and wise man, but I'm afraid that he held many dark *secrets* as well; secrets that we are now charged with protecting from those who would use them for evil."

The bearded man reached for the small ring lying diminutively on the table. Dwarfed by the larger piece, its worth was no less significant to the gathered men and they hushed in unison as their leader lifted it into the light.

"The Seal will be easier to manage. We must sequester it so that it doesn't fall into hands that would use it for ill," Nadib began. "Kamir and Maloch, I charge you with taking it to the far western edge of the realm. Protect it, let no one know what it is you possess and do not return unless you receive word from me personally."

With that, he handed the golden ring to his most trusted friend, feeling the strange tingling warmth ebb from his fingertips as he placed it into the other man's palm. The comrades exchanged a silent glance before the two soldiers reluctantly followed the order and exited into the gusting wind and darkness of the Tadmor night.

Nadib watched them go, shuddering internally as the door slammed shut with a resounding thud. He turned back to the table, avoiding the still-worried looks of his remaining men. Sucking in a deep breath, he regarded the object left behind.

Reaching out, he touched it this time, his hands caressing the golden length as though it were the skin of a slender beautiful woman. His digits carefully avoided the edge, knowing all too well that beneath the magnificence there lay a deadly hunger.

"This..." he continued. "...presents a much more difficult problem. "It is too large, too well known to conceal."

"You should take it. You alone are capable of handling it," Hamid insisted. One of the younger of the group, he had never seen the thing in action, but like so many of the others, he was all too familiar with the stories of both the object and his former king's "dark dabbling."

Nadib shook his head slowly, still regarding the gleaming item. "I cannot. It is a burden that no single man can bear. There are forces, both good and evil, that would seek it for their own evil purposes. Asmodeus himself, would give nothing more than to see it destroyed so his kind could freely wreak havoc throughout the land."

The mention of the name stirred the men in the room. Even the flames in the hearth seemed to dance wildly at the demon's name.

"We should destroy it or give it to Rehoboam to wield," one of the assembled suggested. "Surely the son has the power to deal with it as his father did?"

"No, he is weak and knows nothing of his father's dark arts," Nadib replied.

"Let's send it away, like the Seal, bury it at the farthest reaches of the world," another offered.

"Again, not a secure option. Asmodeus surely holds the power to locate it. We must be absolutely certain that it is forever beyond his reach."

"We must destroy it..." one of the men demanded.

"Someone must wield it..." another insisted.

"There must be someone that can harness the power of the thing..."

"All shall be lost to Asmodeus and his demon horde..."

Nadib listened as his men offered panic-driven suggestions, his mind swirling with possibilities and outcomes, few of which were to his liking. As the din of the men's talk rose within the small room, the longtime commander formulated a plan. It was an option filled with risk and uncertainty, but Nadib fully recognized that he had few choices if he were to preserve the object and still protect the kingdom from the evil that his liege had precariously kept at bay for so many decades.

"My men," he spoke, silencing them with a raised hand. "I have another choice. It requires a great sacrifice of each of us, but if we are to carry out our sworn duty, it is the only choice."

The men listened intently, their eyes shifting warily between their leader and the gleaming focus of their conversation.

"While we cannot destroy it, not entirely, we can certainly render it unusable until perhaps someday a worthy king steps forth to wield its great power. Even our great king knew that inevitably the day might come where the tools of his dark magic might have to be hidden away for a time," Nadib explained.

“What are you proposing then?” Hamid questioned, his brown eyes seeking assurance from the older man.

“We must break it apart and scatter the pieces to the farthest reaches of the kingdom. Each piece separated so that it becomes impossible to tell what it once was while we await the day that it might be restored to its former power and glory.”

“How shall we ever keep track of the individual parts? How will we know when that day arrives?” one of the assembled asked.

“This,” Nadib continued, gesturing toward the object. “was bound to our king until his death. Likewise, we can bind the pieces to ourselves. This is the sacrifice that will be required.”

“Sacrifice?” Hamid asked worriedly.

The old soldier nodded. “Yes, my friend. A great sacrifice. In order to protect it, we must bind ourselves by blood to it. Should the piece under our care ever be lost, we shall forfeit our own lives.”

Nadib paused as he watched the men’s reactions. “Each of you must consider this wisely. This is no small task to be charged. There is no assurance that another king shall come along in our lifetime, capable of harnessing the power contained within this thing. You bind not only yourselves, but possibly your sons and their sons to this task, and this fate.”

Silence filled the tiny space and only the ghostly howling of the wind outside the door broke the quiet as those standing around the table considered what their commander asked of them.

“For God and King?” Hamid spoke finally, his voice hesitant and turning the proclamation into a question.

“For all mankind...” Nadib added reluctantly.

One by one, each of the men gathered uttered their acceptance of the plan. Nadib smiled sadly, never once fearing that his faithful and valiant officers would do anything else.

He hated to ask of them such a great commitment, but ultimately he knew it was the only choice to be made. Reaching down, he lifted the length from the tabletop, watching as it reflected the light from the hearth and created a prism of sparkling colors on the walls about the room.

“It is decided then. We shall do this tonight, melting it down and each taking a portion to protect with the last breath of our bodies,” Nadib announced.

The men voiced their affirmation, each reaching a hand in to touch the gleaming scrollwork on the flat of the metal. If they felt the strange creep of energy and warmth extend from their fingertips and course up to their chests, none reacted, but Nadib knew.

With his hands firmly grasping the hilt, he felt as though every nerve in his body was on fire. Not painful, it was a warning and a reminder of the awesome power contained within the weapon. In a fleeting thought, Nadib worried. Had he done the right thing or merely cursed his men for all eternity?

Inhaling deeply, he drew the blade slowly across the hands splayed out along the edge of the weapon, bright red rising from the wounds and staining the golden sheen. Once each man’s blood was coating the blade, Nadib raised it above his head and spoke the invocation, sealing their fate once and for all.

“We swear this night to protect the Sword of Solomon. Let nothing sway us in this duty and may God protect us until the day that it is brought together once again. “

Atlanta, Georgia Six months ago...

Gerard Daniels pulled into the driveway of his condo and goosed the accelerator one final time just to hear the rev of the engine on his brand new Porsche. Smiling in

satisfaction, he switched off the ignition and flung open the door, stepping out into the muggy southern night.

As he turned to reach for his gym bag, his eyes caught the scratch on the back fender of the precision sports car and he groaned as his fingers touched the offending scar.

“Sonofabitch!” He exclaimed, trying without success to rub away the mark. “So friggin’ stupid...”

It had been raining earlier and in his desire to get to the gym, he chose to park up closer to the entrance instead of his usual safe solitary spot at the end of the lot. People were lazy and generally the further away he stowed the car, the less likelihood that someone would park near it. Now, he was paying the price for his own haste.

“Just friggin’ great,” he bemoaned one final time, gathering his briefcase and gear bag and stalking towards the front door of his home.

Unlocking the door, Daniels immediately entered the code to disarm the security system and then flipped on the switch to illuminate the hallway. He reset the alarm then continued through the apartment, quickly diverting into his study to turn on his computer before heading off to his bedroom and the beckoning shower.

Tossing briefcase and duffel on the floor, Gerard began stripping off the shorts and t-shirt he’d worn home from the gym. While he loved working out, in truth it was the payoff that he most appreciated.

Standing naked in front of the bathroom mirror, he looked at his six foot three reflection with appreciation, taking in the hard line of his abs as well as the finely sculpted definition of his arms and legs. That the women loved his body would have been ample trade, but Daniels loved the endorphin rush more than anything that a good, hard workout gave him.

Peeling off his watch, he casually tossed it onto the countertop then repeated the process with his class ring and the silver chain around his neck. His hand came to rest briefly on the thick golden band at his wrist and for a moment he considered removing that as well, but as he continued to stare at his reflection, the all-too-familiar tingle from the bracelet whispered a warning along the edges of his mind.

Moving away from the mirror, he twisted on the knobs to the shower and stepped in, relishing the scalding heat of the water as it sluiced down his muscular body and instantly forgetting the jewelry at his wrist. After a time, he finished, coming out of the stall and toweling himself dry before redressing in a worn pair of sweatpants, emblazoned with the Harvard logo and letters down the outer leg.

Daniels strode slowly toward the elaborate desk, stopping only to pour a hearty glass of whiskey which he tossed back, savoring the smooth burn as the liquor found its way down his throat. He refilled the glass and continued on to the highbacked leather chair, dropping into it with an elongated sigh.

The lights inside the condo flickered and the young man looked up from the computer, glancing around the room and over his shoulder to the window. Storms weren’t that uncommon this time of the year and it had been raining most of the afternoon. Still, he hadn’t heard any thunder or noticed any lightning, but then Georgia Power often had its issues with keeping the lights on during high demand periods.

Undaunted, the financial whiz turned back to the monitor as his fingers began flying across the keyboard, so focused on the late morning Asian ticker scrolling across his screen, he didn’t notice the shimmer of movement creeping up behind him from the next room.

In a flash, the attacker was on him, a meaty arm encircling Daniels’ throat and choking off his cry of surprise. Despite being perceived as a “desk jockey,” the muscular blond reacted with the skills of a trained fighter, vaulting up from his chair and twisting out from his assailant’s grasp.

He spun around to face the threat, his hands held in front of him, prepared to defend himself against the next assault. Across from him, his foe stood cloaked in darkness. Clothed in black from head to toe, Daniels' attacker looked like a sad extra from a ninja movie.

Daniels laughed, waving the man towards him. "What the hell are you supposed to be?" he asked mockingly.

Behind the mask, steely blue-green eyes stared back at him. Lacking any emotion, the figure barely even blinked, but the tension in the man's body told Daniels that the fight wasn't over yet.

"Look, you got past the alarm, so you must be a decent thief, but I guarantee you aren't getting out of here with anything other than a serious ass-beating," he promised. "So why don't you just cut your losses and go before I get seriously pissed off?"

The dark-clothed form dropped his attacker's stance and for a moment, Daniels thought he had backed the fool down. But as he tentatively relaxed his own body, the man across from him shook his head, laughing low.

"You're not even a challenge..."

The taunt would have seemed laughable to Daniels had the man not seemed so deadly serious. For an instant, every hair stood on end and the muscular Harvard grad couldn't hide the shudder that coursed across his flesh.

"Screw you, buddy. You had your chance," he threw back, lowering his shoulder and rushing forward.

He struck solid muscle, hardly budging the intruder from his stance. Undeterred, Daniels launched his attack, throwing a flurry of rights at the dark-clothed figure before punctuating with a vicious left hook.

The prowler staggered under the blows, falling back a step but remaining on his feet. Daniels moved in again, striking repeatedly as he wove back and forth like a boxer. Some connected solidly drawing blood from a split lip or a cut cheek underneath the knit mask. Others glanced off harmlessly, deflected by raised arms.

Blocking the next couple of punches, the man smiled unfazed, teeth gleaming out from the mouthpiece of the mask, as Daniels retreated breathlessly.

"I expected better from you," the stranger snarked.

"Who the hell are you?" Daniels queried.

He was worried now; having given this man everything he had, he should have been standing over an unconscious burglar waiting for the police to arrive. Instead, he was face to face with a man who was defiantly staring him down, seemingly uninjured despite the repeated blows to his face and body.

"I'm what you could have been. What you were meant to be," the man replied, his green eyes narrowing. "But like the rest, you're soft, untrained. An embarrassment."

Daniels backed slowly toward the hallway. If he could make it to the kitchen, there was a chance he could snag a knife out of the butcher block. Maybe he could even hit the "panic button" on the alarm system near the back door.

Inching backwards, the tall blond raised his hands in submission. Maybe he could just give this guy whatever he wanted and file the claim later.

"Look buddy, there's two hundred dollars in my wallet on the desk and a new Rolex on my dresser. Just take them, okay?" he offered. "Hell, take whatever you want."

The stranger laughed and casually moved over toward the window. Pushing aside the curtain, he peered out into the night, seemingly unconcerned about Daniels.

"Do you think I care about such petty trinkets?" he replied, fingering the sheer fabric. Reaching into the pocket of his black pants, he pulled out an object.

Daniels tried to see what the stranger retrieved but only caught a brief flash of gold as the small article quickly disappeared into the man's hand. He watched in abstract fascination as the intruder considered the object, rolling it between his fingers as though it were a prized possession.

Deciding that it was now or never, Daniels chose that moment to make a break for the kitchen. Sprinting for the hall, he was in the other room within eight steps, his hand closing around the largest knife he could pull from the block in one fluid motion.

Breathing heavily, he retreated until his back was against the cabinets, the blade held in front of him defensively.

The condo was silent with the exception of the pounding of his heart as he waited for the masked man to pursue him into the kitchen. Several seconds passed while Daniels waited, and still, the man did not appear.

Chancing an attack and feeling slightly more brave since he held the knife, Daniels headed toward the rear door leading to the back patio. Like many, the only phone in the house was his cellular, so that left his only other means of contacting the police the automatic signal of the alarm system.

He peeked over his shoulder and down the hallway as he moved toward the door, but the corridor was silent and empty. Reaching up to the control pad, he was about to touch the “panic” button when he was hit from behind and slammed into the glass patio doors.

Before he could react, Daniels was spun around and face to face once again with the darkly cloaked man. He raised the knife, bringing it down towards the intruder in a wide arc that glanced off the man’s arm slicing through material and skin beneath.

Despite the wound, the man didn’t respond, never even uttered a sound. Instead, he grabbed Daniels’ wrist and pushed it backwards, slamming it against the doorjamb repeatedly until the force caused the young man to drop the blade.

“That was a mistake,” the stranger hissed as he punched Daniels brutally in the chest.

The energy behind the blow was so powerful that it drove the air from Daniels’ lungs and dropped him to his knees, dazed and struggling for his breath.

From his vantage point, he could only see the man’s feet, unable to find the strength to even lift his head or defend himself. He was powerless to stop the intruder and he still didn’t even understand what the man wanted.

“Please...” he gasped.

A booted foot lashed out and kicked at his outstretched hand, knocking him to his face on the ceramic tiled floor.

“Pathetic,” the man said in disgust.

Daniels was prepared to beg now even though he held no hope that it would do any good.

“Mister, please. Take my money, take my Porsche. The keys are on the table by the front door. I swear I won’t even call the cops. Hell, I don’t even know what you look like...”

Daniels listened as the stranger paced around the kitchen, afraid to make eye contact, yet wondering what the man was up to. He kept his head down, hoping that just maybe if he appeared subdued, the man might just leave.

“There’s only one thing that I want,” his attacker said finally as he came back to Daniels side and bent down close to the beaten man.

“Anything... anything... just name it...” Daniels replied in desperation.

If he held any hope it waned thin as the stranger leaned over and picked up the discarded knife from a few feet away. The scrape of the blade across the tile sending an ominous chill across the blond man’s body as he caught the glint of the kitchen light reflect of the metal.

“Please...I’m begging you...”

“I know...”

“I’ll give you anything...”

“I know you will...”

“What is it you want?” Daniels screamed frantically.

The man paused as he rose up over the begging man. Lifting the blade high, he poised the tip of the blade directly over Daniels’ head.

"I want it ALL!" the stranger snarled as his arm whipped downward, the blade slicing through Daniels neck and severing his carotid and trachea, showering the area in a wash of blood.

The stranger stepped back, carefully avoiding the pool of red that was quickly spreading across the floor. He dropped the knife next to the body, uncaring about evidence as he examined the gloves on his hands.

He didn't care. Not like the authorities would find him in any database if they did happen to find his prints. He was a ghost for all practical purposes, coming and going as he pleased. Anonymity suited his needs, especially in situations like these.

Sidestepping the blood, he knelt close to the dead man and roughly rolled him over until Daniels was lying face up. In a matter of seconds, the stranger spotted what he wanted.

Gold and gleaming despite the mess he'd created by slashing the man's throat, his prize lay wrapped around the deceased right wrist. A thick gold bracelet, plain and lacking any other jewels or engraving, adorned the extremity.

Reaching out, he touched the gold band tentatively, always expecting some sort of electrical shock that never seemed to come.

Smiling at his foolishness, he quickly became serious again as he roughly tore the band from the arm. Once free, he held it in his hand, appraising it with near-reverence.

"One more piece..." he murmured to himself. "One more piece."

Present Day

Central City, Iowa

"Dude, I still say we need to get the hell out of Dodge," Sam insisted as he peeled back the yellowed curtain to stare at the relentless downpour that hadn't let up for the past five days.

"Ha! Shows how smart you are. We aren't even in Dodge, we're in Central City," Dean replied, not bothering to look away from the television screen.

"Funny, Dean. But seriously, if you'd turn off the cartoons and turn on the local news, you'd see that if we don't get out of here soon, we're gonna need a canoe."

The older sibling rolled his eyes and loosed an exaggerated grunt as he pushed off the musty smelling twin bed and came to stand next to Sam at the window. Peering outside, the afternoon sun had surrendered to the dismal gloom that had plagued the Midwest for several days, blanketing the area in torrential rain, frequent thunderstorms and even the all too common threat of a tornado.

Still, they were here to do a job. What was a little wet weather?

"Come on. Sam. Are you afraid you're gonna melt or something?" Dean teased, turning to flop back onto the bed.

"Ass!" Sam snapped to his brother's back.

Dean rolled over to face him, a toothy smile flashing. "That's jerk to you," he countered.

Sam glared, ignoring his brother's lack of concern and striding over to the laptop at the nearby table. Dean might not be bothered, but Sam knew enough to be worried for the both of them.

He'd been listening to the local news reports, he'd heard how the Wapsipinicon River, like many of the other nearby waterways, was already creeping over its banks and threatening to flood the town. Like Cedar Rapids and Iowa City, people were being advised to get out while they still could, before the rising river water made it impossible.

Sam dropped into the desk chair and logged on to the internet. Quickly pulling up the regional radar, he groaned when he saw the entire area covered in shades of green and yellow.

"More rain coming, Dean," he announced.

"Yeah, they say it happens this time of the year," the elder Winchester mumbled back as he flipped through the channels.

"Dammit, Dean. The friggin' river is already near flood stage and we're no closer to getting out to that cemetery. Do you plan on putting on scuba gear to dig up those bones? Oh and I forgot, just how were you planning on salting and burning them in the pouring down freaking rain?" Sam shouted.

"Jeez, Sammy. Since when did you become such a nervous Nelly over some bad weather? I mean I know that whole deal in Cali with the tornados was freaky and all but that's no reason to be wiggin' out about the rain here..."

"That's not it," Sam interrupted. "Dean, don't you get it. There's a crap-load of water coming down out there. More than normal."

"So what then? You think there's another Nathan Cole doin' this?" Dean asked suspiciously.

Sam sighed, running his hand through his hair as he shook his head in frustration. "Sometimes I can't believe we're related," he grouched. "Can you please just shut up and listen and maybe act like you learned some science in school and not off of *Day After Tomorrow*?"

"Hey, that was a kick-ass movie! Although, I still can't believe that Gyllenhaal dude went and made that *Brokeback Mountain* movie. I mean, ewww..." Dean mused, wrinkling up his face in distaste.

"You saw *Brokeback Mountain*?" Sam asked in surprise, momentarily distracted from the main topic.

"HELL NO!" Dean yelled back defensively, rising up on the bed. "Just what I read about it."

"Since when do you read anything that doesn't have pictures of naked women in it?"

"Hey, they have fantastic movie reviews in some of those magazines," the elder hunter pleaded his case.

"And again I ask, when do you *read* anything?" Sam reiterated.

He was answered by the stiffly raised middle-finger of his older sibling.

"Yeah, okay. So seriously, Dean, we need to just forget this job, pack up and get out of here. We can come back later when things dry out."

Dean snapped off the television with an angry flip of the remote before tossing the controller down on the bed in exasperation. He stood up and crossed back to the motel room window, looking out once again at the rain pelting against the glass.

"Sammy, I know you're worried, but dude, do you really want to cut and run now? We took this gig because people have been dying. We can't just walk away when we're so close," he asked. "Maybe this will all let up and we can get out there and try to find where our Casper is buried."

"Dean, we don't even know who we're digging up yet. Not for sure. I mean, all we know is that our spook is tied somehow to the county nursing home. Do you care to guess how many dead people are buried out at the cemetery from that place?" Sam whined.

"All of them?" Dean offered with a sneaky smile.

"Huh?" Sam asked with confusion.

"I said all of them were."

"All of them were what?"

"All of them were dead. You asked if I wanted to guess how many dead people were buried out at the cemetery. All of them are dead... or at least they better be," Dean joked, wagging his eyebrows.

Sam rose up with a huff of air and grabbed his jacket, yanking it on without hiding his irritation. He stormed toward the door, brushing past his brother and intentionally pushing Dean into the windowsill.

"Aw come on. You're gonna be pissy now?" Dean asked, recoiling as Sam pulled open the door and the wind-driven rain assaulted the room. "Where are you going, Sam? It's raining like a sonofabitch out there."

"Oh, you care now?" Sam snapped back, his hand on the doorknob.

"No, I don't care. I just wanted to avoid you being a pain in the ass and sick at the same time," Dean replied curtly, his own palm flat against the door blocking his brother's escape.

Sam didn't answer but roughly pulled the door free of Dean's grasp, slamming it closed hard enough that the adjacent window rattled within its frame. He stood outside the motel room as the rain showered down on him, instantly soaking his clothing despite the meager shelter offered by the awning.

He really had no idea where he was headed, most of the local businesses had closed early, the shopkeepers preparing for the threatening flood. Sam just knew he needed to get out of the motel room before he resorted to strangling his brother... or worse.

He thought about heading to the library but knew that there was no point. They had already exhausted the resources available there. Still, since it seemed that Dean wasn't about to budge from this job until it was completed, flood be damned, then the only other option was to try to solve the damn thing before they were washed away in the rising water.

Drawing the collar of his already waterlogged jacket up around his neck, Sam started off down the sidewalk toward the main part of town. Passing the motel office, he noticed that the clerk was busy packing boxes, glancing up to cast Sam a worried look as he walked by.

Sam nodded to the man but continued on, silently wondering if they were soon to be kicked out of the motel despite Dean's best intention of staying until the hunt was done.

As he slowly made his way down the walkway, devoid of any other pedestrians, the young hunter tried to work out who might be the possible culprit haunting the local nursing home and seemingly killing some of the patients. At first, he'd thought it had been nothing more than the work of a reaper, doing its macabre job and taking some of the residents when their days were up.

But as they dug into the details further, he and Dean found that there were simply too many deaths, too many mysterious circumstances to be attributed to a reaper, even an over-active one. Checking deeper, they found a vague tale about a former maintenance man who had been arrested and imprisoned for allegedly abusing some of the residents. The man had died in prison and the brothers thought that perhaps his spirit had come back seeking revenge.

Yet that theory hadn't really panned out for them and then another strange death occurred. This time a staff nurse was found dead at the end of her shift, her autopsy showing that she had somehow choked to death even though no food or drink was anywhere near her body.

There was no denying that something supernatural was going on, but the brothers just couldn't seem to figure out who or what was behind it. Like Sam had said, dozens upon dozens of people had lived and died at the Linn County Nursing Home, any of which could now be their vindictive spirit. If indeed it was a spirit they were dealing with at all. The only thing they knew for certain was that the body count was rising just like the nearby rivers.

A crack of lightning accompanied by the booming roll of thunder jolted Sam from his introspection and he hunkered down slightly more even as he hastened his pace. Despite the inclement weather, there were still a couple of townspeople braving the rainstorm. Darting from the various buildings to their automobiles and back, most were rushing to remove precious belongings before the river claimed their town.

"Scuse me, but do you know where I can find a motel?"

Sam looked up, startled by the sudden appearance of a tall, sandy-haired man standing in front of him. He'd been so caught up thinking about the case, and admittedly still stewing over Dean's somewhat juvenile behavior and refusal to walk away from this hunt, that he hadn't even noticed the stranger approach him.

"Good going there, Sam. Nothing like those hunter's instincts being on "full alert" he silently chastised himself.

"Uh... sorry... what did you ask?" he stammered, unconsciously flinching as another crash of thunder sounded.

"A motel, someplace dry to stay," the man repeated, seemingly unfazed by the onslaught of rain.

Sam stared at him, noting blue-green eyes so much like Dean's it was almost eerie, not to mention that the man was about the same height and build as his older sibling. As a matter of fact, everything about the man seemed to remind Sam of his brother; the wary tension in the way the stranger stood to the almost menacing hand that remained suspiciously within the pocket of his coat.

"Uh, there's a motel just a few blocks back," the tall hunter finally answered, pointing back down the street in the direction he'd just come. "But considering that the town is likely going to be forcibly evacuated soon, I'm not sure how long they may be renting rooms."

"S okay. I'm not planning on being here long," the man offered.

"Probably smart," Sam added. "I wish I could get my brother to think the same way. At least before the river rises and we have to swim our way out."

The man smiled slightly, but his handsome features never lost their cautious edge. "Well, good luck with that. Thanks for the directions."

"No problem," Sam replied, watching as the stranger pulled the collar of his jacket up tighter around his neck to block the buffeting wind and rain, and continued down the sidewalk away from him.

He stared after the man until his shape was swallowed up in the diminishing afternoon light and precipitation, all the while feeling a sudden uneasy chill settle into his body.

Shivering, Sam turned away and darted into the small diner, hoping to chase away the strange feeling about the man and hopefully what wasn't the start of some obnoxious cold, with a hot cup of coffee. With any luck, Dean would be feeling sufficiently guilty by the time he got back to the motel and maybe then, he could talk some sense into his older brother.

Yet even as he ordered and then sipped the hot beverage, the unnerving chill just wouldn't fade away.

"Dammit, Sammy!" Dean grouched as another loud boom of thunder rocked the glass in the window. "Why do you have to be so damn stubborn?"

Truthfully, it had never been his intention to drive Sam off, he'd only been trying to keep things a little less serious after being stuck in the small Midwestern town for the past week. Sam had been right, the hunt was going nowhere, their research hitting dead-ends at nearly every turn. But Dean was reluctant to just give up, never being one to walk away from a job. Still, as Sam had said, even if they managed to figure out the name of their homicidal spirit, the local cemetery was located adjacent to the river; the same river that was already turning the low area into a muddy field.

So, Dean had been pacing the tiny motel room for the past twenty minutes, torn between chasing after his absent sibling and tuning back to the *Terminator* marathon on the television.

He didn't understand why Sam was being such a worrywart about the weather. Hadn't they dealt with worse storms than this before? Was there more to it than just floods and rain? Did Sam have some strange vibe going on like back in Northern

California ... or like in Leicester? Did his baby brother think there was something more sinister at play here?

As the thought of Lucifer scurried through his mind, Dean felt his heartbeat begin to race with a twinge of panic. If Sam did think this was something to do with Hell's Lord, then he'd just let his brother trot off without him once again, unprotected.

Dammit, Dean... When are you ever gonna learn? As if leaving Sam on the side of the road for that bitch Mia didn't teach you a lesson, you go and let him walk off again... alone.

Guilt stabbed at his gut, threatening to double him over like a bad case of food poisoning. Every single word of the brothers' heated exchange back in Texas replayed in Dean's head, echoing like the whispers of a ghost trying to torment him.

They hadn't really spoke about that *conversation* since leaving the Lone Star State, "forgive and forget" being easier than dealing with the gaping wound that still chose to bleed on occasion if either of them inadvertently said the wrong word. And although they hadn't mentioned the happenings in Texas or Mia much, Dean still couldn't shake the feeling that he had irrevocably betrayed Sam that fateful day.

Dean flipped on the television again just as a weather alert was flashing across the screen. His attention riveted, Dean listened as the haggard-looking meteorologist warned about the threat of flash floods invading several local communities as the rain increased over the next several hours.

"... the National Weather Service has issued a Severe Thunderstorm Warning for the following counties: Benton, Blackhawk, Buchanan, Cedar, Delaware, Iowa, Jones, Johnson, Linn, and Muscatine until midnight. Conditions are favorable for high winds, hail and even the development of tornado activity..."

"Sonofabitch!" Dean yelled at the T.V., cursing the broadcaster as though the man were somehow personally responsible for the current situation.

"...further, residents living along the Cedar, Iowa, Wapisinicon and Skunk rivers should be on the watch for flash flooding. A Flash Flood Warning has been issued for all counties along these rivers as continuing rain threatens to push water over the banks and into low lying areas. Viewers residing in these areas are advised to seek high ground immediately..."

Another crack of thunder rocked the entire room, punctuated by the staccato drumbeat of something striking the roof. Spurred by the new noise, Dean dashed to the doorway, flinging it open and quickly recoiling as small, chunks of ice bombarded him.

"Ah, Hell!" Dean grumbled, ignorant of the pun.

The icy pellets bounced off the pavement, pinging off in a multitude of directions as they dropped from the sky. Some were small, no larger than a pebble, but occasionally, a larger chunk would smash into the ground with a heavy thud.

Dean stepped out onto the walkway, looking in both directions, silently hoping his brother was sulking just somewhere outside the room. The area was vacant, only the high-pitched whistle of the wind as it drove through the nearby trees left any trace of movement or sound.

Digging the cellphone out of his pocket, Dean quickly scrolled down to Sam's number. Stabbing the button to send the call, he impatiently waited, his breath held for fear his brother was angry enough to ignore the call.

"Come on, Sammy. Answer the damn phone..." he pleaded under his breath.

"Hey, Dean!" Sam's voice carried across the phone loud and strong.

"Where are you dude? I'll come pick you up," Dean asked anxiously.

"Just down the street at that little diner. They were closing up, but said I could hang out here till the hail let up some."

"I'll come and get you," the elder Winchester insisted. "Just sit tight."

"Dean, what's wrong?" Sam asked, picking up the worried edge to Dean's tone.

"Nothing Sammy, just trying to be nice to my little brother. Didn't think you wanted to be walking around out there in this weather. Besides, some of those chunks of hail

are pretty big. One might hit that huge head of yours and cause some sort of brain damage, then where would I be?"

Come on, Sam. I'm trying to say I'm sorry here...

"Alright. I'll meet you down here. You want me to see if they'll still make you a burger or something?" Sam asked. *Apology accepted.*

"Nah. I'm not really hungry and besides, I was thinking about what you said. Maybe we should tackle this case from a different angle," Dean offered. *Or maybe from a different state...*

There was a moment of silence as Dean waited on his brother's response. He was prepared for some smart-assed comment, even some jibe about Sam being right, but instead his brother simply said he'd be waiting.

Dean ended the call just as the storm began to increase in intensity. He snagged the Impala's keys from the nearby nightstand, pulling on his jacket as he darted outside heading for the black Chevy that was parked several yards away, courtesy of the motel's awkward parking lot.

As he tried to dodge the icy missiles, the hail stinging with an arctic bite as it struck uncovered skin, Dean spotted a shadow of movement out of the corner of his eye. Alerted, his attention was diverted from the horrendous weather to a dark SUV that was creeping along the edge of the lot.

Instantly, Dean went into hunter mode, reaching defensively for the .45 tucked into the inside pocket of his jacket. The big vehicle slowed to a stop as though the driver were purposely stalking the elder Winchester, but with the windows tinted nearly black, Dean couldn't see inside. All he could think of were Lucifer's minions, trailing and attacking them at Bobby's as they searched for Gudrun.

But as quickly as the SUV pulled up, it moved on, continuing out of the motel lot and on to the main street.

Dean watched, shaking his head as he calmed jittery nerves.

"Seeing demon-driven SUVs everywhere are you, Dean?" he chided himself as he turned back toward the car, buffeted again by the strong wind and rain.

He was nearly there when the SUV came around once more, this time on the opposite side of the road and this time with one of the windows rolled down.

Dean looked up, the keys to the Impala in his hand hovering in the lock as a flash of light on metal caught his attention.

A gun?

With no nearby cover other than the Chevy, Dean scrambled to find some protection. Struggling against the nearly blinding rain, his vision was assaulted by the flash of lightning and the pungent smell of ozone. Another bright burst of light flared, followed by a loud crack and the young hunter felt himself slammed to the ground, a heavy weight plowing into his body and robbing him of the ability to breathe.

Stunned, Dean lay against the wet pavement as the wind-driven rain continued to pummel him. He wanted to get up, he *needed* to get up, every survival instinct screaming inside for him to get back to his feet. But his body refused to cooperate. He managed to lift his head an inch or two from the asphalt just in time to see the SUV peel off, silver rims spinning madly and tossing water in every direction.

"Friggin' coward..." he mumbled.

Yet as the lightning flash around him and the thunder boomed out angrily across the encroaching night sky, Dean's head dropped back down to the ground, his eyes closing as the weather wailed and the water rose.

* * *

Sam paced, staring out the large plate glass window of the diner as the rain came down even harder. It wasn't hailing anymore, but the precipitation falling from the sky showed no signs of easing up. Already, the water was laying ankle deep in the street,

the storm drains overflowing as they failed to keep up with the runoff from the non-stop downpour.

"You want anything else, mister? We're shutting off the grill soon if you do."

The tall hunter turned to the voice, seeing the young waitress looking at him nervously from behind the counter.

"No thanks," he answered with a gentle smile. "I'm sure you want to get out of here. I would have thought my brother would have been here before now. I'm sorry to keep you."

He grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair and lifted the to-go box from the table.

"I'm sorry mister. You don't have to go out in that. You can wait here for your brother," the petite blonde offered. "I still have some dishes to clean up and Roger, the owner, is still moving as much as he can up to the second floor."

Sam nodded his appreciation for the offer. Truth was he didn't want to go back out into the dismal storm, especially since he had just gotten dry enough to actually warm up. Still, he'd been waiting for nearly a half hour since Dean had called and said he was on his way.

He's probably screwing with me. Probably sitting back at the motel, nice and cozy... and dry... laughing his ass off. Fine... two can play that game.

His anger rejuvenated, Sam tugged on his jacket and headed for the door, the Styrofoam container holding Dean's cheeseburger smashed tightly to his chest.

"Serves him right if the damn thing is cold and soggy," Sam mumbled as he stepped from underneath the protection of the diner's awning.

He groaned as he became instantly soaked once more from the liquid onslaught. The wind alternately tore at his outerwear then pummeled him from all directions, making it difficult to stand up straight.

Sam trudged from one form of cover to the next, slowly making his way back down the sidewalk toward the distant motel. The street, like the sidewalk, was empty except for the occasional police car still patrolling to protect the few citizens that had yet to evacuate the town.

Shielding his eyes from the stinging drops, Sam only casually noted the dark SUV that sped toward him. Kicking up water as it neared, the young hunter ducked away to avoid the wave that splashed up out of the roadway as the large vehicle passed him.

In the end, there wasn't any place to escape as the wall of water flew up off the asphalt, covering him in a blanket of wetness. If the driver even noticed it wasn't apparent as the SUV continued down the road and turned at the corner light, moving much faster than was safe for the conditions in Sam's opinion.

"Sonofabitch!" he yelled after the rude driver.

Completely waterlogged now, he stood there staring after the black truck even as it disappeared from his sight.

"Dammit Dean, you better not have fallen asleep watching some dumb movie," Sam grumbled as he looked down at his soggy jeans and equally sodden shoes.

Sam shivered then sneezed, water spraying off him as his head jerked forward. The cold and damp seeped into his skin and gnawed at the bones underneath making him feel even more miserable. He hated being wet, but even more, he hated being sick and now here he was, still several blocks from the relative warmth of the motel room and all because his brother probably thought it was funny to make him walk.

Still, there was something not quite right about that theory. Dean had called him, had said he was coming to pick him up. His brother had seemed serious enough, a slight tinge of worry in his voice and although he hadn't come out and said it directly, Sam knew that Dean had been sincere, almost apologetic when he called.

Another tremor shook him, but this one wasn't related to the weather. Something was off, and that *something* was suddenly making Sam feel as though there was

more to Dean's lack of appearing than just his elder sibling playing some sort of prank on him.

Quickening his pace, Sam trotted toward the motel, the food container absently dropped to the ground even as he was pulling the cell from his pocket. He hit the "last call" button, still moving forward as he waited for the ringing to begin.

"Hello..."

"Dean? Dean, where the hell are you dude?" Sam rattled off.

"Hello..."

"Dean? It's Sam. Can you hear me?"

"HELLOOOOOOOO..."

Irritated, Sam shouted back into the phone, his patience worn thin by his obviously uncaring brother and the unrelenting rain.

"Dammit Dean! If you're still messing around just to piss me off, it's working!"

"Okay okay, don't shout. I can't hear you anyway 'cause I'm really not here. Leave a message at the beep and I'll call you back..."

His brother's voice was drowned out by the elongated tone signaling the recording on Dean's voicemail kicking in. Sam chuckled, shaking his head. He hadn't heard this latest prompt and he wondered when Dean had taken the time to create it.

"Funny Dean... but where the hell are you?" Sam asked, knowing full well that there wouldn't be a response.

He ended the call, jamming the phone back into his jeans even as a loud crack of thunder shook the ground beneath him. Beyond him, a passing car hydroplaned on the rain-slicked roadway, the driver correcting the vehicle and barely avoiding crashing into a streetlamp.

Sam watched in abstract fascination, relieved to see that the occupants of the small car were all right as the car slowly continued on.

"Oh crap!" he groaned, his mind suddenly filling with a myriad of possible accidents involving Dean and the black Chevy.

Thinking that his brother had been playing some sort of retaliatory joke on him, Sam had failed to consider that Dean might have gotten into an accident on his way to pick him up. Now, as fear pointed an accusing finger at his gut, Sam picked up speed, breaking into a faster jog as he raced back toward the motel.

Despite it being only a few blocks from their lodging to the small downtown, it seemed to take him a lot longer to get back than his trek into Central City. His heart pounding, Sam raced along the vacant sidewalk, battling the torrential rain and the pounding wind.

Lightning flashed around him, but he focused only on getting back to the motel, ignoring nature's violent protests. Dean was in trouble. Somehow he just knew it, every fiber of his being was screaming the exact same warning.

He rounded the last corner, popping out in front of the motel's office just as the brilliant flashes of light assaulted his eyes. Technicolor whites, blues, and yellows lit up the overcast sky, the smell of burning rubber and acrid smoke wafted in the air despite the gusting wind.

Panic tore at Sam as he spotted the snapped electrical pole, its transformer on fire as sparks danced from the downed lines like fireworks on the Fourth of July. Just beyond the fallen post the Impala sat silently, its black skin reflecting the multihued flashes from both the damaged transformer and the continuing lightning that was coursing across the sky.

The car was exactly where Dean had parked it earlier that morning when they had returned from breakfast, his brother furious that he was forced to leave the Impala so far from the door to their room. As Sam's eyes scanned the Chevy for any sign of Dean, another exploding flash from the transformer lit up a dark shape on the ground.

"DEAN!"

Sam shouted above another clap of thunder, charging forward as he recognized his unmoving brother, mere inches from one of the downed electrical lines.

Drawing closer, the younger hunter came to an abrupt halt, shielding his eyes from the bright sparks even as he tried to figure out how to reach his sibling.

"Dean!" he shouted again, not sure if his brother was conscious... or even *alive*.

What if Dean had already been struck by one of the lines? Was he already dead, electrocuted again, as if some bizarre hand of fate was determined to take him out that way?

Sam refused to consider it. Dean had to be all right, there simply wasn't any other option. As the line jerked spastically, he knew that he had to get his brother to safety. He quickly looked for something to toss on top of the line to hold it still, hoping that it would buy him some time to reach Dean. But, a frantic glance revealed nothing useful.

Another loud crash of thunder caused his brother to stir, simultaneously causing Sam a sigh of relief before another concern settled in.

"Dean, don't move. Lie still!" he ordered, his head twisting in every direction as he desperately looked around for something to use on the sparking lines.

Sam watched as his brother struggled to rise up only to sag back down to the rain-covered parking lot. He couldn't tell how badly Dean was injured, but there was no doubting that his older brother was dazed.

Heedless of his own safety, Sam moved forward, determined to pull Dean away from certain death. He was just a few feet away, his hand reaching out to grab at his brother's jacket, when something forcefully pulled him backward by his shoulder.

"What the hell..." he cried out, spinning around to see what had seized him.

"That's not the way to save him..." a deep voice warned.

Sam sought out the voice, his eyes blinking against the rain that struck his face. Dragging a hand across his eyes, he found himself staring at the stranger from earlier, blue-green eyes staring back as the man offered a hand to steady the young hunter.

"He's alive. Don't worry," the tall blond assured Sam. "I was just going to my room when I saw the telephone pole get struck by lightning. It was falling before your brother even knew what was happening. I knocked him out of the way, but I think he must have hit his head on something on the way down."

Sam nodded blankly, his eyes shifting back to Dean's still form.

"We need a rope or a piece of wood. Something to get that line away from him," he suggested.

The stranger patted his pockets, a wry grin spreading across his face as he answered. "Sorry, must have left those things in my other jacket."

"Okay, okay... lemme think for a second..."

Sam bolted to the motel room, his shoulder striking the door hard enough that it broke the lock and flew open, smacking the interior wall with a resounding thud. He quickly grabbed the wood chair from beside the table and dashed back out into the threatening weather.

"We can use this. It's not perfect but short of calling and waiting for the Fire Department, it will have to do," he announced.

The stranger nodded, offering out his hand to receive the piece of furniture. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Can you get my brother? I'm gonna use this to pull the wire away. It's wood so it doesn't conduct electricity... I hope. Just get to my brother, please..." Sam pleaded.

"I can take care of the lines, you get your brother," the man replied, reaching for the chair.

"No... I can't ask you to do that. The ground is soaked and I doubt that those cowboy boots of yours are rubber soled like my shoes. Please... just get Dean!"

The man nodded reluctantly and Sam turned, tentatively moving to where the line was still twisting and flopping like some electrical cobra. He paused, watching as the stranger moved closer to Dean's downed form.

"Okay... you ready?" he shouted above the din of thunder.

"I'm ready, go for it..."

Sam slowly crept closer, sparks flying at him and stinging his exposed skin. He prayed that his shoes would protect him from the threatening current, hopeful that he wasn't about to condemn them all to certain death.

Sucking in a deep breath, he glanced one last time over to his brother.

Please be okay... his mind whispered.

Waiting till the line jerked away from him, he sprung forward, slamming the chair over top the thick corded wire. As though it knew it had been trapped, the line danced wildly up and down, sparks still spitting off in every direction as Sam pulled with all his might to drag the dangerous wire out of the way.

Too occupied with his own perilous duty, he didn't see the stranger grab Dean under the arms and pull the unconscious hunter away from the silent Impala to the cover of the motel awning.

"I got him..."

The shout was a welcome sound to Sam's ears as he gave the chair a final tug before letting go and dashing off to where the man was kneeling down beside Dean.

Let him be okay, please let him be okay... he silently begged as flashes of finding Dean in the basement of that deserted house played through his mind.

The electrocution triggered a heart attack, a pretty massive one... his heart is... damaged... we've done all we can... we can try and keep him comfortable... but I give him a couple of weeks at most maybe a month...

The doctor's haunting words repeated in his head as Sam rushed to Dean. Seeing his brother lying there motionless conjured up dreaded memories of that night in the basement when Dean had battled the Rawhead. Gently rolling his brother over, he loosed the breath he'd been holding as Dean's chest steadily rose and fell in time with his breathing.

Breathing!

"Dean, come on dude... time to wake up," Sam teased as he gently tapped the side of his brother's face.

A jagged cut extended from the top of Dean's hairline, running down to his temple, the blood thinning as it mixed with the heavy downpour. A large knot had already appeared underneath the laceration and Sam assumed it was likely the reason his brother had been unconscious.

"Sammy..." Dean groggily called out, his eyes flickering open as he reached a shaking hand up toward his sibling.

"Yeah dude, take it easy. You're gonna be okay."

"Dude, what the hell am I doing out here in the rain? I hate the rain... it's just sooo... wet," the short-haired hunter complained.

Sam laughed, his obvious relief showing as he carefully slipped an arm behind Dean's shoulders. "Let's get you inside and take care of that cut before any more of your brain oozes out onto the sidewalk," he ordered.

"You look like a half-drowned Sheepdog, Sam," Dean teased weakly as he let himself be hoisted to his feet with a groan.

"Keep it up, dude. Just remember who's gonna be putting stitches in that thick skull of yours once we're inside," Sam reminded him.

"Damn..." his brother bemoaned, taking a staggering step toward the motel room door.

Later

The lightning and thunder continued their relentless chorus outside as Dean leaned back against the headboard of the bed. Unfortunately, the racket generated by the weather was nothing compared to the constant banging in his head. Several ibuprofen and a bottle of Milwaukee's best had done nothing thus far to decrease the *thunder* pounding in his skull.

Still, he was thankful to be alive, the half dozen stitches and darkening bruise were a small price to pay for what could have been the alternative.

"What is it with me and electricity?" he absently wondered. *"Who needs demons when I have fifty thousand volts trying to fry my ass?"*

Pushing the morbid thought from his mind, he tossed back the last dregs of the beer and decided to tackle other pressing concerns.

"So, it was only the flash of the transformer that I saw?" he asked, absently rubbing the back of his neck.

"Well, I didn't see anything else. But then, I wasn't exactly looking," the stranger replied.

"You really thought you saw a gun?" Sam asked as he packed away their first aid kit and cleaned up the bloody gauze from his repair of his brother's scalp.

"I thought so, but now I'm not so sure," Dean answered. "I mean, I saw that black SUV cruising the lot. It went past me once, then it seemed like it turned around and bee-lined straight for me."

"Do you think it might have been some of Luc... er... I mean some of our New Jersey buddies?" Sam posed anxiously, catching and correcting himself as he cast a nervous glance over at his brother's savior.

Dean shrugged. "I dunno, Sammy. It looked just like the one from Bobby's and like I said, for a minute when they dropped the window, I was pretty sure I saw the flash of metal from a muzzle. But now, I'm just not sure."

"Dammit!" Sam cursed, slamming his gear bag down on the opposite bed.

"What is it?" Dean asked worriedly.

"That friggin' SUV. I saw the same damn one flying through town like a bat out of hell. I just figured it was someone trying to get out before the river rose," the younger man answered.

"Yeah, well maybe it wasn't anything more than that," Dean agreed. "Maybe my imagination just got the best of me."

But deep down, the elder Winchester didn't believe that. He'd been hunting for far too long, relying on his gut to tell him when things seemed hokey. Right now, his gut was twisted up, tensely alerting him that there was more to that black SUV than a frantic resident trying to escape the rising flood.

"Can I ask a question?"

Dean looked up from where he had been absently peeling the label from the beer bottle. Across the small room, the older man was leaning forward on his chair, his steely eyes narrowed as he spoke, the gold coin he had been twirling between his fingers now coming to rest in his palm.

"Shoot..." Dean prompted with a casual wave of his hand.

"Did you see the driver?"

Dean paused, closing his eyes as his mind tried to replay the event. He remembered calling Sam, stepping outside into the torrential downpour, wanting to kill the motel clerk for making them park so far away from the room, lightning flashing across the sky like strobe lights at a rock concert, and then the SUV.

In his head, he recalled the dark vehicle shadowing him like a stalking panther, then pulling away only to return from the opposite direction. He could see the driver's side window lower as the truck came to a near stop just several yards away. And then there was a flash.

It had been a gun muzzle! Hadn't it?

Dean twitched as he remembered the loud bang and his body filled in the rest of the memory as every ache and bruise confirmed his hard landing on the ground.

The flash, the booming thunder, it could have been nothing more than lightning striking the nearby transformer. But what if it wasn't?

"I don't think I did. I'm not really sure what I saw now," he admitted.

"You smacked your head pretty good, Dean. Maybe things will be clearer in the morning," Sam suggested protectively.

"Try to think about it, Dean," the man encouraged. "Are you sure you didn't see the driver's face?"

Irritated, the young hunter pushed up off the bed, instantly regretting it as the throbbing in his skull increased tenfold. He strode over toward the window, brushing past the older man's hand as he moved by.

Jerking sideways, Dean felt as though his leg had been jolted with electricity, an instant tingling sensation coursing down the extremity. It wasn't painful, but it startled him just the same.

"What the hell?" he exclaimed, carefully backing away from the seated man.

The sensation was familiar, if not totally uncomfortable, but even as he moved toward the nightstand and his .45, Dean knew that there wasn't any danger present.

My amulet... it's the same feeling as when the amulet touches my skin!

"The sword recognizes the Guardians," the man stated matter-of-factly, a small grin creasing his rugged face.

"What the hell?" Dean repeated, coming to a stop near the wall, his back pressed tightly against the drywall as he stared incredulously.

"Dean? What is it?" Sam demanded, already taking action and standing defensively with his own automatic drawn.

"You know what you felt, don't you Dean?"

"Who the hell are you? And don't bother with that bullshit name you gave us earlier," the younger brother demanded.

"Does it matter what my name is? Call me anything you want. It's what I am that is important."

"And what the hell are you?" Sam shouted, his weapon now trained on the unmoving stranger even as he glanced anxiously at his brother for answers.

Dean looked from the man's face down to his right hand that was once more spinning the large gold coin between his fingers. Even with the rapid movement, he could see the ornate markings on the piece. It wasn't like any coin he'd ever seen, certainly not one currently being circulated. It was old... ancient... like the amulet.

"You're a Guardian?" Dean half asked, half stated, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Takes one to know one," the older man replied with a laugh.

Dean sank back to the bed, the burst of energy seeping from him as he absorbed the implication of that answer.

"How? Why are you here? What do you want?" The questions tumbled from his mouth as he fought to process the sudden revelation.

"I'm here because of you, Dean."

"Me?" he stammered.

"Dean, what is he talking about?" Sam interjected nervously. "Do you know this guy?"

The older sibling shook his head slowly, still unable to take his eyes off the stranger and the coin.

"I've never met another Guardian before," he said simply.

"You have now."

"Who are you really? How did you find me?" Dean queried apprehensively.

The man sucked in a deep breath, settling back into the chair as he took a deep pull from the beer bottle in his unoccupied hand.

"My name is Chris Anderson. I'm from Lincoln, Nebraska if that makes a damn bit of difference. As for how I found you, well, it doesn't matter how I found you, only that I found you in time," he replied.

"In time? What the hell does that mean? So, there really was a gun?" Dean exclaimed.

"Is somebody after my brother? Is somebody trying to kill him? Sam demanded simultaneously.

"Calm down, do you two need some Ritalin or are you always this excitable?" the sandy-haired man joked. "How much do you know about that amulet you have around your neck?"

Dean paused, silently reflecting before answering.

What do I know? Let's see. It was handed down from firstborn to firstborn until it got dumped on me... its part of some powerful sword that was broken into pieces for safekeeping... oh... and if I lose it I'm toast. Yep, that about sums it up...

"I know it's a piece of Solomon's Sword," he answered finally.

"Sure, it's that, but do you understand that there are forces out there that would do anything to get it?" the older Guardian asked.

"Yeah, I get it. It's important and it's my job to protect it," Dean snapped back. Anderson shook his head in dismay.

"Are you trying to tell me that someone is after my brother for the amulet?" Sam posed, his face a mask of concern.

"Not someone, *something*..."

"Something? Jeez Neo, can you be a little more vague?" Dean snarked. "Really dude, if you think you're scaring me then think again."

"My brother's spent his entire life hunting every conceivable form of evil. We can deal with whatever's coming after him now," Sam insisted.

"We're not talking about the occasional vampire or some low level demon. The average demon is pathetic, focused only on torturing poor humans to pass the time. Have you ever heard of Asmodeus?" Anderson asked.

Dean looked at Sam, the name ringing familiar.

"Asmodeus was the demon that Solomon supposedly tricked into helping him build his kingdom," the younger hunter stated.

"Sure, that's the Judaic version, but I'm talking about Asmodeus' true origin. Do you know that one legend has him as the Zoroastrian demon of wrath?"

"Zoroastrian? Great! Just freakin' great," Dean groaned. The pounding in his head rose to a crescendo as memories of Chicago and the battle with Meg's summoned daevas surfaced in his mind.

"So, he's a demon. Dean and I have sent our fair share of demons back to hell," Sam insisted.

"And again, I'm telling you that you've never dealt with a demon as powerful as Asmodeus. Already, several Guardians have fallen, their pieces of the sword lost," the older man stated.

"What does he want with the Guardians?" Dean asked.

"He doesn't want anything with the Guardians, he wants the Sword."

"The Sword? What good would it do him?" Sam questioned.

"He wants to recast it, to melt all the pieces back into the original," Anderson answered.

"What does a demon want with a demon-killing sword?" Dean interrupted.

"Legend has it that Asmodeus battled and was defeated by Raphael, ending up with the demon earth-bound and subservient to Solomon. Think about it... Solomon's Sword was supposed to be a demon-killer, and angels and demons are nothing more than kissing cousins in the scheme of things. If Asmodeus gets possession of it, then not only is he unstoppable, but he'd also wield an incredible power," Anderson explained.

Dean swallowed hard. Memories of Haris screamed through his head. Visions of the yellow-eyed demon trying to get the amulet from him replayed vividly in his mind. Haris had tried everything to gain custody of the golden talisman, only to be repelled.

"How can he touch it? I mean, before, other demons couldn't stand to be in contact with my amulet," he queried.

"We're not talking some piss-poor underling here. Asmodeus is a King in hell. Do you understand that hierarchy? He's not some captain or duke or even prince. Next to Lucifer, Asmodeus is one of the most powerful creatures down in the Pit."

"Yeah, but Dean's amulet killed Haris," Sam insisted.

"I know all about that. His amulet didn't have the power to destroy the demon on its own. The individual pieces are limited, but it's the sum of the parts that makes the Sword powerful. That's why it was originally broken apart and scattered, for safekeeping. That's the legacy of the Guardians."

Legacy? Destiny? Dean hated those words. He didn't believe in destiny and the only legacy he was aware of receiving was sitting outside in the rain.

"I dunno. I don't buy in to all that fate crap. Plenty of others have tried to take this amulet and failed," Dean casually told him.

"They weren't as determined as Asmodeus..."

"I knew this demon-chick once. She was pretty determined to bury both our asses, but we're still around," the elder hunter replied sarcastically.

"Fine!" Anderson shouted, rising up in anger and snatching his jacket from the back of the chair. "You want to go it alone, so be it. But let me know where you're headed so when you turn up dead, I can come and try to reclaim your amulet," he snarled as he stormed toward the door, his own gold coin disappearing into a pocket.

"Just hold up a second," Dean interjected, jumping up from the edge of the bed and blocking the older man's egress. "Look, it's not that I don't believe you, but damn, you pop in here, save my life and then tell me that there's another big bad demon out there gunning for me? I mean, what the hell?"

"Believe me or don't. I don't give a damn," Anderson complained. "I was just thinking that someone with your background might be interested in protecting mankind from the something that wants to destroy it."

Dean became silent, his hand absently reaching up to the horned charm hanging from his neck. The familiar tingle greeted his fingertips, reminding him of its presence as it lay ominously quiet against his chest.

This is not about you, Guardian. This is about the connection to the power that you are sworn to protect. As it is, the lines between good and evil are greatly skewed. These are times of chaos. There are those among us who would choose to go against the ancient establishment and those who would uphold it. You are one of those who would uphold it. However, there are many who have yet to choose or to be chosen. You can trust no one. You have been chosen, and you are sworn to protect the amulet...

Shadrack Mann's word echoed in his mind. He thought he'd forgotten that conversation; his one and only meeting with the peculiar recluse had been the product of desperation, of him trying to save his own life. At the time, he'd casually blown off the old man's cryptic words, but now, staring at another Guardian, everything came back in a rush.

Deep down, Dean knew what Anderson was saying was true. What more proof did he need than Haris' attempt to get the amulet from him? What more evidence than their recent tangles with Lucifer himself? Was it then so inconceivable that Asmodeus might be planning some sort of global domination?

He drew in a shaky breath, his hand still rolling the amulet between his fingers. "Okay, what do you want me to do?" he acquiesced.

The older man smiled in satisfaction, smoothly moving back toward his former seat.

"We must mobilize those that are left," he commanded. "We have to assemble and plan."

"Dean, are you serious about this?" Sam exclaimed, striding closer to his brother. "We don't even know this man and you're ready to just take off on some wild goose chase?"

"Hey, if you don't want to keep your brother alive, then fine. Let's see how you do on your own," Anderson snarled at the younger man.

"Don't you dare threaten me! Dean and I watch out for each other. We've been covering each other's backs since we were kids," Sam shouted back angrily.

"Yeah, well have you ever gone up against one of the most powerful demons that ever existed?"

"As a matter of fact, we've gone up against..."

"SAM!" Dean's voice cut through the raising verbal barrage. "Enough! Both of you!"

He dropped back down to the bed, groaning as he ran a hand through his hair and accidentally touching the newly repaired laceration. Turning first to the older man, he mustered up the best glare his fatigued body and throbbing head could manage.

"Anderson," Dean began. "I said I'm in and I am. But Sam doesn't have to be a part of this. As a matter of fact, it suits me fine if he's nowhere near Asmodeus or anything to do with this amulet."

"No way, Dean," Sam interrupted. "I told you before that I'd help you figure all this out and I meant that. It doesn't matter where it leads or what's involved."

"Sam, I know you mean well and all, but I don't want to draw any more attention to you. We have enough *enemies* as it is. This is my gig, my responsibility, my duty."

Closing his eyes against the agonizing pain that was beating like a jackhammer between his temples, Dean sagged back against the headboard once more. The steady crash of thunder outside was nothing compared to the storm that was raging inside him.

"... Why me, Sammy? I'm no freakin' guardian of nothing dude. I'm not made for no special purpose..."

"... Why is this whole guardian thing freaking you out?" Sam had asked.

"What if I don't want it?"

"Don't want it?"

"Don't want it, don't deserve it, whatever."

"Don't deserve it? Dean, we might not know much about the amulet or how and why it's in the family or even what its purpose is, but this much I do know. If anyone was ever meant to be a guardian it was you. Hell, Dean, you can deny it all you want, but you give a shit about the people we save. That's why you do the job. You're not like Dad, not really. He was all about getting Haris after Mom died. And even me too, it was mostly about revenge for Jess. But never you, Dean. You do this job because you give a damn, because you want to help people, you want to protect them, to save them."

"You said it yourself once, Sam. I do this job because I want to help people, protect them, save them. I can't walk away from this now," Dean reluctantly admitted.

He watched as his younger brother gave in, knowing all along that in the end, there had only ever been one choice to make.

"Fine then, but you're not doing this alone," Sam adamantly stated.

Dean watched his younger brother. The seriousness in Sam's voice and face left no mistaking that the young man wasn't about to let him go it alone.

"All right then, we're in."

The next morning

Dean jammed the last of his dirty clothes into the worn duffle bag, stopping to steal a glance for any forgotten items. Across the room, Sam was still grumbling about leaving Iowa as he finished his own packing. Neither had really spoken about yesterday's revelations, but Dean knew it was only a matter of time before his brother couldn't restrain himself any longer. From the look on Sam's face and the occasional words uttered under his breath, Dean was counting the seconds before his younger sibling would let loose and speak his mind.

"Dean," Sam began, finally breaking the silence.

Here we go... Dean thought to himself, unable to contain the loud sigh as he dropped to the edge of the bed. "Save your breath, Sammy. I'm not going to change my mind about this."

"I'm just saying we should look into all this a little more first before we take off. We don't know anything about this Chris Anderson, he could be lying to us for all we know."

"Sam..." Dean's tone warned.

"Come on, Dean. This dude strolls in here with a story about being a Guardian and now he's trying to recruit you to his private little army. I mean really? Don't you think that's just a little convenient?" Sam posed.

"He saved my life, Sam..."

"Yeah, and about that. Isn't it convenient that he just happened to be here, in the right place at just the right time? How the hell did he find us Dean? It's not like we tend to run on the grid."

"I dunno, Sam. Maybe it's some sort of Guardian thing? Maybe he just tracked us down?" the elder hunter offered.

"Oh sure, because you're listed on some sort of Guardian Who's Who directory. Dean, up to a few months ago, you didn't know squat about that amulet other than what Mann or Dad told you. How does this guy know so much?"

"Maybe he's just done more research? Maybe whoever handed down that coin to him filled him in on crap. How the hell do I know and what difference does it make?"

"But Dean, to just take off and follow him to Idaho, doesn't that make you a tiny bit suspicious?" Sam asked, his eyes imploring as he sunk into the nearby chair.

Dean paused, his mind whirling with possibilities even while his gut told him that Anderson was on the up and up. He nearly felt a physical kick to that same gut when he realized there was more to this than Sam being paranoid about some stranger popping up and trying to enlist their help to stop a demon.

"This is about Mia isn't it?" he asked, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice.

He watched Sam recoil slightly, his head dropping down as the two brothers found themselves unable to continue making eye contact.

"No Dean. This doesn't have anything to do with that."

"Yeah, right. You think that I'm just falling for his story like I fell for Mia's. You don't trust me to be able to see through someone's b.s. anymore?" Dean demanded, rising up from the edge of the bed as he stood defensively before his younger sibling.

"Dean, I do trust you. And this situation and the deal with Mia isn't the same. I know you want answers about the amulet and I promised I'd help you find them, but let's not go into this blind. That's not your style," Sam pleaded.

Defused, Dean turned and walked over to Sam's still-opened laptop. He picked up the computer and handed it to his brother.

"Dude, you looked up that story about the guy in Atlanta, Gerard Daniels. You saw the police report on the guy's murder. He was found dead, alone, in a locked condo with the alarm on. What do we know that can pull off entry to a locked, alarmed house?" Dean posed.

"I know, but the report also said Daniels was beaten and stabbed to death. Not exactly a demon's m.o., now is it?" Sam retorted.

"Oh sure, 'cause demons never use conventional methods of killing people do they?" Dean threw back.

"Ya know what? Fine... I don't want to argue about this anymore. I'm tired of arguing with you," the younger man gave in, wearily rising to his feet and grabbing the laptop from his brother's hand.

Dean shook his head. He didn't want to argue either, he never wanted to argue with Sam again, not after what had happened in Plano.

"Sam, please. I know that this might seem like a wild goose chase, and I know there's a lot we don't know about Anderson or any of this whole Guardian stuff. But, look at it this way. We go in with our eyes and ears open, we don't trust Anderson and we watch our backs at every turn..." he suggested.

When Sam didn't answer, Dean moved closer, placing a hand on his brother's arm.

"Please, dude... I need to know...and I need you behind me or..."

"What? You'll take off and leave me behind again on some back country road?" Sam snapped yanking away from his brother's loose grasp.

Wounded, Dean forced a thin smile to his face. He knew he deserved that comment, but that didn't mean it stung any less. Forcing away the nagging memory of Texas and Mia's brutal attack on his family, he reached out for Sam once more.

"Never again, dude. You've got my word on that. We either go together or not at all. If you don't want to do this then fine, we don't," he gently apologized.

He saw the turmoil developing behind his brother's eyes as Sam considered his offer. While he wanted, truly needed, to find out more about the Guardians and his own role in all of this, Dean knew he couldn't go against Sam's suspicions. Not again.

"No," Sam softly replied. "You've been there for me every step of the way since Stanford, before that even. When I had no clue about what was happening to me with these freaky visions and crap, you stood by me. You know I'll do the same for you."

Dean's smile broadened as he clapped Sam on the shoulder. "Thanks dude! And hey, look at it this way, we're getting the hell out of Dodge before we needed the canoe," he joked.

It was Sam's turn to roll his eyes, but at least this time, he was smiling.

Pocatello, Idaho

Dean pulled the Impala into the diner's lot, parking beside Anderson's non-descript Ford F-150. Despite it being mid-afternoon, the elder Winchester felt like he'd been driving for days. Climbing out of the classic Chevy, he stretched, feeling his bruised body protest the movement. He was ready for a hot shower, a decent meal and a cold beer; not necessarily in that order.

As he followed his brother and the mysterious newcomer into the restaurant, Dean couldn't help but think about the long ride out from Iowa. On one hand, he felt a familiar anxiousness that always accompanied the start of a new hunt, but on the other, he couldn't shake Sam's earlier concerns, suddenly wondering if his brother's caution was rubbing off on him.

Maybe Sam had been right. Maybe he was too eager to follow Anderson without any real proof about the man's claims or intentions. Maybe his need to understand the strange responsibility placed on him was clouding his better judgment. Maybe he really didn't trust himself as much since falling so blindly for Mia.

Whatever the reason, whatever the excuse, Dean found himself twisted up, not completely sure if he was doing the right thing or not, but determined that he needed to figure out this amulet-Guardian thing before...

Before what? He silently asked himself. *Why do I need to do this now? I've been wearing this damn thing for years and it never made a damn bit of difference.*

But that's before you had a demon trying to take the thing off you, before you basically died and met a cowboy that let his own dark needs betray the amulet,

before you melted the thing down and shot through your brother to kill ol' Yellow-Eyes.

"Dean? Hey dude, the food's this way," Sam called out jokingly as he held the door open.

The hunter looked up, suddenly realizing that he had stopped in the middle of the parking lot as he was lost in thought. Shaking his head to clear the myriad of voices that seemed to be screaming over top each other, Dean smiled wanly and picked up his pace.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm awesome," he answered, carefully avoiding his brother's piercing gaze.

They moved inside, taking a table in the far corner of the establishment. Dean didn't miss the fact that Anderson quickly took the seat that placed his back to the wall. Even as they perused the menu, the older man's wary eyes never left the entrance.

"You expecting someone?" Dean asked curiously, spotting the man's stealthy reach for a concealed pistol.

Anderson laughed as he thumbed off the safety. "No, but I didn't get to this age by being a careless fool, either."

"What do you mean by that?" the younger Guardian snapped back.

"Not a thing! But as I've told you repeatedly, there are those that would stop at nothing to gain what we possess."

"Yeah, yeah, I got all that last night. But I make it a rule to not ruin a good cheeseburger by shooting up the restaurant," Dean quipped as he reached for his own .45 within the pocket of his jacket.

"Can we please just eat in peace without one of you opening fire?" Sam intervened.

The waitress came and went as they placed their order and quickly received it. The threesome sat in relative silence as the meal was eagerly devoured. It wasn't until the woman returned with the coffee pot that Dean spoke.

"So, we're here now, middle of nowhere Idaho. What's the plan?" he asked, toying with the steaming cup. He would have much rather had a cold brew in his hand, but Dean knew that his day was far from over.

"I traced another Guardian to Pocatello, guy by the name of Seth Bowman. I've got a recent address so I figured you and I could go talk to him," Anderson suggested.

"And tell him what exactly? Excuse me, but we're from the National Association of Anonymous Guardians and we'd like to talk to you about helping us reassemble an ancient sword before a powerful demon gets his claws on it. Yeah, I'm sure that line will get us through the front door," Dean snarked.

"It worked on you," the older man retorted, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, I'm not the average civilian, completely in the dark about what's out there. Sam and I have had our fair share of dealings with the likes of Asmodeus."

"Speaking of which," Sam interrupted trying to diffuse the growing antagonism. "Since you two seem to have the welcome wagon detail well in hand, I'm going to do a bit more research on all this."

"Research?" Anderson's voice rose.

Dean tensed as he watched the blondish man react to the mention of Sam checking in to more about the Sword and the Guardians. The response was a little over the top in his opinion, but then Anderson didn't exactly come off as the most social of people to begin with.

"Hey, chill out man. This is what Sam does best. Trust me," he said simply as he smiled. "Sammy here's like the human Google."

"You won't find anything useful," Anderson stalwartly replied.

"You don't know Sam."

"Fine, whatever. We don't need him with us to meet Bowman."

“Okay then,” Dean continued, “I’ll take Sam to the motel and I’ll meet you there. Where does this guy live?”

The hunter didn’t like the narrowing eyes of the older man seated across from him, but he chalked it up to Anderson just being a loner that didn’t trust others or technology. After all, was he so different? Hadn’t he essentially grown up being taught to rely on himself, developing and trusting his hunter’s instincts above all else?

“I’ve got an address for this Bowman at 1137 Randolph Avenue. Think you can find that and meet me there in thirty minutes?” the Guardian asked sarcastically.

Dean smirked, his head cocking sideways as he answered. “I’ll be there!”

He followed Anderson as the man rose from the booth, casually throwing several bills on the table and stalking out the door. Dean waited a few seconds before he drained the last of his own cup and began to rise as well.

“So, tell me that wasn’t just a little bizarre,” Sam mused aloud.

“Yeah, he’s wired a little tight, but just remember what I said. We keep our eyes open,” Dean cautioned. *And the safety off...* he added to himself.

Mountain View Motor Lodge

Sam came out of the bathroom regretting his choice of chicken salad sandwich earlier at the diner. He rubbed his stomach, wishing Dean would have left him the Impala so he could have gone for some Pepto or something.

Dropping onto the nearby bed, he groaned as his belly grumbled and rolled again, threatening to empty itself once more. Closing his eyes, he willed his intestines to quiet as he fought down the urge to bolt back into the bathroom.

“There can’t be anything left in me...” he bemoaned wiping a sweaty palm across his equally sweaty forehead.

“How the hell does Dean manage to eat all the crap he does and not end up like this? It’s just not fair...”

The room was too warm and the oppressive feeling of claustrophobia suddenly washed over him like thick syrup. He needed some fresh air, the remnants of his activity in the tiny bathroom now wafting into the main room.

Forcing himself to stand, he slowly crossed over to the door and unlocked it, pulling it open with a satisfied sigh as the cool evening breeze poured into the room. Like a gentle caress, the light wind ruffled his hair and dried off the sticky perspiration that clung to his face and neck.

Sam stood there, wavering less and less as he inhaled the fresh mountain air. It soothed his protesting stomach and helped him refocus on the task at hand.

Or rather the task that had been at hand... before I spent the last thirty minutes bowing to the porcelain god. And why do they refer to it as the porcelain god anyway? The porcelain hellspawn would be more appropriate...

Reluctantly, the young hunter turned away from the door and glanced at the laptop that sat glowing on the nearby table. As promised, he’d immediately dug right into researching everything he could about Asmodeus, Solomon, the Sword and anything else he could think of related to the Guardians. He’d even done a reasonably thorough search on Chris Anderson, turning up little more than a birth certificate and a high school yearbook picture that could have been of anyone with sandy-blond hair and bluish eyes.

Still, just because there wasn’t much info on the man wasn’t a reason to become ultra-suspicious. Was it?

Sam sucked in another deep breath, relieved when his intestines chose to remain inside him. He cast a look out to the vending machine at the end of the line of rooms. Deciding that a cold Sprite might settle the last of his queasiness, he walked the short distance down the sidewalk and dug into his pocket for the required change.

Retrieving the can, he popped the top and tilted it back, relishing the cold drink as it flowed down his raw throat. Taking another long drink, he startled, nearly spilling some down the front of his shirt when the loud screech of tires drowned out the usual nighttime sounds.

He looked around nervously, expecting at any minute to see a black SUV tear out of the encroaching darkness straight at him. Calculating the distance and time needed to reach the door, Sam considered making a dash for the room and the weapon he'd carelessly left behind in his duffle.

But as the crickets chirping returned and no obvious sign of a demon-driven truck appeared, the young hunter relaxed and grinned at his sudden paranoia. As his heart rate decreased back to normal, the sudden thrumming in his chest ceasing, he slowly made his way back to the motel room.

Dean should be back soon, no reason to be so jumpy.

Once inside, he closed and locked the door, turning the deadbolt until the telltale click signaled the cylinder's movement and the throw dropping into the strike plate on the inner jamb. Catching sight of the computer again, he made his way to the small table, first stopping off to grab the automatic from his bag.

"Paranoia or not, can't be too careful," Sam voiced.

Sliding into the chair, he laid the gun next to the keyboard and resolutely let his fingers begin to glide over the keys. Opening up a tab from earlier, he stared at the picture of Solomon's Sword. It's long golden length glowed back at him from the web page, the ornately designed hilt with raised reliefs of the Ark of the Covenant and the Star of David.

He didn't know if that's what the actual weapon had looked like, since very clearly the real sword had never been discovered. Tales of the blade had circulated down through the centuries, treasure hunters claiming to have found it at one time or another, but each was soon debunked when the sword turned out to be nothing more than a pathetic copy forged in the sweatshops of China.

Sam knew the real weapon would never be found. At least not in one piece.

Stretching back from the table, his mind wandered further. What if this Anderson did manage to find all the Guardians? What if they did try to recast the sword?

What would that mean for Dean?

Sam vividly recalled seeing his brother nearly die in front of him, twice, because of losing the strange amulet. Hadn't Dean been warned, repeatedly, about the risk to his own life if the talisman left his possession? Hadn't he risked enough during his little stunt in Wyoming?

"Just promise me that thing stays round your neck from now on, okay bro?"

He had been somewhat teasing with Dean that day back at Bobby's, but his tone did not belie the sentiment. Sam was worried about his older brother, fearful that Dean in his quest to find out more about his part in this odd destiny would stop at no end. Likewise, knowing his headstrong sibling, it would probably cost him his life...

"Or at least several pints of blood," Sam snarked aloud.

He went back to the keyboard, this time typing in the words "Guardian" and "Solomon", unsurprised when the computer returned nothing useful. Sighing with disappointment, he'd hoped to have something new to tell his brother when Dean returned. Draining the last of the soft drink, Sam was about to type in another search when the soft creak of the floor made him look up.

In an instant, the attacker was on him. Covered from head to toe in black, the face obscured, Sam couldn't tell who was behind the mask as his body was thrown backwards out of the chair.

He came to his feet quickly, his hand stretching for the 9mm that had been lying on the table. Yet as he blocked a sharp kick to his chest, Sam saw that the gun like the table had been overturned in the initial attack, the weapon nowhere to be seen.

Before he could turn his attention back to the fight, the mysterious intruder landed a solid blow to his abdomen, staggering the tall hunter and instantly making him gag

as the recently-drunk soda threatened to reappear. He weakly threw his own punch but it missed its intended target, glancing off his attacker's covered face.

Sam blocked the next blow that was aimed for his own head, deflecting the incoming fist with his forearm. He countered with his own left hook, satisfied when it connected solidly with the figure's jaw and eliciting a loud grunt.

"Who the hell are you?" the hunter demanded, taking an offensive step forward.

It was a man's low voice that answered. "You should know."

Perplexed, Sam was caught off-guard by the peculiar question. A thousand possible answers roamed through his head, but he didn't have the chance to reply as the stranger charged him.

He felt the impact as the man's shoulder drove into him, throwing him backwards and into the closest wall. Sam groaned as his head ricocheted off the drywall, brilliant stars flashing before his eyes like some Warner Brothers cartoon.

Another rock-hard punch to his jaw and the younger Winchester felt the room darken. He managed to throw his hand up in time to block the subsequent blows, but his defense was feeble at best.

Weakened by his earlier bout of food poisoning, Sam felt the energy quickly draining from his body. The muscles in his arms moved as though they were weighted down by concrete and despite the urgency of the situation, even the adrenaline coursing through his veins wasn't enough to help him mount a decent defense.

"What the hell do you want?" Sam shouted, managing to squeak out that final question before his attacker's hands encircled his throat.

Thumbs pressing in on his trachea, the hunter could do little more than scratch at the man's stranglehold. He felt his lungs screaming for air as the darkness invaded his field of vision.

"You, Winchester. I'm here to stop you," the intruder snapped back as everything went black.

1137 Randolph Avenue Outside Seth Bowman's apartment.

Dean leaned against the driver's side door of the Impala, his fingers drumming out a staccato beat on the roof as he waited impatiently. He'd arrived outside the older two-story duplex over an hour ago, stopping adjacent to the nearby park for cover, and then remaining in the car as he waited for Anderson to join him.

The afternoon sun was beginning to dip below the mountain range as the day slowly gave way to evening, bringing with it a cool breeze that gently kissed his face and dried the perspiration that the earlier heat had drawn to the surface on the back of his neck. He was tired from driving, hot and sticky, and desperately in need of a shower and the cold beer he'd been seeking when they'd stopped at the diner for a bite to eat. Add to that his still-sore body and pounding head and his patience was just about worn thin.

"Where the hell are you?" he grumbled under his breath as he looked up and down the quiet street.

He'd watched as Bowman came back to his apartment fifteen minutes earlier, a backpack slung across one shoulder and a mountain bike hoisted up on the other. To look at him, Dean was reminded of Sam. The young man appeared to be a college student, which wasn't very surprising considering the proximity of the nearby university.

Smaller in stature than his tall brother, Bowman had the same shaggy hairstyle and wore a pair of thick glasses that made him look more geek than Guardian. Still, looks could be deceiving and Dean was well aware not to judge the "fight in the dog" by the size of the dog in the fight.

Keeping an eye on the quiet abode, the young hunter was tempted to just walk up to the doorstep and talk to Bowman himself; to hell with Anderson and all his mysterious, "Guardians are in danger" crap. Even as the idea tugged at him, he reconsidered the wisdom of that action.

"Yeah, like I'm gonna knock on the door and tell this kid there's a big, bad demon out there gunning for all of us?" he chided himself. "Hi, you don't know me, my name's Dean and I've come to ask you to join me in the battle to stop darkness and evil from overtaking the world. Come be all you can be..."

He chuckled and shook his head, suddenly feeling very stupid for succumbing to Anderson's story and tagging along behind him on this seemingly bizarre quest. What did he really have to go on other than the older man's assurance that Guardians were dying and that Asmodeus was the culprit?

"Shoulda listened to Sam... trusted Sam's gut that something wasn't right about all this..." his inner voice chastised him.

But as he stood there, deciding whether or not to pack it in and head back to the motel, the prospective Guardian flung open the front door and came out to the porch, casually dropping down on the first step as he withdrew something from his pocket and began carefully cleaning it. Even with the diminishing light of late afternoon, Dean could clearly see the brilliant reflection sparkling off the golden object.

At first, he thought it might have been another coin, the object too small for him to make out from his vantage point. Grabbing the binoculars from the trunk, he zoomed in and saw that it was instead a simple band, similar to a man's wedding ring, but definitely larger and thicker than normal.

"Hmm, why couldn't I have gotten the ring?" Dean mumbled, lowering the glasses. "Would have saved me a crap-load of trouble back in the Louisiana swamp."

He idly reached for his own amulet, absently twirling it between his index finger and thumb and feeling its strange but somehow comforting tingle. He'd worn the talisman for so long now he was barely cognizant of the familiar prickling as it lay against his chest from day to day. But, once in a while, Dean could feel, *needed to feel*, its supernatural hum against his flesh.

Confident that Bowman was temporarily occupied, Dean glanced at his watch.

6:48

"Just great! I'm sitting here like an idiot, next to a park and playground. No, of course I don't look like some child predator. Honest officer, I'm just waiting for a friend to meet me here so we can go recruit soldiers to battle a demon. What? Am I a nutjob? Why would you think that officer?"

Dean carried on the sarcastic dialogue to himself, his annoyance growing as he looked around again for some sign of Anderson's pickup truck. When the street remained empty, he dug the keys from the pocket of his jeans with a disgruntled scowl determined to call it a night and get started on a good buzz. With any luck, he could be showered and sitting at a bar somewhere by eight, talking some brainless blonde into helping him work the *kinks* out of his bruised body.

His hand was reaching for the handle to the Impala when a thunderous crash stole Dean's attention back to the house across the street. Bowman had disappeared from his perch on the top step, only the white cloth he'd been using remained behind to mark his earlier presence.

Dean scanned the residence, his hand automatically reaching for the Colt 1911 tucked secretly inside his green jacket as he watched for any further sign of a disturbance.

Another loud bang emanated from the interior as the young hunter watched. Sparks flashed from behind the lower level window as the sound of breaking glass signaled some sort of conflict taking place inside.

Not hesitating any longer, Dean charged from his position beside the Impala, crossing the street in a dead run and taking the steps two at a time. He paused as he reached the front door, suddenly worried that maybe Bowman had just broken a lamp

by accident and how completely foolish he was going to look if he smashed down the man's door.

A harsh exchange of words, followed by an obvious pain-filled yell cleared Dean's conscience of worry. Rearing back, he planted the bottom of his booted foot against the thick oak of the door, mustering all the force his adrenaline pumped body could gather.

It gave with a screech, bits of wood from the frame shattering and flying off in a dozen different directions. Fully in hunter-mode, Dean moved slowly into the home, his eyes darting about as he sought what had caused the commotion while his ears remained alert for any sounds of more fighting.

"Sheriff's Department," he called out, his gun held before him as he skirted the living room.

The house remained ominously silent, any indication of the earlier clash now absent. As Dean moved from the first room back out into the hallway he spotted a wide smear of blood covering the corner of the wall.

"This is your last warning... come out with your hands up or I'll fire," he yelled as a flash of movement above caught his eye.

"Don't shoot... help me... please..."

The panic-filled voice called out from the second floor and Dean could hear the soft scrabbling of feet as they moved above the ceiling. He took the stairs slowly, reaching the first landing and keeping his back to the wall as he carefully swung around the turn, the .45's muzzle pointed ahead of his advance.

Reaching the top, the encroaching night outside plunged the second story into shadows. There were three rooms on the level, each obscured by a closed door. One near the top of the landing remained open, a tiny beam of light peeking out from the room and trickling into the hallway.

Dean advanced warily, his body tense as he listened for any indication of movement.

"Where are you? Mr. Bowman?"

A strangled cry answered Dean's call. The hunter bolted for the nearest closed door and the sound of the distressed Guardian. Standing to the side of the jamb he slowly tried the knob, twisting it counterclockwise and quietly pushing on the door.

It opened with a prolonged creak causing Dean to cringe as all chance of stealth was lost. He entered the dimly lit bedroom, his face wrinkling in disgust as he spotted the blood pool that was thickly spreading out across the hardwood floor.

With no body immediately visible, Dean's paranoia escalated ten-fold. There was simply too much blood for any human to have crawled away very far. Yet, as the hunter scouted the room, there wasn't any sign of a body, either alive or dead.

A soft cry trickled from the nearby closet, a mere whimper not unlike that of a small puppy. Reacting to the noise, Dean spun, his finger tensing on the trigger. He listened intently for the sob to be repeated, inching across the floor towards the closed door.

"Bowman?" he called out quietly, leaning in toward the wood panel.

When there was no response, the young hunter reached for the handle. Yanking the door open, he jumped in front of the opening, the automatic sweeping back and forth. Huddled on the floor beneath a mass of hanging clothing, the young college student sat cradling his right hand.

Dean scanned the supposed Guardian, eyeing the man's form as he recoiled further into the closet. Bowman's shirt was covered in blood from where he held his damaged hand. Dean couldn't see the exact extent of the injury, but from the amount of blood he knew it was more than a scratch. The rest of the young man's features were obscured by trails of red. Crisscrossed lacerations scored his face while deepening bruises peeked out from behind the wounds.

"Seth Bowman?" he asked tentatively.

The shaggy head lifted slowly, brown eyes wide with fright peered up at Dean.

"Don't hurt me..." the man pleaded.

Dean sucked in a breath. The bloodied face framed by a brown mop of hair was too similar to Sam's for comfort. Even though the eye color and features were different, visions of his brother, beaten, bleeding and left on the side of a deserted road in Texas haunted Dean. But Sam had survived, had recovered from the abuse suffered at Mia's hands just as he had. Still, seeing Bowman was too similar, too recent.

"Can you walk?" Dean managed finally, pushing aside the memory as he focused on the situation at hand.

"No...yes... I dunno," Bowman replied shakily. "He cut off my fingers..."

Dean jerked in revulsion as the young man lifted his mutilated hand, bloody stumps with jaggedly torn flesh remaining where his four fingers had once been attached.

"What the hell..." he muttered, unable to hide the shock from his voice even as he dug in his pocket for a handkerchief to cover the brutal wound.

"It's okay, just hang in there. I'll get you outta here, I promise. Where is *it* now?"

"It?" Bowman answered in confusion. "I don't know where the sonofabitch went. He attacked me when I came back into the house, beat the crap out of me and then pulled out this huge friggin' knife and chopped off half my hand."

"What did it... he... look like?" Dean questioned as he pulled the traumatized man up from his hiding place on the closet floor.

"I don't freakin' know. He was covered in black and had like a ski mask on. Can we just get the hell out of here please?"

"He took your ring? Is that why he cut off your fingers?" the hunter questioned.

But Bowman had enough of Dean's interrogation. Pushing the older man back with the fist of his uninjured hand, his eyes went wide in disbelief.

"Yes, he took the goddamn ring. How do you know about that? Why the hell did he do that?" the man demanded as suspicion mixed with his panic and fear.

"Do you know what that ring is?"

"It's a friggin' ring! My grandfather left it to me when he died a few years ago. I s'pose its worth some money, but damn, it wasn't worth this," Bowman shouted, raising his bloody hand.

He doesn't freakin' know... Dean thought with amazement. *The poor clueless jerk doesn't have the foggiest idea what in the world he's been toting around. How can that be?*

"Look kid, your grandfather screwed you to hell with that ring, not telling you what it was all about. But right now is not the time for a rerun of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. You just need to trust me that I'm one of the good guys," Dean snapped back reaching out to grab the sleeve of the young man's shirt. "Besides, if we don't get that damn ring back, you're gonna have worse things to worry about than learning to pick your nose with your left hand," he added with a smirk.

"Who the hell *are* you?" Bowman asked again, pulling away from Dean's grasp.

"I'm the guy that's trying to save your stupid ass. Now come on," he ordered with a rough tug on the arm of the unaware Guardian.

Dragging the young man along behind him, Dean moved cautiously toward the hallway, one hand on Bowman while the other held the .45 out front. He peeked around the corner of the door, checking the hall to be sure it was safe.

Secure, Dean led his charge, heading toward the stairway, feeling certain that whoever, or whatever, had taken the sacred ring was now long gone. As Bowman reached the top of the steps, Dean just scant inches behind him, a dark shadow surged from the nearby open door, slamming into the hunter and knocking him up and over the railing.

Dean fell through open space, his arms flailing as he tried to stop his fall, fingertips skimming one of the balusters but unable to find any purchase as he plummeted downward. In less than a heartbeat, he crashed into the hard edge of a

tread several feet below, landing with a painful grunt before he tumbled down a few more steps and finally came to a halt.

Dazed, his chest screaming as his ribcage reacted to the impact, Dean could only lay there as the pain refused to let him move. As his body protested the too-recent additional abuse, his brain threatened to shut it all down, dimming his vision even as he struggled to remain conscious.

“Noooooo...”

The scream pierced his dulled mind, bringing him more alert even though he couldn't seem to focus on the source. Forcing himself to an elbow, Dean peered back up the stairway, spotting Bowman a split second before the young man lurched forward, a look of shock and horror frozen on his youthful face as he collapsed limply.

Dean struggled to his knees, well aware that his attacker was still somewhere on the second floor. He didn't have to look far as the intruder appeared at the top of the stairs, a large, blood-coated knife held offensively in his hand while the rest of his body was covered in dark black.

“You sonofabitch,” Dean shouted. “Who the hell are you?”

“Who the hell are you?” a deep voice challenged.

Glancing at the still body of Seth Bowman, Dean felt the anger rise up in his chest.

“I'm the guy that's gonna kick your ass and send you packing back down to the Pit,” Dean promised with a smirk.

“You first...” the stranger replied, diving down the stairs and colliding again with the hunter.

The two rolled down the remaining steps, Dean fighting to protect his body even as he grappled with the masked man. He managed to land a solid right even as they tumbled, satisfied by the deep grunt as his knuckles connected with the intruder's jaw.

They landed in a tangle of arms and legs, but Dean made it to his knees first, immediately searching out his attacker as he prepared to continue the fight. The man was on him in an instant, delivering a solid kick to the hunter's back that dropped Dean down to the floor.

Dean rolled over, ignoring the fire that had blossomed along his left kidney. He knew he had to get back up, had to get to his feet before he sustained any more injuries. As the masked man came in once more, Dean kicked out with his foot, catching his assailant and sweeping his legs out from under him.

There was a loud “humpf” of air as the intruder's body dropped to the hardwood. In that instant, Dean was standing again, towering over his adversary as he loudly sucked in air, fighting the urge to face plant right back down on the floor.

“I bet you thought you were just gonna waltz in here and kick some pathetic Guardian's ass. But let me tell you something you sonofabitch, you aren't getting away with it as long as I'm still breathing,” Dean shouted.

“How 'bout I fix that little problem for you,” the intruder snarled back, rising up on one arm.

Dean laughed at the threat. Rearing back, he kicked the man's body as hard as he could, grinning broadly as he heard the resulting grunt.

“Hurts like a bitch, doesn't it?” he mocked, stepping back and allowing the shadowy figure to return to his feet.

Dean was itching for a fight; after a week of inactivity in Iowa, his impatient wait for Anderson, and then finding Bowman, brutalized and bleeding, the hunter wanted nothing more than to extract a pound of flesh from the mysterious attacker. Still, if Anderson was right and this was actually Asmodeus wearing some poor slob's skin, then Dean was in for more than the average barroom brawl.

“You don't know who you're screwing with.” The darkly cloaked man sneered as though he could read the hunter's mind.

“Yeah, you're evil, whatever. I've wasted a few of your kind before,” Dean threw back.

Hunter and intruder launched at each other simultaneously, colliding in the center of the lower level hall in a flurry of fists.

Dean ducked the first right, weaving underneath before popping back up and throwing his own. The punch connected and he followed it up with a second, each aimed for the cut out portion of the ski-mask that allowed a small glimpse of the man's eyes, nose and mouth.

The next punch was blocked, but Dean still managed to land a jarring left behind it that caused an explosive blast of blood from beneath the knitted cover. The man behind the mask staggered backward briefly, but quickly regained his footing and continued advancing on Dean with a menacing laugh.

As much as Dean appreciated drawing blood from his opponent, he didn't have the chance to gloat over the river of red that flowed out from the mask as his foe's knuckles caught him solidly on the temple.

The room around him darkened as Dean dropped to one knee, his head exploding in pain even as all semblance of balance was lost. He opened his eyes, struggling to locate and focus on his adversary amid the brilliant flashes of light burning behind his left eye.

"Not laughing so much now are you?" the deep voice asked.

Through the fog that was cloying at the edges of his consciousness, Dean fought to rise up. Enduring two more blows to his back, the hunter struggled to protect himself from any further abuse. Blind desperation fed adrenaline into his system giving Dean the added burst he needed to crawl forward and grab the intruder's large blade that had been lost in their tumble down the stairs.

Lashing out, the hunter connected with the man's leg, tearing open a long furrow through both the man's jeans and flesh. Blood rushed to the surface, staining the black fabric even darker.

The intruder jerked away with a hiss of pain even as Dean readied himself to strike again. Inches higher and the blade would have taken out the hamstring, a few inches lower and it would have severed the Achilles. But as it was, it merely scored the calf, painful and bloody, but not enough to cripple the assassin.

As Dean rose to his feet, swaying like a scrub pine in a strong wind, the dark-covered figure turned and dashed for the front door. The hunter staggered after him, following his opponent out onto the front porch and down the steep stairs to the sidewalk below.

He tried to keep up with the injured killer, but his twice-concussed head had other ideas. Pulling up short as he neared the neighborhood park, Dean felt the dizziness return with a vengeance. Breathless and unsteady, he approached the tree line that hemmed in the recreation path. Switching the bloody knife to his left hand he reached for his automatic, groaning ruefully as he remembered losing the weapon in the fall over the balcony rail.

Night had enveloped the town while Dean had been fighting inside the residence and the resulting blackness made it nearly impossible to see anything lurking in the shadows of the Scotch Pines. He hated going in with nothing more than the blade, but there was no way Dean was willing to let the bastard get away with murdering Bowman, not to mention the dead man's ring.

"Come on out here, you coward," Dean taunted, hoping to draw the man out. "Don't tell me you're afraid to face me again? What will all the other demons say?"

"Demons? Are you brain damaged? Did I hit you in the head too hard?" the voice shouted back at him from beyond the trees.

Dean tracked the sound, pushing past the branches and venturing further into the park. He moved cautiously, his ears alert for any noise, his eyes straining to pick up any movement. Across the lot, he spotted a shadow ducking through the door to the covered picnic area.

He crept closer to the children's slide, pushing past the swings that swung lazily in the light wind. Skirting carefully toward the pavilion, Dean kept his back against the

hard wood of the building. Inching near the door, he held his breath, adrenaline making his heart pound as he looked at the bloodied blade in his hand.

"Nothing like taking a knife to a demon fight," he muttered quietly. "Oh well, standing here ain't getting it done."

Reaching for the handle, he pulled the door open, swinging inside and seeking out his quarry. His heart pounding in his ears, Dean scanned the interior, eagerly hunting for the assassin. The place was small and held few hiding spots. It only took a moment for the hunter to realize that it was empty.

"Losing your touch, there Winchester. Letting your eyes play tricks on you," he chastised himself.

Disgusted, Dean headed back for the exit. Just at the doorway, the intruding moonlight shone down on a smear of fresh blood coating the edge of the frame. It brought him on guard instantly, his eyes once more searching for the wounded killer.

The moon suddenly drifted behind thick clouds, plunging Dean into total darkness. He turned back, curious as to where the light had gone on what had been a clear night sky.

He saw the tree branch rushing toward him, the rough edges of the bark standing out as it zeroed in toward his face. Dean threw up an arm to shield his head but it was a fraction late as the limb caught him under the jaw and snapped his head back.

He dropped to the ground, the night suddenly illuminated with brilliant flashes of light as he fought to remain conscious. But as his body told him to "go to hell," Dean's eyes slid closed, his last conscious thought was wondering why there was a ninja standing over him.

"Nice try... but not good enough," the dark-clothed man sneered.

American Falls Reservoir

Sam awoke to his stomach protesting and threatening to turn inside out. Nausea rolled over him in waves as bile rose in his throat and left an equally noxious taste in his mouth.

He swallowed it back down, instantly regretting it as the acid burned the back of his throat and most of his upper esophagus. Apparently, the combination of being strangled into unconsciousness and leftover gastroenteritis was something more than his abused G.I. tract was willing to tolerate.

Reflexively, he tried to lift his hand to his mouth, but the extremity wouldn't respond.

"Great, tied up," he acknowledged ruefully.

Glancing about his surroundings, the dark, damp smell confused him. The stench of decay and rank water made him recall the time he'd woken up in the sewers of St. Louis. But this smell wasn't quite as putrid, more that it resembled a chemical odor rather than the scent of death.

Good, maybe it's not a skinwalker then...

"Where the hell am I?" he questioned, tugging against the rope that encircled his upper body.

The sound of rushing water pricked his hearing. Echoing loudly, it was near, yet not.

He twisted his head around to look for the flowage, regretting it as the movement caused dizziness which in turn only made his stomach squirm more. Closing his eyes, he waited for his head and belly to calm, determined not to puke while he was tied up tighter than a stripper's bustier.

He smiled briefly at the thought, wondering if Dean had somehow wormed into his subconscious and left behind his usual lewd point of view.

Dean?

Sam panicked slightly as his memory of the dark-clothed assailant replayed in his head. What if the man had waited for Dean to return? What if Dean was hurt or worse? If he was alive, wouldn't he be here too?

"Dean?" Sam called out tentatively.

He waited, holding his breath as he alternately hoped and feared that his brother might answer. If Dean was here with him, then the chance of rescue was fairly slim. If he wasn't, then what might have happened to him?

"Dean?" he tried again.

"Save your breath, no one's coming to help you," a deep voice answered from the shadows.

Sam turned his head toward the direction of the noise. From out of a tunnel, a figure appeared. Still wearing the black mask, in the better lighting, Sam could see snips of blond hair sneaking out from underneath the knit cap. Slightly shorter than Sam, the newcomer was much stockier, biceps and chest straining the material of the gray t-shirt that covered his upper body. Behind the disguise, Sam could still see startling blue-green eyes staring back at him.

"Who are you? What do you want with me?" the younger Winchester queried.

The man's laugh was low and venomous as he casually approached Sam.

"Does a name matter? Will it make you feel any better to know who I am as you die?"

"Fine," Sam snarled. "I'm good with calling you 'asshole' for now. So, you mind telling me why the hell you broke into my motel room and dragged me here?"

The man's laughter rose as he drew closer, pacing in front of the hunter as he looked him over with an appraising eye.

"I had my reasons. I don't think I owe you any explanation, seeing how you're pretty much my prisoner right now. You're not quite what I expected."

Sam grunted, straining against the ropes. "Sorry to disappoint you. What did you expect?"

"Someone stronger, considering what I'd heard about you. I figured you'd give me more of a fight."

...what I heard about you...

His brows knitted together as Sam considered the implication of those words. How did this man know him? What had he heard? Was this Asmodeus? Had the demon somehow tapped into the Hell Quarterly Newsletter and found out all about Sam and his bizarre powers?

"Anderson was telling the truth?" Sam silently questioned. *Was this the demon that was after the Guardians, after Dean?*

"Christo..." Sam shouted at his captor.

The man whirled around, eyes glaring from the cut-out portion of the mask. Bending down close to the young hunter, he grabbed Sam roughly by his hair.

"What the hell is your dysfunction?" he shouted.

Crap! Crap, crap, crap and even more crap! Sam thought to himself. The guy was human!

Somehow that information really didn't bring much comfort to the captive man. Not that he had wanted to face Asmodeus, but as Dean had commented long ago...

"Demons I get, people are just crazy!"

Sam pulled away from the man's grasp, offering his best glare in return. He wasn't afraid now, not that he had been before, but *human* meant that he still had a chance of escape. *Human* meant that Dean stood a chance of taking this guy.

Assuming Dean could find him... assuming Dean even knew he was gone... assuming Dean hadn't already been attacked and killed in the motel room.

Not smart to assume anything, Sammy, he rebuked himself. *What's the joke? When you assume something you make an ass out of you and me.*

"What the hell is so damn funny?" the man demanded.

"You are!" Sam smirked. "What are you, Quasimodo or something, that you have to wear a mask? If you're gonna kill me then why are you afraid to let me see your face?"

"I have my reasons. Besides, it keeps my prey at a disadvantage."

"Oh yeah, 'cause being tied up like a Thanksgiving turkey didn't quite have the intended effect?" Sam snarked.

He was answered with a swift backhand, the man's fist connecting along the side of Sam's face with a resounding "thwack."

The hunter spat out blood from the resulting split lip, taking small satisfaction when the glob hit the man's boot. His captor jumped backwards trying to avoid the wet missile, hissing in pain as he hopped on his left leg, clearly favoring the right as a red wetness blossomed on the leg of his jeans.

He's hurt!

That knowledge nipped at Sam's mind. He knew he hadn't done anything to wound his attacker during the struggle at the motel. What had happened then? Was it Dean? Had his brother already battled the man and managed to get in a few hits?

If Dean had, and the man was now here – alive and breathing – then what had happened to Dean? No way would his brother just let the intruder walk away. Not if he was physically able to stop him.

His mind whirling with questions, his chest tightening with dread, Sam forced himself to focus on his situation.

He couldn't think about his brother being injured or worse, he needed to find a way to get himself free.

"What happened to your leg?" he taunted. "Cut yourself shaving?"

"Real funny! How 'bout I give you something to really laugh about?" the masked man snapped back.

"I'm guessing that's a pretty empty threat right now. You want me for something or you wouldn't have kept me alive this long," Sam observed.

"You're pretty smart. Must be the brains of the team. I should have done my homework better. I got a little sloppy on this one, got excited and jumped too soon."

"Pretty stupid on your part then. So, taking me wasn't the prize? Lemme guess, you were looking for a Guardian?" Sam queried.

"Like I said, you're pretty smart. Yeah, I was looking for the Guardian. Didn't realize you weren't it until I was already in the room. Mistaken identity, I grabbed the wrong Winchester. But no worries, I'll rectify that situation real soon," his captor vehemently informed him.

Mistaken identity, I grabbed the wrong Winchester. But no worries, I'll rectify that situation real soon.

Dean was alive! Otherwise, why hold Sam, why say that he was going to fix his mistake?

"Dean will kick your ass, dude. You don't want to piss off my brother. But I have a feeling it's too late to rectify that particular situation."

The man stalked closer, his hand oddly held behind his back.

"Oooh, I'm shaking in my shoes. You've got me scared now. Maybe I should call your brother and tell him how sorry I am that I took you. Maybe if I promise to return you without harming a hair on your head, he won't hurt me."

Whipping his arm out, Sam's captor brandished a long shining dagger.

Sam couldn't help but be mesmerized by the golden hue of the blade, its length reflecting the miniscule light in the place and making it dance crazily on the concrete walls that surrounded them.

He stared, unmoving even as the knife plunged downward in a lazy arc, spearing into the center of his thigh and burrowing deep into the muscle. Crying out as a white hot fire followed the trail of the blade, Sam felt the world spin around him as his stomach instantly revolted against the onrush of nauseating pain.

If going in had been bad, then the removal of the blade was far from a relief as Sam fought back the urge to vomit. The sickening, sucking sound of the knife being pulled out of the wound seemed several decibels louder than it should have been and it served to only make the young captive even more ill.

Dazed, his mind swimming in a pain-filled haze, Sam was barely aware as the man quickly slipped the tip of the dagger underneath the tail of his outer shirt. Yanking upward, he ripped through fabric, the buttons giving way and flinging into the air.

With no regard for gentleness, the masked man tore the tattered shirt free; half of it remained behind still swathing Sam's right shoulder. As Sam looked on from beneath the mop of hair that dangled over his eyes, his captor jammed the piece of shirt down into the hemorrhaging wound with a vicious thrust and a sadistic laugh.

Pain overwhelmed him and Sam's head slumped forward. Clinging to consciousness by sheer force of will, Sam's mind was still preoccupied by the strange gold blade.

"I bet your brother comes running now, smartass," the masked figure sneered, holding the blood-soaked remnant of shirt up for Sam to see.

"I bet he still kicks your ass when he does..." Sam returned with a gasp.

"Are you willing to bet your life on it?" The tainted dagger flashed in front of Sam's face as the stranger threatened him.

"I'm willing to bet that you'll have more to worry about than that wound on your leg when Dean gets his hands on you," Sam promised wearily, the continuing blood loss and earlier vomiting exhausting the last of his reserves.

Blue-green eyes narrowed as the man leaned in close enough that Sam could feel his hot breath against his face.

"I'll tell you what... you hang on to that illusion and when I get back from dealing with your brother, you and I can have a long *discussion* about who's tougher."

Sam remained silent, his mind going blank for some snappy retort.

"What? Nothing to say? Well, you just take it easy and enjoy the accommodations. I'll be back as soon as I've taken care of your brother. He ought to be regaining consciousness and picking the tree bark out of his teeth around now."

Sam watched as the man whirled around and disappeared back down the access tunnel, the piece of bloody shirt in one hand, the mysterious blade in the other. The younger sibling strained vigorously against the rope that held him tied to the column, desperate to get free.

He had the utmost confidence in Dean being able to take care of himself in a reasonably fair fight. The problem was, Sam knew with the same degree of certainty that once his brother saw that shirt, Dean probably wouldn't fight at all.

Alameda Park Pocatello, Idaho

"Hey! Hey... wake up!"

"Go 'way, Sam. My head's killing me..."

Dean swatted weakly at the voice that seemed determined to rouse him from the quiet oblivion he'd been enjoying. He had no desire to wake up to the telltale hangover and its accompanying head-banging, eye bulging, stomach churning symptoms, not to mention enduring his younger brother's looks of disapproval. There was nothing he enjoyed more than getting loose with a few beers, but the payback the next morning was definitely Hell on earth.

"Wake your ass up!"

The voice, more insistent this time and followed by a rough shake to his shoulder, forced Dean to crack open one eye. Intent on finding Sam so he could return a solid

right to his brother's jaw, he raised his head until the fuzzy form of a face came into view.

"Gonna smack that smug smile off your face, Sammy," he threatened, lifting a hand to his head to help steady the swirling scenery that filled his vision.

"You must've gotten hit pretty hard on that head of yours. You're pretty scrambled there, Winchester. Gimme your hand and I'll pull you up."

Dean came more alert. No way did his brother ever... EVER... offer to help him after a night of drinking. More likely, Sam would yell loudly, bang every door in the motel and wave obnoxious-smelling food under his nose.

"Sammy?"

"Try again..."

Dean pried both eyes open, straining until the face before him came into focus.

"Aw crap," he groaned seeing Anderson hovering over him.

Memory rushed back in a tidal wave, carrying with it the pain and acknowledgement that he'd come out on the ass-end of the fight. Struggling up to a seated position, Dean pushed the elder Guardian's proffered hand away with a growl.

"I'm fine," he snarled. "Where the hell were you?"

"I got tied up with something," Anderson replied, reoffering a steadying hand as Dean managed to make it to a knee, swaying drunkenly.

"Tied up? Dude, that bastard was here. I came out to help your ass save Guardians from a friggin' demon and all you can say is you got 'tied up'?"

"What do you want, a box of chocolates and some flowers? I'm sorry. I was a little late," the blond offered, stepping back as the young hunter climbed to his feet.

"I'm sure Bowman will appreciate your apology... well if he was still alive!" Dean spat angrily, dragging the back of his hand across his forehead.

It came away wet, blood coating the skin on his hand. He winced, knowing that the stitches Sam had placed at the edge of his hairline yesterday had likely torn free.

"Did you hear what I said?" he repeated when Anderson remained silent.

"Yeah. I saw his body," the Guardian finally answered. He reached behind his back and pulled out Dean's .45, handing the pistol over as he continued. "I found this on the floor back at the house. Ya know, it's too bad that Asmodeus managed to get Bowman's ring."

"Ha! I'm sure Bowman would be really broken up about that. Do you know that the kid didn't have a clue what he was carrying around? Inherited the damn thing from his grandfather and the bastard never told him," Dean grumbled, snagging the weapon roughly from the other man's hand.

He held the Colt firmly in his fist, his hand whitening as he gripped the butt tightly.

He was angry. Angry because he knew first-hand what it was like to be kept in the dark about important things like sacred pieces of Swords and how that ignorance usually came back to bite you in the ass. Angry because he hadn't been able to save the young man, breaking his promise to get him to safety. And angry because it could have been different if only Anderson would have been there on time.

"Come on, let's get you back and cleaned up," the older man suggested. "There's nothing more we can do here. We need to regroup and figure out our next move."

"Next move? I'll tell you what my next move is gonna be. I'm going back to the motel, taking a hot shower, finding the closest bar - hopefully one with dollar beer night - and then after I wake up tomorrow morning, I'm putting you and this stupid friggin' crusade of yours as far as possible in my rearview mirror." Dean snapped.

"You can't be serious?" Anderson asked incredulously.

Dean glared at the older man. "Does this face look like I'm joking?" He waited a heartbeat before continuing. "Bowman's dead and the poor bastard never even knew why. I just got my ass handed to me because you were 'tied up.' I was a freakin' idiot for ever listening to you in the first place. My brother was right, I went into this blind and I promised him I wouldn't make that mistake again." *Once with Mia was enough... and look how that turned out.*

“So you’re just going to walk off and let Asmodeus kill other Guardians? You’re gonna let him recast the Sword?” Anderson demanded.

“Let him? I didn’t exactly stop him tonight. And by the way... aren’t you the pot calling the kettle black? I don’t exactly see a lot in your ‘save column’,” Dean shot back.

He stood there, hazel eyes full of fury as he waited for the blond man’s response.

“Look. I know you’re upset and I’m sorry that I didn’t get here on time. There’s not many of us left so every single Guardian is critical right now, every piece of Solomon’s Sword is important. We can’t just give up because of a single failure. Innocent lives are at stake here, Dean. Are you going to turn your back on the likes of Bowman?”

Bowman – who died never knowing why, who was a Guardian like Dean, and who had eerily reminded him of Sam.

I do this job because I want to help people, protect them, save them. I can’t walk away from this now.

He’d used that rationale on Sam just yesterday morning and he’d meant it. One day hadn’t changed his determination to carry out that oath.

“Fine,” he acquiesced. “We’ll go back to the motel and figure this all out. But next time, we’re doing things my way or I’m done.”

Stalking off toward the Impala, pent up anger and frustration gave Dean the energy he needed to keep from falling on his face. Bruised and exhausted, he was in no mood to play games with Anderson. Especially when he anticipated what was waiting for him back at the motel.

Sammy... and knowing his sibling... a big healthy dose of “I told you so.”

Mountain View Motor Lodge

Dean pulled into the parking lot, stopping in front of room eleven but remaining behind the wheel for an extended moment as he stared at the curtained window of the room. The light was still on, which meant Sam was probably sitting there waiting to pounce on him as soon as he walked through the door.

It was nearly nine-thirty; not especially late, but definitely later than Dean had anticipated being when he departed for Bowman’s earlier. He’d left Sam nursing an upset stomach and with the promise that he wouldn’t be long.

“Just gonna meet Anderson at this Bowman dude’s place. Talk to the guy... and I’ll be back,” he’d guaranteed.

But that had been a while ago, hours robbed from him while he lay unconscious in Alameda Park.

Sam was sure to be surly, and that’s before he got a look at Dean’s reopened head wound or heard him recount the evening’s events.

Dean wasn’t looking forward to having his brother replace the torn sutures, knowing he’d be trapped in place while his sibling reminded him of all the ways this mission could and had gone south. Still, if he had to admit it, Dean was pretty much feeling that way himself. All Sam could do was reaffirm the doubts already circulating in his mind.

He was a hunter after all, not a recruiter. Right? His job was to track down and waste supernatural creatures, not run around the country trying to assemble some rag-tag army of Sword babysitters.

Saving people, hunting things... his words came back to haunt him.

Emphasis on the “saving,” but that hadn’t worked out so well tonight had it?

“Okay Winchester, sitting here bleeding isn’t solving any problems. Better go face the music and maybe then you can tap into Sam’s gigantic brain to help figure all this out,” Dean muttered, pushing open the car door and stepping out into the cooling night air.

Over his shoulder, Dean heard Anderson pull up in his truck as he moved toward the motel room door. He thought about waving the older man off, not particularly thrilled about having the Guardian's presence while he talked with Sam.

He was still irritated by Anderson's tardiness, silently apportioning part of the blame for Bowman's death to the Guardian's late arrival. Yet, as much as he wanted to lash out at the blond man, deep down Dean's conscience assessed all responsibility for the failure on his own head.

He was the demon hunter; he'd dealt with their ilk most of his adult life. He should have been better prepared, should have been on-guard, and should have fought harder.

The recrimination that ate at his psyche suddenly gave way to panic as Dean opened the motel room door. All thoughts of Guardians, demons or even the pounding pain in his head suddenly vanished as he stared, mouth agape, at the scene before him.

"Sammy?" he called out, slowly entering the damaged room.

The chair and table were overturned, Sam's laptop and papers scattered about the floor as though a small zephyr had ripped through the place. The lamp lay broken, its body cracked in two, the bulb still weakly giving off a faint glow like a dying gasp.

"Sammy... where the hell are you?" Dean shouted rushing through the room.

He knew his brother wasn't there just as surely as his gut told him that Sam was in trouble even before he saw the small smear of blood on the carpet.

"What's going on?" Anderson asked as he came to the edge of the doorway.

Dean whirled on him, his anger returned and augmented by worry for Sam.

"My brother's friggin' missing. Or taken, I'm guessing," he announced bitterly, digging into a knocked over gear bag to retrieve a spare clip.

"What are you gonna do?"

"I'm going after him."

"How're you going to do that? Do you know where he is? Do you even know if he's alive?"

Anderson's question made Dean's insides knot spastically. He had to believe that Sam was alive.

"Face it, Dean, Asmodeus got Sam. He's as good as gone," the older man suggested.

"Screw you. Sam's not dead," Dean insisted vehemently as he jammed the new clip into the .45.

His heart hammering with rage he turned on the older Guardian.

"Where the hell were you tonight?" he demanded, the automatic held threateningly.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Tonight, when you were supposed to be meeting me at Bowman's, where were you actually? What kept you 'tied up'?"

Dean watched Anderson's face for any sign of guilt or subterfuge, his gut yelling at him that the mysterious man was hiding something.

"I had to take care of something. It's none of your business," the blond steadfastly insisted.

"It IS my business. My brother is gone, Bowman's dead and you just happened to be absent. Seems like you had plenty of time to come here for Sammy and then get back to Bowman's," Dean snarled accusingly.

"Why would I do that, Dean? That doesn't make a bit of sense. Look, I know you're upset about your brother, but you're not focusing on the real threat here, the true culprit."

"I think I am looking at him. Tell me, Chris, I noticed you limping when we were walking back to the vehicles. What happened to your leg?"

"It's nothing. An old knee injury that gives me problems once in a while," Anderson refuted.

Dean's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Asmodeus took your brother," Anderson offered. "Consider Sam a casualty of war. I know it hurts but you need to accept it and move on."

"You'd like that wouldn't you? You'd like nothing more than for me to believe my brother's dead. You didn't like Sam anyway."

"He was holding you back. You have a destiny, Dean, a calling. Sam would have kept you tied to this life," Anderson complained.

"Stop talking about him like he's dead," the young hunter shouted.

"Asmodeus wouldn't have left him alive."

Dean quieted, his mind reflecting on the Guardian's statement.

Asmodeus wouldn't have left him alive.

No way! He refused to believe it. Haris couldn't kill Sam. Eli hadn't. Lucifer tried and got his ass handed back to him. Even Mia, demon bitch that she was, hadn't prevailed against his brother.

No, Sam couldn't be dead. Besides, if Asmodeus had killed his younger sibling, then where was Sam's body? Surely the demon wouldn't have had any reason to remove it?

"No," Dean exclaimed, turning back to rummage through the green canvas bag to retrieve more gear. "Sammy's still alive. He's out there somewhere."

Dean ignored Anderson's loud sigh of disgust. He continued gathering weapons, tucking his long Bowie into the back of his belt and then tucking the silver flask filled with Holy Water into the interior pocket of his jacket.

"All right... fine... I'll help you find your brother and get him back. But after we do, then we move on to finding the next Guardian. Agreed?" Anderson offered.

The young hunter twisted back around to face the older man. He stared into the blue-green eyes, suspicion still nagging at the back of his mind.

"Okay, agreed," he consented. "First, we get Sam back, and then we'll talk about our next move."

Anderson nodded in agreement as Dean went back to collecting weapons. With his back to the older Guardian, he glanced up when a flash of light reflected in the dresser mirror.

Spinning around, the .45 automatically appearing in his hand, he caught Anderson as the man pulled his own pistol.

Firing without thinking, the bullet caught the blond in the upper right side of the chest, throwing Anderson backward against the wall. The man sagged to the floor, a wide trail of blood appearing behind him on the white drywall.

"You stupid sonofabitch!" Dean growled. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"I was only gonna knock you out. Just till you came to your senses," Anderson gasped, his hand pressing against the wound.

"Where the hell is my brother?" Dean demanded, coming to tower over the fallen man.

The nagging voice was now screaming in his head, warning him that his suspicions about the older Guardian were probably true.

"Dammit, tell me where Sam is or I swear to God I'll put the next one in your knee," he hissed, the Colt aimed down at the man's extended leg.

"I...don't... know," Anderson croaked, his eyes sluggishly drooping closed.

"First your knees and then your hands; so help me, I'll mess you up so bad you'll have to have some hag of a nurse spoon feed you and wipe your ass for years," Dean promised.

He waited for a response that never came. Looking down, Anderson had passed out, the shock of the bullet and resultant blood loss having taken its toll.

Dean nudged the nearest leg with the toe of his boot, still not trusting that the older man was truly unconscious. When Anderson didn't move, the hunter loosed a more forceful kick, watching as the limp body slid over to the floor.

He felt a little guilt at the unwarranted abuse, but it quickly passed as his eyes fell on the small spot of blood nearby on the carpet.

Sam's blood... it had to be!

More determined to find his brother, Dean turned back and knelt beside Anderson's still body. Roughly patting down the pockets, he found nothing more than the man's wallet and the small gold coin the Guardian had been absently toying with the day before in Iowa.

He held up the ancient sword remnant, shivering instantly as the electrical charge started at his fingertips and ravaged its way up his arm. It didn't hurt, but it didn't feel good either. As the sensation of pins and needles increased, becoming more intense and threatening to seize his chest, Dean hastily replaced the golden coin back in Anderson's pocket.

It was almost as though the coin knew of the attempted theft and had taken steps to prevent its separation from its keeper. Dean wondered if others felt the same thing when they touched the amulet. Certainly every demon had reacted negatively to contact with the necklace, but what about others?

As he considered the implications, he thought about reaching back and taking Anderson's coin.

Serve the bastard right to go through being separated from his piece of the Sword.

Yet even as he considered it, Dean knew he'd never put any Guardian through that. He vividly recalled the two times he'd been separated from the amulet. Death was preferable to the agonizing pain and feeling of emptiness that being stripped of the amulet caused.

Turning for the door, Dean headed for Anderson's truck, hopeful that there was some useful clue in the vehicle. Stepping out into the heavy darkness, he was standing just between the Impala and the Ford when the loud screech of skidding tires tearing into the parking lot stole his attention.

Instantly taking cover, Dean ducked down behind the front fender of the Chevy, the .45 at ready as the black SUV peeled into the lot.

His finger tensed on the trigger, Dean held his breath as the dark truck slid to a stop several yards away from the Impala. The window glided down and Dean waited for the end of a muzzle to appear. Or worse.

With his free hand, he reached into the pocket of his jacket, pulling out the silver flask and spinning the cap off with his thumb.

Human or demon, he was ready.

But as he crouched there, his heart hammering underneath his sternum, an object was tossed from the window, flittering down to the asphalt like a dying ember.

As quickly as it appeared, the SUV tore from the motel lot, the rank smell of burning rubber hanging on the air and burning Dean's nostrils. When he was sure it was safe, he moved from his cover, his eyes still reflexively darting back and forth as he cautiously watched for the vehicle to return.

Taking a slow, guarded step toward the discarded object Dean's eyes widened in dread as he recognized the torn piece of fabric.

Sam's shirt!

Lifting the tattered remains of the clothing, the older Winchester grimaced as he spotted the dark crimson that stained the familiar material.

Blood!

Sam's shirt... Sam's blood...

His heart jammed up in his throat, Dean clenched the fabric tightly in his fist and silently swore.

American Falls Reservoir

The burning agony slowly gave way to a pulsating throb in his thigh as Sam tried to remain as still as possible. Blood was still seeping from the wound beyond the capacity of the denim to absorb. He could feel it running down his leg like perspiration on a hot summer day, sticky as it coagulated against his skin, irritating as it clung in the crease of skin behind his knee. As much as he needed to get free, right now all Sam could think about was scratching at the incessant itch.

He squirmed against the thick ropes, straining in hopes of finding some give in the snug binding. But his masked captor had been too thorough. Three separate lengths of cord held Sam securely to a concrete support; one around his ankles, another around his chest and the third around his wrists that continued on up and around his neck.

Redundant, but effective.

"Dammit," Sam groaned, finally giving up his futile struggle, his head falling back slightly to rest against the post. There was no evident way to pull on the bonds without effectively strangling himself.

Beyond him, he could hear the faint rush of running water. Not running exactly, but surging, the resulting din was loud within the chamber. It was more than just the noise of someone leaving open a tap, more like he was near a dam or waterfall of some sort.

Curiosity chewed at Sam's brain as he dug through his memory to determine where he was being held. He hadn't done a ton of research on Pocatello, mostly because this wasn't really a hunt in his mind. He'd been so consumed by digging up information on the Sword that he hadn't done his customary check on the surroundings.

He mentally kicked himself, not that knowing his whereabouts would be particularly helpful in getting him free, but more that he'd given Dean the whole speech about "going in blind."

"Good going, Sam. Nothing like setting the example," he bemoaned. "Can't wait to hear Dean throw that one back in my face. Not that he won't be giving me enough crap about getting taken by a human... *again*."

The only reason that he'd lived down the whole episode involving the Benders was because he readily countered that Dean had been blindsided by a thirteen-year-old girl. For a long time both brothers had used the incident in Hibbing to taunt as well as torment each other. But after a while, both the passing of time as well as their involvement in more dangerous hunts faded the memory of that particular escapade. In fact, neither of them had brought it up in nearly a year or more, the only real reminder being the still vibrant scar on Dean's chest where Pa Bender had tortured him with the red hot poker.

It was only afterwards that Dean had revealed the vicious injury, quickly brushing off Sam's concern over the wound as he chastised him for being taken in the first place. It was a stark glimpse into the protective nature of his brother's psyche, one that Sam had somehow forgotten about while he'd been away at Stanford but was renewed once the brothers were back on the road together.

"Dean must be going crazy right now," Sam mused.

"Aw, isn't that sweet. You're worried about your brother when you should be worried about yourself."

Sam startled at the sudden deep voice. Caught up in the memory, he hadn't seen or heard the man come down the tunnel. Hovering over him again, Sam saw that his captor still wore his standard black ski-mask.

"Ever considered a wardrobe makeover? Maybe that *Queer Eye* show would be willing to take you on," he mouthed sarcastically.

The man swung his hand back, feigning delivery of a blow that never landed. For his part, Sam maintained his steely glare, refusing to flinch and prepared to take whatever the bastard had to offer.

"You're a real smartass aren't you? I'd almost respect you if I didn't know all that bravado was only for show," he mocked.

"Untie me. I'll put on one helluva *show* for you," Sam returned.

"Oh, I don't think so. You see, I still need you for now. I've planted the bait, but until your brother is dead at my feet, I can't afford to take any chances."

Sam laughed, shaking his head. "If you think I have a smart mouth, wait till you meet my brother. Dean's one of the only people I know that has a wisecrack for every situation in a fight. It makes a nice compliment to his left hook."

"I'm not worried about your brother. I've already taken him once. I know what he has in his bag of tricks. I must say, it was a nice workout. Maybe I'll even give him a go at me again. Doesn't matter really... the end result will be the same."

"Now who's being cocky? I hate to break it to you mister, but whatever went down between you and my brother before won't be anything like what you're gonna get if Dean thinks you've done something to me," Sam advised him.

"See, I think you're wrong about that. I think that all I'm gonna have to do is offer to trade your life for your brother's piece of the Sword and he'll gladly turn it over to me."

Sam cringed inwardly. He tried to mask his reaction, but inwardly, he knew the man's assumptions were dead-on.

As certain as he was that the sun would rise in the morning, Sam knew his brother wouldn't hesitate to offer up his own life to save him. Giving up the amulet wouldn't even cause Dean to blink. He'd done it before; a Vegas bookie wouldn't touch the odds that he would again, consequences be damned.

"Why are you doing this?" Sam asked.

Engage him in conversation, stall for time until you can find a way to get out of here, he told himself.

"Why am I doing what? Tolerating your irritating mouth or resisting the urge to knock your teeth out?"

"Killing Guardians, taking their pieces of the Sword?" Sam challenged. "What do you hope to gain from it? Don't you realize what will happen to them?"

"Of course I do. Why do you think I kill them? See, I'm not a heartless bastard, I know what will happen to them if they're separated from the Sword for any length of time. It's mercy killing."

Mercy killing? It was a coldblooded comment to make, yet as Sam recalled the times that Dean had been without the amulet, the times he'd watched his brother suffer in agonizing pain, the times he'd watched his brother nearly die from being separated from the golden talisman, Sam couldn't help but wonder if in the man's warped mind he thought he was being humane.

"I still remember the one and only time I lost my dagger," the man continued when Sam didn't immediately respond. "I was nineteen and stupid. My father had drilled me every single day from the time I was old enough to touch the damn thing, indoctrinating me into all the history and responsibility of being a Guardian. He raised me like a soldier. I spent hours training every day. I couldn't even come in from school and not have him pounce on me in a surprise attack to test me. While other kids were playing soccer and joining the Cub Scouts, I was sparring, learning weapons, preparing to protect the friggin dagger. He transferred the goddamned thing to me on my eighteenth birthday... then two days later he ate a bullet."

"That's awful..." Sam began.

The masked man whirled on him, his index finger pointing threateningly at Sam's face.

"NO!" he shouted. "Don't you dare feel sorry for me. I might have hated that bastard when I was a kid, but he made me tough, he prepared me."

“He prepared you? Do you think he wanted you to steal the whole Sword for yourself? Did he want you to kill the other Guardians? Seems to me if your dad was so gung-ho and dedicated, that’s the last thing he intended for you to do.”

“He was an obsessed bastard that cared more about carrying on some ancient calling than he did his own children. I have a sister, three years older than me. Our father was so absorbed with carrying on this freakin’ curse that he all but disowned her. Might as well have for all the attention he ever paid her. It was always Bryan this or Bryan that. No matter what my sister she did was never good enough for him. She resented me and she hated him even after he was dead. So much in fact, that Lanie took the dagger and buried it out in the middle of our property just to spite me. She only gave it back when she realized I was gonna die without the damn thing.”

Sam listened to the man’s confession, unable to ignore the similarities between the Guardian’s screwed up family and his own. Were they that much different? His dad could certainly be accused of being obsessed with hunting down Haris. And hadn’t their dad trained and drilled them from the time either he or Dean could manage a push-up or handle a weapon?

Sure, maybe John Winchester certainly hadn’t prepared Dean for his role as the amulet’s protector, but in a similar fashion, he’d certainly programmed his brother to be Sam’s ever-watchful defender. Still, if Dean had ever minded, it certainly never seemed to come up with as much vehemence as this man was spouting now.

“So Bryan, at what point did you decide that you wanted it all for yourself? When did you decide to betray everything your father held sacred?”

The man paused before answering, his head drooping low for an instant as he quietly answered. “When I realized I wasn’t the thing he held sacred at all. When I figured out I was nothing more to him than the right amount of ‘Y’ chromosomes to pass on that dagger.”

“And now...”

“Now I’m in it for myself. I got tired of hearing about how powerful the damn thing was. I want *all* the power the Sword holds. I want it for me and I don’t give a rat’s ass who or what gets in my way. I trained for it, sacrificed for it, I deserve it.”

“Sacrifice? Dude, you don’t know the meaning of the word,” Sam sneered, unable to think about Dean and the sacrifice he’d chosen to make on Sam’s behalf.

Dean had always tolerated all the training, all the obsession, all the craziness that the hunting lifestyle forced on them, embraced it actually. Unlike Sam, who fought and pushed back at every turn, Dean took it all in stride, rarely questioning, always trying to be what their father expected of him. At least that’s how it appeared on the surface.

Did Dean resent it as much as Bryan? What chance thing prevented his brother from becoming like the sociopath before him?

“I have six pieces now ya know. Your brother’s will make seven. I’m pretty sure the Sword was broken into eighteen pieces originally, so I’m over halfway there.”

“Why eighteen?” Sam queried. If nothing else, this man obviously knew more about Solomon’s Sword than anything he, Dean or John had ever been able to learn about the thing. Any information he could pry from his captor would likely be more than any of them currently knew.

“Eighteen is a prominent number in Judaism. It’s symbolized by the word chai – which loosely translated means ‘life’. Even the letters that make up the symbol chai add up to eighteen. There’s no way to be absolutely certain how many pieces there were originally, but everything I’ve studied seems to indicate that Solomon’s Captain of the Guard, a man by the name of Nadib, originally took the blade after the king died, for safekeeping. Nadib had a dozen men under his command to which he charged each with protecting a piece of the broken up sword.”

“I hate to break it to you Einstein, but that adds up to thirteen not eighteen,” Sam snarked.

“Such a smart-ass. I think I’d be doing your brother a favor by wasting you. Of course, too bad he’ll be dead too or he might enjoy the peace and quiet. I know I will,” the Guardian snapped back. “So, since you obviously don’t know as much as you think you do, I’ll fill you in. Originally, the hilt wasn’t broken up with the rest of the Sword, Nadib kept it intact for himself. But as he grew older and ill, and paranoid over the fact that Asmodeus or some other demon might come after the golden hilt, he broke it up and gave a piece to each of his five sons. Eighteen total pieces... see how easy that was brainiac?”

“How is it that you know all of this?”

“How is it that you and your brother don’t?”

“Dean didn’t exactly inherit the amulet from our dad. Not like you did. Our mother didn’t have any brothers so it was held until she had Dean, until Dean was old enough to take possession of it,” Sam explained.

“Shadrack Mann? I knew it. That bastard never would tell me who he gave the friggin amulet to. I should have put two and two together, but the name threw me at first. Of course, he wasn’t in the best shape to really answer all my questions when I was done with him. Guess there’s a lesson to be learned when it comes to *obtaining* information from an old man.”

“How did you track all the Guardians down? Do you know who all the rest of them are?”

“Like with your brother, I just dug through centuries’ worth of genealogy. You can’t imagine how mind-numbing that kind of research can be. And like I said, there’s no guarantee how many pieces there originally were or how many are still in the possession of the firstborn heirs. Honestly, I got lucky with your brother. I was originally tracking a different Guardian. Another real pain in my ass. I almost caught him in Iowa but I missed my opportunity when he went diving into this dude that almost got smacked by a falling telephone pole.”

Anderson! The man was describing the events at the motel in Central City. He hadn’t known that Dean was a Guardian then. That would explain why he attacked Sam by mistake.

“So how did you find my brother?” he asked.

“I was tracking Anderson here. Or rather he was tracking me. But I saw the three of you inside the diner. I heard him call one of you Winchester and it all clicked. The only problem was, I didn’t know which of you was the Guardian. So I took a chance, figured to get you before Anderson got his claws in you, or rather your brother I guess. You can imagine my surprise when I grabbed you at the motel only to find out you don’t have a freakin’ piece on you... anywhere. Like I said, I moved too fast and made a stupid mistake.”

“But you said you’d already tangled with my brother,” Sam asked confused.

“Yeah, later at this Bowman guy’s place. I knew time was running out and that Anderson was here to protect the other Guardian. I had to move fast before he made contact with Bowman, so after I nabbed you, I headed over there. I’m in the process of taking this Bowman jerk and some dude waltzes into the house right in the middle of it. It was dark, we were fighting and I knew it was only a matter of time before Anderson showed up so I knocked the dude out and booked.”

“Not to mention that Dean drew blood?”

The Guardian smiled, his eyes narrowing as he looked down on Sam.

“Yeah, I owe him for that. My dad would have beat me into next year if he’d known how I let an adversary get the better of me in a fight.”

“Aw Bryan, don’t let it get to you. There’s no embarrassment in admitting that the better man got one over on you,” Sam teased.

“Funny there Winchester. I’m laughing on the inside.”

The rogue Guardian casually pulled a piece of fabric from his rear pocket. Bending down over the captive psychic, he jammed the rag into Sam’s mouth, stretching around to tie the ends behind Sam’s neck.

Standing back up, he nodded appreciatively at his handiwork. "What? I'm sorry, did you have something to say?" he mocked.

Sam glared at him. He'd wanted to pry more information from the man, had ultimately wanted to keep the psychotic Guardian occupied a little while longer.

Straining against the bonds once more, Sam didn't bother to hide his efforts as he stared back defiantly. But the young man ignored him, moving away and reaching for a long case.

Sam watched as his captor pulled out an assault rifle, methodically reassembling the scope and then checking the bolt action. An M24, it was the sniper's weapon of choice. Deadly from over eight hundred yards, the man could easily sit nearly a half mile away and pick off targets completely undetected. Dean wouldn't stand a chance against a weapon like that.

He jerked violently against the ropes, bucking against them in a futile effort to escape vaguely acknowledging the pain as his leg flared with the movement and reopened with a gush of fresh blood. He didn't care that the skin was flayed from around his wrists or that his throat was being constricted by the length of rope that extended down to his hands.

None of that mattered. If he couldn't find a way to get free and warn Dean, then he'd just as soon be dead himself.

"Won't do you any good," the man yelled over his shoulder as he continued to assemble and check the weapon. "Personally, I wouldn't give a damn if you strangled yourself to death except that I still need you as bait for your brother."

"...ew...ou," Sam shouted through the gag as he ceased his efforts even as darkness threatened to claim him,

"Nice comeback. But stay with me here. The fun is just beginning. I may have underestimated your brother before, but this time I'm not taking any chances. Funny thing about a kill-shot from an M24, they say you never hear the bullet that kills you. But in fact, there's usually enough blood still pumping to the brain for that last second that the target probably does."

Sam's heart seized in his chest as visions of his brother falling victim to a high-powered rifle played through his mind.

"So what do you suggest? Heart or head? Do you want your brother to hear the bullet, Sam?"

Mountain View Motor Lodge

Dean was shaking; tremors that started in his hands wrapped their way up his arms to his shoulders.

He wasn't cold, despite the chill that was settling in with the darkness. No, the shaking was a byproduct of pent-up anger. Anger that bordered on becoming rage but fortunately was tempered by fear.

The anger was common. It didn't take much to make the hunter angry, in fact, despite the happy-go-lucky persona that he worked so hard to cultivate for the rest of the world, he was really more like David Banner when it came to reacting to things that upset him.

But fear, that was a different story. There was very little in this world that Dean Winchester was afraid of, certainly nothing made of flesh or bone, and very little else that wasn't corporeal. Having faced nearly every form of supernatural creature in his young life, he learned early on that the things that went bump in the night might seem scary but that like humans, it was all a matter of figuring out what their weaknesses were.

Yet despite fearing neither man nor ghost, Dean did hold one particular fear deep within his soul.

Losing his family.

Standing there in the darkness of the parking lot, the fragment of his brother's bloodied shirt clenched in his hand, Dean shook with the blend of anger and fear. Part of him wanted to smash his fist into the nearest solid object while another part of him, deep inside, wanted to scream out Sam's name at the top of his lungs.

He knew neither action would serve any good purpose.

Instead, he sucked in a deep lungful of air, forcing himself to calm down and push away the fury that was clouding his judgment. Focus, he needed to focus on Sam.

Turning the stiff fabric over in his hand, Dean spotted the small piece of paper pinned to the edge of the tattered collar. Carefully pulling it free, he opened it up, cringing as he got a closer look at the blood spattered paper.

American Falls Reservoir - midnight

Bring the amulet or bring a body bag

Dean stared at the note, searching for something more buried within those eleven words. But the message was loud and clear, Asmodeus had Sam.

"Gotta stay clear," he commanded himself as the anger threatened to resurface. "You can't help Sammy if you go in half-cocked."

Stuffing the remains of his brother's shirt into his pocket, Dean determinedly stormed back to the motel room. Once inside, he cast a quick look over to the still-bleeding Guardian lying against the nearby wall.

Anderson's eyes were open, though hazed over by pain. Squatting down, Dean pulled open the wounded man's shirt, exposing the hole caused by his .45's round. Bleeding profusely, the bullet hadn't passed through and while he was certain that it was incredibly painful, somehow at the moment Dean just didn't give a damn.

Still, he wasn't a totally uncaring ass, and despite Anderson pulling a gun on him, Dean wasn't willing to let the man bleed to death. Retrieving a towel from the bathroom, he brought it back to the older man and pressed it hard against the wound eliciting a harsh groan from the blond.

"Sonofabitch," Anderson grumbled at the pressure.

"You rushed my shot. You're lucky I didn't drill you in the head," Dean replied rising back up.

He reached for the lamp sitting on the nightstand, tearing the cord out with a vicious yank. Returning to the downed Guardian, he pulled Anderson's hands together and wrapped the length of electrical wire tightly around his wrists. Cutting off the excess with a flash of his pocket knife, Dean then moved on to secure the man's ankles.

"Why are you doing this?" Anderson demanded weakly.

"I'm going after my brother. I don't need to be looking over my shoulder," Dean snapped back.

"You know where he is?"

"Yeah, that black SUV-driving S.O.B has him. He just sent me a message," the hunter replied.

"Asmodeus! You're walking right into a trap."

"Gee... you think so?" Dean snarked as he grabbed the long green duffle and headed toward the door.

"Then at least take me with you. Untie me and let me help you. The two of us stand a better chance against the demon together than you do alone," Anderson implored him.

Dean smirked, turning back from the doorway to face the Guardian.

"Dude, I've been at this too long to fall for that line. I'm not entirely sure who's the biggest threat right now, you or the bastard that has Sammy. But one thing's for sure, I'm not turning my back on either of you. Besides, I've got a plan," he announced.

"You're gonna get your ass handed to you and that bastard is gonna get his hands on your amulet. Don't you give a damn about your responsibility? Your destiny?" Anderson demanded angrily.

Dean paused for a second, his hand already on the edge of the opened door. "Destiny be damned," he snarled. "I never asked for this, hell I never even got the CliffNotes version on what this amulet is all about. I might be stuck with the friggin' thing but I'll be damned if I owe anyone anything. I'm going to go save my brother. That's all that matters. That's my *only* responsibility."

"Do you honestly think Asmodeus will keep Sam alive once he has what he wants? I told you before, Sam is as good as dead. Why risk your life?"

"He's my brother you stupid sonofabitch. I know you don't have a clue what that means to normal people, but let me just sum it up by saying that there's nothing I won't do to protect him. Nothing I wouldn't sacrifice to save him. I'm not letting him die because of this friggin' ugly-ass piece of gold around my neck." Dean shouted.

He heard the older Guardian yell at him once more, Anderson's voice pleading for Dean to reconsider, to be careful. But he didn't care. Slamming the door shut behind him, he purposefully strode to the Impala.

Was Asmodeus waiting for him to show up at the reservoir? Would Sam still be alive? Was Anderson just trying to protect him or just use him for his own purposes?

A thousand questions tore through his mind, each with possible answers, each creating outcomes that he didn't care to consider. Pushing them out of his head, he turned the key in the ignition, the powerful Chevy 350 booming to life.

Throwing the car into reverse, he backed up out of the lot and then headed for the interstate leading to the lake. It was only about a thirty minute drive, less considering the heavy foot he pressed against the accelerator.

Thirty minutes and he'd be face to face with a powerful demon bent on killing him and everyone else that protected the ancient king's sword. Thirty minutes before he would once again either sacrifice the amulet or die trying to save his brother.

Thirty minutes and his *destiny* might truly be fulfilled.

Dean pulled into a dirt parking lot several yards from the base of the dam. He could hear the water crashing as it cascaded over the spillway and rushed downstream. On this side of the causeway, the supports that held the Highway Thirty-nine bridge were out of the water, but on the other side, the flowage from the reservoir was diverted through a hydroelectric generating station. Since there was no access on that side, short of climbing a fifteen foot high security fence into the plant, Dean decided that this was the most likely place to meet Sam's captor and *negotiate* his brother's freedom.

It was out in the open, with little available cover once he moved away from the Impala. And while that worked against him it also worked for him. He should be able to see anyone approaching him for at least a couple hundred yards in any direction.

Still, if Asmodeus was as powerful as he thought, then the demon could likely "pop" in and out at will, appearing and disappearing with no need for stealth or concealment.

Throwing the pack up on his shoulder, Dean took a calming breath and moved forward toward the control house. The night air was chilling, picking up the coolness from the rushing water and adding it to the slight breeze. He shivered, this time whether from the cold or the ominous silence of the place, Dean wasn't sure.

"Sammy!"

He couldn't help but call his brother's name when he spotted Sam's shaggy head and lanky form tied to a concrete support just ahead of him.

Dean wanted to run to Sam but he forced himself to hold back, knowing with all certainty that it wasn't going to be as simple as just walking in there and freeing his sibling. Instead, he approached warily, his eyes searching the darkness, alert for even the slightest unusual sound or movement.

"Sammy, hang in there. I'm coming," he called out drawing closer.

When Sam didn't reply, Dean peered more closely at his brother. The bright light from the moon overhead peeked from behind a stray cloud and illuminated the area. In that instant, Dean could see the reason for Sam's silence.

Rope coiled around his brother's chest, securing him snugly to the pylon, while a strip of dark material encircled Sam's mouth. Since Dean couldn't see his brother's hands, he assumed that his wrists were also bound behind him.

His brother didn't move, only his eyes darted back and forth as he looked from Dean to the area around them. Dean could tell from the wide-eyed look his brother was casting that Sam was trying to warn him.

I got ya bro... I know it's a trap, but dammit, what else can I do?

Dean looked away from Sam, unable to meet his eyes. He knew his face would betray what he was about to do, likewise knowing Sam would have his ass for even considering what he had every intention of carrying out.

Pulling the amulet from underneath his jacket, he yanked it free from his neck, lifting it high in the air as he took a couple more steps towards the middle of the open lot.

"I'm here," he yelled out into the darkness. "Here's the amulet you demonic bastard. Come and get it."

His stomach churned, nerves pushing the acid around in his empty gut. His mind was swirling, fatigue and injury augmented by apprehension created voices that were screaming inside his head.

Gotta save Sammy... so tired, so damn tired... Sam's gonna kill me if I give up the amulet again... he'll have to stand in line... where the hell is that friggin' demon...

"Come on!" he shouted in irritation. "Let's finish this."

Behind him, he could hear Sam's panicked grunts. He knew his brother was straining against his bonds, most likely cursing Dean for offering up the amulet.

"Sorry Sammy. I know I made you a promise but there's no way I'm gonna let someone die over this freakin' thing, 'specially not you," he softly called over his shoulder.

He scanned the darkness, the hair prickling on the back of his neck as he waited for some sign, some reply from his unseen adversary. Only the rush of the rapids accompanied by the soft chirp of the crickets answered him.

Turning, Dean moved back in the direction of his brother, intent on releasing him even though he was certain he'd likely not make it that far. Approaching Sam, his brother's dark glare was suddenly replaced by a stiff nod of his head in the direction beyond Dean.

"Dude, unless you suddenly added telepathy to your bag of freaky psychic tricks, I got no idea what you're trying to tell me," Dean snarked.

He chuckled inwardly as Sam quickly cast him a wry look. Within reach of his brother, Dean grabbed the knife from the pocket of his jeans as he prepared to cut Sam free.

As his hand came near the first set of ropes, a soft "pop" sounded behind him. At first it didn't completely gain Dean's attention, his focus firmly on cutting the ropes that were holding Sam. But as his knife slipped under the first coil, a puff of dirt billowed up from the ground beside him, followed a split-second later by a second, more staccato popping noise.

Someone was shooting at him!

Dean dove to his right, rolling as he hit the dirt and coming to his feet immediately. He darted for the nearest support even as a third bullet slammed into the concrete a fraction behind where his head had just been.

Sniper rifle, his brain told him.

"This is soooo not good," he moaned, panting heavily as he tucked himself behind the pillar. "And why the hell is a demon trying to take me out with a rifle? Whatever happened to the full-on frontal assault? Since when did Hell's finest prefer bullets to bloody torture?"

"Where'd you go, Winchester?" a deep voice called out.

Muffled by distance, Dean knew that the shooter was a fair piece away. Peeking out from around the column, he searched the distant terrain for a possible spot from where the sniper was holding.

"Come on, Dean... don't make me shoot Sam. Where's the sport in that? Like shooting fish in a barrel. Do you know what a M118 round will do to your brother's skull when it hits? Can you say 'closed casket?'"

"Okay, okay. Don't shoot. I'll come out," Dean yelled back.

He knew the sniper had the range and with Sam sitting out there in plain sight, his brother was a sitting duck for the high-powered rifle. Moving from his cover, he extended his arms upward, the amulet still dangling from where he had spun the leather cord around his hand.

"Why are you doing this?" he questioned. "I thought your kind preferred ripping people apart to modern technology. I can't imagine what the other demons must be saying about you."

"What is it with you and your brother? Are you paranoid much? Always seeing demons at every turn," the voice mocked. "Do you think every nasty thing out there has to be supernatural?"

Sonofabitch! The bastard is human!

"No, not normally," Dean snapped back. "I guess I should have known. Our normal playmates are just bloodthirsty for the sake of being evil, the truly crazy assholes are almost always human."

"Real funny. I guess I can see where your baby brother learned to have such a smartass mouth. But I'm not crazy, I'm just dedicated."

"So you've been killing the Guardians? Taking their pieces of the Sword?"

"Wow, overstate the obvious? Yeah, it's me. Disappointed?"

"Hell no! I've dealt with delusional jackasses like you before. People thinking they could control something more powerful than they ever imagined. But you know what? Sooner or later it always comes back to bite them in the persqueeter," Dean quipped.

There was a moment of loud laughter echoing across the open space. Dean listened intently, hoping to draw a bead on the man's location.

"Well, as entertaining as this has been, I've got places to be and... well... Guardians to kill. It's been real, Dean Winchester. Another lifetime and I would have bought you a beer while we discussed the basic stupidity of the general public. Unfortunately, you're just in my way," his adversary taunted.

Dean tensed, his body going rigid as he waited for the impact of the bullet. For himself, he didn't care about dying, but considering Sam was still being held, his panic returned.

"What about my brother? You've got me, let him go," he demanded. "Let me untie him and he can take the car and get out of here. I'll stay behind, you'll still have me covered."

"Gee, I dunno. He's been particularly irritating; I really would be doing the world a favor if I put a round through his chest. Still, I've never killed an innocent person..."

"Please..." Dean desperately pleaded as he took a step closer in the direction of the voice.

"Eh, I don't think so. Your brother seems like the type that would spend the rest of his life hunting me down to kill me. I can't take that chance..."

Dean was about to scream in denial, his heart racing as he feared that the unseen man would kill him and then Sam. As he was about the yell, another voice cut through the darkness.

"Castor... Bryan Castor!"

Dean spun to the new voice, his eyes falling on Anderson as the older Guardian strode purposefully toward him.

"Anderson... I should have known you would show up, but I was hoping to take care of this little business before I dealt with you," the sniper yelled back.

"It's been you all along hasn't it? I thought it was Asmodeus killing the other Guardians, but it was really your psychotic ass the whole time?" Anderson asked.

"Can't put one over on you for long, can I?" Castor replied.

"Why don't you come out from your hiding place and face me? Or are you too afraid to fight an equal? I'm surprised that you chose a sniper rifle. Seems to me that you didn't mind the full-on approach when you killed your dad," Anderson taunted.

"Go to hell! He got what he deserved."

"I guess I shouldn't be shocked that it's been you taking out all the others. I mean, after all, you started early on by taking the dagger from your father."

"Oh, and your motives are so pure. What line has he sold you, Winchester? I'm telling ya, you shouldn't trust him. He's more than he seems. Tell me Chris, do you really give a damn about all those Guardians you've been trying to recruit?"

Dean watched as movement near a far patch of trees revealed a young man. Near his height, Castor's mass of blond hair stood out in the bright moonlight of the night. As the younger man broke from his cover, Dean marked the eerie similarity between the newcomer and Anderson.

"I gave a damn about you once. But that was before I realized that you didn't give a damn about anyone else. It's a shame Bryan. All your talent, all your training and it's all going to waste," Anderson threw back.

"Well, you know the saying, I'd rather be a prince in Hell than a servant in Heaven," Castor answered with a snide grin.

As the two men carried on their verbal battle, Dean slowly inched backwards, his movement taking him closer to Sam. Hoping to capitalize on the distraction, he was determined to free his brother before Castor had the chance to fire off a round from the huge rifle that he had cradled against his shoulder.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance," Castor snarled.

"You could've tried..." Anderson replied as he swung up his own shotgun.

Dean was nearly through cutting the ropes that held Sam securely to the support. With a harsh tug of his knife, he severed the bindings on his brother's wrists before reaching up to pull the gag from around his mouth.

"Dean... you okay?" Sam asked, spinning around to face his older sibling.

"I'm fine, Sammy..."

"Good, 'cause when we get out of here, I'm so gonna kick your ass for even thinking of trading that amulet away," his brother chastised him.

"Don't start, Sam. Besides, we're not out of this yet," Dean warned, pulling his brother behind him protectively. "Can you make a dash to the car if I distract those two?"

He followed Sam's glance down the bloodstained denim covering his upper right leg. Dean couldn't help but notice the fresh wetness and even in the relative shadow of the bridge, he could see the jagged hole in the jeans.

"Sonofabitch, Sammy!" he exclaimed. "What the hell did he do to you?"

"It's all right, Dean. But I don't think I'm ready for any sprint," Sam admitted.

Beyond them, Anderson's and Castor's voices rose in anger. Whatever long history existed between the two, it appeared to be coming to a head now.

Dean watched as the taunts ceased, both men moving in a blur of motion. It was hard to tell who managed to fire their weapon first as the boom of the shotgun barely eclipsed the staccato crack of the rifle.

Regardless of who was initially faster, Anderson and Castor both managed to get off a second shot. Dean saw the older Guardian drop to a knee, his body jerking as the younger man's round slammed into him. But Castor didn't get away unscathed either, his own chest blossoming red as the slugs from the shotgun found their target.

Even as they dropped to the ground, each man fired once more. Dean pulled the .45 from the back waistband of his jeans, determined to add his own weapon to the battle should their attention turn back to him or Sam. Pushing his brother behind him,

he stared transfixed as Anderson pumped his shotgun and unloaded a final round into Castor's body.

As quickly as it began, it was over. A brief silence was soon replaced by the returning sounds of night; the crickets and night birds resumed their song.

Standing there, Dean remained wary, his eyes darting back and forth between the two still Guardians. He held the automatic ahead of him while his other hand firmly grasped a handful of Sam's tattered shirt to make sure his brother was protected behind him.

"What the hell?" he finally spoke, shaking his head as he relaxed slightly. "That was like the end of *The Departed*, every-friggin-body shooting each other."

Dean moved carefully forward with Sam limping painfully just behind him. Waving his brother off to check on Anderson, he continued over to Castor. The young man lay on his back, his chest covered in blood, his blue-green eyes opened and staring heavenward.

Feeling for a pulse that he knew wasn't there, Dean finally looked back over to his brother and shook his head. "He's dead," he confirmed.

"Anderson's still alive, but he's hurt bad. Dean, we gotta get him to a hospital or we'll lose him," Sam announced.

Dean ran back over to his brother's side, dropping down into the sandy soil next to the wounded Guardian. His eyes took in the man's condition in seconds, his initial assessment in agreement with Sam's.

Anderson was bleeding profusely from two bullet wounds to the chest, his breathing labored as he tried to breathe with lungs filled with blood. He reached up weakly towards Dean, grasping the hunter's sleeve as he pulled him close.

"Get the dagger," he gasped, blood seeping out the side of his mouth as he spoke.

"Shhh, just lie still. I'll get the car and we'll get you to a hospital. You're gonna be all right," Dean promised.

"NO!" Anderson managed. The single syllable was followed a bout of harsh coughing as even more blood spurted from his mouth. "You... have to... get that blade," he commanded weakly.

Dean nodded, pulling away from the man's frail grasp. He darted back to Castor, patting down the man's cooling body until his hands felt something solid tucked in the side of a boot. Lifting the leg of the dead man's jeans, Dean found the golden dagger. Pulling it free of its sheath, he felt the familiar "jolt" as his skin came in contact with the Sword remnant.

The blade was beautiful. Ornate in its simplicity, Dean cautiously ran his thumb along the edge. Honed to perfection, he could only imagine that it paled in comparison to the original Sword. It felt powerful, gloriously lethal as he held it within his grasp. Dean could feel its supernatural pull even as he fought the urge to cast it into the nearby waters.

"Dean!" Sam's voice cut through his silent introspection. "We need to go... now!"

The remaining Guardian looked back at his brother and the unmoving blond. Tucking the shining blade into the back of his jeans, he rushed back to Anderson's side as the man opened his eyes and slowly blinked.

"Leave me," Anderson gasped. "Someone will have heard those shots. The cops are probably on their way. Just go..."

Through the noise of the raspy breathing, Dean could hear the faint sucking sound as the chest wound tried to pull air from the hole caused by the high-powered round. Anderson was as good as dead. His lung already collapsing from the outward pressure, it was only a matter of minutes before the shift in his chest cavity would compress his heart into arrest.

"Get... out... of here... now!" the older man ordered once more.

Dean rose. Slingshot Sam's arm over his shoulder, he began to move away from the downed man. His brother pulled against him, still looking down at Anderson's hemorrhaging form.

"Dean, we can't just leave him," Sam pleaded.

"I'm getting you to the car, Sam. I'll come back for him. But if the cops show, we need to be ready to move and I can't carry your both," Dean insisted.

Slowly and painfully, the brothers made their way to where the Impala waited several hundred yards away. Once he had Sam safely tucked into the passenger's side seat, Dean retrieved a pilfered motel room towel from the trunk and came back to press it tightly against the still-bleeding knife wound in his brother's thigh.

Only then did Dean turn his attention back to rescuing Anderson.

Scanning the area of the battle, Dean spotted the splayed form of Castor's body. Yet, as he looked over the entire field, Anderson was nowhere to be seen.

Dean searched the nearby tree line as he ran back down to where they had left the fallen Guardian. There was a small blood trail leading toward the water's edge, but it stopped several feet shy of the bank.

Could Anderson have crawled that far? Would he have had the strength to throw himself into the rapid current of the flowage? Or was there some other explanation?

The brilliant flash of red and blue lights approaching from the far side of the causeway caught Dean's attention. The squad cars were still nearly a half mile away. They could escape being seen, but only if they took off right now.

Looking one last time at the pool of congealing blood on the dirt beneath him, Dean felt a strange chill sweep over his body. He shook it off and dashed back to the Impala and Sam.

The night hadn't turned out quite as he had thought it would, but right now, Dean wasn't looking a gift horse in the mouth.

Four Days Later...

Dean sat at the small table, preferring the dimly lit seclusion to the boisterousness of the bar. He absently peeled at the label on the bottle of beer that was tucked protectively between his hands, his mind churning over the events of the past week.

"Deep thought? Kinda rare for you isn't it, dude?" Sam teased as he returned carrying two fresh brews.

Dean smiled bleakly, standing up immediately when his brother staggered slightly, his recently injured leg still "giving out" when he put too much weight on it.

"Gee, Samantha, a couple of beers and you're already slobbering drunk," he tossed back.

His brother waved him off as he dropped into the chair with a wince.

"Seriously though, bro. Are the stitches holding okay?"

"Yeah, Dean. They're fine. It's just a little sore from being on it more today," Sam replied as he gently rubbed at the injury. "So, why are you looking like you lost your puppy?"

"I never had a puppy," Dean interjected.

"You know what I mean jerk. Come on, Dean. What's eating you? You haven't said more than a dozen words in the past four days. And while sometimes I enjoy the peace and quiet, it's just unnatural. It's kinda creeping me out."

Dean sighed, unconsciously reaching for the amulet and rolling it between his fingers.

"Sorry dude, I guess I've just had a lot to think about lately," he answered.

"Dean, I'm kinda sorry about how all this went down. I mean, Bryan Castor might have been a power-hungry sociopath, but he and Anderson knew more about Solomon's Sword that we've ever learned. I tried to pry as much info out of him while he was holding me, hoping that it might help you." Sam apologized.

"S all right, Sammy. I know more than I did before. I guess I should be glad to find out there's more guys out there like me. Although having dealt with Anderson and Castor, I'm kinda wondering if we're all a bit unbalanced. Maybe we have to be just a little," Dean mused.

"Do you honestly think that?" Sam interrupted. "No way, Dean. Those two might have been the poster boys for mental illness, but you're not like them at all. They were both pretty twisted."

"Maybe they weren't at one time..."

"Ha! Bryan Castor killed his own father in order to claim that dagger. He never once gave a damn about what it stood for or what his responsibility was toward it," Sam reminded him.

"God, Sam. Don't you start with all that destiny crap too," Dean groaned as he took a long draw from the bottle of beer, nearly emptying it in that single gulp. It did nothing to soothe his nerves, much less quiet the voices that were screaming in his head.

"I told you before, Dean. You were *meant* to be the Guardian of that amulet. It's because you care so much that it's harder," Sam said softly.

"What if it's too much, Sammy?" Dean pleaded quietly. "What if I crack under the weight of bearing this and become like them? What if there are other Castors and Andersons out there? What happens the next time someone or something wants to get their claws on this goddamn thing? What if..."

Dean stopped abruptly, his voice cracking with emotion as he pleaded with his brother for assurance.

"What if what?" Sam pressed.

"What if next time it doesn't turn out like it did this time? Back at Haris' compound, he killed all those women when he was trying to get the amulet off of me. Innocent women died because of this freakin' thing. And this time, it was almost you, Sam. What if next time..."

"Stop! Just stop it," Sam warned. "We're not playing this game. How many times has your life been on the line for me, because of me? We're not keeping score, but we're also not gonna sit around and worry about what's around the corner of every dark alley either. You said it yourself once before, we're stronger as a family. That doesn't just apply to hunting, Dean. We're stronger when we stick with each other, when we have each other's back."

Dean remained silent for a moment, still absently toying with the golden talisman around his neck.

"That was beautiful, Sammy," he replied finally, looking up with a smirk.

"Touching... inspirational... absolutely worthy of a Lifetime Movie."

Sam reached out and punched his brother's shoulder. "You're such an ass, Dean," he answered with a hearty laugh.

Dean finished the beer in front of him, tilting it up and draining it, then following the move with a loud belch. Slamming the empty back down to the table, he rose to his feet.

"Let's go, gimp. Since you're up and about now, I say we head back to Iowa tomorrow. It finally stopped raining there," he informed his brother.

Sam nodded with a chuckle, rising stiffly from the chair and watching as his brother led the way out of the bar.

Dean could feel Sam's eyes on his back as he headed for the door. He knew his brother was trying to be serious, trying to be supportive in the way only Sam could be, but Dean had no desire to share with his sibling the fears that were nagging at his soul. He had no idea what the future held for him or the amulet, he simply knew he wouldn't put *anyone* at risk over it. Ever again!

The brothers walked/ limped the short distance back to the motel, enjoying the cool night air as it enveloped them. The peaceful stillness of the small town was

strangely comforting at the moment and the easy-going townspeople had been one of the reasons they'd chose to stay on while Sam healed.

Drawing closer to their room, Dean felt the hair on the nape of his neck suddenly stand on end. The door stood open, the lights on the inside creating peculiar shadows as they poured from the entry. Dean pulled the .45 from his jacket pocket and warily approached.

As he peeked cautiously around the open door, Dean saw the space inside look as if it had been ransacked. The linens from the beds were tossed on the floor, their gear bags and even Sam's laptop joined the sheets and other belongings on the carpet.

"We were robbed?" Sam asked, pulling in behind his brother.

"No, I don't think so. It doesn't look like anything was taken," Dean answered as he secured his pistol and began rummaging through their possessions.

Their weapons, books, Sam's laptop, their clothes, all seemed to still be intact.

"No...nonononono..." Dean groaned as he rushed around to the other side of the bed.

Throwing the mattress off the box springs, he searched fervently as he continued his mantra of denial.

"It's gone," he announced finally, standing up and looking dejected.

"What?" Sam asked. "What's gone?"

"The dagger. Castor's friggin' piece of the Sword. I hid it underneath the mattress, but now it's gone," Dean grumbled.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm friggin' sure, Sam. Did you not just see me rip the bed apart?" he answered angrily.

Silenced enveloped the room as Dean sank down to the opposite bed.

"Asmodeus?" Sam suggested.

"Demons don't ransack rooms, dude. They tend to take a more head-on approach. Besides, I'm not sure that Anderson's whole story about the demon being after us was ever anything more than his paranoia being validated by Castor's murders."

"Then who, Dean? Anderson?"

"Yeah, I guess so. He was the only other one that knew about it and it sure as hell wasn't Castor," Dean agreed. "But how the hell, Sammy? He was as good as dead."

"You never found his body," his brother reminded him.

Dean glanced up at Sam. He tried to hide the worry that had just engulfed him from appearing on his face.

Anderson had surely looked like he was dying, his injuries were certainly fatal by any normal standard.

...Normal standard?

"Dean," Sam began, his voice barely more than a whisper. "What if Anderson was Asmodeus? What if he was just trying to get you to trust him to get the amulet off of you?"

Dean remained silent.

Anderson was Asmodeus? It was just one of the tormenting thoughts that had been plaguing him since that night after Bowman's.

"He was just a man, Sammy," Dean insisted, hoping he sounded more convincing to his brother than he did to himself. "He was just a man that thought he was doing the right thing for the right reasons. Nothing more."

Sam nodded and went back to picking up their scattered belongings.

Dean remained seated a moment longer, his mind taking him back to the reservoir and the night of the bloody showdown, Castor's words flitting back into his mind like ghostly whispers.

... What line has he sold you, Winchester? I'm telling ya, you shouldn't trust him. He's more than he seems.

Anderson... Asmodeus... One and the same?

Dean rubbed the back of his neck, his fingers glossing over the cord that held the amulet against his chest. Feeling the electric tingle through the fabric of his shirt, he sighed heavily.

"This is not about you, Guardian. This is about the connection to the power that you are sworn to protect. As it is, the lines between good and evil are greatly skewed. These are times of chaos. There are those among us who would choose to go against the ancient establishment and those who would uphold it. You are one of those who would uphold it. However, there are many who have yet to choose or to be chosen. You can trust no one. You have been chosen, and you are sworn to protect the amulet."

Shadrack Mann's admonition surfaced from his memory, warning him even now as he sat considering everything that had occurred.

Saving people... hunting things... the family business...

Perhaps those words were truer than he'd originally realized. Maybe the family business so far as he was concerned, was saving innocent people by preventing an ancient sword from falling into demonic hands.

"Fine then," he thought to himself. "This is my calling? This is my destiny? Then bring it on..."

Dean rose with a new determination and began helping his brother pick up their belongings.

Tomorrow was a new day and somewhere in the Linn County nursing home back in Iowa, an angry spirit waited to be put down.

Anderson or Asmodeus?

He'd deal with them... all in due time.

The End