

Season Three

Episode Nineteen: Behold A Pale Horse

By Tree

Paw Paw, Illinois **2 weeks ago**

To the outsider, Friday night in the not-so-bustling town of Paw Paw was no more exciting than any other night of the week. Resembling nothing like its distant cousin of Chicago, the small farming community's only choices for diversion were the high school football game and the cold beer at the Latham Tap.

Straight off the canvas of a Norman Rockwell painting, Paw Paw prided itself on being a refuge from the rat race of nearby Rockford or any of the Windy City suburbs. Residents of the tiny rural village generally loved the peacefulness of the place, and even the few teens that were looking to escape it as fast as they could, oftentimes ended right back there later on.

There had been some brief controversy several years back when the massive wind farm was built, the old-timers fighting against the loss of precious acreage while the city council insisted on dragging the sleepy little village into the twenty-first century. But since that time, the most exciting news in the local paper was either the crop report or the rare occurrence of a brawl outside one of the town's two bars.

So this Friday night was little exception to the monotonous norm; the crickets chirped, a slight breeze blew the crowd noise from the football field and a lone figure stood at his post outside the Latham Tap.

Mathias Henner was an old man, by his standards as well as anyone else's. At nearly eighty, he'd lived enough life to fill the biographies of at least three others, experienced great joy and gut-wrenching loss, survived a war and seen mankind land on the moon. And while many would think he was lucky to have lived so long and still have his mind intact, to Henner, it was more a curse than a blessing.

Henner could still hear the ear-shattering blast of bombs as they rained down from the sky over France, the tortured cries of his comrades as they prayed to God, called out to loved ones or screamed for help. He could still remember the angelic faces and sweet laughter of his children, gone so many years following an influenza outbreak that took thousands back in the fifties. He could still feel the gentle caress of his beloved Carolyn, taken from him in a violent collision of metal out on the interstate in 1972.

No, memory wasn't all it was cracked up to be and neither was longevity.

But still, Mathias Henner wasn't a man to curse his condition, quite the opposite in fact. He held firmly to his faith that God was watching over him, that the Lord had a master plan in which he still had some part to play.

God-fearing and raised in the church, Henner knew the Bible inside and out. He was proud that he had actually read it cover to cover, twice, in his life. He held sacred the words contained within that promised salvation, peace and eventual reunion with his loved ones. It was what he clung to, his life raft in a world that threatened to swallow up humanity in a wave of violence and degradation.

And while he firmly believed in the promises contained inside the ancient text, Mathias Henner also knew that they came with responsibility as well.

Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature...

It was his duty to spread God's word, his calling to help save those condemned by their ignorance. While others in the church were content to sit in the pews and pay lip-service to words like duty, accountability and faith, Henner knew their lukewarm dedication was as dangerous as the path to Hell that non-believers tread.

So he took it upon himself to carry on the sacred mission, exemplifying his great faith by works of a similar intensity. He spent his days walking the sidewalks of Paw Paw, the signboard slung across his chest extolling all he passed to *"Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is near"* and his evenings either in study of the Word, or, like tonight, at his post outside the local tavern.

Fall was fast descending on the quiet town and the evening breeze gently kissed the bare skin on Henner's arms. He scratched absently at the small sore near his wrist, trying to avoid allowing his fingernails to tear open the thinly scabbed lesion.

The doctors called the "patches" melanoma, the inevitable result of decades of farming underneath the often harsh Midwestern sun, but to Henner, they were nothing more than just another test of his faith. He was certain the physicians didn't know what they were talking about, after all, how could he have skin cancer on places that never saw the sun? Regardless, let them call it whatever they wanted, Henner knew that like Job, this condition was something to endure not bemoan. Like all the other tragedies in his life, this too would only make him stronger, would serve to reinforce his devotion and in the long run, like the Old Testament patriarch, he too would be rewarded greatly in the end.

So he stood there, just off to the side of the bar's entrance, patiently waiting for the Friday night crowd.

When he first took up his crusade, many around the town protested his overt proselytizing, uncomfortable with the old man's "in your face" warnings about the end of the world. Even within the church, Henner was seen more as a nutjob than as a zealous believer. And when he refused to cease his unsanctioned activity, the good members of the New Life Church of God summarily asked Mathias Henner to never step foot in their "proper" church again.

Many would have been discouraged, others outraged, but Henner took it in stride, convinced that he answered to a "Higher calling." He was assured the self-righteous congregation would one day be in for a big surprise.

"Hey there, Mathias," Sheriff Edward McFadden called out as he pulled his squad car up along the sidewalk. "What's tonight's message?"

Henner smiled genuinely, a twinkle in his eye even though he well knew the officer had no intention of listening to his speech. Still, he wasn't about to miss an opportunity.

"The end is coming, Sheriff. The signs are everywhere if you just open your eyes," he warned.

"Oh really?" McFadden replied with feigned interest. "And what signs would those be? The Cubs haven't exactly won the World Series yet?"

Henner ignored the humor. "It's not wise to mock the Lord, Sheriff. God will save his faithful from impending doom and all he requires is your faith."

"My faith?" McFadden replied with a huff of air. "Why Mathias, I don't believe I've had faith in anything beyond death, taxes and the likelihood that Junior Barlow will get rip-roaring drunk and run naked through town later tonight in a very long time."

Henner shook his head sadly. "You're a good man, Edward, with good intentions. But there will be a lot of good men in Hell. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast..."

"Yeah, Yeah, Mathias. Look, you just be careful out here tonight. Been having an increase in calls recently of people getting a bit rowdy, don't know what's been possessing folks lately. But, if you need anything or if you want a ride home later, just have Rich give me a call," the lawman offered.

"Thank you, Sheriff. But I have no fear, God will send his angels to watch over and protect me," Henner stalwartly replied.

"Just the same, Mathias. Maybe you ought to give your guardian angel the night off. I don't know what's gotten into folks, but between Helen Mills beating the stuffin' out of her husband with an iron skillet the other night and then Doc Keller supposedly assaulting that young girl in his office, I'm beginning to wonder if maybe our little town here is growin' up in all the bad ways."

Henner smiled knowingly. "See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her— but now murderers..."

"Call it what you will, but I just don't care to hear that some jackass has taken a pound of flesh outta some crazy ol' man that had more faith than brains," McFadden answered with a tinge of irritation.

"I appreciate your concern, Edward, but it's the Lord that directs my work here. He never said it would be easy or that those who spoke his word would go forward without persecution. Greater men than me have sacrificed their lives to spread the Gospel. How then can I offer any less?"

Sheriff Edward McFadden shook his head with a deep sigh. "Mathias, please just be careful and don't go pissing off the Durham brothers if they show up tonight. You know those two aren't nothing more than a couple of overgrown schoolyard bullies."

Henner nodded, hoping to appease the other man's concern. He watched McFadden's squad car pull away from the curb and turn down Flagg Street as the officer headed to patrol the high school before the game ended.

The old man turned back toward the entrance of the bar just as a young couple strolled by, arms entwined, mouths greedily seeking each other even as they walked past. Henner frowned at the overt display.

Didn't these people know that they were playing with fire? Hellfire to be precise? Didn't they realize they would eventually stand before God and account for their wanton behavior?

"For the lips of a harlot drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave..." Henner called out to the couple.

"Shut up, old man. Mind your own business," the young man shouted back. "Just 'cause your wrinkled ass hasn't got none in forever doesn't mean the rest of us have to miss out on a good time."

Henner ignored the comment, but even as the couple moved away, he couldn't help but think about Carolyn. Not a day passed that he didn't miss her smile, her laughing eyes, her soft touch and her soothing voice. He hadn't slept in their bed since the night of her death, unable to bring himself to ever return to that place of joy, solace and comfort.

But even as his heart ached violently for his lost wife, Mathias Henner didn't curse his condition or blame God.

Instead, he continued on his way, walking back and forth in front of Latham Tap, calling out to the patrons as they came and went. Most ignored him, other's engaged him with a verbal barrage of insults, but all in all, everyone merely walked away, content in their sin.

This night, like most others, dragged on slowly, and by midnight, Henner couldn't stifle the huge yawn that tore through him. The Midwest weather was turning cooler with autumn's fast approach. Already, the sun was setting earlier and the corn was slowly turning brown as it waited the combine harvester.

Henner glanced at his watch, straining to see it in the flashing neon sign of the bar. He shivered as the cool evening breeze embraced him like a frozen shawl. Surely God would forgive him if he left his post early this one evening?

But no! His discomfort was a small fee for salvation.

Slowly, the old man moved toward the alley, immediately appreciating the reprieve from the slight wind as he tucked in between two buildings. It was darker there, the light from the streetlamp barely breaching the entrance much less the far recesses of the long corridor. But this was Paw Paw, and things didn't generally linger in the dark.

The soft scratch of boots scuffing against the concrete emanated from the darkness and instantly startled Henner. He twisted around, his ears leading his eyes as he peered into the blackness.

Emerging from the shadows, the silhouettes of two large forms approached the self-appointed preacher. Towering hulks, they easily dwarfed the old man, their loud, boisterous laughter filling the alley like a couple of sailors on shore leave as they staggered toward him.

“Well, what do we have here? If it isn’t St. Mathias of Paw Paw,” the darker haired man mocked.

The second man joined in, his laughter stopping abruptly as he circled around Henner. “Ya know,” he began. “I think ol’ Methuselah here needs to learn to keep his goddamn preaching to himself.”

Henner stood his ground, one hand holding his signboard while the other tightly gripped the worn Bible. “Ray Durham, what would your mother have said if she’d ever heard you blaspheme the Lord?”

“Shut your mouth, old man. Our momma was a good woman, not some crackpot like you,” the burly young man shouted back.

“You’re mother was a God-fearing woman. She raised you boys better. I’m sure she’s sad to look down from Heaven and see what you’ve become,” Henner replied. “You especially, Louis. Your mother counted on you to look after your brother, not walk beside him down the path of the wicked.”

The older sibling looked away nervously, but his younger brother continued his slow movement, stalking Henner like a tiger waiting for an antelope to bolt.

“Wicked?” the younger Durham cried out with a deep laugh. “Mister, this is the path to the bar and a good cold beer. Nothing more.”

“Come on, Ray. Let’s just get going. Leave ’im alone,” Louis advised.

But his brother ignored him, stepping in closer and pressing his chest threateningly against Henner. “Nah, I don’t think so. It’s early and I’ve got all this extra energy. Besides, who does he think he is to judge us?”

The old man held firm, his eyes locking with the bloodshot brown of Ray Durham even as the obnoxious smell of alcohol assailed him.

“Son, you don’t want to do this,” Henner warned. “But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten.”

The massive brute smiled, the corner of his lip curling up even as his eyes narrowed. He turned slightly to face his brother, seemingly ready to walk away from the confrontation when in one fluid motion he whirled back around, his left fist connecting solidly with the older man’s jaw.

There was a loud grunt as Henner was knocked to the pavement, his frail-looking body colliding viciously with the thick wood signboard as he fell.

He gingerly wiped the trickle of blood from his split lip as he looked up at the towering figure standing over him.

“Come on, old man,” Ray Durham began, his hands raised skyward as he peered up at the dark night sky. “Where’s the bolt of lightning to strike me down?”

Henner remained silent. He knew what this was about. The Scriptures were filled with accounts of the prophets being taunted, baited into fights by unbelievers, beaten, tortured and even killed.

... Just another test... he assured himself, steeling his body as a heavily-booted foot connected with his left hip, lifting him and propelling him backwards.

He rolled until he came to a stop against the outer brick wall of Haney’s Pharmacy, breathing raggedly as seventy-nine-year-old bones protested the abuse. Pain ravaged his body as additional kicks rained in on him.

“Hey old man, where’s your smart-assed mouth now?” Ray hissed before leaning down and delivering a brutal right to the side of the man’s face.

The miniscule light barely illuminating the alley now threatened to disappear completely as his consciousness succumbed to the violence. Henner struggled to rise up on his hands, blood streaming from his mouth and nose, his body shaking as his respirations came in ragged gasps.

“Stop it, Ray,” the elder Durham called out. “Let’s just get out of here.”

“Screw that, Louis,” the bigger sibling snarled, pulling away from the restraining arm of his brother. “No one talks to me that way.”

“He isn’t worth it.”

“Quit being a candy-ass. Give it a little kick. It feels good,” the younger man tempted, continuing his own ferocious attack.

Henner dropped back to the concrete, protectively throwing his hands over his head as the older brother joined in with a menacing laugh.

O Lord, the God who saves me... day and night I cry out before you. May my prayer come before you... turn your ear to my cry... for my soul... is full of trouble... and my life draws near the grave...

Mathias Henner lifted the silent prayer up to Heaven, fervently believing that the God in whom he had such unfailing faith would see him through this. A soft cry escaped his lips as he called out for celestial protection.

“...Lord... protect me...” Henner weakly called out.

The Durham brothers laughed simultaneously with Ray launching a thick glob of spittle down onto Henner’s prone form. About to deliver another punch, the muscular man stopped abruptly as a new voice sounded from the encroaching shadows.

“Are we having fun, gentlemen?” it called out.

The attack ceased, both brothers looking up as a tall blond figure emerged from the darkness. Standing well over six foot and clothed in dark biker's leather and boots, the new arrival strode forth purposefully, stopping just shy of the group.

"Who the hell are you?" Ray demanded, boldly moving forward to close the slight gap. "Look, Louis, pretty boy here must have gotten lost off the interstate. Is that what happened mister?"

The newcomer snickered, his head shaking slightly even as he glanced down at the cowering Henner.

"Send your angels to protect me, oh Lord..." Henner pleaded, his eyes closed in prayer, unaware of the stranger.

"The Lord will provide..." the blond whispered down toward the prostrate man.

"Why don't you just keep on walking, asshole? This is an A and B conversation, so why don't you see your way out of it?"

"Wow, is that the best you can do? Unoriginal snipes and beating up a helpless old man that you outweigh by nearly a hundred pounds. You must have serious self-esteem issues," the newcomer mocked.

"Well, maybe we were just waiting for some lame, piece of crap, city boy like yourself to show so we can pick up where we left off with the crazy old man," Ray retorted, smacking his clenched fist against his open palm.

The blond looked at him dispassionately, neither reacting nor wavering. He barely flinched when the younger Durham brother launched himself forward, hands flashing as his fists sought out the stranger's face.

But before the knuckles connected, the burly man's body veered off to the side, slamming into a nearby row of trashcans with a loud clatter of metal. His brother attacked immediately upon seeing his younger sibling so effortlessly tossed aside. Charging the newcomer, Louis Durham lowered his shoulder and barreled at the blond.

Like his brother, the older man never made contact. Instead, an invisible force stopped him cold, making his body seize up and hold stiffly in place. Louis Durham struggled futilely, his feet kicking back and forth while the veins in his neck bulged.

Recovered, Ray Durham saw his elder brother invisibly impaled and struggling to breathe, and he charged at the stranger from behind, striking the distracted man in the back with a discarded piece of lumber. The two-by-four splintered as it struck, shards of wood flying outward as the post disintegrated.

"What the hell are you?" the small-town bully cried out as the tall blond turned to face him unfazed.

The man smiled, a low growl ebbing from his throat. "Your day of reckoning..." he answered mysteriously.

With a nod of the stranger's head, the two brothers were thrown across the narrow width of the passageway, their bodies impacting the nearby brick wall the sound of bones fracturing echoing in the darkness.

Silence returned to the alley as the smell of blood wafted on the early autumn breeze. Mathias Henner pushed himself up to a seated position and glanced around, his eyes wide as he tried to comprehend what had happened.

The blond eyed him curiously before reaching down to offer his hand. Henner took it, not surprised by the warmth and strength contained in the grip.

"Are you an angel?" the old man asked.

The taller man laughed gently as he steadied the frail, beaten man.

"You are, aren't you? God has sent you to protect me, to help me," Henner said with assurance.

The stranger's eyes narrowed slightly, his head cocked to one side as though he were considering the man's statement and debating on how to respond.

"I *am* a messenger..." he answered finally.

"I knew it... I just knew it. The signs, they were everywhere. I knew if I was faithful, God would provide," Henner exclaimed excitedly.

His injuries forgotten, the old man dropped back down to his knees, his head bowed in respectful submission. "I am the Lord's faithful servant," he whispered.

"Rise up," the blond softly commanded, reaching down to lift the man to his feet once again.

"But you are Gabriel, the messenger, right? Sent to help me warn others that the End of Days is upon us," Henner insisted.

"The End of Days *are* surely upon humanity," the man agreed with a peculiar grin. "But why don't you just call me Don..."

Paw Paw, Illinois **5 days ago**

Bobby Singer walked out of the hazy late afternoon sunshine and into the small diner. Pulling his hand across his forehead, he wiped at the thin bead of sweat that had collected underneath the band of his ball cap as he quickly took in the empty cafe.

Picking a seat that allowed him to keep an eye on the door and most of the shop, he dropped into the booth and nestled into the corner. Grabbing the menu tucked behind the salt and pepper shaker, he looked at the offerings with feigned interest.

"What'll ya have, mister?"

Bobby looked up, smiling as he spotted the heavy-set cook. "Ah, I guess I'll take the dinner special," he answered, pointing to the chalkboard mounted behind the counter. "And a cup of coffee too."

"You got it," the man replied, heading back to the grill.

Bobby watched as the big guy returned with a clean cup and a steaming pot. "Pretty quiet around here," he casually observed.

"Yeah, guess people are spending more time at home. Afraid to go out, what with folks coming down with that weird sickness and all."

"I've been hearing some things about that. What's going on?" the hunter asked.

The big man shrugged. "Damned if I know. People getting sick with some sort of wasting disease. Just dropping like flies, like they was starving to death or something."

"Hmm..." Bobby commented absently. "I heard that folks were covered with strange sores too."

"Heard that too. Saw Ellen Waters in here yesterday. She looked like a raw piece of meat that had been left out in the sun too long or something."

Bobby cringed at the visual. He'd already seen one of the "victims," the man's skin covered with rupturing, pus-filled blisters.

"I've seen rotten hamburger that looked better than Ellen did," the cook continued as he walked away.

The hunter's throat bobbed as he swallowed hard and forced himself to ignore the odor of cooking meat from the grill. He lifted the cup of coffee, relishing the strong smell as the steam wafted toward his nostrils.

His head was pounding and the hot beverage seemed to offer a false sense of clarity. Arriving back in the small Midwestern village just a couple of days ago, Bobby had dug right back into the case following his brief detour down to Springfield. He hadn't minded seeing the Winchester men again, considering the circumstances, and he'd even considered filling them in on the happenings in this tiny rural community.

Yet, once the emergency was over, and God how he still got a chuckle when he thought about John getting taken down by a mosquito, it just seemed more appropriate to leave the family to their own privacy. Bobby knew that John and his boys spent most of their time apart, both physically and emotionally, seeming to only come together when a life-threatening crisis forced them to. It was ridiculous behavior and he rarely missed an opportunity to remind them that family was everything.

Take it from me, he added silently.

Still, if there were three people that he cared most about on the planet, then Dean, Sam and John were at the top of the list. And while he often pretended that he'd

sooner be alone, there were times when the antic-laden company of the brothers was a welcome relief to the solitude of his South Dakota salvage yard.

Regardless, there was no point in dragging the hunting clan into this. He still wasn't one-hundred percent sure what was going on here. At best, it might have been some sort of demonic activity; certainly the strange electrical storms and crop failures might indicate that. But even more likely, what was happening in Paw Paw might be nothing more than some freakish epidemic. Not like that wasn't in the news with increasing regularity; Ebola, Avian flu, even West Nile Virus had all been leaving high body counts in their wake.

"Demons or plagues... peanut butter and jelly," Bobby grumbled aloud. "Not like all of this couldn't be part of some demonic master plan."

Bobby never considered himself a highly educated man, but if there was one thing he well knew, it was signs, more specifically, *supernatural* signs. He'd spent most of his adult life devouring every tome and scrap of information about the supernatural that he could get his hands on. His house was laden nearly floor to ceiling with volumes from every corner of the world. It was like a library gone amuck, yet the older hunter rarely had a problem putting his fingers on whatever reference he needed.

Still, despite the semblance of clutter, regardless of the appearance that he knew little about anything other than evil and engines, Bobby was also no stranger to the word of God.

He well knew the Bible, could nearly quote verbatim the books of Daniel and Revelation. It was that knowledge that had drawn him to Paw Paw. Plagues, pestilence, death. If anything screamed "demonic" more than that, Bobby didn't know what it was.

There's a storm comin'...

"Here ya go, mister."

Bobby startled, his head jerking upward as the cook broke him from his thoughts. The man placed the plate before him and quickly turned away, disappearing into the back of the diner and leaving the hunter alone once more.

He toyed with the offering, stabbing his fork into the gravy-covered meatloaf and stuffing a large piece into his mouth. The flavor wasn't bad and Bobby knew the slight sourness in his stomach had more to do with the strangeness of the hunt than the quality of the food. He was about to scoop up a bite of mashed potatoes when the jingle of a bell hung above the diner's door brought his head up.

"Bobby!"

"Mathias!" the hunter replied eagerly. "How you been? I've been looking all over town for you."

"When did you get back?" Henner asked as he dropped into the seat opposite the hunter.

"Couple of days back."

"How's your friend? I've been praying for him."

Bobby laughed. "He's fine. Came down with West Nile fever from a stupid mosquito. Can you believe that?"

Henner nodded thoughtfully. "God watches over all his children," the older man replied.

"And how's God been doin' watching over Paw Paw?" Bobby sniped. "Seems like things around here have gone from bad to worse."

The hunter watched as his old friend's face broke into a wide, excited smile.

"Oh Bobby, God hasn't forgotten us, quite the contrary. He's sent his messenger to guide his children through the trials and tribulations of the end of times," Henner exclaimed with a bright gleam in his eyes.

"Mathias, I admire your faith, but honestly, taking a look around here I'd have to put my money on it being something a little south of heaven that's responsible for everything that's going on."

"Oh, I agree. These are definitely signs of the times, strange storms, bizarre illnesses, crops that are healthy one day and rotten the next, but it's nothing that we weren't warned about," the weathered old man insisted.

"Yeah, I know, I know; famine, pestilence, war and death, I've read Revelation too," Bobby grumbled.

"Then you know!"

The salvage man scratched at the dark scruff of his beard, his head shaking slowly. "Mathias, I'm not saying I don't believe, but I just haven't seen Death riding in on horseback."

"Well, not exactly. See that's the problem, people think God's word is literal, but it's filled with imagery and symbolism. Come on, Bobby, you know as well as I do that all of this fits together," Henner stalwartly replied.

Bobby let out a long breath of air. He liked Mathias Henner, no doubt. The old man was as passionate about serving God as Bobby was about sending demons straight back to the hellfire that spawned them. But sometimes arguing with a religious zealot required more energy than the seasoned hunter was willing to expend.

"I just don't think God picked Paw Paw, Illinois as his launchpad for the end of the world. But, I will agree with you on one thing," he acceded. "There's definitely something suspicious going on around here."

Henner smiled and Bobby felt the man's callused and worn hand reach out to touch the bare skin on his forearm.

"Ah, Bobby. Fear not... for he sends angels to watch over his faithful in their time of distress."

Bobby's eyes narrowed. "Mathias, what in the hell are you talking about?"

"That is what I've been trying to tell you. It's the most wonderful miracle," Henner continued, his voice rising with excitement.

The hunter nodded the man on, his eyes glancing down at the meal that was quickly growing cold. Still, he liked Henner, the least he could do was let the lonely old man talk.

"I'm listening," Bobby muttered.

"An angel, an honest to goodness angel came to me a week ago, saved me from the Durham boys and seriously kicked their butts," Henner began.

"Mathias..."

"I swear, Bobby. The Durhams caught me outside the Latham as I was wrapping up Friday night. I honestly thought they were gonna kill me, kicked me around something fierce. I'm on the ground, bleeding and barely conscious, just waiting for the Lord to take me home, when all of a sudden this tall young man appears in the alley. Before I know it, he tosses Ray across the alley and has Louis dangling in the air."

"And then what?" Bobby asked, his forehead creased with concern.

"Then the two brothers just go sailing through the air, crashing into the outside of Haney's."

"Kill them?"

"No, but hurt them real bad, not that they likely didn't deserve worse."

"So this angel..."

"Don, his name is Don."

"Your angel's name is DON?" Bobby could not restrict the humor from his voice, barely containing the snicker that was threatening at the back of his throat.

"Yes, that's what he said," Henner repeated with irritation.

"Mathias..."

"Bobby, I swear on all that's holy, he's an angel. I can prove it too!"

"How's that?" Bobby asked.

"I can introduce you!"

Bobby walked cautiously into the Latham Tap. The place was dead, even for a

Tuesday night. The quietness of the bar only served to make it a more peculiar place to meet an angel.

Still, whoever or whatever Mathias Henner wanted to introduce to him, Bobby felt obligated, even curious to find out. Part of him wanted to believe that the old man had actually met an angel, but the hardcore hunter in him just somehow “knew” better.

Following the unexpectedly spry old man, Bobby strode toward the long bar, noting the absence of a bartender but also spotting another patron at the far end.

The lone figure leaned against the counter, standing out amidst the small, dark pub. His long flowing blond hair and black leather pants and jacket screamed big city, or biker bar, not to mention the midnight black boots with gleaming silver buckles adorning the sides. His face was lowered, his features obscured by the yellow locks, and Bobby raised an eyebrow when he spotted the amber-filled shotglass nestled protectively within his hands.

“Don!” Henner greeted enthusiastically. “I’ve brought him to meet you.”

Bobby smiled tentatively, his hand moving slowly forward toward the stranger.

The blond turned to face him and the hunter’s hand recoiled instinctively at the flash of reddish-orange orbs set amid the man’s handsome face.

“He’s a friggin’ demon,” Bobby shouted, stepping backwards, his hands reflexively reaching for the flask of Holy Water within his jacket pocket.

Looking over to Henner, the hunter saw that the devout old man had fallen to his knees, his head bowed in submission or prayer as he kneeled before the demon.

“Mathias, look at him. He’s no angel!”

“Ah, Mr. Singer, isn’t that the pot calling the kettle black? I seem to recall that you have innocent blood on your hands,” the demon growled, stepping around the end of the bar.

“Mathias!” Bobby pleaded. “Look at him!”

“It won’t do any good. He sees what he *wants* to see.”

“Who are you?” Bobby sneered, torn between bolting for the door and attempting to rescue the otherwise oblivious man from the hellspawn.

“Didn’t Mathias tell you? My name is Don,” the demon replied with a broad smile.

“Don? You gotta be kidding me. What demon goes by the name Don?”

“Well, I must confess, it’s actually short for something else.”

Bobby’s eyes narrowed in suspicion even as the tall demon closed the gap between them. Secretly, he unscrewed the cap from the flask, prepared to fling the contents at the blond once he was within striking distance.

“And what would that be?” the hunter snapped. “You assholes pretty much are all one and the same when it comes to being evil.”

The demon laughed, shaking his head. “You couldn’t be more wrong. Some of us are so much worse.”

“And you’re one of the worst?”

“Let’s just say that next to the Big Guy, I’m the nastiest thing out there.”

Bobby flinched, his heart hammering in his chest as the demon’s eyes swirled a brilliant red-orange once again.

“Abaddon...” he murmured.

“I see you’ve heard of me.”

In that moment, Bobby’s hand flew out from underneath his jacket, the contents of the flask spraying out and soaking the tall demon on the face and chest.

There was a brief hiss, steam rising off Abaddon’s body like a runner having exercised out in the cold. But if the sacred liquid had any effect, it wasn’t obvious.

The demon laughed, hands wiping off the remaining droplets from his face.

“I bathed this morning, thanks!”

Bobby began backing off, his feet scuffing across the worn wood floor of the bar. Nervously, he glanced around, knowing the main door was well behind him and scoping out any other means of escape.

“Try for it... I dare you,” Abaddon taunted, eyes following Bobby’s sideways glance. “You might even make it.”

“You’d like that wouldn’t you?” Bobby sneered back.

“It will only prolong the inevitable. Actually, I’m sorta impressed. I didn’t expect to attract the attention of a hunter so soon. Still, sooner or later, I’m gonna be bathing in your blood.”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

Abaddon shrugged, moving closer to the trapped hunter. “Maybe I just want an audience. You know, it’s just no fun if you work so hard on a project and no ones left to admire the end product.”

Bobby lunged, his fist lashing out in an effort to attack the larger form the demon was assuming. His knuckles stopped scant inches from the blond’s jaw, his body suddenly frozen in place by Abaddon’s unseen power.

Jerked roughly upward as his feet elevated off the floor, he could feel an increasing pressure crushing inward on his torso, an invisible vice tightening and restricting his ability to breathe.

"What... do... you... want?" Bobby gasped.

"For me, nothing. But the Master demands *everything*..." Abaddon hissed.

Drawing next to the older hunter's ear, the demon's hot breath assailed Bobby.

"Would you like a taste of what I've been doing here? A small sample of what's to come for humanity."

Bobby groaned, his lungs absent of enough air to form any words.

"I'll take that as a yes." Abaddon sneered.

The hunter could only stare as the demon ripped open the thinning fabric of his button-down and underlying t-shirt. His chest exposed, Bobby could feel the bile rising in his throat as Abaddon's fingers skimmed down the center of his sternum, leaving a numbing sensation in their wake.

He dropped to his knees, the invisible restraint holding him up suddenly gone. His entire body felt as though every muscle had been turned to wet mush. His mind was foggy, as though he was suffocating under the effects of a heavy head cold.

He had no idea what the demon had done to him, but deep down inside, he knew he was dying. Watching as Abaddon casually strode back to the bar and tilted back the glass of whiskey, Bobby struggled to crawl towards the door.

"Run away, old hunter," the demon called out. "Tell the others what you've found here. Let them know that the end is near."

Memphis, Tennessee

Present day

Dean threw the pamphlet into the trashcan, kicking the small metal container to punctuate his disdain. He continued across the room, stretching and grimacing as he rolled his right shoulder and making no effort to hide the discomfort from his face.

Whatever works... he thought.

"Come on, Dean. It'll be cool. It's like going to the White House," Sam pleaded, trailing behind and stooping to retrieve the discarded brochure.

"I said no," Dean repeated. "And besides, it's nothing like visiting the White House."

"And you would know that how?"

"First, because it's just some stupid mansion with a bunch of stupid furniture and second, because the president doesn't live there."

"Wow, and you have the audacity to call me Captain Obvious?" Sam snarked.

"It'll be boring, Sam. There's nothing really there to see," the elder Winchester whined.

"It's history, rock and roll history. I'd think you of all people would be interested."

"Dude, that's not rock. Yeah, granted I can respect what Elvis did in his day, but Sammy, I just can't get the image of an overweight, sequined, sweaty Elvis out of my head. Besides, not like he's gonna be there..." Dean grumbled.

"Well, you never know..." the younger sibling joked.

Dean glared at him. "If you think I'm dumb enough to go to Graceland with you on the premise of a hunt, then I want to know who cheated for you on your entrance exams to Stanford."

He dropped to the bed as he waited for his brother's inevitable reply, absently rubbing his right shoulder once more.

Same damn shoulder that got messed up in York... he reminded himself. But this time, the joint wasn't dislocated and even if it was, no way was Dean going to end up in an ER mainlining Demerol again. He'd sooner have the damn thing rot and fall off first, considering how that particular injury turned out.

"Shoulder bothering you?" Sam asked, breaking into Dean's dark reverie. "You slammed into that bar pretty hard."

"No need to remind me, I was there, dumbass," Dean replied. "It's all right, just a little tender. Not like it was the first time some pissed off poltergeist decided to use me for a tetherball."

"Yeah, but if you've dislocated it again or something, maybe you ought to get it checked out."

"It's fine, Sam! It's not dislocated and it doesn't need checked out. What it needs... what I need... is some peace and quiet... and maybe a stiff belt," Dean snapped back.

"Yeah, some R&R would be nice," Sam agreed, barely concealing a mischievous grin. "You know, go do something fun, something that doesn't involve ghost or demons or saltguns."

Dean looked up at Sam from underneath narrowed eyebrows. "Nice try, but I'm still not going on a tour of Graceland, Sam. If you want to go so bad, then go. I'm just gonna snuggle in here with a cold six-pack and some AC/DC so I can wash the vile taste of country out of my mouth. Scoping out that stupid bar for nearly a week, being subjected to all that whiny-assed, cry-in-your-beer crap nearly burned out my eardrums."

"Yeah, 'cause you blasting that *crap* you call classis rock hasn't already ruined your hearing," Sam retorted.

"I'm sorry, did you say something? I think all the music has ruined my hearing," Dean mocked with a smirk, immediately jamming the earbuds to his cell phone into each ear.

He vaguely heard Sam's voice above the din of Pink Floyd's *Comfortably Numb*, absently waving off his brother's offer to go for food as he closed his eyes and sunk down into the lumpy mattress.

His face creased into a broad smile when the motel room door slammed shut and while Dean knew he'd pay for his obstinate behavior, tonight he seriously didn't care how much of a tantrum Sam threw. He was tired, sore, and for once, he didn't want anything more than to kick back and sleep. It had been a long couple of weeks, between worry over his father and then immediately taking on this hunt, Dean was emotionally and physically wiped out.

Somewhere between *Dream Police* and Warrant's *Cherry Pie*, Dean drifted off, the familiar rock as soothing as a mother's lullaby to the hunter's worn psyche. Jani Lane's voice was interrupted as the annoying beep of an incoming call disrupted the music-induced dream of a hot blonde delivering him a warm slice.

Grumbling, Dean opened his eyes and glared at the screen. Expecting the incoming call to be from Sam, he instantly became more alert when Bobby's name appeared on the caller ID. Considering the last time the older hunter had called him, Dean couldn't help but feel his heart begin to hammer within his chest.

"Bobby?" he answered eagerly.

"Dean..."

The weakness in his friend's voice did nothing to reduce the anxiety coursing through the short-haired hunter. Sitting up in bed, he called out once again.

"Bobby... are you all right?"

"No..."

With that answer, Dean was on his feet in an instant, one hand holding the cell to his ear while the other began tugging on his boots.

"What's going on? Are you hurt?"

"Dean... need help... things bad... demon... sick...."

"Bobby, where are you? What's going on? Dude, you aren't making any sense," he nearly screamed across the phone.

"Dean... it's bad... really bad..."

"Are you okay? Where are you? Dammit, Bobby, get it together and talk to me," Dean pleaded.

The silence on the other end of the cellular scared the young hunter worse than the incoherent babbling that came before. He knew, honestly relied on, the competency and steadfastness that Bobby Singer represented. More than just a trusted friend and comrade in arms, the older man was something akin to a family member, something Dean cherished and fiercely protected more than life itself.

“Bobby?” he called out again. “I’m coming, but where are you? Please... tell me where you are.”

Static crackled across the receiver followed by a low moan that made Dean’s stomach twist in knots.

“Paw Paw...” the feeble answer ghosted faintly from the phone.

“Paw paw? What the hell is paw paw?” Dean demanded. “Bobby, what does paw paw mean?”

The static returned, screeching so loudly that Dean had to pull the phone away from his ear. When the noise ceased, so had the call, the line going dead and leaving the young man staring blankly at the dark screen.

“Sonofabitch, Bobby. What’s going on?” he mumbled at the silent cellular.

He quickly redialed the older hunter, but wasn’t surprised when the call went to voicemail. Simultaneously rummaging through the room, quickly tossing his belongings into his duffle, he punched up the number to Sam’s phone.

Hearing the mellow notes of whatever emo-pop song Sam currently had as his ringtone, Dean looked up in surprise when his brother walked through the door.

“Let’s go, Sammy,” he ordered as he continued his desperate packing.

“What’s going on?” Sam queried.

“Something’s wrong with Bobby,” Dean answered shortly, relieved when his brother joined in collecting his belongings without further question.

“Is he okay?” Sam asked as he dropped the paper bag he’d carried in with him and began putting away his laptop.

“I don’t know... don’t think so. Hey, keep that out,” Dean stated, pointing at the computer.

“Why?”

“Need you to look up ‘paw paw.’ That’s the last thing Bobby said and I don’t know what the hell it means.”

Dean took the initial load out to the Impala as Sam dropped into the nearby chair and began typing on the keyboard at a frenetic pace.

“So?” he asked, returning inside for the last of their belongings.

“Northern Illinois. Paw Paw is a small town just off I-39, about an hour south of Rockford,” Sam replied, closing the lid on the laptop.

“Illinois? Just great! I have so many wonderful memories of Illinois,” Dean grumbled as he glanced around the motel room once more, waited for Sam to exit before him and disheartened shut the door.

Paw Paw

Next morning

Dean slowed the Impala as they entered the village limits of Paw Paw, Illinois. Surrounded by gently waving cornfields as far as the eye could see, the only other remarkable structures were the distant wind turbines, the sun gleaming off the blades as they spun lazily in the afternoon light.

The main street through town was devoid of any traffic and the lone pedestrian that slowly strolled the sidewalk took only a moment to look up at the new arrivals and cast a disdainful glare.

“Dude, are you sure they didn’t film *Children of the Corn* here?” Dean snarked as he tossed a half-hearted wave in the direction of the hostile-looking citizen.

“It’s just a small town, Dean. People are bound to be wary of strangers, especially ones driving up in a jet black muscle car,” Sam answered, looking up from the screen of the laptop.

“Yeah, whatever. So have you found anything suspicious about the place? Other than the fact it looks like a carbon copy of Gatlin, Nebraska,” Dean asked, noting the vacant businesses and frequent “closed” signs hanging in the store windows.

“No, nothing,” Sam answered, confused by his brother’s strange reference. “But I was thinking. Didn’t Bobby say he’d been checking out some demonic omens or something nearby when he was down in Springfield with us and Dad?”

“Yeah, guess so. He never really elaborated and I was a little ... distracted,” the elder sibling replied.

“Well, whatever he was checking out, I can’t find anything worse than some mention about a few fields of corn going bad.”

“Great work, Sam. Good to know the research has paid off and we know exactly what we’re walking into here,” Dean groused.

His brother shot him a dirty look and Dean feeling bad for snapping was about to apologize when something else caught his attention. Just ahead of the dark Chevy, a nondescript white church stood out in stark contrast to the other buildings in town. Its lot full of vehicles, it seemed to be the one place showing any sign of life.

“Sam, look there.”

“It’s a church, so?”

“It’s Tuesday, dude. Kinda odd for everyone to be in church don’t ya think?”

“Funeral maybe?” Sam offered. “I s’pose that might explain why everything was closed back there.”

“Maybe,” Dean reluctantly agreed. But silently, he couldn’t ignore the strange prickling at his spine.

They continued on, stopping two blocks later as Dean pulled the Impala up to the curb in front of the Lucky Diner. He killed the engine and reached for the door.

“Dean, don’t you think your stomach can wait till we find Bobby?” Sam called out from inside the car.

Turning around and leaning down to peer inside the window, Dean’s eyes narrowed with irritation.

“Jeez, let’s see, smartass. We have no idea where Bobby is, hell he might not even be here for all we know. The town appears to be empty, except for the church, and oh... have you seen a motel in this bustling metropolis yet?”

Not waiting for his brother to reply, Dean continued. “So, considering that the diner appears to be the only thing open in town, maybe, just maybe, we might find some info that will help us.”

He heard Sam’s grunt, knew he was grating on his brother’s nerves, but couldn’t help that his worry for Bobby was manifested in his short temper and equally snide conversation.

“Sorry, dude,” he offered as Sam exited the car. “I’m just worried.”

His brother waved him off with a flash of his hand and sad smile, indicating that he too, was just as fearful for the well-being of their old friend.

Inside, they took a seat at the counter, unable to avoid staring at the massive man that stood behind it at the grill. Well over three hundred pounds, the man was clothed in a grease-stained white t-shirt and an equally dingy looking pair of denim overalls.

“Wha’ can I ge’ you boys?” he asked, leaning down heavily on the countertop and stuffing the remnants of a thick burger into his mouth.

“Uh, the special please,” Dean answered, pointing to the chalkboard just over the man’s shoulder. “And a Coke.”

“Grilled cheese sandwich,” Sam added. “And coffee.”

“You got it,” the cook answered, turning back to the grill and gathering the food.

The brothers watched in disgusted fascination as the huge man continued to cram pieces of bread and cheese into his mouth. It appeared that he was eating as fast as he was cooking, soft grunts escaping him as he tried to chew and breathe at the same time.

His behavior was so repulsive that Dean considered canceling his order. Renowned for being able to eat anything, anytime, anywhere and under any conditions, the hunter thought he might actually puke if he had to sit there and watch this grotesque behavior.

Clearing his throat and sucking in a deep breath to settle his churning stomach, Dean looked away and stared out the large plate glass window.

“So, where’s everybody at today? Kinda quiet for lunchtime isn’t it?” he asked. *Or maybe everyone loses their appetite once they’re here...*

“All over at the church,” the cook replied between bites of mashed potatoes.

“Yeah, we saw that. What’s going on? Somebody die?”

“Can tell you boys are from out of town. Everybody around here is convinced the world is coming to an end,” the obese man answered sarcastically. “Simple fools. Spending night and day over there praying that God will save them.”

“Why would they think that?” Sam interjected, sourly looking at the sandwich as the man casually tossed it down on the counter.

“How the hell should I know? Nutjobs, all of them. Once in a while someone comes over and gets some food to take back, but otherwise they’ve been locked up in there for nearly three days now. Praying, singing, listening to the damn preacher going on and on about repenting their sins.”

“I take it you don’t subscribe to any of that?” Dean asked as his plate was delivered.

“Religious mumbo-jumbo, people thinking they can wipe out all the bad things they’ve done all their life just by saying some prayer. Think that God’s just gonna wipe the slate clean.”

“So getting back to the end of the world stuff, why are people freaking out?”

“Probably cause folks been taking sick, sudden like. Others have just gone out of their minds, attacking family, friends, whoever gets close, usually decent people just going mad. And then of course there’ve been the crop failures and weird storms. Guess folks are just spooked and looking for anything to explain it all,” the man answered before turning back to the grill and shoving a large piece of deep-fried chicken into his mouth.

“Uh, so we’re looking for a friend of ours,” Sam stated, pushing away his grilled cheese in disgust. “An older guy, dark beard, was probably wearing a baseball cap of some sort.”

“Yeah, he was in here,” the cook answered between the sound of bones crunching between his jaws. “Haven’t seen him a few days though.”

“Do you know where he was staying?” Dean asked anxiously.

“Nope. But Henner there probably does,” the man answered, pointing toward the door and the frail-looking old man that was just entering.

“Hi there, Ben,” the newcomer called out. “You feeling any better?”

“Not a damn bit,” the cook responded, grabbing another piece of chicken. “What can I get you, Mathias?”

“Just some coffee. How are you boys doing? What brings you to town?”

“Fine, sir,” Sam answered respectfully. “We’re looking for a friend of ours. Ben here said you might know where he’s staying.”

“I know most everyone around here,” Henner replied. “Who you looking for?”

“An older man. Dark beard, would have been driving an old Charger,” Dean offered.

“Bobby? You boys are looking for Bobby Singer?”

“Yes!” both brothers answered simultaneously.

Henner was about to answer when a loud crash distracted the three men. Behind the counter the large cook dropped to the floor in a clatter of metal pots and utensils.

A strange gurgling sound emitted from the huge man just before he went ominously silent.

Dean vaulted the counter in a single leap with Sam just behind him. Rolling the cook onto his back, the elder Winchester pried away several layers of sweaty flesh in an attempt to feel for a carotid pulse.

“Call 911, Sammy,” he ordered, trying to find purchase on the rotund chest in order to start compressions.

He worked on the downed cook until Sam came back to relieve him, both of them sweating profusely and breathing hard by the time the first EMTs arrived. They moved out of the way so the rescue squad could work and joined the old man outside the diner. The threesome stood by silently as the cook’s body was removed from the little restaurant and hauled away in a blare of sirens and flashing strobe lights.

“What in the hell just happened in there?” Sam mused.

“My guess is that the big guy’s heart just couldn’t keep up with his mouth,” Dean snarked.

“It was God’s will…”

The brothers spun to face the old man, slightly surprised by his off-handed comment.

“God willed that man to eat himself to death?” Dean asked sarcastically.

“God didn’t force him to do anything. This is simply His master plan being carried out. If Ben would have only heeded His warnings,” Henner answered mysteriously.

“Just great, we’ve officially entered the Holy friggin’ Twilight Zone,” the elder sibling grumbled.

“You should not mock the Lord,” Henner warned.

Dean started to reply when Sam’s strong hand closed on his arm, stilling him to silence.

"Look Mister, we know there's something strange going on here, but we're just trying to find our friend. You said earlier that you knew where Bobby Singer was?" Sam asked softly.

The old man nodded, pushing up his sleeve as he absently scratched at one of the many sores covering his upper body. Dean took a step back, repelled by the red, weeping wounds that covered Henner.

"I tried to save Bobby, you know. He would have been all right if he would have only believed."

"Believed what?" Dean demanded, his worry increasing by the way Henner spoke of Bobby in the past tense.

"Believed in God's messenger, sent to save those would repent and show their faith. Don would have saved Bobby from the pestilence, if only he would have believed," the old man informed them.

"Don?" Dean repeated. "Who the hell is Don?"

"An angel, sent from God to protect His faithful from His wrath."

"The angel's name is Don?" the young hunter asked, making no effort to hide the humor from his voice.

"Dean..." Sam's low voice warned.

"Aw, come on, Sam. I may not have read the Bible from cover to cover, but I'm pretty sure there aren't any angels by the name of Don mentioned in it."

"You seem like a nice young man, but your lack of faith will be your downfall," the self-appointed preacher warned him.

"Mr. Henner, please. My brother means well, he just doesn't always readily embrace spiritual things. Now can you tell us where we can find Bobby?" Sam pleaded, shooting a look at Dean that cautioned him to remain quiet.

Henner smiled warmly and nodded. "Of course. He's staying out at the old Wahlstrom farm, three or four miles outside of town. I haven't seen him in a couple of days, but that's where he was."

"Thank you, thank you so much," Sam replied gratefully as he turned to follow an already moving Dean toward the Impala.

"If you find Bobby, please tell him that it's not too late to repent. The same goes for you boys too. I'd be happy to take you to meet Don as well," Henner called out behind them. "Take care boys and make sure your souls are right with God. It's not too late...."

Dean watched as Sam waved his acknowledgement, shaking his head at the man's crazy dialogue. Turning the key in the ignition, he quietly murmured, "Stupid fool... it's been too late for a long time..."

Wahlstrom farm

Both brothers remained quiet during the short ride out to the deserted farm, each lost in their own thoughts. Had it not been for the mysterious phone call and the strange behavior of the residents of the small agricultural community, the drive would have likely been accentuated by booming rock streaming from the Impala's speakers. But as it was, only the rush of the wind and the soft chirp of cicadas broke the afternoon stillness.

Slowing as he approached the overgrown driveway, Dean grimaced as the Chevy's undercarriage scraped on the gravel road. Still, his thoughts were centered more on finding Bobby than any potential damage to his precious car and he continued up the short lane.

Reaching the top of the slight grade, the rundown two-story loomed above the landscape, weathered siding and broken shutters adorning the frame like tattered clothes on a beggar. The house had likely been beautiful in its day, but now, abandoned and left to decay, Dean feared it was an ominous portent of what they would find inside.

"There's Bobby's car," Sam announced, pointing towards the Dodge parked just to the side of a nearby barn.

Dean stopped the Impala, forcing himself to slowly exit the car. Part of him wanted to rush the rotting house, screaming Bobby's name, but the hunter inside demanded caution. Drawing his .45, he approached warily, his eyes scanning the immediate area and beyond into the tall rows of corn.

"Sam, check his car. I'm going inside," the elder sibling ordered as he continued toward the back door.

Pulling open the screen, he entered the house, cringing as the smell of decay assailed his nostrils. It wasn't the odor of death, but it sent a shiver down his spine nonetheless.

"Bobby?" he called out tentatively. "Bobby...you here?"

A soft groan emanated from the next room and Dean charged through the kitchen doorway toward the noise. Rushing to the fallen hunter's side, Dean slid to his knees quickly lifting Bobby up into the crook of his arm.

"Bobby. Come on, please, open your eyes," he begged.

The older man shifted slightly, his eyes flickered open yet remaining glazed and unfocused. He reached a shaking hand up toward Dean's face, fingers barely skimming the thin shade of stubble.

"Dean?" Bobby called out weakly.

"I'm here, I'm here. What happened. Are you hurt?"

“Dean?”

“Yeah, Bobby. Its me.”

His old friend shuddered within his grasp, muscles tensing then relaxing even as Bobby sucked in a gasping breath.

“Be...careful... bad here... not...”

Dean listened intently, his heart pounding within his chest as he willed his own strength to transfer through the slight physical connection.

“What? Not what?” he encouraged.

“...End of the world... angel... careful...”

Sam entered the room, instantly taking in the scene. Dean looked up, unable to mask the mixture of concern and fear on his face.

“Is he?” the younger Winchester asked hesitantly.

“Sammy, get a blanket and water from the car,” Dean ordered.

As his brother dashed off, Dean turned back to his injured friend. Bobby was feebly trying to speak, his mouth moving even as his hand strained to grasp the edge of Dean’s jacket.

“Bobby, come on man, just stay awake, stay with me. What happened to you?”

Dean strained to hear the words, but Bobby couldn’t manage more than a whisper.

“...Destroyer...”

Three slow syllables and Bobby’s eyes rolled back in his head as his body went limp in Dean’s arms. The young hunter grabbed the still form tightly, his heart refusing to admit what his brain was telling him.

Desperately, his fingers sought out the thick artery at Bobby’s neck. Finding no pulse, he gently lowered the man’s torso to the dust covered floor.

“SAAAAMMMM!” Dean screamed out, barely able to pull the next breath into his lungs as he fought back the tears that were threatening his eyes.

Mendota Community Hospital

The emergency room waiting area was claustrophobic and uninviting, lacking in any distracting media and decorated in “Early American Boring.” Any one of those qualities would have set Dean on edge, but combined, it was enough to sap the meager patience and control he possessed, especially considering the circumstances.

Tossing the empty paper cup into the trashcan, he paced his way back toward the closed double doors that lead to the treatment area. Stopping just shy of the entry,

Dean leaned forward, his palms pressed flat against the milky glass as he fought the urge to storm back to the trauma room and find Bobby.

“Sit down and relax, Dean,” Sam’s voice called from behind him. “Working yourself into a tizzy isn’t gonna help Bobby.”

Dean spun around; anger, frustration and worry all synergistically combining and venting explosively in his furious response.

“Don’t tell me to relax, Sam!” he shouted, his fist clenching tightly at his side as he stood glaring at his younger brother. “And I’ll sit down when I’m damn good and ready, thank you very much!”

He immediately regretted lashing out as Sam’s head dropped, his brother attempting to hide his face behind shaggy brown strands of hair; but not before Dean caught the look of hurt and sadness contained within the younger man’s blue-green eyes.

“Sammy...” Dean began apologetically. “You know...”

“Yeah, Dean, I do. I’m worried too, okay. I might not show it like you do, but I am,” Sam responded without looking up. “Do you think it was a picnic for me doing CPR on Bobby in the back of the Impala all the way here?”

Dean turned away, the image from the rearview mirror burned into his memory; his brother feverishly compressing the older hunter’s chest while intermittently delivering life-sustaining air. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever pushed the old Chevy as much as he had this afternoon, his foot barely lifting from the gas pedal as he sped across the narrow country roads on the way to seek help for Bobby.

Now, he could only hope that they’d made it in time.

“He’s gotta be okay...” Dean whispered. He hadn’t meant to actually voice the desperate statement and cringed slightly at the bare emotion he’d exposed when Sam replied.

“No news has to be good news. Right? I mean, if he was... gone, then someone would have come out and told us by now,” the younger Winchester offered.

“I guess so,” Dean agreed. “But dammit, what the hell are they doing in there?” Before Sam could respond, the automatic doors swung open with a whoosh of air. A scrub-clad middle-aged man stepped into the tiny waiting room, a clipboard held in his hand as his eyes glanced from the chart to the two brothers.

“Are you family of Mr. Singer?” he asked.

Dean was already in motion before the doctor spoke and he eagerly met the physician at the edge of the hall.

“Yes, we’re his nephews. We’re the only family he has. What’s going on with him, doc?” he fired off rapidly.

The physician's heavy sigh did nothing to instill optimism in the elder Winchester, but Dean forced down the heavy lump that had lodged in his throat as he waited for the reply.

"Well, first, he's alive, albeit barely. You did a great job of getting him here and considering that most folks from Paw Paw never make it this far, that's encouraging."

"What happened to him, Doc?" Sam asked as he drew up to Dean's side.

"We're not completely sure. Physiologically, his electrolytes are severely depleted and ketones are building up to critical levels in his muscle tissue," the physician replied.

"And that means exactly what to us mere mortals?" Dean snapped in irritation.

He felt Sam's hand reach out and clasp his arm, the silent touch conveying a subtle blend of warning and calming reassurance.

"Sorry, doc. It's just that we found him like that and he was perfectly fine not more than a week ago," Dean explained.

"I wish I had answers for you. I wish I had them for all the others. But the truth is, it's almost as if your uncle is starving to death. We see the same blood chemistry results in someone that hasn't eaten in weeks."

"Weeks? But that's not possible," Sam exclaimed.

"I know, I know. He doesn't look emaciated like you would expect, but I'm telling you, on a cellular level, that's what's happening. The cardiac arrest was a manifestation of that."

"So what now? You can fix him right?" Dean asked hopefully.

"Again, I can't promise that. We don't know what's causing this. For now, we have him stabilized and are pushing fluids through his IV. As soon as he can tolerate it we'll be putting an NG tube down so we can boost his caloric intake, but..."

"But what, doc?" the brothers asked simultaneously.

"Your uncle isn't the first patient to be admitted in this condition," the doctor replied.

"How many more are there?" Sam queried, his eyes narrowed with concern.

"A dozen so far; and what's even odder is they're all from Paw Paw. I've notified the CDC, and I've been waiting to hear back from them. But something is going on over there."

"Doc, the other patients, how are they doing now?" Dean asked hesitantly.

The physician paused again, his face downcast even before he spoke.

"Only one has survived to this point. I'm sorry boys, I wish I could be more optimistic, I just don't have any answers."

“Bobby’s gonna survive, doc. He just has to...” Dean insisted, his eyes dark and intense despite the slight cracking in his voice.

The doctor reached out and gripped Dean’s arm, nodding as he acknowledged the fierce sentiment in the young man. “I’ll do my best,” he assured them. “Would you like to see your uncle now?”

“Yes, please,” Sam eagerly responded even as Dean pulled away from the older man’s contact.

“I’ll take you to his room, but be warned; the severe electrolyte loss causes tissue to breakdown and muscles to contract. In addition, there’s often a fair degree of dementia. If he’s awake, he’ll likely not be lucid.”

“We understand,” Sam answered.

“Follow me then.”

Sam followed his brother into the hospital room, stopping at the doorway and allowing his eyes to take in the bleak surroundings. He hated hospitals. Not for the same reason that Dean hated hospitals; it wasn’t like he had spent nearly the amount of time being put back together as his brother had. No, he hated hospitals because every time he was in one, he was generally keeping a bedside vigil for someone he cared about.

He watched as Dean pulled close to the side of Bobby’s bed, and even with his back to Sam, the younger sibling knew that his brother was taking all of this hard. That Dean and Bobby were close was no huge secret, no matter how hardened either of them pretended to be. It had always been that way and next to Pastor Jim, no one had perhaps understood how the young hunters had been forced to grow up or the sacrifices Dean had made along the way as well as Bobby did.

Sure, he and his brother were close, but Sam knew that when it came to truly seeing beneath that reinforced exterior, Bobby was one of the rare folks that possessed the ability to call Dean on his stoic behavior and rarer still, a person that Dean actually tolerated doing that.

The room was quiet other than the intermittent beep of the IV pump as Sam moved further inside. Nearing the bed, he saw the quick movement of Dean’s fingers as he withdrew them from where he had been clasping Bobby’s hand. His brother’s eyes glanced nervously to the side, and Sam granted Dean the privacy of the moment. Any other time, he would have pounced on the opportunity to tease his older brother about the rare show of emotion, but this wasn’t the time or the place.

“He doesn’t look good,” Sam commented taking in the numerous sores that were scattered over Bobby’s exposed flesh.

“The doc said to expect this but...” Dean’s voice trailed off as he slowly shook his head. “What happened to him, Sam? This just can’t be natural.”

"No. Especially considering the doctor said there were others like him. What did Bobby tell you on the phone Dean?"

His brother shrugged, his eyes still solidly glued to the silent form of the older hunter. "Nothing that made any sense. He just mumbled something about a demon, him being sick and to be careful. He was calling for help, Sammy. Maybe if we would have just got there sooner..."

"Don't do that, Dean. I know you're thinking that somehow this is your fault but you gotta know better. Bobby was here on a hunt. Whatever's happening to him now, I'm betting it has something to do with why he was in Paw Paw in the first place," Sam insisted.

"We got nothing to go on," Dean grumbled dejectedly, running a hand through his short-cropped hair.

"So? You're giving in?"

Sam knew he deserved the fierce glare he received from Dean with that remark, but he'd done it purposely. He remembered all-too-clearly how his brother had reacted when seeing their father in the hospital in Springfield. Not that Dean had "shut down," but his fear of losing their dad and the memories of their encounter with the Baba Yaga had taken their toll on his brother's usual steadfast, "never say quit" spirit. In fact, the recent hunt in Memphis had been Sam's way to get his older brother's head "back in the game," even if Dean would never admit to needing it.

Before Dean could respond, a soft moan lifted from the gurney. The brothers turned their attention back to their ill friend even as Bobby's eyes fluttered open.

"Bobby!" Dean called out, turning back and leaning down, making no effort to hide it this time when he reached out to gently touch the man's arm. "Bobby, it's Dean. I'm here."

The elder man's eyes flew open. Red-rimmed and sunken, he looked like one of the many spirits the brothers had dispatched over the years. Yet despite being conscious, Bobby's gaze was wild and unfocused.

"No...nonononono..." he cried out, arms thrashing about as he appeared to fight against some unseen antagonist.

"Easy... easy, Bobby. Just be still. It's okay. You're gonna be all right," Dean assured him, even as he gently wrestled against the older man's flailing arms.

"Not okay... bad... very bad..." Bobby groaned.

"What's bad? Bobby, what happened in Paw Paw?" Sam questioned as he came to stand at the foot of the bed.

"Gotta stop it..."

"Stop what? Bobby, come on, help us out here. What do we have to stop?" Dean pleaded.

"The horsemen..."

Sam looked over at his brother even as Dean glanced at him, each questioning Bobby's peculiar response.

"The horsemen? Bobby, what horsemen?" Sam asked intently.

"Gotta stop it..." Bobby repeated once more, drawing in a shuddering breath as his eyes closed and his body ceased to struggle.

"Bobby?" Dean called out as he carefully shook the bearded man's upper body.
"Bobby, come on, wake up. We don't understand. Dammit!"

Sam watched his brother pull away when it was apparent that their friend was no longer responsive, frustration even more evident on Dean's face. Sam knew what was coming next just as surely as he could gauge the pent up worry that his brother was trying to mask.

So he wasn't greatly surprised when the solid crash of Dean's fist impacting the drywall to the side of the doorway echoed throughout the small room. He equally wasn't shocked to look up and see that Dean had disappeared into the hallway, leaving behind a bloody smear on dented plaster.

He waited the requisite couple of minutes, just long enough to allow Dean to reinforce his emotional façade but not so long that Sam couldn't get to him before he tried to hide what was likely going to be a broken hand.

Sam whispered encouragement to Bobby and a promise to return, watching a moment longer in the vain hope that there might be some reaction from the older man. When there wasn't, he left the hospital room, finding Dean leaning against the corridor wall, his cell phone snugged up against his ear. He flipped it closed as Sam approached.

"I tried to call Dad," Dean announced. "Course, he didn't answer, but I left a voicemail anyway."

Sam nodded, "Maybe Bobby told him something before he left Springfield."

"Yeah, 'cause both of them are so good at sharing that sort of information," Dean grumbled as he absently rubbed his abused hand.

"You okay?" Sam asked, motioning his head toward Dean's still-bleeding knuckles.

"Do I need to waste my breath in answering that?" his brother snapped with a piercing glare.

Sam rolled his eyes in response to Dean's irritating, but expected, reply. Even though he'd spent nearly every waking minute over the past couple of years with his brother and was used to Dean's behavior when it came to being injured, it still pissed him off to no end.

Running a hand through his unruly hair, Sam pushed back his own frustration, ignoring the obvious trail of blood across the back of Dean's hand and deciding that if the stubborn jerk didn't care, then why should he?

Jackass! Sam silently groused. "So what's our next move then?" he asked instead.

"I just don't know," Dean admitted with a characteristic swipe of his hand across his mouth. "But we can't just sit here and let Bobby die. There's gotta be an answer out there."

"We need to find out what happened to him, backtrack his time here or something. If we can find out who or what he's come in contact with, then we might figure out what caused this. Hey! Maybe we ought to talk to that old man, Henner?"

"Henner?" Dean exclaimed. "That old whack job?"

"He seemed to know a good deal about Bobby. Maybe he knows what Bobby was hunting here," Sam suggested.

"I dunno, Sam. I think the old guy is a few toppings short of a supreme pizza."

"He seemed pretty coherent to me," Sam insisted.

"Dude, he sees angels! Angels named 'Don,' no less."

Sam groaned. "That doesn't make him crazy, Dean."

"It does in my book," the elder sibling mumbled in reply.

"This isn't the time for a debate on *that* subject, Dean. We're running blind here. We need answers if we're gonna help Bobby."

Sam watched Dean's body relax, tension borne of a fervent disbelief of everything spiritual giving way to his desire to "do anything" to help their friend.

"So, we head back to Paw Paw?" Dean asked, a hint of acquiescence in his voice.

"That seems to be ground zero."

Dean nodded in agreement before glancing over his shoulder toward the entrance to Bobby's room. Sam followed his gaze, sensing his brother's reluctance to leave the older hunter, knowing Dean was torn between staying at Bobby's side versus heading back to the little town to seek answers.

"We'll figure it out, Dean," Sam offered with more assurance than he really felt.

Dean turned away and began walking down the corridor toward the elevator, his silence speaking volumes about his frame of mind.

Sam sighed, taking a final peek at Bobby's frail-looking form lying deathly still on the hospital bed. Sucking in a deep breath and steeling himself against the sudden shudder that enveloped his body, he turned and trailed after his brother.

New Life Church of God Paw Paw

They arrived back in Paw Paw well after dark and at a slower speed than when they left earlier. The town was still eerily quiet, closed storefronts sunk into the shadows with only the meager glow from the half dozen streetlamps barely illuminating the main thoroughfare.

A solitary halo of light rose at the far end of the street, emanating ethereally from the small church the brothers had passed in the afternoon. The only sign of life in the dismal town, Dean aimed the Impala in the direction of the sanctuary, following the sounds of music and voices that filtered out of the structure.

Pulling into the gravel lot, the Chevy's headlights flashed across Mathias Henner standing at the edge of the property, his signboard held before him as he ranted loud enough to be heard above the noise coming from inside the church.

"Dean, look!" Sam called out, pointing at Henner.

"Yeah, I see him," Dean snorted with derision.

"We should talk to him," his brother reiterated as Dean parked the car in an empty spot in the lot and killed the engine.

The elder sibling stared at the old man then glanced back to the well-lit church.

"He's all yours," Dean replied, pushing open the driver's side door and stepping out.

"Where are you going?"

"You talk to Methuselah, I'm heading inside to see what's going on," Dean answered, his eyes still focused on the building and the multi-hued light peeking through the stained-glass windows.

He moved off in the direction of the steps, turning back to his brother just as his booted foot hit the first riser.

"Hey, Sammy!" he called out. "If you meet Don, ask him if he can hook you up with Roma Downey."

Dean chuckled slightly, enjoying his brother's look of disdain. He took the remaining steps two at a time, reaching the heavy oak door and pushing it open slowly.

The smell struck him first, overwhelming him with its intensity and causing him to shrink back even as he raised a hand to cover his nose and mouth. The stench of body odor, fetid and rank, filled the inner sanctuary and made the interior resemble a locker room more than a holy sanctuary.

A quick look around confirmed what his nose already told him. The people within the building looked worn and disheveled, their ragged appearance affirming the lack of attention to hygiene. As Dean stood there, the acrid hint of ammonia reinforced that at least a few of the members hadn't even bothered to move outside to "relieve" themselves.

Stunned by the shocking conditions, Dean swallowed hard and moved further inside coming to stand just behind the last row of pews. He accidentally rammed his knee into the corner of the hard wood seat, muttering a curse barely less than a whisper as he reached down to rub the throbbing joint.

If anyone noticed his arrival, or his somewhat sacrilegious comment, they didn't react.

Standing atop the pulpit, a gray-haired man clothed in a wrinkled robe spoke to the congregation, his hoarse voice cracking as he led the assembled in prayer. Before him, a mix of young and old stood, many swaying precariously, heads bowed in supplication as they repeated the pastor's words.

"...Save us, oh Lord, your faithful servants, in this hour of our despair. Protect us, oh gracious God, from your wrath as you prepare to cleanse this world of sin and evil..."

Dean shook his head in disbelief. He never subscribed to organized religion mostly because in his mind, he'd never seen anything positive come out of it. The scene before him only served to reinforce his skepticism.

"...We are your children, dear Lord, submitting ourselves to your will, trusting in your great design to deliver us in these end times..."

"Well you sure are betting on a lame horse..." he grumbled under his breath.

"...We've seen the signs... we prepare ourselves for the hour of your judgment... the wicked shall perish and the righteous shall be borne unto everlasting glorious life..."

"Righteous? Yeah, right," he huffed, shaking his head.

To his left, a quick flash of movement followed by the soft sound of a body colliding with the hard wood of the pew diverted Dean's attention.

Next to him a young woman reached for the struggling form of the small boy who had collapsed to the floor. At her side, a curly-haired little girl stood wearily watching, blue eyes looking dull and vacant as though she saw but didn't comprehend. *Or didn't care...*

As Dean observed, the mother pulled the boy back to his feet, holding him steady even as his knees threatened to buckle once again.

"Please, Momma! I'm so tired... and thirsty," the small boy pleaded, blue-green eyes staring up at the young brunette woman.

Dean felt himself become angry as he watched the mother "shush" the child and then turn her attention back to the clergyman. She looked as worn and dazed as the children at her side and he wondered exactly how long the family had been there.

When the child collapsed again, he couldn't ignore it any longer. In three steps he was beside the tow-headed boy, lifting the surprisingly light child into his arms. The boy's eyes fluttered open, his gaze unfocused, his head bobbing on neck muscles that seemed too weak to hold it upright.

“Please... mister...” the boy croaked, a single precious tear trickling down his cheek as his eyes met Dean’s.

The young hunter looked up at the brunette, really “seeing” her now that he was so close.

She was pretty, would have been beautiful were it not for the hollow, sunken cheeks, the dark rings beneath her eyes and the tangled, dirty strands of hair that hung limply to her shoulders. Worse still was the unmistakable smell of a body that hadn’t been washed in some time and while her clothing was likely her “Sunday go to meeting” best, the wrinkles and sweat stains made it look like she’d spent time in a dumpster rather than a church.

There was no denying that this family, hell everyone inside the sanctuary, had been here for a while, days even. It was then that the cook’s words raged back into Dean’s mind.

... Once in a while someone comes over and gets some food to take back, but otherwise they’ve been locked up in there for nearly three days now. Praying, singing, listening to the damn preacher going on and on about repenting their sins...

Days?

Was it possible? Had she and her children been standing there for nearly a week with no food or water? The thought was staggering, yet the way they and everyone else looked, there really was no denying what Dean was witnessing.

“Leave my son be...” the woman hissed weakly, looking down at the hunter and the small boy in his arms.

“Ma’am, your son is sick. He’s dehydrated, if not worse,” Dean returned.

Reaching into the interior pocket of his jacket, he pulled free the silver flask filled with Holy Water.

It might not be cold... but it’s still water... he thought to himself as he unscrewed the cap with his thumb.

He was about to press the mouth of the container against the small boy’s lips when his mother lashed out and struck Dean’s arm. The flask skittered across the floor, precious liquid spilling out onto the worn carpeting.

“What the hell!” Dean shouted, glaring up at her.

“Stay away from my son,” she snarled again.

“Your son is sick. Don’t you give a damn?”

“God will provide...”

“Lady, I don’t exactly see *God* raining down Evian on the church right now,” Dean snapped back.

But the woman turned away, focused again on the monotonous sermon. Dean glanced back down to the little boy in his arms, the youngster's pale face meeting his gaze with wide imploring eyes.

"Please..." Dean begged again. "Please let me get your kids something to eat and drink."

"You're a non-believer. Get away from my son," she screeched, stooping down to pull the weakened boy out of Dean's arms and back to her side.

Dean returned to his feet, still staring in disbelief, even glancing around the crowded church to see if anyone else had taken note. But like the young mother, all of the others were focused on the altar and the continuous droning of the pastor. If anyone had observed the exchange, no one seemed concerned.

As the voices of the congregation began to rise following the lead of the church organ, Dean reluctantly backed away. With his back to the large doors, the young hunter couldn't peel his eyes away from the two children.

Part of him wanted to grab both kids and whisk them out of the church. He knew he could do it – they were small and he was certainly strong enough and in far better shape than anyone in the sanctuary that would potentially try to stop him.

Sure... why not add kidnapping to the laundry list of capital crimes I'm wanted for? he sarcastically mused.

Yet while his brain couldn't come to terms with the level of religious conviction that caused a mother to stand by while her children weakened and possibly died, Dean also understood the single-mindedness that caused a father to raise his sons to hunt down and kill anything that smacked of supernatural origins regardless of the toll it took on their childhood. Perhaps this woman was in essence no worse than his dad. Still, no matter how obsessed John Winchester had been during his and Sam's childhood, outside of hunting, he'd never purposely put them in a situation where their lives were grossly in danger.

Off-key voices rose once more as the assembled broke into the chorus of *Rock of Ages*. Dean shivered unconsciously, it was all too surreal. Whatever was going on in this small town, it definitely had a hold on the residents in some bizarre way.

His eyes went back to the small children then on to the glazed faces of the surrounding adults. So absorbed in the worship service, Dean was pretty sure the church could catch fire and burn down to the foundation and the congregation would do nothing to save themselves. Memories of Leicester resurfaced, throngs of citizens "hearing voices," behaving irrationally. Was that happening again here?

"No friggin' way..." he grumbled aloud. "I'm not watching some kid starve to death just because the adults have whacked out on religion."

He made a move back towards the two small children, his heart pounding with adrenaline at what he was about to do. But as he took the first step, a strong grasp of his arm startled him and he whirled around, right fist ready to swing.

“Sonofabitch, Sam. You nearly ate a knuckle sandwich, dude,” Dean chastised, lowering his hand with an exaggerated intake of air.

“You’re a little tense there, big brother. Maybe you oughta cut back on the caffeine a bit,” Sam teased in response.

Dean glared at him in reply, but turned back to locate the weary siblings. Sam followed his gaze, his brief humor fast fading as he picked up on Dean’s obvious uneasiness.

“What’s up, Dean? Did you find out anything in here?” Sam asked.

Dean turned back slowly, torn between watching the children and answering his brother.

“I dunno, Sammy. Everybody in here is out of their minds if you ask me. Not a soul has even looked up to notice that we walked in. They’ve done nothing but pray and sing the entire time I’ve been standing here,” he replied.

“That’s not so unusual, Dean. What did you expect them to do, stop the service and welcome you in?”

“No, smartass. But take a look around. Take a big whiff of the air. These people have been here for a while, non-stop is my guess. Either that or there’s a serious lack of personal hygiene being taught during health class at the local high school,” Dean snarked. “Seriously, Sam. That little boy over there is nearly dead on his feet. He was begging for water but when I tried to give him a sip from my flask, his mother went nuts and slapped it out of my hand. She doesn’t even care that he’s so hungry and dehydrated that he can barely go on. She just keeps saying that God will take care of them.”

“The power of faith can be pretty strong, Dean. Dozens of cultures and religions believe in the power of prayer.”

“That’s crap, dude and you know it. Look at Roy LaGrange, look at what happened in Rapture’s Climb. The only power there was demonic. There’s something evil going on here too, I can just feel it,” he insisted.

“Well, according to Mathias Henner, the people all believe the Apocalypse is coming and soon. That’s why they’re here, Dean,” Sam informed him.

“The Apocalypse? Here? In podunk Illinois?”

“There have been some strange signs, Dean. Crop failures, bizarre weather, people coming down with odd sores, some even dying like the cook at the diner; stuff straight out of Revelation. And here’s the kicker, Henner says that God has even sent an angel down here to help guide and protect the faithful.”

“Oh yeah, Don the angel. Well, it must be true if the old man says so. I mean, not like he could possibly have Alzheimer’s or anything...” Dean said mockingly with a fast roll of his eyes.

“Now who’s the smartass? Come on, Dean. After everything we’ve seen lately, especially in Leicester. You heard what Lucifer said. He has every intention of bringing Hell to earth,” Sam insisted, his face pinched with seriousness. “Who’s to say this isn’t the beginning of the end?”

Dean shook his head, his hand waving as he gestured to the still-oblivious congregation.

“Even if I was going to buy all that end of the world crap, then where the hell is their savior? Where’s this messenger of God to help deliver them from Satan? All these people are blindly following that so-called pious bastard up there in the pulpit. If he gave one good damn about these people, he’d send them home, or at the very least have some pizzas delivered. No! No way, Sam. That preacher up there, LaGrange, Leviticus Cross, even that old man outside, they’re all tools, dude. And I’m not talking the useful kind of tool either. This isn’t some sort of second coming. At the very best, this is mass hysteria and these religious types are just preying on the weakness and fear of these innocent people.”

The elder hunter stole one final glance at the two children, swallowing hard when the little boy looked up and met his gaze with hollow, pleading eyes. Dean turned away, anger, frustration and guilt making a fearsome emotional concoction.

“I’m not buying this religious mumbo-jumbo, Sam. People are dying, something’s going on here, but just like always, the only people I see rushing into the fight are you and me. If God and Lucifer are sending in the troops, I sure as hell wish they’d step up to the line and quit using the rest of humanity as sacrificial pawns,” he snarled as he broke for the large door making no effort to minimize the loud bang as he exited and allowed the massive oak to slam shut behind him.

Wahlstrom farm

They rode back out to the abandoned farm in utter darkness and silence. The moonless night and endless fields of corn made it feel as though they were the last two people on the planet.

The relative quiet of the car was only broken by Dean’s thumb as he tapped out a nameless beat on the top of the steering wheel. Added to the desolate country road, the absence of the elder sibling’s usual raucous rock chords pouring from the Impala’s speakers only served to make the drive that more unnerving.

Sam considered commenting on the lack of AC/DC, even thought about teasing Dean about the nearly suffocating quiet, but when the thumb-drumming started, he held back. Dean choosing to forego any music was unsettling enough, but when he started with the steering-wheel percussion, Sam knew his brother was chewing through some deep thoughts. It was one of the few times that Dean was ever this quiet.

Deep thought and near death... Funny how concerning Dean, both are equally scary... Sam silently mused.

The younger hunter rubbed his temples and turned to look back out the window as the cornrows whisked by rapidly. It wasn’t that Sam wasn’t sympathetic to his

brother, but Dean was an open book and after all, Sam had his own thoughts to occupy him.

He knew that his brother was tormenting himself over the two small children in the church. There was no mistaking the rigid, clenched jaw or fixed stare as Dean drove. But Sam also knew there was nothing he could say that would make his brother feel any better about leaving the kids behind. He'd listened to Dean's rant for the first few minutes after storming out of the church, knowing that most of his brother's anger was geared less towards his bias about religion and more because he felt like he'd done nothing to help the little boy.

Dean hated to lose, it was just that simple. And after growing up with him and now hunting with him again, Sam knew that nothing short of time, or smashing something, was going to soothe Dean's broiling anger.

And so he turned his mind to what he could perhaps help: piecing together the strange bits of information they'd gleaned since arriving in this small Midwestern town.

First, there was the strange call from Bobby. While Sam hadn't talked to him, Dean had said that Bobby had managed to say something about a demon. Of course, according to his brother, Bobby had also babbled something about angels and a destroyer too.

Then there was Henner. The old man seemed lucid enough and it was obvious that he fervently believed that the Apocalypse was manifesting in the little town. Granted, Henner was zealous in his belief and he was certainly old enough to be battling some form of age-induced dementia. But he, like Bobby, had mentioned the appearance of an angel, Henner going so far as to tell Sam about how the angel had saved him from the town bullies.

Sam had to admit that he was more than open to the possibility of angelic supernatural creatures, had a certain degree of faith in a higher power. But really, an angel named Don was more than even his open-mindedness could accept.

Still, there were other occurrences that seemed to validate the whole "end of the world" notion. Certainly crop failures and lightning storms happened frequently and were not necessarily the result of demonic forces. But the illnesses and deaths were another matter.

Henner told him that over a dozen people had either come down with the strange sores or had died suddenly much like the cook back at the diner. Of course, the old man had been quick to attribute the rashes and deaths to lack of faith and God "thinning the herd," but Sam was less than accepting of that idea.

Experience had taught him better...

"Dean, you know, I was thinking..." he began.

"Wow, you thinking, what're the chances of that?" his brother snarked back without even looking away from the road ahead of them, although he ceased the manic drumming of his fingers.

Sam chose to ignore his brother's comment, not seeing the need to antagonize Dean by firing off his own derogative retort when he well knew that what he was about to say would more than likely set his brother off anyway. Taking a deep breath, the younger sibling scratched absently at the back of his hairline before speaking.

"Okay, so I know you're not sold on even the remote possibility that what's happening around here is the Apocalypse, but what if it isn't far off the mark?"

There was a sudden rush of expelled air from Dean's mouth and Sam braced himself for the barrage.

"Not sold?" Dean cried out. "Sam, please don't tell me you're buying this load of crap? After everything we've seen in our lives, do you honestly think that God and the Devil are gonna play out their end game here? Now?"

"That's not what I'm suggesting..." Sam began.

"'Cause really, I kinda had you figured for more of a realist when it came to things like that," Dean continued.

"I am, but..."

"You *can't* believe that there's an angel running around Paw Paw..."

"No... well maybe, but listen..."

"I mean, when have we EVER seen a single sign of divine intervention in our entire lives?"

"I guess we haven't... but..."

"... Demons, yes, every manner of evil thing out there, but really, angels? Whatever's going on here is nothing more than the demon of the month club bro."

Sam sucked in a sharp breath and exploded.

"Dean! Would you shut the hell up for one second and let me finish?"

The Impala became silent once again, and even in the relative darkness, Sam could see his brother glaring at him, mouth agape.

"I get it, Dean. You don't think this could really be the beginning of the end. Okay. I'm not disagreeing. All I was going to say was what if this was some sort of test run? You know, like maybe what's happening here is just a dry run for the greater plan."

"Sam..."

"No, come on, Dean. Open your mind just a crack for a minute. You don't want to believe in angels, fine. But you can't deny that people dying of starvation when there's food everywhere, people coming down with biblical sores and rashes, crops withering and dying when the conditions couldn't be more optimal; all of that isn't just chance and hysteria."

Sam paused, listening to Dean sigh loudly.

"All's I'm saying is that we need to consider that there might be forces at work here far greater than we normally deal with," Sam suggested.

Dean laughed. "Yeah, Sammy. 'Cause we haven't dealt with anything as powerful as this lately. I mean, we've been on a crusade with an immortal Viking princess, we've had a brotherhood of demons trying to reenact every heinous serial killer in modern history, oh and let's not forget Lucifer. That was just a walk in the park."

"That's sorta my point, Dean. Look at all the demons we've dealt with lately. Like Bobby said, more and more of them are walking among us. Then that whole deal in Leicester. Lucifer as much as said that he was just biding his time."

"Sam, I just don't know..."

"You were ready to believe it in Leicester. As I recall, it was you that was convinced it was Armageddon back there. The river of blood, the plagues, the Beast," Sam reminded.

"Yeah, and you were the one to remind me that it was God not Lucifer that brings about the End of Days, Sammy. Now which is it gonna be here? Demons or angels? God or Lucifer? I'm still slightly more inclined to believe in this being something demonic. At least until I see the white of fluffy angel feathers," Dean nearly snarled back.

Sam chewed the inside of his cheek, frustrated with the unexplained and irritated that Dean wasn't even giving any of this serious consideration. Then Sam played another card.

"You saw Lucifer, up close and personal. Is an angel any less likely?"

He heard his brother's intake of air as he prepared to speak, but after a moment, Dean remained silent. Instead, the older sibling pulled his cell phone from the pocket of his jeans and thumbed the device to life, the glow of the cellular illuminating the harsh look on Dean's face.

Sam waited patiently, curious as to whom Dean might be calling considering the topic of conversation.

"Yeah... hello, this is Dean Henley. I was wondering if someone could give me an update on my um... uncle..."

So that was it? Sam thought to himself. Dean never could rationally discuss anything when his mind was fixed on something else; and Bobby's current condition definitely ranks as "something else."

"Oh? Okay... yes, I understand. Thank you," Dean finished.

Sam waited a half-heartbeat before asking the obvious.

"How's Bobby?"

“Not good...”

“What did they say?”

Dean turned his face away from Sam, but it was a wasted gesture. Sam knew by the tone of his brother’s voice and the quick glance away that Dean was taking the news hard.

“He’s dying, Sammy. Said they’re trying everything but he’s just not responding,” his brother whispered back.

The younger Winchester didn’t reply, instead he grabbed the armrest on the door as the Impala crested the rising driveway to the abandoned farm house. He waited to lift the handle and open the door, but Dean never killed the engine. Instead, his brother merely sat there, eyes focused out into the darkness, hands still tightly gripping the steering wheel.

“Sam...”

“Go, Dean,” Sam answered, knowing full well what Dean was about to say. “I’ll stay here and sort through the stuff Bobby was working on. Maybe there’s something here in his notes. Just give me a call and let me know how he’s doing.”

He watched Dean silently nod as he opened the passenger side door and climbed from the Chevy. Bending back down to peer inside the car, Sam chose not to comment on Dean’s backhanded swipe across his face.

“Dean, um... be careful. Okay.”

“Yeah, you too. And Sam...”

“Yeah?”

“I...uh...”

“Not necessary, Dean. I understand...”

And Sam did understand. Even as he walked to the darkened, rundown structure, watching the Impala’s lights fade into the distance, Sam understood his brother.

Dean refused to lose. And if this really was the end of the world, then the thought that there was little either of them could do to stop it was just not something his brother would easily accept.

Mendota Community Hospital

Dean arrived back at the hospital just before midnight. His eyes were red and heavy as his body shouted for sleep. Glancing at his watch, he realized that he’d been up for nearly forty hours straight, having left from Memphis immediately after Bobby’s call yesterday.

Walking through the nearly deserted hallways, the hospital eerily reminded him of Roosevelt, or maybe even Harrisburg. Shuddering at the thought, he stopped outside the doorway to Bobby's room, rolling his still-aching shoulder as he stood there lost in a myriad of thoughts.

"Visiting hours are over, sir..."

Dean spun around, briefly startled, but relaxing as he came face to face with a scrub-clad nurse. Under other circumstances, he would have flashed his trademark "lovable rogue" smile and attempted to charm the petite blonde into joining him for a nightcap once her shift was over. But as it was, he was tired, worried and the no-nonsense look she wore implied that she was going to enforce the rules.

"Please," he began, brows raised as his green eyes flashed with just enough desperation. "That's my uncle in there. We're all the family he has."

"Look, I understand, but it won't do your uncle any good if you don't let him get some rest," she insisted.

Dean looked back over his shoulder and into the room. The slow steady beep of the monitor and the occasional chime of the IV pump echoed out into the quiet hallway. The dim light above the bed cast a pale glow across Bobby's equally pasty features.

"Miss, we're the only family he has. If he's gonna..." Dean couldn't force himself to utter the word for fear of validating the dire situation. "I just don't want him to be alone. I swear, I won't be a problem."

He watched the nurse as she stared into his eyes, not certain if she was going to give in to his request or call for hospital security. When she looked at her watch and then down to the charts in her hand, Dean knew he was home free.

"Alright," she sighed. "I have rounds to make. So long as I don't hear a peep out of the room, you can stay."

She smiled at him then, but Dean knew it was forced. He caught her off-handed glance into the room and the brief pinch of her eyebrows as her gaze fell on the unconscious hunter. The look on her face confirmed that even she knew it was only a matter of time for the older man in the bed.

It didn't matter to Dean. He wasn't giving up hope. He couldn't afford to.

He entered the room as though he were entering a chapel; slowly, silently, reverently. On auto-pilot, he quietly pulled a chair over to the side of the bed and slid into the seat, his eyes never losing contact with the still form in the bed.

Bobby looked horrible. *No*, Dean thought. *Horrible was an understatement.*

The exposed skin on the older hunter's arms, neck and face was beet red, interrupted by patches of flaky white where his flesh was drying and peeling away. Still, nothing was as bad the quarter-sized, weeping lesions that erupted randomly on Bobby's body.

Undeterred by his physical condition, Dean reached out and finding a small patch of unmarred skin just above Bobby's wrist, he gently touched his friend.

"What did you get yourself into, old man?" he asked, shaking his head.

In his mind, he could hear Bobby's irritated huff at the "old man" comment. "Old man my ass," Bobby would say. "I can still take out you young Winchester whelps."

Dean smiled sadly; he would have given anything to hear Bobby's voice now.

"I'd buy you a beer if you'd just open your eyes right now. I'd even get you one that was full strength, none of that holy-watered-down variety that you like pulling on people," the young hunter added with a soft chuckle.

He leaned forward till his forearms rested on the stark white linens covering the gurney. It was so tempting to simply allow his head to follow the extremities, so inviting to just let his body succumb to the need for sleep. But he shook the cobwebs from his mind, forcing himself alert and determined to remain at the older man's side for as long as needed.

"I bet you thought I never knew about your little trick did ya? I probably wouldn't have if it hadn't been for all that beer you *let* me have when I was a kid."

Dean sagged backward in the chair, memory washing over him as a glint of a smile creased his haggard face.

"See, I grew up thinking that beer always tasted that weak, course at the time I didn't know you were watering mine down more than normal. I s'pose it was just your way of trying to make me feel like I fit in without Dad showing up and finding me drunk off my ass. But you can imagine my surprise the time I went to Craig Millikin's kegger back when we were living in Nebraska."

Dean snorted. "God, I was so drunk and sick as a dog the following day. I thought Dad was gonna skin me alive for that one. I can't even say I remember much about that night or the next one other than thinking that Matt's beer was sure a helluva lot different than yours."

He paused for a moment, his smile broadening. "Ya know, I've never told anyone that you do that. Not Dad, not Sam. I wonder if they ever noticed? Sammy probably wouldn't, not like the kid is exactly a connoisseur of alcohol, but I gotta think Dad would have caught on by now. Always makes me wonder what other little tricks you have up your sleeve."

"I've learned so much from you, Bobby. I mean, Dad might have trained us, but you *taught* me a whole lot more. I know we woulda never known about Devil's Traps if it hadn't been for you. And God knows Sam still treats that Key of Solomon like it's made of gold. The kid can scrawl out a trap faster than I can break out the spray paint."

Dean halted again as Bobby's body twitched violently, the alarms on the cardiac monitor briefly squealing with the movement. There was a breath-stealing pause before the older hunter stabilized and the machines resumed their metronomic pings.

It was only when his lungs were bursting for fresh air that the young man thought to release the breath he'd been holding and take in another. Pulling his hand down across his face, Dean paused as his fingers reached his mouth, resting them there as he swallowed hard against the borderline nausea that his already twisting stomach was offering up.

"Dammit, Bobby. Don't pull that crap on me," he demanded with an intense whisper.

He quickly turned away, his weary eyes and fatigued brain choosing that moment to flash the image of his father lying still as death in the hospital in Springfield. It took a moment before Dean could trust himself to look back on Bobby's quiet form, a few extra seconds to be sure that one bearded face was not the other. In his heart, it didn't really matter which face Dean saw lying there before him. He loved father and surrogate uncle equally.

"You can't give in, Bobby. You gotta fight this. Come on now, what's a little rash when you've survived being blown up?" he asked jokingly. "You got that nice new house and everything, courtesy of Winchester Building and Construction. Who's gonna look after that library and all the weapons if you check out?"

Dean drew in a sharp breath as he reached back to clasp the man's hand. "We've lost so many; Caleb, Pastor Jim. The ranks are looking pretty thin, not enough hunters out there to stand up against all the evil crap that keeps coming at us. Dude, you can't bail on us too, can't take the easy way out. You gotta fight this... fight to hang on!"

He stole a quick glance over his shoulder, paranoia nagging at him that someone might hear his heartfelt confession. When the room and the hall behind remained empty, Dean continued his one-way conversation.

"We've taken such a beating lately, Bobby and I'm so damn tired. Every day it's one more hunt, one more injury, one more loss. And for what? What are we supposed to be, a couple of freakin' superheroes, swooping in to save the day one demon at a time? We disappear again, trying to stay one step ahead of the law, never any thanks, never any appreciation for what we've done. All we get is pain and suffering, all we have to show for it is bruises and scars."

He rubbed absently at his temples, lines of fatigue creasing his handsome face.

"And then there's the never-ending laundry list of bad guys. It used to be so simple, find a spirit, find a creature and put it down. Even with all the demons we've fought, there were rules. We even put that yellow-eyed bastard down. But lately, we have a whole new crop of badass wannabes, all after a pound of our flesh. That Myers creep in Seattle, Bryon Castor, those two jackasses back in Culpepper, even Sid Morrow and his gang. The demons were bad enough, but having to watch our backs against humans, how the hell are we supposed to fight that?"

"And then there's Mia..."

Dean lowered his eyes, the weight of the brunette's betrayal still eating at his conscience, her brutal attack on Sam no less painfully raw than it had been months ago. His fault.

"I really screwed up on that one, Bobby. I know Dad tried to convince us that Mia was all his fault but I'm the one that let her into our lives. The things I said to Sam, the things I thought... I drove him away, I picked Mia over my brother."

He swallowed hard, choking down the large lump in his throat. "I'm just so tired, Bobby. And part of me just thinks that if this really is the beginning of the end... if Lucifer really is out to burn humanity to a crisp, what the hell can we do to stop him? And why the hell should we even try?"

As if in reply, Bobby stirred again, a harsh raspy sound coming from his mouth even as his eyes fluttered. Dean sat up straight, his eyes wide and hopeful as his heart hammered within his chest.

"Bobby?" Dean called out as he hoped for the older man to waken.

But the brief rally turned into a depressing tease as the patient succumbed once again to the deathly quiet that perversely filled the room.

"Come on, Bobby, fight this, we need you, we're operating blind here. We don't know how to help you," Dean bemoaned. "This town, what's happening, none of it makes any sense. If you want me to fight, then you gotta fight too."

"What did you mean about the horsemen? Did you really see an angel? Sammy thinks there really is one here, he believes that old kook, Henner. I say, show me an angel and I'll show you a congregation that's been hitting the communion wine on the side."

Dean snickered, pleased with his little attempt at humor. But he quieted just as rapidly, the levity of the situation overshadowing any joke. He slumped back against the rough frame of the chair, a slight groan escaping his lips as his aching shoulder met the unyielding hard wood.

He sat there dolefully, and to an outside observer the young hunter would have appeared small and forlorn as he sat a vigil next to his long-time friend.

Hours ticked by and neither patient nor watcher moved, Dean's eyes barely blinking as they remained focused on Bobby. The blonde nurse came in twice to take vitals or adjust the IV, each time offering a wan smile in Dean's direction. He thought about asking her about Bobby, but each time she checked the older man, her face spoke more than any words.

Finally, as the first hints of sunlight began to peek through the partially drawn blinds, she came in one final time, her hand gently clasping Dean's shoulder as she approached. The strong waft of coffee filled the room and at the moment it was more appealing than the most expensive perfume.

Dean rose up in the seat, taking the cup she offered and thanking her with a warm smile.

"I'm going off shift," she explained. "The day staff will be in after report. They'll probably kick you out while they clean him up and change the IV and such."

He nodded and looked back at Bobby.

"Have you gotten any sleep?" she asked.

"Nah," Dean replied. "I just wanted to be here with him."

"Go home," she ordered. "Get some rest. I promise I'll make sure you're called if there's the slightest change, one way or another."

He looked at the unconscious hunter once again and rose from the chair. "Thanks," he mumbled as he paused by Bobby's side, his fingers ghosting over the older man's arm.

"He's lucky, you know?"

Moving toward the door, he stopped when she called out to him. Turning, Dean faced her, confused by the comment.

"I see people in here all the time, some better, some worse. But few ever have any family or friends that care enough to just sit and keep them company. That's pretty special."

He smiled weakly back at her as he turned for the hallway.

"Have faith," she added. "He's made it further than any of the others. Maybe someone upstairs is watching out for him."

Dean absorbed her words but offered no reply. He simply walked down the corridor and out into the promising sun of another day.

Wahlstrom farm

Sam awoke to a stray beam of sunlight that pierced the worn wood siding of the house and chose the exact trajectory by which to burn the cornea from his left eye and scorch the flesh on that side of his face. He swatted at the errant ray as though he were brushing away an irritating insect, but the offending light steadfastly remained.

With a groan, he rose from the spot on the dirty floor where he'd fallen asleep, his face creased from where he'd been laying against the edge of a book and the zipper of Bobby's sleeping bag. He stretched, groaning again and cursing his own height and long limbs. Bodies like his just didn't simply curl up on the floor of an abandoned house and wake up refreshed and ready to take on... *Hell?*

The thought made him chuckle slightly as he extricated himself from the encampment of books, scraps of paper and assortment of notes that carried the distinctive scrawl of Robert Steven Singer. He had to hand it to the older hunter, Bobby might be a bit unorganized with his research, but it was thorough. There had been plenty of references to angels, the Apocalypse, even passages highlighted from Revelation, but no specific notes on what Bobby was actually checking into.

Newspaper articles from over a month ago listed the increase of strange phenomena, bizarre lightning storms during perfectly cloudless days, whole fields of corn withering and dying overnight as though they'd been deprived of rain for the entire season, and

dozens of reports on the local residents either committing uncharacteristically violent acts or simply falling ill due to unexplainable rashes and sores.

If Bobby was thinking that the end of the world was coming down on Paw Paw, then by all accounts, Sam wasn't sure he could disagree.

Glancing at his watch, he wasn't shocked to see that it was only six-thirty. In actuality, he was more surprised that he'd only been asleep for a little over two hours. It certainly felt like more to his sleep-craving body and mind.

He stooped down and turned off the small camping lantern that he'd been reading by during the night. The thin mantle glowed for a moment longer then returned to its ghostly white color even as the barest hint of smoke and burning kerosene lifted into the air and mixed with the unmistakable odors of the decaying house.

Casting a look around the deserted parlor, he noticed for the first time the large Devil's Trap spray painted on the lofty ceiling. Like many houses of its day, this one had vaulted ceilings well over twelve feet from the floor. How in the world Bobby had managed to paint the sigil way up there became an instant curiosity to the young man.

"I don't even know why I'm surprised," Sam mused aloud, shaking his head as he contemplated the achievement.

A tease of a shadow outside the boarded window caught his eye and Sam spun to make out the movement.

"Dean?" he called out, assuming his brother had returned from the hospital. "You out there?"

When there was no response, Sam moved to the door and stepped out into the burgeoning morning light. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he called out once again.

"Dean? You back?" But stepping off the porch and peeking around the side, the Impala was still absent from the drive.

He dug into his pocket, retrieving his cellular and quickly dialing his brother.

"Hey, Sammy," Dean answered after the third ring.

"Hey, Dean. Where you at? Still with Bobby?"

"On my way back."

"How's Bobby doing?" Sam asked hesitantly. If Dean was returning, did that mean...?

"No change..." Dean breathed back, his unsuppressed yawn coming across the cellular. *"Did you find out anything?"*

"I'm not sure. There's all kinds of notes about angels, demons, and get this... a whole chapter from Revelation about the Four Horsemen," Sam answered.

“Meaning what?”

“Remember Bobby said something about ‘horsemen?’ Well I think he may have been referring to that chapter.”

The silence on the other end confirmed that his brother had no clue what Sam was talking about.

“Nevermind, when you get here I’ll explain,” Sam returned.

Dean mumbled something in reply and Sam regretted his snappiness, realizing that his brother had been going strong for nearly two days. He knew Dean could and had often managed to go several days with little to no sleep, subsisting off nothing more than catnaps and black coffee, but add in the emotional exertion of Bobby’s condition and Sam knew his brother was running on fumes.

He considered calling Dean back to offer an apology, but his own weariness demanded attention. Turning toward the tall well pump rising from the ground a short distance from the porch, Sam strode purposefully toward it, giving the handle a couple of rough tugs in order to prime it. He jumped backwards as water rushed from the spigot, splashing onto the dry soil.

Cupping his hands, Sam gulped down several handfuls of cold water before splashing more on his face and over his head. With his hair dangling in wet tendrils, he stretched his back, feeling the satisfying pop of cartilage in his spine.

Feeling slightly refreshed, he spotted Bobby’s Charger sitting to the side of the rundown barn. Sam moved toward the rusty Dodge hopeful that perhaps there might be other clues inside the vehicle. Walking alongside the long rows of tall corn, it felt strange to Sam to be dwarfed by the lofty vegetables. Even on his tiptoes, he couldn’t see above the stalks.

Reaching the car, he was about to grab the handle when another flash of movement, this time within the cornrows, startled him again. Spinning around, his hand went automatically for the 9mm tucked into the waistband of his jeans.

The beauty of the Glock was that it didn’t need cocked in preparation for firing; with his finger on the trigger, Sam moved toward the edge of the field, the pistol held out before him in a stance that would have made his brother proud. A section of stalks just beyond him stirred as though an unseen breeze had pushed them over.

“Except that the wind’s blowing the other way right now...” Sam reminded himself in a hushed voice.

He stepped slowly into the field, his shoulders brushing past the long green leaves that seemed to reach out and grab at his shirt. He moved carefully down the thin path between the rows, his senses all straining for any further sign of an intruder.

Another flash of movement made him spin toward his left.

“Who’s there?” he yelled, gun still at ready.

He didn't really expect an answer; certainly the hair that was standing on end at the nape of his neck was the best indicator that this was no prank being played by some bored farmer's kid. As Sam moved deeper into the field, he suddenly felt like Mel Gibson in *Signs*, almost waiting to see some transparently skinned alien pop out from behind the corn and attack him.

"Dean would be so proud of the movie reference..." he thought to himself, smiling inwardly. *"At this point, I'd rather it be an alien rather than what could be out there."*

He walked on a little further, stopping as he realized how far into the field he'd travelled.

It was pastoral, serene even as the gentle movement of crops around him created a soft whisper. The cool breeze combined with the warmth of the early morning sun only added to the peacefulness of the moment and he had to shake himself from the seductive pull to focus on why he was there in the first place.

"Focus, Sam!" he warned himself.

Turning in a full circle, he looked for any more movement among the cornrows, but whatever, if anything, had been out there seemed gone now. Stretching to his full six-foot height, he popped above the top of the stalks to scan even further, but again, other than the random bird, he was the only living thing in the field.

Sighing, Sam turned to head back to the old farmhouse and wait for Dean, his exit from the field slower and more relaxed. The roof line of the building was nearly in sight when his ears picked up the sound of a low hum coming from behind him.

The sound was initially very soft, almost like the noise from a distant airplane, but when he twisted to look into the sky, Sam saw that the bright glow of the sun had suddenly vanished behind a jet black cloud. Peering across the remainder of the sky, it remained as clear as before with the exception of the lone obscuring cloud.

Mesmerized, Sam stood watching, waiting for the sun to peek back out from behind the opaque cover. As he stood there, the low-level hum grew in intensity, becoming louder and more incessant. It seemed to emanate from the dark cloud itself, which also appeared to be moving steadily toward him.

A hint of panic touched the young hunter as the looming blackness steered toward his position in the field. The sound increased in volume until he was forced to drop the Glock and jam the heels of his hands against his ears to block out the racket.

As the sun began to inch from behind the dark mass, Sam recognized the strange cloud for what it was.

Locusts!

The massive swarm descended on the field in a flurry of insect legs and wings amid the raucous chirruping. They dove at the crops like mini-kamikazes, hunger-driven to devour the corn until nothing remained.

Sam broke into a full run even as the first of the swarm slammed into him like small missiles. His hands swatted at the locusts as he tried to keep them away from his eyes, his single thought to make it back to the relative safety of the farmhouse.

But as they dove at him, miniscule jaws taking tiny bites out of Sam's exposed flesh, he knew he wasn't going to make it. Nearly covered in the yellow-green bodies, it became harder and harder to stay on his feet. His vision obscured by the cloying mass of insects, he stumbled blindly through the field.

As the swarm fell from the sky like a torrential rain, Sam succumbed and dropped face-down to the ground. Throwing his arms protectively over his head, he tried to keep the tenacious insects from finding their way into his nose and mouth.

As the tall stalks disappeared under the swarm, the insects covered Sam in a living, ravenous blanket until he was buried beneath their mass. He remained there, silent and unmoving, while the noise of the locusts rose to a deafening crescendo and the field surrendered to the devastating horde.

Wahlstrom Farm

Dean drove the deserted country road back to the farm, his mind divided between concern for Bobby and the beckoning call of sleep. The sun was already warming the interior of the car and making him even drowsier than he'd been when he left the hospital. The monotony of the drive and lack of any interesting scenery only served to lull him further. Even the pounding beat of Foghat's *Drivin' Wheel* did nothing to keep him alert.

He sank down into the seat, letting his neck drop back against the top of the leather. Having driven the Chevy his entire life and under nearly every condition, Dean was comfortable in his ability to steer with a couple of fingers and the top of his left knee. Heaven knows, he'd driven this way millions of times before when "getting there" conflicted with pulling over for sleep or rest.

"Besides, not like there's anything out here to run into," he silently mused.

Drivin' Wheel gave over to Nugent's *Motor City Madhouse* but Dean didn't notice. Lines of green stalks continued to zip by like telephone poles on a highway as he made his way back toward the farmhouse. The deep purr of the Impala's engine was like white noise, the hum of her tires on the pavement as soothing as a mother's lullaby. To Dean, sitting behind the wheel was the equivalent of a baby being held and rocked to sleep; safe, warm and constant. Fitting, since the old Chevy had been surrogate home and parent for most of his life.

Home... If he tried, he could almost remember his mother's soft embrace, her dulcet voice gently waking him in the morning or putting him to sleep with a bedtime story. He clung to those memories, often forcing himself to recall them just to keep them fresh in his head. *To never forget.* The memories represented warmth, love and safety, something he hadn't really felt since that last night his Dad put him to bed with a loving tousle of his hair and his mother followed behind with a soft kiss on his cheek. The last night before he woke up to fire and screams.

So when he suddenly felt the Impala jerk violently to the right he startled awake much like he had that dreaded night. His eyes flew open, the sudden awareness that he'd

briefly fallen asleep was pushed aside as he quickly sat up and pulled the steering wheel to the left, forcing the heavy Impala back onto the asphalt.

“Sonofabitch...” he exclaimed, eyes widening and mind fully alert.

His heart hammered wildly in his chest as he slowed the black car to a stop on the edge of the road. When he finally let go of the wheel again, he wiped clammy palms against the denim atop his legs and allowed himself to release the breath he’d been holding.

Too close...

“Sorry, baby. You know I’d never let you get hurt like that,” he cooed reassuringly to the metal surrounding him.

Dean looked at the endless fields of corn that lined either side of the road. Not like the tall crops would have done that much damage to the sturdy car, but the humiliation of having to explain to his brother what happened while picking kernels of corn out of the grille would have been more embarrassing than the time he’d accidentally let the Impala run out of gas.

Sammy still hasn’t let me live that one down...

Dean chuckled, yawned, then silently chastised himself for allowing his fatigue to get the better of him.

“Wake the hell up, Winchester. Time for sleeping when you’re dead,” he joked.

Rubbing his eyes, he then slapped the side of his face for good measure, the sting of his hands against the flesh on his cheeks solidly bringing him back to full alertness. He stifled back another yawn and squinted against the bright sunlight coursing through the windshield.

As he drew the shifter back down into drive, the light beaming into the Chevy suddenly dimmed. He didn’t know why he paused and looked up, there was just something ominous about the way the bright sunshine had just given way to an overcast sky.

With his hands back on the steering wheel, Dean leaned forward to peer out the tempered glass, watching as a large, dark cloud moved toward him. He turned and looked out the rear window, scanning the heavens for signs of an approaching storm.

But behind him, the blue of a cloudless day contradicted the scene in front.

Bizarre weather...lightning storms...

His brother’s words echoed in his head even as he pushed open the Impala’s door and stepped out onto the pavement.

The air still held the odor of fertilizer and freshly turned earth, not at all the usual ozone smell of an approaching thunderstorm. While he’d heard of freak lightning strikes occurring with demon activity, he’d never actually seen it occur firsthand.

Get back in the car, dumbass. Best place to be if lightning is about to strike is with rubber under your feet... he reminded himself.

Dean heard the low thrum just as he was about to dart back into the driver's seat. The noise made him pause as he looked back up at the nearing cloud.

Something not right about that...

And then he knew. This was no demon-spawned tempest, this was something much creepier.

Locusts!

Even the thought of a horde of bugs coming at him was enough to make his skin crawl. He'd sooner be bathed in ectoplasm or decomposing bodies than to deal with the sliminess and overall gross prospect of any sort of insect. Funny, he never remembered them bothering him before. But then, that was before Oasis Plains. He'd never really gotten over being covered by the swarm of bugs back in that attic.

He hurriedly dropped into the driver's side seat, quickly rolling up the window before stretching across and repeating the process on Sam's side.

Sam!

Dean peered back out the window, his heart catching in his chest as he watched the black mass descend toward the towering crops. The swarm was probably a mile away, but he knew that it was just above the old farm *and* his brother.

Throwing the Impala into gear, Dean slammed his foot down on the gas pedal, the tires squealing as he pulled away from the side of the road leaving a thick glaze of rubber behind him. As the Impala ate up the asphalt, he silently assured himself that Sam was safe. Protected by the old house, his brother would escape the ravenous insects. They were only after the crops.

Right?

But that house is barely held together, a strong cough would probably knock it down...

Locusts don't hurt people. They're just overgrown grasshoppers.

Maybe. But not when you're covered by millions of them...

"Stop it!" he shouted aloud. "Sam's okay, just keep driving."

As he sped along the deserted road, the rundown structure finally came into view. From this distance, the house looked unscathed, but as he drew closer, the once-standing fields of corn around the farm were quickly succumbing to the hungry maws of the locusts. More and more of the yellow-green insects descended into the field, settling like thick smoke that eerily reminded the hunter of the black fog of a demon as it entered or exited its human host.

Dirt and gravel were tossed into the air as the Impala crested the drive, Dean's foot barely lifting off the accelerator. The windshield was nearly obscured by the thick slime of insect guts as the Chevy plowed through the remaining swarm. Ignoring the mass, Dean's eyes were already flashing back and forth, seeking some sign of his brother as he slammed the gearshift into park and jumped from the car.

His feet carried him toward the structure, his hands frantically swatting the air as the determined bugs dove at him. In just the short dash to the house, he was covered in the pesky things; black bodies scuttling their way underneath the neck of his shirt, thin legs weaving into the short-cropped strands of his hair. The mass was so thick that a few strays even accidentally darted for his eyes and mouth. Repulsed, Dean could do nothing more than crimp his eyes and lips tightly together as he raced blindly for the screen door.

Once inside, the low buzz of the locusts lessened slightly. Dean glanced around nervously, not entirely sure that the nasty things wouldn't find their way inside. But he had more pressing concerns at hand than to worry about the fortitude of the old farmhouse.

"Sammy!" he shouted at the top of his lungs as he tore through the barren interior.

The evidence of his brother's late night research greeted Dean as he reached the empty living room. Books, notes, a lantern and a worn sleeping bag were littered across the hardwood floor. But no Sam.

Dean flew through the remainder of the structure, screaming his brother's name at the top of his lungs as he bolted from one vacant room to another. Confirming that the abandoned house was empty left only one alternative as to Sam's whereabouts.

"Sonofabitch..." the young hunter cried in frustration as he looked out through the milky glass of the kitchen window and into the nearby ravaged field.

"Don't be out there, Sammy... please don't be," Dean begged. But somewhere deep down, he knew his luck, hell their luck, just didn't run in that direction.

Heading back outside, he was cautiously relieved to see the front of the swarm lifting from the nearby crops and moving off to the west. The field was decimated, scattered stalks that escaped the ravenous mouths standing like lone wounded soldiers that had barely survived a battle. All in all, it was a sad sight; the once green plot laid to waste in a matter of minutes, raw earth exposed like dried blood from a wound.

"SAAAMMMM!" Dean yelled, his eyes scanning the remnants of the crops.

On the upside, now that the giant stalks were mostly gone, picking out the still form of his tall sibling was easier than it would have been before. But on the downside, Sam's body appeared as nothing more than a large, *unmoving*, insect-covered mound. Without a second thought, Dean charged into the remaining rows, his boots crunching on the carapaces of the few lingering cicadas.

Reaching Sam several yards in, Dean dropped to his knees beside his brother. His hands frantically brushed away the locusts, some alive, most dead, from where they enshrouded his sibling in a cocoon of yellow-green bodies.

“Sammy?” Dean called out as he rolled his brother over on his back, Sam’s upper body and head coming to rest limply in the older man’s lap.

“Come on, Sammy,” he pleaded, his fingertips reaching for the pulsepoint at his brother’s neck. “You’re not gonna let a freakin’ bunch of bugs put you down, are ya?”

Dean sighed audibly as the steady throb of Sam’s carotid pulsed beneath his index. More carefully now, he took stock of his brother’s condition, gently picking away the dead insects as best he could from Sam’s face, mouth and chest. It was a disgusting chore, but he was equally thankful that Sam’s breathing was regular underneath the mass of bugs.

“Come on, dude. Wake your ass up...” Dean chided with a light slap to Sam’s face. “I know you’re into having plenty of green in your diet, but don’t you think this is taking it a bit too far?”

Sam stirred, a smile of relief immediately beamed across Dean’s pinched expression. Pulling his younger brother further upright, Dean waited patiently, worriedly, as Sam coughed, gagged and spit out a mouthful of saliva mixed with legs and wings. He felt his own stomach roll, his last cup of coffee threatening to reappear, but he fought it down, his hands remaining solidly on Sam’s back as his brother continued to gag.

“Dude, do you know how gross that is?” The elder sibling teased as he unwaveringly continued to support his brother’s upper body.

Watching with a concerned eye, well concealed behind the expression of humor, Dean looked on as Sam drew a shaky hand across his mouth. He waited a moment longer until his brother pulled against his arm, intent on rising to his feet.

“I really hate the country...” Sam grumbled as he swayed.

“Country... camping... basically anything that involves nature is so getting crossed off my list,” Dean agreed as he playfully slapped Sam’s back. “Come on, let’s get you cleaned up. You look like something from that show *Dirty Jobs*.”

Sam nodded silently, allowing Dean to guide him for the first few steps as the brothers exited the remains of the cornfield. Dean followed quietly as Sam bee-lined for the pump, standing to the side while the taller hunter cranked the handle to get the flow of water started.

“So, any idea what the hell happened here?” Dean asked as Sam stripped off his outer shirt, sending a flurry of bug parts into the air.

“A locust swarm?” Sam replied nonchalantly, the remainder of his comment lost in the muffle of fabric as he pulled the t-shirt over his head.

“A locust swarm? Just that simple?” Dean challenged.

“It happens,” Sam answered before dunking his head under the cold stream of water.

“Sure it does, just like it happens that people drop dead of starvation when there’s food everywhere,” the elder Winchester snapped back.

He stood there, impatiently waiting as Sam continued his make-shift shower, allowing his brother the opportunity to scrub bug guts from his shaggy hair and rinse out his mouth over and over. Dean cringed silently as he watched, immediately grateful that it was Sam and not him, and even feeling a little sorry for his brother when he spotted the small welts from the ravenous bites of the locusts appearing over Sam's upper body and arms. He retrieved a stolen motel towel from the trunk of the Impala, tossing it in Sam's direction as the tall man finished up and shook the excess water from his hair.

Dean jerked backwards as the water splattered in every direction. "Dude, what the hell? Do you think you're Lassie or something?" he complained, wiping the errant droplets from his face.

For his answer, Sam merely muttered under his breath and stalked off toward the still-warm Chevy. Grabbing his duffle from the back seat, he dug out a clean t-shirt from the bag and finished toweling dry his chest and arms before pulling on the dry garment.

"Better now, Samantha?" Dean quipped.

"Dude, I'm so not in the mood," Sam warned. "How's Bobby?"

Dean sighed, his eyes darkening and downcast as he absently toed a loose rock in the driveway.

"No change..." he finally mumbled. "Did you find anything useful in his stuff?"

"Define useful."

Dean glared, his own lack of sleep making him less than willing to play twenty questions with his sibling. "Useful as in, what the hell is going on here?"

"You're not gonna like what I have to say," Sam warned, leading the way toward the rickety screen door.

"Dammit, Sam, just out with it already. I'm tired, covered in friggin' bug parts and our best friend is lying in a hospital dying. Tell me you got something!"

Dean instantly regretted snapping at his brother. Sucking in a deep lungful of air, he ran a hand through his hair, grimacing as his fingers brushed away several dead locusts. Following Sam into the old house, he continued. "Look, I know we're both tired, but we're running out of time. Bobby's running out of time. We've got to figure out what's happening if we have any hope of helping him."

He watched his brother's eyes and expression soften before Sam spoke, knowing that the younger man was just as exhausted and frustrated as he was. A quick glance at the books and papers scattered across the floor confirmed that.

Dean never meant to minimize the contribution Sam made toward research; the kid had a knack for piecing together the most obscure bits of information and making them coherent. He only hoped that Sam had worked his magic and made some headway on whatever-the-hell was happening in this strange little town.

"Bobby was checking into references about the Apocalypse, notes on Revelation, the second coming of Christ, you name it," Sam began.

Dean rolled his eyes. "So Bobby was on the End of Days bandwagon too? He thinks that the end of the world is going down here? Now?"

"I'm not exactly sure that was his point," the taller hunter replied.

"Then what the hell was? Why was he checking into all this religious mumbo-jumbo?" Dean asked gesturing to the notes spread out before him.

Sam squatted down and eagerly snagged a book and a lone piece of paper.

"Angels," he replied.

"Angels?" Dean repeated with a roll of his eyes. "So we're back to that again?"

"Bobby was looking at all these references to Armageddon, but he was specifically looking at passages that talked about angels and demons."

Dean's eyebrows pressed together as he drew closer to examine the information. The page Sam held open revealed several paragraphs underlined in red. The margins were filled with notes unmistakably written in Bobby's illegible scrawl.

"Bobby was definitely reading up on The End of Days, especially Revelation chapter six. That's the scripture that talks about the Four Horsemen," Sam explained.

"Okay, so? The Four Horsemen aren't exactly demons. Aren't they supposed to be like harbingers of the second coming? War, pestilence, famine and death?"

Dean looked up, feeling his brother's eyes on him and catching the raised eyebrow look that his brother was casting in his direction. Sneering, he slapped the open Bible away.

"Don't look at me like that," Dean muttered. "You know how Pastor Jim drilled that kind of stuff into us when we stayed with him. Some of it just stuck."

He grumbled again when Sam smiled knowingly and shook his head.

"So anyway..." Dean continued nervously, casually thumbing through another book he'd picked up from the floor. "How does that and angels have anything to do with what's going on in the middle of nowhere, Illinois?"

"Well, remember that Bobby kept repeating something about 'the horsemen' and then there's Henner and his insistence about an angel being in town? Well, I think it could all be true," Sam stated bluntly.

Dean looked up at him, his eyes dark at the mention of the strange old man. "Dude... there is NO angel running around Paw Paw. Do you even realize how crazy that sounds? Even for us."

"I'm not saying that there is, but Dean, look at everything that's been happening here. People are dropping from starvation even though they're eating three squares a day,

crops are rotting in the field even though everyone says this has been the best year in a decade for weather and rain... *famine*. Then I found several reports in the local paper about some of the residents becoming strangely violent, a wife attacks her husband, a doctor attacks a patient... *war*. And let's not forget my personal favorite, swarms of locusts devouring an entire field, in and out in the blink of an eye... *pestilence*. Dude, how much more textbook End of Days do you want?"

The elder Winchester walked slowly away and glanced out the cracked pane. He stretched, his hands pressed solidly into the small of his back, then groaned softly, aware that his brother's eyes remained on him the entire time. He was struggling with this, every last bit of the notion that the world was coming to an end, brought down by bugs, plagues and avenging angels. *Or Horsemen*... he added silently.

"Let's just say that I buy into all this crap," Dean offered after a minute. "Then where does that leave us? Where does that leave Bobby?"

Sam smiled once more and crossed the space between them. "That's just it. I'm not so sure that it *really is* the end of the world. And I don't think Bobby was either."

"You reading unconscious minds now, psychic wonder?" Dean's smile faded as he recoiled from Sam's lethal glare. "Okay, so tell me why you and Bobby seem to think that something else is going on here," he then added. "'Cause you know I'm on board with any explanation other than Armageddon being upon us. Never was a huge Ben Affleck fan anyway...although my man Bruce was pretty awesome..."

"DEAN!" Sam interrupted, irritation clearly in his voice as he thrust another set of papers into Dean's hand. "Focus for a second and look at that."

The elder hunter's lip curled up at his brother's impudent command, but he snatched the paper from Sam's fingers and held it up. He scanned down the page, reading the random biblical passages that were scribbled in Bobby's distinct hand, stopping as he came to one that was circled repeatedly in red ink.

"For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect..." Dean read aloud.

"For they are the spirits of devils, working miracles..." Sam added in.

Dean flipped the page over before looking back up at his brother. "So this is all a hoax?"

"No, not a hoax necessarily, not like you're thinking. More like this whole deal might be some ploy borne out of Hell, to fool people into believing the End of Days is coming," the younger man offered.

"And why would *Hell* give a damn about fooling people into thinking the end of the world was coming?" Dean questioned.

"Think about it, people all fearful, looking for salvation. And along comes a 'messenger of God' sent to deliver them from all these awful things. You saw how those townspeople were back in the church. Fear is a powerful persuader."

“So, this angel then, might not be an angel?” Dean asked.

“Not in the whole fluffy white wings kinda way, no,” Sam replied. “But, there’s one way we can find out for sure.”

Dean groaned, knowing full well what his brother was hinting at. “We gotta go talk to that crazy old man, don’t we?”

Sam smiled and nodded eagerly. “He says he’s seen the angel. It’s our best lead.”

“Ugh... I know, I know. I just wish for once our nutcase informant of the week could be a beautiful blonde with a serious lack of inhibition,” Dean bemoaned as he headed toward the door.

“I’m just happy when our ‘nutcase informant’ isn’t trying to kill us,” Sam snarked back, grabbing his discarded jacket from the floor and trailing after his brother.

“Just keep thinking those positive thoughts, Sammy... one of us ought to.”

New Life Church of God

The Impala tore into the church parking lot with its characteristic throaty rumble, peppering the air with a spray of fine dust and small rocks. It was an entrance that Dean was generally proud of and that nearly always made Sam cringe. But today, it didn’t garner the attention that either of them was accustomed to.

Like the previous night, numerous cars sat silently in the lot, their owners sequestered inside the tall white building and ignorant of the world beyond them. And like the previous night, Mathias Henner remained stalwartly at his post just at the edge of the church property, his signboard still held before him as he continued his litany of warnings and admonitions.

Dean threw the Chevy into park, but remained defiantly behind a second longer as Sam threw open the door and headed toward the gray-haired holy man. He didn’t know what it was about the old guy that seemed so quirky or set his hair on end, but whatever it was, Dean trusted that Sam would see through it, relying on his younger sibling to be more objective about it than he knew he would, or could be.

Maybe it was just the thought of Bobby lying in the hospital bed, emaciated and looking near death that made him more untrusting of Henner. Maybe it was just the thought that somehow the old man was involved with everything going on around here and that put him under suspicion in the young hunter’s mind.

Whatever the reason, Dean knew with all certainty that answers weren’t just gonna magically come to him. With a heavy sigh, he pushed open the driver’s side door and allowed his boots to land on the hard packed earth outside.

His eyes trailed over to where Sam was already engaged in a conversation with Henner, the old man’s hands waving as he talked. Dean stole a quick glance up to the large oak entry to the church, worry and curiosity tugging at him to go check on the young woman and her children.

“Dean!” Sam called out, preventing him from acting on the impulse. He turned and literally trudged over toward the two, his boots scuffing up dirt as he advanced.

“What’s up, Sammy?” he asked, trying to avoid making eye contact with Henner but to no avail as the older man began chattering to him as well.

“I was just telling your brother that I was a little surprised to see you both back here. So many of the younger folks have already taken off for St. Louis or Chicago, kinda like the rats leaving the sinking ship I guess you could say. Little do they know, they can run, but they cannot hide from God’s judgment.”

“Yeah, sure,” Dean grunted in reply, plainly not disguising his disinterest in the man’s rhetoric. “So, about this angel you claim to know.”

“There’s no claiming about it, young man. It’s true,” Henner insisted stubbornly.

“Tell us what’s been going on around here, Mr. Henner,” Sam intervened, gently placing a hand on the older man’s arm.

Dean watched Henner’s face turn dark, his eyebrows pinching together as he seemed to pause and recall. The elder Winchester wasn’t really in the mood for a walk down memory’s Dementia Lane, but a sideways glare from Sam when he huffed told him he needed to at least pretend to pay attention.

“It started a couple months back,” the old man began. “At first, it was just these weird storms, lightning strikes on cloudless days, strong gusts of wind when moments before it was calm, nothing that really caused anyone to raise an eyebrow.”

“There’s all sorts of weather anomalies that can occur...” Dean interjected.

“These were not anomalies. And don’t try going all big-city educated on me, son. I’ve been around the world a time or two,” Henner snapped back.

Dean stepped back slightly, gnawing his lip and biting back the snarky comment that was just behind his teeth.

“So what else, Mr Henner?” Sam prompted, trying to soothe the situation.

“Then it was a combination of things. Crops started wilting in the fields, even though we had plenty of rain and sun. Literally there and healthy one day and laid flat on the ground the next. But it didn’t stop with the crops. Pretty soon people were falling down the same way.”

“Like the cook at the diner,” Sam asked. “And our friend, Bobby?”

Dean’s breath hitched at the mention of the downed hunter. He watched Henner’s face go sullen and he felt himself soften slightly toward the man.

“Yeah, like Bobby, all of them. Just fine one minute and the next keeling over, dying from starvation the docs say, even though they had plenty of food all around. And others, even worse, waking up covered in sores and boils, like me,” the old man explained, pulling up the sleeve on his shirt to expose the violently red and weeping flesh beneath.

Dean grimaced at the sight. The wounds looked raw and he couldn't imagine how the man tolerated what had to be endless pain from the cancerous lesions.

"You're a man of faith? Tell me why your God does this to you?" Dean queried.

Henner smiled genuinely. "Oh son, God doesn't do this to me to punish me; he *allows* this to happen to test my faith, to make me stronger."

"Yeah, whatever," Dean grumbled in return, nervously rubbing the back of his neck. "So, what else then?"

"Then it started really affecting the people around here. Good, God-fearing folk I've known all my life, just changing. Attacking each other, hurting loved ones. Why, Lilly Hammacker took an axe handle to her granddaughter's head, darn near smashed the girl's skull in. All of them, uncharacteristic behavior, almost as if they were possessed of something," Henner mused.

"Maybe they were," Dean muttered, preemptively throwing his brother a look of defiance.

Henner laughed, shaking his head. "No, I don't believe that's the case. God's Word says that people will be brought to destroy one another. *When He broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come." And another, a red horse, went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that men would slay one another; and a great sword was given to him.*"

"Revelation 6, the Four Horsemen?" Sam commented.

"You know your Bible. Good! Perhaps if you heed the warnings you will find a place at the Lord's table. It's not too late to repent and consecrate yourselves to God's will," the old man countered.

"So, you think the Four Horseman have been riding through Paw Paw?" Dean challenged.

"Not all four, not yet. There's still one left."

Dean joined his brother in flashing a look of concern at Henner's comment.

"And which one would that be?" Sam asked solemnly.

"The Rider of the Pale Horse..."

"Death?"

"Death is coming for all of us, one way or another. I've seen the signs, probation has closed. If you trust and have faith in our Lord, then your death lead to salvation, instead of hellfire. I beg you, you both seem like good young men, repent, our time here is fast running out," the old man begged.

Dean laughed. "Mister, there's not nearly enough time for me to confess all the sins I've committed in my life, whether the world comes to an end in the next fifteen minutes or the next fifteen years..."

Before Henner could answer a piercing wail emanated from the church. The brothers twisted in unison, their well-honed reflexes responding to the noise and potential threat. When a second cry broke, Dean was already moving, his feet pounding across the gravel lot as he charged, weapon drawn, toward the large main door.

Inside, the scene was garish. The putrid smell from the day before was augmented ten-fold now, the zombie-like congregation no more attentive to their condition. In fact, in Dean's opinion, the group looked more like extras from *House of Wax* than they did human beings anymore.

As his eyes quickly scanned the crowd, his ears directed him to the origin of the disturbance. The young brunette sat on the floor between the narrow pews, her back to him, but he could see that she was hunched over something, rocking back and forth as a pathetic keening sound rose up from her.

He drew closer, hesitantly, the voice in the back of his head screaming at him and telling him he wasn't going to like what he saw. Dimly, he felt Sam join him, slightly behind and to his right; that strong presence that was undeniably his brother, even when unseen.

Dean inched further, warily watching the remainder of the congregation out of the corner of his eye. As he passed the edge of the slanted cherry-wood pew, his attention was drawn solidly in, and he sucked in a breath, feeling his heart slam down to the pit of his stomach.

Cradled in the woman's arms, the little boy laid limply, his blue-green eyes open but sightless as they peered lifelessly upward. The child looked peaceful for all that his emaciated form appeared even more skeletal than it had less than twenty-four hours earlier, but Dean took little solace in that.

"My son! My baby..." the brunette wailed.

Dean could feel the anger building up inside him, pressure like a heated canister threatening to explode in both a verbal and physical rant that would have surely been blasphemous in the so-called sanctuary. Instead, he felt Sam's hand gently land on his shoulder, his brother's strong grip offering caution as well as calm.

In the end, Dean merely shook his head angrily and stormed out of the church, slamming the thick doors for not only added emphasis but also as a means to release the fury inside him. He stomped down the front steps, bee-lining straight for the old man who remained under the shade of a hundred-year-old maple.

"Is THAT what your God does to his children? Innocent... harmless... children?" Dean demanded.

"Dean..." Sam warned behind him. "It's not his fault."

"No," Dean exploded. "It's not his fault, it's HIS fault" he shouted, his index finger stabbing heavenward.

"It's easy to lay the blame on God, son. But the Lord allows free will, and those who set their feet upon a path must often follow it to a not-so-pleasant destination," Henner calmly replied.

"And that little boy in there... he chose some path that caused him to die of dehydration? 'Cause it looks to me that all he did wrong was have a religious nutjob for a mother," Dean shouted.

"Do you consider that there are tears being shed in Heaven over the loss of the child? Do you think our Lord doesn't grieve every time one of His children is lost? But there's a lesson to be learned here."

"Oh? And what's that? 'Cause you know, I'd really like to hear some explanation for why kids have to die!"

"That child's mother, all the people in there, their eleventh hour faith isn't going to save them now. They can't just stand in there praying for salvation and going through the motions. There's only one thing that can save them, that can save the world," Henner explained.

"And what is that, Mr. Henner? What can save these people?" Sam asked quietly.

Dean couldn't stand it anymore. Fatigue, desperation and all this talk about God testing people while the world crumbled down around them was just too much to digest. He took several steps away from his brother and the old man, staying just close enough to eavesdrop on their continuing conversation while turning his face up toward the warm fall sun and allowing it to sear his skin.

"Only God's messenger can help these people now," Henner answered nonchalantly. "Just like he protected me."

"You're talking about the angel again?" Dean heard Sam ask.

"Yes," the man replied excitedly. "Don has been working miracles all over the area, healing the sick and helping those who put their trust in him and their faith in God. If it weren't for him, I would have surely been killed by the misguided anger of a couple local boys."

"Do you think we could meet him?" the younger hunter requested.

"Oh, surely! That would be very good! I'd hate to see either of you young men fall prey to pride and self-assurance when it comes to your salvation. I'm to meet him in a couple of hours, as I do every day, to confess my sins and spend time in contemplation of God's plan."

"Great. Where can we join you?"

"Latham Tap, just over at the corner of Main and Flagg. You should have no trouble in finding it," Henner answered.

Dean turned back to face the two men, his mouth dry from the warmth of the sun's rays now suddenly moist with the thought of a cold beer.

“Meeting an angel in a bar... well, maybe that’s some religion I can actually get into,” he snarked, fishing the keys from his pocket and trying not to look back at the church as he headed toward the Impala.

Latham Tap

They pulled up front of the old bar in the late afternoon, the sun’s rays beginning to wash across the landscape in that typical Midwestern Indian Summer way. Whoever said that fall meant cooler temperatures hadn’t spent any time on the flat plains of Illinois in October.

Having returned to the abandoned farm, braved the cold water from the well and captured some much needed sleep, Dean almost felt human again. He was certainly cleaner, the straggling sensation of the locusts now washed from his flesh, and his mind slightly clearer if not still tormented by the image of the dead boy in the church.

He was ready for a stiff belt, needing to feel the harsh bite of alcohol as it burned a path down his throat and collided with the bile in his stomach. The emptiness in his belly had been bitching for attention, but with Bobby, and the little boy, weighing heavily on his thoughts, the only thing Dean really wanted to intake was liquor; hard, strong and a mass quantity of it, hoping to dull the negative voices that were whispering in his head.

Walking inside, the brothers both paused briefly as the cool caress from the bar’s air-conditioner bathed their faces. It was a sweet relief from the heat outside, even if it chilled sweat-glistened skin to the point of causing a slight shiver.

As they moved in tandem toward the bar, Dean noted the location of each of the establishment’s patrons, a half dozen men mostly segregated from each other as they nursed glasses filled with various flavors of booze. Most of them met his gaze, equally wary as he continued toward the counter, his confident swagger in full swing. The hard glare and predatory vibe that Dean chose to employ when he wanted to keep others from challenging him surrounded him now like a mystical aura; unseen but just as strongly present. Under the circumstances, a good fight would have been a welcome release of the pent up tension in the young hunter.

“What’ll ya have?” the bartender asked as the brothers approached.

“Beer, whiskey chaser,” Dean ordered before turning to lean against the counter.

“Just a beer,” Sam added, his elbows pressing down against the rail.

“You serve any food here?” Dean added over his shoulder. “I’m starving.”

He could feel Sam’s watchful eyes bore into him, but he waved off the younger man’s concern.

“Dude, I haven’t eaten since... well... I can’t remember. I’m hungry, nothing more.”

Sam stared at him a moment longer as Dean ordered a cheeseburger and fries, smiling slightly when his sibling added his own request to the order. He waited until the bartender disappeared into the back before he spoke.

“So, you really think we’re gonna meet an angel here?” Dean asked, holding his voice low.

“I dunno. Henner sure seems certain. But I guess I’m not really counting on it either. As much as I’d liked to hope we do, part of me is worried that if it is an angel, that makes everything that’s happening here all real,” the younger man answered hesitantly.

“Is that what you really think?”

“No, not really. I mean it’s just all too convenient for me. The Four Horsemen, all these so-called signs of the Apocalypse, it’s like someone just lifted it out of the Bible to make a bad movie,” Sam admitted.

“More like a bad nightmare if you ask me,” Dean added before taking a huge gulp of his beer and then slamming down the small shot of whiskey.

He gritted his teeth as the alcohol followed its expected course, momentarily preventing Dean from taking a breath, but quickly filling him with comforting warmth.

“I’m telling you, Sam. All this religious crap about the world coming to an end and God sending in the troops to whisk away his so-called faithful, it just doesn’t sit well with me.”

“Well, while I don’t share your skepticism on there being some supreme power for good out there watching over us all, I will agree, it just doesn’t feel legit here. There’s definitely something powerful behind what’s happening, but at this point, I wouldn’t be surprised if Lucifer himself walked through that door,” Sam joked weakly.

“That’s so not funny, dude.”

“Well, he is... err... was... technically an angel at one point.”

Dean unconsciously twitched as the front door to the bar creaked opened, his hand reflexively reaching for the .45 tucked behind the back of his waistband underneath his loose hanging Henley. The young hunter relaxed slightly when he saw it was only another patron, draining the last of the beer from the glass to hide his sudden nervous display.

He was spared any further need to mask his behavior with the arrival of his meal. Greedily, Dean picked up the burger and tore free a large mouthful, chewing through the medium rare meat as though he hadn’t eaten in weeks. He could feel Sam’s watchful eyes on him again, and he knew the suspicions running through his brother’s ever-worried mind as well as if he too possessed some sort of mind-reading ability. When it came to being paranoid over his brother, Sam was an open book.

Swallowing, Dean cleared his throat and then gnawed into a second smaller bite.

“M’ okay... S’ mee... jus’ ’ungry, li’ I tol’ you...” he insisted as he chewed. “Qui’... loo’n at me... li’ tha’.”

Dean washed down the last bite with a swig from his refilled glass, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth to erase the smear of mustard as well as the thin line of

foam from the beer. He would have let loose with a deep-gutted belch were it not for the still-piercing glare coming from his brother. Instead, he stifled it back, letting the low 'erp' escape just from the corner of his lips.

He got a disgusted groan from Sam anyway...

"Dude, you give me crap about how I eat on any average day. Just 'cause the world is coming to an end, I wouldn't want to disappoint you," he snarked. "Come on, eat up. Could be your last meal and besides I know you're hungry. Growing boy like you can't live on locusts alone!"

That made his brother chuckle. The sound of Sam's relaxed laughter was music to Dean's ears, and all too often absent of late.

He watched Sam finger the cooling burger in the basket lying before him on the bar before tearing off a small chunk and popping it in his mouth. There was always something deeply satisfying for Dean when he watched his brother eat, some part of him that still needed to be sure his baby brother didn't want for anything and was taken care of. Some things time just never diminished.

Always watching out for you, bro...

Dean finished another beer and glanced down at his watch. *Half past four and no sign of any angels*, he thought to himself.

Sam must have been thinking the same thing, discarding the last of his sandwich with a disgusted "humpf" of air. He pulled the cellphone from the front pocket in his jeans and looked at it for a long moment.

"Calling someone, Sammy? Or were you just turning it back on 'vibrate' to pass the time," Dean teased with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

"Funny, Dean!" his brother snapped back. "I was just thinking about calling to see how Bobby was doing."

Dean's smile faded and he nodded silently.

He ordered another shot, suddenly feeling the need to kill off a few extra brain cells, or at the very least, numb them into oblivion. He absently observed as Sam tapped out the number to Mendota Community Hospital, not realizing he was holding his breath, until Sam ended the call with a stab of his thumb.

"What's up?" Dean asked worriedly.

"Nothing, there's no service in here or something, nothing but static. I'll go outside and see if I can get a signal. Be right back. And Dean..."

"Yeah, what?"

"If some guy shows up with fluffy white wings and a halo... try to be nice," Sam joked.

Dean answered with an eye-roll and an extension of his middle finger that, along with its four brothers, was wrapped around the cold glass of beer. He downed the remainder and watched his brother walk out of the bar.

Sam hadn't been gone all that long when a gust of air swept in from around the corner of the bar. The sudden air current drew Dean's attention away from the front door to land on the newcomer that had entered from the rear.

Taller than Sam, the man would have been imposing with his height alone. But, clad in black biker leathers and boots, with long blond hair flowing freely at his shoulders, the stranger appeared more comical than intimidating to Dean.

At first, he didn't think much of the man, chalking up the outfit and appearance to overcompensation or seeing one too many romance novel covers. Either way, it was hard for the hardened young hunter to take the guy seriously, except..

...Except that directly behind the light-eyed man, strode Mathias Henner. The little old man was still as animated as he'd been earlier in the day, trailing behind the taller blond like an eager puppy looking to gain its master's attention.

So, this is an angel? Dean thought to himself. *Looks more like Fabio than Michael Landon...*

"Dean!" Henner called out, moving around the tall stranger and rushing over to the hunter's side. "I'm so glad you came. Where's your brother?"

"Sam's um.... he stepped out for a minute. Should be back in a few," Dean stalled, his eyes never leaving the towering blond behind the older man.

There was just something about the man that set Dean on edge. It wasn't like he'd expected the "angel" to just stroll into the bar wearing a white robe and carrying a harp, but somehow the combination of the apparel and the predatory smile that curled up just slightly on the man's face caused the muscle in Dean's jaw to twitch.

"Well, no matter. Please... come... come... I want you to meet Don," Henner pleaded eagerly.

Dean inched forward, still wary and even more than a little disgusted when the haggard old man reached the blond biker and dropped to his knees in submission, his head bowed in humble respect. The newcomer smiled as he looked down on the prostrated man, reaching out and touching Henner's shoulder in silent permission for the man to rise. Henner sprang back to his feet and turned back to Dean.

"Dean... this is Don," he introduced.

The blond extended his hand, the wily smile still plastered across his face. Dean reached for it, grasping the angel's in a firm grip. In that instant, the amulet hanging from his neck exploded with heat, the gold metal scorching through the shield of fabric and searing the flesh on his chest.

Dean recoiled instantly, his eyes going wide as the realization of who, or rather *what* Don was, ripped into his mind. His left hand reached for the still-burning amulet while his right darted for the flask of Holy Water tucked in his back jeans pocket.

"I know who you are," the blond hissed, his eyes narrowing as he focused on the gold hanging from Dean's neck.

"Yeah, well I know what you are too, you sonofabitch," Dean snarled back as his thumb worked to unscrew the cap to the bottle.

"And what are you going to do with that?" Don sneered. "I've already bathed this body once today."

"Oh really? I can still smell the sulfur stench on you from over here."

"If you think that's gonna have any effect on something like me, then knock yourself out."

Dean cringed, memory flooding him of the time Haris had possessed his dad. The Holy Water hadn't had any effect then, he was suddenly doubtful it would now. Whatever Don was, he was no low-level hellspawn.

The demon moved closer, its assumed biker's swagger all the more stereotypical but no less lethal. Dean watched as Henner scurried out of the way, still cowed in his respect to the evil creature.

"Henner, don't you see what he is?" Dean implored. "This is no angel. He's not here to help anyone."

But the old man refused to listen. He didn't even look up to catch the reddish-yellow swirl of Don's eyes as the demon flashed a sadistic glance in his direction.

"He won't listen, he only sees what I want him to see. To him, I'm Don the saving angel. He doesn't see me for who I truly am," the demon warned.

"And who the hell are you?"

"Many call me the Destroyer, but that sounds just so... harsh... don't you think? I've also been called King of the Locusts and the Angel of the Pit, but that's so dramatic."

"Oh yeah, because you're so not about the drama are you?" Dean joked gesturing to the black leather.

"I know all about you Winchesters," Don continued. "You're all somewhat notorious down below. I must admit, I'd love nothing more than to bring your heads back with me on a stick, but that's just not what I'm here for. I have a more important mission to fulfill."

"And that is?"

"Ah, well, my boss said it was supposed to be your garden-variety plague and mayhem, but damned if it just didn't become more fun to mess with the people around here too. Everyone thinks that it's the end of the world, everyone praying for

some sort of heavenly deliverance and they all think I'm some angel sent to save them."

Dean grunted, shaking his head and retreating slightly more as the demon slowly advanced. "You're no angel, that's for sure."

Don laughed loudly. "No, I'm not, and neither are they." He waved his hand broadly at the other patrons, each of them immediately standing and advancing toward the trapped hunter.

Dean shifted nervously, his head whipping around as he took note of the now black-eyed customers that were stalking ever closer to him. The loud crash of a beer bottle's neck being smashed against the edge of a table left the young hunter no illusion about his current predicament.

"Tell me, how's that other hunter doing?" Don sneered. "Has his body turned into a puddle of bloody slop yet?"

Dean growled at the mention of Bobby. Throwing any caution or restraint he might have possessed to the wind, he flung the open flask of Holy Water at the nearest demon, briefly enjoying the hiss as the creature's flesh sizzled and popped.

"Seems like you brought a cup when you should have brought a barrel," Don taunted. "But then, ultimately it won't matter anyway. And to think you thought you were going to meet an angel. Hmmm... maybe you still will."

Dean watched as the blond turned and sauntered toward the back door, Henner in tow like a faithful acolyte. He spun around, simultaneously trying to keep watch on the rest of the possessed townsfolk. As if on cue, the group launched at him, makeshift weapons and fists all seeking out his body.

He tensed muscles, cracked his neck in a manner that would have done John McClane proud and waited for the attack.

"Yippee-ki-yay..."

Sam stepped outside and squinted against the glare from the sun that reflected off a nearby windshield. Turning, he took a few steps down the sidewalk until he came to a stop underneath the cool shade of an awning.

Pulling out the cellphone again, he redialed the hospital and waited for an answer. Several minutes of frustration caused by a complicated voice directory went by before he was connected with the nursing station on Bobby's floor.

It only took a moment for the on-duty nurse to tell him that the older man was status quo, not worse, but certainly not improving. Still, she said, he was alive, which was more than could be said for another of the Paw Paw patients.

She excused herself as a blaring tone sounded in the background and Sam found himself praying that the “code blue” alert he’d heard before the call disconnected was in no way related to Bobby.

Pushing the dire thought from his mind, he was heading back towards the bar when the low rumble of a diesel engine and pounding of heavy machinery captured his attention. Glancing up the road, he spotted the convoy, dozens of deep green trucks making their way down the main street.

The heat from the afternoon caused the exhaust from the nearest Hummer to hang lazily, cloying the air with the black soot and harsh smell. Sam coughed against the black cloud, waving his free hand back and forth to dissipate the thick fog.

As he stood there, one of the Hummers slowed and pulled to a stop in front of him. The man inside stuck his head out of the open window, but for all his military garb, the self-contained respirator he wore over his head made him seem like something from outer space.

“Hey there,” he called out, his voice sounding more like Darth Vader than anything human. “We’re looking for Sherriff McFadden. Know where he is?”

“You try the Sherriff’s office?” Sam replied, not intending the comment to be as snappy as it had come out.

The military man glowered at him. “Hey look, smartass. We’re here to help you people out. You think any of us want to come to some plague-infested town?”

CDC... Sam remembered. The doc was calling the CDC. They must have decided that they had no idea what was happening here and sent in the troops.

This was bad! Worse than bad, these people had no idea what they were letting themselves in for. Respirator hoods and HazMat suits weren’t going to protect them from the malevolence that was eating away at Paw Paw.

“I haven’t seen the sheriff since yesterday. He’s likely either in the office or out in his squad car,” Sam answered more civilly.

The soldier smiled weakly and nodded. “Thanks. Look mister, I’d advise you to head on home and stay there. We’ll have this situation under control in no time.”

Sam waved his thanks, silently shuddering at the implication of how these guys were going to “control” things. He watched the convoy pull off, heading toward the outskirts of the tiny town before stopping and unloading dozens more of similarly white-suited soldiers.

“Great! It just keeps getting better and better. Dean’s gonna love this,” he muttered as he watched them set up a road block and take their positions, automatic weapons at ready.

Turning back for the door to the pub, he stopped abruptly, on guard the moment he heard the commotion inside.

“What the hell...?” he began, ducking aside just as the first body came crashing through the plate glass window and collided with the concrete sidewalk in front of him.

Sam only had the briefest second to see the man’s black orbs before they slid closed.

“Dammit... Dean!” he swore and charged in through the front door.

Sam flung open the door to the bar, his sight momentarily useless as his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting. As his pupils dilated, he rapidly took in the scene, not having to look far to pick out the erupting melee.

In the middle of the room a pile of bodies converged, fists flying, booted feet hammering into a hunched form on the floor. He knew without looking that Dean was underneath that mass of human flesh and under normal circumstances Sam wouldn’t have even been surprised.

His brother had been wired tight since they arrived, first Bobby’s collapse and then the weirdness surrounding the tiny town had all been taking their toll on Dean’s patience and relative peace of mind. If Sam was really honest, Paw Paw was just the tip of the iceberg, his brother had been overly edgy since their Dad’s brush with West Nile just a couple of weeks back.

Considering all that, he wouldn’t have been shocked if under the combination of alcohol, fatigue and overall frustration Dean had taken it upon himself to start the barroom brawl, he’d certainly done it countless times before and with less motivation. But as the flash of black orbs from one of the attackers caught Sam’s attention, he wiped all those assumptions from his mind.

Demons!

It looked as though all the patrons in the small establishment were under the influence of hellspawn, each going after his brother as though Dean was a scrap of meat and they were ravenous dogs. He watched as his brother managed to fling off the scrawny body of one of his attackers, a brief peek at Dean’s bloodied face spurring Sam into action.

His long legs came in handy as Sam bridged the distance between the front door to the pub and the free-for-all occurring in the open space created by the smashing of chairs and tables. But even in the nanosecond that it took for him to reach the battle, Dean had been pulled under again, a crushing mass of flailing arms rolling over him like a giant wave.

There was a mix of curses, grunts and even the occasional cry of pain emanating from the pile as Sam pulled at clothing and extremities in an effort to extricate his brother. With his free hand, he flung his own holy water-filled flask in every direction, knowing there wasn’t nearly enough of the precious fluid to have any real effect, but relishing some small victory as the demonic flesh surrounding him sizzled violently.

It helped enough. The demons fell back in their attack on the older Winchester as they sought out the newest threat. Sam struck twice more, delivering a series of punches that pushed away the nearest of the black-eyed foe.

"Dean!" Sam shouted as his fingers closed around the loose fabric of his brother's Henley.

Punch-drunk and dazed, Dean came up swinging, his left fist narrowly missing Sam's jaw. The younger sibling deftly avoided the blow, barely catching his brother as Dean's momentum carried him past Sam's side. The elder hunter stood, swayed and dropped once again to a knee, even with one of Sam's large hands holding him up.

"We gotta get outta here," Sam warned.

"No... argument... there..." Dean answered, struggling to his feet as he fought to catch his breath.

The low growl of the demons regrouping around them warned of an impending attack and signaled that it was time to run and fight another day. Sam glanced around nervously, they were still grossly outnumbered and Dean looked as though he was barely on his feet.

A long trail of blood poured from a cut on the side of his brother's right eye, joining the smaller line that dribbled copiously from Dean's mangled lip. But as Sam looked on, the more disturbing sight was the blossom of red on Dean's side. There was a small tear in the blue fabric, the cloth dangling awkwardly from just underneath his brother's armpit.

Adjusting his grip more firmly, Sam wrapped an arm around Dean's back as he half-guided, mostly pulled, the older man from the bar. They reached the sidewalk, boots crunching on the glass from the broken window as they stumbled across the concrete. Without looking back, Sam steered them towards the Impala parked on the opposite side of the deserted street.

Depositing Dean in the passenger's side and mildly concerned when his brother offered no protest, Sam glanced back over his shoulder toward the Latham Tap. Standing in the doorway, three or four of the bar's patrons glared back as the brothers made their escape, black eye staring out of the shadows menacingly.

They didn't pursue the siblings, and for once, Sam didn't know why and cared even less. Demons, that many at least, all showing up here, now, only added to the confusion of what was going on in Paw Paw. At this point, he was totally in favor of putting the town - hell, the entire state - in their rearview mirror.

Sam fired the ignition and peeled away from the curb with a screech of rubber. Out of the corner of his eye he caught Dean cringing at the sound, but Sam offered no apology. Instead, he pointed the nose of the car in the direction leading out of town and back to the old farm, intent on getting his brother patched up before they figured out their next move.

Next move ought to be heading for Amsterdam... he thought to himself, quickly snickering when he realized how much like Dean that had sounded.

"Something funny?" his brother asked, groaning as he shifted slowly in the seat.

"Yeah, this whole hunt is just one big hoot, Dean. Can't you tell how much fun I'm having?" Sam snapped.

“Easy there, Sammy. Does it look like I’m enjoying it here?” Dean shot back, absently smearing the blood as he ran the back of his hand across his face.

“What the hell happened in there, Dean? I was only gone for a few minutes. Where the hell did all those demons come from?”

“They were there the whole time... I guess...”

“You guess?” Sam asked, irritated.

He hadn’t meant to sound so angry, he wasn’t really, mostly just verbalizing the same irritation and fatigue that Dean had hours earlier. He felt like the walls were closing in on them, the timer running out, pick your euphemism. Sam just knew that if they didn’t figure out what was happening here really soon, somehow not only Bobby would be lost, but everyone in and around the little village, including him and Dean.

“Are you okay?” Sam asked gently, hoping his concern would soften his previous harshness.

Dean grunted his answer, but Sam didn’t miss the slight grimace or the taut hold his brother had on his left side. Dean might pretend to hide all his physical pain and emotional torment behind the thick walls that he’d learned to so carefully craft, but Sam could read the little nuances.

“We’ll get back to the farmhouse and ...”

He stopped mid-sentence, his eyes flaring wide, his feet pressing down on the brake pedal hard enough to fling both of them forward.

“What the hell, Sammy. Watch the car,” Dean shouted, his hand flying out to brace himself against the dash.

“Shut up, Dean,” Sam cautioned, his voice going ominously low.

In front of the car stood several camo-clad soldiers, M-4s held across their chests, their bodies blocking the road out of town. Sam cursed out loud. He’d seen the troopers taking up their post but hadn’t really considered the implication of the action at the time.

The nearest soldier waved at them as he approached the driver’s side of the car. He was flanked by two others each coming to a cover position behind him, their rifles trained on both Sam and Dean.

“What the hell is this?” Dean grumbled.

“The CDC,” Sam replied as he lowered the driver’s side window the remainder of the way.

Catching movement out of the corner of his eye, Sam realized his brother was automatically reaching for his .45. Sam’s hand shot out, stilling Dean’s movement with a warning shake of his head. The older man shot him an angry look and pushed against the restraining hand.

“Haven’t you lost enough battles today?” Sam inquired.

Dean mumbled under his breath, but he relaxed, although the body language pouring off the hunter still worried Sam.

“Good evening, sir,” the soldier greeted, stooping down to peer into the Impala. “I apologize for the inconvenience, but we’re under orders to quarantine this entire area.”

“Why?” Sam asked innocently. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not at liberty to say, sir, but there’s a shelter set up at the local high school. I have to ask that you turn around and head back that way.”

“Uh... but look, Sergeant, we need to get back out to our farm. Our umm... uncle isn’t well and we were going out to check on him,” he lied.

But the soldier remained stalwart. “I’m really sorry, sir, but we’ve got men out going from house to house around the county. If you give me the address, I’ll radio in and make sure they check on your uncle and bring him into town.”

“Uh, thanks, but really, our Uncle Bobby is more likely to fill one of your boys with a round of buckshot than let them on his property. It would really be safer if we went to get him,” Dean insisted, leaning over towards the open window.

It could have been the dimming light of afternoon, or it might have even been the paranoia feeding off the mysterious occurrences in the town, but Sam guessed that when the soldier caught sight of Dean’s bloodied and bruised face, any chance at resolving the situation pleasantly faded away. He watched the soldier recoil, trying to hide his fear in front of his men, but apparently the man had read the reports, perhaps had even seen pictures of the residents afflicted with the sores and lesions.

“I... I t-think y-you both need to s-step out the car...” the officer ordered, tugging down the respirator to cover his face.

Behind him, the other two soldiers moved in closer, mimicking their leader’s action by donning their own masks. Sam watched as hands gripped the stocks convulsively, fingers twitching against the trigger guards.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed. “It’s okay. I know you’re thinking my brother is sick, but honestly, he just got a little mouthy with a couple of drunks down at the bar.”

“Just step out of the car, both of you...” the man shouted, ignoring Sam’s explanation.

“Sammmmy...” Dean’s voice warned. “What are we doin’ here?”

Sam’s eyes moved nervously between the National Guardsman at the window and the edgy movement of his brother at his side. Normally, he relied on his ability to talk his way out of any situation, trusting that talent to keep him looking better than Dean currently did. Problem was, Dean’s method for “handling” any confrontation usually manifested long before Sam could try his hand at diplomacy.

And that's where Sam Winchester found himself now. Caught between a rock and a hardass...

Still, the soldiers were rapidly circling the Impala and Dean's hand was inching toward his back...

"Mister, don't do anything stupid..." the soldier cautioned. "We have our orders. Be a shame if we put an accidental bullet hole in that hot car."

Don't do anything stupid? Sam repeated silently. *Yeah, 'cause fighting demons, hunting creatures straight out of a horror movie, and digging graves to salt and burn decaying bodies, those are actions of "sensible" people.*

"Sam, you heard the man," Dean whispered at his right. "My baby isn't faster than a speeding bullet, but she's damn close."

Sam understood his brother's hint. That was the beauty of spending so much time with your older sibling, the unspoken words and innuendo had become a code, saved for situations just like these.

In a burst of movement, the younger man yanked down the gearshift, throwing the Impala into reverse while slamming his size fourteen shoe down on the accelerator. The Chevy responded to the demand, lurching backward and eating up pavement just as efficiently as she did when moving forward.

The soldiers gave chase, the staccato pop of automatic weapons fire trailing after them. Several hard thuds signaled that not all of the rounds had harmlessly whistled past.

"Dammit!" Dean cursed and Sam flinched knowing either now or later, he was going to hear about the damage to the car.

Slamming on the brakes and spinning the steering wheel to the left, Sam spun the heavy car around with the skill and precision of a stunt driver, leaving the front end of the Impala pointed towards the center of town. Without a groan from the transmission, he threw it into gear and jammed on the gas once again.

Assuming that the CDC had the entire town cordoned off, Sam deftly navigated the small side streets in search of some place they could hide out for the time being. Dean spotted the darkened garage first, shouting out even as Sam slowed the car.

Pulling up to the door, Dean darted out and disappeared around the side. Sam waited, holding his breath, his eyes scanning nervously for sign of the soldiers. A brief moment later, the overhead door flew up, Dean standing in the opening and motioning Sam inside.

By the time Sam had the car parked and killed the engine the sun outside had sunk below the horizon, covering them and the place within the cloak of nightfall. Stepping out of the Chevy, he leaned back heavily against the still-warm metal, closing his eyes and letting the adrenaline wash from his system.

The clatter of falling objects behind him startled Sam and he spun around, instantly on alert. Just off in the shadows he spotted Dean: his brother had tripped over

something in the darkness and was now hopping as he made his way through the garage.

"You okay?" Sam called out.

"Peachy," Dean grumbled. "It's just been a helluva day. We should do this again sometime."

Sam moved around the edge of the car to the trunk. Lifting the hood, he rummaged through the compartment and drew out a kerosene lantern, their first aid kit and a couple of pilfered towels from the last motel. He zeroed in on the light coming from a small restroom in the back of building, following his brother with the necessary items.

"Here," he offered, tossing one of the towels to Dean who was splashing water from the tap across his face. "When you get done with your face, take your shirt off."

Dean chuckled. "Gee, Sammy, do we really have time for this? I mean I know I do my best work in the dark, but..."

"I want to see the damage, Dean. Quit being such a jackass."

"Ah, but you love me that way..."

"No, I don't," Sam retorted, shoving his brother down onto the toilet seat. He grimaced when Dean peeled off the bloodstained Henley, revealing a long laceration that ran along his ribcage. "What the hell is that from, Dean?"

"Knife wound? Pretty sure at least," Dean replied casually, straining to catch a glimpse of the wound, his fingers tentatively touching at the edges.

Sam sighed disgustedly and smacked his hand away. "Do you mind telling me how the hell you ended up in a barroom brawl with a pack of demons? Did Henner ever show with Don?"

Dean huffed air, flinching as Sam took to wiping away the caked blood from his side. "Oh, Don showed all right. Dude, he's a friggin' demon too. And not some low level piece of hell-trash either."

"This needs stitched. And what do you mean the angel was a demon?" Sam asked as he pulled out the necessary instruments and a length of suture material from their kit.

"Did I stutter? I'm telling you, Don was a demon. A full-on red-eyed, sulfur smelling, amulet-glowing, evil bastard from Hell. And he was pretty proud about what he was doing here."

"Did he tell you?" Sam asked as he slid the needle under his brother's flesh.

Dean sucked in a harsh breath, holding it against the sudden pain, the muscles in his arms and chest tightening as he braced for the rest of the procedure, his fingertips going white as he maintained a tight grip on the edge of the seat. "Yeah, he did," the elder hunter eventually answered. "He said he was on a high-level mission from his boss. I'm guessing that means it was Mr. Big himself. Don said it was supposed to be

some sort of plague and crap but that he was having too much fun with the locals. Apparently, he gets his rocks off pretending to be an angel and promising to save these people.”

Sam placed several more stitches, closing the remainder of the wound. As he retrieved new bandages from the box, he paused, a sudden thought flying into his head.

“Dean, I know who it is we’re dealing with here. It all makes sense.”

“And that is?”

“Abaddon. And you’re right, he’s definitely not some bottom feeder. Some consider him to be Lucifer’s right hand man, his second in command.”

“Oh joy!” Dean groaned. “And knowing this is better how?”

“I didn’t say it was better, but at least we know what we’re dealing with. It makes sense actually, Abaddon is known as the Destroyer. I imagine in his warped demonic mind, he probably thinks it’s somehow ironic mimicking the Four Horsemen,” Sam stated as he applied a thick pad of gauze and then secured it with several pieces of tape.

“So, where does that leave us? How do we fight something like that? ’Cause I gotta tell you bro, I’m not in the mood for a replay of Wyoming,” Dean complained.

Sam snorted. “No, can’t say that I am either. How’s that feel?”

He watched as Dean tested the sutures, lifting his arm and twisting sideways, the skin on his chest pulling as he flexed the muscles beneath. He nodded an affirmative and quickly rose from the seat, acting as though he hadn’t been hurt at all.

“It’s good, Sammy. I’ll be fine. Thanks.”

Sam cleaned up the evidence of his make-shift surgery while Dean walked back to the Impala and broke out a clean shirt from his duffle. Sam kept a careful eye on him, warily knowing that only when Dean thought he was out of his baby brother’s line of sight would he let his guard down and truly show how injured he was.

“So, if we can’t kill Abaddon, how do we make him stop what he’s doing here? How do we make him reverse what he’s done to Bobby?” Dean called out from the rear of the car.

“Right now, the bigger problem is our well-armed buddies out there. If the CDC has quarantined the entire area, they’re playing right into Abaddon’s hand. If he’s trying to create panic and mayhem, then what better way than if the CDC decides to start burning crops or bodies in an effort to contain whatever plague they think is happening here?” Sam explained.

“They’d do that?” Dean asked nervously.

"If they thought they couldn't cure it or control it, yes! And don't forget, those soldiers are gonna be on the lookout for the Impala now. That's going to make it pretty hard moving around without getting caught."

"Yeah, well if it weren't for Bobby, I'd say let them burn the whole place down," Dean said bluntly.

Sam cast him a disparaging look. "You don't mean that. You'd never let innocent people die."

"No, but I'm not thinking too many of those people over at the church deserve much better."

Sam watched Dean's face darken. He knew his brother was thinking about the little boy and not really meaning what he said. Dean could be harsh, even intolerant when it came to religion, but he'd never, in Sam's whole life, let anyone die needlessly, guilt or innocence never factoring in.

"You know we've gotta find Abaddon, gotta find some way to stop him," Sam softly informed.

"Yeah, I know. But it doesn't mean I have to like it."

They waited until it was completely dark outside and for Dean to get just a few extra minutes of rest; *not that he was willing to admit needing it*. Sam had scavenged some sodas and a couple of left-over lunchmeat sandwiches from a grease-stained refrigerator in a back office. Dean smiled, shaking his head as he watched his brother dig out a ten dollar bill from his pocket and leave it behind on the desk.

"You are such the do-gooder," he teased as he polished off the last of the meal.

"Consider it good karma," Sam threw back. "We could use all we can get."

"You just keep having the faith lil' brother. I'll make up for all your decency with my own special version of *badness*," Dean chided the younger man with a suggestive wag of his eyebrows.

"It never stops with you does it, Dean?" Sam asked.

"You'd be worried if it did."

"True. Now look, we know what we're doing right?"

"Yeah, we find the crazy old man, he leads us back to his buddy Don, we trap the demon and kick its ass back to hell," Dean answered as he tossed more paraphernalia into his duffle. "Simple enough."

He smiled crookedly as Sam laughed. "Yeah, simple enough," his brother returned.

There was a brief moment of silence as the siblings continued their preparations. It was always this way, Dean absently admitted. Anytime they were prepping for a hunt, long after the “plan” was reviewed and all options weighed, there was that moment just before they headed out that both of them became lost in silent introspection.

Dean supposed it was something born from all the years of hunting with their father. John Winchester had a fairly strict regimen when it came to setting up for a hunt. He drilled the brothers for hours on end, making sure they both knew not only what their roles were, but also other subtleties such as what to do if something went wrong.

At the time, Dean thought it was just a huge waste of time, all the repetition, all the contingencies. But now, here, he would have given anything to have had his father’s counsel, anything to have a Plan B that didn’t involve them either running for their lives or ending up torn to shreds by Abaddon.

“Did you check on Bobby?” Dean asked, breaking the stillness.

“Yeah. They said there was no change. I s’pose that’s something, right?”

Dean nodded, unable to force the air past his vocal cords to reply, knowing his voice would betray him.

“I left Dad another voicemail message. Told him where we were, what was up.”
Where he can find our bodies... well... that’s assuming there’s anything left of us.

“Do you think he’ll call back or come here?” Sam asked as he tugged the backpack onto his shoulder.

Dean stopped and looked up. “You’re kidding, right?”

Sam shook his head, his shaggy hair barely moving against his sweat soaked scalp. “Nah. Consider that a momentary lapse, lack of sleep...” he joked.

“You had me worried there, Samantha. Thought for a minute you were actually concerned about all this,” Dean teased back.

He listened as his brother snorted, not missing the nervousness contained in the brief laugh. Dean finished packing his own bag and slammed the trunk shut on the Impala.

“So, you think we can avoid those soldiers?” he asked.

“Yeah. I think they’re more concerned with keeping everyone in town. So long as no one tries to leave, they won’t try to stop them. And, so long as they don’t see the Impala, we should be able to move freely,” Sam answered.

Dean looked longingly at his Chevy. “I still don’t like the idea of being on foot.”

“Would you like it better with a bullet in your hide?” Sam threw back.

The elder hunter paused thoughtfully, absently scratching at the nape of his neck. “Weellll...”

He chuckled as Sam shook his head in disgust. Sometimes it was just so easy to mess with his brother.

"All right, let's get going then," Dean ordered, moving toward the small door just to the side of the larger overhead entry.

The night air had cooled significantly, the humidity of the afternoon giving way to a soft breeze that made autumn tolerable. As he glanced upward, Dean noted that the night sky was filled with clouds, a heavy covering that obscured the moon and added to their ability to move about the desolate town undetected.

He led the way down the street, his senses fully alert for any sight or sound of the soldiers. He knew without looking that Sam was right behind him, could hear the slight scuffling of his sibling's shoes against the sidewalk. Dean supposed that considering Sam's size, it was a miracle the guy didn't make more noise. Still, he also knew that his brother had been trained by the best, and he'd adapted his skills as he'd grown over the years. It had been like watching a puppy grown into its oversized paws, all gangly and clumsy until eventually muscle filled out against frame and the pup became an imposing dog.

Yeah, a big old shaggy Sheepdog... Dean thought with a quiet snicker.

They advanced along the deserted street, hugging closely to the building fronts while dodging from one point of cover to the next. The rumble from a passing Humvee pressed them into the darkness of an alley, breath held, hearts hammering.

Dean's hand moved slowly toward the .45, but Sam's hand pressed against his arm, stilling the motion.

"Covert, Dean. Not guns blazing, bullets flying," he warned.

"You take all the fun out of it," Dean whined in return, but left the gun in its hiding place.

Another truck passed, more slowly than the first and shining a spotlight into the storefronts as the soldiers sought out any remaining residents. They waited several minutes until it pulled around the corner before darting from the darkened alley once more. All in all, it was an eerie spectacle, the stillness of the night, the lack of activity or signs or life in the small Midwestern town.

"You ever feel like you're the last person on earth?" Dean asked absently as they passed the local mortuary.

"Would you prefer to be inside there?" Sam answered. "Come on, Dean, forget for a second that there's a sadistic, powerful demon out there bent on killing innocent people for no apparent reason and this is kinda like *Resident Evil*."

Dean pulled up short, staring incredulously at his brother.

"What?" Sam whined, stopping and returning the wide-eyed stare.

"Dude, *Resident Evil* is all about the zombies. This is more *I am Legend* or *Omega Man*, maybe even *Andromeda Strain* although that was an alien virus..."

“Are you serious?” Sam interrupted. “You’re gonna school me on modern cinema, here... now?”

Dean cocked his head, the sincerity in his eyes and voice not waning. “You really have to get your television and movie references right, geekboy. I mean, geesh, is it too much to ask for you to pay attention to all the relevant culture I try to bring into your life?”

Without waiting for a reaction, Dean turned and continued down the sidewalk at a jog, his hearty chuckle trailing behind him.

Mathias Henner stood at his customary spot outside the New Life Church of God, his signboard held before him as usual. He could hear the soft strains of another chorus of *Bringing in the Sheaves* ebb from the building, but unlike times before, he smiled, no longer harboring the feeling of dread that he’d had for the congregation.

Henner rubbed his forearm, ignoring the sticky warmth from the blood that trickled lazily from a recently opened sore. Pain had been his friend for so long that he’d become immune to her harsh shouts, her voice now subdued to a mischievous whisper since he held every confidence that his earthly shell was soon to be inconsequential.

He clung to the faith that his time in this life was fast ending, that his reward was soon to be delivered. Pity that the folks inside the church were so less certain, he ruefully considered. Had they only heeded his warning sooner, had they only listened when he tried to tell them that the end was close, then perhaps the music wafting from the building would have been more joyful sounding.

The distant engine rumble of a large truck sounded but Henner held his ground. He’d already defiantly held his position against the threat of the soldiers’ automatic weapons when they’d come earlier to try to take him to their makeshift infirmary. He knew his physical appearance probably made the young men nervous, but it had also worked to his advantage, none of the soldiers wanting to come near him for fear of “catching” whatever they thought he had.

Ultimately, he didn’t really care. Don had promised him that the soldiers would be dealt with, that he needed to stay steadfast and await the angel’s return. When he asked where the heavenly messenger was off to, the tall man simply smiled and said he was going to help with final preparations.

So the old man returned to his post, excitement filling him as he envisioned his long journey finally coming to a close.

As the crescent moon peeked from between the thick night cloud cover, Henner stooped down to pick up the battered thermos lying on the ground. Unscrewing the cap, he sipped at the lukewarm coffee inside, wistfully remembering the aromatic brew that his beloved Carolyn had put in the container every morning for nearly twenty years as he ventured out to work their farm.

“Not much longer, my dearest,” he murmured looking Heavenward. “After all these years, we’ll finally be together once again.”

A gentle wind answered him and he closed his eyes, relishing the breeze as though it was the very touch of his adored wife. In his mind’s eye, she was ever the beautiful brunette with perpetually laughing eyes and a sincere smile. Henner never could see the wrinkles that creased her face from all the years of working underneath the hot summer sun, never recognized the slow gait that a degenerative hip caused, and certainly never noticed any sign of sorrow or regret for the loss of their children.

He knew the pain was there, just like it was for him. But Mathias Henner also knew that Carolyn clung tightly to her faith as well. It was what had first drawn him to her and became the glue that held them together through the years.

“Soon, Carolyn, very soon,” he promised.

Distracted by his introspection, he hadn’t heard the soft scrabble of boots on the loose gravel. It wasn’t until the slight cough of someone clearing their throat caught his attention, making him focus on the two tall figures suddenly before him, that he realized he was no longer alone.

“Sam! Dean!” he called out with a broad smile.

“Mr. Henner,” Sam replied. Dean merely grunted a greeting.

He took in their appearance, both young men looking haggard even in the dim light. The shorter-haired one, Dean, bore the beginnings of a bruise along the right side of his face and he stood there with a barely perceptible list to the left, his arm tucked stiffly against his chest.

“Are you okay?” he asked with genuine concern. “You’re hurt. What happened?”

The older brother grunted once more, his eyes rolling upward. “Like you don’t know,” he snarled back.

Henner stood there in confusion, the wave of animosity pouring off the young man impossible to ignore. He watched as Sam placed a hand on Dean’s forearm, the gesture meant to calm the angry man.

“I don’t understand,” Henner admitted.

“Why don’t you ask your buddy Don? Where is the bastard by the way?” Dean demanded.

“Dean! Enough! We agreed to deal with this my way,” the taller youth warned, stepping in between Henner and his brother.

“Don?” the old man repeated. “He’s not here right now.”

He heard Dean grumble another curse but chose to ignore it. There was a time in his youth that he had been angry at the world, had rebelled against God and chosen to follow a secular path. It was just too bad that Dean didn’t have the time to see the error of his ways and choose to put his faith in the Almighty.

“Mr. Henner, about Don. There’s something we need to talk to you about,” Sam stated.

He turned his attention back to the longer-haired boy, his neck bending painfully upward as he strained to make eye contact with the taller man. Nodding, he waited for Sam to continue.

“Do you know where Don is now, Mr. Henner?”

“Not exactly. I was with him a short time ago. He was healing some of the folks over at the church. Well, at least the ones that had the sense to accept him as God’s messenger,” Henner answered.

“He still there now?” Dean interjected.

“No. He had other work to do.”

“Other work? Yeah, probably rounding up the locusts or hanging with his Hell-homeys over at the Latham Tap,” the shorter brother snarked.

Henner frowned. He liked these two young men, but the blasphemy was grating on his tolerance.

“You should be mindful of your tone. Don has been merciful toward those that rebuke him and his mission, but you should respect his power. You mock what you do not understand,” he warned.

“Mr. Henner, that’s the thing. Don is not who or what you think he is,” Sam insisted. “He’s really a very powerful demon and we think he’s here to mislead everyone, not to save them.”

Henner couldn’t restrain the gasp that escaped his lips. A demon? How could these young men make such a horrifying allegation?

He shook his head sadly, looking back up into the sincere blue-green eyes of the younger brother. “Samuel, Don is not evil. That is just the misguided talk of those who fail to embrace the Lord’s wonderful plan for humanity. They seek to blame Him for all the bad things that happen rather than accept that it’s their own disbelief that brings about so much misfortune.”

“How the hell can you be so friggin’ stupid?” Dean shouted, turning away in frustration. “Is your faith so blind that you can’t see what’s going on around here? Didn’t you hear a word he said to me at the bar? That demon nearly killed our friend, your friend and a whole lot of other townsfolk that you know. He set a whole pack of possessed men on me back there after you left. He’s not here to save anyone.”

“You’ll see, you’ll see...” Henner maintained adamantly, shaking his head in denial.

“No, Mr Henner, Dean’s right. We came here to warn you. Don is really a demon named Abaddon, and he’s a very powerful and high-level demon down in the Pit,” Sam informed, reaching out to grasp Henner’s arm, unafraid, as so many others had been, of actually touching the violated flesh.

"You're wrong," the old man shouted. "He's coming back to the church in the morning. He's coming to guide the faithful home, to protect them from the soldiers and the imminent death awaiting them within the fires of purgatory."

"This is no use," Dean growled angrily at his brother. "Let's just leave this simple fool. Hell, for that matter, let's leave all of them to the freakin' demon. We're wasting our time here."

Henner watched as the older sibling waited a moment more before stalking off slowly toward the shadows of a nearby building. Sam waited behind, watching as his brother walked away then turning back toward the old cleric.

"Please, Mr. Henner. Won't you please consider for a moment that what we're telling you is true? You know the Bible says there will be false prophets, false Christs. Do you honestly think that God would send His messenger to hurt people? To create plagues and pestilence and death?" the tousle-haired young man implored him.

He stared at the youth long and hard, taking in the depths of Sam's eyes and the sincerity held there. The boy certainly knew his Scripture; but then, so did the Devil.

"Sam, I'm sorry. I know you're a good man, I know you mean well, but this is about faith."

"I do have faith, Mr. Henner. In my line of... work... well, let's just say that I see some pretty awful things, evil things, and if it weren't for faith in a higher power, then I'm not sure I could go on sometimes. But trust me when I tell you, I've seen enough evil to know when it's masquerading as good."

"I'm so sorry, Samuel. I'm sure you've had your fair share of hardship, I can see it in both you and your brother's eyes. But I've been around for a long time, I've studied His word, I *know* that this is good. Don is good," Henner insisted. "Trust me. All the pain and suffering, it will finally be over."

He watched as the young man let out an exasperated sigh, slowly shaking his head in surrender. A low whistle sounded from the nearby shadows and Henner spotted the dark figure of the elder brother motioning toward his sibling.

"I wish you were right," Sam said dishearteningly. "I *really* wish you were right..."

Henner made no attempt to stop him as the young man turned on his heels and headed toward his waiting brother. He watched them disappear into the quiet darkness, the stillness of the night swallowing up their silhouettes until they were gone from his vision.

He felt bad, his heart aching that the two of them were condemned to be lost for their ignorance. He liked the boys, and at any other point in his life, might have even considered the validity of what they were so fervently offering. But not now...

Now, he'd simply come too far to let his convictions waver, too far to be mistaken at this late stage of his existence, and too far to even consider that what they were telling him might be true. His faith was about to be rewarded, his long suffering soon to be ended. The brothers just couldn't be right...

Could they?

He rubbed at the back of his neck, a sudden knot forming at the base of his skull that chose to manifest as a physical accusation against him. Henner tried to ignore the sharp pain as it screamed up his neck and ripped through his head. An agony so sharp, it stole his breath and nearly dropped him to his knees.

Squeezing his eyes tightly closed, he held his breath till it passed, persevering through the blinding agony.

“Red sky at morning, sailors take warning...”

Dean turned away from watching the stark white church and looked over at his brother as Sam’s eyes scanned the heavens.

“Huh?”

“What?”

“Dude, what the hell were you mumbling about?” Dean demanded with irritation.

“Oh... I was just looking at the sky,” Sam replied nonchalantly.

“Yeah... and?”

“It’s just a saying, Dean. You’ve never heard that one before?”

“Of course I have, I just mean, what the hell does it have to do with here and now?” Dean complained looking up at the blood red hues barely giving way to the brilliant rays of the rising sun.

“It’s appropriate, don’t you think?” Sam continued. “Here we are, gearing up to go after Abaddon and God knows how we’re going to manage it. And the sky looks like that... It just almost feels like everything is trying to warn us off.”

Dean considered him carefully before speaking. “So what are you saying, Sammy? You wanna just pack it up and take off? Leave all these people at the mercy of that demon?”

He watched his brother sigh and run a hand through his shaggy hair.

“*You* said it last night,” Sam reminded him.

“And what about Bobby?” Dean challenged.

Sam shook his head. “I’m not giving up on him, Dean. Hell, I dunno. I’m just tired... tired of trying to save people that don’t seem to want to be saved.”

“This is about that old man, isn’t it?”

Sam shrugged. "No! Yes... Dammit, Dean, Henner's a good man. He's spent all his life having faith that some ultimate power would someday reward him for his devotion, and for what? So that now, here at the end of his life, some piece of crap out of Hell can deceive him? Where's God's plan in all that? What kind of reward is that for a life of faithfulness? Hell, Dean, if someone like Henner can't be saved, then what about people like us?"

"Sammy..." Dean replied quietly. "You know the rules, dude. We can't save them all."

"And that little boy yesterday, that didn't bother you at all?" Sam challenged.

Dean looked back at the church, knowing that no matter how he answered his face would give him away.

"There doesn't seem to be any movement in there," he said, nodding his head toward the building. "Not even any singing like before."

He was grateful when his brother didn't comment on the obvious change of discussion. Dean knew they were both tired, beyond exhausted if he were honest, the brief catnap they each stole during the night after leaving Henner not nearly enough to replace the lack of real sleep. It was making them edgy and he could only hope that their current plan wasn't suffering from their poor physical and mental state.

"Do you think Abaddon is in there yet?" Sam asked tentatively.

"I dunno. I haven't seen anyone or anything go in or out since we got here. But it's a demon after all, who knows."

He heard Sam sighed loudly and watched the younger man scratch nervously at the back of his hairline.

"What is it, Sammy?"

"Do we really know what we're doing here, Dean? I mean, we've no way to remotely trap the damn thing so we have no way to exorcise it," Sam exclaimed.

"Hey, you got something better in that gray matter of yours, I'm all ears," Dean retorted.

And for the third time his brother let out an exaggerated breath, simultaneously shaking his head. "No, I don't," he replied dejectedly.

"Alright then. Sitting here isn't solving anything and I'm getting a cramp in my ass, so let's do this okay?" the elder hunter joked, flashing a broad smile as he stood.

Sam loosed a small laugh and Dean smiled even more. Making his brother smile could always make his day. Setting Sam at ease before a hunt had not only been his goal but also just made Dean feel slightly less tense himself.

The brothers broke only slightly from their cover, darting from the nearby woods only after they couldn't get any closer to the side entrance of the church. They entered the

building with caution, Dean with his Colt in hand while Sam displayed a large flask of holy water.

The interior was ominously quiet and the smell that permeated the space was even worse than before. Dean pressed the back of his free hand against his mouth and nose, hoping to block the odor, but it was no use.

“Damn, dude,” he whined. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and the smell will kill the demon.”

Sam rolled his eyes at the comment, pushing against Dean’s shoulder to move him forward into the sanctuary.

Slowly edging through the entrance to the nave, Dean quickly took in the condition of the congregation. There were a few still on their feet, albeit most were swaying, their faces glazed over with blank expressions. Here and there, others had succumbed to the lack of food and water, their bodies draped across the hardwood pews as though they were little more than decomposing shells of their former selves.

“Are they dead?” Sam whispered from behind him.

“Smells like it,” Dean replied with a grimace.

He scanned to the back of the room, his eyes seeking out the brunette mother. He spotted her, her frame only noticeable among the teetering remains of the congregation because she held her tiny daughter against her chest. The child clung limply to her mother, dirty strands of flaxen hair plastered to her dirt-streaked face, hollow eyes gazed blankly, the youthful spark all but snuffed out.

“Dean... Dean!”

Sam’s voice cut through and Dean suddenly realized that his brother was slowly pushing down the .45 in his hand. He looked down at the weapon in his grasp, his eyes noting the white-knuckled grip he had on the automatic. With chagrin, Dean removed his finger from within the trigger guard.

“You okay?” Sam asked gently.

“Yeah...” Dean replied, his voice barely above a whisper.

He wasn’t, not really. At the moment, he seriously considered emptying an entire clip into the woman’s body, simply not able to rationalize how she could allow the death of her children under the premise of faith. He could feel the blood pounding within his veins even as he pulled away from Sam’s grip.

“What are you doing, Dean?” his brother asked. “We’ve got a job here. Nothing you can say or do to her is going to bring that boy back. You can’t do this...”

“The hell I can’t,” Dean snarled back intensely. But as he moved determinedly toward the young woman, a collective gasp rose from the assembled.

The brothers turned in unison, their attention captured by the revitalized movement of the congregation. Following their gaze, Dean saw Henner step up to the pulpit, his

cancer-ravaged body standing out in stark contrast to the white of the pastor's robes as he pushed the man aside.

Just behind the old cleric, Don strode confidently to the podium. Dressed in a crisp white button down and tan Dockers, the demon looked more like a model from GQ than either angel or devil. The creature's long blond hair framed his face, creating an almost ethereal halo of brilliant yellow as he stepped up to address the congregation.

"My friends, the hour has come, the time of your deliverance is at hand," Abaddon began, a generous smile wide across his face as he greeted the parishioners.

"You have waited so long, endured so much, your faith sustaining you when the demands of the flesh were surely overwhelming. But no more, my friends. For God has sent me to deliver you, to bring you home to his warm embrace. Come... come to me and accept your reward."

A weak cheer rose from the congregation, the townspeople's excitement exhibited in the way they rallied toward the pulpit. Off to the side, Dean tensed. Watching as the worshipers made their way toward the demon, he couldn't help the impulse to surge to the front and attack the hellspawn.

"Those stupid fools," Dean groaned as he watched them approach the demon.

With his arms open wide, Abaddon stepped around the podium to greet the members. One eager soul rushed forward through the pack, dropping to his knees in front of the false angel.

"Save me," he pleaded, looking up with beseeching eyes.

The demon smiled. "Heaven's reward is for all who are faithful," it promised.

Dean watched as Abaddon bent down and grasped underneath the man's chin, long fingers with immaculately manicured nails gently pulled the man to his feet.

The crowd hushed, enthralled with anticipation of what was to happen next.

Like a consummate performer, Abaddon paused, casting a glance between the haggard man standing before him and the rest of the group.

"Are you prepared to receive your reward?" he asked.

The man nodded keenly. "Then receive it you shall..." the demon continued.

The hunters could do little more than watch as the man's body was magically lifted up off the floor, suspended in the air in front of the demon and before the entire congregation. He twitched, slowly at first, but it progressed until his entire body was engulfed in bone-jarring spasms.

"Dean, he's crushing him," Sam cried out in a forced whisper.

"What d'ya want me to do?" Dean threw back in an exasperated yell. *Been there, on the receiving end...* he added silently.

It was over without a single sound, Abaddon releasing his touch as the man fell to the floor dead. The assembled remained hushed, awed by what they had just seen.

"He's gone home to be with his lord," Abaddon announced. "Now, who shall come forward next?"

A cheer rang out from the congregation and if there was any suspicion or fear, Dean certainly didn't see it on any of the townsfolk's faces. One by one, they made their way to the line and methodically, one by one, they dropped to the ground lifelessly.

"We've got to stop this somehow," Sam pleaded, turning to face Dean. But his brother was absent from his side, Dean already moving from the entrance of the sanctuary and towards the front.

He cut a swath through the mass of bodies, pushing as he made his way toward the brunette and the little girl who stumbled behind her toward the demon. He really had no idea how he was going to stop Abaddon, but at the moment, he didn't care. All he knew was that the little girl wasn't going to blindly follow her mother to her death.

From behind him, he heard Sam's voice rise above the low murmuring of the congregation, a shout of "CHRISTO!" echoing within the lofty structure. Before him, he caught a glimpse of the demon, its body jerking backwards as it reacted to the word.

He reached the woman and her small daughter, grabbing the girl away from her mother and pulling the child protectively behind him. The woman shrieked in defiance and clawed at his hand and arm in an effort to retrieve her daughter. But her weakened condition was no match for Dean's strength and he easily pushed her aside.

Sam's continued shouting appeared to halt the demon's work as Abaddon backed away from the press of the crowd and for the briefest moment, his eyes flashed red revealing their true color. Still, if the people noticed, it didn't faze them.

Dean didn't relent. Ignoring the seeking throng he pushed to the front, the .45 tucked into his jacket and replaced by the double barreled Remington. With a defiant roar, he pulled the twin triggers, emptying both barrels into the chest of the demon, the rock salt peppering the perfect white shirt and staggering the demon backwards.

From out of nowhere, Sam was beside him again, the younger hunter wasting no time in backing up his brother's attack by launching a spray of holy water at Abaddon. The combined effort had an effect and the demon bellowed loudly, shrinking away from its adversaries.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dean spotted Sam pulling a journal from within his jacket. In a flurry of words, his brother began reciting Latin, yet despite their best efforts, the crowd pushed closer, intent on receiving the reward from the false messenger.

"It's not working," Dean yelled as he reloaded.

"Did you actually think it would?"

Dean's head swiveled around to the voice, so close to Abaddon now that he swore he could smell the sulfuric stench of the demon's breath as it strode toward him.

"You didn't think we wouldn't try?" he growled back.

"You hunters... so arrogant... so insignificant..." Abaddon hissed back with a wide smile.

Dean fired again, taking small satisfaction when the demon's chest erupted once more.

Abaddon laughed, the sound eerily booming within the sanctuary. His eyes were flaming now, the very pits of Hell reflected in the narrowed orbs.

"There are disbelievers among us," the demon cried out to the congregation. "They seek to separate you from your reward. Do not let your faith waver at this critical time."

Dean looked nervously around him, suddenly feeling like he was a lone seal amidst a sea of desperate sharks. Beside him, Sam had ceased the Latin incantation and was slowly taking a defensive posture as he backed away.

"Do not let yourselves be sullied by the presence of the Beast's minions. They will try to sway you with their cunning arguments, but do not be dissuaded from the true path..." Abaddon continued.

"Sammy!" Dean called out. "I think we're in deep crap here."

He bumped into his taller sibling as he continued to retreat, seeking an escape route even as the faces surrounding him became filled with hate.

"We're not the enemy here," Sam pleaded. "Look at him, look at the face of your so-called savior. He's not Heaven-sent, he's a demon playing on your fear and faith."

"Look into their eyes," Abaddon sneered. "See how they come armed into a House of God. See how they seek to harm his messenger."

"Back off!" Dean ordered, swinging the shotgun around and taking aim on the advancing crowd. "Sammy, we gotta get out of here."

But if his brother was listening it wasn't apparent. Instead, the taller Winchester was pushing against the oncoming throng and towards the pulpit.

"Mr. Henner!" Sam shouted to the old man who remained placidly at the demon's side, blankly observing the scene. "Please, look at him. He's not an angel. Look at his eyes, look at how he reacted to the holy water. You know... you know in your heart that he's not one of God's angels."

Henner glanced casually up into the demon's face, but if he saw anything more than the demon's façade, his expression did not show it.

The blast of Dean's shotgun boomed over Sam's continued pleas, the elder hunter making one last attempt to stop the imminent attack. It had little effect as he dodged

the first fist only to catch the next along the side of his already bruised jaw. Hands reached out to grab at his clothing and within seconds, Dean felt the onslaught of knuckles and the sharp pain of feet as they impacted his body.

He swung the weapon like a club, trying to pick non-lethal targets as he struggled to defend himself. His saving grace was that the crowd, weakened from days without adequate food and water, and funneled by the closely arranged pews, was hampered from delivering any significantly harmful blows. Still, the ones that landed had an effect and as a particularly hard fist slammed into his kidney, Dean knew that facing these numbers, he and Sam wouldn't last long.

Absently, Dean noticed that his brother's voice had gone silent and as he fought to stay on his feet, he managed a quick glance to locate Sam. Just a couple feet ahead of him, between Dean and the pulpit, Sam was under a similar attack. Sam being Sam, Dean knew his brother wouldn't choose to defend himself if it meant hurting the innocent, if misguided, parishioners.

"Sammy!" he shouted out. "Get to the front door."

A slashing hand clawed at his eyes, catching instead the side of his face and leaving behind a furrow of blood and missing flesh. Dean spun to fend off the new attacker and came face to face with the brunette.

"You!" she screamed madly. "Because of you, my son is gone."

Dean ducked her next move, but the press of bodies around him and the multitude of blows pushed him into her and they went down hard to the floor, bodies tangled among a mass of feet. She continued her assault, her hands seeking out his skin, his hair, any part of him that she could tear at like an animal.

He tolerated the abuse but when her fingers found his neck and began to dig in against his throat, he knew he was left with few choices.

"Sorry lady," he rasped out as her thumbs pressed in on his trachea. "But this... is one time... I'm not gonna regret hitting a woman."

With all the force he could muster within the close quarters, Dean threw a solid right that caught the brunette on the jaw and snapped her head back against the carpet. She groaned and went silent, her body limp beneath him even while other hands pulled him from atop her.

Hauled back to his feet, Dean desperately sought some sign of how his brother was faring. Instead, he was distracted as the large oak doors at the front of the sanctuary suddenly flew open. A swarm of camouflage poured through the opening as the well-armed soldiers stormed the church.

"The CDC has ordered the mandatory collection of all residents of Paw Paw. Please come with us peacefully and you will be examined and treated at a nearby field hospital."

To Dean's relief, the soldiers accomplished what he and Sam hadn't been able to. As they tore into the crowd, the deluded mass shrank away from their attack on the

hunters. Cries of terror and pleas to God rose in the church as the congregation fought against their capture.

Dean wasted no time, seeking out Sam among the melee he rushed to his brother's side and grabbed his arm, pulling him toward the rear of the church. Just ahead of them, Abaddon and Henner were also breaking for the exit, the demon's long hair now disheveled, his clothing bearing testament to the desperate crowd that still sought him.

Sam stumbled, nearly taking both of them down as they ran. Dean tightened his grip, keeping his larger brother on his feet and several steps ahead of both the soldiers and the scattering congregation. He pushed Sam before him and out the exterior door into the burgeoning sunshine.

Luckily, the soldiers hadn't thought to cover all the exits and once in the clear, Dean gulped a breath of fresh air before turning to check on Sam. His brother's face was smeared with blood that still streamed from his nose and the edge of Sam's left eye was already turning a violent shade of purple.

"You okay?" Dean asked, his fingers reaching out to touch the vivid bruising.

"Yeah..." Sam replied dazedly. "Where's Abaddon?"

Dean scanned the back of the church lot but there was no sign of the demon or Henner. The shout of a soldier from behind him spun Dean back around, any thought of following the demon forgotten with the need to escape the troops.

"He's gone. Come on, Sammy. We gotta get out of here too. We can't track down that demon if we're stuck in a military jail."

Sam nodded weakly, looking up as a large explosion reverberated through the air. Beyond the edge of the field a giant plume of smoke and flame rose up into the early morning sky.

"They're burning the fields," Sam yelled, pointing toward the rising black cloud.

"Either that or there's a huge friggin' demon out there," Dean snarked as he followed Sam's finger.

"Dean, they think this really is some sort of plague. At this rate, if the demon doesn't wipe out the town, the military and CDC will."

"One problem at a time, Sammy," Dean replied, motioning toward the cover of the nearby woods. "Between bullets, demons and fire, I'm thinking TJ's looking pretty good right now."

Mathias Henner burst through the screen door to the old farmhouse, letting loose a deep breath of air as he leaned back against the relative security of his home. Out of breath and haggard, the old man had left the church in a dead run, following behind the angel but losing the heavenly creature somewhere in the woods outside.

He was briefly impressed with himself, not thinking he still possessed the mobility and stamina to escape the relentless reach of the soldiers. Closing his eyes, he raised his face upward and said a silent prayer of thanks, convinced that it was God and not his own power that saved him from the roundup.

Crossing the kitchen, he poured a full glass of water from the tap and enjoyed the cool wetness as it sluiced down his parched throat. Staring out the window above the sink as he sipped, Henner spotted the thick black smoke and brief hint of orange-red flames from the fields that blazed just beyond his property.

The sky overall was darkening, partially because of the dipping sun but more so because of the dark clouds that hung lazily above the burning crops. Henner grimaced as he watched, wondering silently if this was what the Bible meant when it spoke of the world being swallowed up in a sea of fire.

Yet the red glow was nothing to be fearful of, of that he was certain. In all his seventy plus years he'd never doubted the Lord, he wasn't about to start now. Whatever was planned, he would abide.

Still, the vibrant colors of the flames brought about a different thought, a not distant memory of eyes. Don's eyes, to be precise.

The old man rubbed at his temples as he struggled to rationalize what he'd seen within the church. The morning had been so exciting, so full of promise that Henner wasn't sure if his eyes had merely played tricks on him.

But he knew they hadn't.

He'd seen the angel's eyes, seen them glass over with a redness that appeared to reflect pure evil. It was hard to fathom, such purity and goodness on the outside, yet the eyes seemed to provide a glimpse at the underlying spirit.

"It just can't be..." he murmured aloud with a sad shake of his head. Hadn't God promised deliverance in exchange for unwavering faith? Hadn't he spent every moment of his adult life in servitude to Heaven's plan? Hadn't he seen with his own eyes, the miracles that the "angel" had performed?

Could he really question it all now? Could he risk succumbing to doubts at this late hour?

Henner sighed and moved away from the sink to drop in a nearby chair. Pulling out his worn Bible, the old man flipped through several pages until he came to the passage in Matthew.

"For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect..." he read out loud, his finger tracing the words on the faded page.

He thumbed through several more pages, his fingers again tracing down the text until he found the passage he was looking for.

"And deceiveth them that dwell on the earth by the means of those miracles which he had power to do in the sight of the beast..."

Henner frowned, had he missed the obvious when it was right in front of him? Had he so desperately wanted to believe that he had been deceived by Satan's ilk?

Turning more pages, he found another passage and read it aloud, his voice faltering as the words fell from his lips.

"And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit. And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power...And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads..."

His eyes read through the next several lines, his breath hitching as he came across verse eleven.

"And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon..."

It couldn't be? But Henner knew it was. The young man, Sam, had been right, Don was no angel. Memory replayed and the vision of smoke rising up off the angel when the younger brother had tossed water on it coursed through his mind.

Holy water... angels wouldn't react that way to holy water, now would they? And the dead bodies... piling up on the floor at Don's feet. Was he really sending them home to be with the Lord? Suspicion filled the old man and he slammed shut the Bible and limped toward the door.

Once outside, he staggered out past the shed and beyond the empty barn, moving on auto-pilot until he reached the relative shade of the old massive oak. Pushing open the white picket gate, he moved more slowly, reverently, as he made his way toward the nearest grave.

Dropping to his knees at the foot of his beloved wife's resting place, Henner wiped the tears from his eyes. Reaching forward, he pulled free an errant weed, his hand then gently brushing against the weathered headstone.

"I failed..." he bemoaned. "I lost my way, Carolyn. My faith was for nothing."

A slight breeze lilted past him, carrying on it the acrid hint of smoke, but Henner continued on undisturbed.

"Heavenly Father... forgive me, forgive my foolish pride. I wanted, needed to believe that it was your messenger, sent to save us all, to bring us home. But I forgot the counsel of your Word, I forgot that there would be those sent, Satan's servants, come to deceive your faithful," he prayed. "In my arrogance, I lost my way..."

"Aw, don't be so hard on yourself," a deep voice consoled from behind him.

Henner turned and squinted as he tried to see the newcomer.

"You!" he snarled. "What are you?"

"I am what you think I am..." Abaddon replied mysteriously.

"I think you're a devil... a servant of Hell."

"Such a harsh accusation... and after all I've done for you Mathias Henner. Where is your faith?"

"My faith is still strong, but my eyes are now open. Tell me... Don... when shall I receive *my* reward?" Henner demanded.

The demon laughed, low and throaty, and stepped forward toward the family cemetery, stopping just outside the gate.

"I guess my little game is over..."

"This is a game to you?" the old man demanded angrily, rising to his feet.

"Aw, calm down. It's more than a game, it's my job! And let me tell you, it's a job I take great pride in. What could be more satisfying than watching self-righteous, pious sheep like you follow me down the path to Hell?" the demon replied smugly. "Do you know how much fun it's been leading you around by the nose? Some Biblical scholar you are... you couldn't see a demon when it was right in front of your face."

"God will take care of you and your kind," Henner threatened.

Abaddon laughed again and shook his head. "Maybe. But what's He done for you lately?"

The old man clenched his fists at his sides. If he were truly lost now then he had nothing to lose.

Launching himself, he tackled the taller form of the demon, an unearthly bellow of anger pouring from his mouth as he catapulted through the air. His fists worked like pistons, delivering blow after blow, his strength augmented by years of farm labor and the angst that was eating him inside.

"I may be lost," Henner screamed between blows. "But I'll see you in Hell before I'm done."

From their position at the edge of the cornfield, Dean and Sam watched the old man throw himself at the demon. Having fled the church, they had made their way back to the garage and the hidden Impala, first cleaning their wounds before rearming and heading back out to find the demon.

With no other lead, they'd trailed Henner, catching sight of him as he retrieved his worn signboard and then following him back to his homestead. Dean had to hand it to the old guy, despite his age and infirmities, Henner had managed to stealthily make his way home, carefully avoiding the blockade and the patrols of the troops as they continued to search the town.

Despite his admiration for Henner's physical ability, as he watched now, he knew the old man was no match for the demon. Without a word to Sam, Dean sprang from cover, shouting at Abaddon even as he charged toward the fight. The demon had gained the upper hand and now had Henner pinned beneath him as he began to choke the life from the old man.

"Get off him, you sonofabitch!" he shouted, his finger pulling on the shotgun's trigger.

Twin blasts echoed and the demon was propelled off Henner as both loads of rocksalt caught it in the back and side. Abaddon rolled away on the ground but was up immediately to his knees, even as Dean slid to a halt beside the downed man.

"You again!" Abaddon snarled.

"Yeah, I just love to make an entrance," Dean shot back as he helped Henner to his feet.

"I'm getting really tired of you hunters. I think it's time to put an end to both of you. I'm sure they'll mark this day a holiday back down in the pit."

"Well, I hate to rain on your little show here, but this ain't *Armageddon* and I don't plan on being Bruce Willis today," Dean taunted in return.

"Funny... but I'd heard you were the smartass of the duo. Big talker, but can you back it up?" Abaddon jeered.

Another blast sounded and the demon was spun around in the opposite direction as Sam fired more rocksalt from the weapon in his hands as he approached.

"You forgot what they say about the tall, quiet ones. Never turn your back on them," Sam warned as he pumped the forend and fired again.

Abaddon twisted to face the younger hunter. "Ah, junior shows up. How delightful. I'd heard you were the brains of the outfit, and so much potential too. But then, you already turned down the apprenticeship with Haris. Not very smart really... you gave up the starting pitcher's position on the winning team."

"I'd rather be a benchwarmer and still human," Sam retorted.

"Suit yourself," the demon agreed with a shrug of his shoulders.

With a wave of the blond's hand, Sam was lifted and thrown through the air, crashing solidly against the weathered wall of the barn. His body hit with a rush of exhaled air and the young hunter slid down the boards to the ground.

Seeing his brother attacked only served to spur on Dean. Emptying the last two slugs from his shotgun, he tossed the useless weapon to the side and pulled the automatic from his pocket. He cursed as he advanced, his voice shouting above the din of the .45 as round after round plugged into the demon's body. Abaddon flinched as the bullets slammed into its human shell, staggering slightly.

It was a foolish effort, but without the benefit of any other weapon, it was the best option Dean had at the moment. Just a few feet away, he saw Abaddon look up from the damage to his chest, red eyes glowing evilly, a smug smirk forming on his face.

“Where’s the Colt? Where’s the magic bullet? You should have brought you’re ‘A’ game, hunter. Pretty stupid if you think that pea-shooter will have any effect on something like me. But then, you’ve been down this road before, haven’t you Dean?”

“Yeah, and I’m still alive to tell...”

“Let’s see if I can remedy that situation...”

Dean watched the demon lift his hand in a repeated version of what he’d done moments before. The hunter knew what was coming, and as much as he braced for it, the actual action still caught him by surprise. One moment he was on terra firma, the next, the wind was tearing across his face as his body was picked up and flown through the air.

The impact didn’t particularly shock him, his chest slamming into the solid trunk of the oak managing to knock all the air from his lungs with a rib cracking thud that was an all-too-familiar occurrence. Still, as he dropped to the ground in a heap, Dean grimaced against the resulting pain.

He managed to roll onto his hands and knees, but taking a breath, much less moving his upper body, seemed beyond his ability. Abaddon advanced menacingly, his hand’s grasping Dean by the shirt and lifting him back to his feet and beyond.

“Now what was it you were saying? Something about today not being your day to die?” the demon asked.

“Bring it...” Dean choked out defiantly.

He watched as the demon’s eyes closed and reopened filled with blood red hues. Dean braced himself for the pain, knowing too well what it felt like to be torn apart from the inside. He only hoped this time went faster than the last.

“ABADDON!”

The demon spun at the yell, but maintained his hold on Dean. Held like a limp doll, the young hunter could do nothing more than play observer to what happened next. Henner strode confidently forward, a fierce determination set deeply in his face.

“Abaddon, I command thee to submit to the name of the Lord and put that boy down!”

The demon laughed, looking back and forth between Dean and the old man. “Submit? Who do you think you are? But regardless, I’m in a good mood so I’ll grant you that... demand.”

And suddenly Dean was flying again. Granted, he was out of the demon’s grasp, but at this rate, he was logging more frequent flyer miles than a United Airlines stewardess. He landed, without benefit of gear, crashing into the short fence that surrounded the Henner family plot. When the fog lifted from his head, he rolled to his

back, thankful that none of the wooden tips had managed to spear him during the landing.

“But the Lord is just, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one... He guards the course of the just and protects the faithful...”

“So what now, little old man? Are you going to talk me to death with your sanctimonious diatribe?” Abaddon taunted.

“Let evil recoil from their slander of me... in your faithfulness, you will destroy them...” Henner continued, oblivious to the jeers of the demon as it moved slowly toward him.

“I’m going to rip the bones from beneath your flesh and then hang your skin from the steeple on the church,” Abaddon threatened. “And then, when I drag your worthless godforsaken soul down to the pits, the real fun will begin...”

Dean watched in fascination as Henner suddenly opened his eyes and stretched out his hand toward the demon.

“In the name of Jesus Christ, I command thee to come out...”

Abaddon halted, and Dean could see a wave of rigidity sweep over the demon’s form.

“You... pathetic... little... human...” the demon spat. “Do you... think... you can... stop me?”

“In the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, it is He who commands you. It is He who flung you from the Gates of Heaven to the depths of Hell...”

“I ... will... strangle... you with... your own... intestines...”

“Come out... in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit... COME OUT!” Henner shouted.

Abaddon dropped to his knees, the demon’s human shell convulsing on the ground before them. With a scream, a thick cloud of black fog tore from the creature’s mouth along with a strangled scream that rattled the glass panes in the nearby farmhouse.

The black cloud lifted, swirling above their heads even as the tall blond body lifelessly collapsed to the earth. Dean struggled to his knees, barely able to hold his head upright as he fought to shout a warning to Henner. He forced a full breath of air into his lungs, forming the words but unable to get more than a squeak past his lips. By the time he made it to his feet, wavering unsteadily, it was too late.

The thick pitch swooped down from its place above their heads, enveloping Henner in a suffocating black blanket. Henner spasmed, jerking backwards even as the demon fog forced its way past his still-moving mouth. It sped down his throat and disappeared in a matter of seconds, leaving nothing in its wake but silence and the far off caw of a crow.

Dean rushed to the fallen man's side, joined seconds later by a dazed Sam. Together, they lifted the frail old man, Sam lightly tapping his cheek and calling out his name.

Gradually, Henner's eyelids peeled apart, his pupils taking an extra minute to focus as he struggled to see the two concerned faces hovering above him. Dean let out a sigh of relief that was short-lived as the old man spoke.

"I got him..."

They waited as the sun set and afternoon gave way to night fall. Both Sam and Dean taking turns at watching Henner as the man went about cooking dinner and then later reading his Bible by the fireplace. They both knew what they had seen out in the yard and likewise knew there was only one possible outcome.

Motioning Dean over to the spot he'd commandeered, Sam nodded toward Henner as the man continued in unabated prayer.

"What are we gonna do, Dean?" he asked as the elder hunter sank down beside him on the seat of the bay window.

He didn't miss the way that Dean held his ribs or the muffled groan as his brother eased down to the seat. He knew Dean was hurting, hell, the beating in the bar had been bad enough and that was before Abaddon had dealt out his own punishment.

In fact, if Dean even felt a fraction of the aches and pains he was currently enduring, then Sam knew they were going to both need some serious R&R when this job was over.

Assuming they made it out alive...

"I dunno, Sammy," Dean replied as he watched Henner across the room. "I mean, we could try an exorcism, stick him inside a Devils Trap and hope for the best. But let's face it, Abaddon isn't some low level demon. Who knows what he'd do to the old guy on his way out."

"We can't leave him like this," Sam insisted.

"He looks like he's holding his own right now."

"Yeah, but for how long? You said it yourself, Dean, Abaddon's too powerful to just sit back quietly. Besides, no one can control demon possession."

"I did..." Dean mumbled absently and Sam grimaced as memories of his brother fighting for control against Haris' spawn poured through his mind.

"And look how that turned out," Sam added. "It nearly killed you, Dean."

"Yeah, well... What do you want to do here?" Dean covered, nodding his head back toward Henner.

"You know, I might be old, but I'm not deaf. You should watch what you're saying," Henner called out from his place in front of the fire.

Pushing up from the rocker, he stretched, groaned and then slowly walked over to where the brothers sat observing him.

Sam turned red and Dean chuckled nervously. "Yeah, kinda learned that lesson from a blind man," the older sibling responded.

Henner smiled genuinely then paused, inhaling sharply and closing his eyes.

"You okay, Mr. Henner?" Sam asked anxiously, springing from his seat.

He saw Dean reach for his flask of holy water out of the corner of his eye and then rise as well. They stopped just short of the old man when he raised his hand and waved them off.

"I'm okay... I'm okay," Henner gasped, opening his eyes and revealing the brown irises.

Despite the revelation the brothers remained wary, Dean's hand still clenching the silver flask even as he stepped back.

"Can I get you something?" Sam offered, his hand reaching out to clasp Henner's elbow and steadying the older man.

Henner shook his head. "I think a stiff shot might be in order, but I haven't touched the stuff in over forty-five years."

"I could remedy that for you," Dean suggested with a waggle of his eyebrows, reaching for the second flask that resided inside his pocket. He presented the container of alcohol to the man, but Henner pushed it back.

"I'm not giving in that easy."

"I know what you're going through. Trust me, take a sip. It'll shut up the voices for a little while," Dean admitted.

Henner smiled, but shook his head again. "I can feel him inside me, like a parasite. He's trying to tempt me, trying to make me think that he's going to win. But he doesn't know the power of our Lord. God will see me through this."

"Mr. Henner, Dean and I were talking, and maybe we can get that demon out of you. We've been successful before with exorcisms, but..." Sam began, but his voice trailed as he stopped himself from revealing his doubts.

"It's okay, son," Henner interrupted, placing a gnarled hand on the younger hunter's shoulder. "God will provide. I have faith."

Sam began to insist, but Henner smiled at him and pulled away. He turned back as he reached the foot of the staircase.

"You boys are exhausted. There are a couple of spare rooms upstairs, the beds are soft and the blankets are warm. You should get some rest. I'm just going to read a little longer and say my prayers and then I'm turning in too," he suggested.

"Mr. Henner," Sam repeated insistently.

"Son, please, trust me. Nothing bad is gonna happen. But you... and your brother... your work isn't done yet. You can't keep going at this pace, and humanity can't afford to lose you," the old man answered cryptically.

Sam watched as the old man slowly climbed the stairs, and he couldn't help admiring Henner's faith and resilience. If anyone could beat a demon, maybe this man was the one to do it.

Dean broke the silence first. "Dude, you go. I'll take first watch," he ordered.

"Dean..." Sam started to protest. He knew his brother was worn out and hurting, but likewise, he knew that battling Dean Winchester on the topic of injury, Sam was out of his league.

Instead, he nodded and moved toward the stairs. He glanced back down as Dean moved closer to the crackling fire. He made no comment when Dean dropped into the vacant rocking chair and picked up the worn Bible.

The sun peeked through the clouded window and warmed his face, stirring him awake from exhausted slumber. Dean groaned, raising a hand to block the offending rays, then stretched as the last fog of sleep was pushed from his head.

It took a minute longer for him to seek out the white face of the watch on his wrist, a second beyond that to acknowledge that it was well past eight in the morning. With a shout, Dean threw back the patchwork quilt, his still-booted feet slamming down hard against the floor.

His voice boomed as he headed down the hallway, shouting for Sam, shouting at Sam for letting him oversleep. Dean took the stairs at a gallop, hitting the landing and spotting Sam as the younger sibling shot up out of the rocking chair.

"Dean... what... what's going on?" Sam asked worriedly.

"Dude, do you know what time it is?" Dean demanded.

"Yeah, a little after eight. So?"

"Dude, you were s'posed to wake me up. Where's Henner?"

Sam shrugged, "Still sleeping I guess. I haven't seen him yet."

"Sammy, do you think a man like him sleeps past eight unless he's sick or dead?" Dean posed. The feeling that something was wrong was eating along his spine. He'd

woken up with a feeling of dread and panic, and now, still unable to put the sentiment to words, he simply knew something was up.

To his relief, Sam responded, a look of worry now creasing the younger man's face. Dean watched as his brother tore up the stairs, shouting for Henner only to return a moment later with a look of panic and a piece of paper in his hands.

"He's gone," Sam announced. "But he left this."

"Dammit!" Dean cursed, spinning around and grabbing the jacket he discarded during the night. "He can't be far. I'll check the barn, you take a look back by the graves."

"Dean, wait. Listen to this."

The older man stopped, irritation on his face as he waited for Sam to continue.

"Sam and Dean... I can never repay what you've done. You opened my eyes to the deception of the Beast. You've restored my faith in goodness and ability to care about our fellow man. And most importantly, you've shown me that God sometimes provides in ways not so commonplace..." Sam read.

"I've spent most of my adult life in faithful service to our Lord's plan, thinking with great ignorance, that if I was patient, and endured, my reward in Heaven would come. I foolishly ignored the signs that were before me... unwisely believed that my faith and works would save me. And while I've never complained about my condition, or the things that have happened to me in this long life, I realized that I hadn't really praised God either."

Dean huffed with impatience, but Sam continued reading.

"Now, I understand. I know what my purpose was for being here all these scores of years. I now know what it is that God has designed for me, my use in his glorious master plan. Perhaps there will be salvation within the cleansing fire. So thank-you, for helping provide a foolish old man a second chance at redemption. You are wonderful young men and I know that God's purpose for you both will be rewarded with crowns in Heaven. Goodbye and God bless you, Mathias Henner."

"What's he up to? What the hell did all that mean?" Dean asked.

"Don't you get it? He's going to try and destroy the demon," Sam replied.

"How's he gonna do that, Sammy?"

And realization dawned on both brothers at the same time.

"Awww, crap," Dean groaned as he immediately dashed for the door with Sam right behind him.

It took them nearly a half hour to make their way from the old farmhouse and back to the now-quiet church. The low rumble of a Humvee sounded on a nearby street as the brothers ducked into the cover of the thick brush. They looked first at the spot where Henner usually stood his post, but it was vacant like the rest of the town.

Dean was about to suggest that they try the Latham Tap when a loud crash from within the church sounded. He looked questioningly at Sam, who nodded and rushed toward the building.

Inside, the remaining odor of death and decay assaulted them as freshly as it had the day before. Strewn around the sanctuary were the remnants of the congregation's long vigil, and Dean couldn't ignore the ghostly echoes of singing that rang in his head.

"Dean... look!" Sam called out quietly, pulling on his brother's arm and pointing toward the altar.

Dean couldn't restrain the gasp when he spotted Henner sitting atop an oil drum and surrounded by large plastic containers marked "Fertilizer." He approached cautiously, sniffing the air as the hint of diesel fuel overpowered the stench of body odor.

"Get out!" Henner commanded, raising his hands and displaying a long wick in one and a lighter in the other.

"Mr. Henner, don't do this!" Sam pleaded.

"This is the only way," Henner replied. "I can be absolved of my sins, all of my sins."

Dean flinched as the old man flicked the lighter, a small flame bursting to life in his hands. He couldn't help be mesmerized by the yellow-red glow and for a moment, he was transported back to the scene in the Impala outside the church in Oklahoma.

He could still hear Mia's voice, could see her eyes blacken over as she threatened to blow up the classic Chevy with them in it.

Maybe he should have let her... considering what happened later?

"Mr. Henner... please... let us help you," Sam begged once more.

"No, Samuel. This is the way I've been shown. This is the ultimate test and I shall not fail."

"It won't work," Dean shouted. "All you're going to do is blow yourself to bits. It's not going to stop that demon. Abaddon will just leave you and possess some other poor fool."

Dean watched the old man's reaction, half expecting Henner's eyes to glaze over red or for a giant black cloud to erupt from his mouth. But it didn't happen.

"I beg you to trust me. This thing... is stuck within me. Where I go, it will go. And I don't think, by the screaming and shouting that's going on in my head, that it's very happy. Now please, I'm begging you both, go and let me get on with this before I cannot control the demon," Henner insisted.

Another flame erupted from the lighter and the old man moved it closer to the rag in his other hand.

"He means to do it!" Dean shouted. "We gotta get out of here."

He tugged at Sam's arm, but his brother remained stubbornly glued in his spot.

"Mr. Henner... please! Not this way," Sam cried.

Now the rag was lit, a curl of black smoke amid a brilliant flame rose from Henner's right hand.

"NOW, SAMMY!" Dean shouted, pulling roughly on his brother, twisting him around and pushing him toward the exit.

They stumbled outside, still running while looking back over their shoulders.

The explosion rumbled the earth, sending a shower of wood and debris skyward. A blast of heat pummeled them, scorching exposed skin and searing the air around them as it slammed them into the hard dirt.

It was over just as quickly. The groan of collapsing supports and the crackling of burning wood the only noises that remained. Dean pushed up with a grunt, rolling over on his side, his eyes seeking out his brother. Sam rose next to him, coughing violently and rubbing his eyes. Dean knew he was worse for the wear, but alive and breathing was enough for now.

They sat on the ground, watching the flames fly skyward, neither speaking, both too numbed by what had happened to find the words.

Dean watched as the blaze slowly dwindled, giving way to a thick black smoke as the immediate fuel for the fire diminished. Absently, he wondered if amidst the dark cloud, the demon was finding its escape.

"Do you think he took Abaddon with him?" Sam asked finally.

Dean shrugged. He wasn't a man of faith, his life teaching him that good rarely triumphed over evil.

"I dunno, Sammy. But either way, I sure hope that old man found his peace."

"All right, old man. Are you done with all your laying around? I mean, geez, must be nice just to kick back and chill while the rest of us are out there saving the world," Dean teased as Bobby pushed himself up in the hospital bed.

"That's funny, Dean, coming from the man who could write the ultimate travel guide entitled 'Emergency Rooms I've Known.' Seems to me that you spend more time on your backside than you ever do fighting evil," the bearded hunter threw back with a smile.

"So, what do the docs say about you? Are you gonna be okay?" Dean asked hesitantly, barely masking his underlying worry.

Bobby's face softened to mirror the concern on the elder Winchester's face. He smiled genuinely and nodded. "Yeah, they think it's nothing short of a miracle, but yeah, I'm gonna be okay."

"That's great!" Dean eagerly replied, a short sigh of relief escaping his lips but not escaping the attention of the older hunter.

"Thanks..." Bobby added after a moment.

"For what?"

"I know you were here for me, not giving up..." the bearded man stated simply. "I really appreciate it."

Dean dipped his head down, a red tinge coloring his cheeks. "No problem..." he answered quietly. "You woulda done the same."

Dean heard the other's man soft grumble of affirmation and he quickly coughed to hide his own embarrassment.

"So," Bobby continued, "You managed to put down Abaddon for good?"

Dean strolled over toward the window and peered outside. From his vantage on the third floor, he had an unobstructed view of much of the countryside. While he couldn't pick out Paw Paw from here, the miles of cornfields that stretched out before him and the cloudless landscape was a welcome improvement from the burning fields and smoke-filled sky of three days before.

He rubbed the back of his neck. Was the demon truly destroyed? Had Henner been successful?

Considering their luck, the answer was likely "no."

"Hard to tell," Dean answered finally. "We never saw it leave the old man, but who knows. Demons are sneaky bastards and they seem to keep coming back like friggin' cockroaches."

"Well, hopefully you stomped on his ass for good."

Dean snorted, turning back to face the salvage man. "I dunno, I hope you're right, cause I have a feeling that if we didn't, that bastard is gonna come back with a vengeance."

"So, what else is new for you and Sam? I'm tellin' ya, you Winchesters don't do anything half-assed, including making enemies," Bobby joked good-naturedly.

"Ain't that the truth," Dean admitted.

Quiet enveloped the room as both men searched for another topic. Dean was spared the awkwardness of a prolonged silence by Sam's sudden burst into the room. The younger sibling flew through the entrance in a flurry of excitement and tousled hair.

"Hey," he shouted. "Turn on the television. You're not going to believe this one."

Dean stepped over to the set that was hanging from a wall-mount and stretched to stab at the "on" button. The picture immediately materialized and a young woman with a microphone appeared on the screen.

"The CDC has issued a final statement regarding the bizarre occurrences in the tiny community of Paw Paw. We've been told by senior officials that the cause behind nearly twenty deaths was a chemical pesticide leak at a nearby farmer's co-op. The chemical, identified as a combination of Atrazine and Cyanazine, was improperly mixed resulting in some minor manifestations such as sores on the skin and in more severe exposures, respiratory arrest. The leak also contaminated several acres of corn, however officials state that all affected fields have been destroyed. The residents of Paw Paw are now being allowed to return to their sleepy little village after several days of forced evacuation."

"In an unrelated story, local resident, Mathias Henner, in an apparent suicide, was killed when he was caught in an explosion at the New Life Church of God. Sources say that Mr. Henner was well known in the area for his very public religious activities. Many in the small community say that Mr. Henner was convinced that the world was coming to an end and the recent occurrences in Paw Paw may have caused the deluded man to resort to a violent ending."

"In other news, Jake Peavy pitched a nine-inning shutout to give the Cub's the lead in the NLDS against the Padres. WGN's, Rick Carlson was out at Wrigley Field for the post-game celebration..."

Dean slammed his palm against the power button, shutting off the news story with a disgruntled groan. He turned back to Sam who was equally scowling at the report.

"They just explain it all away, so conveniently," Sam grumbled. "They didn't know a thing about Mathias Henner, he just became a suitable scapegoat, another nutjob for the media to sensationalize."

"He was a good man," Bobby added solemnly. "He just believed so much, was so desperate to find his way home."

Dean remained silent. Part of him was even more convinced that if God was out there looking down on His children, He sure wasn't too concerned about their well-being. Yet another part of him had to admit, maybe the old man's faith really had saved him in the end. Certainly, Abaddon had possessed the man, yet never once it had been able to manifest its demonic self.

And then there was the way the old man had been able to call out the demon in the first place. He hadn't used Latin, none of the *Rituale Romanum* had been uttered. Henner simply invoked the name of Christ and forced Abaddon from its human shell. Was that faith, or some higher power channeling through the old guy?

Dean shook his head, it was making his brain hurt just thinking about it. If there was one thing he'd learned in all his years of hunting, it was that there were some situations that defied explanation. Some days it truly was simpler to abide by the mentality of shoot first and have a cold beer afterward.

"He saved our asses," Dean spoke finally. "Somehow..."

"He was a hero. He managed to control that demon the entire time it was inside him," Sam added.

"Did he?" the older brother challenged. "I mean, we're talking Abaddon here, not exactly some bottom shelf demon."

"Is it so hard to believe, Dean? Dad managed to control Harris briefly, and you managed to keep that demon from controlling you for a long while," Sam reminded him.

"I had the amulet and you weren't on the receiving end of Dad's possession," Dean recalled with a shudder.

"Still, Henner saved that town," Sam added after a moment. "I can't believe that people are falling for that BS chemical leak story. As if that isn't the most overused cover-up out there."

"I think you boys might be missing the bigger picture here," Bobby chimed in, thoughtfully tugging at his unkempt beard.

Dean turned to look at him as Sam drew closer.

"And what's that?" Dean demanded. "There's a bigger picture than demons, plagues, swarms of locusts and people dying?"

"Abaddon said he was here on orders from the Big Bad. Maybe he took a few liberties with the game plan, but what the hell was Lucifer up to?" the sagacious hunter posed. "You two clowns bothered to consider that?"

Dean looked over at Sam and his brother's face held a crimped look of undisguised fear.

"You thinking this was just practice for something larger?" he asked

Bobby shrugged and Sam swallowed hard before answering. "It might not have been textbook, but the Bible certainly says that the world's gonna end in flames."

"I don't know about all that, but I do know we've been running into Lucifer a bit too often lately," Dean admitted, rubbing at the side of his head as a strange little stab of pain drilled him between his temples.

"At least you're still coming out on top," Bobby suggested grimly.

Dean paused. Coming out on top? Over two dozen people had died in Paw Paw, Bobby had nearly been lost and then there was the little boy from the church whose name he'd never know. If that was winning, Dean wasn't sure if losing could be much worse. If Lucifer was ramping up toward some sort of end game, then how much longer could he and Sam continue to fight the demonic legions and still come out alive?

At least you're still coming out on top? He considered Bobby's words again.

"So far..." he agreed after a moment. "So far..."

The End