

Season Three
Episode One: Ashes To Ashes
By Kittsbud & Tree

Devils Tower, Wyoming

Neither moved, neither responded, neither *seemed* to be alive as John knelt between them, one hand reaching out to grasp, to cling to each son, as though his physical touch might anchor them to this life.

"You know, your sons were a royal pain in my ass," Ferinacci - *Lucifer* admitted ruefully, looking down at the still forms of the young men at John's feet. "But, I gotta respect them. Tenacious damn bastards, right to the end. That little stunt they pulled in New Jersey, I would have killed them if it wasn't for the fact that I needed them. I guess it was good thing I kept them around, huh? But take pride in the fact that you raised them right, John, trained them real well."

John's head rose slowly, tears uncontrolled streaming down, cutting furrows in the dried blood and dirt that stained his haggard face. He made no move to wipe them away, but instead chose to display the tears as an external symbol of the wound that was hemorrhaging within his chest.

"I failed them. I raised them only to lose them. All I ever wanted to do was protect them, to save them..." he replied, his voice trailing off as he verbalized his grief to the demon.

Lucifer laughed, his voice booming across the open field, bouncing off the rock of the daunting tower that seemed to be carved by his very hand for some evil purpose. Eyes glowing like flares on a pitch black night, he leered down at the hunter, reveling in the anguish, absorbing it like it was ambrosia.

"Oh John, they were never yours to protect or save. They were never yours at all."

"Well, they aren't yours either you sonofabitch! I'll be damned if I saved them from that yellow-eyed bastard all this time to lose them to you," John hissed in defiance, rising up to stand before the still forms of his sons protectively.

"Such pathetic posturing. What do you seriously think you could do to stop me? I could crush what's left of their pitiable little hearts with nothing more than a snap of my fingers should I chose to, RIGHT NOW!" Lucifer's voice exploded, his eyes firing red as he reared toward the tormented hunter.

John met him defiantly, standing his ground and even taking a half step forward as he positioned himself between the Prince of Hell and his boys. Lucifer leaned back against the rocks, arms folded across his chest as he smiled again.

"Although really, why should I waste my time with any of you? I have much more important things to do. But, I must admit, it would be fun watching you suffer as the vultures rip those two whelps of yours apart piece by piece."

From the hard-packed soil beneath his father, Sam stirred alert to the sound of voices. He would have groaned had not the effort to make the noise been as painful as every other miniscule movement of his body. Even the feel of the dirt against the skin of his crushed hand and arm was nearly unbearable.

Unable to find the strength to rise up from the ground, Sam concentrated his remaining energy on forcing open both eyes and then getting them to work in unison. From beyond the legs of his dad's dust-covered jeans, he spotted the red-eyed demon, his mind struggling through the haze of confusion to understand why the creature looked so familiar.

"But really, John, if you ever get to New Jersey, feel free to look me up for old times sake..."

New Jersey? Luciano Ferinacci... Lucifer...

It seemed so simple, how could he not have seen the connection between the sadistic mobster and the demonic lord. But why? Revenge for his and Dean's little escapade against the gangster? Or was this part of some larger evil plan?

Sam's attention was drawn back again to the demon and the hunter as his father spoke.

"Look, kill me, kill my sons, but get it over with and quit boring me with the wiseguy taunts," John threw back.

"Hmmm, I see where Dean's smart mouth and defiance came from. But that would be too easy wouldn't it, letting you off the hook like that? No, John, like I said, it's more my style to let you suffer. You know, if I were you, I'd quit wasting my time trading smart-ass snipes with me and maybe say your goodbyes to your boys. As for me, I've got places to go, souls to torment," Lucifer jeered, breaking into near-maniacal laughter. "Have a nice life, Winchester. I'll be seeing you around."

Through pain-fogged eyes, Sam watched as the demon blinked out, disappearing in a flash of fire straight out of the pits of Hell itself. He raised a shaking hand to block the glare from his eyes, the motion bringing forth a grunt of pain.

John spun around at the noise, instantly dropping down to one knee and quickly wrapping an arm around his youngest's back to support him.

"Sam... Sam, just sit still. I gotcha," he said softly.

"Dad, that demon, it was..." Sam began,

"Yeah, it was," John affirmed.

"And Haris?"

"Dead. He's gone, Sam. Dean killed him."

Dean!

Sam twisted around; despite the vertigo, the blood loss and the absolute agony of his abused body that threatened to plant him on his face. He fought the darkness that sought to drag him under, forcing his eyes to find the all-too-still form of his brother.

On his knees, Sam began to crawl over toward Dean, not cognizant of the patches of dirt that turned into mini blood-pies as the gunshot wound in his side continued to leak. Within inches of reaching him, Sam felt a gentle tug at his shoulder and the strong grip of his father's hand pulling him back.

"Son, no," John cautioned, his voice cracking as he fought to spare Sam from seeing his older sibling, not wanting him scarred by the memory of Dean dying in his arms.

Heart-crushing pain, more primal than any of the physical wounds scouring his body, ripped through Sam as he tore away from John's grasp and closed the final distance to Dean. His uninjured hand made contact with the flesh at his brother's neck, desperately seeking some glimmer of hope there.

"NO! Dammit, you don't get to do this. Not for me!" Sam wailed, shaking the cold, limp form.

"Sam... please... don't..." John pleaded softly, coming to pull the grieving young man away once again.

The young hunter turned toward his father sharply, lashing out verbally. "How could you let him do this? You knew what would happen to him without the amulet. You selfish sonofabitch, you cared more about killing that yellow-eyed bastard than your own son?"

"Sam, it wasn't like that..."

"No? That's what all the secrecy was about wasn't it? Even back in Minnesota? Damn you both!" Sam cried out.

"Sam, it was Dean's decision. He wanted to do this. Don't you think that if there had been any other way to destroy that bastard without the amulet I would have done it? I looked high and low. Hell, I looked for every way possible to see if there was a way to break the binding between Dean and that damn amulet, even Bobby went to look..."

The amulet! Desperation clicked the gears into working in Sam's brain. Could it really be that simple?

Ignoring every nerve ending that screamed out in a unified chorus of misery, Sam pulled himself over to Dean's outstretched leg. Yanking up the frayed bottom of the jeans, he fumbled for the knife that he knew his older brother always kept tucked into the top of his boot.

Sam pushed up to his feet, swaying precariously until John caught him under the arm. He cast a quick glance back down at Dean's still body, his mind racing. He couldn't accept losing his brother now, not after everything they'd been through, not after everything they'd survived. And now, after finally killing Haris, losing Dean would make the entire crusade a catastrophic failure.

Stumbling across the hard Wyoming soil, Sam pulled away from John, too focused on the task at hand to let his father slow him down, especially now, when Dean had precious little time to spare. His steps faltered but he forced himself to remain upright as he made his way over to the still smoldering corpse of the demon.

Dropping to his knees beside the remains, Sam fought down the urge to gag, the smell emanating from the charred husk overpowering his empty stomach. Despite the pieces of burned clothing that stuck to bits of blackened and cracked tissue, Sam couldn't help but notice the yellow irises that still gazed upward at him. Ignoring the flies that were already buzzing about the body seeking out a place for their larvae, Sam moved with exactness to the scorched area of the creature's chest.

Using the edge of the knife, he picked away at a large piece of eschar, exposing violently raw meat underneath. With as much skill and care as a starving man cutting into a well-done steak, Sam dug into the tissue of the dead demon, plunging the tip of the blade deep into the remains. Twisting the metal around, the edge grated against bone as Sam frantically continued his bizarre surgery.

His heart pounding from desperation, Sam continued the probing until the reverberation of the tip striking another piece of metal echoed back to his hand. He anxiously dug a second longer, but when the action didn't produce the desired result, Sam tossed the knife down to the dirt and plunged his fingers into the gaping wound.

The sucking sound of blood and pulp being squished between his fingers assaulted Sam's ears, but despite the sickening noise and the constant attack of the now-swarming flies, Sam continued his gruesome task. Just when he thought he had nearly dug through the entire chest cavity of their former nemesis, his fingertip grazed something solid.

From above him, John watched in disbelief as Sam triumphantly withdrew the amulet bullet, raising it between a bloody index finger and thumb. "Sam... what are you..." the elder hunter began, torn between going back to keep his promise to Dean the he would not let the young man die alone and curiosity as to what Sam could possibly hope to gain by obtaining the bullet.

Sam ignored him once again. He didn't care what his dad thought anymore, he didn't care about anything except the single-minded purpose laying on the ground before him.

Stumbling back to Dean's side, he nearly fell to the dirt, his body betraying him even though his heart had not given up. Reaching out, he gently took Dean's hand, trying to pretend the coldness that ebbed from his brother's flesh was nothing more than the result of the chilling Wyoming night. Almost reverently, he placed what remained of the amulet into Dean's palm and closed his fingers around it. Sam finished by wrapping his own undamaged hand around his brother's as though the connection might convey warmth, strength, and life.

"Come on, Dean, please," he whispered, the words coming out as a breathy prayer. "You can't give in to that bastard reaper, you just can't."

Precious seconds ticked by, but Dean didn't respond as Sam became more frantic. Letting go of his brother's hand, he grabbed a handful of Dean's jacket and shook him, pouring all the heart-wrenching agony pent up inside into the action.

“Dammit, Dean. Open your damn eyes now and look at me!” Sam ordered, the words leaving his mouth and eerily reminding him of another time when he held his bleeding brother in his arms and fought to keep the reapers at bay. That night, like this one, before the crash of the Impala, Dean had put himself between the yellow-eyed demon possessing their father and Sam, trying to distract the thing’s attention away but ultimately paying for it as the hellspawn ripped him apart from the inside. History seemed determined to repeat itself and Dean seemed determined to help it along.

Tears flowing freely down his bruised and bloodied face, Sam’s effort to rouse his brother became weaker. His own battered body forgotten, he pulled Dean closer to him, his brother’s short hair coming to rest against his leg as he ran a trembling hand through the sandy spikes.

“Please... Dean...” he begged, watching as his brother’s chest rose in one exaggerated gasping breath.

Sam screamed out in denial, burying his head against his brother’s body, his good hand pounding against Dean’s shoulder. John moved in, kneeling beside his sons, placing a hand on Sam’s shoulder even as he reached out to touch Dean’s still body.

“Sam, come on,” he somberly spoke. “This isn’t what he would have wanted.”

“BACK OFF!” Sam snapped in return, spit flying from his mouth as he clung to his brother like a child clinging to a security blanket.

“I know you can’t understand this right now, but it was what he wanted to do...”

“What? You expect me to believe that he wanted to die? Why don’t you feed that line of bullshit to someone who doesn’t know any better ‘cause I ain’t biting. Really, what did you expect, Dad, he always did every damn thing you wanted, anything to please you. What did you have to tell him? Huh? Sacrifice yourself to save Sam? Or was it some larger, grander carrot that you dangled in front of him?” Sam challenged, his eyes reddened by free-flowing tears and unrestricted rage.

John remained silent, knowing the vehement words were spoken out of grief and on a certain level knowing he deserved them. He took the verbal assault as he would have a physical one, allowing the attack to continue until the energy was expended so he could console his son.

Sam waited for his father’s response, wanting him to try to defend his actions, needing him to say something so he could lash out again. Deep down, he knew his dad hadn’t coerced Dean into anything, knowing full well that his brother had likely jumped on the opportunity to kill Haris, despite the cost to him personally.

“I’m done with this, all of this. No more excuses, no more vendettas, it’s all over, Dad, none of this was ever worth...” Sam’s words were cut off abruptly by a single, sighing breath emanating from the otherwise still body in front of him.

Sam’s eyes widened as the breath was followed by another, then an even deeper one as Dean’s chest began to rise and fall in something resembling a normal rhythm. John scrambled to the other side of his eldest as his breathing became punctuated by ragged coughing, supporting Dean’s head and back as the young man fought for air.

Father and son looked on in disbelief as a soft glow emanated from Dean’s open hand. The bullet that minutes ago had been deformed from firing and covered in blood and gore, was now before their very eyes liquefying into a golden pool within the hollow of Dean’s palm.

Within seconds, the radiance subsided and Sam stared in amazement as the golden-horned face of the amulet peered back at him from within Dean’s limp hold. His brother sputtered, eyes fluttering as fingers moved to grasp the amulet more tightly.

“The amulet, it recognizes its guardian,” Sam announced, a broad smile crossing his face as he took as much satisfaction in his theory being right as his brother still breathing.

Across from him, John grimaced slightly at the mention of Dean's "guardianship." As he watched his oldest son struggle to regain consciousness, he couldn't help but despise the fact that the very thing that had apparently saved Dean's life had been the thing that nearly killed him. Had he to do it all over again, he would have never taken Dean to meet the crazy Shadrack Mann all those years ago.

"Did I do it? Did I kill that yellow-eyed sonofabitch?" Dean's voice rasped as he weakly attempted to sit up.

"Yeah, yeah you did," Sam replied, his voice cracking with emotion as he nodded. "And you damn near killed me too," he quipped a moment later, gingerly touching the still oozing wound at his side.

With his dad's help, Dean's pushed up from the dirt, teetering like a drunken sailor as his body refused any semblance of coordinated muscle movement.

"Ah, quit your whining, Sammy. It's barely a scratch, I'm better than that," he refuted.

"Dude, you shot me. Well, you shot through me. What the hell were you thinking anyway?"

Dean shrugged. "I, um, it probably wouldn't make any sense," he replied, fumbling to make the thoughts that still rambled through his head coherent. *The Guardian and the Quatre Yeux ... you're stronger together than apart... It was always in Sam's blood to either join me or destroy me...*

"It doesn't matter. I mean, Haris is really dead, right?" Dean asked, his eyes peering past Sam's shoulder to the charred remains of the demon.

"He's definitely dead, son," John assured, lightly patting Dean on the shoulder. "You really did it."

"I guess I can't believe it," the young hunter muttered back. "All these years, after everything we've been through, it seems almost anticlimactic."

Sam huffed. "Anticlimactic? You should have been where I was sitting. You simple ass, you were almost dead."

"Aw, stop being such a drama queen, Sammy..."

"Don't even try that crap, Dean. If I had the energy right now, I'd take a pound out of your ass for what you and Dad did," Sam threatened.

"Sam, look, I know you're pissed, and maybe we shouldn't have kept it from you, but it was the only way to put that bastard down. And honestly, Sam, had we told you, what would you have done?" Dean challenged.

"I would have told you it wasn't worth it, Dean. Nothing was worth your life," the younger sibling argued, not sparing his father a venomous glare.

Dean shook his head. "It wasn't your call and besides, I'm hardly dead now am I? Which, by the way, not that I'm not grateful, but..."

"It was the amulet," Sam replied simply, gesturing down to the talisman resting in his brother's hand.

Dean opened his hand, his eyes widening in surprise as he took in the piece of golden jewelry. "What? How?" he asked, lifting the amulet for closer inspection.

"Sam figured it out," John interjected. "Somehow he knew. Dug the damn thing out the demon."

"But you melted it into a bullet. I saw it," Dean insisted.

"And we watched it reform in your very hand, Dean. Granted, there's a lot we don't know about that damn amulet and however you're tied to it. But, for whatever reason, it saved you again today, and I for one can just be happy enough with that for now," John stated.

Dean's eyebrows bobbed up in agreement as he considered the amulet a moment longer. He could feel the familiar tingle against the skin of his hand, the slight warmth the thing seemed to emit whenever it was near his flesh. Was he really so shocked by what his father and brother were telling him had happened? Hadn't he seen the amulet resist every one of Haris' attempts to remove it from him when he was held captive at the compound? Hadn't it seemingly protected him from being fully

possessed by the demon's spawn? Was it so far-fetched to believe that the thing was able to reform itself after serving its purpose?

He reached up and rubbed at his temple, a dull throbbing begging to make itself known in response to the strain of trying to make sense of the whole "amulet-guardian" deal. Dean glanced back at Sam, seeing reassurance in his younger brother's face and then something more.

Dean's eyes scanned up and down Sam's seated form, quickly cataloging the younger man's condition. Beyond the bruises and dried blood, Sam carefully guarded his right hand and arm, tucking the extremity close to his side, but there was no mistaking the strange angulation or discoloration that marked the underlying fractures.

And then, just behind the injured arm, the steady ooze of blood as it seeped from the gunshot wound in Sam's side caught Dean's attention. Like a red cape to a bull, the blood demanded the older sibling's action and Dean struggled against his own still weak body to peel away Sam's shirt and assess the injury he'd created.

His brother groaned quietly, trying to flinch away from Dean's inspection but knowing it was a losing battle. Sam feebly swatted at Dean's hand, but even that miniscule movement jolted both his damaged hand and injured side, making him pale for the briefest instant.

"Sammy!" Dean's voice rose in concern as he rolled over on his side, edging closer to his brother and sliding an arm up underneath him.

"I'm okay, I'm good. Like you said, just a scratch," Sam insisted through clenched teeth.

"Yeah, right. Try that on someone who hasn't perfected the line," Dean shot back, trying to stand, but immediately dropping back down to the dirt as his knees collapsed underneath him.

"Enough, both of you," John intervened, placing a firm hand on his still struggling to rise eldest. "You've both been through the wringer and I seriously doubt that between the two of you, you could get the upper hand on roadkill right now."

John looked around the darkening landscape and then down at his sons. Sam was hurt; bleeding and with an arm that was definitely broken in one if not more places. And Dean, despite his best effort to appear recovered, had hovered far too close to the brink for John's comfort.

...they were never yours to protect or save. They were never yours at all...

The seasoned hunter shuddered as the words echoed in his mind. What had the demon meant? He had thought that his sons would be safe now with Haris gone; Sam at the very least since he had resigned himself to Dean's sacrifice. So now, with both of them alive and still drawing breath, he was more determined than ever to keep them that way, demon's taunts be damned.

Rising to his full stature, John trotted over to the edge of the clearing. He returned just as quickly, pulling open a canvas backpack and handing both boys a bottle of water. Rummaging through the bag some more, he then retrieved a small first-aid kit and handed that to Dean.

"Can you patch up Sammy? I'll go back down to get the Impala and bring it up this way," John announced.

Dean nodded, instantly pulling out a wad of bandages from the box and carefully lifting aside Sam's blood-soaked shirt. The younger man remained ominously silent while Dean tended to the various wounds covering his body. When the silence became overbearing, Dean bridged the stillness.

"Ya know, you scared the crap out of me, disappearing like that back in Phoenix," he began, eyes still focused on the length of gauze he was wrapping around Sam's side. "I mean, when I thought that mind-blasting bitch was back and had got you somehow, dude, that was bad enough, but then Haris showed up..."

"You had no right, Dean," Sam interrupted.

Dean paused, sensing where the conversation was heading. "I'm not going to discuss that with you, Sammy..."

"Yeah, you are, you're gonna listen to me, for once. After all the crap you gave me for what I did to get you free of Haris' kid, and then you go and serve yourself up like that?"

"It wasn't the same, you don't understand," Dean argued, trying to avoid making eye contact.

"Oh, I understand perfectly, Dean. It was Dad, and his goddamn vendetta and you bought into it hook, line and sinker. What did he sell you on Dean? Kill Haris, save Sam, be a good little soldier like always and obey orders?" Sam said mockingly, pain and anger filling his eyes.

Dean stopped his ministrations, tossing the remaining medical supplies back into the kit and glaring up at Sam. "He didn't have to sell me on shit, Sam. He didn't want me to do it at all, didn't even want to tell me about the amulet or how it could kill the demon. I forced him. And do you know how hard it was for him to have to do that? To have to melt that friggin' thing down, knowing that he might lose one son to save another? Do you think a parent ever wants to have to make THAT choice? Do you think he did?"

Sam shook his head, refusing to give in so easily and allow his brother the justification of his near-martyrdom.

"And what makes your life worth less than mine, Dean?" he asked finally.

"What makes it worth any more, Sam?"

Sam sat there, mouth gaped, speechless as he searched for the words to continue his argument. He knew it was futile, knew that Dean carried self-sacrifice for his family deep in his genetic code.

"Look, Sammy, Haris is dead. We're finally done looking over our shoulder for that bastard. And... we're alive to tell the tale. Let's just be happy about that, okay?" Dean asked.

The younger hunter's eyes narrowed as he glanced nervously over his shoulder to the mound of rocks just at the edge of the clearing.

"Dean, before you, well, while you were still out of it, I saw and heard something," he began.

"Yeah?"

"Well, I was still kinda out of it too," Sam paused, chewing his lower lip, unsure of how to tell his brother what he had witnessed.

"What Sammy?" Dean asked impatiently.

"Dean, I'm pretty sure I saw Luciano Ferinacci here."

"The mob guy from Jersey?" Dean burst into laughter. "Dude, have you lost your mind?"

"I'm serious, Dean. He was here. Standing on top of that outcropping of rocks, right after Haris went down. It was like he was checking out what happened. Dean, he was talking to Dad." Sam insisted.

"Sam, what in the hell would Ferinacci be doing out in the middle of Wyoming much less talking to Dad?"

"He told Dad he was Lucifer, Dean."

"Lucifer? Are you for real?"

"Yeah, Lucifer, Prince of Darkness, the Keeper of Hell. I mean think about it, Luciano Ferinacci... LUCI... FER... it's not a stretch. And remember all that strange crap that was going on back at his mansion that night?" Sam explained. "Even Eli, the demon that held me here, said he was working for someone bigger than Haris, someone more powerful."

"But Lucifer? Really Sammy?"

"It's true, Dean."

Both young men turned as John rejoined them, Dean looking up at his father in disbelief. John sighed, bowing his head slightly and running a hand through his hair

stopping at the back of his neck to rub at the stress-induced knots that corded up the muscles there.

"I don't know this Ferinacci character, but it was definitely Lucifer that appeared after Haris died. He used you both to get to Haris. Whatever plan old yellow-eyes had going on apparently wasn't sanctioned in Hell and he managed to have Lucifer himself pissed off at him. But Sam is right, the big guy was here and he said..."

"What?" Dean demanded when John's voice trailed off.

"Look, it's not important. He's gone, Haris is dead and I gotta get you boys back to civilization and patched up. That's all that matters right now. I've brought the Impala up as close as I can get it. Can you make it with some help?" John asked looking between both young men.

Dean readily nodded, pushing off from the ground and managing to get to his feet. He turned to offer a hand down to Sam, preparing to help his younger brother up when his own still-weak muscles dictated otherwise. He swayed forward, trying to act as though the movement was planned, but both Sam and John knew better, with the Winchester patriarch reaching out a steadying arm.

"How 'bout you just work on getting yourself to the car. I'll help, Sammy," John ordered in a voice that left no opening for argument.

As they began to make their way towards the waiting Chevy, Sam couldn't help but look back at the remains of the other young men and women. Their broken and mutilated bodies were scattered about the clearing, left behind like carelessly tossed litter. Despite his father's strong grip, Sam pulled up short. He felt certain the others were all dead, had heard their screams of torment, their dying gasps of breath.

"Sam, come on. Let's get out of here," John quietly directed, following Sam's gaze but trying to distract his son away from the carnage.

"Dad, wait, please, we gotta check." Soulful eyes peeked out from under blood-encrusted bangs, beseeching the elder man.

"Let's get you and Dean taken care of first. I promise I'll come back and take proper care of these kids, okay Sammy?"

"Wait, Matt... Matt Teller. Over there," Sam pointed excitedly. "He was still alive. Go check, please."

John looked skeptically at his son, acquiescing only when Dean moved up and hooked his arm under Sam's good elbow.

He slowly walked over to the first victims, grimacing at the mangled bodies, his stomach threatening to revolt from the sight and smell.

He came across the crushed remains of David Mitchum. The young man from Oxford, Nebraska was barely recognizable from what was left in front of him now. John felt for a pulse despite the futility of the maneuver, glancing back toward his sons and shaking his head sadly.

He continued on, coming finally to Matt Teller. The pyrokinetic lay deathly still, both legs splayed out at sickening angles, while white shards of bone burst out of his flesh like a bloated carcass left in the sun too long.

John was about to reach for the young man's carotid when his eyes flashed open and he let out a loud gasp of pain, startling all three hunters.

"He's alive," John announced.

Pine Haven, Wyoming

The low rumble of the Impala did little to comfort Dean, especially since he was relegated to riding shotgun and since the only other noise in the interior of the car was the occasional groan from Sam when the Chevy struck a bump in the road. He had hoped to jump behind the wheel after they dropped Matt Teller off at the ER in Gillette, but his father had adamantly refused when he caught Dean nearly face-planting outside the hospital entrance.

Admittedly, the young hunter didn't feel ready to tackle a wendigo, but he was reasonably certain that a few miles behind at the helm of his "baby" and a couple of hours of Zeppelin or Metallica, would go a long way to improving his health. Add in a cheeseburger and a couple cold beers and Dean was pretty sure that he'd be back in shape in no time.

Glancing over his shoulder as Sam groaned again, Dean knew it was going to take more than a hearty meal and a couple of Budweisers to get his brother back on his feet. Despite Dean's best effort to staunch the flow of blood from the gunshot wound he'd inflicted, the torture suffered at the hands of Lucifer's minion had taken its toll on Sam. His right hand and forearm, now crudely splinted, was purpled and swollen, misshapen and clutched tightly to Sam's chest as the younger sibling lay huddled in the back seat of the Impala.

"Hang in there, Sammy. We'll get you fixed up soon," Dean promised, looking from his brother back to his dad expectantly.

"We're here, actually," John announced, slowing the car to a halt in front of a small, rustic building.

Dean looked up, eyes widening as he spotted the sign hanging from the post on the porch.

"You gotta be friggin' kidding me? I know he's a Sasquatch, but seriously, a veterinarian?" he asked in disbelief.

John killed the engine, turning to face Dean and throwing him a haggard look that silently warned the young man.

"Well, thanks to you, it's not like we could take Sam to a real hospital. Not unless you think the cops will understand that you put a .45 slug through his side because you were killing a demon," John snarked back as he stepped out of the car.

Dean quieted, the guilt for the pain he was causing his brother apparent in his downcast eyes. He moved to the back door, opening it and offering his hand to his brother. John came around from the other side, waiting at the foot of the steps as he stared up at the sign.

"Garrett Wade and I served together in the Corps. He was a medic back then but after a tour during the Gulf War, he got tired of seeing how people could blow each other apart," he began. "I guess he decided that taking care of animals somewhere out in the middle of nowhere was more to his liking, so he became a vet and moved out here."

"Does he know what you do now?" Dean asked.

"Yeah. He kinda had a bit of a run-in with a Yelandooshi a few years back when he thought he was taking care of an injured coyote. Turns out the damn thing was actually a skinwalker taking on that form. Damn thing came around, tore him up pretty good while it was going back and forth between shapes," the elder hunter explained. "Anyway, he's helped out hunters before, but I haven't seen him in a while."

"Just tell me he's got something for pain," Sam groaned.

"Hey, maybe we can get you groomed while you're here, Sasquatch," Dean teased. "Clip some of that fur you call hair, a little flea-dip, maybe even a couple of those cute bows they put in poodles ya know?"

Sam threw him a dirty look. "Yeah, and maybe they'll even toss in neutering you for free, Dean. Save the women of the world all the grief of having you chasing them like a dog all the time?"

"Bitch..."

"Boys!" John interrupted, irritated as he knocked on the door. "Look, Garrett is a great guy, but I should warn you. He's not quite... well, he's used to being by himself a lot, so none of your nonsense, okay?"

"He's not quite what, Dad?" Sam asked, suddenly curious about the man that his father had brought him to.

John was about to answer when the clinic door swung open revealing a man taller than even Sam. It was hard to tell much about the newcomer since the long hair that cascaded past his shoulders blended in with the scraggly beard obscuring nearly all his facial features. He hovered warily behind the edge of the door briefly, before a wide grin broke on his face.

"Winchester? Well I'll be damned!" the shaggy man exclaimed, holding out his hand toward the seasoned hunter.

"Hello, Garrett," John replied, taking the offered hand and shaking it eagerly. "I'm sorry to land on your doorstep, but I need a little help for my boy here."

The ex-medic turned vet eyed Sam up and down, spotting the makeshift sling as well the bloodstains on his outer clothing. He looked out past the threesome suspiciously before nodding and motioning them inside. Once the door closed, Garrett immediately turned the deadbolt and pulled down the blind.

Dean watched the man curiously as he continued throughout the small office, pulling down the blinds and bolting any remaining locks. The young hunter could understand, even appreciate, the need for secrecy and discretion, but Wade was bordering on paranoia, especially with all the locks. For a moment, Dean wasn't sure if his dad's old friend was going through all the motions to lock something out or rather to lock them in. Unconsciously, his hand moved to the .45 in the interior pocket of his jacket and thumbed off of the safety.

"Son, you'd be dead long before that pistol would ever do you any good," Garrett mumbled over his shoulder as he moved towards the large metal desk in the corner of the room.

"Dean!" John warned. "Stand down, dude. I told you, Garrett's a friend."

Dean raised his empty hands out of deference then leaned over towards Sam.

"I guess our overgrown Cousin It must have pretty damn good hearing underneath all that hair. I sure the hell hope his eyes are as good when he's patching you up," he whispered.

"Just shut up, Dean," Sam hissed back.

"Okay, John. Bring your boy back to the treatment area," Wade instructed, rising up and motioning to the door behind him. He turned toward the brothers and added, "And by the way, my eyesight's even better than my hearing."

Sam glared at his older brother as he followed the vet to the back room. Dean shrugged, but tagged along, still not comfortable with Garrett despite the man's long-time association with his dad.

Garrett motioned Sam to sit on a raised exam table big enough to hold a small pony. The tall man then pulled a pair of scissors from a nearby cart and set about cutting the splint away from the injured arm.

"Wow, you broke the shit outta that arm," he exclaimed, once the appendage was exposed. "I 'spose we should get a film of it before I take a crack at setting it."

"You suppose?" Dean repeated, looking over to his father as if to say "seriously Dad, is this the best you could do for Sam?" Instead, what he got back was the patented, "Shut up now, Dean" glare from John.

"Oh and what's this? A gunshot wound?" Wade asked as he peeled away the bandages from Sam's side. "Let me guess, smart ass over there probably did this. He strikes me as a lousy shot."

Dean lurched forward in retaliation, but John restrained him with an arm, pushing him toward the doorway even as Garrett chuckled.

Propelled toward one of the waiting room chairs, Dean half sat, half dropped into the worn naugahyde seat with a huff of air. It wasn't that he didn't trust his dad's choice of friends, he just didn't generally trust anyone when it came to providing medical care to his brother. Ultimately, he realized he'd screwed himself big time since not only was Sam at the mercy of the strange animal doc, but Dean had been kicked out of the room and couldn't even watch over him.

Annoyed at being excluded, Dean fumbled through a stack of magazines on the table next to him. Never one to enjoy even the easiest reading, the current offerings in the vet's office did little to entertain him. Electing to skip the latest article on housebreaking puppies in favor of the most recent trends in back country hunting, Dean tried to distract his attention away from the closed door.

The magazine worked for about ten minutes, until the sound of Sam's yelp of pain seeped out from the treatment room. Dean was immediately on his feet, magazine dropping to the floor as he headed toward the door in a rush. He barely crossed the threshold when John met him, barring his entry and assuring him that Sam was okay before shutting the door again.

Grumbling and more than pissed, Dean paced the empty waiting room, casting glances toward the blocked entry while muttering curses under his breath. Time passed at a snail's pace as the hunter wore a path in the hardwood floor of the clinic.

As the half hour passed, he first considered putting his fist through the drywall once or twice, and then considered going outside and driving the Impala through the small office. In the end, it was a final pain-filled yell from Sam that made Dean pull the .45 from his pocket and storm towards the door.

Just as Dean's free hand touched the doorknob, it swung open and Garrett strode out. The manic vet raised one eyebrow as he spotted the pistol in the young hunter's hand.

"I bet you've been out here playing with that thing the whole time haven't you?" Wade mocked. "Probably sleep with it under your pillow. I've known plenty of soldiers like you, all thinking they're tough shit with a weapon in their hand."

"You just better have taken care of my brother or you'll find out how good I am with it, smart ass," Dean threatened in return, straining to see past the older man and into the adjoining room.

With his back turned and his attention diverted, he didn't see Garrett whirl back around. Instantly, the ex-Marine medic grabbed Dean's right shoulder, spinning him around while he grabbed his wrist and twisted the entire arm up and behind his back.

Wade drew up close behind Dean's head, never relinquishing his grip on the young man's arm. "Your daddy should have taught you better, son. You pull a pistol out on a man, you damn sure better use it," he whispered intently by Dean's ear.

Dean glared at him over his shoulder. The pain in his arm was excruciating and his hand was nearly numb, but he refused to give in to the older man even as Wade forced the arm upward a millimeter more.

"I meant what I said about my brother. You might take the .45 off me, you might even break my arm right now, but I guarantee you, friend of my dad's or not, if you've hurt my brother I swear I'll find some way to plant your ass in the ground permanently," Dean promised through clenched teeth.

Garrett laughed but still did not release his hold on Dean's arm even as John reentered the room.

"Should I even ask?" the elder Winchester posed as he took in the scene.

The veterinarian laughed once again. "Your boy here doesn't know how to respect his elders, much less his betters," Garrett answered.

"Yeah, well you've already put one of my sons' arms back together. How 'bout if we don't go for two?" John suggested, a hint of warning to his voice.

Garrett looked at his former comrade warily then slowly released his hold on Dean's arm. He patted the young man's shoulder good-naturedly, smiling back at John.

"No offense, Winchester," he offered apologetically.

"None taken," Dean shot back, swinging around and driving his still-numb fist squarely into Wade's jaw, sending the vet sprawling to the floor.

Without looking back, Dean walked past his dad and into the treatment room to check on Sam. He found his brother lying flat on the oversized table, eyes closed and unmoving.

For the briefest moment, Dean panicked, his mind getting carried away with every negative thought even though he knew Sam was alive. He pulled up close to the exam table, careful not to touch his brother as he took in the swathe of bandages that covered Sam's side and the massive white cast that encased the lower half of his right arm. In fact, lying against the sterile metal, his upper body exposed, Dean could finally see the total ravages his brother's body had suffered at the hands of the demon.

Dean bit back another curse, his own fingernails digging into the flesh of his palm as he clenched his fist tightly in anger.

"I'll survive."

Dean startled alert, looking back up to Sam's face as the younger man's voice signaled that he was now awake.

"Of course you will. A couple broken bones and a few bruises, hell, that ain't crap. I've had a lot worse," Dean quipped.

Sam groaned and Dean immediately rushed to his side. The younger man waved him off, struggling to sit up, then realized that he wasn't going to accomplish the maneuver without help. Without another word, Dean gently placed an arm behind his brother's back while Sam swung his legs over and off the side of the table. Brows knitted closely together, Dean watched warily, hands ready to reach out and grab Sam if he tilted even the slightest towards the floor.

When several minutes passed and Sam appeared able to maintain an upright position, Dean relaxed and drew around to face the fatigued younger man. He carefully lifted Sam's freshly casted arm and helped ease the appendage into the sling that had been left on the Mayo stand, grimacing sympathetically even as Sam loosed a soft grunt of his own.

"I'm sorry, Sammy," he offered quietly.

"S'all right, Dean. Not your fault," Sam returned.

Dean shrugged, "Yeah, but, what if..."

"Stop, Dean. You made the right call."

"I know that I guess. But seeing you now, dude, I was supposed to be saving you, not shooting you. It happened so fast, I didn't even think, I just pulled the trigger," Dean stammered, absently fumbling with a leftover piece of cast padding.

Sam sighed shaking his head. "You said it yourself, Dean. Haris is dead. We're still alive. Let's just be happy about it. You're the best damn shot I know, Dean. I'd trust you to hit anything you aim at."

The younger Winchester dropped from the table to his feet, his face screwing up in pain as the impact reverberated through his side.

"Although, next time, can you maybe go for winging me instead?" Sam added teasingly.

Dean laughed nervously, looking up as John walked back into the room.

"Well, I take it you two are in good enough shape to get back on the road?" he asked. "Considering Garrett probably isn't exactly out there thinking about asking Dean to stay for dinner."

"Hell yeah," Dean readily agreed. "Besides, even if he did, he'd probably serve up Kibbles and Bits or something."

John chuckled, shaking his head. "He's a good man, Dean, and beggars can't be choosy. Just because you decided to get into a pissing contest with him, doesn't make him all that bad."

"Where we heading, Dad?" Sam interjected.

"Bobby called while I was out there trying to keep Wade from coming after Dean with a syringe full of animal tranquilizer," John joked.

"Bobby? What's up with him?" Dean asked, eager to hear about the junkyard owner slash covert demon hunter.

"Well, once he got over the initial idea that we were all dead, he was actually pretty damn happy to find out that the Winchester clan was still this side of Hell. He offered for us to hole up with him while you two get back on your feet."

"Hey, I'm ready to go," Dean insisted.

"Well, that's debatable, but your brother isn't," John reminded adamantly.

"Uh Dad, where are we gonna stay at Bobby's? His place is kinda nothing but ash?" Sam asked.

John chuckled, running a hand through his short beard. "Yeah, well, like I said, he was pretty happy about us being alive. Seems he figures the Winchesters owe him a new house. He's got an old Airstream that will hold us till we help him get the new place built."

"I don't know how much help I'm gonna be with this," Sam offered, raising his casted hand.

"Yeah, and Dad, I'm way better with burning things than building them," Dean whined.

"Boys, we owe him, and we pay our debts. Besides, the beer is cold and you know there'll be plenty of Bobby's own version of holy water to fill the flasks," John reminded.

Dean looked back at Sam and shrugged. "Well, what are we sitting here for? Hey, do you think we should ask Cousin It for one of those plastic cone things before we go? You know, to put over Sammy's head so he doesn't gnaw on his cast or stitches or something?"

Sam swung out to punch his brother in the arm but missed as Dean sidestepped. Still slightly off-balance, the older sibling stumbled over the legs of the Mayo stand before catching himself on the edge of the treatment table with a grunt.

John bit back a disapproving grumble and settled for a harsh glare, even though inwardly listening to the good-natured banter and the familiar physical exchange was a welcome sight.

"I'm still driving," he insisted.

"Aw, Dad," Dean whined as he righted himself. "It's at least five hours to Bobby's."

"I call shotgun," Sam quickly put in.

Dean looked back and forth between his father and brother, groaning in disgust as he followed them out and through the waiting room to the exit. "I so should have shot him through the ass instead," Dean mumbled as he watched Sam head for the passenger's side door of the waiting Chevy.

He fumed in the backseat, impatiently waiting while his dad finished talking with Garrett on the clinic's small porch. The vet smiled and shook the elder hunter's hand, nodding toward the car then scowling when he made eye contact with Dean. He handed John a small bag, then nodded once more before scanning the horizon and bee-lining back inside the small building.

It was just beginning to drizzle when John dropped into the driver's side of the car. He paused for a moment, glancing into the rearview mirror at Dean and then over at Sam who had already begun to shimmy his long body into the corner of the front seat and door.

Turning the key, the low rumble of the powerful engine echoed through the metal framework of the car and up into the very muscle fibers and bones in Dean's body. He closed his eyes, allowing the low hum to envelope him like the pounding bass and drums of a heavy metal band. It was soothing and electrifying both at the same time, but to Dean, ultimately it was lulling and despite his protests and assurances that he was quickly regaining his former vitality, he was swiftly following his brother into slumber as the Impala pulled out onto the back roads.

A short time later, John glanced once again across the seat. Sam, asleep, his casted arm stark-white in comparison to the bruises that marred a face that twitched in response to haunted dreams. He then stole a peek in the rear view at Dean. His older son lay against the back seat, arms wrapped protectively around himself as he

snored softly. To the unknowing eye, he looked merely asleep, but on closer inspection, even his closed eyes were still too hollow, too dark.

John sighed. They were alive, what more could he ask for?

...they were never yours to protect or save... they were never yours at all...

The demon's words still haunting him, John tried to focus on the road ahead of him, determined that the road behind them all was just that; the past. So preoccupied with Lucifer's taunt, the experienced hunter didn't notice the black SUV that hung several hundred yards behind the Impala, always far enough away to be inconspicuous, but just close enough to keep the black car and the three men inside within sight or striking distance.

Bobby Singer's Salvage Yard Several Days Later...

Dean swung down from the roof truss, pulling his bare arm across his forehead and wiping away the sweat droplets that hung precariously from his short hair. He'd forgone his t-shirt earlier, giving in to the heat of the midday sun just as he had the past couple of days while working to raise the frame of Bobby Singer's new home. Now, stripped bare to the waist, his chest and arms with the beginnings of a slight sunburn and glistening slightly with perspiration, Dean leaned against a sawhorse, tipping back a large bottle of water and watching as Sam approached carrying several more two-by-fours tucked under his uninjured arm.

The younger sibling dropped the lumber to the ground then picked up a framing nail from a box and was about to jam it down into the edge of the cast when Dean strode forward and grabbed it from his hand.

"No scratching, dude," he warned, tossing the nail into the pouch slung at his hip.

"I'm sweating my ass off in that trailer and it's making this cast itch like crazy," Sam whined, resorting to using his fingernails to flay at whatever skin he could reach underneath the offending fiberglass. "Besides, Bobby kicked me out. Said he wasn't desperate enough to eat anything I cooked."

"Yeah, well you're more than welcome to be out here working your ass off instead," Dean offered, flexing fatigued muscles in his upper arms.

"Tell that to Dad. After I dropped that wall yesterday, I thought he was going to break each one of my fingers off and use them to nail the frame back together."

Dean laughed. "Yeah, he was pretty pissed. Good thing he had steel-toed boots on or there'd only be me and Bobby working on this place."

"Hey, I tried to tell him that support wasn't gonna hold. It was all a matter of engineering and load bearing," Sam defended himself.

"Ooh, the college boy knows construction now too? Well, I'll tell you what, you know so much, how 'bout you figure out how I'm 'sposed to get that next truss up there by myself?"

Sam smiled. "It's not rocket science, Dean. We just gotta build a block and tackle system," he answered knowingly. "We'll need some of the lumber, a couple pulleys, and some rope."

Dean stared at him for a long moment then shook his head. "I swear, Sammy. Sometimes I think you were switched at birth. Somewhere out there my real brother is a roadie for Ozzy," he grouched, taking a final swig from the bottle of water before pouring the remnants over his head, relishing the coolness as it cascaded over his bare skin.

"Hey, if you'd rather do this by yourself, I can go let Bobby abuse me some more," Sam snapped.

"No, no. You're not getting out of work that easy. Dad won't be back from town with more rafter ties for another hour and I'm tired of busting my ass by myself. You can help me nail some of these studs together to frame the interior walls."

He paused momentarily, a mischievous smile creasing his dirt-smudged face. "Dude, I said nail and stud in the same sentence. Who knew carpentry could be so naughty?"

"Dean, get your mind out of the gutter," Sam groaned, his eyes rolling as he watched his older brother's face reflect the sordid mental images he was sure were running through Dean's head.

"I'm just saying, Sammy, it's been a while since..."

"I get it, Dean, don't need you to draw me picture. Please don't draw me that picture," Sam begged jokingly.

"Why don't we take off into town after dinner? Come on, Sam. We deserve a night out after everything," Dean insisted.

Sam paused, absently rubbing his casted arm. The throbbing was irritating, but bearable. Still, he just didn't feel up to carousing around a bar or even watching his older brother prowling like a wolf for some unsuspecting hot bartender.

"I dunno, Dean. My side's still aching and my arm's been throbbing like a toothache all damn day. I don't think I'd be the best company," he exaggerated purposely, hoping to dissuade his brother.

Dean's face became serious as he looked over his brother's towering form, scanning Sam for any sign his injuries from Wyoming had worsened. He took a step forward, one hand reaching out towards Sam's side and the healing gunshot wound.

Sam twisted away before Dean could make contact. "I'm alright, dude. I'm just tired and sore. It wasn't an invitation for you to go all big-brother on me."

"Too bad, Sammy. It's my job. You don't like it, go find yourself another brother, but until then, you're stuck with me," Dean replied authoritatively. He motioned over to the sawhorses with a nod of his head. "Just hold the ends of the boards while I cut them, okay?" he then ordered, picking up two of the ten foot planks and hoisting them onto his shoulder.

"Dean, I can help. Quit treating me..."

"Shut up, Sam. Let's just get to work," Dean insisted, dropping one of the two-by-fours across the sawhorses and stretching out the tape measure as he marked the wood to be cut. He tucked the pencil behind his ear before picking up the circular saw.

"Are you pissed at me now or something?" Sam asked, coming to stand at the end of the board, his large hand clamping down on the wood.

Dean triggered the saw, pushing it through the board and sending a shower of sawdust spraying outward while the loud squeal of the blade drowned out Sam's voice. He made two more cuts with only a quick lull of noise in between, allowing him the opportunity to avoid replying to his younger brother.

"What's your issue?" Sam dogged after him when the racket ceased.

"I don't have any issues," Dean shot back, picking up another piece of lumber and repeating the process of measuring and cutting while Sam looked on in silence.

When he finished, he pulled the hammer from the belt at his side and began nailing the newly cut boards together on the ground. Sam joined him, kneeling down and trying to steady the plank while Dean drove the nails into the framework.

"You gonna tell me what's bothering you, Dean? And before you try to blow me off, you better know I'm just gonna keep asking till you tell me," Sam stated matter-of-factly.

Dean looked up from his handiwork, scowling at his brother. "Go away, Sammy. If you aren't going to help, then just leave me alone," he grumbled threateningly, the hammer gripped tightly in his hand.

"I am helping, you just don't see it," Sam insisted. "I've been watching you, Dean. You've been brooding around here all week. Hell, the only smile I've seen on your face was when Dad was hopping around on one foot when I dropped that wall on him and then again just a minute ago when you were talking about going into town. Otherwise, you haven't hardly said ten words."

"Yeah well, there's nothing to talk about."

"Bullshit, you talk more than any person I know," Sam teased, hoping to get his recalcitrant sibling to crack.

Dean rolled his eyes in derision before going back to pounding another nail into the boards. His mind scrambled for any topic to divert his younger brother, while outwardly he took out his frustration at Sam's badgering on the lumber.

"Dean..."

"Sam!" the older hunter exploded, punctuating his anger with a single swing of his hammer against a nail and burying it deep within the length of wood.

Dean softened slightly when he saw Sam recoil away, immediately feeling guilty when he saw the look of hurt in his younger brother's eyes. He dropped the hammer to the ground and slowly rose to his feet walking over to the cooler laying at the base of a nearby tree.

Reaching inside, Dean fished out two bottles from within the pool of miniature icebergs. He started to toss it to Sam, but the gleam of the white cast made him reconsider and instead, Dean extended the beer out in a gentle offering.

Kicking the lid shut with his boot, Dean dropped to sit on top of it, leaning back against the trunk of the tree. He twisted off the cap and tilted back the bottle, swallowing nearly half the contents in a single gulp.

Running the back of his hand across his mouth, Dean drew in a deep breath, keeping his head down and avoiding Sam's seeking gaze. When he looked up, his free hand absently went to the amulet that rested against the hardened muscles of his chest.

"I've been stuck out here, working on Bobby's place everyday, with nothing to do but think," he began.

"You, thinking? That's scary," Sam joked, laughing easily.

When Dean didn't react, simply continued twirling the golden talisman between his thumb and forefinger, as he stared at the ground, Sam quieted, growing concerned at his brother's strange solemn shift.

"What is it, Dean?" he asked, squatting down on his haunches to meet his older sibling's eyes.

"It's this thing," Dean answered after a long moment, pulling the amulet forward. "I've just been thinking about it, trying to figure it all out. I mean, Dad told me some stuff back in Wisconsin, but I guess I never took the time to really think about it all 'cause of everything that happened after. But, there's so much I don't know, so much I need to know."

"Like what?"

"Like why me? I mean, I get the whole deal about it being passed down through Mom's side of the family and all, but why me, Sammy? I'm no freakin' guardian of nothing dude. I'm not made for no special purpose."

"Why not, Dean? Is it that much of a stretch to believe? 'Cause it's not to me," Sam immediately answered.

"Of course it wouldn't be to you, psychic wonder that you are. You got this whole special purpose thing tattooed all over you. Hell, Sam, even before all this crap with your abilities, you were gonna do something special, be someone important. I never doubted that," Dean admitted. "It's just, for me, I never thought..."

"What? Never thought you might possibly have some purpose in life other than being Dad's second in command? Other than being my self-appointed protector?" Sam threw back sarcastically.

"That's different."

"Is it? How's that?"

"Because with you and Dad, it's family. It's my responsibility. It's just what I'm supposed to do," Dean said simply.

"That's such a load of crap, Dean. How many times do we have to go round and round about this? You've given so much for this family, for me. Dammit, you just

nearly died for me. It's enough. So, why is this whole guardian thing freaking you out?" Sam asked.

"What if I don't want it?"

"Don't want it?"

"Don't want it, don't deserve it, whatever," Dean answered, shrugging, before tilting back the beer bottle and finishing the alcohol in one final gulp.

Sam laughed, shaking his head. "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."

Dean looked up finally, green eyes meeting darker hazel, searching for the reassurance and finding it in Sam's sincere face. He smiled grimly, shivering slightly as a late afternoon breeze dusted across bare skin cooling down from his earlier activity.

Sensing Dean's remaining reluctance to accept his words, Sam spoke again. "Dude, whatever it is about the amulet, we figure it out, we'll find out more. Okay? I know Dad said he researched everything about it, but he isn't me. Who you gonna trust to know more about research, huh?" he asked, playfully slugging his older brother in the bicep.

Dean chuckled. "My geeky little brother," he answered, his fingers dropping the golden necklace to lie back against his chest.

Sam rose, walking past Dean toward the old Airstream he paused at his brother's side. "Just promise me that thing stays round your neck from now on, okay bro?" he chided, patting Dean on the shoulder. "How 'bout we go see if Bobby has dinner done yet? Then maybe after dinner, you can buy me that beer in town. I have a feeling I might need to avoid Dad just a little longer."

Dean rose, trailing Sam to the small trailer. "Yeah, probably not a bad idea, Sammy. At least stay out of his way until his foot is back to being some shade other than blue or purple," he agreed, laughing.

... Next morning

Sam came out of the shower, straining to pry his tall frame from the small closet that passed for the Airstream's bathroom. His broken arm, still wrapped in the oversized plastic garbage bag to keep the cast dry, was competing with his head to see which one could torment him with its own rendition of a Neil Peart drum solo of throbbing pain.

Damn Dean and his Jaegermeister shots!

"Good morning, Sunshine!" Dean beamed cheerfully from the nearby kitchen. "I got bacon. How you want your eggs?"

"Coffee, just coffee," Sam groaned. "And some Ibuprofen too!"

"Aw, Sammy. Can't keep up with the big boys? Come on, you gotta eat. How 'bout some nice runny eggs?" Dean taunted, looking up, skillet in hand. "Oh dude, you look like hell, and seriously, can you please get dressed before you ruin my appetite. There's something so wrong with seeing your brother naked before breakfast."

"Funny Dean! Do you know how hard it is for me to even squeeze into that shower, much less try to get dressed in there, especially one-handed?" Sam whined.

"Hey, I tried to fix you up with what's her name last night at the bar. You know, that blonde chick that was in nursing school, Bethany or Belinda or Bridget? Whatever. Anyway, I bet she coulda taken good care of you. Given you bed baths, made sure you were all squeaky clean and feelin' no pain."

Sam rolled his eyes, regretting the move when it only made his head pound more fiercely. “Her name was Brianna and she was a phlebotomy tech, Dean,” he answered, pulling the towel around his waist and stalking off toward the bedroom.

He dressed and slowly trudged back out to the kitchen area, dropping into the built in booth and letting his head fall into his hands. Across the table, Dean stopped the rapid shoveling of food into his mouth and retrieved the pot of coffee and a cup, pouring one and setting it in front of Sam.

“Sugar and milk are on the table, princess,” he stated as he twisted open the bottle of ibuprofen and tapped out two, holding them out in his palm. “Here,” he added.

Sam looked up, spotting the tablets and snagging them from his brother’s hand. He swallowed them dry with a look of gratitude. Leveling several spoonfuls of sugar into the cup of coffee and following it with a generous splash of milk, Sam lifted the cup and took a long draw despite the burn to his tongue.

“Where’s Dad and Bobby?” he asked as the coffee began to chase away the cobwebs from his brain.

“Dude, you really need a haircut. Can’t you hear them pounding away? Already got the last of the trusses up and they’ve started on the roof sheathing. Dad will probably be in here any second screaming for us to get out there and help,” Dean replied in between bites.

“I guess I thought all that pounding was just my head,” Sam groaned. “What time is it anyway?”

“Nearly nine.”

“Hmmm. I think I’m gonna call and see how Matt Teller is doing. You got your cell phone handy?”

Dean dug into the pocket of his jeans, pulling out the small cellular before sliding it across the table to Sam. Opening it, the younger man dialed the hospital and was engaged with someone on the other end of the phone when Dean’s prediction came true and John stomped into the trailer.

“Hey, you boys planning on joining us anytime today?” the elder Winchester asked in a booming voice.

Sam looked up with an irritated glare as he continued speaking. “Yeah, I just wanted to check on a patient. Am I family? Uh, no. I’m a reporter for the Gillette Observer, just doing a follow-up about a young man that was hurt in a hit and run. Yeah, that’s him!”

Listening intently, the injured hunter nodded silently before saying his thanks and ending the call. Handing the cellular back to Dean, Sam sucked in a deep breath before updating his waiting family.

“He’s stable, but they said he probably won’t be getting out of the hospital any time soon. And he’ll need more surgery to finish repairing the fractures in his legs,” he reported.

“He’s alive, that’s something,” Dean suggested.

“Yeah, considering how it turned out for David and the others, I ’spose you’re right,” Sam admitted with a sigh, turning to stare solemnly out the nearby window.

“You think Lucifer went after any other of Haris’ special kids? I mean, we know there were others besides the ones that were there,” Dean posed. “Maybe we should check in with ol’ Moses, and what about little Rosy? Should we be worried about her?”

“I don’t think you two need to be thinking of going up against Lucifer right now. How ’bout we keep you both off his radar?” John interrupted. “Besides, it was Haris that had Sam marked for some ulterior plan. I don’t think the Big Guy is all that concerned with either of you and I’d like to keep it that way,” he quickly added, hoping to be convincing enough his voice didn’t betray the lie.

Sam snapped around, irritation clearly apparent on his face. "People died, Dad. They were slaughtered, horribly. All because of some power struggle in Hell. Pawns, that's all we were. Objects just to be used or destroyed."

John carefully considered his son, crossing the small distance between the door and the table in two easy strides. He placed a large hand on his youngest child's shoulder and squeezed gently, feeling Sam tense under the touch. He recognized the emotions being displayed, had seen them before, had even felt them himself.

"Sam, I know how you're feeling, I do. And I know you're sitting there thinking that somehow you should have done something to save them, but survivor's guilt doesn't serve any purpose. Trust me, I know," he said gently.

"You know? How the hell do you know? Were you there listening to David Mitchum beg for his life while he was being crushed to death?" Sam challenged.

Brown eyes cast downward toward the table as John clasped his hands together before him. He paused for a long moment before looking up into the green eyes of his eldest seated across the bench, then turned to look up into Sam's face next to him.

"No, Sam. I wasn't there. But, I know how I carried it around for years after the night your mom died. Thinking I should have done more. Thinking I could have saved her somehow. Even sometimes wishing I would have just died with her instead of being left behind to live with the guilt," John quietly admitted. "I know you both think that all these years have been about nothing but revenge, but the truth is I just never wanted to go through that amount of grief and guilt ever again in my life."

Sam could see the glassy shine to his father's eyes as John shared a rare glimpse of emotion. All of his own pent up frustration and anger washed away now, sucked out of him with the mere reminder of his mother's death. He supposed he'd always known, having gone through the loss of Jess, what his dad must have felt at the loss of their mother. But it never really hit home until now, the full range of feelings, of torment and anguish his father went through.

A half smile creasing his face, his head still pounding, Sam reached his uninjured hand over and clapped John's shoulder. "I get it, Dad. And like you said before, maybe we really are a lot more alike than either of us ever wants to admit."

Across from them, Dean coughed nervously, rising from his seat and picking up the remnants of his meal. "Okay, I'm totally gonna lose breakfast now. Is the Winchester family Hallmark moment officially over?" he joked.

"Don't be an ass, Dean," John warned, before breaking into warm laugh.

Both brothers joined in the laughter stopping abruptly as the door to the trailer swung open letting in a wash of South Dakota air. Bobby poked his head into the entry, eyes wide as he glanced around at the three jovial hunters.

"Well, I'm glad to see you're all having such fun in here. I mean, I wouldn't want to interrupt or anything. After all, its not like the weather isn't just balmy here in the winter, which might I remind you is only a couple months away," he complained.

"Oh, don't get your overalls in a bunch old man. We're coming," Dean threw back. "Besides, don't know what you're complaining about? You're gonna have a nice place compared to that rat hole you used to call a house," he teased, ducking under the older hunter's arm and dodging outside.

"John Winchester, I'm gonna beat that boy senseless," the older hunter warned.

"That implies he has sense to begin with," Sam snarked, rising as well and following his father out of the makeshift abode and into the late morning sun.

By late afternoon, the roof was nearly completed and John and Bobby had begun framing interior walls while Dean went to laying shingles. Unable to help with the general construction, Sam was relegated to playing "gofer" to the three others for

most of the day, his only reprieve from the somewhat subservient job coming in the form of the “pizza run” he made to retrieve dinner for the group.

As the pounding of hammers on nails slowed, replaced by the burgeoning sound of crickets, the four men ceased their work and gathered around a weathered picnic table. While Dean readily dug into the steaming pie, the others sat back and stared at the young man’s voracious eating habits.

“This is damn good,” Dean mumbled, in between bites of cheese-laden crust. “Hey, Sammy, I need a beer.”

“Do I look like your personal bartender?” Sam immediately replied.

“You’re not my type bro. But since you’re sorry ass has been taking it easy while I’ve been on top of that roof all day baking in the heat, I figured the least you could do was grab me a cold one.”

“Can you be any lazier, Dean?”

“Aw come on, Sammy. My back feels like its one giant knot from being bent over up there all day laying shingles. My knees have third degree burns from the heat pouring off the asphalt and my arms feel like they both weigh a ton. Cut your big brother some slack, huh?” Dean whined.

“Dude, broken arm here... two places... see the cast?” Sam retorted, raising his extremity as evidence.

“Wuss!”

“Whiner!”

“Slacker!”

“STOP! Holy hell you two, I’ll go get the beer if it will just shut the both of you up for five minutes,” Bobby shouted, breaking up the verbal sparring.

The mechanic trudged off toward the long silver trailer, muttering crude epithets under his breath. Sam and Dean watched him walk off, Bobby’s trademark baseball cap disappearing into the RV before they broke into simultaneous laughter.

“It still works,” Dean announced, with a final chortle.

Sam nodded conspiratorially, reaching in for another piece of pizza.

John watched his sons, shaking his head, but chuckling inwardly. After everything they’d been through, both physically and psychologically, it was good to see them still able to act like typical brothers. It was a taste of normalcy, or at least as close to normalcy as his boys might ever know.

Listening absently as Sam and Dean carried on a conversation, reminiscing about another time when they pulled a similar trick on Jim Murphy, he marveled that his sons managed to remain so tightly bonded. He took consolation that despite everything they had lost, the life they’d been robbed of, the opportunities they had been denied, his sons had managed to forge and maintain a relationship stronger than most people every imagined. In a sense, it made them stronger in a way he could have never anticipated. And in the end, he knew it would have made Mary proud.

“Dad... Dad!” Dean’s voice broke through John’s reverie, snapping him back to the present.

He quickly realized both sons had stopped eating. Dean had risen from the picnic table and was moving toward the trailer in obvious hunter mode. Next to him, Sam was warily scanning the perimeter of the salvage yard.

“Sam?” John asked suspiciously. “What’s going on?”

“I dunno. Dean saw Bobby coming out of the Airstream. Said he signaled him to take cover, then ducked around that stack of cars,” the younger man replied, motioning to the mound of wrecks just beyond the trailer.

John’s eyes narrowed as they darted about the junkyard. He couldn’t see his fellow hunter, but knew that Bobby was likely weaving about the maze of old hulks. Several feet beyond the fresh lumber of the new house, Dean moved stealthily toward the trunk of the Impala. Feeling the hair go up on the back of his neck, John rose from the table as well, unconsciously making his way to a place of cover.

The rumble of the SUV as it crept down the dirt driveway drew John's attention. He then recognized what apparently already alerted both Bobby and Dean. At first impression, he thought it might have been the rogue hunters come back for another attempt at revenge, but as the large black vehicle stopped short of the new construction, two over-sized, dark suited men climbing out, John knew it wasn't Sid Morrow or any of his bunch.

Moving from his cover, Bobby suddenly appeared at the edge of the driveway, his hands secreted away within the pockets of his jacket.

"Can I help you?" he asked warily.

The lead man sauntered up to the hunter, towering over the man even before he was within reach, menacing in his stature. His partner approached from the passenger's side but seemingly disinterested in the mechanic, he continued past and toward the others.

"We want nothing with you," the first man replied brusquely, brown eyes oiling over black. With the barest movement of the man's head, Bobby was launched through the air, slamming into the nearest stack of rusting cars.

In that instant, hunter instinct kicked into gear as Dean appeared from behind the Impala, simultaneously shouting while tossing a shotgun to John. He boldly strode around the front of the Chevy, brandishing his own weapon and came to stand in front of Sam who had pulled up short on his way to the fallen Bobby Singer. Standing defiantly before the massive demon, the elder brother pumped the shotgun he was holding with his right hand, while pushing his brother behind him.

"I think you two might be a little lost. You're supposed to make a left turn at Albuquerque to get to Hell," he snarked.

"Where is she?" the demon asked, ignoring Dean's sarcastic taunt.

"She? See Sammy, I told you that long, shaggy hair was gonna get you mistaken for a woman sooner or later. Gee buddy, I don't think I know what you're talking about and quite frankly, I don't seem to care," Dean answered, leveling the shotgun at the man's chest. "How 'bout you and your overgrown pal there head back to whatever pit you crawled out of before we open up a can of Winchester whoop ass?"

A wide grin slowly spread across the large man's face and before Dean could react and fire the weapon, he felt himself knocked to the ground as the demon slammed both fists into the young man's chest. The young hunter sprawled on his back, dazed and breathless as he fought to rise.

Sam grabbed his brother's lost shotgun, lifting it and preparing to fire when John shouted out a warning, firing his own weapon and moving in to place himself between the demons and his sons. Distracted by the elder Winchester's intervening, the lead demon turned away from the brothers and advanced on the older hunter.

"Tell your boss he isn't getting my sons," John shouted, firing the shotgun at the nearest suited thug.

The impact of the blast threw the demon backwards against the SUV as the hunter continued unabated toward the second behemoth. Tossing the spent double-barrel to the side, John pulled a silver flask from the back pocket of his jeans. Unscrewing the cap as he confidently strode forward, the senior Winchester was determined to send the hellspawn back to their master.

"Where is she?" the second demon demanded, steadfastly holding his ground as the hunter approached.

"Dean, get Sam and Bobby the hell out of here," John ordered, ignoring the demon's question as he finished uncapping the container and lashed out with the holy water.

The liquid struck the demon across the face and upper chest, steam roiling off its body as it recoiled protectively and hissed in anger. It recuperated quickly from the sacred water, staggering forward as it lunged toward John.

"It doesn't matter, we'll get her soon enough. We just would have made your deaths less painful if you would have cooperated," it threatened.

“That’ll be pretty hard to do if you’re back in hell,” John roared back, preparing to toss a second volley of holy water at the massive man.

Before he could throw the flask forward the demon reached out and grabbed John by the throat, lifting him and spinning around to slam the hunter down against the hood of the SUV. John struggled to get his arms up underneath the strong grasp of the muscular demon, fighting against the stranglehold wrapped around his throat.

With a surge of desperation, John managed to douse the last of the holy water across the demon’s hands at his neck. The creature screeched as the skin smoldered, releasing its grasp of the hunter as it recoiled defensively from the attack. It moved backwards a half step, just enough to allow John to level a solid fist at the demon’s face.

In a splatter of blood, the giant man’s nose erupted as the hunter’s knuckles connected. John stepped in, unrelenting as he followed through with several more punches to the body of the creature.

With his attention focused on the second of the two gigantic men, John didn’t see the first dark-suited thug clamber back up from the shotgun blast and approach from behind. The demon grabbed him, pulling him away from its associate and tossing John back against the windshield of the SUV, smashing the tempered glass as the hunter’s body made impact.

The demon pulled John from the hood of the vehicle only to slam him back down again with a resounding crash of flesh and bone against metal. The hunter grunted with pain, his vision darkening as his head bounced off the top of the truck. A rock-hard fist landed solidly on his jaw, followed by a duplicate left to John’s mouth that tore open his bottom lip.

Dazed, John couldn’t prevent the half dozen blows that railed in next, each one rocking his head harder than the one before, leaving behind fresh blood in their wake. He weakly raised an arm to stop the onslaught, but the demon merely brushed the feeble defense aside as it continued to pummel him unmercifully.

As the beating moved down to his chest, the hunter fought to draw in air feeling his ribs begin to give in to the behemoth’s onslaught. John tried to see past the blood that was trickling into his eyes, seeking out his sons, and silently praying they managed to escape.

John’s prayer went unanswered as the demon suddenly stopped its attack, its body propelling forward nearly on top of him. He tried to squirm out from underneath the muscular frame even as the creature scrambled to retaliate against the new threat. John struggled to see beyond its bulky frame, grimacing when he spotted Dean raising a long crow bar to strike once again. He tried to shout out a warning to his eldest, desperate to protect Dean from Hell’s minions, but the young fighter was already fully engaged, swinging the metal wildly.

Seeing his father being beaten by the stocky assailant, Dean sent Sam over to help Bobby who was still lying silently at the base of a rusted out pickup. Quickly returning to the Impala’s trunk, he retrieved the pry bar and rushed over to the SUV where his father was now dazed and bleeding. He called out to his dad, yelling reassurance even as he screamed determined threats at the demon, slamming the crowbar across the creature’s spine with all the force he could muster.

Not allowing the demon a chance to recover, Dean struck again and again, wailing on the man’s back, ignoring the protest from the already aching muscles in his shoulders and arms. The metal connected once more, tearing through the material of the suit and into the flesh beneath laying open a strip of flesh, yet the demon barely grunted in response. Instead, it spun around to face the young man, a sadistic smile spreading across its face as it convulsively clenched its fists.

“What the hell? Don’t you know how bad steroids can be for you? All that anger and rage building up inside...” Dean taunted.

The demon laughed, unfazed even as Dean swung the crowbar again, aiming for its head. It effortlessly blocked the attack one-handed, while grabbing the weapon

with the other and stripping it away from the hunter. Flinging the crowbar off into distance, it then turned back on Dean.

Grinning and weaponless, Dean stood his ground, hoping to distract attention away from his dad and allowing him a chance to recover and escape. Impudent bravado in full effect, he took a step forward, intent on meeting the demon head on.

"Bring it on, Arnold," Dean goaded the black-eyed man, motioning him forward.

He threw a roundhouse right, catching the demon squarely on the jaw but just as quickly drawing his hand to his chest as his knuckles throbbed from the impact against the unyielding bones of the brute. Before Dean had the chance to add a left hook, the demon answered with a powerful backhand.

Dean's head twisted sideways from the blow, the force of it spinning his body around as well. He started to sag to one knee, mouth bloodied and vision blurred, but the demon reached out and snagged his outer shirt, preventing the descent.

"Where is she? Tell us now and I'll snap your neck quickly and painlessly," the demon snarled, hauling up the young hunter, large hands encircling his throat as he had John's a short time before.

"Dude," Dean began, struggling to speak as his windpipe was constricted. "I've been with a lot of women. What can I say? I just can't seem to keep 'em off me. So you're gonna have to narrow it down some..."

The demon growled, low and deep, silencing Dean as he hefted the eldest Winchester brother up and over his shoulder, throwing him through the air with ease. Dean landed against a stack of lumber, grunting with the impact as he slammed into the wood before slumping unconscious.

From across the yard, Sam watched his father and brother take on the demonic tandem. He dropped to Bobby's side, tugging the older man to his feet and holding him steady as he wavered. Blood coursed from a laceration above the mechanic's eye, coating his face and matting his thick beard. He staggered slightly, trying to get his bearings and nearly falling back down to the dirt.

Sam was torn, part of him wanting to join in on the melee ensuing between his family and the demons, but knowing that Bobby wasn't able to stand on his own either. Deciding to get the injured hunter to safety, Sam snagged Bobby by the arm and began to pull him through the maze of discarded vehicles.

Behind him, Sam could hear the muffled grunts of his dad and Dean as they fought against the larger attackers. Weaving amongst the wrecks, the sounds of the fighting quickly diminished, punctuated by a loud crash of tumbling wood before silencing altogether. Sam fought the urge to panic, hoping the sudden quiet was a sign that his father and brother had been victorious, but somehow knowing in his gut that it wasn't likely the case.

Searching out a safe place to deposit Bobby so he could go back to help, Sam spun past the burned out remains of an old station wagon. Pushing the injured hunter ahead of him, his attention was abruptly caught as Bobby was torn from his hold and sent airborne.

Sam screamed out in rage, scrambling in vain to maintain a hold on his mentor even as the demon appeared from behind the nearby mountain of abandoned cars. He startled at first, then reacted as he'd been trained, lifting the shotgun he'd recovered from Dean before, he leveled it at the demon's head.

"Do you think that's gonna stop me?" the demon asked incredulously.

"No, but I doubt you're gonna be able to catch me when I make hamburger out of your face," Sam replied defiantly.

The demon paused at the threat, seeming to assess the seriousness in the young man's tone and posture. The large man smiled, a mouthful of teeth gleaming at Sam while solid black orbs glared in stark comparison.

"Last chance. Where is she?"

Sam snickered, his finger tensing slightly on the trigger. "Boy, you guys should put more effort on brains and less on brawn. You sure aren't getting it. I don't know who you're talking about," he answered.

"Enough of your games. We know she was coming here. We'll find her, wherever you're hiding her," it hissed.

The youngest of the Winchesters twitched, responding subconsciously to the barely perceivable movement of the possessed man before him. The shotgun exploded, the spray of pellets flying outward seeking flesh but not finding any because at the last moment, Sam was propelled backwards against one of the many wrecks adorning Singer Salvage.

Sam cried out in pain as his still healing body slammed into unyielding metal. He fought against the unseen force holding him, despising the feeling of panic that was threatening to overtake him. Memories flooded him and for the briefest second, when Sam closed his eyes, the screams of the other psychics filled his ears as they were tortured to death by Eli.

But Eli was dead and gone, just like Haris. So who did these demons work for and what did they want with some girl?

The young hunter thrashed wildly, but to no avail. His body invisibly pinned to the rusted car behind him, Sam couldn't prevent the massive man as he slowly closed the distance and buried his fist in the young man's abdomen.

"I've heard you Winchesters can be pretty pigheaded," the demon mocked.

"Nah, Pigheaded's my brother, I prefer to think of myself as selectively obstinate," Sam snarked back breathlessly.

The demon answered with another strike, connecting with Sam's face, opening a small cut at the side of his left eye. "I also heard that it was the older one that had the smart mouth. I already shut him up, now I guess I have to shut you up too," he goaded.

Sam tensed, the mention of Dean worrying him since he'd heard the sounds of his father and brother fighting the demons, but considering the one before him now, the outcome must not have been in the Winchester's favor. He could only hope that his dad and Dean were alright.

"Better than you have tried," Sam finally replied in a tone of voice he hoped would have made his older brother proud.

With deliberate slowness, the demon reached down and grasped the white fiberglass encasing Sam's fractured arm. "Maybe I'll make you scream instead," he hissed, jerking the arm upward and smashing it into body of the car.

Unable to prevent what happened next, Sam couldn't stop the cry of pain as the demon slammed the door shut on the casted wrist. Held immobile by the entrapped extremity, Sam fought to stay conscious against the tide of utter agony that was enveloping him. He was vaguely aware of the rain of punches that showered in on his body, those smaller hurts barely registering above the focus of his arm.

"What? Not so much to say now?" the creature asked. "Are you ready to tell me where the girl is or shall I rip that arm from your shoulder?"

"I... don't know... who...you're talking about... you... dumb sonofabitch!" Sam gasped.

"Have it your way then..." the demon began, claw-like fingers digging into the joint.

Sam steeled himself, determined not to give the bastard the satisfaction. Dimly, his mind registered the rumble of an engine revving higher as it seemed to draw closer. He looked up, searching for the source of the noise, but finding only the pitch blackness of the demon's eyes glaring back smugly.

But the pain never came and the demon's arrogant smirk suddenly faded as it spun around reacting to the clamor. Distracted, it released Sam, who managed to drop and roll out of the way a split second before the flatbed slammed into the demon, flipping it up onto the hood of the truck before impaling it between the front bumper and the nearby stack of wrecks.

Rolling to his knees, Sam squinted through the haze of pain, coughing past the settling dust and looked up to see Dean suddenly appear at his side. His older sibling was sporting a new scalp laceration, the tell-tale trail of blood down the side of his face still freely flowing, along with a patch alongside his throat that was already starting to turn purple.

Dean wasted no time as he checked Sam over, hands turning his brother's face to the side as he grimaced at the obvious signs of the demon's abuse. "You gonna be okay?" he asked, gently placing his hands underneath Sam's arms and lifting him to his feet. When Sam nodded weakly, Dean warily watched him a second longer before darting off to the flatbed.

Pulling open the damaged door, Dean then set about repeating the same procedure on his dad. In the driver's seat, a dazed John waved his eldest off, grimacing as he pushed out of the cab and dropped to the ground.

"You okay? Sammy?" he asked, limping heavily as he headed toward the front of the flatbed.

"We're good, Dad," Dean answered, trailing behind him as he approached the trapped demon.

Cradling his arm, Sam drew up a few steps behind them, cautiously remaining just off to the side as his father and brother advanced on.

"Alright, you bastard, I told your boss he wasn't getting my boys, not back in Wyoming, not ever," John shouted in fury. "So what the hell are you doing here now?"

"We were just looking for the girl, nothing more," the man gasped back, thrashing weakly against the hood of the truck.

"Already told you, no chicks here. Not that I couldn't go for a little action," Dean added in.

"What girl, what's her name? Why do you want her?" John demanded, ignoring his eldest's suggestive comment.

"It's not my job to know. We were just sent here to take her out," the demon answered.

"Not high enough on the food chain, huh?" Dean threw back. "Sucks to be expendable."

"Laugh now, Winchester, but you won't stop us."

John reached out and grabbed a handful of the giant man's hair, slamming his head down against the hood of the truck repeatedly and leaving behind a gooey smear of blood on the metal as the demon's face shattered.

"Wanna bet?" John snarled, finally letting go, allowing the bloodied head to drop limply on the hood. He turned back to his sons, nodding to Sam. "You up to sending this sonofabitch back to hell where he belongs, Sammy?"

The youngest hunter nodded in reply, moving forward even as a haggard Bobby Singer reappeared by the trio.

"Just saw his buddy haulin' ass outta here. Must not have liked the odds, but I'm betting he's going back to tell his boss," Bobby reported, absently wiping at the congealing blood on his face.

"Yeah, well this one will be right behind him," Dean added. "Sammy? You got this?"

Sam nodded once more, his mind fighting to recall the Latin while the pain in his right arm threatened to drop him to his knees. He sucked in a deep breath, knowing Dean was watching him and looking for any sign that he wasn't one-hundred percent.

He broke into the *Rituale Romanum*, the Latin rolling off his tongue with practiced ease despite the throbbing that tried to distract his concentration. Sam was well into the second stanza when the demon inside the massive man bellowed loudly.

"This won't stop us. She won't save him. And when we finish with her, we'll kill all of you too," it screeched.

Dean stepped up closer to his brother, resting a hand on Sam's back. "Shut him up, bro. I'm sick and tired of listening to these bastards and their empty threats," he softly muttered.

Sam dropped back into the Latin, watching as the body before them writhed; the demon beginning to tear out of the shell it had been possessing. As he drew to the end of the exorcism, a thick black mist slowly began to seep from the mouth of the giant man. With a final scream, the demon was expelled, the lifeless body of the former innocent collapsing back against the flatbed.

For a moment, absolute quiet returned to the South Dakota landscape as the hunters exchanged restless glances. Beaten and bruised, both Bobby and John sagged wearily against the flatbed.

"What the hell was that all about?" the salvage yard owner asked, rubbing his shoulder.

John sighed, shifting the weight off his left leg. Lucifer's words still haunting him, the not so veiled threats aimed at his boys chewing away at his gut. With the demise of Haris, he had thought the bullseye on his son's backs had been erased, but with the appearance of these two demons, he had to question whether or not an even greater threat was now gunning for Sam and Dean.

"I don't know, Bobby. Damn things just kept going on and on about finding some girl. Dean, do you know anything about this?" John asked.

The young man looked over from where he was standing next to his brother. He made no attempt to hide the indignation from his face at the implication of his father's question.

"What? I mean, yeah, I know the ladies can't get enough of me, but do you think I'd honestly hang out with demon-bait?" he answered in a huff. "I have my standards after all."

"And those would be what? Breathing with a pulse?" Bobby teased.

Dean began to reply when a barely stifled groan from Sam drew his attention. Ever the watchful protector, all thoughts of retaliation were forgotten when he spotted the paling face of his brother.

"Sammy?" he asked tentatively. "You okay, dude?"

"M' fine, Dean." Sam answered quickly, brushing away his brother's hand as Dean began tugging at clothing searching for any new signs of injury.

"You gotta stop stealin' my lines, dude. Besides, if you're gonna use them, then you ought to at least lie better when you say them, 'cause no Oscar for you right now. What gives?" Dean pestered.

"Its nothing," Sam insisted, withdrawing once again, protectively tucking his arm to his chest.

"Yeah, bullshit. I saw what that bastard did. It's the arm again isn't it?"

Sam looked down at the cast then back up at his brother's green eyes. While he'd always been the master at the puppy-dog face, Dean had always been able to stare right through him with a fierce, piercing sort of glare that could as easily intimidate an adversary as weaken the knees of a young woman.

In the end, Sam simply couldn't hide the pain. "It's messed up, Dean," he admitted woefully, eyes seeking relief, begging help, pulling strength from his brother as he cradled the damaged appendage.

Without hesitation, Dean rose and headed for the Impala, hesitating as he reached John and Bobby. The Winchester patriarch glanced up at his eldest, knowing without speaking that Dean was already determined to take care of his brother. Like a hellhound on a scent, there was stopping Dean once he was focused on protecting or caring for Sam.

"Go on, take care of Sam. Bobby and I will get rid of the body while you're gone," he instructed, gingerly rising to his feet and suppressing a groan of his own.

"Your leg?" Dean asked, noticing the crimson stain seeping through the denim on his father's thigh.

"It's okay. Bobby can take care of it. Not like we haven't traded needle work before,"

Dean nodded reluctantly, but darted off into the encroaching darkness toward the waiting Chevy.

Later...

Dean paced the small waiting room of the emergency department for the fifteenth time in the past several hours. He could have blamed his nervous activity on the lack of decent television programming currently streaming across the small thirteen inch screen. He could have blamed it on the lack of magazines scattered about the room. He could have even blamed it on the one-too-many cups of coffee he'd drank or the pounding headache that made him want to smash his head against the wall until he was blissfully unconscious.

But...

Truth be told, Dean paced because short of storming back into the treatment area and demanding information on Sam, there simply wasn't anything else to do but wait... and pace.

Looking at the watch on his wrist, he groaned. Nearly three hours had gone by and not a single word, or even glimpse, of his brother. Deep down, he knew it couldn't be good, a strange sense of foreboding filling him even though he tried to chase the haunting whispers from his mind. The ER had been reasonably empty since their arrival, so any delay hadn't been due to an overabundance of patients.

Heading toward the vending machine, Dean fished into the pockets of his jeans, flinching as the torn skin and bruised flesh of his knuckles caught on the rough fabric. He hissed, wringing his hand in the air, foregoing the beverage as he dropped into a nearby chair in a tirade of obscenities.

"Stupid, sonofabitch, goddamn, pain-in-the-ass, friggin'..."

"Dean?"

He stopped his rant mid-curse, looking up to see Sam standing above him. His own discomfort forgotten, Dean jumped to his feet, hands immediately reaching out to his brother.

His eyes took in Sam from head to toe in a fast once-over, noting the stark new cast that now stretched from fingertips to elbow as well as the downcast face his brother tried to hide underneath the shaggy mop of hair.

"What did the doc say, Sam? How's your arm? You were in the forever. Hell, I thought they were doing a transplant or something, turn you into Steve Austin," he rambled nervously, the feeling of dread returning as Sam continued to look away.

"Nothing new, Dean," Sam answered quietly. "Look, I'm tired. Can we just head back to Bobby's?"

Dean watched him carefully, trying to see beyond the brown hair that strategically hid hazel eyes. Sam's body language was not much of a clue either, held taut, Dean knew his brother was in pain, but that much he'd expected. Beyond that, there was something else, something his baby brother was hiding.

Deciding that getting Sam back and squared away was the first step, Dean conceded, wrapping an arm around his brother's back and guiding him toward the exit. Once outside, he raced ahead, opening the passenger's side door of the Impala and waiting patiently while Sam folded his long body into the front seat.

The drive back to the secluded salvage yard was cloaked in a suffocating silence. For a while, Dean was content to simply let Sam rest, glancing over on occasion and seeing that his gangly sibling had somehow managed to nearly curl into a ball on the seat beside him, injured arm held protectively within the cocoon of his six foot four frame. His eyes closed, Dean thought maybe the docs had given Sam something for pain, but the occasional barely-stifled groan soon gave away that his brother was still awake.

“So, got yourself a new cast? And a nice white one too,” Dean opened, breaking the oppressive quiet. “Guess I’ll have to break out the colored sharpies while you’re sleeping tonight.”

Sam’s eyes flicked open, but he remained ominously quiet.

“You in there, Sammy?” Dean asked again.

“Tired, Dean,” his brother’s clipped answer came back through the darkness of the Impala’s interior.

“Yeah, yeah, I know you are, but I’m not as dumb as you think I am,” Dean countered, foot pressing on the brake as he slowed the car, gently pulling it over to the shoulder of the road and throwing the gearshift into park.

He swiveled in the seat, turning so he could look directly at Sam who was already reacting to his brother’s sudden choice of parking spots.

“What the hell, Dean?” Sam exclaimed, scooting to sit upright in the seat.

“Give it up, bro. What did the doc say about your arm?” Dean demanded.

“I told you, nothing new. Now can we please get back to Bobby’s?”

“You can’t lie to me, Sammy. I know that look. What did the doc say? Why is it in a different cast? Did that demonic bastard break it worse or something?”

Frustration tinged with panic crept into Dean’s tone. He knew Sam was hurt, but every fiber in his being could tell there was more to it than simple pain. Sam had been hurt before, had broken bones before, there was something else going on to account for why his brother was acting withdrawn, trying, albeit poorly, to hide something from him.

“Sam?” Dean’s voice held the timbre that warned physical harm if not heeded.

“It can’t be fixed, Dean!” Sam blurted out.

“What? What are you talking about?” the elder hunter asked confused.

Sam sighed, his face turned downward as he stared at the injured appendage lying uselessly in his lap.

“They said it wasn’t set right to begin with and it started to heal wrong...”

“Sonofabitch, I’m gonna kill him...” Dean reacted violently, hands slamming into the steering wheel.

“Dean, no! It wasn’t Garrett’s fault,” Sam intervened. “It was a small fracture in my wrist. The ortho doc said anyone could have missed it. But once they did, and then, well having it smashed up again by that demon didn’t help much. Anyway, it’s too late now. The doc said stuff about osteonecrosis and the bones fusing together. They can do some sort of bone graft surgery but even then the chance of success is only like sixteen percent and even with that I’ll have limited use.”

Dean sat stunned in silence as Sam sucked in a breath that bordered on a sob. Wanting to reach out to his brother, tempted to drive to Pine Haven and perform his own sort of neutering on one Garrett Wade, even more tempted to go back to Bobby’s and just break the nearest two-by-four with his bare hands, but ultimately Dean simply spoke softly.

“Sam, we’ll just find another doc, a better one. Hell, they do all kinds of stuff for baseball players and crap...”

“No, Dean...”

“No? Why the hell not, Sammy?”

With his head down and his voice scarcely above a whisper, Dean could barely hear his brother’s next words, but when he did, the finality and brokenness nearly tore out the older sibling’s heart.

“They said I’ll never be able to use it again, Dean...”

Bobby Singer’s Place

Sam could hear the distinct “clink, clink, clink” of the fan behind him as its whirling blades caught on its outer casing. It was an annoying and yet familiar noise in the

confined space of the Airstream – a sound he'd quickly become accustomed to until its grating whir had grown almost hypnotic – and somehow, comforting.

"Dude, are you gonna eat that or stare at it 'til it freakin' walks off your plate?"

Sam dragged down a long breath, glancing first at the offering before him, and finally, up to his brother's waiting eyes.

The eyes were always the worst.

While Sam could look like a chastised pup to get attention, Dean's willful gaze always meant he was reading his younger sibling.

And Dean was rarely wrong in his perceptions about Sammy.

"I'm...just...not hungry." Sam looked away from the monster-sized B.L.T. that his brother had actually *cooked*, preferring the grimy walls of the trailer to those oh-so-observant hazel orbs that now glowered at him.

The old Airstream's decor had seen better days, that was for sure – but then, so had he. The new stark white cast on his hand and wrist gave testament to that.

"Sam..." Dean looked at the food he'd so carefully prepared and then ran a hand through the back of his hair, trying to think of the right words, the right mood to shoot for to get Sam to see sense. Sam had been quiet since his revelation back in the car.

Too quiet, even for Sasquatch.

"Look, Sam, we can go find another doctor – get a second opinion." Dean took a glance at his own sandwich, but suddenly that held as little appeal to him as his brother's had only moments earlier. "Even if the dude was right...it's not the end of the world..."

Sam's eyes snapped up, his voice rising to match the rapid redirection of his creasing brow. "Oh no? Tell me how that is, Dean? What kind of hunter can I be with a hand I can barely use? Tell me how I live with myself when some freaky thing tears you or Dad a new one 'cause I couldn't reload in time..."

"That's *not* gonna happen."

"Because what, Dean? You and Dad are gonna watch me like a damn baby twenty-four-seven?" Sam shook his head, shaggy locks flopping in front of his face until he was forced to use his good hand to brush them away. "I've had enough of that already..."

Looking back down at the cast, he refocused on the clattering of the fan. The thing had long since been any use to cooling the room, but its metronomic cadence at least calmed him like one of the lullabies Mary used to sing so long ago.

He had to get a grip – accept what fate had dealt him and move on. There were far worse things that could have happened given the fatality rate back at Devil's Tower.

No, this was an omen, it had to be.

I'm alive. I can go back to college. Finish what I started there. Haris is gone – my fight is over anyway...

Dean fidgeted, his brother's abrupt silence and acceptance of the inevitable leaving him with a hollow abyss in the bottom of his stomach. He'd once hunted alone while Sam had gone off to be educated, and it had been an odious lifestyle.

Merely existing instead of living.

Dean didn't want to go back to those long, lonely days filled with nothing but hunts, food and the odd chick at night for comfort. He wanted to be part of a team.

A family.

The only problem was, there was no way to let his little brother know that – at least, not without expressing feelings he reserved for funerals – because hell, he just didn't talk that way. "Look, what am I gonna do without my sidekick geekboy? You're Robin to my Batman, dude. I need your ass right in the Impala riding shotgun."

Sam shook his head. Dean would never see sense – mostly because he tended not to have any when rational, systematic thought processes were required. If Sam was the totally logical Spock, then Dean would always be the impulsive, action man that was Kirk.

"Maybe I can still do research for you, but I don't need to be with you for that." Sam felt his brother's eyes lock onto him and the air in the trailer seemed to condense – evidence that an emotional storm of hurricane proportions was brewing. "Face it, Dean, the family business is over for me. And honestly? Maybe that's a good thing." He let just one brow tick up slightly, elbows on the table already set in defiance should Dean try and talk him out of what needed to be done.

"Sam..."

"I'm going back to Stanford, Dean. I figure its time I acted *normal*, even if I'm still some psychic freak inside. I deserve a future. Maybe a family even." Sam spat out the sentence so fast he hardly had time to see the expression on his brother's face at the word "family." "Dude, you deserve a life too. You can't do this crap forever. Maybe it's time, Dean – for *both* of us..."

Outside...

John Winchester swirled the dregs of his Coors around, listening to the swishing sound it made against the side of the can. It was the last of two six packs he and Bobby had shared – and he had consumed most of them.

He leaned forward, his elbows perched precariously on his knees, wishing he had a thousand more cans to quell his misery. In killing Haris, he had assumed there would be some shred of peace, some feeling of accomplishment, but he felt nothing – only a vein of numbness that seemed to dissect his very being since he'd heard the news about Sam's hand.

It could have been worse, way worse. But it didn't really change the guilt he was feeling. Maybe he really had pushed his family too far. Dean had almost died, Sam had almost died.

It was time to live.

"Ya think it will do any good to sit there moping, John?" Bobby nodded towards his old friend as he took a sip of his own beer, the lively froth sticking to his beard until he had to wipe it across with his shirt sleeve.

"Not moping," the elder hunter corrected. "Just thinking about what comes next for us." He shot a glance towards the cigar-shaped metallic abode to his left, considering the future of the two young men inside. "I think...I think maybe its time the Winchesters returned to their roots-"

"Give up hunting?" Bobby let the can in his hand slide through his fingers in surprise, only catching the elusive item just before it tumbled to the ground at his feet. "John, just because that yellow-eyed sonofabitch is gone doesn't mean we don't need good men to carry on the fight. Evil isn't just gonna up and give in 'cause one demonic bastard got canned."

"There are others out there." John chugged back the remainder of the Coors, crumpling the can in his hand and tossing it across the yard. "People who still have fight left in them. This family, my family has paid enough. I figure Sam has a bright future if he goes back to school, and Dean – there isn't anything he doesn't know about engines..."

"But what about you?" Bobby slipped a hand inside his grease-covered waistcoat and tugged out a small silver flask. Uncapping the elaborately engraved flagon, he took a swig, savoring the homemade brew it held. "Singer's finest," he smiled, offering up the moonshine.

"There are always jobs for people like me." John accepted the flask, but his words weren't spoken with any conviction as he thought about his own future. He couldn't see beyond this point in his life. He'd *never* seen beyond the death of Haris.

"Well, I guess you got time. You boys got no need to hurry into anything – 'cept maybe teachin' Dean there's more to life than feeding that stomach of his. I think he's gotten through half a damn sow and he's only cooked twice!" Bobby chuckled and

pushed up from the balding tire he'd been perched on. "That son of yours is gonna eat me outta supplies if we don't put him to work soon."

John smiled back, intending to thank his friend for lightening an otherwise grim moment in his life, but Bobby had already turned, his ears pricking at the sound of something unfamiliar and alien in his personal kingdom.

Bobby stood for a second, eyes squinting as he scanned between crushed and mangled cars for anything out of place. This may be a salvage yard that *appeared* to be completely disorganized, but the hunter knew every make, model, year and their position – right along with the several booby traps he'd recently placed among the vehicular cadavers.

John silently joined his friend, the alcohol in his system not once dulling his instincts as his hand automatically slid for his weapon. "You see something?" He asked almost inaudibly.

Bobby licked his lips, his beard twitching as he considered exactly what had spooked him. "More like sensed it," he corrected, pointing towards the wreck of a twenty-year-old Buick. "Maybe our demon buddies decided they needed their butts whooped some more..."

"You plant the salt and holy water bombs?" John questioned quietly, taking the left flank of a blistering Skylark as Bobby bordered the right.

Bobby nodded, never letting his gaze shift from their target. Something or someone was definitely behind the rusting hulk. He could see their silhouette reflecting in the dulling metalwork of the next car.

When he was within a few feet of the Buick, he dropped low, not wanting his own shadow to give his presence away to the interloper. As Bobby closed in, John did much the same, creating a classic pincer movement that Sun Tzu would have been proud of.

"Hold it right there you sonofa..." Bobby's sentence trailed as he set eyes on the lithe figure that was crouching behind the Skylark. After the initial shock, he held his weapon fast in one hand, and tugged down the peak of his cap out of habit with the other, adding to the already abundant amount of grease smudges present on its brim. "Now what in the name of hell is a pretty young thing like you doing in a place like this?"

"Maybe because she's *from Hell*?" John suggested, appearing from the blinding glare of the setting sun to flank the girl with his own revolver. "Lucifer starting to regret not finishing the Winchesters when he had the chance, already?"

The blonde straightened, blue eyes sparking with energy and a strange air of satisfaction at being caught that confused both hunters.

"Trust me," She flicked her flaxen locks over her shoulders absently, "if I was batting for the other team, you two would be sitting on your asses right about now..."

"Oh really?" Bobby tilted his head, eyes narrowing as he watched the girl with uncertainty. "Maybe you shouldn't underestimate your enemy," he suggested, cocking the gun in his hand to test her reaction.

The girl shrugged slightly then crouched, making slow movements in her captors' presence. Carefully picking up a piece of broken taillight from the oily sludge pool at her feet, she tossed the angled segment of toughened glass at a two door Ford to their left. Her aim was perfect – as if she'd thrown things with such precision for millennia – but then, maybe she had.

Before either hunter could react, the taillight impacted on the Ford's slightly elevated hood and something beneath exploded.

The charge wasn't huge – just enough to send the Mustang's hood flying into the air and discharging two strange substances from the canisters beneath.

White powder and holy water were expelled into the air like a mushroom cloud of atomic proportions, raining down on anything demonic that may have been foolish enough to enter the salvage yard unprepared.

As the “demon mortar’s” contents began to settle, the blonde placed her hands on her hips, staring at the two hunters like they were children just caught out by their own prank.

While Bobby had escaped some of the salty miasma, John had not. A thin sheen of white covered his hair, whiskers and the shoulders of his jacket until he looked like a poor man’s Santa Claus.

“Like I said,” The girl’s blue eyes rolled in mirth, “I think we’re on the same team. Although I tend not to be dumb enough to get caught in my own traps...”

Bobby’s hand wavered. She was no demon, no spirit, but he sensed she wasn’t exactly normal either. He hadn’t been in the business all these years to not be able to get an angle on such things.

John obviously wasn’t enamored by her attitude either, and as Bobby retook his aim on the girl he quickly caught her forearm, twisting it behind her back with just enough pressure to hold her fast.

“Who are you? What do you want here?” John’s subterranean tone seemed to get deeper as he instinctively returned to the hunter mode he had only recently been considering taking leave of. Perhaps he could take the hunter out of the hunt, but he would never take the hunt out of the hunter.

“She’s a reaper...”

John turned to see Dean hastening towards the Buick with Sam close at his heels. The sudden explosion had obviously alerted his sons to trouble - and as usual they’d headed straight for it rather than turning tail.

“A *what?*” Bobby let the gun in his hand slip to his side, abruptly realizing the futility of pointing it at something that, technically, couldn’t die.

“A reaper,” Dean repeated breathlessly. “Dad, Bobby, meet Gudrun...”

The blonde craned her neck, letting her pale blue orbs lock on John. “You gonna let me go Santa?”

John’s own eyes sparked with recognition and his grip loosened. In their sparse communications, Sam had told him about this girl – although he hadn’t exactly used the term “reaper.” This was the entity, the woman that had saved his dying son back in New Jersey.

“You might regret that, Dad.” Dean nodded towards Gudrun as she pulled free from his father. “Sassy doesn’t even begin to describe this one...”

Gudrun absently brushed flecks of salt and dirt from the yard off her jacket before bothering to respond. When she did, it was with pure pleasure. “Nice to see you again too, Dean. Still driving that crate that’s older than I am?”

“Oh sweetheart, she might be old, but she talks back way less than you.” Dean stole a glance to Sam, knowing his brother wouldn’t likely be enjoying the already acerbic banter.

Gudrun’s personality just clashed with Dean’s far too much for them to ever be civil to one another – and after she’d saved Sam’s life – Sam didn’t really feel comfortable talking to her, or having Dean talk to her that way.

Bobby groaned. “Oh for crying out loud, don’t tell me I gotta put up with two of you now? Winchester squabbling is bad enough...” He looked to the girl and then back to Dean, hoping and praying they could all stop the bickering long enough to discover what someone like Gudrun could possibly want with them.

Sam shook his head at the old timer, knowing Bobby and John had a rude awakening coming, and fast. “Put up with them? Guys, you just have *no* idea...”

Back Inside...

Dean watched as the blonde pulled up a chair in the Airstream and surveyed her surroundings. Throughout her life, he had no doubt she’d seen worse – Vikings didn’t exactly have the best table or party manners, after all. And yet, he couldn’t help but

see a tiny flicker of bemusement on her face as her darting eyes settled on the discolored walls and torn upholstery.

Not that the hunter cared what Gudrun thought of the trailer – or him, for that matter. While he accepted she was the only reason his brother could still draw breath, there was just something about her kind that freaked him. This tiny, and very pretty woman held life and death in the palm of her hands as if it was the most natural thing on earth.

She used those gifts to take people, even though it wasn't their designated time. Granted, she took bad guys out of the equation, but...

No, she may not have the pale skin, sunken eyes and wizened face of the reaper he'd met in Nebraska, and the word "Valkyrie" sounded much more heroic than calling her a death maiden, but when it all boiled down, he was *scared* of her.

"Off your food, Dean?" Gudrun examined the B.L.T. on the plate in front of her, recognizing it was the hunter's, even though she had no way of knowing who had been seated there before. "So unlike you to lose that *voracious* appetite of yours..."

Without asking, she picked up one half of the toasted sandwich, taking a much larger bite than anyone in the room would have given her credit for. She nodded as she chewed, eventually mumbling, "Your cooking is way better than your pick up lines, Dean..."

Dean's eyes widened and for a moment he stood in awkward silence as Sam began to chuckle beside him. If there was one thing Gudrun was great at, it was catching the elder sibling off guard.

"Do ya think you two could cut it out long enough for us to actually *talk*?" Bobby slapped his cap down on the dingy table and raised a brow along with his voice, signaling he was losing his temper no matter who or what was in his presence.

John nodded in agreement and then set his gaze on the newcomer. She was a pretty thing, but then, looks could be oh so deceiving. "You strike me as a person who doesn't do anything without a reason. What do you want from us?"

Gudrun's lips pursed then spread into a small smile. John was straight to the point – she liked that – no, *needed* that kind of approach right now. "I need help," she admitted, watching as Dean and Sam shared a glance. "Let's just say a 'mutual friend' has been taken by a cell of demons that work for Ferinacci. Given my...less than human status, I can't rescue him alone. I thought of you..."

"What? You mean you thought 'Hey, the Winchesters owe me big time, I can collect?' Well, let me tell you, sister, we've done our share. Some other schmucks can go get themselves killed for your reaper ass." Dean slammed a fist into a small filing cabinet Bobby had nestled in the corner, the weight behind his punch crumpling the pliable metal enough to leave a small dent.

Sam's had enough, been through enough. No way is Miss friggin' Norway 1000 B.C. dragging him into anything else...

"Hey!" Sam's usually soft voice cut through the air, grabbing everyone's attention until their burning gazes seemed to slice into him. "We owe it to her at least to listen," he continued, eyes now set on Gudrun. "I owe it..."

"Sammy? What the hell are you thinkin' with that thing on your hand? What were you just telling me? No more hunting, period?" Dean's tirade stopped in mid-sentence, the pained, pleading stare from his brother's eyes commanding him to shut up.

A command even John and Bobby understood, as they too simply waited for Gudrun to continue. If Sam needed this, who were they to disallow him that one compromise?

Gudrun nodded to the young hunter, some unspoken words conveying she understood his belated "thank you" for the gift of his life. "My captured friend could be very important in the months ahead. He is what you might call a key player on our side – a player who could thwart Ferinacci's future plans."

"You mean, *Lucifer's* future plans?" Bobby's scratched at his beard unconsciously, the thought of the high ranking demon having any kind of designs on the world making him fidget in his seat. "And just what kinda things are we talkin' here? More crap like Haris pulled or what?"

"Plans mankind truly doesn't want to see come to fruition, trust me on that, at least."

"But you have powers, gifts beyond anything we can do," Sam pointed out, rubbing at his cast as if the motion would make the cumbersome impediment vanish. "Can't you use them to help get this person out?"

Gudrun sighed. Sometimes humans were too perceptive for their own good – especially Sam Winchester – maybe that was why she liked him.

"My kind, their kind – we were all once one and the same. Consider demons; is it not said they were once simply fallen angels? In that respect, good and bad are susceptible to, shall we say, similar entrapments..."

"Are you telling me I can put your ass in a Devil's Trap and have a little peace and quiet around here? 'Cause, sister, that's mighty inviting right about now." Dean leaned forward and winked, snagging the remaining half of his sandwich and unceremoniously taking a bite before the girl had chance to finish off his meal.

Gudrun smirked. Somehow, the possession of the B.L.T. had become about so much more than food. "You could lock me up, yes...but it wouldn't shut my mouth..."

"Why am I so not surprised..."

"Anyway," Gudrun continued, disregarding the hunter as he stuffed in more of the toasted sandwich. "Ferinacci's goons expect me. They know my weaknesses and have no doubt prepared for them. As humans, though, you could walk right on through-"

"We had some visitors here recently – they were after you, weren't they? The damn things knew you'd come here." John, who had until now remained reasonably neutral, looked at the girl accusingly. It was one thing to need help, but to put people in danger without their knowledge irked him. This was his family after all.

"Probably..." Gudrun admitted. "But then, it wouldn't be the first time you've put people at risk for your own gains, would it, John?" The Valkyrie shrugged. It wasn't an accusation, just a simple matter of fact they were both willing to do whatever was needed to get the job done.

"Don't you class my dad with your kind." Dean's lip curled in real anger. He'd "toyed" with the girl until she'd made things personal – and taking a stab at John was more than that. "We don't take lives for fun..."

Gudrun's brow arched in mock surprise. "Oh? So you *didn't* savor the moment you killed Haris? Come on, Dean...I know his demise was one of the first things you asked about when you found yourself still in the land of the living. Felt good to know his evil hide had burned, didn't it?"

"Yeah, well, lady, I take care of my own dirty work – maybe you can take a lesson from that." Dean turned to face the wall, his temper rising to boiling point until even what little cool air the fan was giving out was welcome.

"Will you just stop? All of you?" Sam slammed his hand down on the table, forgetting the cast and his debilitating injury for a second. "This isn't about what we want. It's about the bigger picture. Just when did we forget what we're fighting for? Just when did it become about us?"

The trailer fell into silence save for the groaning fan and the decrepit moan of the refrigerator's compressor kicking in. Hunter looked to hunter in uncertainty until John as head of the family took the lead.

"Sam, it's not what we want to do. It's what we *can* do. After Wyoming we're not even in any kind of shape for this." He nodded towards his son's healing hand, eyes deep with sadness. "It's over for this family."

Sam glanced up, eyes sadder than his father's. Why couldn't they understand? Why couldn't they see? Pushing away from the table he stood up, almost knocking his own untouched sandwich to the floor.

"You just don't get it do you? Any of you? I *need* to do this..." With one last glance to John and then Dean, Sam trudged from the Airstream, slamming the door as he barged from the trailer.

Gudrun looked to John, her normally mirthful blue eyes suddenly deep with regret. It was sometimes hard to speak with humans. Hard to make them understand her kind and the workings of the universe they lived in. Knowing about evil was one thing, but understanding the balance of nature and how to keep it in check – well, that was something else.

"It's never over for warriors, John, not until they die in battle..."

Taking leave of her own seat, Gudrun followed Sam out into the darkening night before anyone could argue. Perhaps only Sam would ever understand her – and it was Sam she needed to focus on right now. Not to coerce him into helping, for he had surely already made that choice.

She crossed the yard, picking her way between rotting cars and puddles of oil until she found the young hunter.

Even though Sam heard her approach, he didn't turn as she walked to his side. He was staring at the stars as if they had all the answers – as if some higher being really resided among them and was looking down at this moment to guide him.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Gudrun peered into the heavens, moving her gaze after a second to look at Sam. "The stars guided my kind across many waters in times past..."

"Do they guide you still?" Sam asked, taking his eyes from a distant constellation to look at the girl. "How do you know what choices are the right ones?"

"I don't," Gudrun smiled, her rose-colored lips curling softly as she took Sam's broken hand in her own. "Even beings like myself aren't perfect, Sam. If we were, demons wouldn't exist."

Placing her other hand atop the offending cast, she closed her eyes, her forehead furrowing as concentration took away all other thoughts.

Sam wanted to pull away, to run back to the trailer and finally agree with Dean that reapers weren't to be trusted, but somehow, he just couldn't move.

At Gudrun's touch he had become paralyzed, not by some draining death force hell-bent on taking his soul, but by something familiar. A heat – a warmth that had consumed him once before in a lonely New Jersey hospital.

A tingling, itching sensation began to radiate from his shattered wrist until the gnawing feeling was almost too much to bear.

Sam closed his own eyes, abruptly aware of what was happening beneath skin and sinew. Somehow, bones that could not be healed, bones that had already set and could not be reset, were moving, regenerating until he was whole again.

Eventually, Gudrun released her grip, and when Sam dared to open his eyes she had moved away, uncertain of his reaction.

She stood now with her back to him, shivering slightly as a chill wrapped around the salvage yard.

Should she even get cold? Sam wondered as he looked to his cast and then back to the girl in awe. *She healed me...she **healed** me and I don't even know what to say to her.* "Thank you...again," he finally found the strength to mutter.

"I didn't do it so you'd help me..." Gudrun used the trunk of a Chevy as a seat, perching on it with perfect balance even though it sat at an impossibly odd angle.

"I know," Sam answered, feeling somehow servile in her presence. "You did it because you *care*...that's why no matter what the others say I'm going with you. That's why I would have gone even if you hadn't healed me."

Gudrun's smile reappeared, just a touch of mirth on her lips as she responded knowingly. "Oh, you don't need to worry about 'the others.' Your brother already

surrendered to the inevitable, he's just not so thrilled about admitting it yet." She chuckled wryly, bringing "the dimple grin" to the fore on Sam's face. "You know, he really is a teddy bear underneath all that sarcasm...just don't tell him I said that..."

Sam nodded. "Don't worry, I won't. I'm not sure he'd actually appreciate the sentiment."

Gudrun's smile grew. "Me either...maybe I should tell him after all." She raised a brow, hooking an arm around Sam's to guide him back towards the Airstream. "C'mon...I hope your brother is as good with a saw as he is a frying pan, or you might lose a hand yet."

"Huh?"

"Well, I fixed the hand, you can't expect me to get rid of the cast too..."

Impala The Next Evening

Dean Winchester didn't like not knowing where he was going. He liked it even less that the person doing the directing just happened to be a girl – at least that term loosely fit her description. He wasn't really sure what the hell she was, but *annoying* seemed the most fitting word right now.

The hunter stole a glance in the rearview to take a peek at his guest. So far, she'd been uncharacteristically quiet in the backseat, and that fact scared him.

Gudrun had pretty much only spoken to give out a few sparse directions – without the aid of any kind of map. He couldn't be certain, but Dean was pretty sure she was avoiding giving up their destination on purpose.

Taking a long drawn breath, he spun the Chevy's wheel hard over, exiting a main road on to something that looked like a very pot-holed dirt track.

Great, she's not satisfied with insulting my baby, now she wants to ruin the suspension. Damn freaky reaper chick...

Dean did a double take in the mirror as he caught Gudrun's mouth ticking up into a smile.

"I'm not a reaper, Dean...and I'm sure your car can handle this road, otherwise I wouldn't have taken it."

"Will you cut out that mind reading crap? Jeez, even thoughts aren't private around you." Dean shot a glance to Sam who was once again finding his brother's torture somehow amusing.

"I'm glad Dad decided to stay back and help Bobby with the house – he'd have banged your heads together before we'd even hit the freeway." Sam watched Dean begin to cuss under his breath, muttering something about girls not understanding men and cars.

Eventually, the cussing stopped and Dean peered over his shoulder, daring not to look ahead even though the Impala bounced in and out of cavernous, rain-filled ruts every few seconds. "Are you gonna spill exactly where I'm supposed to be heading, or do I gotta turn around and head for the nearest museum..?"

Gudrun's eyes widened in incomprehension. "Museum?"

"Well, sweetheart, I figure you gotta be the oldest relic in the U.S. I might as well drop you off somewhere you *do* fit in."

The blonde flicked her hair back and cocked her head in an unspoken "touché." "Let's just say my friend isn't anywhere warm. I hope you've packed for the cold..."

Dean scrunched his nose up at the thought. Why couldn't the bad guys have hideouts in Hawaii? "Ha friggin' ha!" He grouched as the Impala bucked sideways as it rolled out of another groove in the road. "We're headed for the North Pole to rescue freakin' Santa from some rogue elves..."

"I thought you didn't believe in Santa?" Sam pointed out, joining in the sarcastic festivities as he grasped the dash to keep from being tossed around by the less than comfortable ride.

Dean rolled his eyes, gunning the gas pedal just a tad more to annoy his passengers. "Don't tell me you're on her side now?" He took another glance to Gudrun. "So, are you gonna spill, or what?"

"Take the last turn on this road and you'll understand," Gudrun offered somewhat cryptically. "But one thing I can tell you, *you're* going to *love* the next part..."

Dean's eyes narrowed and slid from the blonde back to his still grinning brother. "Why do I think I'm gonna regret this?"

Sam shrugged, but he was pretty sure that was an understatement. Rather than argue the point or give in and blab where they were going, he remained silent, his face reddening as he stifled laughter at his brother's expense.

Dean took the expression for exactly what it was, and began mentally plotting all-out revenge. "Dude, you and your Viking vixen are *sooo* gonna pay..." He shook his head, making the final left turn through an open gateway.

The gate led to a larger, fenced-off area that housed several ancient hangars which had once been part of a USAF training base during the fifties.

Dean groaned as he noted several aircraft parked outside the buildings – what was worse – all of the planes were what he would describe as kites with a motor. He'd managed to get a grip of his fear of flying on airliners somewhat, but these things were a whole different ball game.

Pulling the Impala over to what he assumed was the next best thing to an office, the hunter killed the engine and took a long, unappreciative look at the impromptu grass runway that served the airfield.

A lump formed in his throat as he imagined the kind of bumpy takeoff the uneven surface would give.

"You knew about this, didn't you? *Dammit*, Sammy you freakin' KNEW!"

"Dean, we can't drive all the way...it would take too long. Besides, I thought you were over all that 'don't do flying' crap?" Sam tried not to smirk, but the look of deep despair that had begun building on his brother's features was just too much to pass up. "I think that's our ride over there." He pointed to a small four-seater Cessna and then climbed out of the car, intent on grabbing his bags before Dean fired up the engine and beat a hasty retreat back to the highway.

A loud metal groan followed by a harsh "thunk" told Sam his brother had climbed out too and was pissed enough to slam his baby's door till the window glass almost shattered.

"Dude, I ain't getting on no plane..."

Sam popped the trunk and then glanced over. Dean's brows were raised, his eyes were bulging, and his cheeks were so flush with color, Sam was sure his brother's blood pressure was higher than Everest.

"You sound like B.A. Baracus, you know that?"

"Huh?" Dean balked. "Dude, I so do not. And even if I did, the guy had a point." He jerked a thumb at the Cessna. "That is *not* my idea of safe. Man, you may as well strap on a pair of friggin' wings and start flapping..."

"Dean, it's perfectly safe. Besides, we'll have Gudrun with us..." Sam shot a look past his brother to the blonde who was now staring out across the airstrip. She had no possessions – nor did she need any.

"Great, we have a *death maiden* tagging along and that's supposed to make me feel *better*? You're enjoying this way too much, Samantha." Dean grabbed his own pre-packed bag and slung it over his shoulder with a grunt.

Sam followed suit, slamming down the trunk once he was finished. "Maybe just a little," he admitted playfully.

"Yeah, well, this overgrown paper plane better not go down out in the boonies, Sammy, 'cause you and Gudrun the Great sure as hell ain't eating my ass if we run outta food." Dean took a long look at the skyline. It was almost dark – not his idea of the best time for a take off.

He shuddered.

"If it makes you feel any better, I don't need to eat..." Gudrun's cobalt orbs twinkled. "But if I did, I'm sure I'd find you...less than appetizing after all the junk food you eat..."

"Hey, trust me, sweetheart, I taste *good*." Dean winked roguishly. Adjusting the weight of the holdall on his shoulder as he reluctantly approached the tiny plane.

Sam rolled his eyes skyward at the innuendo he knew was about to fly.

This was going to be a *long* journey.

Cessna Cutlass

Three Hours Later...

Dean had hoped the incessant droning of the tiny plane's engine would somehow lull him into a sense of security, but so far, the constant roar had only served to give him a headache.

Flying on an airliner was like getting on a bus compared to this, and how he wished he was on one right now.

The evening sky had soon darkened further, and as the flight continued all that he could now see out of the large Plexiglas panes was the white fluffy blur of clouds as they drifted through the cotton-like growths in the stratosphere.

Dean dared to force his eyes from the floor of the Cessna to take a short glance outwards. The overhead wings seemed to bob as the plane bucked a headwind, making it appear to have all the stability of some balsa wood model.

Watching the movement only added to his paranoia and nausea and he felt his hands involuntarily grab the base of his seat.

"Your knuckles are going white, dude. Could you possibly hang on any tighter?" Sam peered over the book on Canadian myths and legends he was leafing through, finally placing the hardback down on his lap as he realized his brother had turned an ugly shade of jade.

"Yeah, well, I figure I'm okay if there is something *to* hold onto, right?" Dean scrunched his eyelids closed as the Cessna hit a pocket of air, only reopening them when the turbulence subsided. "This thing has parachutes, right?" He mouthed, suddenly scouring the small cabin for evidence of any carefully wrapped canopies.

Sam rolled his eyes. "Dean, you'd need to be pushed out kicking and screaming even if there was..."

"Ha! You had to full-on push me aboard this crate, I doubt I'd need as much effort to get off." Dean winced as he accidentally caught another view of the outside.

The Cessna was turning, and the rolling motion made his stomach churn – that added with the sprawling view of a spiraling earth below was all he needed to wish his ride came complete with sick bags.

Dean grabbed at his stomach, wishing he'd had a thousand Alka Seltzers, or maybe a good bottle of Bourbon before he'd climbed aboard. "Tell me we're nearly there, Sasquatch, or you're gonna be wishing this thing had window winders in the back."

Sam grimaced at the thought, his face puckering at the distasteful image he was suddenly presented with. Sitting in the back with his phobia-stricken brother had once seemed like a good idea, but now he was wishing he'd gone up front with the pilot and left Gudrun to deal with his sibling.

Maybe she could have fixed his phobia like she fixed my hand...

Tapping Gudrun on the shoulder, the gangly hunter pointed down, raising his voice above the rumbling engine noise. "How much longer?"

"We should be over Kootenay National Park anytime now. It's not much farther after that..." Gudrun peered into the night as if she was reading the stars like her ancient ancestors once had – like she once had. "Out here is the perfect hiding place for Ferinacci to keep his prisoners..."

“Perfect place to freeze my damn ass off!” Dean groaned. “Maybe if I hummed Metallica...”

“Please...*anything* but Metallica!” Sam stuffed the book he’d been researching into a holdall under his feet and then watched as the pilot began to make the little plane climb. Maybe he was trying to take the bird over some bad weather.

Maybe now might be a good time to take Dean’s mind off the flight...

“So, once we arrive we go on foot to this place?” Sam asked, placing his attention on the blonde upfront. “Or have you made other arrangements?”

Dean scoffed. “Dude, she doesn’t need any arrangements. Hell, she didn’t need to fly here, did she? Probably got some version of a Viking magic carpet stuffed up her...”

“Dean!”

“Actually, I used to have a horse...it’s Valkyrie tradition.” Gudrun shrugged, taking time to glance at their pilot. If he thought their conversation was weird, he wasn’t saying anything.

Sam noted the direction of the girl’s gaze. Was she using her influence so the pilot wasn’t even *hearing* half they said? It wouldn’t have been the first time Gudrun had altered human perceptions, after all.

“Don’t tell me the horse’s name was Silver and you had a partner called Tonto, right?” Dean shuddered, even though the cabin was well heated.

“Dean, can we concentrate on why we’re here?” Sam shook his head, wondering how much of his brother’s sarcasm was actually caused by fear. It was something he could relate to in a way. Clowns had the same effect on him – always had from being a kid.

“I *am* concentrating – on saving my ass!”

As if to prove his point, the Cessna seemed to hit more turbulence, its wings shaking violently as the pilot tried to compensate. The more he seemed to struggle with the yoke, the more the plane seemed to fight back – like some violent airborne battle between man and machine.

Dean closed his eyes and began muttering under his breath so incoherently it took Sam a minute to realize his brother was reciting ‘The 23rd Psalm.’

Upfront, the pilot tugged away his earphones enough to talk to them unhindered. Sweat was already beginning to trickle from his brow, and the knuckles on his hands were as white as Dean’s had been earlier from the sheer exertion of keeping control.

“We’ve hit a storm front...ice on the wings...impossible, and yet...” The pudgy ex-TWA skipper was shaking his head, words struggling to form in his throat as he watched the clouds thicken and the air crack with ozone.

The Cessna’s temperature gauge along with the air in the cabin seemed to plummet to untold depths, and outside the 180 horsepower motor began to sputter uncontrollably no matter how the pilot fought with his throttles.

“We’re all gonna die, and then I’m gonna kick your ass for getting me into this, Sammy...” Dean opened one scrunched together eyelid to peer at Gudrun. She seemed unabashed as huge particles of snow began to pelt the plane’s airframe, some hard enough that metallic thuds reverberated along the aluminum plating. “Okay, so maybe *she’s* not gonna die...but I’m still kickin’ your ass...”

Sam ignored the jibe and the bucking motion of the plane, instead focusing on the cause of their predicament. “Our black-eyed friends can control the weather, right?”

Gudrun nodded grimly. “They’re expecting us...”

“Expecting us?” The pilot finally caught part of his passengers’ conversation, but it made no sense. “I’m going to try turning back,” he spat. “If I can’t climb out of this...”

The Lycoming engine seemed to hear the terror in its master’s voice, responding to it with more spluttering that eventually gave way to all out death.

To his credit, the pilot didn’t completely panic. There were procedures to stick to – chances that had to be used up – but the sudden deathly silence in the cabin told the only tale that needed to be heard.

Gone was the monotonous drone of the motor, replaced by a strange howling as wind whipped around the nosecone as it dropped into an unhealthy dive.

Dean felt his stomach leap as the Cessna's angle changed steeply, making him feel almost weightless for a second. "Flying 101," he yelled. "Never take a plane trip with a freakin' reaper chick, it's bound to end badly..."

"Dean? You have your belt on, right?" Sam's voice buzzed around the cabin, but Dean wasn't really sure what the hell his little brother thought a measly safety belt was going to do.

Not when our butts are about to go vertical at about two hundred miles an hour...

"Dean..!"

The silence ended with the noise of over a ton of metal, wood, flesh and bone bouncing off the earth like a giant gnat that had been swatted mid-air.

The Cessna hit the snowy Canadian carpet hard, even though the pilot had managed to at least pull it from its former almost ninety degree nosedive. The jarring, brutal impact violated its frame so hard the wings snapped with the shockwave, only jagged metal edges remaining.

The propeller gouged into ice and earth, metal bending and contorting until the shaft that held it sheared clean in two. Beyond the prop, the impetus of the crash pressed the motor backwards, ramming it into the cabin compartment enough to shrink the passengers' and pilot's area almost in half.

The Plexiglas windows cracked with the pressure exerted upon them, spiraling fractures splintering through the material like a spider's web.

From the crumpled engine, fuel and oil began to leak, hissing as they sputtered out onto the fuselage, painting a grotesque picture on the newly settled snow.

Snow that was drizzling down from the heavens so fast, it would soon bury any of the aircraft's shell still remaining above the drift it had plowed into.

The smell of aviation fuel was nauseating – no, it was beyond that – it was a stark reminder that flying was dangerous.

Dangerous.

The word rebounded in Dean Winchester's head until he realized he still had a head.

Daring to move an arm, the hunter soon found that all his other limbs also seemed to be attached and in working order. He was damn cold, but he could live with that awhile longer.

Something wet hit him in the face, and he blinked, noting that the fluffy white flakes were cascading in through a gaping hole in the cabin. It appeared that when the left section of wing had snapped away, it had taken half the roof with it.

Huge clouds floated aimlessly above, interspersed with the odd star that dared to sparkle in the otherwise deathly black sky.

Something was resting on his chest, and after a brief examination he discovered half a sheet of unbroken but dislodged Plexiglas and Sam's mythology book pressing down on him.

Sam's book... Sammy!

"Sam? Sam, you better not be dead...that was so gonna be my job..." Forcing the weight away from his body, Dean managed to twist around enough to get a hand in his jacket pocket.

Searching quickly, his fingers laced around the familiar metal of his Zippo and he pulled it free, flicking it several times in quick succession until an iridescent flame illuminated what was left of the Cessna's interior.

Sam groaned at the new light source shimmering in front of his eyes, flexing his frame just enough to make sure he could maneuver without pain lancing through him. After two seconds to adjust to the light, he risked opening an eyelid. "Next time, when you say we shouldn't fly? Remind me to listen to you..."

Dean heaved out a breath. Other than a small bruise to his forehead, Sam seemed to be in one piece. "Yeah well, who's the psychic one now, geekboy?"

“Psychic, but not very smart...” Gudrun had scrunched her body into the tiny space left by the invading engine until she looked like some Tibetan guru out to prove she was double jointed. The position, and their current predicament, had apparently done little to alter her cynical attitude. She pointed carefully outside with a perfectly manicured fingernail until Dean quickly flipped his Zippo closed.

While there was no imminent danger of an explosion, the close proximity of the leaking aviation fuel was not to be taken lightly. Luck was already not on their side – there was no need to provoke it to further disaster.

“Is everyone alright?” Sam winced as he tried to move, realizing that the cabin was not as big as it had been when they’d taken off. At least he wasn’t pinned in completely, though.

“Everyone but the pilot,” Dean answered with a shake of his head. “Looks like he had an argument with a tree and the tree won...”

The plump little man wasn’t about to argue. A large branch from one of Canada’s finest had smashed through the side of the cabin window, piercing the pilot’s left eye socket and exiting through the back of his skull. If that hadn’t been enough to kill him, the engine that now resided halfway in his chest would have surely finished the job.

Dean squirmed as blood and brain matter dribbled from the remains of the branch where it had pushed through, taunting him with its presence. He didn’t even want to think about the amount of force it must have taken to allow a tree to skewer a man so perversely. *Frickin’ gross...*

He glanced back to Gudrun, who seemed to be appraising the best exit now the door frames had been permanently melded shut by the impact. “I thought you controlled this crap? Life, death, the whole shebang? So how come Biggles just bit dust?” He nodded towards the pilot, abruptly feeling sorry for the man.

Gudrun held little of the remorse the hunter felt. She shrugged, familiar with the serenity of death enough to embrace it rather than feel sympathetic. “Everyone has a purpose in life, and when that purpose is fulfilled...”

Dean glanced away, back to the hole in the roof, unable to face the Valkyrie’s logic. She may be all-knowing, or at least way more knowledgeable than the average Joe, but she was scary with it too, in an undead kind of way.

Huffing, the hunter let his hands feel out the edge of the roof and remaining segment of wing, using the edges to pull his muscle-toned body through the newly-made hole. “Friggin’ whacked out reapers gimme the creeps...”

Once outside, Dean pushed away from the fuselage, turning his body until he’d rolled over onto his stomach. Still avoiding Gudrun’s gaze, he let his right hand dangle in through the tear in the metal, offering his brother a much needed hand out into the night.

“Jeez, are you still growing, dude?”

Sam grinned as he sprang through the torn metal like a lanky gazelle, landing with a soft thud in the thickly-packed and still falling snow. “I can’t help it if all that junk food stunted *your* growth, short stack.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Dean paused, hesitating as his eyes caught the fuel flowing from the crushed engine. He wanted to grab their gear and leave Gudrun to her own devices. She was trouble, but leaving a girl – *any* kind of girl – out here? That just wasn’t his style.

Sighing, he returned his attention to the hole he and Sam had just exited. “You planning on building a Viking love nest down there or are you gonna show us just where the hell we’re supposed to be going?”

Gudrun clasped a tiny hand around his outstretched palm, allowing the hunter to carefully pull her to safety. She hadn’t been in any danger, but somehow, his presence – his chivalry – had reminded her of another time – of another human he reminded her of far too much.

“I can’t see any kind of house or cabin, not even on the horizon...” Sam shielded his eyes from the huge snowflakes falling from the heavens, then turned to his two

companions to check out their reactions. Dean he *expected* to freak, but he was hoping Gudrun had something more than fear to offer.

She didn't disappoint.

"We can walk to Ferinacci's hideaway prison from here. It's a few miles, but you boys are good for a hike, right?"

"Hiking through the Canadian snowfields with a few demons after our asses? Sweetheart, I can't think of anything I'd rather be doing." Dean's expression contorted into something between sarcasm and annoyance, but he didn't dwell on the moment.

Whether they headed out on their rescue attempt or tried to get back to civilization, one thing was a certainty: they needed supplies.

Dropping to his knees, he ignored the tingling sensation of melting snow wetting his jeans in favor of digging to retrieve their packs and weapons. Save for the one Sam had under his feet, everything had been stowed away in the Cessna.

Pulling a sheet of metal away, Dean grabbed a shoulder strap and tossed the backpack to Sam. While Sam checked the gear inside, the elder hunter pitched a second bag at the unsuspecting blonde.

"Even immortals carry their weight around here – that is, if you're still all fired up about saving your buddy's ass?" Dean flicked a brow skyward, the particles of snow landing in his lengthy lashes already becoming an annoyance.

"We have to finish what we started," Gudrun stated blankly, still avoiding giving out any exact details of their mission. "I know where we are and where we need to be."

"And you don't think we should find a Ranger station? Maybe do a little regrouping seeing as Ferinacci's people know enough to bring our plane down?" Sam asked pointedly, slinging his pack over his shoulder.

"No time to go back." Gudrun flicked her long locks behind her, sapphire orbs suddenly looking skyward as if she was reading the wind, the elements and not liking their message. She stayed that way for over five minutes, giving no explanation, no reasoning behind her sudden silence.

"Oh great, it's like being in a *Lassie* movie," Dean wisecracked as he pulled on an all-weather jacket from their provisions. "Look, she's trying to tell us something..."

"Dean, you ass-" Sam started to retort, but Gudrun held up a hand, ignoring their remarks in favor of gesturing towards a dense patch of woodland to the north.

"We need to head for the trees," the Valkyrie offered. "There is a clearing a few miles in that will afford us cover. We can camp there for the night."

"She means *freeze* there for the night," Dean suggested, already heading for the snow-covered foliage before he surrendered to the embarrassment of a girl taking point as well as calling the shots.

Sam shrugged and then winked at Gudrun as she began to follow, trudging through inches of slush until they hit the tree line.

If the plane ride with an irate and very pissy Dean had seemed like hell to Gudrun, then the poor blonde immortal hadn't seen anything from the jibe-filled hunter yet.

Sometimes, Sam wondered how he lived with it. *Dean is so never getting married. There isn't a girl out there who'd put up with him...*

Sometime Later...

The bright, ever-moving flames of the fire were a stark contrast to the woodlands that hid its luminance. Vivid orange and yellow hues danced like tiny, mischief-filled demons, spitting out sparks and glowing embers as Dean prodded the kindling beneath with the tip of his hunting blade.

It hadn't taken long to discover the dell Gudrun had spoken of, and it had taken even less to set up camp. While they had sleeping bags and provisions for a few days, they had little in the way of shelter save for a ground sheet.

Both tents had been lost to the crash, and Dean had been forced to improvise Boy Scout style and make a miniature lean-to with the sheet as a roof.

The lean-to was just left of the now glowing camp fire – far enough away so that warmth still reached it, but not too close to cause an unwanted and very fiery demise should a stray spark head its way.

Dean huffed as he looked at the structure made from branches, leaves, bits of rope and anything else they'd managed to slam together. It was a typical Winchester conglomeration of pig-headedness and sheer doggedness.

Right now, he could only hope the rest of their journey would turn out so well.

He was sure of Sam – always would be – but Gudrun, she was an enigma he'd yet to fathom.

Dean poked again, causing a fresh shower of cinders to rise into the atmosphere.

Watching the glistening, burning elements rise and fall was all he had for entertainment. Of course, he could always try and talk to "The Reaper." He could ask her the thousand burning questions he needed answers to, starting with who the hell was the mystery dude they were here to save?

But talking to Gudrun only ever seemed to be a battle of wits where Dean was concerned. Maybe they were too much alike to ever get along.

He poked the fire one last time and then re-sheathed his blade. He shouldn't criticize the blonde – no matter what she was – she'd saved Sam twice now, which was all that should matter.

But we hunt her kind...

She dragged our butts out here, and we don't even know who the hell we're supposed to save or why...

"Gudrun...I..." Sam rubbed one hand over the other, remembering with distaste the sensation of bone grinding on bone from only a few short days ago. "I know this isn't easy. I know there are things you can't or won't tell us, but why doesn't Ferinacci, I mean...*Lucifer*...why doesn't he just kill your friend?"

Gudrun's face creased into a small smile. "There is very little difference between good and evil, Sam. In fact, they were once all one kind..."

"Is that your way of saying trust no one?" Dean huffed. "Cause I sure as hell don't trust you..."

The blonde sighed. Faith, trust – they were things that didn't come to the young hunter very easily. Maybe they never would. "Think about your Christian Bible," she offered carefully. "God and the Devil, for instance? God can only banish the Devil, he can't easily kill him. It works something like that. Although *Lucifer could* kill my friend, it's not easy. It's much simpler to hold him captive so that he can no longer be a force of good."

"So, I can't send your ass back to Viking heaven if you get too mouthy?" Dean shook his head, feigning disappointment. "Crap...and I was just about to break out the rock salt."

Sam took in the information with slightly less indifference. "But it's not impossible for...for your kind to be..?" He hesitated, unsure how speak his mind without sounding cold.

"Nothing is impossible, Sam," Gudrun responded, breaking into another small smile. Where Dean was sometimes caustic in his approach, Sam was ever the tactful gentleman. "It's just...*harder*..."

"You talk about Christianity and yet both our worlds, our religions have the same demons?" Sam edged forward, intrigued by what he could learn from the immortal.

"I like to think that we simply use different names for our deities, and that we all serve the same purpose – siding with either good or evil." Gudrun slipped a hand into the thin cotton jacket she was wearing and pulled out a small leather bag that was held closed by a chunky hide cord.

Tugging at the cord, she emptied the bag's contents onto the snow in front of her, spacing the small, carefully carved wooden items were they had fallen. "In my world, we call these runes," she explained, running her fingertips over the symbols etched

into the ancient wood with a look of humble reverence. "With these, my people can see into the future, and sometimes, sometimes they're used to make magic-"

"Can you tell me who's gonna win the next World Series with those freaky little things? 'Cause, sister, I can't think of anything else I'd wanna know in advance." Dean peered at the strange little chips and then shook his head. Magic was real, if anyone knew that it was the Winchesters, but he found it condescending of this "girl" to be trying to teach them her "ways" considering her title on the "other side."

When Gudrun did exactly as he expected and ignored his remark, he stuffed a hand into his open pack and pulled out a small silver flask. Bobby had been bandying the thing around for days and Dean had acquired it and its contents for his trip.

After all, there was nothing quite like Singer rot gut to warm a soul on a night like this.

Taking a long swig of the burning liquid, Dean pushed away from the fire even though his body yearned for the warmth it gave. *Maybe Sammy wants to listen to her mumbo jumbo, but I sure as hell don't have to...*

He took another shot of the moonshine and sauntered away from the campfire tall tales, favoring the darkness to his present company. In the background, he could still hear the blonde talking, but his ears muted the sound so that he could listen to more important noises.

Noises of the night.

Noises that could signal they had bad company.

Sam glanced up as his brother left the relative heat of their camp, but didn't attempt to call him back. Dean was just being Dean. He'd never been interested in the more spiritual side to their dealings, and after Nebraska and then Missouri he'd totally clammed up when there was any mention of reapers, angels or anything with a similar supernatural description.

While Sam understood his brother's reasoning, that didn't mean he had to follow Dean's lead. "Don't mind him, he ugh...had a bad experience or two with your um...kind," Sam apologized.

"I know." Gudrun nodded perceptively. "But he never had anything to fear. He still has a purpose – as do you." Cupping the runes in her palms, she gently shook the wooden pieces, mixing them before re-scattering them across the snow. "Raidho and Algiz." She let out a slow breath, eyes darting over symbols to double check their meanings.

"Which is?" Sam asked, huddling closer to the girl to get a better view.

"Raidho is normally a symbol of travel, possibly a journey..."

"Well, I'd definitely say we're on a journey." Sam waited, sensing there was more to the explanation.

"The runes are merkstave, Sam." Gudrun's usual air of composure broke just long enough for Sam to see fear in her eyes. She rubbed a nail across the nearest pictogram and for a fleeting moment her gaze shifted to the edge of the clearing where Dean was still pacing. "When they appear this way their meaning is much more negative," she informed. "When viewed this way, Algiz signifies a warning, a hidden danger. And Raidho means a possible death-"

"Death?" Sam waited for clarification, but the Valkyrie suddenly didn't want to talk mythology anymore.

Taking the leather pouch, Gudrun scooped up the runes, returning them to their inner sanctum. After she snagged the cord tight, she slipped the bag back in her pocket and almost magically retrieved another item.

"Take this, Sam." Without pausing, she gently took the hunter's huge hand and placed the carving in its center, closing his fingers over it as she pulled away. "It's a charm. We call it an 'Aegishjalmur.' Keep it close, you may need it soon."

Sam blinked, not from the fresh flurry now falling from the sky, but from surprise and confusion. He opened his hand back up, looking down at the trinket that resembled an ornately carved snowflake. "I...what..."

Gudrun shrugged as if even she didn't have the answer, and then turned as a fresh sound made her flinch.

Both Valkyrie and hunter zeroed in on the perimeter of the glade – the edge of the tree line where Dean had been standing.

In the harsh light, it was difficult to discern movement, but both saw the silver flask fall to the ground just before they perceived a familiar flash of metal from Dean's .45.

Dean clasped the weapon with both hands, his aim pointing with precision at the source of the noise he'd heard. While he could see nothing beyond the nearest snow-capped tree save for darkness, his senses screamed that his ears had not been wrong.

"Come and get it, you sonofabitch..." He took down a breath and held it as the sound came again.

A soft crunch as someone or something walked across the compacted snow.

A blur of white caught his attention off to the right and he corrected his aim just a touch to match it. The movement came again, and this time the blur came into focus as the interloper exited the shadows, padding out into what little moonlight had pushed through the now dissipating clouds.

"Crap!" Dean dropped the nose of his weapon slightly and finally let out the breath he'd been holding. "I almost blew away *Diefenbaker!*"

The husky paused at his words, its gorgeously marked head cocking to one side in curiosity as to why the human was so flustered. After scrutinizing the hunter with eyes bluer than even Gudrun's, it finally decided he wasn't worth the attention and began sniffing at the air for newer, more interesting scents.

"I see you found a friend your own IQ level there, bro." Sam trotted to his brother's side, a mammoth grin forming on his features. Cocking his own head to mimic the dog's earlier move he offered, "Maybe I'm insulting *the dog* when I say that..."

"Ha freakin' ha!" Dean flicked the safety back on his automatic and quickly slid it under his jacket. There was nothing quite like being looked at like you were an ass – especially when it was a dog doing the "looking." "What's he doing creeping around out here anyway?" he griped, pulling a face at the animal. "Should be back home with Nanook of the friggin' North or something."

"Maybe he's just lost," Sam suggested, hunkering down level with the husky. The animal seemed to appreciate his eye contact and cautiously moved forward. "Hey, c'mon, fella...we don't bite..."

"No, but he might." Dean watched as the husky pawed the ground as if sensing out who it could trust.

The dog's blue orbs flicked to Dean, Gudrun and then finally Sam before it made its choice. Scuttling forward, it fell into step with the youngest Winchester and padded back to the fireside camp with him as if it belonged at his side.

"Gah," Dean picked up his flask from the snow, noting with annoyance that most of the moonshine had leaked out, making a strange yellow stain on the ground.

"Don't worry about me," he muttered through gritted teeth. "I'll just take first watch...rather not share my food with the Queen of the Undead and the Hound of the Baskervilles anyhow..."

Midnight

The camp fire had died to a low flicker, and the moonlight had finally escaped the clouds that had imprisoned it, allowing its opaline glow to at least give some light to the glade.

The snow too, had stopped falling – only the odd bird causing a small flurry as it dislodged white clumps from the treetops above.

Everywhere was silent, and Dean liked it this way.

While Sam and Gudrun slept soundly under their makeshift tent, he was playing lone sentinel. The watcher who would never allow harm to his sibling, or the girl while he still drew breath.

He looked over, stealing his eyes from the Canadian tableau just long enough to check on his companions. Sam groaned in his sleep, his face twitching as some unseen terror chased him in the darkness of his mind.

Sammy hadn't always been this way, but since the visions, since he'd learned the truth about himself – the dreams – the nightmares had come more often.

Dean knew what that was like. Sometimes, even now, he could still smell the aroma of scorching flesh, the sounds of a house burning, flames roaring around him as he'd clutched his brother in a life or death embrace all those years ago.

Winchester dreams were never pretty.

Picking up a piece of meat Sam had brought over earlier from the fire, the hunter began to eat. It wasn't exactly the best home cooking he'd ever tasted, but then he wasn't a gourmet chef himself and he was damned hungry. Take outs and fast food joints were more his regular haunts. Not because he enjoyed their offerings, but because it was quick and easy when you were on the road.

Munching on the somewhat undercooked piece of deer, Dean realized he had company. He might not be the telepathic Winchester, but it was funny how it was so easy to sense eyes burning into his back.

Slowly turning, he was forced to smile as he chewed on the tough but edible slab of meat. Sitting patiently at the base of the nearest tree was the husky. Its head cocked, eyes locking on the food in the hunter's hand.

"Ha! I'm your best buddy suddenly now I've got chow, huh?"

The dog's tongue slid from its mouth and licked around its muzzle, flagrantly abusing the very familiar "begging expression" Sam was so good at.

"Okay, so Sammy's been teaching you a few tricks already. So gotta talk to him about that." Dean shot a glance back over to his still slumbering brother. While it was perfectly fine to fuss the husky, he wasn't going to do it with an audience.

Sam was still fitfully pitching his gawky body around in his sleep, and the girl had her back to man and dog. Dean nodded, satisfied, and slowly hunkered down, meat in hand. "I hope you don't mind sharing, and I'm all out of napkins, buddy."

The husky sniffed as Dean offered up a small piece of deer meat, savoring the aroma before at last snatching the food away from its owner. It backed up, swallowing the meat with just two movements of its powerful jaws.

"Dude, you keep that up you're gonna get puppy heartburn."

Ignoring the amused look on the hunter's face, the dog seemed to stiffen, muscles in its back tensing as if something had spooked or angered it.

A low growl burred from its throat, growing louder as its ears flattened and its head came up ready for attack.

Eyes that had once glowed with the beauty and innocence of the summer sky seemed to change and morph, their pale blue tones whirling like a kaleidoscope until cobalt was replaced by a shimmering, vibrant scarlet that was unmistakably evil.

Dean watched, paralyzed by some morbid fascination. The husky was no dog, and yet he felt compelled to do nothing as it bared its fangs, saliva dripping from two huge canines that would undoubtedly gouge into his flesh at any second.

Eventually, he pushed up, seeking to find a better position than his current hunkered stance. Before his knees could even lock straight, the animal lunged forward, a haze of grey and white fur and razor sharp fangs.

Dean grunted as he landed hard on his back from the dog's attack, arms outstretched over his head in a protective posture that had already saved his face and neck from being ripped to shreds.

He could see the thing's fetid breath pluming from its open jaws as it frenziedly clawed at him, teeth snapping hungrily until they found something to sink into.

The red eyes whirled, their pupils moving like some eel was squirming at their centers.

Pain jarred his senses as the husky, or whatever it truly was, continued to push down on his chest, claws scratching frenetically until they dug through his jacket, biting into the flesh beneath.

“Friggin’ full-on zombie mutt!” Dean dared to grab at the thick fur around the dog’s neck, yanking it harshly as he rolled away from the animal. “Lesson number one, never bite the hand that feeds, you freaky bastard!”

The plan half-worked, and the husky slid from his chest enough for the hunter to grab under his jacket and pull out his favorite automatic.

Sliding the safety off, his eyes shot to the dog. It had landed on all fours and was ready to make another springing attack at his position. As its hind legs flexed, the hunter fired, pulling at the trigger over and over until he fully expected to be showered with segments of pelt and bone.

Instead, the husky simply kept up its full frontal attack.

He fired again, emptying the Colt’s clip into the dog until only the clicking of his weapon made him ease off on the trigger. Bullet after bullet had pierced the thing’s skin and many had even exited, lodging in the surrounding trees, but there was no blood.

No damage.

Dean dropped his .45, scrambling desperately backwards, but there was no escaping the creature they had so readily accepted into their camp.

The husky landed on his chest once again, held only at bay by the hunter’s fraught grip on its throat.

“What the...” Dean clenched his hands further, fingers digging into the animal’s flesh until he should have been throttling it, but like the bullets, it seemed impervious to any form of earthly damage.

Its strength seemed to increase as he battled its flailing body, as if the fight somehow empowered the creature. The more he struggled, the faster it seemed to be overpowering him, its huge jaws anxious to gnaw on human flesh.

The thing shifted its weight, catching Dean off-guard just enough for him to loosen his tenuous grip. Sensing the weakness, it jerked free from his grasp, hunter’s fingers sliding through fur until he no longer had any protection.

The animal paused, ears flipping backwards as if it was receiving some secret canine command.

And then it moved in for the kill, long teeth sinking into moist human flesh –Dean’s flesh – as it savored the taste of iron in the pathetic human’s blood.

TBC in Dark Territory...