

**Season Three**  
**Episode Two: Dark Territory**  
**By Kittsbud & Tree**

Dean felt the two long fangs dig into the flesh of his forearm, skin starting to tear and warm blood beginning to flow as he instinctively jarred back from the vicious bite.

The thing's eyes bored deep into his as it clung to his flesh, the intelligence behind them far more advanced than that of any feral creature the hunter had ever been privy to encountering.

This was no husky, and whatever it truly was knew what it wanted – no *needed* to do. It wanted the kill, and it would be relentless until that task was complete.

"You friggin' Furbee with attitude, don't you know Winchesters *bite back*?" Dean snapped at the dog, refusing to give in even though its jaw still held fast on to his arm.

"Dean!"

The hunter's eyes took one precious glance away from the husky to see Gudrun rapidly approaching. Apparently, his tussle with the pup from hell had roused the Valkyrie from her slumber and she was now racing to his rescue.

"Stay back!" Dean barked out, the sudden realization hitting him that perhaps the creature swinging from his forearm may even have the strength to harm his "reaper" friend. Whatever it was, it was from beyond the grave, of that he was sure.

He'd looked into the lost soulless eyes of the dead long enough to know.

As expected, Gudrun ignored his warning and continued to sprint athletically forward. All the grace of a ballerina and the determination of a warrior showing in her carefully placed moves.

At her side, Sam was less graceful, but no less resolute.

The pair came to a halt either side Dean, each unsure what move to make next. The husky still held on to its prey, but it had stopped the shaking motion from before, abruptly aware that it was being watched.

The thing's eyes seemed to glow even redder, spittle dripping from its mouth as it attempted a low growl while refusing to unlock its jaw.

Gudrun scrutinized the dog, her gaze seeing far more than any mortals. "Sam, go get a stick from the fire."

Sam hesitated, not wanting to move for fear the husky would go for his brother's throat. It seemed only inches away, and Dean's hold on it was shaky at best. He could see Dean's good arm quivering with the stress placed upon it as he pushed away the animal.

"Sam! GO!"

Finally, Sam broke away his gaze and made a dash for the muted campfire in the distance. It wasn't really that far away – and yet to the young man it may as well have been on another continent.

The husky noted the new movement and made a decision based on reasoning skills no dog should possess. It quickly released its maw, letting the bleeding human loose in favor of a more important quarry.

Snarling, the dog honed in on the blonde one – the girl it sensed was more than just a human. She knew its weakness, but likewise it knew who and what she was.

There was no fear.

The thing could not fear the death Gudrun could normally cause, for in truth, it had never lived. It bared blood-marred canines, back legs flexing and tail stiffening ready for another attack.

"Gudrun, don't move..." Dean clambered to his feet, holding out an arm that still oozed blood in warning to the girl.

To her credit, the Valkyrie actually followed his advice. Her totally static pose reminded the hunter of a stone carving he'd once seen on a Native American reservation. But still, her frozen stance couldn't save her, of that he was sure.

Reapers, Valkyries, Shield Maidens – whatever their name – they still showed fear with exactly the same expressions as a mortal.

And right now, Dean could see blind terror in Gudrun's pale blue eyes.

He might not like her kind, he might not appreciate her attitude, but in that instant, Dean knew if the husky moved just one more paw forward in the snow, then he would place himself between it and the girl.

"You want to take a bite out of her, Furbee, you gotta come through me first!"

Dean felt his muscles tense, ready to blindly jump forward into the dog's path. He was prepared for the extra pain of yet another puncture wound, and for the possibility of death from one of its bites.

The husky's pupils dilated, but instead of pouncing it took a step backwards as Sam dived between it, Gudrun and his brother, flaming branch in hand.

Sam whirled the glowing section of wood back and forth while advancing, trying to push the husky backwards away from his injured brother and Gudrun.

The husky snorted at the move, its scarlet orbs narrowing as it took in the flickering blaze at the end of the stick.

The flames bobbed in the breeze, but did little to instill panic in the animal. Perhaps ordinary dogs would have feared the heat and smoke, but this creature did not.

Instead, the husky cocked back its head and let out a high pitched howl that seemed to reverberate through the woods, bouncing from tree to tree until it dissipated in the heavens.

Before the last echo had dispersed, the dog launched forwards one last time, angling its head to hit the stick in the young hunter's hand.

Sam stumbled, not expecting the lightning rapidity of the move, and within a split second the branch had been torn loose from his grip.

The stick landed in the snow, hissing wildly as the damp ground began to asphyxiate the flames.

Beside it, Sam slid in the mush churned up from the recent fighting, almost losing his balance as the dog dived at his chest.

"Sammy!"

Sam almost didn't hear the cry from his brother. In fact, his ears barely heard anything save for the high-speed thumping of his heart against his ribcage and the anguished yelp of the husky as it seemed to bounce away from his touch.

He'd been expecting fangs to sink into his skin, or at least claws to begin digging into flesh through his jacket, but the dog was repelled from him like they were two opposing magnets in a science experiment gone wrong.

Landing on its back from the bizarre retreat, the husky quickly righted itself, shaking away snow from its pelt before its muscles stiffened again in Sam's presence.

Sam took a tentative step forward, eyeing the creature just as it eyed him.

When the husky appeared frozen in its stance, he took a chance, kneeling just long enough to retrieve the still smoldering stick he'd dropped during the fray.

Locking his gaze with that of the animal, Sam took a second calculated risk and lunged at the beast, for once the attacker instead of the attacked.

The husky yapped like a scolded pup, its tail slamming down between its legs as it saw the full frontal assault and withdrew from it as fast as its legs would carry it.

"Well that was interesting in a painful kinda way!" Dean scowled as he pressed a hand over the puncture wounds in his arm, blood seeping through tightly clasped fingers to melt the snow beneath his feet.

"You okay?" Sam winced in sympathy as he saw the wound.

"I'd feel a whole lot freakin' better if I knew what just tried to chow down on me," Dean complained, turning to quickly walk back to the warmth and semi-security of the camp. "I think *Teenwolf* just used me for his starter..."

"Perhaps I can help..?" Gudrun waited until the hunter had perched himself on an upturned log and then joined him. There was sympathy in her gaze as she inspected the bite, even if she didn't vocally express it.

"I don't need any help from a reaper," Dean snapped crabily. "Your kind will get your hands on me eventually, what's the rush?"

Gudrun shrugged. There was no point in denying the title he gave her, or trying to argue with his skewed male logic. "Fine." She rolled her eyes. "Leave a blood trail in the snow our enemies can see half a mile away..."

"Yeah, well at least I bleed, sister." Dean leaned over, rummaging in his backpack until he'd found a small first aid kit – not exactly as stocked as the Impala's – but it would suffice for his needs.

Letting go of his forearm, he delved inside the box until he'd found a suitably-sized dressing and bandage. While he could easily have let the girl help him even if she didn't use her gifts, he chose not to. Gudrun needed to learn the lesson that Winchesters could take care of themselves – mostly.

As he haphazardly wrapped the bandage, he glanced to Sam. The puppy eyes were watching, but his sibling knew better than to offer his assistance.

This was a Dean thing to prove a point to Gudrun.

"Any ideas what that thing was?" Dean finally asked his brother with a huff. "This is more your kind of territory, Sasquatch."

Sam shifted his boot, using the toe to push fresh snow over the blood trail his brother had left. He didn't expect it would deter the likes of the husky, but somehow it made him feel better not to have the glaring red stain on view. "Shapeshifter," he offered half-heartedly as he worked.

"I think it was something called a tupilaq," Gudrun intervened, offering her thoughts even though she was sure they probably weren't welcome.

"Is that a doggie version of a Tulpa?" Dean raised a brow impishly and let out a deep breath, filling the damp air with a thin mist. "If we start seeing Blue Oyster Cult symbols in the snow, we know we're screwed, Sammy."

"As long as you don't start humming *Don't Fear The Reaper*, I think I'm safe." Gudrun winked at the elder hunter and then paused as she saw the strange look forming on his brother's face.

Sam had gone from his regular "annoyed at big bro" face into "light bulb" mode. "Tupilaqs?" He asked intently. "I thought they were simply Inuit carvings...just legends from the olden days..." Memories of the book he'd read on their journey here were resurfacing, but they were disjointed and incomplete.

Gudrun took a seat next to Dean on the log, ignoring his best "pissy" expression as she huddled too close to him for comfort – at least – his comfort. "Tupilaqs are carvings now, Sam, but many years ago they were so much more. In the olden days, there were Inuit shamans with enough power to create these creatures by using old bones, pieces of rotting flesh – anything they could lay their hands on. These *things* were given life and sent after a specific enemy..."

Dean looked at his brother and shook his head. "Ugh oh, who you been pissing off now, Samantha?"

"Hey, it went after you first, remember?" Sam pointed out with annoyance. "So, if we're the enemy," he returned his attention to the blonde. "Just how do we stop this thing from coming back for a second try?"

Gudrun shook her head. "There is no way to stop a tupilaq unless a more powerful shaman can reverse the magic. In essence, someone more gifted can send the tupilaq back against its maker. Kind of like mirroring the "kill" order right on back to its sender."

Dean let out a low whistle. “Good thing we got your magical ass along for the ride after all then.” He softly patted the Valkyrie’s knee. “And a pretty cute ass it is too – for a reaper...”

“Even I cannot fight a tupilaq – as you saw, it turned on me too.” Gudrun didn’t try to be smart. She simply drooped her head, allowing both brothers to realize the severity of the situation. “I’m not omnipotent. A more gifted shaman must reverse the magic and turn the creature back on its master.”

“Oh great!” Dean pulled off a small piece of tape with his teeth, finally securing the bandage he’d been fumbling with for far too long. “Turns out we shoulda brought Barbara Eden instead of our friendly, neighborhood death omen.” He dropped the tape back into his backpack, satisfied with his handiwork. “I guess if we can’t fight this thing, we better shag ass before it decides it wants some Winchester dessert.”

Gudrun tapped Dean’s knee playfully like he had hers only a short while ago. “Finally,” she teased. “Something we *both* agree on-”

The comment earned her a scowl of frustration from one brother, and a puerile chuckle from the other.

When Dean huffed, showing his annoyance at being the object of their amusement, the group finally began to pack up camp.

“You know after all that effort I’ll kinda be sad not to use that thing at least once.” Dean nodded towards the lean-to as he stomped out the last remnants of their fire with the heel of his boot.

“I thought heroes didn’t sleep?” Gudrun toyed as she hoisted her already full backpack over her shoulder.

“Yeah well, you should know, sister, you collected enough of their souls...” The fire extinguished, Dean moved to grab his own bag, forcing a smile as he pushed past the blonde.

“Will you two ever quit?” Sam’s thought-filled head was spinning, and his two companions constant bickering wasn’t helping. If it wasn’t so damned exasperating it would be better than any network comedy show. As it was, it was giving the young hunter a headache trying to think in between bursts of sarcasm.

He looked to Gudrun for support, hoping the Valkyrie was actually more mature than his brother. “You’ve told us what the dog really is, but why did it run from me?” His expression hardened as he considered the frightening possibilities. “The thing was scared of me...I could see it in its eyes-”

Sam let a hand drift to his pocket and pulled out the tiny wooden charm he’d been given earlier in the evening. It still looked nothing more than an old and very fancy piece of carving, and yet the hunter now believed it was far more. “You said this was for protection?” He held it up in the stark moonlight for everyone to see.

Gudrun bobbed her head knowingly. “It can afford some limited defense against a tupilaq’s magic, but it is nothing on its own.” Reaching forward, she took Sam’s hand, closing his huge palm back around the charm.

“Yeah,” Dean intruded. “You gotta buy the yearly subscription to get the full package, dude.” He grinned, pulling a rock salt-filled shotgun from his bag before slipping the backpack strap over his shoulder.

“You have to trust yourself. *Believe* in yourself.” Gudrun looked into Sam’s eyes as she held a hand over his closed fist. “I cannot send the tupilaq back, but you can.”

Dean shook his head. “Ugh oh, Yoda strikes again.” He pulled an almost empty packet of M & M’s from his pocket and stuffed a handful into his mouth. When Sam simply stared back at the Valkyrie he shrugged and began to pull the sheet from the lean-too roof in case they needed it later.

“Me...I..?” Sam eventually stammered. “I’m not a shaman. I don’t know Inuit lore or magic.” He shook his shaggy mop of hair, looking away into the night for fear Gudrun would tell him otherwise. He didn’t want to be special – he just wanted to be like everyone else. “What can I do?”

Gudrun pulled her hand away, her eyes narrowing as she inhaled deeply. “You will know, Sam, when the time comes. Remember, everyone has a purpose...” She turned, willing to give away no more secrets – not yet. Pointing north, she began to walk without looking back. “We should go this way. The tupilaq will return soon and we have little time.”

Dean cocked his head, letting the sawed-off muzzle of his weapon rest on his shoulder. “You know, I would ask who died and put her in charge, but given her line of work...”

“You can be such a dork, you know that, right?” Sam didn’t wait for an answer, but began to follow the girl, looking over his shoulder every few seconds.

“Hey, I got nothing against girl power.” Dean shrugged, reluctantly beginning to trudge through the snow after Gudrun. “It’s just I figure it’s kinda like dancing, ya know? Guys lead, gals follow...”

Sam nodded just a little too quickly. “Oh yeah, that’s right, because you’re *such* a John Travolta in that department. What about that time at the night club in Vegas?”

“Hey, I was still recovering from Liberace’s spook trying to grab my ass! My moves were off...” Dean picked up the pace; suddenly wishing the conversation would take a different direction. If it wasn’t Gudrun beating him up, it was Sam. *Those two would so make a great friggin’ tag team... Psychic Boy and The Death Maiden*, he thought, abruptly wishing for snow or some other distraction.

Sam saw the annoyed expression on his brother and pulled back just enough to give Dean some space. Big brother had apparently taken enough ribbing for one day. Not only that, but there were more important issues at hand.

While it was good fun to throw the odd jibe and keep their spirits up, they now had the added job of watching for the return of the tupilaq.

Sam had yet to actually see anything conclusive that it was following, but every now and again he couldn’t help but pause and turn just long enough to see what he thought was a blur of fur in the trees.

Of course, it could just as easily be his imagination. It was a known fact that if you feared something enough you could talk yourself into believing it was there. Many reported ghost sightings were simply that – overactive minds reacting on their own fears.

*Get a grip, you’re just panicking because of what Gudrun said to you...*

Sam held back further, taking slower and slower steps until his brother and the blonde were starting to fade into the distance. The husky *thing* was here, he sensed it.

Lucifer’s goons had known they were coming long enough to bring down the tiny Cessna, they had known the Winchesters and Gudrun hadn’t died in the crash.

Sam was sure that they also now knew the tupilaq had failed in its mission. If the dog didn’t return then its masters surely would.

“And if they don’t come looking for us,” Sam talked to his empty surroundings, blowing into his freezing hands to warm them. “Then they’ll surely be waiting when we reach our destination...”

### **Some Time Later...**

The early morning sun dared to peek over the horizon, its orange and red shades sending a minuscule amount of warmth across the cold and very barren panorama.

After awhile, white on white had become almost blinding, and the sun’s tiny offering was enough for the group to want to wallow in its glow, appreciating the burning star as they never had before.

“Man, what I’d give for a hot shower and a beer right about now.” Dean shielded the sunlight from his eyes, making a beeline for a nearby stream that bubbled and beckoned as it flowed over a rocky pool. As he reached the water’s edge, he looked

up to Gudrun innocently – although his thoughts were far from chaste. “Don’t suppose you’d like to share that idea?”

Gudrun smiled, passing over a medium-sized canteen to be filled as she slipped off her backpack. “Sure, I’d go for the beer – but I doubt you’d want to share a shower with me.” She turned just enough to slyly wink at Sam.

Dean took the canteen, kneeling at the snow-edged bank to fill it. “Oh sweetheart, I got *plenty* to share...”

“Even with a *reaper*, Dean?” The blonde smirked triumphantly. Finally, she’d gotten the hunter to see her beyond his opinion of her kind.

Dean’s cheeks flushed and he feigned a sudden deafness. Dammit if the girl wasn’t starting to get under his skin. If this kept up, he might actually *like* her before their mission was over. “I gotta take a leak,” he offered lamely, desperately needing a way to escape before he said something wuss-assed he’d regret later.

“You know, he really is a nice guy,” Sam laughed as his brother dodged into a swatch of snow-covered undergrowth. “He just well...”

“I know,” Gudrun nodded. “He’s not had the most normal life. Neither of you have. It’ll get bet...” The Valkyrie’s voice became muted and her pupils narrowed as she suddenly became distracted.

Instinctively, Sam followed the girl’s gaze. He’d been expecting company, but even a moment’s distraction had been enough for him to let his guard down – Dean too.

“What did you see?” He forced through almost gritted teeth. “Is it the dog..?” He hunkered down, fixing his eyes on any drift of snow or clump of vegetation that might hide the enemy.

“I didn’t see anything,” Gudrun admitted. “But I felt eyes upon me.” She gestured to a small patch of scrub to their rear. “There’s something out there...”

“Yeah, and it ain’t no man...”

“Huh?” Gudrun’s brow creased.

“Sorry,” Sam apologized, gently pushing the girl behind him as he moved towards the bushes. “*Predator* quote. I’ve so been around Dean too long. Wait here...we know this thing doesn’t like me...”

Sam glanced over his shoulder to make sure the girl obeyed. He suspected – no – *knew* that she had a stubborn penchant for ignoring orders, and today wasn’t going to be the day that particular proclivity sent her back to Valhalla.

To his surprise, Gudrun remained by the stream, her eyes darting across the tumbling vista as if she had x-ray vision.

“Just wait for Dean to come back...”

Sam paused until she nodded, then returned his focus on the shrubbery. The patch of undergrowth was easily large enough to hide the husky *thing* and give it the upper hand should it pounce.

Swallowing hard as the snow crunched noisily beneath his boots, Sam let a hand drift to his belt where his Glock sat snugly against him. He wanted to draw it on impulse, even though he knew the bullets it contained would have little effect on the dog should it attack.

Speeding up his pace, he moved to the left of the bushes, hands outstretched ready to grab the mystery creature should it make a lunge for his throat.

“Sam!”

Gudrun’s cry was like the husky’s fangs piercing warm flesh. It was frenzied, urgent – fraught.

Sam spun back around, boots sliding on the ground as he realized his mistake. Dean had warned that the husky was smart – too smart for an animal – and yet, they’d still treated it as one.

Now, they were in danger of paying for that mistake with someone’s life. The husky had tricked them, using the ancient divide and conquer technique to split them up so that it could concentrate on just one – Gudrun.

It made perfect sense that the creature would go for the sole person who knew all about it, and all about those who had sent it. Gudrun was a mine of information Lucifer's people needed out of the equation.

"Hey, you don't want her, you want *me!*" Sam picked up a rock, pitching it at the husky as it cornered the terrified Valkyrie.

The animal's back flinched as the stone hit hard and it turned, the hairs of its pelt suddenly standing rigid when its eyes met Sam's.

There was fear there, and a kind of respect Sam truly didn't comprehend.

*Why does it fear me so much?*

The husky pawed at the snow, looking back to Gudrun almost disappointedly as it gave in, darting across the ice-covered landscape before Sam could get near it.

Sam watched it go and then picked up Gudrun's canteen where she'd dropped it. "You okay?" He asked, handing the once again empty container to the girl.

Gudrun nodded, but her hands shook as she accepted the carafe. "I don't think I'm on its list of puppy pals," she muttered, kneeling to refill the canteen, but pausing as foliage to her left began to rustle.

"Are you two fixing up a date or something?" Dean pushed noisily from the Canadian scrub, mischievous eyes darting from Sam to the girl and then back again. "I mean, jeez, how long does it take to fill a canteen?" His pupils narrowed as he realized he'd already filled the container once. "Something you two wanna tell me?"

"The husky came back while you were taking time out," Sam offered dejectedly. "We screwed up big time, Dean. We knew it was intelligent and we let our guard down-"

"It's not your fault, neither of you," Gudrun interjected, picking up her pack again resolutely. "I should have expected more...resistance. Maybe I should never have gotten you involved..."

"Yeah, well you did, sister, and now that thing has started to piss me off." Dean's brow scrunched in annoyance as he looked at his brother. "Sammy, I swear I'm gonna hunt that bitch down and use its hide for a freakin' rug!"

"We don't live anywhere to lay a rug," Sam pointed out less than helpfully.

"Then I'll lay the damn thing on the rear seat of the Impala. 'Cause I'm telling you, Furbee has got to go." Dean slid on a pair of sunglasses from his pocket, tempering the glare from the rising sun as it continued its journey upwards in the sky. "First, though, I wouldn't mind finding a safe spot to get some shut eye. We've been walking all night, and unlike *some* people I didn't get any sleep yesterday..."

"Actually, I don't need sleep." Gudrun shrugged. "But I see your point."

"Maybe I can find us a cave or at least somewhere higher up with better cover."

Sam snatched the Remington from his brother's grip before the elder Winchester could argue. "Besides," he grinned, "I get the impression you two need to be alone."

"Very funny, Sasquatch, the only thing I want to be alone with right now is a double cheeseburger and fries, or maybe some apple pie – with extra cream..." Dean seemed to go into a momentary trance at the thought of his favorite foods.

Eventually, he shook himself, knowing he was not going to get anything half as interesting while he was on a hunt. "I should come with you, that thing is stronger than Tyson on PCP."

"And it's scared of *me*, not you," Sam argued. "You should stay here and watch Gudrun." He turned to leave, knowing that the longer he held back, the more likely Dean was to argue. "Just watch your backs."

"Dude, you're so enjoying leaving me with her, aren't you?"

Sam continued plowing through the snow, but he couldn't resist a small chuckle of amusement at his brother's expense. He didn't look back, but he could just imagine Dean's pained expression and wild hazel eyes at the thought of being left alone with Gudrun.

Maybe throwing Dean together with the Valkyrie would keep him from thinking too much – at least, for a little while. That was what Sam was banking on.

He didn't want his brother putting the pieces together and realizing that he'd been left behind because of the danger he would otherwise likely have put himself in.

Sam had no doubt that when Dean said he was going to hunt the tupilaq, he would. And the tupilaq would welcome the hunter's attack, because that was what it had been created for.

In truth, Sam feared his brother's bravado sometimes – and he feared Gudrun's eerie message of death right along with it.

Stuffing his free hand into his coat pocket, Sam fingered the little charm he'd been given by the blonde. Why had she only given it him? Why not one for Dean too?

Abruptly fearing the thing, his grip loosened and he pulled back his hand into the frigid atmosphere. Placing his palm under the shortened barrel of his weapon while the other remained wrapped around the trigger, he moved on, eyes scanning the compacted snow at his feet for paw prints.

Sam didn't care whether there were any caves out here. He didn't care if he found cover. Sam was going to hunt down the tupilaq before it attacked again.

He reached a fallen tree stump and paused, taking care to keep his weapon poised as he clambered over the rotting hulk of timber. As his boots hit the ground the opposite side, he hunkered down, his searching gaze spotting imprints in the snow.

Sam let out a hazy breath and ran his forefinger over the tracks. He was no ranger, but he'd learned enough to know this was probably the thing he was looking for.

The husky was stalking them, keeping just enough behind to remain hidden for the most part, but soon, soon it would strike again.

Sam looked at the shotgun in his hand, knowing the shells it held would have no real impact on the tupilaq. He carried it more for reassurance than anything.

If he returned to Dean and Gudrun now they still had no protection from the thing – not that that would stop Dean trying to kill it.

No, Sam couldn't afford for his brother to do something stupid and try and hunt the dog, even though he had no chance of winning.

Sam was the one it feared.

He was the one Gudrun had given the Aegishjalmur to.

*I have to kill it before...before...* He couldn't even think the words. Not after all he'd been through recently.

Making the choice without clearly thinking it through, Sam straightened and began to track the paw prints. There would be very little time before Dean realized something was wrong and came looking for him, and Sam needed to use that time wisely.

He *owed* Dean that much, Gudrun too, after all she had done for him.

Following the trail, Sam realized he wasn't just tracking the creature. He was almost retracing his own steps. The thing had doubled back, and taking higher ground it had basically circled back to where Gudrun and Dean were now held up.

The *dogthing* was sitting quietly, waiting, watching. Every once in awhile, its ears ticked forward just a little as it took in the conversation from below. Could it actually understand what was being said?

Sam thought of all the times he'd wanted a pet as a child and finally understood why his father had blatantly refused him. It wasn't just because of their life on the road – it was because animals could so easily be used as vessels for evil.

Carefully sliding the weight of his pack from his shoulder, Sam flipped open the fastener and pulled out his favorite machete. It had been a gift from John after their first vampire hunt together, and he hoped it would afford him some luck now.

If bullets couldn't hurt the tupilaq, then maybe the loss of its head could. He placed the Remington down across the top of his pack in favor of the new weapon, dragging in a breath of freezing air before launching himself into the trees to his left.

The copse would hopefully give him cover until he was closer to the husky – not that getting closer to the thing would be considered sane by most.

With each step, Sam's breathing grew slower until he was almost parallel with the dog. Once he was a gunslinger's distance from the animal, he stepped away from his cover, moving completely into the open.

As expected, the husky's ears pricked back in the realization that it had company. The dog whirled, churning the snow below as its claws frantically moved to reposition it for attack.

The thing's eyes locked with Sam's and its maw dropped open in a snarl of untold, and very unnatural proportions. While it was apparent the thing was still apprehensive of his presence, it showed no intention of retreat.

Sam didn't break his gaze with the creature, holding the machete high ready to strike the first blow. He didn't really have a plan beyond decapitating the dog, and right now that looked like he may need to make the first move to achieve.

The husky whined, and for the first time Sam understood that maybe it not only understood human conversation – maybe it detected human thought too. *It knows what I'm trying to do...*

Resisting the urge to take a step backwards, Sam braced himself as the husky made a dive for his position.

The dog hit hard, surprising the young hunter by its technique. Instead of trying to knock him down as it had Dean, the dog charged at Sam's arm, jarring it backwards enough for him to lose grip on the sharpened blade he held.

The machete tumbled into the snow outside of his reach and he was knocked backwards by the blow. For precious seconds he tried to keep his center of balance, and was almost winning the battle when the husky attacked again.

Man and beast fell hard against the frozen earth, human and canine limbs flailing as each tried to get a grip on the other.

Amazingly, Sam's huge hands found a home first, constricting around the husky's throat as he held the creature away from his body.

The dog yelped as if his touch was somehow poison, its back legs kicking out as it tried to pull free. Its red orbs rolled wildly, but Sam wouldn't let go.

Instead, the hunter focused on its panicked eyes, looking into them, searching, probing until he felt a connection. He was afraid too, afraid of himself – afraid of what he was about to do even though he didn't know where the knowledge came from.

The sensation almost made Sam lose his grip, but he held fast for his brother, for Gudrun.

The husky screamed with rage and then seemed to go limp in his hands. It was giving in to him – giving in to a power – a gift Sam didn't even really know he had.

The feeling wasn't a new one.

Sam had felt this energy before, he'd felt the strange sensations the day he'd faced Alyssa – the day he had somehow sent the girl's memory wiping powers right back at her.

The husky's eyes seemed to flash over white, just for a second, and then it was pulling away, yelping, terrified – changed.

Sam released his grip on the thing's throat – suddenly more afraid of himself than the creature. Had he really just done the impossible and sent the tupilaq back against its maker? Or was Gudrun's charm more part of the equation than he realized?

Panting heavily, the hunter rolled over in the snow, tugging himself up to watch as the husky's frenzied legs carried it into the distance.

Sam glanced at his watch. He'd already been gone for over twenty minutes. Much longer and Dean would break out into search party mode. But still, could he really go back without knowing if the tupilaq had gone for good?

As if to tease further, the clouding sky began to open up, allowing some of its burden to fall from the heavens. The snow wasn't heavy, but it reminded Sam that it

would be all-too easy to lose track of his location should he decide to hike after the dog.

Not only that, but the husky's prints would soon be covered over, affording him with no way to follow it back to its lair.

Sam walked over to the lost machete, grabbing it from its snowy grave and replacing it in his pack.

He had to know what *had* just happened. If that meant Dean getting pissy with him, then so be it.

Taking the pack by its strap he launched into a slow jog after the husky's rapidly disappearing paw prints. Trying to run over this kind of terrain wasn't easy, and Sam wasn't exactly one hundred percent yet after Wyoming, but despite the obstacles he made good time. He had to, or suffer the consequences.

About a mile from the overhang where he'd fought the tupilaq, the prints moved onto a path cut into the snow and were almost swallowed up by the mud and slush upon the ground.

Sam paused, winded by the constant influx of biting cold air into his lungs and the uncertainty of what to do next.

The trail was definitely man made, winding up through a multitude of pines until it reached a small cabin.

The structure looked ancient – like some frontier abode left over from the gold rush. It was the first sign of humanity since they'd crashed, and yet the steady whirl of smoke from its chimney did little to comfort the hunter.

The place looked wrong somehow, even though there were no outward signs of anything malevolent at work.

Sam caught his breath and moved off the pathway, picking his way to flank the left side of the building through the snow-laden pines. If this was where the husky had come, then there was a good chance it was the home of the shaman who created it. It wouldn't be safe to just walk on up and knock on the door.

*If I really sent that thing back here, what does that make me?* The thought wasn't a cheering one. He had hoped, no literally prayed that after Haris had died he would be free of the gifts that had haunted him. But if he had sent the dog back here, then could he ever truly be free?

A surge of guilt washed over him and he felt his stomach churn. He'd only recently given Dean a lecture about the amulet, about how he deserved to be a guardian. And yet, here he was, wishing that his own gifts were nothing more than a distant memory.

Sam dropped his pack on the ground as he reached the rear of the cabin, using his height to cautiously peer through an ice-covered window. The pane was grimy - dirt and frost making the view almost indiscernible until he was forced to rub the back of his glove gently against it to clear the view.

Inside was a mishmash of strange items, including shelves filled with potions and jars full of dead and very ugly looking creatures. Inuit carvings covered most of the walls, although the floor was bare save for a body now sprawled across its aged wooden surface.

The body looked to be an Inuit male in his fifties, although only his traditional clothing could really add credence to the assumption. There was too much damage to anything else to clearly tell.

What had once been the man's face had been chewed and bitten until only bone and mangled, bloody sinew remained. The shaman's throat was in a similar condition, his lifeblood still leaking from the huge wound inflicted by the tupilaq.

Sam gagged as he realized he was looking at what was left of the man's windpipe, now exposed in all its raw, fleshy glory.

Alongside the recently deceased Inuit was more evidence that he had been the instigator of the tupilaq. A mangy fur pelt and several yellowing animal bones lay at odd angles, where they had fallen once the thing's mission had been complete.

The shaman was dead, and now too was the creature he had called to act on his wishes.

Sam stepped back from the window, unsure how to digest the information. The shaman had obviously been using his power to practice the dark arts. Surely that meant he was working for Ferinacci – or rather Lucifer?

Now that the shaman was dead, where did that leave their mission? How many more of Lucifer's people were up here, just waiting for the kill? *And how the hell did I beat one of their kind?*

Sam felt the pit in his stomach widen. He needed time to take in what was happening – what was happening to him. But time wasn't something he had right now.

*Dean and Gudrun will be freaking already...*

Taking the Remington, but leaving the pack behind, Sam edged to the cabin door, keeping his back to the rough log exterior. So far he's seen no reason to think there were more bad guys here, but it always paid to err on the side of caution.

*Especially when your name was Winchester.*

The front entrance to the cabin lay open just a fraction, and Sam used the tip of the shotgun's barrel to push the door further ajar. There might be no urgent need to check out the place now the tupilaq was gone, but any intel he could find here might be enough to placate his brother once they regrouped.

Because Dean was going to be more than pissed.

Sam couldn't stifle a smile as he imagined his irate brother storming through the snow with the Valkyrie in tow. Dean could be such a comedian sometimes without even realizing it, and part of Sam wished he was here right now.

Forgetting sibling rivalry, Sam forced his lofty body through the doorway and quickly skewed from left to right, scanning the cabin's interior. As far as he could tell, he was alone with the remains of the shaman and his canine creation.

The room smelled stale, like the Inuit had lived here in squalor for many months. Old food lay uneaten on the table, until even here in the glacial temperatures, maggots squirmed as they enjoyed their feast.

Sam ignored the rotting food, knowing soon the maggots would move on to the fresher meat of the floor. He kneeled, keeping the Remington across his knee as he examined the wizened Inuit.

An abyss like hole replaced what was once the man's nose and his cheeks were mere flaps of flesh where the husky had torn at it, but around the shaman's neck a cord had remained bloodied, but intact.

Yanking off a glove, Sam jerked on the leather until a whale bone carving popped from shaman's scruffy plaid shirt. The craftsmanship was expert, and the charm jarringly familiar to Sam.

"The sigil of Lucifer," he mouthed to no one in particular.

Letting the charm fall back around the Inuit's mangled neck, Sam straightened, his mind shooting backwards in time till he was once again in Wyoming. The demon that had held him captive there had painted Lucifer's symbol on his forehead. At the time, he hadn't known what had been daubed on his flesh, but later he'd been forced to look upon it in the mirror before he'd showered.

*Lucifer.*

The name still stung harder than a bad case of heartburn in his chest.

Sam tried to ignore the implications, striding over the shaman's body to inspect other obvious more modern occult items that were shattered around the foul-smelling hut.

Behind the table, the hunter noticed a small hand-woven rug that appeared as grimy and as old as the cabin itself. The colors would once have been startlingly bright, but now the only thing interesting about the carpet was where one of its edges had completely frayed away.

Underneath the non-existent section of rug, the floorboards seemed raised and at an odd angle, as if something had been hidden beneath them.

Sam hunkered down again, taking the rug with his fingertips and slowly peeling it back. The boards were in fact a trap door with a small hole carved in the center for leverage rather than a handle.

Around the perimeter of the strange wooden opening were symbols painted onto the wooden timbers in red spray paint – at least, Sam hoped it was paint.

Around the signs and whole door was something that reminded Sam of a Devil's Trap, but it was different – definitely some kind of cryptogram, but like nothing he'd encountered before.

If it was something Solomon had known about, he hadn't seen fit to include it in any of his written texts.

Trying to recall the design for later, Sam slid a hand into the handle-hole and carefully tugged, trying to make as little noise as possible.

The wooden doorway swung outwards effortlessly, as if the hinges had been oiled with far more effort than had been put into the housekeeping of the cabin.

Sam leaned closer, letting his body tilt forwards to look into the opening. A fresh breeze greeted his cheeks, with just the tiniest hint of sulfur. He recoiled slightly, getting the distinct idea that this was not the most welcoming place he'd ever visited.

The hunter squinted, but even his 20/20 vision did nothing to reveal the secrets of the chasm below. Rungs peeked through the shadows, giving at least the impression that this was not a pit directly into hell, but from what Sam's instincts told him, it was close enough.

Sam held his shotgun with one hand, fumbling with the other to find his Maglite in the depths of his winter jacket's thinsulate-lined pockets. Just as flesh met metal, a scuffling sound from behind made him forget any plans of searching the underground tunnel.

Sam tried to straighten his legs and whirl around at the same time, but in his position the move just wasn't fluid enough. A dark form was all that his eyes could pick out as someone, or something pushed him forward.

Without anything to regain his balance, there was little Sam could do to stop his forward momentum. There was a brief moment where he was teetering on the edge of the trap door, and then nothing.

His arms thrashed wildly in the darkness as his body suddenly felt weightless, but no matter how hard he tried he couldn't grab a hold of the elusive ladder rungs he had spotted moments earlier.

He was falling.

Falling into a pit that for all he knew led to Lucifer's lair and beyond...

\* \* \* \*

Dean was pacing – pacing until he'd turned the snow at his feet into a thick brown sludge that threatened to engulf his boots.

Not that the hunter had noticed. He hadn't noticed a great deal of anything since the realization hit that his little brother had duped him.

"I should never have let the big lug leave on his own. He has two huge left feet that have probably gotten him at the bottom of some ravine by now..."

"Are you *always* this way?" Gudrun picked up her pack, taking care to brush away loose snow before slinging it over her shoulder. "You're not his mother, you know?"

Dean froze on the spot, his facial muscles hardening more than the Arctic tundra they were heading towards. "Maybe I am," Dean snorted tepidly. "Seeing as your kind took away the real thing before he was old enough to even remember her."

"Not my kind." The blonde's face softened, her cheeks coloring slightly with embarrassment at her faux pas. "Sam can look after himself, Dean...but for what it's worth, I think you're right. We should go look for him."

"Jeez, the voice of reason." Dean let a hand glide under his jacket and retrieved his forty-five. Ejecting the clip, he checked it was fully loaded before tapping it back home. Maybe the automatic was useless against the tupilaq, but there was no guessing what else might lay in wait that it *might* work on. "Your reaper radar giving you any ideas which way the Abominable Winchester might have headed?"

Gudrun let a hand ruffle through her hair in thought, then brushed past the hunter to crouch by a nearby drift. Her eyes played across the ground, carefully picking out indentations that were quickly being filled by the fresh snowfall.

"Sam went this way..." She straightened, following the almost-hidden tracks without giving any more details.

"Jeez, it's worse than working with friggin' Tonto." Dean kept his weapon at waist height, eyes scanning the nearby trees while the girl pursued his brother's overly-large boot prints.

At the base of a tree stump, Gudrun paused again, noting not one, but two sets of marks in the snow. "He's hunting the tupilaq..."

Dean edged up to the girl, using his left hand to anxiously brush across his face. "Aww, that stupid sonofa...I knew he was gonna try something like this!"

"I don't think he's that far ahead of us-"

"Far enough to have gotten himself hurt or worse! Probably stepped in a damn bear trap by now," Dean grouched, trying to sound like he was half-joking, but to anyone who knew him – including Gudrun – it was easily apparent he was more than concerned about his brother.

"Sam is more capable than you give him credit for. I'm sure he's fine."

"Yeah, well, you'll forgive me if I don't take that advice too seriously, given the source." Dean pouted, nodding towards the trail it appeared Sam had followed. "Now can you just shut up and shag ass here? Or do I gotta leave you behind? 'Cause I'm telling you, that's mighty tempting about now..."

Gudrun cocked her head, evaluating just what the hunter was really thinking. He was a dark horse, but very few people could fool her – Dean included – she'd simply been around mortals too long. "If we cut through here," she eventually suggested, "we can shorten our time to the cabin..."

"Cabin?" Dean arched a brow, but didn't argue when the girl dodged across a boulder and began clambering up a sharp incline.

*Man, this chick just loves taking point...*

## Shaman's Home

Soft grey wisps of smoke continued to spiral from the log hut's chimney as if the fire beneath had recently been stoked. There was no obvious presence outside the building – nor any evidence of any kind of transport.

And yet, Gudrun faltered as she stepped onto the muddy pathway leading to the decrepit lodge.

"What's wrong?" Dean clicked the safety off his Colt and eased himself past the girl, taking tentative steps up the sloping wooden porch. "You see Sammy?"

Gudrun shook her golden locks negatively. "There's evil here."

"Yeah, well then I guess we're in the right place." Dean pushed his back against the doorframe, sliding inside the abode sideways, gun poised. It was then that he felt it – the familiar crushing feeling that he'd always had in Haris' company – except this time the atmosphere felt devoid of all oxygen too.

And was that a trace of sulfur in the air?

"I think we're alone," Gudrun noted as she moved across the room, opening a second door to what could loosely be called a bedroom.

"Yeah, you, me and Furbee's dad." The hunter gestured to the floor with the muzzle of his forty-five. "Looks like the husky decided to bite the hand that fed it."

Gudrun grew pensive, cobalt pupils narrowing as she examined the dead shaman's remains. Ravaged, torn bodies were nothing new to her, but this body and how it had died were very important. "You shouldn't worry about Sam. He's taken care of the creature and its master as I knew he would."

Dean scrunched up his nose in distaste at the gory cadaver, realizing that the off-white pustules he could see were actually moving. *Ugh, friggin' maggots already...*

The hunter let his thumb rub on the grip of his automatic, instincts telling him that something was still "off." Just because Sam had somehow used his gifts to send the tupilaq against the shaman, it didn't mean he was safe. "If Sasquatch already played hero then where the hell is his sorry butt?" He asked, pacing to the nearest window to double check outside.

"I...don't know," Gudrun admitted, fingering the whale bone carving Sam had examined earlier.

"Lady, you brought us out here. 'Don't know' right now just doesn't cut it." Dean spun back around, about to pour out another verbal diatribe when he spotted the open trap door. "What the..." He bobbed his head, indicating the opening to the girl without actually speaking.

While he had a reasonably good view of the door, he had no clue if anyone was hiding below it in the shadows.

Gudrun nodded in understanding, joining the hunter to flank the hole. As her boots met the painted cryptogram around the opening, she froze, stepping back from the symbols as if she'd been bitten by some unseen serpent.

Dean ignored the blonde's jarring retreat, instead dropping his pack into a moth-eaten chair to allow more movement. Once the bag was out of his way, he grabbed the Colt with both hands, lowering his aim to just above the trap door.

"Sammy, if you're down there you better get your sorry butt back up here before I ventilate you by mistake..." Dean edged closer to the hole in the timbers until his own voice was echoing hollowly back to him.

The sound of his voice seemed muted, strange – off even – as it bounced around in the gloom below.

Dean winced when there was no reply, and taking the automatic in just one hand he began to poke into his jacket's breast pocket in search of his tiny flashlight.

Before he could locate the light, Gudrun offered up a larger, somewhat brighter flashlight – although the hunter was at a loss as to exactly where she'd plucked it from.

"I thought your kind would be into flaming torches, you know, full-on *Robin Hood* style..." He smirked, but took the light before Gudrun had chance to snatch it back.

"Robin Hood was...*interesting*..." Gudrun shrugged. "But certainly nothing like Hollywood painted him."

Dean inched his thumb forward, switching on the flashlight and aiming it down the hole, right along with his forty-five. "Yeah, Kevin Costner just didn't have the accent for it – although Rickman was pretty cool." He twisted the unit in his hand, arching the beam until it played all the way down the shaft, reflecting off the shiny rungs of an overly-used metal ladder.

When the wide ray still refused to show the bottom of the pit, Dean hunched over, daring to get close enough to hold the light at a right angle to get the best view. Finally, the washed out beam hit something solid, and the hunter squinted enough to make out it was a stone floor.

Moving the flashlight just a hint more, he paused, realizing he was looking at a shotgun – not just any shotgun – but the Remington Sam had taken from him before his little rebellion. What was worse, Sam wouldn't have let go of the weapon unless he'd been forced, either by someone, something, or...

Dean judged the distance between the trap door and the dull granite glaring up at him from below. Right now, he didn't even want to think about the "or."

"Crap!"

Gudrun slowly nodded, her face turning into a sudden mask of pain and regret. “I know,” she muttered hollowly. “I think my friend is down there too.”

Dean’s brow shot up in surprise. He’d expected something more of a prison than a hole in the floor of a cabin. “Here?” He asked, grabbing a few items from his discarded pack as he talked.

The blonde pointed to the floor and the strange symbols she’d flinched away from. “This is part of a trap. Once inside, my kind cannot leave.”

“Oh yeah? So this is the part you wanted me and Sammy for, huh?” Dean feigned a hurt expression as he finally plucked out his smaller Maglite and handed back the girl’s more cumbersome flashlight. “Nice to know I have my uses.”

The hunter shook his head, swinging his legs into the darkness as he dropped fluidly onto the metal rungs below. As the bottom half of his body entered the shaft, he felt the temperature around him become colder, as if he’d ventured back outside without his insulated jacket for protection.

“I’m sorry, if I could come with you I would. This is more important to me than you’ll ever realize.” Gudrun’s eyes grew glassy and the hunter abruptly half-expected her to shed a tear. Instead, she pulled back away from the opening, her brief lapse of emotional restraint gone in the blink of an eye.

“Okay, so before I lower my ass into Hades, you mind telling me how we’re supposed to rescue your special buddy when we don’t know the guy, don’t have a clue what he looks like, and best of all, we don’t have your magical ass tagging along to lend a hand if things get screwed?”

“I picked you for a reason...”

Yeah, I know, everyone has a purpose.” Dean huffed, his brow knitting in frustration. “Let me tell you, my purpose is to find Sammy’s butt and drag it topside. At this point, I don’t give a rat’s ass about this Messiah-like dude we’re here to rescue.” He placed the Maglite between his teeth without waiting for an answer, making the tiny light illuminate his path while holding his Colt in the hand he wasn’t using on the ladder.

Gudrun watched silently as the stark ray from the light grew dimmer and dimmer until it was just a dull blob in the distance. Dean was vanishing into some unknown underworld, and all she could do was sit in the cabin and wait – hoping that at some point the bobbing beam of light would return, and the Winchesters along with it.

The Valkyrie peered down at the red daubed symbols on the floor and winced as if even eye contact was painful.

Backing away, she let a hand glide to Dean’s pack, dislodging it from the chair so she could sit down. Once perched on the squashed seat padding, her pale features turned from a glum scowl to a welcoming smile.

“Don’t you think it’s time you came in from the cold? You and I really need to talk...” Gudrun looked at the back door to the cabin expectantly, as if her gaze alone would bring the newcomer into the lodge’s midst.

Eventually, the log door swung inwards, its hinges moving so slowly it seemed like time itself had been put on hold.

Gudrun nodded towards the interloper. “It’s about time...”

## **Catacombs**

Sam felt icy air enter his lungs and realized that despite crash landing not once, but twice, he’d managed to stay in the land of the living.

*Planes, trap doors...what the hell next?*

He slowly inhaled again, carefully noting that breathing wasn’t causing him any pain.

Next came the more drastic test of actually moving to see if his bones had been spared any more undue fractures.

Sam groaned as he tried to stretch out, his head spinning wildly as if he'd spent a day on a rollercoaster. Still, at least his body wasn't protesting, even if his head was.

*Great, probably got a concussion or something...*

Sam rolled into a sitting position, edging backwards until his spine came into contact with something cold and slimy. It was too dark to see exactly what he'd pressed himself up against, but the hunter was hoping it was nothing more than a very damp granite wall.

He took a breath, closing his eyes until the "sea-sickness" appeared to abate. Swallowing hard, he touched a hand to his temple and wasn't shocked when it came away sticky. The tunnel shaft wasn't cleanly cut into the stone, and he'd probably caught one of the edges on his tumble into the abyss.

His ribs felt sore too, where they'd impacted with the ground, but somehow, he'd managed not to break anything.

"Dean is so gonna kick my ass for losing his shotgun." Sam leaned forwards, hands patting the ground in front of him for any sign of the weapon. After a moment he grasped the fact that it was useless.

There was no stray light from above to guide him in his quest. Either he'd crawled away from the trap door and ladder without realizing it, or the door had been closed from above.

Sam squinted, forcing his eyes to strain as he tried to make out any sign of the metal rungs on the ladder, but that too seemed invisible in the impossible lighting.

"No gun, no light," Sam grunted as he pushed his body upright. "What I'd give right about now for Dean's freaky little Zippo..."

The hunter's words seemed to reverberate back to him, bouncing around the stone catacombs endlessly. If Sam could imagine what it would be like to be trapped in a burial vault, then this was just how he'd envisage it.

Sighing, Sam let his ears do the work his eyes could not.

From somewhere to his left came the steady drip of water – apparently his new home wasn't completely sealed off from the outside elements. That was good news, considering he didn't know how long he'd be stuck in the cavern without food or drink.

*Dean will find me...*

But the harsh truth was Sam had chased off after the tupilaq without giving his brother any clue what he was up to. Even with Gudrun in tow, it would be like finding one Sasquatch in the whole of Canada.

Sam's mouth creased into a smile and he wanted to laugh at his own thought. The nickname had become so commonplace even he was using it.

"Yeah, well, how many abominable snowmen does it take to find a light bulb?"

Sam pushed away from the security of the wall and began to move his arms around in front of him, hoping to find something else solid to follow.

The air was stale with an odd odor, and there was no hint of a breeze to use as a source to follow to aid his escape.

After fifteen minutes of wandering aimlessly in the shadows, Sam was about to give up and sit back down when a pattering sound made him stop and listen.

The tapping grew louder as he strained to locate the direction it was coming from, and eventually, he realized he was hearing muted footfalls on the slime-covered floors.

The hunter quickly considered his options. This could be one of Lucifer's people searching for him. Once they realized there was no body at the foot of the trap door, it wouldn't take them long to want to find him, would it?

On the other hand, if there was such a thing as a good guy out here in the wilderness, could he risk gaining their aid?

Sam blinked, and when only darkness glared back at him he decided he had nothing to lose. If he stayed here like this, it would only be a matter of time before he succumbed to the temperature, lack of food or worse.

“Hello?” Sam hesitantly stepped into what he presumed was the center of the tunnel. “Is anyone there?”

To his left, a match ignited, flaring for the briefest of moments before settling into a small, but very welcome flame.

Sam honed in on the tiny burning stick, savoring the glow it offered. As he watched, the flame moved to light up a shaft of wood swathed in torn cloths.

“Finally, some company.” The voice had a strange lilt to it – not a full-blown accent, but more a conglomeration of several.

Sam followed the unusual drawl to its owner, taking in the man’s features before he responded.

The stranger looked to be around thirty, his short blond hair cut in much the same fashion as Dean’s. He had blue eyes that seemed to spark with energy in the radiance of his makeshift torch, and a thick growth of stubble suggested he’d been deprived of a razor for several days.

The man’s clothes were much the same thickly-padded arctic wear as Sam’s, although if he’d ever had gloves, they were long gone now, leaving his brawny fingers devoid of much color.

“My name is Jon Volsung.” The stranger offered a weathered and heavily scarred hand out in friendship. “I’m guessing you’re a prisoner here too?” He waited, seemingly in no hurry for an answer.

Sam faltered. Until now it had never occurred to him that he was a prisoner – or that the newcomer might be too. And if this man was a captive, did that make him Gudrun’s ally?

“Sam,” he responded cautiously, taking Volsung’s hand and shaking it firmly. “I...don’t really know if I’m a prisoner...”

Volsung’s sharp features broke into a smirk. “Oh, trust me, if you’re this side of that trap door, you’re here to stay. I’ve been trying for days to get out, but there are no other exits.” He sobered again, eyes downcast and voice hushed. “I don’t even know why I’m being held...”

“You’ve tried climbing back up the ladder? I mean, you have light, I’m assuming you can find the trap door again?” Sam turned in the direction he assumed was where the hole in the rock ceiling had been cut. Without light, though, the void around him was just another black chasm of dancing silhouettes.

“I’ve tried.” Volsung shook his head. “But every time I climb to the top I’m thrown back to the ground. Let me tell you, after a few harsh falls onto the rock floor I soon gave in. It was bizarre, like I was walking into some kind of science fiction force field.”

*Or a Devil’s Trap*, Sam pondered silently. *This has to be Gudrun’s friend. The thing I saw on the outside of the trap door is holding him in here. But why doesn’t he realize that?*

Sam stared at Volsung again, even though his gaze bordered on bad manners. He looked like any other man – acted like any other man – and what was more, he appeared not to know who or what he was.

“Look, I know I sound crazy, but trust me, I’m not,” Volsung continued, sensing Sam’s skepticism. “I’m a scientist myself. I know none of this should be possible...”

Sam arched a brow. Of all the things he’d expected of the man he’d come to rescue, a regular scientist was not on the list – not unless Volsung was some whacked out nuclear physicist Lucifer could use to blow up the world.

“Scientist?” Sam finally asked, intrigued by the new puzzle.

Volsung bobbed his head heaving a sigh as he explained himself. “I was part of a Norwegian Marine Biology expedition. I was out on the ice taking core samples one minute, and the next I was being snatched by two thugs.” He paused, considering whether to carry on.

“Thugs? Up here?” Sam prompted.

“I know, I sound like a madman, and it only gets worse but...they had black eyes. I mean *all* black. And I swear to you, so damn strong.” Volsung flexed his hand, balling

it into a fist. "Trust me, I can hold my own, but those people were...it was like they weren't even human..."

*That's because they're not,* Sam thought, turning away from the Norwegian just enough for his facial expression not to give him away. *But then, maybe if I'm right, neither are you...*

"So, you're all the way from Scandinavia?" Sam probed, watching as the flame from the torch flicked and bobbed in the confined space of the granite maze. "Do you think the people who grabbed you could have been Greenpeace or something?"

The question seemed random, but the hunter had to know if he was talking to a man who could save the world, or destroy it. His country of origin suggested he was one of Gudrun's kind, but appearances could often be deceptive.

For all Sam knew, he could be talking to Ferinacci in another guise – it wouldn't be the first time an arch demon had taken on a false identity to gain information.

Volsung seemed to find Sam's question amusing and he hoarsely chuckled. "What, my accent doesn't give away my nationality enough?" He held the torch higher to search Sam's face for sincerity. "The expedition I was on was a joint operation *with* Greenpeace," he finally clarified. "I'm one of the good guys..."

"I guess you are," Sam agreed, uncertainty making the pit already aching in his stomach widen into a chasm the size of the Grand Canyon.

Volsung suddenly shivered and his eyes seemed to glaze over as if he were reliving a past event. When he looked back up he feigned a smile, but it was obvious he was afraid.

And why shouldn't he be?

The scientist had been kidnapped and held captive by creatures and devices that shouldn't exist – and he didn't even know why.

The crunch didn't end there, though.

Sam suspected Volsung had a short, very sharp shock coming. After all, it wasn't every day you were told you could be the savior of mankind – at least, if Gudrun was to be believed.

*What the hell do I tell this guy?*

"So, Sam, you know all about me. How about you? What are you doing way up here in the Canadian wastelands? Maybe we can figure this whole thing out between us and get the hell out of here." Volsung gestured forwards with the still flickering torch, adding another strip of torn clothing as he moved ahead.

Sam followed the Norwegian, carefully choosing his words. "The plane I was on crashed. My brother and our friend Erika were trying to hike out when I found this place..." The hunter paused. It was time to test the water. "I think Erika is from your part of the world – her last name is Gudrun."

Volsung shrugged, ducking his head as he bobbed under a low hanging ceiling shelf to pass into the next fissure in the granite. "Sounds like a good strong Norse name," he smirked again, not understanding some of Sam's logic. "Not like I'd know her though – I mean, there are over four and a half million people living in Norway alone, Sam."

Sam felt his cheeks redden even though the temperature still felt sub-zero. Jon was pretty sharp with his wit – even if he didn't realize the true reason why Sam was asking some weird questions.

Dean would definitely like the scientist. Sam could see the pair trading snark and sharing the odd lewd joke. Right now, though, that didn't help their situation.

Jon may be something special, but he didn't know it. Any unearthly talents he may possess were locked away just as Sam's once had been.

Sam could risk telling Volsung he wasn't normal, but what would that gain them? In all probability the man would think Sam had lost his mind and desert him.

*See, you're being held here because you're some kind of Norse Superman and Lucifer is scared of you. Those black-eyed guys you met were actually demons, and the reason you can't leave here is the red symbol painted on the floor...*

Sam rubbed a hand across his temple. No matter how he played out the conversation in his head, there was just no way to explain himself and not sound like he wasn't firing on all cylinders.

No, for now it was better if Jon remained clueless to his true identity and purpose – whatever that might be.

“So, this chick and your brother, you think they'll be able to find us down here? I mean, if you were hiking together they can't be too far off, right?” Volsung rammed the burning shaft into a crevice in the rock wall, and then sat down, using a jutting section of rock as an impromptu seat.

Sam joined him on a similar outcropping, finding the granite cold, but not as damp as he'd expected. “I kind of strayed,” he admitted ruefully. “Dean wasn't expecting me to come this way. He's pretty smart when he needs to be, though, and Gudrun...well, let's just say she has a gift for finding her way...”

The scientist nodded, but he still seemed unfocused, as if something else more important than their current conversation was clawing at his mind. “She sounds like an interesting woman, but for her sake, I hope your brother doesn't bring her here.”

He moved across the chamber into the darkness, returning with something swathed in another torn strip of cloth. Opening the ragged material he revealed thin strips of uncooked meat.

The raw rodent flesh reminded Sam of the shaman's shredded corpse and he almost had to yank his head away to stop from gagging. Holding the back of his palm to his mouth he asked, “You've been eating that?”

Volsung snorted, sensing the young man's disgust at his recent diet. “You will eat it too, soon enough, if your brother doesn't find us. Like I said – not a place to bring a girl.”

The Norwegian's eyes suddenly shifted as if he'd heard a noise in one of the adjoining tunnels and he quickly re-wrapped the precious meat, plucking a large blade from his ankle that Sam hadn't noticed before.

The blood-encrusted knife was obviously what the scientist had used to kill the rats, but Sam doubted it was rodents that had Volsung on the alert right now.

“What is it?” Sam tried to see past the illumination of the torchlight, but his eyes were not nearly as well adjusted yet as his companion's.

“It,” Volsung explained. “Is the other reason why I pray your brother doesn't bring a girl here.” He glanced over his shoulder, blue eyes flashing over with fear. “You see we're not alone down here-”

Sam snatched the torch from where it had been wedged, feeling the heat radiating from it across his face. In two long strides, he joined the scientist at the mouth of the nearest passageway. “I thought you said you were alone until I got here?”

“I meant alone in the *human* sense.” Volsung narrowed his eyes, peering cautiously into the insidious gloom. “Again, I sound mad, but you'll come to believe me. You'll come to know that there is something down here with us – something evil...”

“Have you seen it?” Sam pushed, leaning forward so that more light from the torch bounced off the shaft ahead of them.

Volsung shivered again, this time the shudder making his whole body quiver like he was having a mini-seizure. “I don't have to see it,” he confessed. “I *feel* it watching me. Waiting until it knows I'm weak and easy prey...” The scientist looked up, apology flashing across his gaunt features. “And now, you're its prey too...”

## **Shaman's Home**

An icy wind blew through the open doorway, bringing huge drifts of swirling snow in with it as it roared through the cabin. The small wood-fueled stove in the corner

had no chance of competing with the elements as they ravaged the interior of the ancient abode.

Gudrun pushed up from her perch on the chair, crossing her arms defiantly without even feeling the now all-encompassing chill that had invaded her space.

"Come on in," she invited. "I love a good party."

The Inuit at the door's brown eyes flashed over black, but he didn't move. The raven orbs simply locked onto Gudrun, staring, boring into her soul.

*If she had a soul.*

"Ooh, the strong silent type." Gudrun cocked her head, the unmistakable mocking tone of her voice cutting through the frigid atmosphere better than any fire. "Pretty archaic these days, even for you guys. I mean, no offence, but the best demons all have big mouths...and trust me, I've sparred with some greats in my time..."

The Inuit's weathered face creased with annoyance, his lined features making his skin look like a well-aged piece of hide. "You won't be so mouthy when you're down there." He nodded his head towards the trap door. "Right along with your hunter buddies." He laughed, his cackle giving the impression his vocal cords had been sand-blasted long ago. "Did you really think you could come up here and outsmart the Master?"

Gudrun ran a finger along the edge of the table, her eyes tracing the contours of the marred wood rather than looking at the demon. He was insignificant to her – and she wanted him to know it. "You mean Ferinacci? Or should I say Lucifer?" She made a tutting sound with her tongue. "He's really not so tough - too much ego, ya know?"

The Inuit growled, his throat simulating the sound of the husky she had heard earlier so vividly Gudrun was forced to look up at him. He was clenching and unclenching his fists, flexing his arm muscles so tensely sinew would have snapped had he not been a hellspawn. "You dare to slur the true Lord of the Underworld?"

Gudrun smirked, her every intention to enrage the demon more. "*Dare* insult him? Oh buddy, I *invented* insulting that bastard!"

The Inuit's face seemed to melt just for a second as the demon within almost burst from its human shell in unadulterated rage. He dived forward, using his extra strength to grab Gudrun by the throat, tossing her over the table.

The Valkyrie landed among the eviscerated remains of the shaman, and was forced to let her hands sink into his putrefying flesh to push herself back upright.

She shook her palms, blood, segments of flesh and wriggling maggots flying from her hands in a shower of gore worthy of a Craven movie. "You people are just so messy." She shook her head, moving sinuously across the cabin's decking at her enemy.

The demon scoffed, picking up a glass jar filled with an animal fetus preserved in alcohol. The item had been stored for potion making, but now it made good use as a projectile.

Lobbing the receptacle, the demon dodged to his right, narrowly avoiding the table as Gudrun slammed it over and used it as a battering ram.

Shards of wood and glass filled the air as Valkyrie and Hell's finest battled it out to see who held most power.

Gudrun held out a hand, an ancient and rare whale bone carving that hung from the wall drawn to her palm by some mystical force. She slammed the carving against the wall of the lodge, snapping it into a spiky lance. "You ever seen a Viking toss a hatchet?" She enquired, raising a brow teasingly. "And I'm way better with a spear."

The demon lunged again, his boots sliding in the maelstrom of smashed jars, pottery and potions that littered the floor.

Gudrun anticipated his lumbering move and welcomed it. Racing sideways, she used the broken carving with expert accuracy, piercing the Inuit's stomach with the jagged tip and thrusting it through until the yellowing bone fragment had exited his back.

The demon screamed – not in pain, but in temper as he was held fast in the girl’s grip. The possessed Native thrashed, trying desperately to pull torn flesh from the improvised spear and failing miserably.

Blood spattered the floor, joining the drying red carpet that had oozed from the shaman, but still the Inuit fought.

“Talk about dangling a worm on a hook. You people are so easy to snag.” Gudrun held the spear with one hand, showing her captive that she had just as much strength as him.

The demon laughed back, scarlet spittle showering the girl as his voice deepened. “You talk of how easy we are to catch.” His head lolled towards the red markings around the trap door and he half-laughed, half-wincing. “Your kind are no better...”

Gudrun tilted her head forwards, chin jutting out in victory. “Maybe we aren’t...but I’m not the one who’s about to have to tell his boss he failed...” She could smell stale sweat, smell the iron in the leaking human vessel’s blood – and now, now she could smell the demon’s fear. “Tell Luciano I said Hi...”

Driving the broken bone shard even harder into the Inuit, Gudrun forced him backwards until the makeshift lance dug into one of the cabin’s log sections. She continued to push until she felt the timber give, knowing the demon was now held fast by her efforts.

“I’ll see you in Hell, bitch!” The demon jerked and spasmed, knowing what would come next if it couldn’t escape. He looked down, considering tearing his body off of the spear that now skewered him. “You don’t care about these mortals...”

Gudrun glanced at the trap door and what it meant to her.

It didn’t matter what the demon spouted.

This was her war.

*Her* chance at redemption.

The Valkyrie placed a hand on the Inuit’s writhing forehead and closed her eyes. Beneath her fingertips she could feel the throbbing energy from the creature – she could feel its power – and now, now she was going to extinguish that power.

It was a different feeling to taking a life in battle, a different feeling to collecting the soul of a soldier who had fought bravely and deserved his place in Valhalla.

But still, she was sending someone – something – away, even if it needed to be returned to Hell.

The Valkyrie felt the demon’s energy waning, but she held her hand fast, her palm sucking the creature from its earthly shell like the vacuum of space dragging air from a ruptured capsule.

The demon screamed, a black sooty cloud belching from the Inuit’s body as it tried to escape its fate.

The Inuit’s limbs fell limp at his side, any life he now had fading like a setting sun. And as the human husk expired, so did the creature that had controlled it.

The air in the cabin seemed to grow denser – every putrid odor intensified as Gudrun concentrated on her task.

The Valkyrie’s hand began to shake, but she didn’t falter or move away from the body – not yet.

The demon’s swirling mass enveloped her, fighting, screaming for its freedom, but it had no way to cheat death. As it had been sucked from the human, it was now dragged downwards, every particle of its being hauled into the ether of Hell where it had once resided.

Gudrun opened her eyes, her palms sweating as she finally let go of the dead native’s forehead. Blank, lifeless orbs stared up at her, but she ignored them. There was nothing she could do for him now, and although she had ultimately caused his demise, she felt no guilt, no pain.

His purpose had been served.

Brushing a hand through her tousled hair, Gudrun looked around her.

The cabin was a mess, but she had at least saved the Winchesters one fight with her actions. The open trap door caught her eye and she felt an abrupt pang of shame.

She had left the brothers to go on without her, knowing what may lie ahead.

It wasn't her fault she couldn't join them in the catacombs, but it was her fault alone that they were here.

*Everyone has a purpose...*

The blonde turned away from the hole in the floor. Maybe everyone did have a purpose, but what right did she have to invoke it this way – especially when she herself was so helpless?

Gudrun pursed her lips and glanced around her. There had to be something here she could use to aid the Winchesters. Information, anything that might give them the upper hand.

*Except I trashed the place.*

The Valkyrie peered at the shaman's mangled remains. Would he, could he have anything on him that might be useful in their fight?

She crouched low, ignoring the gloop of flesh and bone that her knees rested in. Gently turning the cadaver, she began to rifle through his pockets.

The Inuit didn't seem to carry many personal possessions, but then, his home wasn't exactly furnished well, either.

There was a small pouch of tobacco hidden in a tiny pocket of his jacket, but as Gudrun opened the small bag she realized it had not been concealed because of the amount of Virginia's finest. No, there was something else hidden here.

Delving into the tobacco, she let her fingertips pluck out a small carving not unlike the one the shaman had worn around his neck – at least, it looked similar – but its purpose was something much more sinister.

As her hand closed around the small whale bone, Gudrun's sense of guilt was complete. This thing was pure Inuit magic – just like the tupilaq – only far more dangerous.

It looked innocent, like any other native craftwork, but in its true form, the kikituk could be deadly to the shaman's enemies. The thing was a spirit helper to Inuit shaman's and its ethereal form usually resided in the whale carving Gudrun now held in her hand. Usually, the kikituk would leave the carving only to possess its master and do good or evil on his behalf.

Sometimes, the spirit form had even been known to take out a shaman's enemies by burrowing into their flesh and biting their hearts – not a death even Gudrun found heroic or worthy.

Gudrun let her fingers caress the bone, using her gifts to 'feel' for the kikituk. If it was still present in the carving, her intuition would tell her. She shut her eyes, probing for the spirit within the charm, but there was nothing.

Sighing heavily, the blonde set the table back upright and placed the carving on it.

The kikituk was free from its natural home, and it had not died with the shaman. That meant that somewhere – possibly in the catacombs below the lodge – the kikituk was running amok.

It was alone, without true form – and worse still – the creature was uncontrolled, like a wild animal uncaged in a big city.

Gudrun held her breath for the longest moment.

The Winchesters and the man they had come to rescue were probably trapped with a creature they could never comprehend – a creature they didn't know even existed.

And the only way to warn them was to join them.

The Valkyrie dared to once again look at the trap door, and the strange cryptogram that guarded it. Once she crossed over, there would be no crossing back.

For her the war would be over.

Straightening, Gudrun crossed the room and stood at the edge of the darkness. She didn't need a flashlight to see what was below.

For her kind, eternal damnation at the hands of Lucifer.

Stepping forward, she shook her unruly locks one last time and walked over the threshold, traversing the symbols on the floor and entering her own personal Hell.

Sacrifice in her system of belief was the ultimate mark of a hero, and already, the Winchesters had sacrificed enough.

It was time to pay back that debt in full.

## Catacombs

Dean reached the bottom rung and dropped to the ground, his booted feet striking bedrock with a bone-jarring thud. He pulled the Maglite from between his teeth, swallowing accumulated spit before running the back of his hand across his mouth. Replacing his .45 into the pocket of his coat, he picked up the Remington left behind by his brother.

With the shotgun leveled across his forearm holding the small flashlight, Dean began to move slowly through the blackened cavern. The light from the beam barely illuminated more than a few feet in front of him and accompanied by the numbing cold, the total effect was unnerving to the hunter.

"I'm gonna kick your ass little brother, so help me. You drag me out here, followin' some damn reaper, crashing in the woods, trudging through the snow, now chasing your ass down into some freakin' cave," Dean muttered. "You're so gonna owe me a week at the Bellagio after this."

He took a few more steps forward cautiously, ducking under a low hanging stalactite, and muttering a curse as ice cold water from the column dripped off and ran down the back of his neck. He shivered uncontrollably; despising the water, the cold, the darkness, and the situation in general, wanting nothing more than to find Sam and get back to South Dakota... *Screw Gudrun and her special purposes...*

Dean moved further and further into the murky darkness of the cavern, cautiously making his way through tunnels that narrowed and divided, his senses straining to pick up on any sign of his brother. The scuttle of something against the rock behind him caused him to spin around, his gun chasing the glow from the Maglite as he scanned the looming blackness.

"Sammy?" he called out tentatively.

His skin prickling, Dean's index finger tensed slightly on the trigger of the Remington. He knew he wasn't alone in this pitch dark chasm, over a decade of hunting assured him of that fact.

"Dammit, Sam, where the hell are you?" he called out, moving toward the opening of a shaft.

A low growl answered his call, echoing through the darkness, its origin difficult to ascertain within the hollow depths of the massive cave system. Dean whirled around, shining the flashlight back and forth, his eyes searching for movement in the ominous shadows that seemed to leap out from the cavern walls.

"A bear, it's probably just a bear, right? Bears hibernate in caves," he assured himself. "Of course, so do wendigos. And after all, this is my luck, we're talking about."

Dean quieted, straining to listen for any more movement, any further noises. The steady sound of water dripping from the ceiling and the hanging mineral formations matched the thrum of his own blood as it pulsed within his veins. His heartbeat banged within his ears and for a moment he worried that the sound might even be audible to whatever else resided within the dark void.

Before he had a chance to consider the thought further, another growl rumbled just beyond Dean's right shoulder. Alerted by the cascade of tumbling stones, Dean

shifted toward the hint of movement, shotgun aimed in the direction of the perceived threat.

"Come on, you sonofabitch. Grow a set and quit playing hide and seek," he shouted, bracing himself as he waited for the impending attack.

"Dean?"

Startled by the sound of his own name being called and the touch of a hand on his shoulder, Dean spun around, nearly firing both barrels of the shotgun into his brother.

"SAMMY! Dammit, dude. Haven't I told you not to go creepin' up on me like that?" Dean warned, his breath coming out in pants as he fought to slow his heart back down to a rate slower than a Lars Ulrich drum solo.

"Man, its good to see you," Sam continued on, ignoring Dean's irritation.

"Yeah, you too. Although, I'm seriously considering kicking your ass right now. What were you thinking there Rambo? Taking off on your own to go after Rin Tin Tin and his master all by yourself?" Dean admonished, swatting at his brother's head.

"Ah, you're just pissed 'cause I left you with Gudrun," Sam countered with a snicker. "By the way, where is she?"

Dean grunted. "Princess Leia stayed topside. Did you notice the markings on the entrance to your luxurious accommodations before you came down here?"

"Yeah, that weird looking Devil's Trap."

"Yep. Well it seems that your Viking girlfriend isn't exactly immune to them either. Guess that's why she conned our asses into coming here. Needed us to come do the dirty work for her," Dean grumbled.

"Dean..." Sam groaned, rolling his eyes at his brother's anti-Gudrun tirade.

"I'm just saying, Sam. I get that we owe her reaper ass, but we're stumbling around in the dark down here. We don't know who or what we're even looking for. And she sure as hell isn't around at the moment, helping us find this almighty savior of mankind."

"Yeah, well I kinda got that part covered," the younger man answered.

As if on cue, Jon stepped out of the darkness, joining the brothers. His blond hair stood out like a beacon in the blackness and despite the obvious masculine build, Dean felt a chill at the noticeable similarities between the tall man and the Valkryie.

"Dean, this is Jon Volsung. Jon, this is my brother, Dean," Sam introduced the newcomer.

Dean tilted the Maglite upward, casting the beam at the man's face as he eyed him suspiciously. The blond raised a hand to block the offending light, shifting backwards defensively.

"Dean, cut it out," Sam warned, reaching out and pushing his brother's arm down.

"Yeah, alright. So what's your story? How'd you end up on the armpit of Canada tour?" Dean asked, casually laying the Remington across his arm but leaving his finger on the trigger cautiously as he continued to watch the lanky Scandinavian.

"As I told your brother, I was part of an arctic expedition, taking polar ice cap samples, a multi-country scientific study on the effects of global warming."

"Global warming? Great! One of those do-gooders, huh?" Dean mumbled.

"One minute I'm with my team, the next, two men grab me and I wake up here," Jon recapped, ignoring the hunter's snide remark.

"Courtesy of a couple of very large, *dark-eyed* men," Sam added in, hoping his brother picked up on the inference.

"Have you seen these men again since you've been here?" Dean asked warily.

"No, why?"

"No reason."

"As I told Sam, I've been down here alone, except for... well," Jon paused, as though not quite sure what words would make him sound less insane.

"Except for what?" Dean asked suspiciously.

"I'm not sure. I just know I haven't been alone down here, even before you and your brother showed up. I know you'll probably think I'm crazy, but it's just this feeling of evil..." The blond attempted to convey his meaning.

Dean shifted the flashlight's beam over towards Sam, but even before the light illuminated his brother's features, he knew that the younger man was already looking concerned by Jon's remark.

"Well, I for one, suggest we don't hang around here long enough to find out if your feelings are right," Dean offered, nervously scanning the adjacent tunnels, remembering the growl he'd heard moments before.

"Can you get us out of here?" Jon asked skeptically, his ice blue eyes nearly glowing in the darkness.

"Just relax, Frodo. Leave it to me, I'll get you out of here," Dean snapped, starting off back the way he'd come.

"Dean, hang on," Sam called out, snagging the sleeve of his brother's coat.

"Yeah? What?" Dean answered irritated. He wanted nothing more than to be out of the dismal surroundings, the oppressive cavern slowly feeling as though it were collapsing in on top of him.

Sam maintained his grasp on Dean's coat, pulling his brother several steps ahead and out of Jon's earshot. He looked back over his shoulder to where the tall Norwegian fumbled with another makeshift torch.

"Dean, how're we gonna get him out of here?" Sam demanded. "He can't get past the Devil's Trap markings either. Whatever there is about him, those sigils are keeping him stuck down here."

"I don't suppose he has any magical superpowers he's just waiting to demonstrate?" Dean quipped.

"He doesn't have a clue about what's going on. I mean, seriously, I don't think this guy thinks there's anything more evil in the world than drunken Exxon captains or whaling boats," Sam explained.

"Yeah, that or he's just playing us, Sammy. I mean, come on. Would you be so calm, sitting in a friggin' cave in the middle of godforsaken Canada? I don't trust him. I don't trust Gudrun. As a matter of fact, this whole freakin' adventure stinks worse than the socks off your massive feet," the older hunter complained.

"Dean, why would Gudrun lie about Jon? Why would those demons have come after her at Bobby's? Why bring the Cessna down and then the attack by the tupilaq? Don't you think that's an awful lot of work to stop us from getting here? From getting to Jon?"

"Gudrun is a reaper, dude. How many times have I got to remind you of that fact? Sure, maybe she's not collecting dead Viking heroes anymore, but it isn't like she doesn't have ties to the other team. She leads us here, and now, conveniently, she can't come down and help rescue 'save the whales' boy? Oh, and let's don't forget, savior of the world over there doesn't even have a clue about current events," Dean protested, his voice raising.

"Keep it down," Sam warned, looking back at Jon. "So, what? You just want to leave him here then, 'cause you don't trust him? 'Cause none of this makes any sense?"

Dean toyed with the release on the shotgun. "No, I'm not sayin' that, Sam. Dammit! I'm just tired of being in the dark about all this," he whined. "I'm tired of being in the dark period."

"Then let's get the hell outta here. We'll figure it out topside," Sam encouraged, sensing his brother's frustration. Dean was action, not theory, head-on, not hold back. Right now, they had way too many questions and not nearly enough answers and Sam knew if it was making him uneasy then it was likely driving Dean well past the borders of sanity.

"Yeah, well go get Frodo then. I'm thinking he's right about there being something else down here with us," Dean added, handing Sam the shotgun before pulling his .45 back out from his jacket pocket once again.

"Jon, come on. We're outta here," Sam called out.

The tall scientist trotted back over toward the brothers, proudly displaying the revamped torch he'd been tinkering with. He tossed the torch to Sam, who plucked it deftly out of the air.

"Hold that a second," the Norwegian ordered, while he struck a match, holding it up to a tattered piece of cloth that was wound around the short length of wood.

"Ooh, Frodo make fire," Dean snarked, snatching the flaming stick out his brother's hand and heading back toward the head of the tunnel.

"Is you're brother always such an... esel?" Jon muttered in frustration, reverting to his native language.

"I have no idea what that means, but yeah, more than likely, Dean is one," Sam replied good-naturedly, slapping the Scandinavian on the shoulder as they followed behind.

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The trio moved through the catacombs slowly, Dean leading the way cautiously as he listened and watched for any sign of the thing that made the growling noises earlier. Just behind him, Sam and Jon trailed. He could hear them chatting, carrying on some sort of conversation about seals or dolphins or God only knew what. Considering his geek brother and the equally nerdy marine biologist, Dean wouldn't have been surprised to have heard them talking about the mating habits of cave worms at this point. Granted, it was likely nervous chatter on the part of the scientist, and he couldn't rightly blame him all things considered, but at this point, the noise was beginning to get on Dean's nerves.

"Dammit, you two, can you possibly talk any louder? I don't think the entire northern hemisphere has heard us yet," he grumbled, turning back to glare.

He was about to chastise the duo further when the skittering of rocks sounded in the tunnel just beyond him. The clatter stopped all of them in their tracks, Dean fanning the .45 ahead of him in the darkness. Sam pulled up closer, mimicking his brother's movements with the shotgun.

"What do you think it is?" he whispered.

"Don't know, don't care to find out," Dean replied, thrusting the torch forward to illuminate the shaft. "Grab Frodo, let's get moving."

The elder hunter picked up the pace, leading the others and trying to ignore the feeling that some larger, darker presence was lurking just out of sight within the shadows of the cave. By his memory, they weren't more than a hundred yards from the ladder and the trap door above. Just a little further and they'd be in the clear and out of this black pit.

The first growl echoed throughout the cavern, bouncing off the granite walls like the roar of some massive beast. It came from everywhere and nowhere simultaneously, causing all three men to spin around crazily in search of the source.

Dean spurred into action first, grabbing Jon and pushing him ahead while yelling at Sam to follow. The second snarl was closer; a lower, longer and more insidious sound. Dean was almost certain he could feel the thing's hot breath on the back of his neck as he was racing for the exit to their impromptu prison.

"Dean, how much further?" Sam questioned.

"Just keep moving, Sammy," Dean ordered, glancing back over his shoulder as yet another deep growl sounded. "You get him to that ladder and don't stop for anything."

"Dean, what about you?"

"Sam! Don't argue, just..."

Dean's command was abruptly cut off as the kikituk sprung from the cloying darkness. It howled as it rose up to tower over the young hunter, the saliva dripping from its ghastly maw eerily similar to the water that fell from the stalactites earlier.

Dean didn't hesitate. Raising the pistol, he took careful aim on the creature's head, pulling the trigger and allowing the automatic's clip to empty the first half dozen rounds before he released pressure.

Unfazed by the bullets, the kikituk screeched in defiance, lashing out with razor-like claws that just barely missed ripping open Dean's chest. He jerked backwards, stumbling over the uneven ground of the tunnel and landing hard on his right arm. The .45 fell from his hand, suddenly gone numb from the solid whack to his elbow.

"Dean!" Sam shouted, charging back into the open area and firing the shotgun at the massive beast.

While the bullets from the automatic had pinged harmlessly from the kikituk's strange outer covering of fur and leathery hide, the onslaught of rocksalt peppering its exterior seemed to give it pause. Dropping back on its haunches, it snarled at both hunters once again just as Sam fired another round.

The kikituk screeched a final time, clawing the air ineffectively, then just as quickly darted off into the tunnel, the darkness swallowing it up as though it never existed. But they could still hear the thing, could still smell its rank odor of death and decay permeating the very rock walls surrounding them.

"Dean? You okay?" Sam asked, squatting down to check on his brother.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Where the hell did that thing go? Keep an eye out, Sammy," Dean ordered, pushing up from the ground while gingerly nursing his right arm.

"What the hell was that thing?" Jon asked, suddenly appearing from the shadows.

"What? They didn't show *Predator* in your country hey Frodo?" Dean quipped. "I thought Arnold was like your national hero or something?"

"I know who Arnold Schwarzenegger is and he is not from my country. And likewise, I *have* seen the movie *Predator*. THAT was not like anything from a movie," Jon insisted, trying to hide the terror from his voice.

"No, that was most definitely not something from a movie, dude. More like a nightmare," Dean agreed, softening slightly as Sam threw him a warning glance. "And now, that big nasty hunk of rotting cave-alien is between us and the way outta this hellhole."

"The rocksalt seemed to stop it," Sam offered.

"Nah, I don't think it really hurt it, more like it just startled it. Something it wasn't ready for, no real stopping power. Anyway, I only have a few more shells unless you can make some magically appear."

"You don't have to be a smart-ass, Dean."

"True. But this is so much more fun than say falling apart and weeping uncontrollably. Besides, I'm just not very good at the whole, 'we're gonna die, we're gonna die' crap," Dean whined.

"Okay then, *smart-ass*, what are we gonna do?"

"We're still getting out of here. I'll be damned if I came all this way to let some overgrown wendigo-wannabe stop me. And I damn sure ain't dying in friggin' Canada, in a cave no less. Get the torch and if push comes to shove, we'll light it's ass up," Dean suggested, ejecting the clip from the .45 to check the remaining rounds.

"Who are you two? Really?" Jon asked, retrieving the torch from where Dean had dropped it during the kikituk's attack. "The weapons, rocksalt, this creature, you both act as though it's just another day at some horror movie set."

Dean looked over to his brother warily. Having no desire to be the one to try to explain the mysteries of the supernatural world to this would-be savior of mankind, he motioned to Sam that he was scouting up ahead and moved into the darkness of the catacombs.

Sam sighed. He knew this question was overdue. But now wasn't really the time or the place for the *War and Peace* version.

"Jon, um... my brother and I are hunters," he began.

"Hunters?" the tall man repeated skeptically.

"Yeah, but probably not like you think."

"Are you trying to tell me that you and Dean are poachers or something?"

Sam laughed. In Jon's world, this was the worst thing he could come up with. The poor fool had no concept of the true horrors that existed out there and yet he was supposed to be some powerful being, some key to the salvation of the human race?

*So this isn't going quite like I thought...*

"Uh, yeah- maybe we're not like that exactly, Jon. That wasn't quite what I was trying to tell you. Uh, look. Never mind. Let's just say that sometimes, Dean and I, we kinda end up getting called to handle problems with uh... creatures... that are being a bit of a nuisance. Sometimes, we just have an *expertise* with certain situations that aren't as run of the mill," Sam tried to explain.

Jon seemed to consider the younger brother's words, nodding thoughtfully before he looked back up and smiled.

"Look, Sam. I'm sorry. You don't owe me an explanation. You and your brother seem like decent enough people. I don't exactly see either of you as the type to be going around clubbing baby seals. Don't ask, don't tell, right? Isn't that your government's motto?"

Sam smiled. "Yeah, I 'spose it is. Honestly Jon. We're gonna get you out of here, okay. Count on that!"

"Alright boys and girls, Sam you can be the girl, let's get moving. I didn't see any sign of our big buddy, so let's haul ass before it decides to chow on ours," Dean interrupted, popping back into the larger chamber and startling Sam and Jon.

Dean reached into one of the large outer pockets of his coat and pulled out the remainder of the salt-loaded shells. He handed them over to his brother, waiting as Sam chambered the first few, and then pocketed the remainder.

"Okay, we stay close and we move fast. If that thing pops out, Jon, I want you to stay behind Sam and keep heading toward to the ladder. Sammy, you just keep pumping rounds at the bastard," Dean commanded.

He paused as he assessed the other two men's readiness. When both Sam and Jon nodded, Dean cocked the .45 and headed back down the tunnel, leading the way.

They moved as quickly as Dean could push them, fear-induced adrenaline helping drive fatigued muscles into responding. The creature was near, the occasional low growl emanating from the shadows and spurring them on even though they didn't need the motivation.

At one point, the tunnel narrowed sharply, the walls and the ceiling closing inward and forcing the threesome to slow and wedge through the claustrophobic space one at a time. Dean held back, motioning Sam through first, smirking in the darkness when he heard his younger *and taller* sibling curse loudly as he smacked his head on the low hanging cavern rock.

Jon struggled through next. Like Sam, his height hindered him as he tried to navigate the contracted confines. Carrying the torch, it cast a spooky shadow around the tall Norwegian as his hunched over figure moved through the shaft.

"I'm through," he shouted back upon reaching the other side.

Hating the small space, but relishing the fact that the massive creature would likely have a hard time pursuing them past this point, Dean entered the tunnel next. His six foot frame allowed him to nearly stand straight up without the associated risk of hitting his head, but the jutting rocks of the walls seemed to reach out and grab at his arms and legs.

Taking a step, something snagged his left ankle and he stumbled forward, barely reaching out in time to prevent himself from face-planting into the wet cavern floor.

Irritated, Dean managed to right himself, preparing to take another step when it seemed like the very granite wall of the cave lurched out and jammed into his right shoulder sending him sprawling to the ground.

His curse elicited retaliatory laughter from Sam further ahead in the tunnel and for the briefest moment, Dean considered mouthing back some sort of bodily threat. The only thing preventing him was the sudden wash of pain from his right shoulder accompanied by the fetid stench of decaying flesh.

He “felt” the creature’s presence a split second before he heard it, the ear-splitting howl nearly deafening him within the confines of the small space. Dean rolled over and over, instinctively curling his body in an effort to stay out of the range of the kikituk’s razor-like claws.

“Dean? Dean!” Sam’s panicked shout echoed back through the restricted shaft.

Breathless, the older brother scrambled to remain out of range of the hideous monster’s reach. The thing filled the entire expanse of the tunnel, its deformed head skimming the top of the cave as it strained to get at Dean.

Backpedaling, Dean kept moving through the tight shaft, never taking his eyes off the creature. The rough rock bit into his flesh, but he ignored the minor pain, too intent on the deep-set yellow eyes that seemed to glow at him. A shiver ran down his spine as his subconscious briefly flashed a mental image of Haris over-top the raging beast.

“Dean? Dammit, answer me!”

Sam’s voice snapped Dean back to the present, the visage of the dead demon replaced by the long fangs and matted fur hanging from the elongated skull of the creature.

“Yeah, Sammy. I’m coming, keep moving. I don’t think the bastard can get through here,” Dean shouted back.

He reached the other end of the tunnel, nearly stumbling into his brother’s waiting arms when he emerged. Dean clambered to his feet, sagging momentarily before Sam grabbed him underneath his arms to support him.

“You’re bleeding,” the younger man exclaimed, his hands peeling at the torn coat at Dean’s shoulder.

“It’s fine, we’ve got to keep moving,” Dean insisted, shrugging away. “Where’s Jon?”

“Right here,” the tall blond answered, tentatively stepping forward.

Dean turned. Breathing hard, he forced himself to block out the cold and wetness that was seeping through his clothing. Closing his eyes, he sucked in a deep breath, willing his mind to focus on the problem at hand. When he opened them again, both Sam and Jon were staring at him; Jon with panic, Sam with his customary concern.

“I’m alright,” he snapped at Sam, then looking at Jon he continued, “You better be worth it.”

“He is.”

The soft voice was a preview to the lithe body that abruptly materialized from the shadows. The three men spun around to the newcomer, instantly on alert although Sam relaxed immediately upon recognizing the Valkyrie.

“Gudrun? What are you doing down here?” he asked worriedly.

“I ran out of bad guys to kill, figured you boys might need some help,” the female warrior answered.

“Ah, we’re doing just fine, sister. Thank you very much,” Dean added in, determinedly moving past the blonde.

“Yeah, I can see that you are,” Gudrun replied sarcastically, noting the crimson stain adorning the older hunter’s shoulder.

“Erika, how did you get down here? I mean, the markings, the trap? What will you do?” Sam asked in rapid fire succession.

"Can we please save the tearful reunion for later? I'd kinda like to haul ass outta here before our little playmate tries to make trail mix out of us again," Dean reminded.

"It's not important, now, Sam. I take it you've run into the kikituk?" she countered.

"Big nasty looking thing, looks like Dr. Frankenstein had a go at creating an oversized grizzly? Yeah, you could say we've run into it," Dean sniped back. "Nice of you to warn us about the damn thing by the way."

Gudrun turned to face the elder hunter, her face a mask of sincerity. "Dean, I swear, I didn't know it was down here until I saw the shaman's carving. I would have never sent you to face it alone. Why do you think I came into the cavern?"

"Yeah, well next time, don't do us any favors, okay."

"Fine, you ungrateful ass, why I ought to just leave your unappreciative, pigheaded, stubborn..."

"Stop, both of you just stop," Sam implored, raising both hands in exasperation. "Don't you think we have just a few larger problems to deal with than your constant bickering?"

"Are they always like that?" Jon asked drawing up to the group.

Sam nodded ruefully. "Yeah, pretty much since they first met. But don't let it fool you. Behind all that abrasive banter is just unbridled lust."

"Shut up, Sam!" Both Dean and Gudrun simultaneously yelled as the younger Winchester chuckled.

"Alright, seriously, we need some sort of plan here because unless you have a way to kill that damn thing, we've got to manage to keep out of its path while we figure out how to get not one but two of you out past those weird Devil's Traps now," Sam reminded.

Gudrun smiled knowingly, but not revealing anything, her attention captured by the tall Norwegian.

"So?"

"The kikituk won't be easy," she began, forced away from her silent observation of Jon.

"No shit, Sherlock," Dean mumbled, absently rubbing his shoulder.

Gudrun glared at Dean then continued. "The kikituk, in its true form, can be used for healing or for evil when controlled by its creator. It's not much different than a tupilaq in that respect. Unfortunately, when Sam sent the tupilaq back on the shaman and it killed him, the shaman's power and control over the kikituk was lost as well. Before, the thing was kept essentially in check, waiting to do the shaman's bidding. That was until the shaman died."

"And now?" Sam chanced.

"Now, it's loose, out of control, essentially raw, unfocused power," she answered.

"Just friggin' great. Any other cheery news?" Dean grumbled.

"Well, you might want to stay away from its teeth, because it does tend to like to bite out its victims' hearts," Gudrun replied nonchalantly.

Sam swallowed reflexively while next to him, Jon paled in disbelief.

"You're kidding right? This is all just some joke? Some unreal nightmare?" the Norwegian implored, looking back and forth from the hunters to the beautiful blonde that seemed so out of place in the dismal cavern.

"This hasn't been real enough for you, Frodo?" Dean asked. "Maybe you'd like to have your arm sliced and diced open. Would that be enough reality for you?"

Gudrun gently placed a hand on Dean's arm, silencing him. "Please," she murmured quietly, asking, not demanding as she turned her attention back to the panicked biologist.

"Listen, I know this all seems kinda crazy to you and I wish I had the time right now to explain everything," she began.

"Explain everything? You can explain *any* of this? Maybe you can at least tell me why I'm here? Why does anyone want me? Why am I here stuck in a cave with some monster trying to, what did you say, bite my heart out?" Jon rambled.

"I won't let that happen to you," Gudrun promised solemnly.

"You won't let that happen?" he cried out. "Don't get me wrong, I'm really grateful that you all seem to be trying to help me here, but honestly, unless you have a large 'S' painted on your chest, I'm not sure what you think you're going to do."

"Let's just say I have my talents. We all do, including you," the Valkyrie replied mysteriously.

"Me? Ha! Lady, I don't know who you think I am, but a few days ago I was just another marine biologist doing my part to save the planet," Jon insisted.

"I know exactly who you are."

"Do I know you?" Jon asked, his eyebrows pinched together as though he struggled to recall a distant memory.

"*En annen liv, min venn,*" the woman replied back in Norwegian.

The words, spoken in his native tongue, perplexed him but Jon shrugged the confusion off, flinching suddenly when the Kikituk's nearby howl resounded through the catacombs.

"Guys!" Gudrun shouted, alerting the brothers.

Sam and Dean bounded back to the female warrior's side, both on alert and scanning the looming shadows.

"Where is it?" Dean demanded, his .45 fanning in all directions.

"Close," Gudrun answered, unmoving, only her icy blue eyes shifting in the faint flickering of the torchlight.

The creature yowled again, closer still and seemingly from the nearer side of the narrow tunnel shaft. Sam lifted the Remington, his finger tensing as he searched for a target.

"It got ahead of us. It must have found another way around," he surmised.

"What do we do now?" Jon asked, panic tingeing his voice.

Gudrun shifted to face Sam, cerulean orbs locking on his green-blue.

"You promise me no matter what happens, no matter what you see or hear, you'll get him out of this place?" she pleaded, her head motioning toward Jon.

The young hunter looked at her, confused then suddenly worried by the soulfulness contained within the piercing stare.

"Erika, what are you going to do?" he asked suspiciously.

"I thought at first that this was all about capturing him, about preventing him from fulfilling his purpose, his calling. But maybe I was wrong. I think maybe it was also to get me here. They knew I'd come once I found out he was here. You know, kill two birds with one stone," she mused.

Sam stared at the blonde, unsure of her current train of thought but not entirely liking the ominous tone of her voice.

"What are you talking about? Look, can we save this for later, we need to get to the trap door," he reminded her.

"I guess I suspected it all along. Selfish. I was selfish Sam, for dragging you and Dean into this. And I'm sorry, I truly am. I just want you to know that I never wanted to put either of you at risk; you were never bait, never acceptable losses. But someday, I just hope you'll understand my motives," she explained cryptically.

"Erika, you don't owe us any explanation. We trust you, whatever your reasons. Now come on, enough of this, let's just focus on getting everyone out of here."

The Valkyrie smiled warmly, but Sam could still detect a certain sadness in her eyes. He wanted to challenge her, to force her into explaining or at the very least to make her understand that he owed her far more than he could ever repay. To that end, whatever situation in which she had involved them paled in comparison to all she had done for him.

But before Sam could confront the ancient warrior, the kikituk burst from the hidden depths of the granite tunnels. Jon screeched in surprise as the beast's claws glanced off the nearby rock wall, the strike missing the biologist's head only by the barest of fractions and only because Dean grabbed him by the collar, pulling him away at the last moment.

Immediately pushing Jon ahead of him, Dean turned and fired several rounds at the massive creature. "Move, move, move," he shouted, frantically trying to drive everyone into motion. "Come on you sonofabitch, come get me," he taunted, attempting to draw the beast away from their only means of escape.

"Dean, no!" Gudrun shouted, rushing over to the hunter's side and pulling him back from his bold stance.

He struggled against her, attempting to throw off her restraining arm, irritated by her intervention. "What the hell, woman? Let go of me and get your reaper ass down that tunnel," he shouted, trying to shove the blonde in the direction of the ladder back to the surface.

"No," she replied, twisting out of his grasp and whirling him around, exhibiting strength borne of her supernatural origins. "Not this time."

Dean began to argue, his mouth opening but the words freezing on his tongue. He looked at the woman before him, her long, nearly white hair enveloping a face that belonged more on the front cover of *Elle* than at the bottom of a dark pit preparing to battle some shaman's out of control monster. At that moment, Gudrun looked petite and vulnerable, even though he knew that just below the surface, power and strength were stealthily hidden in the small frame.

"No way, not happening," he insisted. "I'm not letting some chick fight the big bad kikituk to save my ass."

"We all have our purposes," she reminded him.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm tired of that bullshit line," Dean refuted.

"Dean, please. Your purpose has not changed. I'm counting on you to get Jon out of here. Get Sam out of here. This is my purpose," the Valkyrie insisted.

Gudrun turned away from him without waiting for a response, dashing forward toward the lumbering beast. She pulled a slim blade from the interior of her thick coat before shrugging her arms from the sleeves and allowing it to fall like a lifeless skin to the cave floor.

The kikituk trumpeted a defiant screech, flexing its clawed appendages as though it was beckoning the warrior maiden onward. Gudrun obliged, darting in and underneath the mammoth's flying claws and thrusting upward with the weapon. She spun around behind the creature in a continuation of the movement, scoring the leathery hide and splattering the nearby rock wall with the kikituk's thick ochreous blood.

The beast spun around to retaliate, following the fast moving attack of the blonde a fraction too late as Gudrun next drove up from a crouched position, plunging the knife into the side of the Inuit monster. She tore the blade free, dive-rolling across the wet ground as the kikituk howled and lunged at her.

She came back to her feet, instantly calculating her next offensive move and vaguely aware of Sam's voice shouting above the battle din. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the tall, young hunter struggling against the hold of his older brother as he fought to enter into the fray. Beyond them, she briefly spotted Jon, his blue eyes staring at her, through her, eyes that held fear yet also something more.

The kikituk bellowed once more, distracting her and forcing her attention back on the battle. She shouted at them to go, hoping they would listen, praying that Dean would at least be sensible enough to think with his head and not his heart and get the others out while she carried on with her plan.

Gudrun charged the kikituk like an ancient berserker, her battle cry filling the cavern. She drove her shoulder into the thing's torso, her free hand blocking the flash of talons while jamming the knife upward into the beast's chest. Propelled by her

unearthly strength, the blade tore through meat with a grisly ripping sound, the yellowish fluid that passed for the creature's blood splashing all over the blonde.

Her hands slicked, Gudrun couldn't pull the weapon free from where it had lodged within the kikituk's chest. In too close, she was caught within the monster's reach, crumbling when the kikituk's massive razor-tipped appendage slammed down on her shoulder.

A tiny gasp of pain escaped her as Gudrun fought to escape. Breathless and slightly dazed, she scrambled to her knees, stumbling, crawling forward. She felt the red hot lash of the kikituk's claws as they scored the flesh on her back, continuing down to her right hip. The power of the hit threw her body forward and the former handmaid to Odin struck a protruding stalagmite, driving the air from her lungs and fracturing bones underneath.

Dimly, she heard her name yelled out and as she struggled back up, she saw Jon hanging at the edge of the shaft opening. She watched as Dean forcefully grabbed the young man by the back of his collar, tugging him backward even as she saw the urge in the hunter's eyes to leave the biologist and rush into the melee.

Spitting out a mouthful of blood, she stalwartly rose to her feet, sensing the kikituk approaching from behind even though she hadn't turned to track it. Without breaking eye contact, she nodded at Dean, conjuring up a wry smile that he could only half-heartedly returned.

With the kikituk's fetid breath scouring the back of her neck, she focused on Jon, calling to him even as Sam joined his brother in pulling the man toward safety.

As the beast's first claw speared the back of her neck, impaling her and trapping her to her fate, she focused on the visage of the tall, blond man, allowing his image to burn into her retinas for all eternity.

"Helgi!" she cried out, listening to the ancient name echo off the cavern walls. "Helgi, Jeg vil elske deg til evig tid, og når tiden ikke er mer, vil jeg fortsatt elske deg, til universets slutt og videre. Jeg er din for alltid."

Feeling herself lifted off the ground, Gudrun was flung once again to the ground as the kikituk dislodged her from its claws. With a howl of victory, the beast pounced on her, pummeling her repeatedly with its distorted paw-like extremity.

Unsatisfied with its abuse, the creature hauled her up, suspending Gudrun several feet from the floor and face-to-face with its gaping, fang-filled maw. She met its stare defiantly, determined to embody the stoic warriors she'd seen face death on the battlefield so many times before.

As the kikituk's lengthy fangs plunged down into her chest tearing through flesh, bone and vessels as it sought out her heart, she focused only on the empty tunnel beyond the edge of her dimming vision. She smiled in satisfaction, burrowing her fingers into the kikituk's matted fur in a death-grip and closing her eyes one final time as the beast roared triumphantly.

She'd smiled wryly, her blue eyes trying to convey strength but actually belying a sad resignation. She nodded to him then, a silent motion that pleaded for him to accept her decision, her sacrifice, and save the others. In that moment, everything Dean had ever thought about her changed.

She wasn't the cold, unfeeling reaper, determined only to collect brave warriors from the battlefield. She wasn't even the demon-fighter, appearing miraculously to save his brother from certain death. Right then, she was simply a woman, strong and passionate and ready to fight for those she cared about.

He flinched in sympathetic pain when the kikituk speared her, cringing when the blood welled up and coated her hair, turning it from yellow to red. Cursing under his breath, he fought the urge to ignore her request and charge in to free her from the beast. But his momentary hesitation was all it took for the creature to spin her around, its deformed head plunging downward and tearing into her chest.

If he lived to be a hundred, the sound of her body being so brutally violated would haunt him; the nauseating noise of flesh being torn and bones being crushed

between the kikituk's fangs echoed throughout the cavern. He didn't have to see it to know she was gone; the creature's howl of victory assured him even if the previous noises had not.

He chanced a quick peek around the corner of the tunnel, watching in disgust as the kikituk fed, her blood covering its upper torso and beginning to coagulate in the thing's matted fur. He backed away, fighting down the bile that burned heavily in the back of his throat and banging his head against the cave wall in frustrated anger.

"Dammit, Gudrun!" Dean cried out. "Why?"

In the darkness, he blinked away an angry tear, silently berating himself for failing to help the Valkyrie, for standing by while she died. He'd never hated her, not truly. He'd only mistrusted what he hadn't really understood.

Deep down, Dean knew she was alright. She saved Sam, had healed him, twice if he counted his brother's recently ruined hand. In the balance sheet of life, Gudrun had more than proved herself as an ally and friend. If he'd given her a hard time, it was only because, well... it was just his way.

She'd never been like any of the other women he normally chose to be around. She wasn't a pushover, not another one night stand to be added to his tally. She was independent, strong-willed and intelligent, not exactly the things he commonly looked for or found in the average smoke-filled bar.

But now she was gone and he'd stood by and let her die.

Mired in self-recrimination, Dean stumbled forward on auto-pilot, unconsciously acknowledging Sam and Jon still needed help to escape, and at some level knowing he made a promise to Gudrun to get them out of here alive. He owed her that much, didn't he?

Picking up the pace, Dean ran toward the head of the tunnel where the base of the ladder waited meeting his brother and the marine biologist just several yards ahead in the dismal shaft. Even within the darkness, he read the questioning look on his younger sibling's face.

"Gudrun?" Sam finally voiced, straining to look past Dean.

Dean merely shook his head, placing a hand on his brother's shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze. He felt Sam tense under his touch then felt the subsequent shudder as his brother's hitched breath escaped.

"No..." Sam's denial wailed throughout the narrowed confines as he struggled against Dean's restraining hands. "She can't be..."

The unfinished words from his brother served to accuse the elder hunter more and Dean swallowed hard turning his eyes away only to catch sight of Jon. The Norwegian seemed strangely distant, his blue eyes clouded over as he too stared past Dean back down the tunnel.

"Dean, we have to go back for her," Sam pleaded, trying to pull away.

"Sam, listen to me. We have to get out of here. We have to get Jon out of here. We owe her that," Dean insisted, forcefully pushing Sam towards the waiting ladder.

The taller Winchester retaliated, slamming his open palms against Dean's chest and propelling the older sibling backwards a step. Dean barely stifled a gasp as Sam's rough attack landed on his kikituk-injured shoulder. He staggered slightly as he fought the flashover of heat from the wound, regrouping quickly and placing himself back in front of his brother before Sam could dash back down the tunnel.

"Sam, no!" he shouted. "She's gone, dammit. There's nothing any of us can do!"

Dean watched as Sam's body sagged in front of him, gutted as surely as if he'd plunged a knife into the younger man's belly. He stood there, waiting, one arm holding a steadying grip on Sam while his sibling slowly accepted the Valkyrie's demise.

"I'm sorry," he added softly. "Maybe if I would've..."

Sam shook his head now, turning away as he fought to hide the slight glistening around his eyes. "Don't, just don't, Dean!" he begged, sucking in a final half-sob.

Dean nodded solemnly, the rawness of Sam's pain eating away at his soul. If he despised himself for leaving Gudrun behind to her elected fate, then seeing the agonized reaction in his brother's face had sealed his condemnation.

Instead, it was the banshee-like howl of the kikituk that brought both men out of their melancholy. Dean whirled around defensively, his .45 appearing back in his hand, despite the worthlessness of the weapon. Sam in turn, spun and looked about for Jon, calling out for the biologist.

When the creature didn't immediately appear in the tunnel, Dean broke back toward the head of the shaft, gathering up Sam and Jon in his quest to put as much distance between them and the beast behind them. Sam moved along with the same sense of urgency, but as Dean approached the Norwegian, Jon remained nearly frozen in place, the same glazed look covering his face that Dean had spotted before.

"Come on, Frodo, no time to stop and smell the cave mushrooms," Dean quipped.

Jon remained locked in place, staring blankly into the darkness.

"JON! Do you hear me?" Dean shouted, shaking the tall blond.

"I remember..." the scientist answered cryptically. "I remember pieces, strange old places, things I can't possibly know."

Dean watched him, as confused by the man's puzzling admission as he was by the man himself. Shaking his head, he tugged on Jon's arm.

"Whatever dude. You and Sam can sit around and do your *Psychic Friends Network* thing once we get out of here," he teased.

Jon looked up, his turn to be perplexed.

"I'm serious, let's go. I'm not losing anybody else to that fugly-assed bastard back there, not even you. If I have to knock your whale-lovin' carcass unconscious and drag you outta here myself," Dean informed matter-of-factly.

Jon nodded reluctantly, casting one final glance over his shoulder back to where he'd last seen the flowing-haired Valkyrie. Sam's voice broke his reverie, calling back to the both of them.

"Dean, Jon, I found the ladder."

"That's us, let's go," Dean added, pulling at the man's coat sleeve.

They ran the several yards to where Sam stood at the base of the ladder. Jon pulled up short, looking up the expanse toward the trap door above, his hesitation apparent.

"Come on, get your ass up the ladder," Dean commanded, warily glancing back down the tunnel.

"I can't..." Jon began.

"Dean, the markings," Sam reminded, pointing out the symbols scrawled on the adjacent cave walls and above on the bottom of the trap door.

Dean followed the light cast from the torch as Sam scanned it back and forth across the rising shaft. He hadn't noticed the markings on the interior of the cave wall on the way down, not that it had mattered to him at the time. But now, a trio of the designs plainly adorned the rough granite of the cavern.

Beside him, Jon's face was a mixture of dejection and fear as he looked back and forth between the hunters. "I've tried this before," he admitted woefully. "Every time I tried to climb up that ladder, I've landed on my backside down here. Its like I hit an invisible brick wall half way up."

"It's gotta be something like a Devil's Trap, Dean," Sam reiterated. "What are we going to do about him?"

"Yeah, Gudrun said as much when we were up top. That's why she couldn't come down, or why she didn't at first..." Dean's voice trailed off.

"So? What's our plan?"

"Dude, you're supposed to be the large-brained, Stanford lawyer wannabe. What the hell do you think I keep you around for?" Dean snarked back.

Behind them, the low growl of the kikituk sounded once more, rumbling through the cavern like an earthquake. The threesome startled collectively, each whirling about and taking a defensive stance in case of attack.

When the creature still did not appear, Dean tucked his .45 back into his coat and pushed past his brother. Striding purposely to the rungs, the elder hunter reached up and began to climb the shaft.

"Dean! What are you doing?" Sam shouted in disbelief.

"Well, I'm not sitting down there waiting to become kikituk chow," Dean snapped back in between harsh breaths.

"You're not gonna leave Jon here?" the younger sibling demanded, protectively pulling the equally tall Norwegian closer to him as the kikituk howled again.

Dean ignored him, concentrating on keeping his handholds on the slippery rungs. Without benefit of the Maglite, he was ascending blindly, only the meager beam from Sam's torch below and the tiniest crease of light seeping through the floorboards above giving him any guidance. Even with the minimal light, he could still see the bizarre markings as he drew closer to them, one each on the opposing walls matching the one on the bottom of the trap door and flooring.

"Dean! Dammit, what are you doing?" Sam yelled up at him, his anger punctuated by another louder growl of the kikituk.

Hooking his elbow around one of the rungs, Dean stretched outward, his fingertips straining to touch the designs. The pseudo-Devil's Trap seemed to be cast right into the granite itself, almost as if the drawings were just another form of stone blended into the wall.

"Dean, whatever you have in mind, I hope you hurry the hell up," Sam warned. "I think our over-sized friend is getting closer."

"I'm working on it, Sammy," Dean mumbled back in frustration, pulling the knife from the pocket of his jeans.

Stretching out again, he scraped the blade against the rocky face, chipping at the unrelenting surface. Despite the regimented precision Dean maintained with the blade, it was no match for the unbreakable cave wall. After a few seconds, it was apparent to the hunter that this tactic wasn't going to work.

Falling back to the ladder, Dean caught his breath while his kikituk-battered shoulder throbbed from being extended and holding his weight. Desperation tore at him, as he clung to the rungs, staring down at his brother and Jon.

"Think, dammit Dean, think," he chastised himself quietly.

Transferring the small knife to his other hand in preparation to return it to his jeans, the edge of the blade nicked the corner of his thumb. Unconsciously, Dean jammed the thumb into his mouth, the coppery taste of his own blood saturating his tongue.

As the digit continued to seep, Dean looked at the mocking red fluid and was struck with an idea. Pulling his left arm free of the thick coat, he pushed up the sleeves of the multiple layers of shirts he was wearing to expose the skin of his forearm.

"Dean? What are you doing?" Sam questioned suspiciously from below.

Paying no attention to his brother's voice, Dean drew the edge of the blade across the underside of his forearm, laying open a deep furrow in his skin. He bit down on his bottom lip as the pain from the self-inflicted wound rose up in time with the thick crimson fluid. He waited till the blood coated his arm and was freely flowing in long channels down to his wrist.

Just as it pooled by his hand, beginning to fall in tiny red droplets to the cavern floor below, Dean extended out again, stretching to reach the sigils. With a grunt, he whipped his brutalized arm toward the markings, flinging blood outward and watching with grim satisfaction as the serum splattered across the rock as effectively as spray paint.

Twisting around to face the opposite wall, Dean repeated the gory process, hurling more of his own blood at the second strange Devil's Trap. Within seconds, its outer edges were obliterated as well, the shape broken, the restraining power of the symbols rendered ineffective.

Snuggling back to the security of the ladder, the elder hunter sucked in a deep breath and looked down at his brother. He smiled broadly, unsure if Sam could see him in the dim light until he saw his younger sibling's shaggy head shaking in disdain.

"I bet you think you're pretty smart now?" Sam bemoaned.

"Aw Sammy, losing your faith? Dean taunted in return.

He scrambled up the last few rungs to the top of the ladder, pausing to shout back to the other two men.

"What are you two overgrown geeks waiting for? Haul ass!" he barked as he climbed through the open trap door, smearing blood across the wood as he passed.

He pulled himself up and onto the floor, rolling clear of the opening and lying flat on his back while he stared up at the rough hewn beams of the cabin. Dean listened to Sam and Jon as they ascended the ladder, their grunts of air echoing up through the hole. He rolled back to his knees as they drew closer to the top, leaning over the trap door and extending his hand down to help pull up Jon and then Sam to the welcoming safety of the main level.

Taking no chances, Dean flipped closed the trap door then motioned to Sam to help him block the opening. Between the three of them, they pushed a tall cabinet, overturned during Gudrun's earlier battle, across the floor and overtop the closed entryway to the caverns.

Exhausted, yet relieved, Jon mimicked Dean's earlier move, collapsing immediately into a nearby chair as he closed his eyes and tried to hide the sudden shaking that plagued his hands.

Behind him, Sam shot a quick glance around the destroyed interior. Spotting a flannel shirt still hanging on a nearby hook, the younger Winchester snatched up the discarded garment and ripped it in half. Striding purposefully over toward his brother, he forcefully pushed Dean down into another chair, ignoring his brother's immediate protest.

"What the hell?" the older hunter whined.

"Shut up, Dean. Let me wrap up your arm before you bleed to death. What the hell were you thinking, you jerk?" Sam admonished as he wiped away the blood from Dean's arm that was still dripping and leaving tiny blotches on the wood floor around their feet.

"Hey, it worked didn't it?"

"This is gonna need stitches," Sam continued, folding the second half of the torn shirt and pressing the fabric against the deep laceration eliciting a groan from his brother.

"Sonofabitch, Sam!" Dean complained. "Come on, it worked, and you're just pissy cause you couldn't think of any way around it yourself," Dean teased, his eyebrows raising.

Sam rolled his eyes, pulling another length of fabric tighter around the wound as he tied a knot to hold the dressing in place. "That's not it," he refuted, silently relishing the grunt generated by the rough tug on the bandage.

"Is too. You're jealous 'cause I figured it out."

"Jealous? Of what? You hacking on yourself? Give me a break, Dean."

"Aw Sammy, it's just a little flesh wound and you know my motto... chicks..."

"...dig scars. Yeah, Dean. I know it verbatim," Sam finished, chuckling slightly and allowing the tension to ease.

"Come on, bro. Lighten up. We made it out of that pit," Dean began.

"We didn't all make it out," Sam added quickly, the five words cutting through the small space like a subzero wind chill and biting deeply into the other two men.

Dean became silent, the brash humor gone from him now as he sunk deeper into the ratty old chair, quietly cradling his arm as he absently toyed with Sam's makeshift bandage. Looking up from under long lashes, he saw that his brother had chosen to hide his emotion by staring out the far window while Jon continued to examine the myriad of creases in his own hands.

When the silence became unbearable and he felt as though he was suffocating in the small cabin, no longer able to tolerate Sam's mourning, Jon's strange silence or even his own self-reproach, Dean decided to clear the air.

"What did she say to you?" he asked the Norwegian. "Back down there, in whatever language that was."

Jon looked up, his face turning pale, his hands still twined together but thumbs nervously rubbing backwards and forwards. He sucked in a deep breath, his eyes darting back and forth between the two hunters.

"What has you so spooked?" Dean pressed. "Did she break the news to you about having to save more than just the whales? I guess it's gotta suck when you find out you're the savior of the whole world..."

"Dean!" Sam's voice was a low warning.

"What?" Dean snapped back. "We have a right to know, Sammy. She put our asses on the line for this dude. Didn't tell us anything other than how the world hinged on his survival. Hell, if she was willing to put her reaper ass on the block for him, then I guess he must be important. I just think we deserve some answers."

"But he doesn't know, Dean. And badgering him about all of this won't help either," Sam calmly reminded him, turning away from the blinding glare of the sun on the snow to face his brother. "Whatever Gudrun knew, whatever part Jon was to play in all of this, that info died with her."

Jon stood up stalwartly, stretching to his full height, imposing were it not for the still nervous twitch of his hands and the uncertain look on his face. He took a couple of steps toward the kitchen area of the cabin, reaching down and picking up a broken coffee cup from the floor and gently placing it on the table.

"I'm not withholding anything from you, I swear it," he quietly asserted. "What she said to me down there in the cave...well, she just reminded me of something."

"Of what?" Sam asked.

Jon smiled, but it was tinged with sorrow. "She just reminded me that maybe love is the key."

Across the small room, Dean rolled his eyes and did little to suppress a groan. The last place he wanted the topic of this conversation to turn was to love. He glared at Sam when the younger man threw him an angry look from his position at the window.

"Well, as Tina says, what's love got to do with it?" the older hunter snarked. "I mean really, there sure as hell ain't no love involved when we're lopping the head off a vampire or dusting some demon's ass."

"Well, you sure aren't the poster child for *Love Connection*," Jon uncharacteristically quipped back.

Dean raised his eyebrows in appreciation for the scientist's snappy comeback. "Ouch! Frodo has a sense of humor buried in there. Sammy, you should take some notes," he teased.

Sam shook his head and was about to suggest that despite his brother's apparent enjoyment at nagging the marine biologist, they might be better served by getting as far away from this place as possible while they still had the sun on their side. He was about to propose they gather whatever provisions were available in the shambles of the remote shack when the cabinet lying across the trap door was hurled across the room, smashing against the cabin door.

Jon shied further away from the dreaded opening while Dean popped up from the chair, instantly on alert and drawing the .45 from its usual resting place.

The rank smell of the kikituk blossomed into the room just a split second before the beast erupted from the subterranean confines. Its claws flashed wildly, smashing furniture as it sought to connect with human flesh. Screeching loudly, it thrashed about the small cabin, wildly seeking its prey.

Dean crouched behind the remains of the cabinet, ducking for cover as pieces of wood and glass flew at him like shrapnel in a war zone. He popped up, capping off several rounds at the beast even though he knew the slugs would have little effect.

Beyond him, Dean heard the report of the Remington, and even though he couldn't see his baby brother behind the massive bulk of the Inuit demon, he knew Sam was firing the shotgun as fast as the younger hunter could chamber rounds. Like the .45, the salt rounds were now having no effect on the kikituk, the tiny pellets merely irritating the already enraged beast as they pelted the creature's thick hide.

"Sammy, this isn't working!" Dean shouted above the din.

"I'm open to suggestion," the younger hunter yelled back striding closer and firing another slug at nearly point-blank range.

The kikituk bellowed from the impact, whirling around, it lashed out with its bulky appendage, catching the barrel of the shotgun and knocking it from Sam's grasp. Before he could dodge out of the way, the beast swung around and caught Sam a glancing blow on the upper arm sending the younger Winchester backwards and flying into the kitchen cupboard.

"SAMMY!" Dean screamed at the top of his lungs, rapidly emptying the remainder of the .45's clip into the creature as he vaulted the overturned chair toward his brother.

The kikituk ignored the approaching hunter, instead focusing on the prey sluggishly recovering before it on the floor. It lurched forward, claws scrabbling to impale Sam even as he scrambled to remain out of their lethal reach. His back to the base of the sink, he ran of real estate, trapped in the corner of the makeshift kitchen he couldn't do anything but try to curl in defensively as the talons slashed downward.

Sam rolled to his left at the last second, hoping to avoid the razor-like claws and thinking he had until the feeling of a red hot lash tore into his leg. He tried to stifle the cry of pain, but one of the kikituk's claws had found its mark, cutting a deep furrow through the fabric and into the flesh of his calf.

He pulled away, forcing himself to ignore the pain, knowing he had to escape before the beast struck again. Sam heard the kikituk bellow and raised his arm protectively across his face as the thing reared up over him, waiting for claws to tear into his chest.

"Sam, hold on!" Jon called out.

There was a flash of activity above Sam as the Norwegian attacked the beast, swinging a broken-off table leg at the creature's head, pummeling again and again like he was swinging an axe at a tree. As Sam scooted for safety, he spotted Dean joining the assault on the kikituk, the older sibling brandishing a poker from the fireplace.

While Jon continued to work on the behemoth's head, managing to land blows while dodging the thing's flailing claws, Dean jammed the sharp end of the iron pole into the side of the creature, gouging out a large chunk of flesh as he tore it back out.

"Sammy? Can you move?" Dean shouted over his shoulder, unrelenting as he plunged the poker into the kikituk again, this time the angled tip ripping into the side of the beast's neck.

The kikituk screeched, an ear-piercing clamor that filled the small interior. The beast swung outward, knocking the makeshift club from Jon's hands and also catching the blond a glancing blow to the upper body. It sent the Norwegian flying across the room and landing in a dazed heap against the overturned cabinet.

Dean took the opportunity to attack the creature with more vigor, adding his own angry yell to the din as he spun to the front of the beast, rising up as far as his six foot frame would allow and plunging the iron spear directly into the kikituk's eye. The

Inuit conjuration howled as yellowish serum splattered outward, the remaining portion of the gelatinous orb slowly slithered down the creature's hideous face.

Partially blinded and screaming in rage, the beast thrashed around wildly, its long extremities whipping about like propeller blades out of control. What passed for blood continued to pour from its damaged eye socket, coating Dean as he tried to close in for another strike.

Behind him Sam struggled to rise to unsteady feet, the tattered leg of his jeans saturated with blood that was slowly seeping down to fill the top of his boot. He watched with a strange fascination as his brother ducked underneath the kikituk's claws, the entire battle playing out like some bizarre slow-motion dance, choreographed and practiced, even though Sam knew Dean was fighting for all their lives.

In an instant the "dance" became lethal. Sam shouted out a warning as the kikituk's massive paw found purchase on his brother, catching Dean at the hip and upending him. Sam could hear Dean's harsh grunt as the air was forced out of the older hunter, his body slamming into the remains of the kitchen table.

Ignoring the pain in his lower leg, Sam launched himself over to his brother, grabbing Dean by the front of his thick coat and rolling them both over and out of the way just before the kikituk's knife-like extremities slammed down on the now empty spot.

Breathless, Sam looked down at his older brother, still half covering him as Dean met his gaze with a dazed response. It took another second before green eyes flashed with clarity and Dean wedged his hands between them, pushing against his taller sibling and rolling Sam off.

"Dude, get off. What the hell, Sammy, you been hitting the doughnuts when nobody's looking?" Dean teased.

"Shut up, Dean," Sam groaned, pushing up weakly and teetering when his leg protested bearing his weight.

Dean noticed the hard set to his brother's jaw and the bloody size thirteen boot print on the hardwood floor where Sam's foot shifted. Worried about Sam's injury, but distracted by the still raging beast, Dean wordlessly slipped an arm underneath Sam's shoulder and began to pull him away from the kikituk.

They reached Jon near the front door, the biologist rising to his feet unsteadily as he wiped at a thin line of blood running from a cut between his eyes. "How do we stop it?"

As the threesome looked on, waiting for the beast to advance on them again, the kikituk suddenly halted in midstride. Blinded, its already misshapen head a mask of gore, blood and teeth, the thing quieted as it came in contact with the body of the dead shaman. Gone ominously quiet, the creature let out a strange keening sound just before the evil spirit that had originally been created to deal death in the caverns now sought a home in its former maker.

Filling the shaman like the black mist of a demon, the now empty husk of the kikituk dropped to the floor with a thunderous bang. Backs pressed to the door, the three men stared with wide-eyed disbelief as silence returned to the cabin.

"Well, I didn't see that coming," Dean said, finally breaking the quiet.

"Is it dead?" Jon asked hopefully.

Sam and Dean looked at each other before both returned the glance at the Norwegian.

"Not likely," Dean answered matter-of-factly. "You kinda have to understand how our luck works."

"Then can you at least kill him?" Jon asked, his finger pointing beyond Dean's turned shoulder.

The hunter spun around a fraction too late as the resurrected shaman charged at them, tackling Sam to the ground with a fierce, guttural growl. Dean dove for the medium's body, trying to pull the Inuit from his brother even as the possessed man

rained blows on Sam's head. The elder Winchester drove his shoulder into what should have been the soft gut of the frail looking frame with no effect, the shaman's attention remaining fixed on his brother as a cut opened underneath Sam's left eye even as the younger sibling's consciousness faded.

"Sonofabitch!" Dean grunted, reeling backwards as the shaman let go of his brother and launched at him.

Devoid of the kikituk's size but still possessing its strength, the shaman lifted Dean up and slammed him into the nearby rough-hewn logs of the cabin wall. It felt as though his spine was snapped nearly in two and Dean wasn't altogether uncertain that he didn't hear something crack. Everything went numb, his muscles going slack as he tried vainly to put up some sort of defense.

Staring into the blank eyes of the shaman, Dean saw nothing but a dark void; no emotion, no sense of humanity within the shell of the former human. Like the former beast, the Inuit medicine man growled again, literally snarling in the young hunter's face as it slammed Dean against the wood over and over.

"Feel... free... to ... help..." he gasped, spotting Jon hovering just beyond his slowly dimming field of vision.

The blond stood frozen, stunned by the sudden attack and the supernatural resurrection that had taken place before his very eyes. He heard Sam's soft groan from the floor just to his left. The younger man was bloodied and bruised, but struggling to rise to his feet, already intent on going to his brother's aid.

Jon looked to Dean. The older hunter was suspended against the far wall, the shaman shaking him like a terrier intent on destroying a rodent. If Dean was even capable of defending himself, it wasn't apparent, the normal vibrant green of the young man's eyes glazed as they barely met the Norwegian's.

The biologist scanned the room, desperate to help the brothers, to repay them for rescuing him from the dark recess of the caverns below. He looked for one of their weapons, spotting Sam's discarded shotgun lying across the room and making a dash for it.

Halfway across the space, Jon stepped over the debris from Gudrun's earlier battle, his boot striking something small but unyielding on the floor. Curiosity made him look down, his eyes locking on the whale bone carving lying innocuously on the rug.

His mind screamed at him to get the Remington, to chamber a round and blast the shaman until the thing's flesh was nothing more than ground beef, yet somewhere deeper in the recesses of his memory, a faint hint of knowledge made him pick up the peculiar figure. With the whalebone carving firmly in his grasp, Jon smashed the small sculpture hard against the floor, shattering off the end and leaving an edge of jutting white bone.

Striding purposefully back to where the kikituk-possessed shaman was still battering the eldest of the Winchester brothers, Jon jammed the sharp-end of the carving deep into the back of the Inuit. The shaman bellowed, dropping Dean and spinning to face Jon.

Without hesitating, the tall blond loosed his own battle cry and plunged the remnants of the carving directly into the shaman's chest, the jagged end cutting through flesh until it sunk into the soft tissue of the heart. The Inuit priest shrieked once, lunging to attack Jon even as it clawed pathetically at the bone protruding from its sternum.

Jon sidestepped, watching almost dumbfounded as the shaman merely dropped to the floor at his feet, once again a lifeless cadaver. He watched for an extended minute, tentatively toeing the corpse not quite trusting that the thing was truly dead this time, not after everything else he'd seen this day.

"You took your sweet time there, Frodo. Gonna have to get your ass in gear if you're gonna save the world," Dean snarked breathlessly, sagging against the wall and running the back of his hand across his mouth, smearing blood.

Jon smiled weakly back at him. "Don't mention it," he just as snidely replied, moving over to extend a hand to help up the hunter.

Dean looked at him, suspicion mixed with indignation, but he accepted the proffered help, stifling a groan as he stretched the abused muscles of his body. He moved alongside Jon, both men making their way to Sam, still seated on the floor and staring at the lifeless cadaver.

"Sammy? You okay, dude?" Dean asked worriedly, motioning Jon to the other side of his sibling.

"Yeah, I will be," Sam answered, his gaze shifting to take in the concerned look of the Norwegian squatting down beside him. "Jon, how did you know to do that?"

"I'm not sure..." the blond replied softly, a faraway look washing over his face.

Dean helped Sam to his feet, supporting his younger brother while they both watched the tall Norwegian walk quietly towards the doorway.

Jon pulled open the massive door, standing in the entry as cold Canadian air flooded the cabin. A light flurry of snow dusted into the small house, a smaller version of the billowing flakes that fell so peacefully outside. In stark contrast to the carnage and battle inside, the scene outdoors was almost pastoral. It was almost as though the world was trying to cover the brutality of the place with its own version of healing.

To Jon, the cold, the snow, the wind, even the remnants of blood and the battle, teased strange memories from him. He looked down at his left hand, expecting to see a ring adorning the fourth finger, the sensation of the metal band as real physically as it was mentally.

*... but there wouldn't be a wedding ring, would there?*

"Jon?" Sam's voice startled him as the equally tall hunter drew up beside him at the doorway.

"I don't understand any of this and yet, I miss her..." Jon replied mysteriously causing the young man to stare at him perplexed.

A silent nod and Sam added, "If you ever need anything, there's a priest named Kyle Williams in Wyoming. He can always find us."

Jon turned and smiled knowingly at Sam. Moving out onto the porch, he looked around at the stark white horizon, then stepped down into the deep snow, the crunch of his boots the only other sound besides the high whine of the wind.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?" Dean shouted, barging through the doorway and onto the porch.

"Let him go," Sam cautioned, holding his brother back with one arm and watching as the biologist continued to walk on unabated.

"But where's he gonna go? What about saving his ass for all that 'savior of the world' stuff? Damn dude, what about everything we've been through for him? What about Gudrun?" Dean rattled off, straining to go after the tall blond even as he faded further into the enveloping whiteness.

Sam tightened his hold on Dean's coat even as his brother's words replayed in his head.

*What about Gudrun? What was your relationship with her, Jon? Will you ever know? Will we ever know?* Sam wondered.

"He just wasn't ready for the truth, Dean," the younger man replied, feeling his brother's resistance lessen.

Dean sighed, shrugging slightly. "Are any of us ever ready, Sammy?"

The brothers stood there on the porch in silence, the northern cold wrapping around them, wind-driven snow quickly filling in Jon's tracks even as they watched him disappear from sight until nearly every trace that the biologist even existed seemed wiped clean.

Sam shivered, wrapping his arms tightly around himself and shifting his weight off the wounded leg that was beginning to make itself known again. Beside him, Dean looked around the vast white countryside, one hand scratching at his short-cropped hair.

“Hey, Sammy,” he began.  
“Yeah?”  
“Dude, tell me you got a map!”  
“Um, Dean...”  
“So I guess a snowmobile is out of the question too then?”  
“Well, uh...”  
“I’ll settle for a sleigh and reindeer...”  
“Shut up, Dean. Just start walking!”

### **Bobby’s Place** **Several days later**

“So how the hell did you manage to get this place done so fast? I mean, we weren’t gone *that* long,” Dean asked, admiring the nearly finished house. “What’d you do? Bribe a demon or something old man?”

Next to him, Bobby huffed, throwing the elder of John Winchester’s sons an irritated look.

“Not a demon, you ass. More like a priest with more money than sense,” the older hunter replied.

“Moses? Well, damn, definitely more anything than sense then,” Dean agreed.

“Actually, he mentioned something about God having mercy on anyone that had to share a trailer with you for any length of time, Dean,” John added in teasing. “Seriously though, Kyle got word of what happened and sent over a bunch of carpenters and such and hell, with you and Sam out of the way, they finished the place off in no time.”

“Hey, I wasn’t the one dropping walls on your feet, Dad,” Dean reminded motioning toward his brother, seated just across from him.

“I’m never going to hear the end of that am I?” Sam complained. “I had a broken arm in a cast, I can’t believe you’re gonna hold that against me.”

“Oh, I’m not holding it against you son. Accidents happen,” John admitted. “But my toes on the other hand, they won’t ever forget.”

Sam rolled his eyes while both Bobby and Dean laughed loudly. The salvage yard owner pulled several beers from a nearby cooler, handing them out one by one before opening his own. He took a long pull from the bottle before looking between the two younger hunters.

“So, you two gonna spill about what happened up in Canada?” he asked, settling back and looking between the two brothers.

Dean shrugged, twisting off the cap to his own beer and nodding at Sam. “Have at it, Sammy.”

The younger man sighed, peeling paper from his own bottle as he inspected it carefully. Sam slowly recounted the brothers’ expedition, pausing to answer John’s question about the tupilaq and how he had managed to send it back on the shaman. The young man didn’t miss his father’s cautious concern when he blatantly glossed over how his “abilities” had come into play in the whole affair.

Sam continued on, telling the older hunters about Jon, the caverns and the strange Devil’s Trap markings, even the kikituk’s attack. He grew quiet as his story culminated with Gudrun’s sacrificing demise.

“So, she’s dead? I thought she was some sort of mystical creature herself?” Bobby asked. “How the hell can that be?”

“She was a freakin’ reaper,” Dean interjected. But for all his animation, he just as quickly quieted. “Still, I guess even she wasn’t invincible,” he added, chugging back the remainder of the beer before abruptly standing and striding away to retrieve another bottle.

Sam watched his brother’s escape, knowing that Dean was feeling the Valkyrie’s death just as much as he was, even if he refused to show it or admit it.

“So what about Jon? You boys went all the way up there, damn near got killed rescuing this guy and you never found out who or what the hell he is?” John asked worriedly.

Sam reached down to the backpack next to the chair, pulling out the well-travelled laptop. Flipping it open, he started to explain as it powered up.

“I’m not a hundred percent sure about this, but I’ve been putting it together on the way back from Canada. There are a few different myths about Gudrun, but most of them are consistent about her being married to a Norse warrior named Sigurd who was murdered. But right before she died, Erika called out to Jon. She called him Helgi and that got me to thinking,” Sam explained. “So I dug some more and I found out that according to some legends, Sigurd was actually Gudrun’s second husband. Her first was a very human warrior, Sigurd’s half brother, Helgi Sigmundarson.”

“And what does this have to do with Jon?” Dean asked, returning back to his seat.

“Helgi died in battle and according to the legend, Gudrun cried for him so much that he rose from his grave and joined her in Valhalla as an Einherjar, one of Odin’s army of the dead. But here’s the best part. In some of the legends, Helgi Sigmundarson is also known as Helgi Volsung,” Sam elaborated, flipping the laptop around so the others could see the screen.

“Holy crap! Jon Volsung? You think that’s more than coincidence huh?” the older sibling posed.

“Dean, when has anything ever been a coincidence in our life?” Sam replied, eliciting a brief chuckle from Bobby and a nod of agreement from John.

“Damn, no wonder she was so friggin’ determined to save his ass then,” Dean admitted.

“So, this guy just walked away?” John asked. “Is he dangerous to any of us?”

“I don’t think so,” Sam answered. “I’m not even sure he totally knows who he is either. Or what he can or can’t do. Or even if he’ll side with good or evil. But one thing’s for certain, those markings sure had an effect on him just like any other demon and if he really is an Einherjar...”

“Maybe we’ll never know now with Gudrun gone. She thought maybe this was as much a plan to get her out of the way as it was to get Jon,” Dean recounted.

“But you said she sacrificed herself to save him, to save all of you?” Bobby asked. “Then maybe Lucifer did get what he ultimately wanted.”

Sam closed the computer, Bobby’s words striking home considering everything he and Dean had been through back at Devil’s Tower. Were they any different than Gudrun? Neither of them hesitating to sacrifice themselves for the greater good or for each other. One thing was certain, in the battle of good and evil, another hero had been lost, and another painful casualty had been sustained. Sam could only hope that maybe someday, whatever purpose Gudrun had thought Jon was to serve, the immortal warrior might return and fulfill it.

Maybe hope was what it was all about? Could they really hope to stand against the Devil? Yet looking around the room as his brother, father and friend laughed and relaxed, Sam knew that none of them would ever admit to possessing hope or faith, despite the fact that all three would give their last breath for what they believed in.

He sighed somewhat contentedly, listening as the conversation turned back to Bobby’s new house and the demon hunter’s quest to replace the myriad of texts he’d acquired over the years. The discussion was interrupted by the staccato chirp of a cell phone ring.

Sam patted his pocket, reaching for his cellular, while Dean chugged back another mouthful of beer, ignoring the ongoing noise since it wasn’t his own familiar ringtone. In the end, it was John that pulled his cell phone from his jeans, glancing at the caller ID until the ringing finally ceased, the call going to his voicemail.

Without a word, the elder Winchester retrieved the message, immediately tapping buttons on the keypad to delete it and glancing around nervously to see if anyone else had overheard the communication or observed his reaction. Relieved when he

spotted Sam with the laptop reopened and Dean absorbed back in another bottle of beer, John nonchalantly rose and moved toward the living room. But as he walked away from the group, green eyes followed him.

Once within the perceived privacy of the other room, John flipped open the cellular and redialed the previous number. He waited until the voice answered before he spoke, keeping his voice low but still with all the threat that his normal baritone possessed.

"How did you even find me?" he asked. "You don't understand what happened."

There was a pause before he spoke again, cautiously keeping his voice down despite his temptation to yell.

"Well, better than you have tried. Just remember who you're dealing with," the hunter retorted.

Listening for a moment longer, he cursed at the person on the other end of the phone then ended the call abruptly, standing there in the silent darkness as his mind raced. Battling a range of emotions, John forced himself to replace a mask of calmness before he turned and headed back toward the kitchen area. Pausing at the doorway, he smiled briefly listening to the familiar banter as Dean teased Sam about spilling beer. His younger son retaliated and as the verbal clash escalated, even Bobby joined in.

His smile broadened as he watched, but glancing down at the phone, it faded into a frown as he realized what he must now do. Without a word, he walked past them and into the back bedroom, grabbing his duffle bag from the floor and beginning to toss his meager belongings into it.

"What's going on, Dad?" Dean's voice startled him and he turned to see his eldest leaning against the doorjamb, green eyes peering inquisitively into the room.

"Nothing, son. Something's just come up and I need to take off," John replied cryptically.

"Okay, that's vague enough. Come on, Dad, where are you going? Why can't it wait till tomorrow?"

"A friend of mine needs some help. I promised I'd take off tonight," the Winchester patriarch explained.

"Well, give us a sec and me and Sammy will pack and come with you," Dean offered.

"No!" John replied all-too-quickly causing Dean to eye him even more suspiciously.

Softening slightly when he saw the somewhat confused and wounded look in his eldest's eyes, John added. "Dean, son... you and Sam were barely recovered from Wyoming when you took off for Canada. Look at you now, you're still half beat up and it would do you both some good to get rested. Besides, this is just something I need to do on my own."

John saw Dean's mouth open to protest, but he raised a hand, effectively silencing the young man, knowing all too well that unlike Sam, his eldest would ultimately obey him.

"Will you at least tell me where you're going?" Dean asked finally, his voice respectfully hopeful.

John could hear the underlying hurt and disappointment in his son's voice, knowing that Dean was never happier than when he had his family around him. Still, the sage hunter knew what he had to do and to pacify his son, he lied.

"I'll be up around Idaho. I'll have my cell, okay?" he said, slinging the duffle over his shoulder and striding purposely from the room.

Sam looked up as he re-entered the kitchen, stunned when he saw John with all his belongings and preparing to leave. He rose immediately, looking to Dean who hovered at the hallway entrance shaking his head, the older sibling's face downcast as he made no attempt to hide his emotions.

"Dad?" Sam questioned.

John stopped as he reached the new front door, his hand pausing on the handle as though the very effort of turning the knob was tearing out his heart. He turned back to look at his sons, both now standing shoulder to shoulder at the edge of the living room, while beyond them even his old friend looked perplexed by the sudden action.

Despite the newness of the structure, the lack of familiar furnishings or the taunt of other hunters outside bent on capturing his sons, the situation felt uncomfortably similar to another time except then it had been Sam and Dean that were fleeing the salvage yard for their lives. Ultimately, the end result was the same, the Winchesters being separated once again. Although he tried to tell himself that at least this time, he was leaving his sons safe, secure and alive John took little comfort in the fact that he was still leaving.

Forcing a smile onto his face and trying to block out the look of devastation on his sons' faces, John said goodbye. "You boys take care and stay safe. I'll be in touch when I can."

He'd left them hundreds of times before in his life, going off on hunts and sequestering them in pathetic motel rooms to await his return, always promising he'd come back. But never before had walking away from his sons felt so final.

He spun back around, not allowing them to see the slight glistening that was threatening his vision, twisting the doorknob and pulling open the freshly stained oak door. Stepping out into the South Dakota darkness, John tried to ignore Sam calling his name again and the harsh thud of Dean's fist as it slammed into the fresh drywall. Pulling the door closed behind him, he begged the nighttime to swallow him and dull the ache in his chest.

The End