

Season Four
Episode Five: Blood At The Root
By calUK

There's no warning.

No cries to break the peace of the crickets chirring in the dark until the door's lying in pieces on the floor and the torchlight burns crazy shadows over the rough walls and the tattered sacks that hang between the beds.

Even that illusion of privacy, of humanity, is ripped away as they storm through the barn, rough hands and hard eyes searching, his name spat out as if it turned their stomachs.

There isn't even time to roll out of his cot before they find him and lock hands around his wrists, as iron-cold as the bracelets that mark him and all the rest of the crowd that swarm up, try and swamp him, hide him in their midst.

He's dragged through them, one elbow cracking hard against the packed floor, his arm going numb and tears springing to his eyes. He wriggles, cries out, but he's dizzy, the world lurching from one side to the next as he's carried, dropped, shoved stumbling over the yard and the lawns. The light streaming through the windows of the house flickers by, brief moments when he can see them in the dark, can make out their eyes in the shadows and his heart seizes up as he sees the blood-lust in them.

And then he fights harder, so hard his joints ache and his muscles burn as he squirms and twists and finally manages to drag one arm loose.

The adrenaline's pounding through him, still, draining and energizing at the same time, leaving him shaky and furious and he swings his free arm, curls his fingers into a fist and lets the iron around his wrist power the blow. It smashes into a face, nameless and only vaguely recognized, warmth spurting over his hand.

Nameless staggers back, clutching his nose and gurgling curses. Through the gap in the bodies surrounding him, he gets a glimpse of another crowd, eyes wide and horrified, white against dark skin, spilling along their trail. Voices raise over the growls and imprecations, cry out in fearful indignation.

The head of the cane glitters as it fills his view, the lion's head snarling before the night erupts with stars. He sags to the grass, curls in on himself, wraps his arms around his head as fists and heavy boots rain down and turn the world to jagged chaos.

He hears shouts, screams, wonders why his own voice doesn't join them but clings to the sounds. They mean he's still there, to be fought for, to be accused. He knows that it's the silence he has to fear, because when the mob goes quiet it will be over.

Through the din of blood pounding through his ears he makes out snatches of what they're saying, the rattle and clink of chains a harsh underscore.

"A girl, just a little..."

"Eho! É gbedé..."

"My niece and he..."

"Please, suh, jus' lissen..."

A din gbawe! Nu gbo we ã!

"...worst kind of sin, she's ruined..."

Vi sunnù! Eho, nu gbo...

"...only one punishment...a crime so..."

Blood trickles into his eye, hot and acid and turns the world red. He blinks, sees grass slither by, feels it coarse against his bare legs, against his side as the thin shift rides up his back. They've woven chains through the iron on his wrists, using the length to drag him along, bouncing and jolting across the immaculate lawns.

For a moment he thinks he can feel the sun on his face, turns his head up to it just as he did the morning before as he carefully trimmed the edges of this same lawn.

It's the heat of the torches, flaring and sparking as they gutter in the breeze that stirs the leaves of the cottonwood trees on the far side of the grounds.

A ringing starts up in his ears, sets his teeth on edge and his stomach flips, rolls greasily. He can taste the congru they ate at dusk, bitter in the back of his throat, and swallows hard, pulls at the chains until the iron chafes through the thin skin of his wrists and blood trickles down his arms.

He tries to kick, tries to gather his feet under him, knows that if he can just stand he might have a chance and even life as a runaway, the threat of recapture and punishment, of maiming and feeling the bite of iron locked around his throat instead of his wrists, even that would be better than the cottonwood trees that are getting closer and closer with every shaky breath he sucks down.

The air's cold, pluming in front of his face as he gasps out the names the shaman taught them in their stables after dark, *Ogun, Yemaya, help me!* Hopes the blood on his arms and face is offering enough for the Orishas, but the moon and stars are lost in the shadow of the cottonwood as he's dragged underneath its spreading branches.

And then it's quiet.

He hangs from pale hands, marked with bruises and scrapes, the world spinning around him as he sways on his knees and fights to lift his head.

One eye swollen shut, the other dark with blood, white gathering at the corners of his vision, he strains to see and his heart leaps once as he sees them, standing still and proud, dark skin almost lost in the shadows as they surround the tree.

The men holding him stir, uneasy in the face of such calm defiance. His lips twitch in a faint smile, cracking, fresh heat spilling down his chin.

At the back of the crowd, half-hidden behind shoulders and arms, a face he knows better than his own smiles back, tremulously, fearfully. Her dark eyes full of pain shared, so like his own the others used to call them Mawu-Lisa, the twins who birthed all the gods.

"Step aside."

They flinch, start to move, instinctive response to the voice that commands them every day.

"Eho!"

It's too deep to be her voice, but he sees his sister's lips move, shape the denial, and they still, his family, by blood spilt together in the fields if not shared.

"Step aside, or I'll see you all whipped."

"Eho."

She whispers it this time, no, and it's still that low, resonant growl that pins them there, backs to the tree and won't let them obey anything else.

Something flashes gold in the corner of his eye, the lion's head that's snarling in bruises on his cheek and he twitches away as far as he can as the tall figure strides to the front of the quiescent mob, stops beside him, too close.

"This boy committed a crime. Justice must be done."

"No, suh. He wouldn'a do what ya say. No way."

Someone else this time, a faceless call from the back of the crowd and the overseer stiffens at his side. He sees knuckles turn white around the lion's head.

"You doubt my word? You call me a liar?"

"No, suh. Someone told ya false."

There's a pause, so long he finally dares to look up again, to hope.

"*Stand aside.* Or you can join him on the bough."

"Eho."

But he can see them shift, can hear the way that growl is losing its power and he sees a few of them glance up at the branch, rope-scarred and waiting.

Somehow, he can't find it in himself to forgive them as they drift away, one at a time until only a single, slight figure is left.

The tree trunk is wider than her shoulders as she presses into it, the overseer taking four long strides to crowd her against the rough bark. He gestures at the men holding the chains and they drag him forward again, a rope tossed over the branch, quickly fashioned into a noose and he can't believe it, suddenly, wills himself to wake up from the nightmare.

The leaves of the cottonwood are still, the crowds, dark and pale, all motionless below as the rope burns his neck.

It's silent.

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Bare branches sketched across the sky, tiny buds painted red as the rising sun caught the rain water soaking them.

The trees looked as though they'd been dipped in blood.

He blinked, frowned at the morbid thought.

Jeez, Dean. Creepy much?

The car rocked steadily beneath him, the low hum of the tires enticing him to shuffle further down in the seat. He gave in with a weary sigh, rolling his head along the back, leather warm against the short hair on the nape of his neck and felt his brother's glance skate over him.

His jaw tightened on the angry snarl that crawled under his skin, the fist that was tucked down between his thigh and the door curling tighter until his nails dug into his palm.

Sam's quiet huff was almost lost in the sound of the engine, and Dean's anger evaporated as quickly as it had formed. He loosened his fist deliberately, one finger at a time, staring through the window as the sun came up behind them and threw shadows out along the road in front.

"Should hit Damascus in another hour or so."

His brow smeared sweat across the glass as he nodded, frowned again and reached up to swipe at the mark with his sleeve.

"It's pretty early. I figured we could get some breakfast; maybe see what we can find out before we head to a motel?"

"Sure," he muttered, carefully noncommittal. He could almost hear his brother's teeth grinding together and chewed at his lip, biting back the reprimand he was too used to giving. *You'll wear them down to stumps, Sammy. We'll have to pull them all out and get you a set of dentures, call you Granddad.* He almost smiled at the thought, from a time when "Sammy" didn't earn him a scowl and a slam of whatever door was handy.

Rolling his shoulders stiffly, he stretched his legs out until his boots bumped into the wall of the foot well.

"You okay?"

He shot a look across the car, took in his brother's eyes, tight and pinched, the way his hands tightened around the wheel as if he could strangle the spirit that had tossed the older man down two flights of stairs a couple of days ago.

The fact that the spirit had been aiming for Sam until Dean shoved his brother violently out of its reach and taken the brunt of its attack himself hadn't exactly helped make the experience any easier for either of them.

"Yeah," he answered softly. "I'm fine. Scratch that, I'm *starving*. Breakfast sounds good."

The younger man smiled briefly, face lighting up, the tension around his eyes easing and Dean felt his own shoulders relax in unconscious echo. He stretched out a hand to the radio, grinned a little as his brother snorted and slapped it away.

"House rules, Dean."

Pressing his lips together in a pout, the hunter settled back into the seat, head cocked a little to one side as Sam flicked through his collection of CDs and finally slipped one into the player with a smirk.

Dean groaned as a cheerful, light guitar solo rang out and clamped his hands over his ears.

"Dude! I swear I never woulda fitted the damn thing if I'd known you'd play this in my baby!"

His whine was drowned out as his brother warbled along to the vocals, a persistent half-tone out of tune and three beats behind, lips split in a grin the older man couldn't help but mimic.

"Sometimes you call me your baby; sometimes you call me your man. You can call me anything you want to, babe, but just call me anytime that you can."

He twisted, hiding a wince in his arm as bruised muscles protested the stretch, and reached into the back seat for his jacket, wrapping the leather around his head and curling into the corner with a grumble. Hidden, he grinned outright as Sam laughed and the engine roared a little louder and the music played on unaccompanied.

"Cause I'm the one to see it through, at three o'clock in the morning I'll be there for you."

His smile tightened at the promise in the words, the leather suddenly stifling and he fought free of it, pressed his head against the window, trying not to let his brother see the shift in his mood as he watched the trees blur by on the other side of the glass.

Always on the other side.

He rolled his shoulders, remembered the way the girl the spirit had latched on to had looked at him when they'd first turned up on her doorstep, the way *want* had glittered in her eyes as he unlocked the Impala's door for her and turned to *disgust* as they tumbled out of the cleansed house, battered and bleeding, job done.

The way she'd curled one delicate lip when he suggested going for a drive that last night and shrugged one tantalizingly bared shoulder, smile remote and automatic. Cold.

Nothing new.

He wondered if Sam still wished for Jessica, if he still dreamed of her the way he used to.

A sign flashed by, the name familiar from the pages of research his brother had shoved at him.

"Damascus, Alabama. Five people turned up dead on the edge of town. Cops think it's some kind of serial killer. The way they were killed, beaten to death and dumped under this one tree... vengeful spirit maybe."

When he'd suggested that maybe, just this once, the cops had it right, Sam had just looked at him and tapped one long finger on the pages he'd barely even skimmed through.

"Coroner's photos. They had exactly the same injuries, Dean. Same bruise patterns, same ligature marks on their necks. Exactly the same. No one could do that. No one human."

The cottonwood trees gave way to houses, red and blue roofs stark against the washed-out sky, only the faintest traces of night still darkening the horizon ahead of them. In the seat beside him, Sam muttered a low curse as they cruised down the street; the *No Vacancy* sign half-visible in the shadows in the window of the single motel.

Dean reached up, rubbed at the livid bruise on his cheekbone, murmured a reply to his brother's sullen, idle anger.

"Dude, let's just find somewhere to eat, okay? Check out isn't for another couple've hours."

"Yeah. I guess."

He snorted softly, tipping his head sideways against the glass again.

"What?"

Sam glanced at him, faint irritation in his scowl matching the question. Dean shrugged.

"You were the one who was all gung-ho for this hunt, Sam. We'll get a room next town over if we have to. Just take it easy, okay?"

The younger man looked at him for a long moment and finally sighed.

"Yeah. Looked like the diner back down the street was open."

The black classic swung into the empty parking slots lining the sides of the main street, silencing with a rumble that echoed in the town and turned the heads of the few passersby.

Dean smirked, basking in the attention as he opened the door and shoved to his feet, the dull ache lingering in his ribs and shoulder easing. A quiet chuckle drifted over the roof of the car, his brother's head shaking in the corner of his vision.

He set off for the diner, a familiar shadow falling into place at his shoulder with a yawn as they crossed the street. The hunter in him flicked a glance left and right, up and down the main drag of the small town. Twin rows of houses stretched to the edge of the forest, most small, patchy grass stretching from peeling clapboard and sagging porches to the sidewalk. Scattered among them were larger properties, freshly whitewashed, wide columns lining shaded verandas.

His eyes narrowed and he slowed, stopped in the middle of the street.

"Huh."

"Dean? You tryin' to get run over?"

The older man slanted a look up at his brother, gestured at the deserted road.

"Unless the Delorean comes into town, I think we'll be okay Sam. You notice anything about this place?"

Sam frowned, followed his gaze back to the houses and Dean felt him shift as he saw it.

Black ribbons, tied around the cottonwood trees in the yards of the larger houses.

"You think that's for our vics?"

Sam hesitated, turned and looked back down the street behind them.

"Five vics. Five houses with ribbons."

"Hell of a coincidence, Sammy."

"I'll check addresses when we get inside."

"So we got a ghost that's, what, some kind of equal rights protestor?"

Sam shrugged, followed the shorter man as Dean strode towards the diner again, patting his growling stomach absently. He squinted in the morning sun, the brightening light making his eyes water, ducking his head to let his bangs shade them a little. He blinked at the backs of his brother's legs, not really seeing them.

Not really seeing anything but the gut-wrenching sight of Dean disappearing into the stairwell with a yelp while he sprawled on the floor.

He'd kept hidden the bruise on his arm where Dean's shove had sent him crashing into the edge of a small table, seeing enough guilt and hurt in his brother's eyes lately to make the thought of adding to it turn his stomach.

Since he'd dragged the older man out of the church at Stull and they'd watched it disappear with their father still inside, Dean's stare had been more carefully guarded than ever, the walls behind it shored up with hunt after hunt. He torched spirits, beheaded vampires with a reckless desperation that was only matched by the fervor with which he kept the younger man safe.

It was only in the downtime between hunts that the masks ever slipped, that he saw the raw ache his brother was hiding. Sam had searched, poured over every ancient tome he could, the echo of the days he'd spent trying to find a way to save Dean from the demon possessing him trailing goose bumps down his spine.

The bell in the diner rang jauntily, bringing him back to the present with a jolt as his brother shouldered through the door. The Winchesters hesitated just inside the large room, packed with tables and dark-wood booths lining the walls.

"Grab a seat guys. I'll be with you in a sec," the harried waitress called to them, peering through a cloud of steam behind a large, battered coffee machine.

Sam eased past his brother as Dean leered at her, weaving between the tables to a booth at the back of the room. He dropped into one side, back to the door without even thinking about it, leaving the opposite side for the older hunter. Slouching in the deep cushions, he yawned, narrowed his eyes to slits and gazed blankly at the wall.

He didn't move when Dean slipped into the booth, slid a mug of coffee over the table to him and sat back with a sigh.

"Annie says the motel's closed down."

Sam let his eyes shut completely, reached out and wrapped his hands around the mug, letting the warmth sink into his fingers.

"There's a few over in Warrior, 'bout eight miles away. She reckoned we'd get a room there alright."

"Kay," Sam murmured, sipping at his mug, quirking an eyebrow as he tasted vanilla and creamy froth. He took another, longer gulp as Dean buried his smile in his own brew, slurping at it noisily, and wriggled further into the seat.

"I ordered already."

The younger man nodded, rubbing at gritty eyes and hunching his shoulders until his spine popped. As soon as he'd stopped moving, the weariness he'd been holding off suddenly became all-consuming.

Dean grinned outright as he yawned cavernously, curling forward and folding his head down into his arms as he crossed them on the table.

"Wake me up when breakfast gets here," he mumbled into the table top, letting himself drift to the muted sounds of his brother fidgeting, nails clicking out a rhythm on the battered Formica, one boot heel thumping a quiet bass beat on the floor.

He'd spent a lifetime falling asleep to the same lullaby and it never failed, no matter how rough things got between them.

Sam dozed off, slipped into dreams where fire flickered in the dark, threw strange shapes on rough walls that billowed and shifted. He knew he was sleeping but he couldn't help the guttural cry that clawed out of him as hands grabbed his arms, his legs, dragged him kicking and flailing through the smoke.

Adrenaline ran hot through his blood, curling his hands into fists, lashing out with elbows and feet. But for everyone that fell away, there were two, three, four more waiting, blows raining down on his head and shoulders, one boot slamming into his kidneys and he arched away, crying out again as voices snarled at him, low and rough with fury.

In the middle of it, he heard something he knew instantly.

"Hey! Sam!"

What?

Dazed, hurting and confused he still recognized that voice.

Dean?

Flinching back from a blow that spilt blood down his cheek, he squinted, searching for his brother as something grabbed his shoulder and shook him until he blinked at a dark scrawl that looped across a pale, stained surface.

Slowly, as his heart thundered at his ribs, the curls cleared, resolved into shapes he knew.

W.E. + A.G.

"Sammy?"

He mumbled something that didn't make sense, even to him and peeled his head up from his arms, still folded across the graffiti-scarred table top.

"You awake?"

Sam squeezed his eyes closed, still trying to shake the dream that clung to his thoughts.

“No.”

“Wanna skip breakfast?”

He peeled open an eye at that, gazed blearily at his brother through the slit. “You’re offering to miss pancakes?”

The older man tried to look offended, but the worry behind his pout shone through. “Hey!”

Shaking his head slowly, carefully, Sam eased back in his seat, sniffing at the smell of blueberries and maple syrup. “Nah. I’m good.”

He managed to fumble at his knife and fork, slice off a bite of the pancake and shovel it into his mouth.

It tasted like soggy, burnt cardboard.

Dean snorted, rolled the pancake on top of his stack and swiped it through the syrup spilling around his plate. Sam watched in horrified fascination as the hunter chewed contentedly on half the roll in one mouthful, grinning at his brother with blue-stained lips.

The younger man heaved a sigh, stirred his breakfast around on his plate and shifted uncomfortably under Dean’s scrutiny. The diner was quiet, so early in the morning there were just a few scattered locals sipping moodily at coffees in the booths lining the walls and it felt like he was the center of everyone’s attention.

“Sammy.”

He jerked in his seat; belatedly realizing he’d begun nodding off even as he squirmed under the weight of so many gazes.

“What?”

“Dude, I’ve been calling you for five minutes.”

“Sorry. Sorry, just tired, I guess. Long drive.”

He regretted it as soon as he said it, but couldn’t help his shoulders relaxing as the guilt that flashed through his brother’s eyes made him drop them. He didn’t protest when Dean reached out and snagged one of the shreds of pancake from his plate.

“You done?” the older man asked, already digging in his pocket for his wallet. Sam nodded, swallowing as his stomach flipped greasily at the ripe, sweet smell of the berries and syrup.

“M gonna use the bathroom,” he mumbled, already sliding from his seat. “I’ll meet you outside.”

His brother frowned at him, called after him as he bolted for the battered door at the back of the diner, vision blurring, the world lurching around him. It felt like someone was drilling through the back of his skull, like he’d swallowed a handful of snakes that were churning in his stomach, and he staggered to the stalls, the slam of the door behind him detonating in his head as he hunched over the toilet and heaved.

Finally, he sagged against the graffiti-covered wall, barely stifling a cry when his back pressed against it and pain stabbed deep into his kidneys. Flinching away, curling forward he hissed as he pushed to his feet, a dull throb building across his lower back.

“What the hell?” he murmured, wondered briefly, idly about food poisoning and salmonella, shaking his head at himself as he shuffled out into the bathroom. He recognized the sullen ache, knew it for what it was.

Just a bruise from the hunt, that’s all. I didn’t notice before. Stiffened up in the car or something.

He twisted awkwardly, painfully, in front of the mirror, gingerly tugging his shirt up, eyes going wide as he saw the shadow that spread dark across his side. It curled around to his spine, faded into purple and blue around the edges of the unmistakable boot print.

That's not from the hunt.

"Sam?"

Sam jolted at the soft call from the other side of the door, couldn't remember how to make his tongue form the words in his throat, *Dean, something's wrong. That's not from the hunt.*

He was fixated, pinned in place by the dark print, staring helplessly at it, mind circling over and over, coming back to it again and again.

Not from the hunt. It's not.

He heard his brother sigh, a soft rustle that sounded like someone leaning against the door.

"Okay, Princess. I'll be at the car while you fix your hair."

He choked, found his voice.

"Dean..."

There was nothing but empty space on the other side of the door, empty space and the black and blue boot print, burning on his skin.

It's not from the hunt.

* * * *

"Okay, Princess. I'll be at the car while you fix your hair."

Dean waited for a moment, leaning one shoulder against the wall beside the door.

There was nothing but strained silence on the other side.

Rolling his eyes, the hunter shoved away from the wall and walked back to the table. Digging in his pocket, he tossed a few bills onto the table, gulped down the dregs of his cold coffee and rolled up half a pancake, munching on it as he headed for the door. He ignored the weight of eyes on him, the other patrons watching him pass. It was easier to do when he had his brother in his usual place, two paces behind Dean's shoulder.

The door clicked shut behind him and he shivered once in the cool air, hunched his shoulders inside his jacket and strode across the parking lot to the Impala, tucked into one corner. Edging around the classic, he leaned against the side, shifted uncomfortably as the bruises on his back twinged.

The quiet street felt empty, almost deserted.

Lonely.

He dropped his head, lifted one hand to knead at the tension riding the back of his neck. A dull throb centered around the bruise on his cheekbone, thumped behind his eyes, and he closed them, listened to a car splash past on the wet road.

The pressure behind his eyes had been a steady, slight weight ever since the desert. Ever since the yellow-eyed version of Sam had started tearing him apart from the inside out. He frowned, dragged his hand around his neck, up over his jaw, his ring scraping against his lips. Leaving his dad there had felt like claws tearing at his insides all over again, the desperation to find John a wall between Sam and he that he couldn't reach through. Sometimes, he wasn't even sure he wanted to.

His brother felt like a different person now. Dean knew that what the Yellow-eyed...Sam had said to them still haunted his brother.

"Don't be like that, Sammy. You might be from a different reality but we're the same person deep down."

Hell, it haunted him, left him feeling somehow off-balance. The shift in their roles didn't help, the way Sam just seemed to want to throw himself into the hunt while all Dean wanted to do was search for a way to find their dad and fill the hollow that had lodged in his throat, drown out the echo that always followed him up out of dreams of choking, dangling helplessly in the twisted version of his brother's mental grasp.

Take your brother and run. Now Dean, go!

He forced out a long breath between clenched teeth, felt a muscle in his jaw ticking, one hand curling into a fist at his side.

“Dean!”

The cry, punctuated by the glass doors of the diner slamming open startled him out of his daze, spinning so fast his aching back spasmed, locked up, sent him lurching into the car, one hand halfway to the pistol tucked into his jacket.

Sam bolted across the parking lot, eyes so wild Dean could read the raw fear in them from where he stood.

“Sam?”

“God, Dean,” Sam panted, stumbling as he neared the Impala and Dean didn’t even think as he limped stiffly around the car, reaching out for his brother, catching hold of Sam’s arms and steadying him as the younger man tripped again and almost went down.

“It’s not... from the hunt... it’s not. Dean, it’s not from the hunt!”

Dean blinked, ducked his head, trying to catch his brother’s roving gaze.

“You said that, Sam. What’s not from which hunt?”

“The bruise... it’s not... I don’t know...”

He quirked an eyebrow, tried not to feel like he’d just walked into the middle of a conversation but the younger man’s near panic was infectious, dragging along his nerves, making his mouth dry and his hands tremble.

“Sam, what the hell are you talking about?”

Sam turned to him, focused on him, pupils dilated and Dean winced away from the sour smell of bile on his breath.

“Damn, dude,” he muttered, started hustling his brother to the passenger door. Sam dug his feet in, brought Dean stumbling to a halt and twisted his arms in the older man’s hold until his hands caught at Dean’s wrists.

“The bruise on my back, Dean.”

He spoke clearly, precisely and something about it set the hunter’s teeth on edge, made his hackles rise.

“What about the bruise on your damn back, Sam? You’re not the one who got thrown down the stairs, remember?”

Sam huffed, let go of his arms to tug at fistfuls of his hair in palpable frustration.

“It’s not from the hunt, Dean.”

“Well, where the hell else is it from, Sam?”

Voice tight and clipped with more than a little frustration of his own, Dean finally managed to fold his brother into the car, hurrying around the hood and yanking open the driver’s door. Sam’s whisper stopped him in his tracks, halfway into the seat.

“I think it’s from my dream.”

“Come again?”

“I had a dream about...” Sam trailed off, shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. I got kicked in the dream, and there’s a bruise on my back right where it happened.”

Dean gaped, dropped heavily the rest of the way into the seat. The younger man stared at him, wide-eyed.

“That’s... that’s just crazy, Sam.”

“I know!” Sam almost yelled, thumping one hand against the dash, the other reaching around to skim over his back. Dean watched him, saw the way his eyes crinkled at the corners, lips thinning as he shifted in the seat.

“Sam, it was probably just a bruise from the poltergeist, that’s all.”

He pitched his voice low, soothing, acting on instinct older than the distance between them. His brother was scared and hurting, and Dean couldn’t do anything other than try and make it alright.

“Your freaky mind just worked it into some random dream about getting the crap kicked out of you. Which is, admittedly, kinda twisted, but the dream didn’t give you a bruise.”

“It wasn’t there last night.”

Dean chewed back the retort that simmered in his mind, stuffed down the irrational irritation with his brother’s stubborn pout.

"Sam, you got pretty beat up by that 'geist. Between that and patching me up, driving here. You probably just didn't notice one more bruise."

Sam glared at him through his bangs, folded his arms across his chest, jaw set tight, and Dean almost growled.

"Come on, Sam. Think about it for a second. Which is more likely, huh? That you didn't notice a bruise because you were already hurting and a little preoccupied with picking me up off the floor, or that you had a dream that somehow managed to kick your ass? Even in our world, that's just buckets of crazy."

The younger man didn't answer, just sat there glowering at him, arms still... he looked closer, saw the way his brother's fingers dug into his biceps, the way his elbows were pulled against his ribs. Arms still wrapped around him, like they were all that was holding him together, like they were the only defense he had against the world. Against Dean.

When did this—we—get so screwed to hell?

Dean deflated at the thought, reached out awkwardly for Sam's shoulder, curling his fingers around it.

"Let's just find a motel, okay? Get some sleep," he murmured, felt his brother twitch under his hand and forced the irritation and disbelief out of his face. He smiled gently when Sam finally nodded, pulled back and twisted the key in the barrel, shrugging out of his coat as the engine roared to life. Tossing it at his brother, he grinned as Sam huffed, untangling himself from the leather, one flailing arm catching the older man in the side. Dean "oofed," winced and rubbed at his ribs, flicking a mock glare at his brother as he turned onto the street.

Sam just ignored him, slumping down against the door, long legs sprawled out under the dash as he tugged the jacket up to his shoulders. Dean rolled his eyes, watched the road and quipped out of the corner of his mouth, "Dude, are you snuggling?"

Sam huffed and the older man smirked, flicked on the radio, static muted under the thrum of the tires as he spun through snatches of stations, settled on a whispery, crackly rendition of *Freebird* and beat out a rhythm against the steering wheel with his thumbs all the way to Colquitt.

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Something shaking his arm woke him from an uneasy doze. Sam blinked at foggy glass under his head, peered sleepily at a vague suggestion of cracked asphalt though the white.

"Sam?"

"Hmm?"

Behind him Dean snorted, the hand still gripping his arm gently turning to a fist that thumped him lightly.

"We're here, dude."

Sam frowned, shook his head a little, trying to clear the haze out of his mind.

"Where?"

"The delightful Star Motel, Colquitt, Georgia."

"Oh."

He could almost feel the eyeroll.

"Let me know when you've graduated beyond words of one syllable, huh Sam? We're in room eight."

Sam hunched forward in his seat, massaging his brow and trying to work the kinks out of his back. He heard a door creak open, felt a brief rush of cold air across his bare arms and shivered, tipping his head back to finally look outside.

A long, low roof stretched away on either side, dark gray tiles shading a narrow porch that ran the length of the building. Faded blue paint peeled away from the doors, a corroded number "8" crooked on the door in front of the car. Thin clouds

muted the sun, turned the bleak building oppressive, almost ominous and Sam sighed, elbowed his door open with a groan that almost matched the screech of the hinges. A shadow passed over his boots, his bag thumping to the ground beside his legs and he rolled his gaze sideways, saw his brother bouncing a key in one hand, one duffel slung over his shoulder, the other dangling at his side as he strode to the room.

Tipping forward, the younger man snatched at the handle of his bag, almost face planted before stumbling to his feet, the old motel tilting dizzily around him for a moment. He grimaced, grabbed at his back as it throbbed fiercely and hobbled wearily after his brother.

Dean disappeared through the door, left it ajar behind him and Sam shuffled across the porch, caught himself against the jamb. Sucking in a breath of cold air, he pushed away, felt his brother's eyes on him as the older man rummaged through his bag, dropped on the closest bed. A pulse of irritation cut through Sam, weary, unreasoning anger at the added distance he'd have to haul his own bag and his jaw locked tight, knuckles white around the handle of his duffel.

"Do me a favor, Sam."

Dean's low rumble made him start and he tossed back a sullen, "What?" over his shoulder.

"Grab a shower and pull that stick out of your ass."

His bag thudded to the floor beside his boots as he whirled, hands curling into fists, eyes hot. He deflated as his brother shot him a tired grin, went back to unpacking, tucking his knife under his pillow, slipping his Colt into the drawer of the cabinet between the beds. Scrubbing a hand through his hair, Sam sighed, taking in the slump in Dean's shoulders, the edge of shadows darkening his skin under his collar.

"Sorry."

Dean shrugged, checked the load in a shotgun and propped it against the wall beside his bed.

"You're tired."

It sounded a little too much like it had when he was five, but Sam squashed the flare of anger and crouched, unzipping his bag. His breath hitched as he twisted and pain stabbed deep along his spine.

"Sam?"

"I'm fine," he bit out, staggered to his feet, caught sight of Dean watching him across the beds. The older man huffed, edged around the end of the bed.

"Let me see that."

Rolling his eyes, Sam turned, tugged at his shirt. He heard Dean whistle, low and heavy with sympathy.

"Jeez, Sammy."

He winced as cold air stirred across his lower back, twitched away with a hiss when Dean pressed one hand against the bruise.

"What the hell did you land on?"

Clamping his jaw shut, Sam grabbed for his bag, sucking in air with a gasp as the movement stretched aching, sore muscles, half relieved, half annoyed when his brother lifted it to the bed. He slumped down beside it, elbows on his knees, heard his brother pace away a few strides, to the table and back again.

"I didn't land on anything, Dean. I told you -"

"Yeah, that you dreamed it and it came true."

"It's not like that's anything new, Dean!"

He looked sideways, saw his brother, silhouetted against the window, throw his hands out in palpable frustration.

"So now it's a vision? Come on, Sam, no way. Your visions have always been about someone else, right? Why would that just change now? No." Sam watched as

the older man started pacing again, hands clenching at his sides, jaw locked tight. He bit off a sigh, couldn't keep the snap of accusation out of his voice.

"Dean, the only bruise I got from that hunt was when you shoved me into the bookcase."

"Well I'm sorry for trying to save your ass a trip down the stairs, Sam!"

Sam huffed, pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, frowning hard at his knees. Dean rolled his eyes, swung around at the end of his short circuit to face his brother.

"Look, Sam, maybe you fell or something and you didn't notice."

"It's a bootprint, Dean. There weren't any boots on that bookcase."

Dean rolled his eyes, forced his voice to stay calm and level in the middle of the frustration pouring from his brother.

"Well maybe the poltergeist threw a boot at you or something. It's a little more likely than you... spontaneously bruising, or whatever."

"It wasn't spontaneous, Dean. It was the dream."

"Come on, Sam. That's so thin it's freakin' transparent."

Sam sighed, shoulders drooping.

"I know," he murmured, finally peering up at the older man through his bangs. "It was so real, so vivid, Dean. It just... it felt like a vision, I guess. Kinda."

"So it's some new twist on your psychic gig?" His stomach churned as he spoke, the old fear stirring bile in the back of his throat now that the burning anger had subsided. *I can't protect him from that. I can't look out for him when there's nothing I can fight.* He shook the thought off, stopped pacing, scrubbed one hand over his lips and sighed between his fingers.

"Look, I'm gonna head back into Damascus, see if I can find any intel on our five vics. Whatever's going on has to be something to do with them, and if you're right and they're all descendants of the founders, there should be records in the library."

Sam stood, wobbled, grabbed at the wall for balance.

"Gimme a second, I'll come with."

"Sam, sit down before you fall down."

"I'm fine, Dean."

Even as he said it, the younger man twisted and paled, his free hand lifting to flatten across his lower back. Catching the movement, Dean frowned, peered more closely at his brother. Sam was gray, dark circles shadowing eyes tight with pain and exhaustion as he wavered.

"Dude, get some rest, okay?"

"Dean, I should help you... research or something."

"Sam, you're exhausted, you're freaking out. Last thing you need to be doing is staring at dusty books all afternoon. Seriously. Sleep, alright?"

Dean crouched, rooted through his bag, finally pulled out a chemical ice pack and snapped it. He tossed it over to Sam, watched from the corner of his eye as his brother fumbled with it before pressing it gingerly against his back. The younger man sank back onto the bed with a wince, the lines etched around his eyes crinkling as he moved. Dean tucked his Colt into the back of his waistband and snagged the laptop from the table, stuffing it quickly into its leather satchel. Grabbing the keys, he bounced them on his palm as he turned back and stopped dead, smiling at the sight of his brother, tipped sideways against the headboard, eyes sliding shut.

Chuckling softly, the hunter shook his head and strode to the window, drawing the curtains, casting the room into shadow. Slinging the satchel over his shoulder, he crossed to the door, glancing back once as he opened it. Sunlight streamed around him, stretched out across the floor, but it didn't quite reach the bed, leaving his brother just a pale blur in the dark. For a moment, it seemed like Sam was unreachable, like there were a thousand miles between them and a shiver crept down his spine, fear he couldn't place crawling under his skin. Swallowing hard, he

almost stepped back into the room, almost drew the Colt from his waistband, a blind, unreasoning urge to stand between his brother and... nothing.

"Dammit," he breathed, shaking it off, forcing himself to close the door, unable to stop himself ducking down and pulling a Sharpie from the satchel, scrawling a small charm onto the frame. Reassured, he lingered for a second, fingers skating across the grip of the gun against his back. Finally he shook himself and turned away, headed for the car parked two spaces down from their door. The familiar creak of the door as he hauled it open and slid in behind the wheel comforted him, the throaty growl of the engine reassuring, and he sighed, relaxed into the seat as he pulled away, turning north towards Damascus.

* * * *

The door clicking shut woke him, hazily, and he blinked at the dark wood under his nose. He took a moment to orient himself, tricks he'd learned over a lifetime of waking up in a strange room that had only taken weeks to relearn after Stanford. Faintly, he wondered if his brother even remembered what it was like to know without even looking where you were, wondered if Dean even cared that he probably didn't.

Sam frowned at himself, shook the melancholy off, told himself it was just the weariness talking. Sniffing back a yawn, he rolled over away from the door, belatedly realized the room was dark, the curtains drawn tight against the sun, and smiled sleepily.

"Thanks, Dean," he murmured, sliding down into the bed, cringing once as the bruise on his back pressed against the mattress. His blood ran cold for a moment and he swallowed hard against the memory of being helpless, of iron around his wrists and hands dragging him across wet grass, fists and boots raining down, thick voices growling at him, cursing him. His back twinged again, pain flaring deep and his breath caught, held against the burn until it faded into a dull throb. He yawned again, didn't bother to cover it, just closed his eyes and waited to sleep.

In the dark behind his eyelids, something flashed, moonlight flickering silver through the clouds, glittering from a pale, bright blur that slammed into him and he bolted up with a yell, one arm raised in front of him. Panting, he stared wildly around the empty room, slowly convinced himself there really was nothing there and tried to steady his breathing. He sagged back against the headboard, licked his lips and ran his hand through his hair, yanking it back out of his face, his pounding heart settling.

Giving a half laugh, he shook his head.

"Spooked by a friggin' dream."

It sounded hollow even to himself. His hand trembled as he dropped it to his lap and he curled it into a fist, willed it to stop shaking. Easing round, he gazed at the window, curtains drawn tight, bright sunlight burning through the thin cracks around the edges. Squinting at the shadows, he guessed it was about midday, pushed out a long breath and pushed himself down in the bed again, burrowing into the blankets as a chill born of exhaustion stole through him. He relaxed, breathed out tiredness and closed his eyes again.

Stared at the dark.

And stared.

Finally, he huffed, flopped over, groaning into his wrist as his back hit the edge of the mattress.

"Sonofabitch..."

His eyes burned, weariness and frustration running riot with his emotions and he bit the inside of his lip, listening to cars outside on the road, the quiet in the room suddenly feeling empty and lonely. Rolling his head sideways, he stared at the window, watched the light shift, a shadow flickering past as someone walked by outside.

Slowly, by degrees, the sun crept closer until it spilled across the edge of the bed, warm on his eyelids as he closed them, drifted.

And then the light on his face was cold moonlight and a silver blur flashing in the dark.

Part Two

When he opened the door, the early afternoon light spilled over him. His shadow slouched wearily, the leather satchel bumping against his side as he shifted, trying to ease the slow ache in his spine from hours spent hunched over books and the laptop, stiffening muscles already sore underneath the deep bruising from the poltergeist. He stretched, stepped into the room so that the light streaked the floor, a bright echo of leaving hours earlier. This time, though, it stretched to the bed and beyond, gilded the hunched figure almost buried in blankets. He looked peaceful, one hand drawn up to his chin, loosely curled into a fist, the other clutching the bedclothes. Dean almost smiled, lips already twitching up, a half-formed idea to reach for his phone and record the moment for future blackmail material lifting his hand to his pocket when he figured out what was wrong with the scene.

His brother wasn't sleeping.

He wasn't even breathing.

The bag slid from his shoulder, utterly ignored as he bolted forward, lunging at the bed, grabbing hold of Sam's arm and hauling him up.

"Sam! Sammy! Wake up!"

He shook the younger man, hard, part of his mind coldly, icily noting the bruises flowering slowly across his brother's pale skin, already darkening from red to purple.

"Sam!"

Dean reared back, one hand fisted in the younger man's t-shirt, the other sliding under Sam's chin, seeking out the faint thrum under his fingertips. It stuttered even as he found it and he shook his head in denial, grabbing his brother's jaw and steadying Sam's lolling head. His heart thundered in his ears as he saw the younger man's lips, tinted blue, the shadows under his eyes turning them hollow.

"Sam, you wake up, right the hell now! You hear me?! Show me those peepers, Sammy," he growled, throat unbearably tight as he felt the odd, compliant weight slump into him. "Come on, Sam. Please."

He'd never know if it was the order or the plea, or maybe just the tears burning his eyes, his voice that finally worked, didn't care as his brother's eyes snapped open, wide and unfocused, rolling frantically. Sam jerked back, choked, grabbed at his throat with one hand, balled the other into a fist and swung wildly at Dean. The older man ducked, heard the blow whistle past his ear, felt it brush through his hair and rocked back, snatching at his brother's wrist as Sam tried to snap his elbow back into Dean's jaw.

"Dammit, Sam, it's me!"

He wrestled Sam's arm down, caught his brother's gaze and saw the moment he woke up, saw recognition burn through the disorientation and held on, steadied his brother, tried to remember how to breathe as he watched Sam cough in air, gasp it out again in shuddering wheezes.

"S-show... me those... p-peepers?"

Dean barked out a laugh at Sam's stuttered query, dropping to his knees on the floor beside the bed. He huffed out a shaky breath, looked up and felt his heart lurch in his chest all over again.

"Dean?" Sam rasped but he barely heard, just reached up to lightly trace the ring spreading around his brother's throat, the bruising already wickedly black. Sam flinched back away from him, lifted his own hand and winced as he touched the ligature mark, scrambled off the bed past Dean and ran for the bathroom. The older man followed as fast as he could clamber to his feet, found Sam standing in front of

the mirror, leaning heavily against the small, dirty bathtub, chin tilted up as he stared at his reflection. His eyes shifted, found Dean's in the mirror and the hunter almost cringed at the fear in them.

"Dean?"

It was quiet, his brother's voice high and tight and Dean crossed the small space in two strides, kept his hands steady by pure will as he flipped down the toilet lid and tugged Sam around, gently shoving him down to perch on it. Leaning back, he snagged the small first aid kit sitting next to his wash bag and digging inside. He set out Arnica, rubbing alcohol and gauze; felt his brother's eyes on him all the time, the unasked question still hovering between them. He didn't answer as he tipped the alcohol against the gauze, tilted Sam's chin up with one hand and rubbed the pad carefully over the worst of the bruising, raw looking scrapes patterning the younger man's throat, staining the gauze pink. Sam flinched once, didn't move again but Dean could see his fists, white against the toilet lid as he worked and set his jaw, finished cleaning, soothing, dressing the contusions in strained silence.

When he was done he pulled Sam up, one hand cupped around his brother's elbow as the younger man wobbled, guiding him out into the main room, heading for the closest bed. Halfway there, Sam balked, brought them both stumbling to a halt.

"No, Dean."

"Sam, you need sleep."

The younger man shook his head and Dean looked up at him, caught a flash of fear again as Sam stared at the bed and Dean sighed heavily, turning to the table.

"I still think you're nuts, but fine. Just remember who it was who wouldn't go to bed when you get all cranky."

Sam snorted softly, leaned into him a little more.

"Dude, I'm not five."

Dean grinned at the wry humor lightening his brother's tone.

Job done.

Dumping Sam gently into a chair, he spoke over his shoulder as he skirted the table and reached for the coffee pot.

"So, what happened?"

Sam didn't answer for a moment and Dean glanced back as he filled the jug, switched it on and spun the top off the jar of coffee, craving caffeine. The younger man was hunched over the table, staring at the scratched, chipped surface.

"Sam?"

"I don't know. I was...dreaming. I guess."

Waiting for the water to boil, Dean turned around, slouched against the counter, arms folded, trying to forget the image of his brother, still and quiet and not even breathing.

"What about?" he husked, cleared his throat when Sam looked up at him, frowning, eyes softening at last.

"I'm... not sure. I think..."

Dean waited, finally quirked an eyebrow.

"Wanna try finishing a sentence there, college boy?"

The coffee pot boiled, clicked off and he filled two cups with hot water, sniffing gratefully at the rich steam that rose around him. Stirring whitener and three sugars into one, he sipped from the other, took them both back to the table and sank into a seat opposite his brother, handing the sweetened cup to him. Sam took it with a small smile, stared into it, seemed to gather himself as Dean watched.

"It was a lynching," the younger man whispered. Dean blinked. "I was... this kid. A slave, I think. Hanging."

Dean grimaced, hid it in his coffee, bit out, "I came in and you weren't breathing."

Sam freed one hand from its white-knuckled grip on his cup, reached up to touch the dark ring around his throat, patterned with rough stripes.

Like rope. Like old, hemp rope, Dean thought and shivered.

“Dean.”

Nothing followed his name and he twitched sideways, tried to see past his brother’s bangs as Sam stared hard at the table.

“What?”

In answer, the younger man shoved his chair back, not bothering to stand even though the scrape of metal on the tiled floor in the kitchenette made Dean wince. He watched as his brother bent double, contorting himself with a grimace to dig in the bag, still lying forgotten, halfway between the door and the bed. Yanking free a handful of papers, he rocked upright again, scooted back to the table with the same screech. He spread the papers out on the Formica surface, shuffled through them, finally settled on one and handed it over, wordlessly. Dean took it, eyes fixed on his brother’s for a long time as he just held it, soaking up the fear running riot in Sam’s face.

When he looked down, his heart stuttered.

The photo was grainy, black and white, too stark and unflinchingly brutal. His stomach flipped and he swallowed hard, forced it to settle, tried to find some kind of distance, some kind of disconnection from the face staring sightlessly back out of the paper at him; dark eyes he thought were probably slate gray in life, hollow in a face that was swollen, discolored, bruises layered over bruises. Wrapped around his throat, a wide, almost black band of scrapes and contusions that marked out a pattern that was like thick, heavy rope.

“Are all the others like that?”

Sam’s murmur startled him and his head snapped up, found his brother huddled in the chair, looking all of six years old again. He shook his head, shrugged, dropped the photo before it could give away how much his hands were shaking.

“I don’t know. There weren’t any other photos I could get, just the written report. But you said it, man. They were exactly the same, right? Same... same bruising? Same injuries?”

Same cause of death, but he didn’t say that. Sam nodded.

“So I’m next?”

He couldn’t sit anymore, had to move, stood so fast his chair rocked back on its legs and almost clattered to the floor. He caught it, righted it roughly, started pacing.

“We don’t know that, Sam.”

His brother huffed out an entirely humorless laugh.

“Occam’s razor, man.”

“What?”

“The simplest answer - ”

“I know what it means, college boy.” The gentle teasing made Sam chuckle again, brought a faint but genuine smile to his face but Dean couldn’t share it, not when he felt like his blood was running like molten lead in his veins, thoughts from that morning echoing in the back of his head. *I can’t look out for him when there’s nothing I can fight.* “Doesn’t mean it’s right. You’re not next.”

“Dean, it’s pretty obvious.”

“What is?!”

Dean threw his hands out, stopped his angry pacing to face his brother where Sam still sat, leaning forward on arms folded around his coffee cup as if he was craving the warmth seeping through the ceramic. The hunter stepped forward until he loomed over his brother, fought the urge to haul Sam up by his collar and shake him.

“We don’t even know what this is, Sam! But I can tell you one thing. It is. Not. Getting you. Not on my watch.” He bit the words off, dropped his hands again, suddenly weary. The younger man looked sideways at him, craning his head up and Dean sighed, stepped back. “We’ll figure this out, Sammy. Okay?”

Slowly, his brother nodded, sat straighter in his chair.

“Yeah. Okay.”

He spoke around a cavernous yawn and Dean smirked for a moment, lost the smile as he realized, saw Sam figure it out at the same time, his face falling so suddenly it would have been funny if it wasn't so desperate.

"I can't go to sleep."

There wasn't much he could say to that, so he just stood with a sigh, and reached for the coffee pot again.

* * * *

"Sam."

The low voice startled him and he jumped, realized he was staring blankly at the same page he'd opened – he checked his watch – half an hour ago. Rubbing at his eyes, Sam pushed the book away, slouching down in his chair with a yawn.

"Seriously, dude. You look like crap."

He huffed out a laugh, cocked his head sideways to see his brother, propped up against the headboard, laptop open on his knees.

"Right back atcha, Dean."

Dean smirked at him, lifted the laptop to the mattress and swung his legs to the floor, standing stiffly to stretch with a low groan. Sam pressed the heel of one hand into his temple, hoping that if he pushed hard enough he might be able to force the dull ache behind his brow away. He reached for his coffee cup with the other hand, found it empty and sighed.

"I'll make the coffee," Dean muttered, shuffling over to the kitchenette. Sam watched him, wondered if there was any point in trying to convince his brother to sleep this time. He remembered the way the older man had swung on him last time he had, one hand fisted at his side, eyes burning and bloodshot. That one look had said it all, and neither of them had mentioned it again.

"Whaddaya got?"

He twisted back to the table, to the books spread across it and the pages of notepaper covered in longhand. Squinting at his own writing, he mumbled, "Not much. There's no link between the vics I can find, except that they're all from old families, founding the town, that kind of thing. Except me."

He rubbed gingerly at one of the darker bruises on his cheek, cringing as the lightest touch made the ache there flare into a sharp pain. Feeling the weight of his brother's gaze, even through the weary haze, he looked up to meet dark eyes that darted over his face, assessing, turning briefly murderous before Dean glanced away, held out a steaming mug.

"Here."

He took it, wrapped both hands around it. The table shifted as his brother sat heavily, gulping at his own cup and Sam winced, his own lips and tongue smarting in sympathy. Dean didn't even notice, just slouched in his chair, scanning the pages in front of him.

"You?" Sam asked, sitting back and watching the older man.

"Figured maybe some kind of vengeful spirit, killing people in the same way that it died."

"The slave who got lynched in my dream," Sam murmured, nodding. "That makes sense. But why now?"

"I got no clue. There's no construction work anywhere in town, no mention of artifacts dug up or donated to the freakin' museum or anything that might've disturbed it."

Sam eyed him speculatively.

"You've been busy."

Dean shrugged, tried to pass it off as nonchalant, but Sam could see the worry creeping under the tiredness in his bleary eyes.

"Nothin' else to do in this crap hole of a town. Hell, the bar doesn't even have a pool table."

Sam laughed, appreciating the diversion even as he recognized it for what it was.

"So if it's a vengeful spirit, we can stop it," he muttered, turning back to the books.

"I love a good salt and burn."

He smiled, yawned, froze with his mouth open as he skimmed an article about the recent spate of murders.

"Huh."

"Sam?"

Sam pulled the newspaper closer, ignored the screaming headline and focused in on the picture taking up half the front page.

"I know this."

"Know what?"

The paper whipped out from under his nose and he scowled, snatched halfheartedly at it, not really protesting when his brother held it out of reach.

"What am I looking at, Sam?"

"The tree. I know that tree."

Dean froze in the corner of his eye, gazing straight through the paper and Sam cursed himself silently.

Then you tell me that I've gotta go back home? Especially when I swore to myself I'd never go back there?

For a second, the room was tight, too small, the air between them strained.

"Dean - "

The older man startled, shook the paper out.

"Skip it, Sam."

His mutter was ragged and Sam gnawed on his lip as the older man continued.

"Know it like 'Oh, I saw that tree on the way into town' or know it like 'I saw it in another freaky-assed vision'?"

"Vision. It was in the dream."

It was Dean's turn to "huh," leaning back to snag a notebook from the bed he'd been working on. He flipped through pages, and if Sam saw the way his jaw worked, he didn't say anything.

"Well, that makes sense."

"What does?"

The older man looked up at him, tossed the notebook over.

"That tree's where all the bodies have been turning up. Cops reckon it's the killer's dump site, but way back when this was still the Confederate south, and even for a while after, it was the local hanging tree."

"So if the kid in my dream was lynched..."

"That's where they would have done it."

"How does that help us find the remains?"

Dean huffed, a sound born of frustration and worry and Sam dropped the notebook, watched him stand and pace restlessly.

"It doesn't."

The younger man yawned, propped his head on one hand, pulled the nearest newspaper to him again.

"Guess we keep looking," he muttered.

"No."

"No?"

"No," Dean repeated flatly. "You need to rest."

Sam sat up, a protest dying on his lips as his brother grabbed his bicep and hauled him bodily out of the chair.

"Not sleep, just rest. You're no good to me half-awake, Sam. I need you sharp, remember? We'll have a grave to dig up tonight and a body to salt and burn."

"Dean, it's too risky."

"I'll keep you awake man. Just... meditate or something."

"Meditate?"

"Or something. Hell, fantasize about Lindsay Lohan for all I care, but rest."

As he spoke, Dean shoved the younger man over to the bed, sweeping handfuls of notes and printouts out of the way, and Sam let himself topple sideways, bouncing a little on the too-firm mattress with a sigh. Fear fluttered under his skin and he rolled halfway up again before his brother stopped him with one hand cupped around his shoulder.

"Sam. I won't let you dream, alright? I promise."

The older man stared down at him, face half-hidden in shadow, a pale blur in the dark, just his eyes glittering. Sam licked dry lips, nodded and curled down onto the bed, his brother's hand warm on his shoulder until he closed his eyes and drifted.

Dean waited until his brother relaxed, breaths deepening, evening out before he moved away. Keeping his back to the bed, he refilled and set the coffee pot to boiling again, caffeine already blurring along his nerves, but the fatigue hazing his senses was too alluring. He dragged a hand over his jaw, scrubbed it through his hair, trying to wipe away the tiredness, the unrelenting replay burning his eyes from the inside out; Sam, lips blue, dying peacefully in the sunlight.

He shook himself, reached out numbly for the coffee pot and poured scalding water into his mug, dumping in a spoonful of powder and stirring it quickly. His fingers stung as he wrapped them around the hot ceramic but he cradled it tighter, craving the warmth as exhaustion sapped his body heat. Clearing a space on the table, he set the cup down, sank into the hard chair and sifted through the papers he'd moved and started reading.

Sam muttered, rolled over and sighed and Dean looked up, caught a glimpse of hazel peering sleepily at him. He watched for a moment, chewing at his thumb as his brother blinked slowly, heavily, each blink getting longer and longer.

"Sam? Stay awake, dude."

"Yeh'kay," Sam murmured back on a long breath and Dean hesitated for a moment, then stood.

"I'll be right back. Sam? Don't you go to sleep."

"Alright," the younger man groaned, more lucidly now, and Dean headed for the door, snatching the car keys from the dresser by the door. The cool air outside hit him like a smack to the face and he just stood there for a moment, let it revive him, watched the sun turning the sky to gold. With the door between them, he could let his shoulders drop, could let the fear tremble in his hands and he sank back against the wall, grateful for the sun-warmed solidity at his back. Dipping his head, he worked at the tension in the back of his neck with one hand, kneading hard until the knots eased away and his fingers cramped. Only then did he push away, steps almost rock-steady as he hurried to the car, unlocked it and slid inside, reaching for the thick wallet tucked under the bench seat. Clambering out, he squinted into the sunlight, soaked up the fresh air and headed back inside, into the fear that smelled of stale coffee and sweat. Locking the door behind him, he detoured past the beds, thumping his brother's boot with the wallet clutched in one hand and grabbing the laptop with the other, wishing he could find the way Sam bolted half-upright, hair tumbling messily into his eyes until he swiped it out of the way funny.

It wasn't even close to funny.

Putting it aside for a moment, he began flipping through the wallet, and he did grin as he found what he was looking for, slipped the disc into the drive. He chuckled as Sam stilled, listening, then laughed softly under the quiet growl of "Enter Sandman."

Sleep with one eye open, gripping your pillow tight.

He felt his brother's gaze on him for a moment before the bed creaked; rustled as Sam rolled away, put his back between them. For a moment, it felt like he was alone, vertigo spinning his senses and he squeezed his eyes shut, clutched hard at the

edge of the table, biting down on his lip to stifle the gasp that threatened to break the hush surrounding the music.

When he could see again, when he could feel the room still and steady underneath him, he pried his fingers open, the table rocking a little as he jerked his hand back, dragged it over his mouth. His ring scraped at his lips, and he propped his elbows on the Formica, papers rustling away from his shirtsleeves as he tilted his head into one palm, kneaded at the tension throbbing behind his temple.

Yawning, he reached out for the laptop, scrolled through the pages to the museum archive he'd bookmarked earlier, found a doctor's journal that looked vaguely promising and started reading.

Mawu was hanged last night. Lt. Meades accused him of molesting his niece, although that young child has been conspicuous in her absence since the death of her father, the lieutenant's brother. With Master Frederick's passing, the plantation has changed. The slaves are sullen now, angry, and even Mawu and Lesia, who have always been the most biddable of children, seemed to be infected with the ill-humor that has clouded this place. Still, I find it almost incomprehensible that Mawu could be guilty of such an act. I delivered him into this world, and now I shall see him pass from it, and that fact leaves a foul taste in my mouth.

He could relate to that. A shiver crawled down his spine as he remembered the tug of the trigger against his finger, the way a wolfed-out Sam had looked at him, apology and hunger mingling in his eyes. Even as he'd taken the shot, and the world had shifted around him again, he'd struggled to understand it, this new, utterly wrong version of his brother.

It had haunted him at odd moments since Stull, sliding into his dreams, insidious and quiet, a doubt he saw mirrored in Sam's eyes sometimes, and wondered what his brother had seen when the church shifted. It always left his mouth tasting like ashes.

He shook his head, read on.

I have never seen a body as badly treated as Mawu's. He was beaten, so badly I doubt he would have seen the dawn if they hadn't hanged him. One blow in particular would almost certainly have proved fatal, there is a mark on his brow, above the thinnest part of the skull and the bone beneath feels almost shattered. The mark is quite distinct, the shape of the tiger's head perfectly clear. I know of only one such object in the town, the finial that tops Lt. Meades' walking cane.

Dean froze, mug half raised as he stared at the picture on the screen, the image of the antique cane tiny but all too clear.

"Sonofabitch," he breathed, finally broke the paralysis that gripped him and turned, almost unwillingly, towards the bed where his brother lay curled under the blankets, the bruise on his temple dark in the shadows. Even in the dim light, the older man could see the pattern in it, the curve of a skull, framing a whorl of stripes around a void where he knew a silvery eye would be. His hand shook as he put the mug down, exaggerated care making his movements slow and steady. He couldn't tear his gaze away from the impression on his brother's head, even as he reached out, scabbled blindly through the papers spread across the table until his fingers brushed across the glossy prints, recognized the smooth touch. He licked suddenly dry lips as he finally looked down, saw the same vortex of streaks around a hollow, in stark and brutal black and white. Empty eyes stared back at him, hollow and cold and his throat closed off.

Not on my watch.

Pulling in a shaky breath, he pushed away from the screen for a moment, far enough back that he could curl forward and rest his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. He curled his back, stretching out the kinks and aches, felt the deeper bruises from two nights before twinge distantly and winced, relaxing again, just staring hazily at the floor between his boots.

"Dean?"

God help him, he almost fell off his chair when his brother's sleepy voice startled him.

"Yeah?"

"Y'kay?"

He looked sideways, saw a slit of bloodshot hazel peering at him and plastered a thin smile over his face.

"M fine, Sammy."

From the way the younger man propped himself up on his elbows and scowled, Sam didn't believe him either.

"You should get some sleep, Dean. Just 'cause I can't, doesn't mean both of us have to be exhausted."

Dean sighed, and nodded slowly against his hand.

"Yeah. I'll finish this site."

"What is it?"

"Town museum put some of their archive online. It's a doctor's journal."

"Huh."

He almost grinned at that, his geek-boy brother sounding so utterly disinterested in the historic records except that Sam didn't sound disinterested so much as utterly exhausted.

"Get some rest, Sam. I'm almost done," he sighed, heard the younger man yawn and slide down in the bed again, one booted foot slipping awkwardly over the edge to thump onto the floor and stay there. Discomfort, to try and ward off sleep. He turned back to the laptop, eyes burning.

The widow Meades came to me this afternoon, begging me to attend to her daughter. Clara was a sweet child before her father's accident, and she used to love to ride. Now, she only has to look at a horse and she is taken with hysteria that only a small dose of diluted laudanum seems to quell. When I saw her this afternoon I scarcely recognized her. She looked at me as I prepared the usual dose, and asked me if "the boy" was truly dead. I answered yes, believing, however unwillingly, that it would offer her some comfort. Instead, she began weeping inconsolably, crying for absolution. Neither the child nor her mother would tell me for what sin she needed forgiveness.

The hunter nodded, shot a quick look at the bed where his brother dozed. His wrists itched with the old echo of handcuffs, too tight against his skin, the helpless frustration of an innocence he couldn't prove. If anything could make a spirit turn lethal...

"That'd do it," he growled, scribbling notes on a scrap of blank paper as he kept reading.

I found Lesia at her brother's grave again today. She was delirious, rambling about seeing him in the woods by the cottonwood there on the western edge of town. I think she truly believes she does see him there, and even seeing her brother buried under the cross she watched me fashion wasn't enough to convince her of the fallacy inherent in this heathen belief. She told me that they are special, named for the gods of her ancestors, that twins have special powers. I could not help but laugh, though she was not angered. Instead, she smiled and promised me that Mawu would see the men who killed him go before him into the afterlife. I truly do not know what to believe anymore. I asked her to come back to the house with me, knowing the rest of the workers would be looking for her, but she would not leave the graveyard until she had finished carving her brother's name into the cross.

God help me, I did not believe her. There was something in her smile that chilled me. She is a child, barely thirteen years old, but she scared me.

"Yahtzee," Dean murmured, too worn out, too drained to feel much elation. His hand cramped as he scrawled a last note, and he hissed, shook it out, sliding his chair back a few inches. He stood slowly, stretched, scrubbed one hand over his scalp and dropped it to rub at the ache in his neck. Rolling his shoulders, he turned,

stared at his brother sprawled across the bed, one boot planted on the floor, one arm thrown over his eyes.

“Sam?” Dean muttered through a yawn, jaw popping loudly. He glanced at the window, the sun burning bloody around the drapes and stifled a sigh. It was still hours too early to try and dig up a grave, even in the middle of the woods. “Sam. I think I found where the body’s buried, but we’ll have to wait for dark.” Wandering over, he kicked at the bed frame, casting one quick longing stare over at the coffee pot.

His attention swung back to the bed, sharpened as he heard a strangled grunt from the younger man.

“Sam?”

Two quick steps took him to the side of the bed, until he could snatch his brother’s arm and pull it away from his face, breath catching as he saw Sam twitch, flinch away from him, bruised throat working as he choked.

“Sam!”

He reached out with his free hand, wrapped his fingers around his brother’s bicep so tight he knew he would leave more bruises and didn’t care as he shook the younger man, forced down bile when he saw blood trickle down through Sam’s hair. He didn’t even have time to duck when his brother snapped awake and lunged up, an iron fist slamming into his jaw and the next thing Dean knew, he was on the floor, blinking up at his brother, staring wildly down at him.

“Dean?”

Sam sounded choked, stunned. And scared. Dean struggled up onto one elbow, rubbing at his aching jaw, trying to smile.

“Damn, Sammy. Hell of a right hook.”

“God, Dean. I... I was...”

“Dreaming. Yeah. I noticed.”

He took the hand Sam held out numbly, and pulled himself to his feet. Blinking, he worked his jaw again, winced as a bright bolt of pain curled up through his face.

“You okay?”

Dean frowned down at his brother, took in the fresh bruises seeping out from under Sam’s hair. Blood still trickled slowly over his brow, drying almost black in the dim light.

“Think that’s my line, dude,” he murmured, reaching out and tilting the younger man’s head to the side, carding through his hair. He grimaced at the lump he found, a short, deep gash across the length of it seeping crimson, and shoved Sam back down when he tried to stand. “Stay there. That looks nasty.”

His brother’s hand flew to his head, something like surprise flickering across his face as Dean turned, headed for the bathroom and the first aid kit inside. He left the door open while he rummaged through it, shifting once until he could see the beds in the mirror, watched as Sam perched on the edge of his mattress, head in hands. It felt way too familiar as he carried another armful out of the tiny room and he sighed, dropping heavily onto the bed opposite his brother. Dumping his supplies on the blankets beside him, Dean sorted through them, pulled out a bottle of tylenol and tipped two into Sam’s waiting hand. The younger man dry-swallowed them, sat quietly as he soaked gauze in the alcohol and wiped it over the gash, flinching once as Dean worked.

“I don’t think it’ll need stitches,” he murmured, felt Sam nod a little against his hand. “Couple of butterflies, maybe.”

“Okay.”

Dean pulled back, ducked down to peer into his brother’s eyes at the defeated tone.

“Sam. We’ll figure this out, alright?”

Sam nodded again, refused to meet his eyes and Dean huffed, rubbed harder at the blood staining the edges of the lump. Sam yelped, jerked away from him, eyes coming up at last, all injured innocence and hurt.

"Sorry," Dean muttered, guilt making his hands heavy as he reached for the pack of sterile tape, feeling the weight of his brother's sideways stare. Gently smoothing the bandages across the gash, he peered intently at his work, trying to ignore the sensation, knew he'd failed miserably when Sam snorted and pointedly twitched away from him as he finished up by flicking a few strands of hair across the white tapes. Standing wearily, Dean reached down to gather the detritus of the patch up, found his brother's hands already there, batting his away. He blinked, looked over at Sam, leaning precariously across the gap between the beds, scowling at him and could almost hear the words before his brother said them.

"Get some rest, dude. You look like crap."

Already tired, he suddenly felt bone weary, exhaustion dragging at limbs and body, frustration bogging down his mind. And he'd had enough. Of feeling helpless, the guilt and failure crushing him down, the uncertain knowledge that their father was out there somewhere, the wavering belief that he had to be okay because anything else was unthinkable. The confusion and fear in his brother's eyes, the way Sam refused to meet his gaze, ducking away and trying to hide it from him, as if he thought Dean couldn't carry his own burden as well, never mind that he'd been doing just that for twenty-six years and never mind that he probably would crumble under the weight.

Enough.

"Screw this," he growled, sweeping an arm through the screwed up gauze and bottles and tapes, dumping them all unceremoniously on to the floor and flopping face down onto the bed, burying his face in the pillows with a heartfelt moan. Sam chuckled behind him, the sound edgy and somehow nervous and Dean huffed into the pillow, waved an arm vaguely behind him.

"Research. Check it. Wake me up in two hours."

Sam grinned at the muffled command, winced as the smile pulled at bruised, scraped skin and shoved to his feet. Walking in the direction of his brother's gesture, he let one hand thump lightly against Dean's boots, dangling over the end of the bed and smiled again, carefully, when he heard the older man snore softly. He reached up to skim one hand over the neat butterfly stitches in his scalp, shivered a little as he remembered a silver blur slamming into him, a glimpse of snarling teeth and a cold eye before stars detonated across the world and all he had left was touch, the feeling of hands dragging him carelessly across the ground until he was thrown down. He swallowed against the ache in his throat, tight and hot from the bruises around his neck, the pressure of the rope that had made him gag as he was pulled up, kicking out at nothing but the air he couldn't breathe.

Every time he dreamed it, he knew what was coming and he was still surprised, every single time.

Leaning one hip against the table, he sifted through pages covered in his brother's messy scrawl, one eyebrow quirking up as he found another sheaf buried beneath the rest. He glanced back at the bed, at Dean's loose sprawl, the edge of a bruise slowly paling to yellow and brown peeping under the collar of his t-shirt, and sat down to read through the notes. A few minutes later he sighed through pursed lips, pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. Gathering the pages up, he took them over to the kitchenette with him, hitching himself up to perch uncomfortably on the counter, edge of a wall cupboard at his shoulder, the pressure against the bruises on his back and arm keeping him awake.

Squinting at the spidery scrawl that filled the pages, Sam sighed, tipped his head back against the cabinet and gazed at the patterned ceiling, not seeing it at all through the afterimage of leaves, blotting out the stars and the world. Idly, he

dropped the papers, rubbed at his wrists, a dull, phantom ache nagging at him, feeling oddly trapped, restrained.

He frowned, deliberately opened his hands out and lifted them, palms up, peering at the marks circling his wrists. He'd been tied up, been handcuffed before, even been shackled once and the cold burn of rough iron against his skin was a sensation that still haunted his dreams sometimes. But he couldn't imagine living with it, day and night. Letting his hands drop to his lap, curling into fists, he remembered the way he'd known what was going to happen in the dream, with an understanding that wasn't his.

He felt his cheeks flush a little with the scared, guilty response to the accusation he remembered in the voices that snarled at him, the hands that dragged him roughly from his bed harsh with blame. He knew that too, the way innocence didn't seem to be enough sometimes, the way you could feel guilty even when you'd done nothing.

He snorted quietly.

"Yeah, nothing except let Lucifer and Mia open the damn Hellgate," he muttered under his breath, curling forward, hunching over his knees and staring blankly at his hands as his fingers knotted together. Past his hands, between his boots, he saw an arc of sunlight on the floor, turning slowly crimson as it curved across the tiles and carpet. Sam watched the afternoon fade, listened to cars humming past outside and the steady rise and fall of his brother's breathing. He didn't look at the bed, squeezed his eyes shut against the angry distance that had swallowed up the customary worry in Dean's gaze in the last weeks. He'd caught the older man watching him sometimes, a faint frown drawn between his brows, as if he was wondering who Sam was, or as if he thought he might see a flash of yellow in his eyes again. Sam shivered, knotted his fingers tighter together.

He'd lost count of the number of times he'd woken up with a hoarse yell in the middle of the night, felt his brother's attention and waited in silence for Dean to turn over and go back to pretending to sleep. He'd kept his own silence when Dean woke up choking, or fighting silently against some invisible force that seemed to pin him in place, turned over and tried not to remember the way it had felt to reach out with nothing but his mind and hold his brother back, effortlessly.

Neither one of them ever mentioned it in the morning, but it sat there between them, a weight of silence and accusation, blame and guilt cutting deep enough to draw blood from them both.

When he could hardly see his hands through the gloom, Sam straightened, slipped off the counter and staggered as numb legs buckled. Catching himself against the table, he grimaced his way through the pins and needles as circulation returned, finally hobbled over to the beds and kicked gently at the foot.

"Dean."

The older man grunted, burrowed further into the bed. Sam sighed, thumped at his boot.

"Dean, c'mon."

"Wha'time's'it?"

He checked his watch, squinting a little in the gloom.

"Little after ten-thirty. It'll be late enough by the time we get to Damascus."

* * * *

Dean groaned into the pillows, waited until he heard Sam walk back to the table and sit down with a scrape of chair legs. The hunter rolled to his side, propped himself up on one elbow, squinted blearily at his brother as the younger man hefted the battered canister of salt from their weapons bag. Sam's shoulders were hunched, his spine curved into a slouch as he worked through their shotguns, fingers quick and sure even through the weariness Dean could feel from the other side of the small room.

Rubbing at his eyes, the older man swung his legs over the edge of the mattress, shoved to his feet, leaning against the wall as vertigo tilted the room dizzily around him. He yawned hugely, shuffling to the bathroom, heard his brother chuckle softly as he kicked the door almost shut. Twisting the taps, he waited until steam curled up around him before he looked up, saw his hazy reflection through the fog on the mirror. The dark shadows under his eyes were still obvious and he scowled, cupped his hands under the water and splashed it over his face, scrubbing with his hands until he felt vaguely human again.

Dripping, he yanked his t-shirt up over his head and turned, craning his neck round to see his back in the mirror, the bruises yellowing. Just two ridges stayed dark, running parallel at a slight angle from the base of his ribs and the point of his hip up towards his collarbone, where the edges of the risers had slammed into him on his way down the stairs. He winced, stretched an arm around to poke carefully at the contusions.

Shoving his brother out of the way had been entirely thoughtless, action taking over before he even had a chance to consider what might happen next, the poltergeist's shove sending him flying backwards even as he realized the stairs were behind him. All he'd had time for was a yell, a curse in his head, and a brief glimpse of Sam's horrified face. Then he was coming to slung over his brother's shoulder as Sam staggered out to the car.

He didn't remember much of the drive back to the motel that night, or the eighteen or so hours that followed it. Just brief moments of rigid pain that stole his breath and Sam, alternating between painkillers and glares from the chair pulled up to the end of his bed.

The hunt in Damascus was supposed to be an olive branch.

It seemed more like poison ivy than a peace offering now.

Twitching away from his reflection, Dean reached out for the thin towel on the rail, dragging it free and mopping at his face. He skimmed a hand through his hair, pushing it into untidy spikes. Scuffing at it, he turned back to the door, hesitated with one hand flat against it, head ducked to stare at the chipped and cracked floor tiles. He knew that as soon as he opened the door, the room would feel too small, over-full with the choking, claustrophobic emptiness in the shape of their missing father, haunted by the ghosts of those other Sams.

Sometimes, when he looked at his brother now, all he could see was a feral, hungry smile or worse, a flash of yellow through his eyes.

"Dammit, Dean," he mumbled, pulled his hand back from the door and pressed it against his eyes, pushing hard and sucking in a deep gulp of the humid air through clenched teeth. Hissing it out again, he dropped his hand, rolled his shoulders, bounced a little on the balls of his feet and plastered a grin on his face, shoving the door open and striding through.

Sam flicked a look back over his shoulder from where he sat at the table, went back to peering intently at the laptop. Dean ignored him, digging quickly through his bag for a clean shirt and shrugging it on. Perching on the edge of his bed, the hunter retied his boots, eyed the coffee pot, but the first buzz of adrenaline was starting to hum along his nerves, making his hands a little jittery.

He bent to the duffel on the floor between the beds, saw the shotguns lined up neatly inside, the canisters of salt and lighter fluid tucked into one end, and slanted a look up at his brother. Sam shrugged an eyebrow at him as he stood, wobbling for a moment, eyes dark with exhaustion and Dean watched him lean against the table with a wince.

He chewed his lip for a moment, took in the tension pulling the younger man's shoulders up, defensive and scared. It was familiar, way too familiar by now, the same wary nervousness that had plagued his brother since Stull, as if Sam wasn't sure of himself. It made him seem young, vulnerable, but every time Dean saw it, all

he could remember was the malice twisting that other Sam's smile into something vicious.

Promise me, Dean. Don't let me turn into something I'm not.

He'd promised, quickly and easily and meaning every single word, but there was nothing in that other Sam he didn't recognize. The cold, desolate fury in his yellow eyes was the same glint that chilled his brother's stare when Sam faced down Haris, Mia or even Lucifer, and when Dean choked his way out of a nightmare, the feeling of invisible hands strangling him was the same touch that held him back from the chasm between himself and John.

Watching his brother rub idly at the furrows in his brow, face pale under the bruises, for the first time Dean wondered if he'd even know if his promise was broken.

Are his powers escalating? Is this spirit latching onto him because he's some psychic?

"You good to go?" he rasped out, before the traitorous whisper in the back of his mind could finish the thought. *Is he turning?*

Sam jolted, spun in his chair, half rising, one hand lifting in front of his face, the other flashing to hover protectively over his back. Dean dragged up a smile from somewhere, knew it was weak.

"Easy tiger," he snarked, zipped the duffle shut, standing easily. His brother shoved back from the table, wobbling a little, reaching for the back of his chair.

"Sam? You okay?"

"Yeah."

Dean huffed, an order for the younger man to stay at the motel on his lips but Sam straightened, turned to him with a reddened, weary scowl.

"I'm fine. Let's get this done."

He held Sam's gaze, felt his heart flinch when his brother's eyes flashed yellow in his memory.

"Sure," he murmured to the younger man's back as Sam turned, headed for the door with slow, deliberate steps, limping a little. Dean dropped his chin to his chest, let his shoulders droop, the bag suddenly heavy in his hand. All he wanted to do was dump it in the car with the rest of their kit and Sam and head out, call Bobby and have him send someone else out to take care of the spirit.

Except that he didn't want that. Not really, not with the same burning, bone-deep drive to protect and keep his brother safe that was once the only thing that could make him even consider leaving a hunt unfinished.

His boots dragged over the carpet as he followed his brother, got to the door in time to see Sam slump wearily into the seat, tip his head against the back with a sigh he could almost hear. Walking around the car, Dean hauled open the trunk, dropped the bag inside and slammed it, letting his hands go through the familiar motions, the throaty growl of the engine strangely distant.

I got to move on, move on from town to town. I got to move on, I never seem to slow down.

He smirked bitterly, felt the tiredness seeping into his muscles, threw the car into drive and pulled out, flooring the pedal, the rush of power through the wheel sending a flush of energy through him that took him all the way to the gates at the end of the long driveway that curled up through the Meades' plantation, Bad Company playing in the dark all the way.

It was the only sound in the car.

Nothing broke the silence until they stood over the unearthed remains, the cottonwood trees skeletal overhead, bright in the flare of the matches as Dean struck one, lit the box and held it out over the small, worn bones.

"Burn, you sonofabitch," he murmured, felt more than saw Sam swaying at his side as he tossed the match into the shallow grave.

They stood there, watching the flames burn down, until there was nothing left but embers, glowing sullenly. Dean stared at them, felt the heat on his face, set his jaw against a shiver as he remembered the way the Hellfire lapped at his boots in Leicester, the way the sun scorched down on them as blood choked him and all he could see was his brother's yellow eyes.

A shoulder bumped his fractionally and he started, realized the light from the grave was almost gone. Beside him, Sam cleared his throat, grimaced and in the corner of his eye, Dean saw the younger man reach up to rub at the bruises ringing his neck.

"You okay?" he asked, still watching the last red eyes wink out into the ash and char in the pit.

"I'm fine," Sam rasped, turned towards him a little and Dean almost groaned.

"We're not gonna have a moment, are we?"

He grabbed the shovel at his side, ignored the flash of hurt that twitched across his brother's face.

"No. Just... I get it, man. I do."

Dean stopped, the blade of the tool buried in the mound of dirt. He didn't look up, just stared at nothing.

"We're gonna find him. We'll get him back."

His lips twitched into a parody of a smile, throat burning.

"Yeah."

"Dean. We will."

"I know, Sam."

Dean dug quietly, felt Sam's gaze rake across him, away again. When the grave was half full, he sighed, rammed the shovel into the packed dirt, hard enough that his palms, blistered and sore from digging the grave in the first place, stung fiercely.

"I know," he repeated softly, leaving the tool wavering a little as he walked slowly to the nearest tree, putting his back to the trunk and staring up at the sky through the empty branches. His brother was a silent presence at his side, a slow beat of warmth against his skin, sweat-chilled until goose bumps prickled across his arms. He crossed them, curled his hands into fists inside his elbows, kept his voice low.

"You ever think about... him. With the..." Dean trailed off, freed one hand to wave it in front of his eyes, felt Sam shift beside him.

"Yeah."

"I don't... what if I... the other me, couldn't stop him?"

"Turning?"

Dean nodded, chewed at the inside of his cheek.

"I don't know, Dean. I guess... we just wait and see what happens."

"Wait and see? That's why you don't come up with the plans, dude."

Sam chuckled mirthlessly. "I just mean, maybe there's no way to tell which decisions lead to... him."

"So we might not be able to stop it."

He shrugged. "If that's how things are supposed to go - "

"Ah, don't give me that destiny crap, Sam. You make your own choices."

"Yeah, and look where that led us, Dean. Lucifer opened the Gate, God knows how many demons got through, or what they're planning."

"Oh come on."

"No, Dean, I mean it. Maybe we can't stop me going Darkside. The point is, we don't know! Hell, you could be the one who ends up crossing the line in this universe."

"Nice, thanks Sam."

Dean pushed away from the tree, stalked back to the graveside and started filling it again. Loose soil sifted down over his boots, slowly burying them.

“What if it’s you, Dean? “Dean froze again, couldn’t lift the shovel even if he could remember how to through the sharp pang in his chest, but Sam didn’t seem to want an answer, turning and walking away without saying another word.

“If it’s me, you do what you have to,” Dean finally whispered, tossed a last shovelful of dirt into the grave, remembered the feeling, like something tearing him apart as he promised the same. *I can’t, Sam. Don’t you ask me to do that.*

It still rang hollow, stifled by the weight of memory, and he sighed, slung the shovel over one shoulder and turning to follow his brother to the car. Sam waited for him, leaning against the wing with his hands shoved deep in his pockets. The younger man peered up through his bangs as Dean neared the clearing on the edge of the road through the plantation where they’d parked, hours before. Sam smiled crookedly and Dean could see the torment running under his grin, the fear and grief churning through his own stomach, but the younger man just muttered; “I guess you’ll have to stick around and be a pain in my ass, then.”

Dean snorted, tossed the shovel into the trunk with a clang, sliding one hand along the roof as he walked to the door, felt it shift under his palm as Sam swung into the seat. Sliding in behind the wheel, the hunter yawned.

“Let’s just get some sleep.”

The silence between them was still taut, still thrumming with memories neither of them could forget. But it was easier, edged with comfort instead of anger, as Dean drove through the night, the road already familiar. He watched it blur past, watched his brother slide further and further down in the seat with every mile, head wedged back into the corner, mouth open.

Once, he would have pulled out his phone, snapped a picture. Now he just reached out and turned the music down, eased off the throttle so that the roar of the engine settled into a low hum.

“Oh, man, am I glad to see you,” he finally murmured, when the small, blue and yellow sign of the motel swept into view.

“Hmm?”

He quirked a brow at his brother, blinking hazily at him.

“Motel’s up ahead.”

Sam seemed to think about that, frowning a little.

“Oh,” he mumbled. “S good.”

Dean grinned as he turned into the parking lot, eased the big car into the slot in front of their door, shutting off the engine and just listening to the hush.

“Dean? We goin’ in?”

“Yeah,” he answered. Now he’d stopped, exhaustion was creeping up on him, turning his limbs heavy and clumsy as he stumbled out of the car, barely remembering to detour and snag the weapons bag from the trunk. Locking it, he saw his brother, propping up the wall by the door, fumbling with the big, plastic key fob. Sighing, Dean shuffled over, plucked the key from the younger man’s hands and wriggled it into the lock, twisting it and shoving the door open with his shoulder in one movement. He dropped the bag by the door, heard Sam shut it, the latch click over as he flopped face down on the closest bed with a groan.

“Wake me up when it’s Monday.”

He drifted away to the sound of his brother’s soft chuckle.

When he woke up, it felt like he’d only been asleep ten minutes, rolling off the mattress, lunging for the knife under his pillow even as he landed on his knees between the beds, eyes wide in the dark, straining to see, to find the threat that had dragged him awake.

His blood ran cold and sharp, the air ragged in his lungs as he saw his brother twisting on his bed, one hand clawing at his throat as he choked.

Part Three

“Here.”

A mug nudged at his hands, clasped together on the battered Formica. Sam blinked at it for a moment, tried to work out how to untangle his fingers to grasp it. He closed his eyes again, let the heat from the mug seep into the back of his hand, felt the booth shift as his brother dropped into the other side. Voices drifted around him, muffled and low, all strange and unfamiliar.

He worked his fingers apart, wrapped them around the mug and pulled it closer, sniffed. Smiled a little.

Hot chocolate.

Lifting it, he took a small sip, swallowed with a wince.

“The pills should kick in soon.”

Peeling open gritty eyes, Sam squinted at his brother, nodded, sank down in his seat, leaning against the window. The diner was almost full, getting busier, but one look at the bruises swelling across his face, half closing one eye and ringing his throat and the waiter had ushered them to the booth.

They sat in the same, strained silence that had smothered them for hours since Dean shook him out of another nightmare, face starkly terrified in a way Sam hadn't seen since they'd left Lawrence and the Stull church behind them.

He sipped at the chocolate again, slouched even further against the wall as the sweet warmth soothed the raw ache.

“Dude, you're gonna end up under the table in a minute,” Dean joked. Sam frowned at him, shook his head a little.

“Jerk,” he whispered, caught his breath as it scraped his throat.

The older man scowled, muttered the usual reply, but for once it didn't bring either of them any comfort. They went back to sitting in silence.

“Here you go, guys.”

The chirpy greeting startled Sam and he jumped, twisted awkwardly to see the same waitress that had served them the day before, two plates balanced on her hands, a paper tucked under one arm.

“Thanks,” Dean murmured, reaching up to take one plate from her, sliding it over the table, taking the other for himself, accepting the folded paper with a muted version of his usual megawatt grin. Sam peered down into the soup in front of him, his stomach rolling greasily once, before settling.

“Eat it, Sam. The pills'll work better with food.”

Nodding, Sam picked up his spoon, wiped it absently on a paper napkin, dipped it hesitantly into the thick stew. It came up heavy with beans and pulses and he tasted it, heard his brother laugh softly as he sighed in relief and took a second, bigger mouthful.

“Good?”

Sam flicked a look up at him, gestured with his spoon at the older man's still untouched plate of steak and reached out to snag a fry as soon as Dean turned his attention back to the paper. He grinned as Dean smacked his hand without looking, dunked the stolen bounty in his soup and munched on it.

“Dude, that's gross.”

Sam shrugged, stabbed one finger at the paper and dug his spoon in the soup again. The heat soothed his throat, the fuel easing the raging beat that pounded behind his eyes, exhaustion and fear fading with the dull hurt from the bruises as he ate. Dean smiled, swiped a forkful of beef through the hot ketchup on the side of his plate and chewed absently as he kept reading.

“Alright,” he muttered through a mouthful. “We got, huh, someone breaking into a library, two towns over. Somethin' you're not tellin' me, dude?” He shot Sam a smirk that didn't reach his gaze and the younger man rolled his eyes, bit back a sigh. Dean flipped a page over, forked up another hunk of steak. “There's a...”

Sam looked up as his brother trailed off, saw Dean staring intently, furiously at the page, pale face so utterly still it could have been machined steel. He stretched across the table, spun his spoon around and tapped the older man's wrist with the handle. Dean just twitched, haunted eyes flickering to him in the tiniest of motions and Sam felt his blood run cold.

"Dean?" he rasped.

His brother jolted, twitched away and dragged a hand across his mouth, sighing into his fingers as he dropped the paper to the table and shoved it roughly over the scarred surface. Sam glanced down at it, knew the blood drained from his face at the screaming headline.

Cottonwood Killer Strikes Again!

A hand looped around his wrist, shook it gently and he flinched, turned burning eyes to his brother, saw the same bleak fear in Dean's face.

"It's not your fault, Sam. We thought it was done."

It didn't help much, the churning guilt making the soup stir uneasily in his stomach.

"This ends," Sam grated. "Now."

His brother just nodded.

* * * *

He was drifting, not quite sleeping, not quite awake, lost in the dark behind his eyes. The low murmur of cars outside, of people next door, walking through the parking lot kept him from dreams as he sat, head buried in his arms on the table.

He smiled wearily when he heard the familiar rumble pull up, a little too fast, the door slamming a little too hard, knew his brother was worried just from the heavy thunder of his boots outside.

"Hey, Sam!"

It was entirely too cheerful, gratingly false and he just grunted an answer, didn't look up, felt his brother's near-panic slide away as Dean shut the door behind him, eyes raking over his back.

"I'm fine, Dean," he finally sighed to the table, heard the older man breathe easier and wander to the kitchen. Water ran for a moment, hollow as it filled the kettle, the sudden quiet when it stopped heavy and thick. Sam squeezed his eyes shut, stifled a yawn, listened to his brother pattering quietly, the sounds sharp and echoing when they broke the hush.

He jumped when Dean spoke, tried to ignore the pounding rush in his head, fight or flight reflex worn down to razor edges.

"So I talked to the last vic's wife."

Sam rolled his head along his arms, peered blearily through his bangs at his brother, slouched against the counter, cradling a steaming mug. He quirked an eyebrow, rubbed surreptitiously at his throat, trying to knead away the tight burn of the bruises.

Dean's voice sounded almost as rough as his when he continued.

"She said they went to bed just like they did every night. Next thing she knew, the cops were knocking at the door to tell her her husband was ant food."

Sam scowled at his brother, Dean just shrugged.

"Sorry," he muttered, unrepentantly, took a long sip of coffee before going on.

"She said she woke up once, when he got up and she figured he was just going to use the bathroom. There's no sign of a struggle, nothing that might suggest he was taken and the charming Elaine who works the desk at the precinct told me the genius in charge of the case thinks the vics just got up and walked out. Figures they knew the killer somehow."

The younger man pushed up in his seat, frowned so hard his brows ached. His brother huffed and rolled his eyes.

“Chill, dude. It’s not like I went in there guns blazing and introduced myself as Dean Winchester.”

Sam spread his hands, eased up on the scowl a little. Dean grinned, flipped a badge out of his pocket and tossed it onto the table. Sam caught it, looked down at it and sighed.

Federal Marshal C. Williams.

“Anyway. Assuming the vics had the same dream deal you’ve got goin’ on, I figure it made them walk out there somehow. Some sort of mind control maybe, God knows we’ve seen that before.”

Sam ignored the flash of memory, thought about the theory, stretched his arms out in front of his shoulders and let his head droop to the side. Dean nodded.

“Yeah, kinda like sleepwalking, I guess.”

Chewing at his lip, the younger man curled one hand in towards his chest and flicked a glance up at his brother.

“I don’t know why you didn’t go out there, Sam. We do know that however this thing is connecting to you, it’s not doing it for the same reasons it had with the other vics. Maybe that made it change its pattern. One more thing though. The guy who died last night? He was descended from one of the slaves that worked the plantations around here, in 1835. Their foreman, to be exact. Closest thing they had to one, anyway.”

Sam looked at him more sharply.

“Looks like we found our link, huh? He would’ve been there that night. Whatever this is, it’s going after everyone descended from the men involved with the lynching. Maybe even just the men who were there.”

Looking down at the badge, Sam fiddled with it, turned it over and over in his fingers, his brother’s face glowering out at him, winking away. It made sense, in a twisted way, the convoluted path from one horrific night almost two hundred years ago pointing neatly at the victims that had brought them here. It made near perfect sense, in fact, just one glaring fact staring him in the face.

“You think...” he broke off, coughed raggedly.

“Don’t talk, Sam.”

What he had to ask, he couldn’t mime.

“Is it coming after me ’cause of the curse?”

He forced it out in a rush, still didn’t tear his eyes away from the badge, heard Dean sigh roughly.

“I don’t know, Sam,” he repeated. “Maybe. Maybe it’s just pure dumb luck.”

Sam laughed silently, shot his brother a sour grin.

“Yeah, yeah, no such thing as coincidence. Chances are we’ll never know, Sam. If it’s your mojo or if it was just wrong place wrong time. Honestly? I don’t really care. Let’s just find this sonofabitch and stop it. I wanna put Alabama in the rear view.”

Dean growled the last through a deep yawn and Sam tipped back in his chair, tilted his chin at the beds. His brother jerked one shoulder in a shrug, scrubbed at his face.

“Maybe later.”

“Dean.”

The older man pulled in a slow breath through his fingers, his gaze flickering up to meet Sam’s. For a moment, his stare was unguarded, naked fear and helplessness snatching Sam’s breath away, making his heart stutter and he knew his brother wasn’t going to sleep until they both could, until Dean could be sure that he was safe.

And he remembered what that felt like, the panic burning under his skin, just barely kept in check as he watched his brother slide further under the control of Haris’ demon spawn and knew there was nothing left to try except to deal with the devil.

Now, as it had then, resignation left a bitter taste in his mouth. He couldn’t sit by and watch them both waste away, worse, couldn’t even contemplate what would

happen to Dean if the next nightmare was the one that finally killed him. He'd known for a long time that his brother would never survive him, even if he'd forgotten for a while just how deep *look out for your brother* was carved into the older man.

Biting his lip, Sam stabbed an authoritarian finger at the coffee pot and Dean chuckled, masks slipping back into place behind his eyes as he poured Sam a cup, dumped in sugar and creamer, stirring it with a plastic spoon as he carried it to the table. Setting it in reach, his own mug still steaming in his other hand, Dean pulled a chair out, turned it and straddled the seat, resting his elbows on the back. He lifted his coffee, sipped at it, watched Sam through narrowed eyes.

Sam fidgeted, knew his brother saw it and tried to still his hands.

"Alright. Spill."

The order startled him, head snapping up too fast and he tried to cover it, not quite ready for the decision he'd already made.

"Sam. Whatever you're planning in that freakishly huge brain, you ain't doin' it alone. Tell me."

He ducked his head again, knew he couldn't keep the truth out of his eyes even as his mind raced feverishly, trying to figure out a way to convince his brother. He picked at a loose thread on his jeans, felt tension pull Dean's shoulders tighter, knew if he looked up he'd see the older man's knuckles white around his mug, his jaw set, lips thinned.

"Sam!"

"I think I know how to figure it out," he blurted, winced and barely caught his hand before it twitched up to press against his throat. Dean pulled back and it felt uncomfortably like a flinch to the younger man. In the quiet, he could hear people in the room next door, deep voices rumbling, a sharp bark of muted laughter and he glanced wistfully at the wall, slid his gaze across the table to his brother where Dean scowled at him. He saw the moment the older man figured it out, saw the snap of comprehension shift into something darker, worry and anger simmering just under the surface.

"No. No way, Sam."

"Dean, we're ignoring the biggest clue we have. The dream can show me what we're missing, before anyone else has to die."

His voice cracked against the rawness in his throat as he almost shouted it and he caught the wince his brother wasn't quite fast enough to bury in the anger.

"No. It's not happening, Sam. I won't let it."

"What are you gonna do, Dean? Stay awake for the rest of your life?"

"Yes!"

Sam snorted, grimaced, pressed the heels of his hands into his temples, elbows propped on the table as he murmured, soft and low and watched from the corner of his eye as his brother flinched again, hard, like he'd taken a blow to the stomach.

"There's nothing else, man."

Dean shoved back from the chair, left it rocking as he turned his back to his brother. Sam could see his hand curling into a fist, could see the impulse to lash out twitching up the older man's arm. Dean snarled out a curse, loud enough that the quiet hum of voices from the other side of the paper-thin walls stilled for a minute and Sam shoved to his feet, took two steps that carried him close and whispered to his brother's back.

"I'm sorry, Dean, I am."

Dean dropped his head, deliberately uncurled his fingers one by one.

"Yeah. I know."

Sam's feet were heavy as he turned, walked back to the beds, a hollow under his ribs burning slowly. He sank onto the closest one, barely even noticed it was his brother's as he lay back, suddenly feeling awkward and wide, wide awake. One hand drifted up to rub at his abdomen, digging gently in, feeling the rise and fall of his diaphragm, the sullen ache underneath.

The voices next door murmured into applause that sounded canned even through two layers of plasterboard and laths. He stared at the ceiling, tracing the cracks that curled across it, urgency crawling under his skin like an itch he couldn't reach. His fingers twitched sporadically, randomly, he thought, until he recognized the heavy beat in the same moment that Dean huffed out a laugh from the other side of the room, hummed a few bars.

"You're humming Metallica?"

Sam grinned wearily at the memory, rolled sideways a little and let his eyes drift shut, heard boots thud softly on the floor, the other bed creak as his brother sighed quietly, suddenly closer. Papers rustled, the low hum of the laptop filling the empty spaces between his breaths, quick clack of the keys following him down into moonlight.

* * * *

Watching his brother fall asleep came right up there on the list of things Dean never, ever wanted to do again.

He leaned back against the headboard, kept his eyes on the laptop balanced on his knees, but every time Sam twitched on the next bed, every time his hands caught at fistfuls of blankets and twisted them, every time the younger man's breath hitched, something wound tight in Dean's throat and suddenly, he was the one gasping for air.

Swallowing hard, he tipped his head back against the wall, listened to a car rush past outside, splashing through the puddles on the wet road. Beside him, his brother whimpered, low in his throat, and Dean rolled his head along the wall, bit at his lip as he saw Sam turn to him, emotions chasing themselves across his face even in sleep.

He swore under his breath, made himself look away, back at the screen glowing coldly. His fingers shook as he stabbed at the keys, hard enough that the sensitive skin on the tips stung. Calling up the familiar archive site, he rubbed at gritty eyes, started scrolling through the pages he'd already scanned the day before.

He almost missed it.

The tiny, cramped letters blurred together, seemed to shift and morph as they rolled up the screen and he blinked hard, afterimages mirrored across his eyelids. Something nagged at him, a sense of something familiar, elusively important. He frowned, opened his eyes again to squint at the screen, flicking back, looking for...

"Sonofabitch."

Dean leaned forward, heart thumping at his ribs, weariness suddenly draining away to a faint heaviness in his limbs as a tingle of adrenaline buzzed along his nerves. Snatching the laptop up he rolled to his feet, hurried to the table, still strewn with their notes, and balanced the machine on one hand as he dug through the papers with the other.

"Come on, come on..."

He grinned quickly as he uncovered a notebook, scuffed and battered and filled almost entirely with his own scrawled hand.

"Yahtzee," he murmured, turning back to the bed and perching on the end, laptop on his thighs, smirk fading to an intent scowl as his gaze darted between the screen and the notebook. "They were twins. They were freakin' twins. Guess you were right to be scared of her, doc."

He reached blindly out for a pen, scrabbled around on the cabinet until he found one, murmured to himself as he wrote, a low echo of the ink that curled across the page, pinned down the thoughts that rioted through his mind.

"They're powerful, right? You saw how the slaves treated them, like they were important. Revered, almost, but you never really knew why. Bet you changed your mind after that night though, after you saw her at the grave. What was she doing, huh? What did you see that you didn't want to write in here?"

There was something, he knew, that the doctor had seen and not been able to understand. It was as if it was there, woven through the journal, hints of clues he couldn't quite catch, clouded by the centuries-old disbelief that made the doctor refuse to accept what he'd seen.

There were times when he wished he could remember what it was like to be innocent, to not know. Then there were times when not knowing was scarier than understanding, imagining what it would be like to be faced with the truth and have nothing with which to fight back. He smiled again, coldly, almost feral as he finished writing, tossed the pen down onto the notebook and yawned. He twisted his back, stretched, trying to work the kinks out of his spine and his eyes slid across the narrow space between the beds. The triumph curdled, turned sour and he sighed as he set the laptop aside, leaned forward on elbows propped against his knees. He lifted one hand to the back of his neck, winced as he kneaded at the tight muscles and caught the edge of the bruising. The poltergeist seemed a long time ago, the scant two days since they'd driven into Damascus with the early morning sun seemed more like two weeks.

He closed his eyes, let his chin drop to his chest.

Time always seemed stretched now, ever since Sam dragged him out of the churchyard and they'd seen the pale blue Kansas sky overhead. He still woke up sometimes with the memory of invisible fingers laced around his throat, clawing at the inside of his skin, holding him frozen in place like a bug pinned to a board. Drenched in sweat, panting, he'd lie there in the dark, watch the neon glow and headlights strobing across the ceiling and wonder if days felt like years for their dad.

Every time he'd wait to hear the shift in his brother's breathing as Sam slipped back into his own nightmares, and knew neither one of them would ever mention it in the morning.

He dragged his hand through his hair, rested his brow on his palm and propped his elbow on his knee, peeling open gritty eyes to stare at his boots, the gray carpet dull and mottled between them. Absently, he wondered what color it had been when it was new.

"Nonogodnooo..."

The strangled whisper brought his head up so fast the room tilted dizzily around him and he swayed, caught himself with one hand spread against the blanket at his side as he turned. His heart thumped to a stop as he saw his brother's head jerk across the pillow, snap back, rolling side to side across the pillow, long hair plastered to his skin.

Dean shot halfway to his feet, stopped in his tracks. Every nerve burned with the need to wake his brother up, only the thinnest control holding him in place as he stared helplessly at the younger man.

"Dammit," he breathed through gritted teeth, turned on his heel, stalked across the room, helpless energy buzzing under his skin. His stomach flipped when Sam choked out a low, wordless cry behind him and he spun again, grabbed for the notebook he'd just dropped on the bed. His hands shook as he thumbed through the pages, searching for a distraction, for anything that might be able to pull his mind away from his brother, dreaming a dream that could kill him right there on the next bed and was still the only place they had left to look for answers.

He managed to read three lines before Sam started choking for real, one thick gasp suddenly cut off with a finality that was terrifying. Dean didn't even register moving across the space between them, just found himself hunched over his brother, felt the blood drain from his face as more bruises flowered across skin already dark.

"God, Sammy," he muttered, jammed two fingers under the younger man's jaw and felt the pulse against the tips stutter. Indecision warred with instinct, "*There's nothing else, man,*" with "*Take your brother and run.*" Sam twisted under his touch, writhed, mouth gaping as he fought for air but it was the single tear that slipped down his cheek that made up Dean's mind.

"Screw this," he growled, gripped his brother's jaw and shook Sam's head, leaning close. "Sam? Come on, Sam, wake up."

Sam just gasped breathlessly and Dean's blood ran cold, sharp in his veins as he shook the younger man again, so hard his head snapped back and forth.

"Sam! Dammit, Sam, come on!"

His throat locked around the words as he saw his brother's lips turning dark blue, skin paling under old and new bruises. Sweat beaded on his brow, trickled cold down his spine as he held the back of his hand over Sam's mouth, prayed desperately to feel air brush against his skin and just felt nothing.

No. No way.

Dean tipped his brother's chin up, pinched his nose shut, hands moving automatically, mind locked on simple denial as he blew air into his brother's lungs, again, sucking in thin gasps for himself that barely registered. One finger slid down from Sam's jaw, found the weak beat and stayed there as he breathed for his brother until he could hardly see through the spots that danced across his vision. He tasted salt, copper on his tongue and couldn't tell if it was from the split in his brother's lip or the teeth he sank into his own every time he came up for air.

NO.

The beat against his finger stuttered once, faltered, and he heard someone sob, soft and muted like it came from the other side of the wall or was just too broken to be heard clearly, bent his head and breathed again.

And felt his heart start beating once more when Sam jerked, coughed against him, choking as he rolled feebly away. Dean fisted a hand against the back of his brother's shoulder, twisting up the flannel shirt in white knuckles, digging them into trembling muscle as he grinned madly.

"Okay, Sammy, 's okay, I gotcha."

Sam shook, pressed back against his hand in answer and the older man leaned forward, caught a glimpse of hectic color on pale skin, lips paling back from that dark blue as they worked to spit out words.

"Hey, hey take it easy, Sam. Just take it easy a minute," Dean soothed, reached behind him for the first aid kit he'd dumped on the bed earlier. Pulling free a handful of gauze, he swiped gently at the blood trickling from his brother's split lip, shrugging a little as Sam glared at him, impatience and frustration sparking in the younger man's eyes as he struggled to sit up, shaking off the hand Dean pressed down on his shoulder.

Huffing, Dean dropped the bloodied gauze and slipped an arm under Sam's elbow, easing his brother up and back against the headboard. He shifted, hissed as stiff muscles cramped and wondered in the back of his mind just how long he'd been hunched over his brother's bed, rescue breathing for him. Dragging his wrist over the sweat on his forehead, the hunter sank onto the next bed wearily, hands dangling between his knees as Sam shuffled, reaching up to probe gently at the new swelling on his jaw.

"You want some ice?"

"No. 'M good."

It was ragged, more of a gasp than speech, and Dean winced, pushed wearily to his feet, headed for the bathroom where he filled a glass with water. Carrying it back, he handed it to his brother, perched on the edge of his bed again as the younger man sipped at it, swallowed with a grimace and sighed, setting it aside.

"You okay?"

Sam nodded slowly, shook his head, shot Dean a wry look and he smirked back, knew it was strained and weak.

"Yeah, me either," he muttered, ducked his head. He could feel his brother fidgeting, could almost hear the words building up behind the younger man's teeth and bit back a sigh. Even with the sweat from saving his brother still drying on his skin, he still didn't want to hear what had almost cost them so much. He ground the

palm of one hand over his jaw, stubble scraping his fingers, rasping loud in the quiet. On the other bed, his brother mimicked his gesture, face twisting in mild disgust as he tugged a hand through his hair, still dampened to his head with sweat.

"What happened, Dean?"

He blinked, wondered what answers he was supposed to have, but the younger man's voice wasn't quite so wrecked now, didn't sound quite so much like broken glass and molten iron so he half-smiled, half-shrugged like that could lessen the impact of memory against his senses.

"You stopped breathing."

It didn't really work.

"You went to sleep, started dreaming almost straight away, then you just... stopped breathing."

He could see his brother's gaze darting to the salt crystallizing on his brow, the dark patches on his shirt, up to meet his eyes, heavy with apology and pity.

"Skip it, Sam. What happened in there?" he asked with a nod at his brother.

"It was... I was... Hell, I don't know. It was like I was watching it this time, instead of in the middle of it. It started out the same, I was the kid when they - "

Sam broke off, swallowed thickly, skin shading to pallid gray and Dean reached out for the glass on the nightstand, held it out to his brother. The younger man took it, gulped at the water, hands shaking so much it slopped over the rim of the glass.

"Take it easy, Sam," Dean murmured, shifted on the bed, leaning closer.

"They hanged me. Him."

It was Dean's turn to swallow, lungs still aching, hands still shaky.

"Then it was... like an out-of-body experience, I guess. I was up in the tree, watching. They... they all left, mostly. It was just the girl and a few of the slaves, and another man. Maybe the doctor? They cut him down and buried him."

It was almost a relief to lean back, away from the shocky grief pouring from his brother. Dean grabbed his notebook, flipped through it to the page he'd been reading when the younger man had stopped breathing. His hands seized for a moment, locked around the thin wire binding, and he felt Sam's gaze lift to follow him as he abruptly shoved to his feet and started pacing, skimming the pages as he stalked from the window to the table and back again.

"She was his twin."

"What? How do you know that?"

"The doc's journal. One of the first entries, he talks about delivering twins but he's vague, never mentions them by name. Just says that all the slaves seemed to almost venerate the kids."

Sam frowned, shoved himself up against the headboard.

"And that's important how?"

Dean squashed the urge to sigh again, settled for bouncing his fists at his side as he paced.

"The slaves in this area came mostly from North Africa, near Benin or Nigeria. In African lore, twins are powerful. Special."

He winced as soon as he said it, tiredness letting the weighted phrase slip through his guard and Sam twitched, hunched his shoulders.

"You think they were - "

"No," Dean growled, hard as he could, swinging round to glare at his brother where Sam sat miserably on the edge of the bed. "No way. Haris was nothin' to do with this."

He saw Sam shiver, tug the blanket up around his chin.

"I saw her, Dean," he whispered, staring blankly at the empty space between the beds. "I saw her wait until they'd all gone, and then she dug up the grave again."

"Jesus," Dean breathed, legs suddenly unsteady. He stumbled to the table, dragged out the closest chair and sank into it, pressed the heel of one hand hard against his eyes, as if he could push out the image his brother's words conjured.

Sam just kept talking, like he couldn't stop if he tried, the words spilling out of him almost dispassionate.

"She took something out of it, some hair, I think, and something else. Then she got some bark from the tree, from the branch that they... that they hanged him from. She was making something, like a... a fetish. Braided some of her own hair with his, tied it around the bark and whatever else it was she took from the grave."

Dean looked up at the tremors that shook through his brother's voice, saw Sam's fingers wound so tightly together the flesh was ridged and yellow, tendons writhing across the backs of his hands.

"Hey, Sam."

The younger man talked right over him, still staring at nothing, the emptiness in his eyes making Dean's throat lock tight.

"S-she slit open her thumb and... and smeared the fetish with her blood then she... she..."

"Sam, take it easy!"

Dean crossed the room in two strides, reached out for his brother's shoulders as Sam kept rambling breathlessly.

"She must've cut her b-brother too, down in the grave, mixed their blood together on the fetish and s-she buried it, she buried it under the tr -"

He shook his brother, hard, heard Sam choke and then an elbow slammed into his side, shoved him aside as Sam bolted for the bathroom, one hand clapped over his mouth. Dean bounced away from the wall, stumbled after Sam, found him hunched over the toilet, retching pitifully.

He slowed his rush by catching himself against the frame, knew Sam heard him, felt him there when he stopped trying to fight the nausea and just balled one hand up against the tank, sliding a little on the dewy condensation. Dean waited it out, rubbed absently at his side where Sam's elbow had connected, leaning against the door as the short-lived adrenaline rush left him feeling shaky and more worn than ever.

Finally, Sam sagged sideways, slumped against the side of the shower stall, hair plastered to his face. Dean reached past him, flipped the lid down on the toilet and flushed.

"C'mon," he muttered, crouched to slip a hand under his brother's arm, hauling Sam to wobbly feet and steering him back to the beds.

"Sit."

It was a command, accompanied by a gentle shove that left the younger man bouncing a little on the edge of the mattress, looking lost and bewildered, blinking heavily. Dean sighed, scrubbed a hand over his face and wandered heavily to the kitchen, poured himself a cup of stale coffee, a glass of water for his brother, and carried them back.

"Here."

Sam took it, sipped, face twisting at the taste in his mouth. The older man looked down at his hands, wrapped around the cold mug, dark eyes staring back at him from the greasy film floating on the black liquid and his stomach flipped once. He swallowed, set it down on the table untouched, spoke around a throat filled with gravel.

"We have to burn it."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Sam nod slowly, carefully, like his head was only thinly attached. Dean reached out, fingered the papers forgotten on the table between them.

"You think the remains in it are keepin' the spirit here?"

He winced. Sam sounded like he'd been smoking fifty a day for the last twenty years.

"Maybe. You said she cast some sort of spell on it?"

Sam shrugged, whispered. "I guess. Maybe."

"Well, what if it was a curse? There's a ton of lore about twins having powers, being... special. Even in the doc's journal, he said the girl told him they were named after gods, right?"

"A curse?"

"Yeah. Take a look at this."

Dean pulled a few papers free, slid them across the table to his brother, breathing a silent sigh of relief when the younger man sat up, leaned over them.

"What is this?"

"I traced the family history of each of the five... six victims."

Sam stilled at the correction and Dean paused, guilt thickening the air between them.

"It's not your fault, Sammy."

His brother nodded fractionally at the hours old echo, didn't look up at him, and the older man leaned forward, repeated himself again.

"Sam. We thought it was done."

"We were wrong."

And that thought was going to haunt them both forever, he knew.

"Yeah. We were. But it made sense, Sam, it did. It looked like a spirit. It's not your fault."

"I know."

It didn't sound like Sam believed it any more than he did. Dean sighed, tipped his chair back on two legs and stared at the ceiling as he went on.

"All of their families were here when the kid got lynched. Ever since, there's been one violent death after another, right the way down the line. Way too many to be coincidence. I think the sister cursed the families, all their children. There's maybe another half dozen families who've already been wiped out."

In the corner of his vision he watched Sam sit up awkwardly, read the set of his brother's shoulders and knew the younger man had seen something else, something he'd missed.

"Sam?"

"None of them had any kids."

Dean blinked.

"What?"

"Dean, none of the victims had any kids! There're no more descendants!"

The hunter frowned.

"I'm not followin' you, Sam. So what if there's no more descendants?"

Sam flipped through the pages of the notebook, quickly, almost frantically.

"You can't stop a curse, right?"

Dean swallowed hard, couldn't keep the tremor out of his voice.

"No. You just get out of its way. Sam, we'll find a way, we will."

The younger man looked up at him, eyes over-bright.

"Maybe we don't have to."

"Come again?"

"Dean, if there's no more descendants then the curse is finished. Whatever's left, my dreams, or whatever, they're just... just like left-over spell work."

He quirked an eyebrow, unseen as Sam huffed in irritation, tossed the apparently useless notebook down on the mattress and headed for the bag on the floor between the beds, the journal tucked inside, muttering over his shoulder as he tugged it free.

"All we have to do is destroy the focus of the spell."

"The fetish?"

Sam turned, shot him a bruised grin over one shoulder.

"The fetish," he confirmed and Dean felt a weight he hadn't even let himself recognize slip away. "I think if we burn it..." Sam buried his nose in the journal, absently shifting out of the way as Dean came to stand behind his shoulder, one glimpse of John's neat print enough to make his throat tighten.

"Come on, college boy," he murmured, grabbing his jacket from his bed, snatching Sam's up as well and tossing it at the younger man. He grinned as his brother fell in behind him, muttering about charms and pyres and for the first time in days, weeks, months, the smile felt real, right down to his bones. Dean chuckled as he opened the car door, slid in behind the wheel, the seat shifting underneath him as his brother took his place in the passenger side.

"What's so funny?"

Flicking a glance across the car, Dean watched Sam frown at him, turn back to the journal, digging in the glove compartment for a pen and scribbling furiously in the margins of the page.

"Nothin'. It's just... It's good to have somethin's ass to kick, you know?" *Good to be fighting something, instead of picking up the pieces. I can't find anything to help Dad, I couldn't stop you using that damned watch in time, even Jane had to be the one to save our asses in La Jolla. The only hunt in the last couple've months that hasn't been screwed right from the start was those damn zombies, and that was a friggin' fever dream.*

Sam looked back at him, searching, and it felt like his brother was seeing right through him. Dean held his breath, wanting Sam to get it, so tired of hiding what was tearing him apart but so worn that saying it out loud might shred the last fragments of control he had left to pieces.

"Yeah," Sam murmured. "I know." *I get it.* Dimples flashed once as he grinned, the edge of hurt and weariness softened by understanding. "You're a freakin' psychopath, dude."

Dean laughed out loud at that, feigned outrage as he twisted the key.

"Bitch."

Sam's reply was lost in the thunder of the engine as he pulled out, swinging the big car onto the familiar road. The wheel thrummed against his palms as he curled his fingers around the narrow leather, traced the stitching with one thumb, the neon light from the sign washing his hands in alternating blue and red. It faded behind them, left a lingering tinge of cold color on his skin, darker than the pale moonlight trickling between the clouds.

His brother yawned loudly into one fist, the sound trailing off into a mutter and Dean reached out, flicked on the radio, spinning the dial through the static until he found a broken, scratchy strain of thudding bass and wailing guitars.

"Dean..."

He almost grinned at the whine in his name, it sounded so much like a six-year-old Sammy begging to stay up late.

Just five more minutes, Dean. Pleeeeeeease?

"You always fell asleep on the sofa," he breathed, heard Sam startle, side of his head thunking against the window.

"Ow. What?"

"Nothin'. Stay awake, Sam."

And he reached out, flicked the music up a notch until the white noise hissed around them like the car was full of snakes. Sighed as he drove, because awake apparently meant brooding and no one could brood quite as loudly as his brother.

"What is it, Sam?"

There was nothing but the hiss for so long he thought Sam wasn't going to answer, the only sign he was still awake the restless fidgeting in the corner of Dean's vision.

"She tried so hard to save him, Dean."

What?

Dean blinked, frowned, skimmed a thumb over the curves of stitching again, worn smooth by the same action repeated countless times, over and over again. Not comfort so much as familiarity; sense memory of doing the same thing when they

were driving away from Stanford for the first time, when he watched the sign welcoming them to Lawrence disappear in the rear view mirror after the poltergeist.

"She was just a kid. What was she supposed to do?"

"Sam, what the hell are you talking about?"

Felt his brother's watery stare scrape against his skin.

"The girl. Slave girl. When they were..." Sam's scratchy whisper trailed off and Dean scowled at the lines snaking across the black road.

"Doesn't make what she did right, Sam. Two wrongs -" His turn to stop dead in the middle of a sentence, though this time it was more like the words dropped over the edge of a cliff instead of fading away, and he flexed suddenly damp palms around the wheel, tightened his grip again through a flash of yellow eyes, the only color in washed out moonlit shadows and a smirk that looked so, so wrong on a familiar face.

"Killin' the men who killed her brother, I can get that," he growled, felt the shift in his brother's attention, from just looking at him to *seeing* him. "But to curse everyone in their families, forever? That's pretty dark side of the Force, Sam."

"I know. But she was so scared."

"So? You're tellin' me it'd be okay to curse a whole circus 'cause you're scared of the clowns?"

Sam laughed like he was supposed to and Dean grinned as he saw lights in between the trees ahead, shifted his fingers around the wheel again, the buzz tingling along nerve endings, turning the smile feral, cold. He turned off the county road, the suspension groaning quietly as the big car bounced along the uneven surface, caught his brother's wince as the rough ride jarred bruises, knew his own grimace echoed it.

"Wanna head to New York once we're done here?"

"New York?"

He shrugged.

"Or Massachusetts. Maine." *Somewhere where the trees are still green.*

"Dean, you hate Maine."

"Yeah, so maybe not Maine. Freakin' bugs. Eat you alive up there."

His brother laughed again, muttered something about Wendigos and Black Dogs. They drove the last mile in easy silence until he stopped in front of the plantation gates, killed the engine with a twist of the key and elbowed open his door, night-cooled air roughening his skin. Dean climbed out of the car, one hand skimming the roof, the thin contact grounding him when the world wanted to tip away under his feet. Wrenching open the trunk, he propped himself against it, leaned in, felt the car bounce as Sam slid out of the passenger door. Reaching in, the hunter pulled free a shotgun, waved it behind him until Sam took it and dug in the cluttered space for two small canisters, salt and gas, that he stashed in his pockets. Pulling out his sawed-off and a folding trench shovel, he straightened with a low hiss as his spine popped, shut the trunk and locked it, leaning against it for a second, watching his brother stare at his feet.

"Sam."

The younger man flinched, slid his eyes up to meet Dean's and away again.

"Sam, what she did was wrong."

"I know."

"Then what's the problem?"

He couldn't keep the snap of annoyance out of his voice as he said it, and cursed silently at himself when Sam looked down again.

"She did it for her brother, Dean."

Oh.

Dean scrubbed his free hand through his hair.

"Good intentions, Sam. Maybe she did do it for her brother, but it was wrong."

The look his brother pinned him with at that took his breath away, layered with hurt and anger and fear and guilt. The same look he'd seen on his brother's face

after Stull, after every nightmare, and understanding dropped into his mind like a stone.

"Dammit, Sam, it's not the same."

"Isn't it? Stopping you going after Dad, I was just trying to do the right thing, Dean!"

"You *did* the right thing, Sam! She didn't!"

"What if I... what if Dad's dead?"

"He isn't."

It was the only answer he had, the only answer he'd been able to give himself in the weeks since they'd left Kansas, gut-deep certainty that he never dared look at too closely. If he couldn't see how shaky the foundations it was built on were, he could believe it.

"He isn't dead and we're gonna get him back."

Dean shoved away from the car, stomped through the wet leaves to the gates and hauled himself over the top, dropping to the other side and heading up the drive, not waiting for his brother. Something locked tight in his chest loosened when he heard the rattle and soft thud of his brother vaulting over and he felt his shoulders relax, the weight of the shotgun and shovel lightening when the younger man fell into place at his shoulder, strides long and even and perfectly in time with his own.

They made their way to the trees at the edge of the estate, following the path they'd found the night before until they came to the clearing and Dean felt Sam stiffen behind him, felt the tension settle between them again.

"Any idea where she buried it?"

He half turned as he said it, caught a glimpse of his brother's pale face, jaw working as he gulped, eyes fixed to a tree on the far side of the clearing. Dean followed the younger man's gaze, saw the scarred branches spreading out from the tree and walked towards it.

Rope scars. This is it, the hanging tree.

He shivered, unease simmering along raw nerves. The air felt colder the nearer he got to the tree and he searched his pockets for the EMF, switching it on without ever taking his eyes away from the scars burned into the bark. The device wailed softly, lit the edges of his vision with red and he nodded, crouched and swept the meter across the ground until it shrieked, flared brighter.

"You think... that's it?"

Sam sounded choked, breathless, and Dean turned on his heels, peered back at his brother, not liking the younger man's pallor.

"You tell me. It look about right?"

He could see Sam swallow again, hands shifting convulsively around the shotgun.

"I guess. Maybe."

"Maybe? Super. I better start digging then," he muttered, propping his sawed-off against the tree and sweeping the piled leaves aside. "This thing had better not be deep."

It wasn't.

Barely three feet down, the blade of the small shovel hit something that grated against it, a jolt of static snapping up his arms, the EMF at his side howling until he turned it off. A shadow fell over him as he started scraping soil away with his hands.

"You're in the light, Sam."

His brother huffed, took a hasty step back as Dean pulled the small bundle out of the shallow hole. He turned it over in his hands, frowned at it.

"This is it?"

"I think so."

It didn't look like much, a bundle of twigs wound with grass, stained with age and dirt. Then he looked closer, remembered his brother's stammering, broken voice, "...braided some of her own hair with his, tied it around the bark and whatever else it was she took from the grave. S-she slit open her thumb and... and smeared the fetish

with her blood... she must've cut her b-brother too, down in the grave, mixed their blood together on the fetish and s-she buried it."

"Damn," he whispered as he realized several of the twigs were bone, the brittle twine around them ancient hair, dark blood staining the bundle until it looked almost scorched. Revulsion twisted in his stomach and he locked it down, forced his hands to steady when they wanted to open and let the fetish drop. He heard Sam stumble back, murmured a quick, "Take it easy, dude," without looking up and started scraping together bark and twigs from the edges of the small hole into a pyre. His skin crawled, prickling along the back of his neck and he swallowed drily, blinked hard as his vision blurred. Ice curled up his arm from the fetish in his hand and he almost threw it onto the pyre, scrubbing his palm against his jeans as he reached for the canisters in his pocket with his other hand.

"You wanna burn this bitch, Sam?"

When his brother didn't answer, Dean looked up, heart in his throat, felt something twist in his chest when he saw Sam leaning against the tree, clinging to it as if it was the only thing holding him up, his eyes utterly vacant.

"Sam?"

He was already moving as he called, dropping the canister behind him, not caring that salt spilled onto the thin grass. The hunter crossed the space between them in three long strides, reaching for his brother's shoulders, almost snatching them back when he heard the low murmur spilling from the younger man's bruised lips, words he didn't recognize.

"Sam!"

"Sà novi sunnú, Ogun, Yemaya, jawe, hen hessi. E de a fifa nu do vile -"

As soon as he touched his brother, Sam jerked back, stumbling away from him, one hand thrown up between them. His feet tangled, breaking the older man's grip, and Dean snatched at his shirt, the sudden weight taking both of them down. His knees cracked hard into the ground and he cursed as he grappled with his brother's suddenly limp form, struggling to cushion the landing.

They ended up in a tangled heap, Sam's head sideways on one of his knees, legs splayed out in the dust. He blinked up at Dean, eyes unfocussed and glassy as the hunter tried to catch the breath he'd lost in the sudden adrenaline flood.

"D'n?"

"God. Yeah. Jesus, Sam."

Mind raging, he hardly noticed what he was saying, the strange, liquid words that had flowed so easily from his brother's lips still ringing in his head. Sam huffed out a bemused laugh and Dean scowled at him.

"What?"

"Nothin'. Up."

He untangled them, rocked to his knees, then his feet and held out a hand, waiting for Sam to grab it. The younger man pitched sideways as Dean hauled him up, only the tree at his shoulder saving them another trip to the dust.

Dean steadied him, one hand wrapped around his arm, ducked his head to see into his brother's gray face.

"Sam?"

"Yeah. 'M good."

"Yeah, you look it. Jesus Sam," he said again, shoving at his brother's shoulder until Sam's back was flat against the trunk, not liking the way the younger man wobbled on his feet even with one hand braced against the tree. "What the hell was that?"

Sam looked up, met his eyes and shrugged, the action rippling irritation under his skin.

"Well, what the hell do you remember, Sam?" Dean demanded, half gratified to see a flicker of heat deep in his brother's bloodshot gaze.

"Nothing. You were digging and I... I got dizzy for a second. I must've leaned against the tree or something. I just..."

"Spaced out."

"Yeah."

Dean looked up at the branches spreading overhead, the old scars ringing the lowest branch, and shivered. The tree suddenly seemed threatening, as if he could feel every single one of the souls whose lives had ended here. Grabbing hold of his brother's arm again, he tugged Sam away from the tree, dragged him over to the far edge of the clearing, ignoring the startled protest.

"Dean, what the hell?"

"This whole damn hunt's jacked," he snapped, snarled wordlessly when the younger man jerked free of his grasp and pointed at the widespread roots of the bare-branched magnolia closest to them. "Sit. Don't move."

"I'm not a dog, Dean."

"Sit. Do. Not. Move."

Sam sat, the weight of his attention heavy on Dean's back as the hunter turned back to the small pyre, almost growling as he saw it scattered across the dust. "Dammit." The younger man chuckled weakly behind him as Dean crouched, started scraping the shredded bark back into a pile. His hands shook, just once, exhaustion and fading adrenaline taking their toll and all he wanted to do was toss a gallon of salt and fuel over the fetish and burn it. Bundle his brother into the car and drive until he couldn't see the road anymore and then just sleep, right there squashed in behind the wheel so he could start driving again as soon as he woke.

He poured salt in a careful circle around the reconstructed pyre instead, sprinkled it on top of the little pile of scraps of bark and reached for the fetish, still lying in its shallow grave.

His fingertips just barely touched it when he heard the unmistakable *schnick* of a handgun safety flipping off behind him and for a moment, for a split second he thought it was his brother, thought, *Quit playin' around, Sam, this so isn't the time for one of your lame, dumbass jokes.*

The low, furious snarl that followed on the heels of the thought took any thought of little brother jokes and throwing Sam into the back of the Impala and just driving, and blew it straight out of the window.

"Freeze, you sick sonofabitch."

Part Four

"Freeze, you sick sonofabitch."

Sam froze, entirely involuntarily, fingers locked tight around the shotgun stock. In the periphery of his vision, he saw his brother rise slowly from his huddle, one smooth step forward putting him between the pyre and the speaker Sam couldn't see. Dean's eyes flickered to his, skipped away, a quick message drilled into him in the brief moment of contact.

Stay put. Let me handle this.

Sam nodded fractionally, cast his gaze around what he could see of the clearing, filing away the position of his brother's shotgun, propped against the tree, the shovel rammed into the ground beside the shallow hole and the pyre beside that, the fetish still lying where it had fallen minutes earlier.

"I said freeze."

"Okay, okay, take it easy," Dean murmured and Sam fought the urge to turn, not knowing the identity of the new enemy was grating against his nerves. In some ways, the brothers were mirror images, he knew, both of them preferring to have a tangible, comprehensible foe they could rail against. The older man spread his hands a little, palms open and out, showing they were empty, but Sam saw his throat work as he swallowed at the deeper click of the gun being cocked. The adrenaline rush ramped

up a notch and Sam shifted on the root he was perched on, dragged his legs underneath him with agonizing care.

"You're under arrest, both of you."

His mind raced, processing each new fragment of information, slotting it into place with what he already knew, and he almost groaned aloud when the picture became clear.

The cops thought it was a serial killer, and this tree was where he was dumping the bodies. *They must've had a report of suspicious activity here last night, after we burned the remains, so they staked the place out. We walked straight into it.*

"Look, officer, you got it wrong," Dean started and Sam could see that his brother had worked it out as well.

"Seems pretty damn clear from where I'm standin'. Only thing we got wrong is that there's two o' you psychopaths, 'stead'a one, but that don't make much difference. Hands on your heads, both o' you."

Dean looked sideways at him again, and Sam could see the muscles along his shoulders tense, knew his brother was thinking about the odds. He shook his head, *Stand down, Dean. It's not worth it*, but for a moment the air in the clearing hummed. Then the older man relaxed, so minutely he knew no one else would have seen it, and slowly lifted his hands, lacing his fingers together behind his head.

"What is it with everyone callin' me a psychopath today?"

He had to smile at the petulance in his brother's mutter, even as he rolled his eyes and mirrored his pose. In the corner of his eye, he saw a man walk forward, dressed in a pale khaki uniform, arms rock steady as he held a large pistol aimed squarely at the hunter.

"I guess that'll be between you and the shrinks. On your knees."

They obeyed, though Sam could see Dean's jaw working, knew his brother would be grinding his teeth. The patrolman circled them, giving them a wide berth, aim never shifting even as his gaze darted up to meet Sam's for a moment. Fleeting, the hunter wished they could have been lucky enough to be caught by a new, green, rookie cop, one who didn't know enough to keep his distance until he was fully behind them, take three long, quick strides forward, twisting as he came up against Dean's back so that one knee rammed hard into the middle of his spine. Sam's jaw tightened as his brother gasped, jerked forward, off-balance long enough for the patrolman to snap the ring of a hand-cuff around his left wrist. The ratcheting sound it made was loud in the quiet, his brother's muttered curse hushed as Dean looked over at him, rueful apology in his eyes. Sam fidgeted on his knees, wondered if he could be fast enough.

Still standing with one crooked knee jammed into the elder Winchester's spine, the cop dragged Dean's cuffed arm down, looked up at Sam as he slid the handgun into its holster on his hip and reached for Dean's free wrist. Halfway there, his hand stopped, stuttered, fingers twitching spasmodically and Sam's gaze flickered down to his brother's, knew Dean had sensed something when he saw his brother's shoulders tense and climb defensively.

What the hell? Dean mouthed at him and Sam shook his head, turned his attention back to the cop as the older man staggered suddenly, stumbling back a step and jerking Dean backwards with a low yelp of startled pain. Sam surged into a crouch as he saw the uniformed stranger lift his free hand to knead at his brow, heard a mumble that made his blood run cold with recognition.

"Eho. Ogun, Yemaya, jawe."

He heard Dean curse loudly, yell his name as he shot the rest of the way to his feet, hands lifting, curling into loose fists in front of his face. That deep resonant voice drew a shiver down his spine, memory strobing across his mind.

"Eho!"

It's too deep to be her voice, but he sees his sister's lips move, shape the denial, and they still, his family, by blood spilled together in the fields if not shared.

"Step aside, or I'll see you all whipped."

"Eho."

She whispers it this time, No, and it's still that low, resonant growl that pins them there, backs to the tree, and won't let them obey anything else.

"Sam! Burn the freakin' thing!"

His brother's cry jolted him back and he found himself on his knees in the middle of the clearing, one hand pressed hard against the side of his head. He blinked at the two men struggling in the patchwork shadows under the trees, swallowing hard when the cop looked up at him with wide, dark eyes that didn't belong there. The stranger snarled, breathless words he didn't need to recognize to understand, threat and fury rolling in the cool air. Sam spun, felt something in him clench tight at turning his back on his brother, part of his mind screaming at him to *stop, wait, how is the curse even working? It's finished, there were no more descendants!*

He shoved the thought away, knew it didn't really matter now, not yet, not when he could hear his brother's strangled gasp and knew the cop possessed by a crazy dead girl was winning.

"Burn it, Sam! Now!"

It was ragged, thick, choked off by the heavy, dull thud of a body hitting the ground and his skin prickled for an instant, a sensation like a million ice cold, white hot needles jabbing into him, sweeping from head to toe before he heard his brother's low groan and heaved a sigh of relief as he dashed the last few meters across the clearing to the hanging tree and the tiny pyre beneath its branches.

The fetish had fallen back into the shallow hole beside the pyre, and Sam let his knees fold, skidded to a clumsy stop at the edge, already reaching in even as he caught himself with the other hand, twisting to snatch a look back over his shoulder. His throat tightened when he saw his brother try and roll away from the cop, brought short by the cuff still dangling from one wrist and coming back with a blow that the cop ducked, lashing out with his own fist. Sam winced as the punch landed solidly on his brother's cheekbone, dragged his gaze back to the ground just as his fingertips brushed the fetish.

A fat, blue spark snapped from the bundle to his fingers, static snapping up his arm and dimly he knew he arched back, felt himself start to fall even as he heard his name yelled hoarsely.

And then everything stopped.

* * * *

"What is it with everyone callin' me a psychopath today?"

He could see Sam's lips twitch up reluctantly as he lifted his hands, twined his fingers together loosely behind his head, let his own smile show briefly for a moment as he turned his gaze back to the cop leveling a small cannon at him. The other man walked forward slowly, keeping his distance as Dean let his smirk turn cold.

"I guess that'll be between you and the shrinks. On your knees."

The gun twitched at him, faintest motion that took its aim from his head to his heart and back again and his jaw tightened, teeth grinding together as he followed orders and sank awkwardly to his knees. The cop circled them, aim never shifting, and the skin on the back of Dean's neck prickled as he lost sight of the older man, the needling sensation creeping down over his shoulders. He turned his head as much as he dared, saw Sam staring at something behind him, could almost hear the wheels turning in his brother's head.

Stupid, rookie mistake, Dean, he chided himself, licking his lips nervously, hating not knowing where the cop was, where the gun was because he knew, even as good as this guy seemed, he was better. If it wasn't for the gun the cop would be tied up behind one of the magnolia trees with his socks stuffed into his mouth.

He smirked at the image in his head, shook it away, focusing back on the here and now, turning his attention to the hole he'd spent the last half hour clawing out of the packed dirt that seemed strangely untouched by the rain. Frowning, he risked a glance up, saw the branches woven together tightly above the clearing, wondered if that was enough to explain the absence of the mud they'd seen everywhere else in town.

The distraction cost him. He didn't hear the sudden rush of footsteps behind him until it was too late, something hard slamming into the middle of his back, flaring pain up and down his spine and throwing him forward even as a hand wrapped like iron around his arm, caught him, snapped something cold and hard around his left wrist as a gasp was startled out of him. The cop hauled him upright again by the handcuffs and Dean growled out a curse, twitched his head sideways and met his brother's eyes, apologizing silently. Sam shrugged at him, tiny flicker of motion in his shoulders, and Dean smiled weakly, turned it into a snarl when the cop grabbed his free, untethered hand, dragging it down behind his back.

The hunter felt the change when it happened, sensation like someone trickling ice cold and boiling water down his back, around the knee still jammed up in his spine. It felt like electricity, like bugs crawling under his skin, like the air itself had frozen to razor-edged shards. His shoulders hunched against it instinctively and he looked over at his brother, saw Sam frowning, confusion carving new lines through the creases exhaustion had already folded into his features.

What the hell? Dean mouthed to the younger man, felt something yank hard on his arms as Sam shook his head. He tipped back, helpless to stop himself toppling against the cop's legs, sharp fire lashing up his wrists, and he bit back a cry. Arms strained, every muscle taut, he could feel the hand wrapped around his, clammy and trembling, heard the cop mumbling strange words and recognition made him twist in the older man's hold, fighting it. He caught sight of his brother lunging to wobbly feet, staggering towards them, face translucent, eyes distant.

"Crap!" He swore loudly, heart pounding at his ribs. "Sam! Finish the job!"

The younger man stumbled forward, knees buckling with every lurching step, gaze still fixed on something Dean couldn't even see. He had the sickening realization that no one could and his throat locked up, suddenly feeling very, very alone.

"Goddammit, Sam. Bad freakin' timing!" He pulled forward against the iron grip on his wrists, the cop's hands still trembling, the low mutter still filling the quiet. Dean licked dry lips, swallowed hard as he heard the other man's voice shift, falling deeper and deeper until it was a resonant growl that sent a shiver along his nerves.

It didn't sound like anything that had ever been human.

Dean twisted again, whispering out a snarl deep in his throat when the cop didn't shift any more than the cottonwoods and magnolias surrounding the clearing would have. Something lurched in his stomach, adrenaline fading into shakes as he tried again and again to break free and couldn't move an inch, gaze skittering from the tiny pyre beside the tiny grave to his brother, a thousand miles away, halfway across the clearing. Claustrophobia settled into his nerves, making his breath hitch and his hands shake against the cuffs and behind him the cop just kept mumbling in that low, weird growl that he could feel, like someone watching him, like something stalking him.

He sucked in damp air, tasted leaf mold and wet earth, wondered again with panicky detachment why the clearing was so dry, static crawling along his veins. Ducking his head, he tried to think, tried to slow down his raging heartbeat.

Come on, Dean. Suck it up.

It sounded like his dad, barking orders in his head, and it worked, blurred vision clearing, breathing and pulse steadying. Dean relaxed back into the cop's hold, looked up, assessing the clearing, and saw his brother stumble again, lift one hand to his head and go down, folding to his knees with a limp, heavy thud that sent a twinge of fear racing through the older brother.

“Sam?”

Sam looked up, finding his gaze, meeting it, dazed but there, blinking heavily. Dean felt the grip on his hand loosen a little, twisted his head to see something staring out through the uniformed man’s eyes, glaring at his brother. “Hey,” he growled, tugged at the cuffs on his wrists. “Hey!” Dean started struggling in earnest, throwing his weight against the possessed man’s hold, anything to distract the spirit. “Sam! Burn the freakin’ thing!”

In the corner of his eye he saw his brother jerk back, start scrabbling across the damp ground, grinned nastily at the cop, losing the smirk in a choked gasp when the knee in his back suddenly dug in viciously. “Sonofabitch,” he ground out, kicked back awkwardly, brute strength making up what the blow lacked in finesse. The cop stumbled, hauled on his arms as Dean yelled hoarsely to his brother. “Burn it Sam! Now!” He finished it through a mouthful of dirt, blinked at the ground where he’d been thrown, and groaned as he rolled sluggishly to his side, brought up short when something yanked hard at the cuff on one wrist. Fury shot adrenaline through him again and he rolled back, leading with a right hook that would have sent the cop and the spirit controlling him straight into oblivion if it had landed. Instead, the spirit ducked its borrowed body with eerie speed and lashed out with a punch that split his cheekbone and sent stars dancing across his vision.

Head snapping to one side with the blow, Dean saw a bright blue flash silhouette a vague, tall shadow on its knees, back arching as it toppled rigidly sideways.

“SAM!”

Frantic, Dean jack-knifed, slammed a headbutt into the cop’s face, followed him up as he reeled back, reaching out, the cuff still dangling from one wrist glinting in the sketchy moonlight. Latching onto the cop’s lapels with one hand, he drew back the other, cocked it in a fist just behind his ear and threw it out in a punch that whistled through empty space. Too-dark eyes glittered at him as the cop reached up to his hand, grabbed hold and twisted, breaking his grip on the shirt with a tearing sound. Dean tried to roll with it, found himself flipped again, face down in the dirt, a knee buried between his shoulder blades. Grunting, he thrashed behind him, one elbow glancing from ribs that felt like the other man was wearing body armor. A hand fisted in his hair, ground his head down into the ground and he choked, heaved his shoulders up, threw himself sideways, scrambled to his feet as the cop tumbled away from him. Spitting out litter, Dean spun, searching for his brother, heart clenching tight in his chest as he took in the younger man’s crumpled form, motionless on the ground. He didn’t waste breath yelling, just put his head down and ran, hitting his full stride in three paces.

He felt the cop behind him, heard the faint jangle of the cuffs over his own gasping breaths, the light tug on his left wrist and knew, knew the cop had just grabbed the dangling bracelet but he couldn’t stop in time. His arm was wrenched back, a sharp pop sounding somehow bright beneath the cry he couldn’t stifle. His feet flew out from underneath him and he crashed down, hitting the ground hard, already trying to curl protectively around the star going nova in his shoulder.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Dean tucked his chin down to his chest, clamped his hand against his shoulder, groaned into the dirt. Hot tears slid past his eyelids, unbidden, almost unnoticed as he tried to breathe through the burning, stabbing pain twisting through the joint.

“Crap,” he whispered, blinked his eyes open, saw a hand curled loosely on the dirt, just a few feet away from his face. “Sam?” Bent fingers twitched, spasmed, jerked away from him as he gathered his arms underneath his chest. Pushing against the ground, his bad arm buckled, almost sent him face down into the dirt again as he scrambled to shove himself up, hustling forward on hand and knees. A boot slammed into the ground where his side had been and he dropped again, rolled, swept one leg out, scything it through the cop’s legs. The older man crashed to the floor, a heavy *whuff* of air escaping him, and he lay still as Dean spun back to his brother, grabbed

for Sam's chin when he twitched again, harder. Blood streaked from his nose, slick and dark on the older man's fingers as he cradled Sam's cheek.

"Sammy? C'mon, Sam," he muttered, panic fluttering under his ribs as his brother moaned, low in his throat, head jerking sharply to the side. Catching it, Dean gently thumbed up one of Sam's eyelids, lips tightening as he saw the distant stare cut straight through him. "Crap. Goddamnit." Forcing himself away, the older man stumbled to his feet, left arm cradled against his chest, fire pulsing down from shoulder to wrist in long, deep waves as he stepped over his brother, reaching for the shovel jammed in the ground. As soon as his fingers closed around the handle, he turned, gaze finding and locking onto the cop, still sprawled on his back a few feet away.

Dean could see too-dark eyes blinking, knew he was running out of time, and hefted the shovel awkwardly as he crouched, grabbed the fetish with his left hand, fingers tingling and numb and leaned forward, shoving the bundle at the pyre, almost knocking it over in his haste. Digging in his pocket, he dragged free his lighter, flicked the wheel, the tiny flame shockingly bright in the shadows and he realized suddenly how dark it was in the clearing, night-adjusted eyes blinded by the glow.

He grinned as he thrust the lighter forward, felt the heat on his fingers, saw the light glitter from the fetish, the first few hairs tying the sticks and bones together starting to curl in the flame.

And then a hand clamped like steel around his ankle, yanked it back and the world lurched around him, disappeared from under him as a second vice-like grip closed around his other leg. He pitched forward, blind instinct keeping his fist tight around the lighter when he slammed into the ground, breath knocked out of him, stars exploding in his vision as his jaw smacked down. He tasted blood, felt something scratch deep along his abdomen as his shirts were dragged up, bunching around his arms and shook his head, blinked his vision half clear, heart seizing when he saw the tiny pyre, rushing away from him.

Behind him, above him, someone laughed, the sound oddly layered and echoing back from the trees. The hunter cried out once, sharp and breathless, one last, desperate roll of the dice as he threw the lighter with all the strength he could manage.

* * * *

It's silent.

Silence like he's never heard.

It grates, something wrong about it, the quiet too complete and it takes him a long beat to place it, that jarring sense of notrightmissingsomething'smissing.

His heartbeat. That's what's missing. The steady rush of blood through his veins, lifelong soundtrack he never noticed until it was gone.

With the realization, everything shifts. There's a fleeting impression of coarse rope burning tender skin, sickening pressure against his throat, empty air cold on wet legs and lingering, pointless shame. Then there's motion, movement, subtle and soft so that he's not sure if he's the one moving or if it's the tree but he's drifting up through branches, around them, between them, heading for the sky and the stars beyond the clouds.

"Eho. Mawu, novi sunnú. Eho."

It's not so much the words that stop him – for a moment he thinks he doesn't even understand them, the tongue he's heard all his life. It's the grief, shattering and brutal, total denial.

No. Mawu, my brother. No.

Then he's looking down, no memory of turning away from the sky and the stars, just seamless transition to watching the ground, strewn with rotting leaves, blown down by the last storm. She's there, on the edge of the clearing, on her knees, back

bowed as she scrapes the slimy, crumbling mass away from the ground in front of a wooden cross. She mutters his name, over and over as she clears the grave, so intent on what she's doing that she doesn't hear the man coming, boots loud on the cold, wet earth.

The newcomer is wearing a uniform, medals glittering on the breast, insignia on his shoulders, and up in the trees, all he can do is watch, stomach he doesn't have any more tying itself in knots as the officer steps closer to the girl on the ground.

"I know what you done," she says, never looking up, marble-pale hands still sweeping, sweeping away the leaves. "I seen you. Wid ol' massuhs geldin'."

"And who will believe you when you tell them what you thought you saw?"

She shrugs, and maybe he's the only one who can see the way her shoulders are tight, almost shaking with tension.

"Don' need 'em to believe me. I know."

The officer laughs and the sound is as cold as the rare northern winds, rattling the bare branches, shivering the last few leaves still clinging to them.

"If you think to threaten me - "

"Mawu knew. He foun' out. Mebbe the girl tol' him. 'Cause she know too, don' she? And they b'lieve her if she tell."

The officer jolts back a step, face chalk-white under the brim of his hat. She carries on, regardless, heedless of the way he hefts his cane, silver tiger's head glinting.

"S why you killed him. My brother. You kill him 'cause that girl you got locked up in that house tol' him what you done. Way you kill her papa, your brother, 'cause you jealous of what he had."

Up in the branches, he can see the officer's knuckles turning yellow around the handle of the cane. She lifts her head a little, and her cheeks glitter.

"You cut them straps on his saddle. Thought no one seen you but we did. Me an' that girl. We seen you do it. An' when my brother convince her to tell what she seen, you fix it so he the one got his neck stretched, 'stead of you."

"Be silent."

From his vantage point, he can see the way she smiles at the wooden cross, reaches out to brush a hand over the carving. Her dark eyes are sad, resigned. Lonely. For a second he sees different eyes, hazel-green, muddied by loss, hands holding onto him tight, whispered promises and empty reassurance brushing over his skin.

Dean?

"Why'd you do it? He your brother, your baby brother an' you kill him. Why'd you do that?"

"Because he had everything I wanted."

The officer blurts it out, seems almost as startled as they do.

"So you took it?"

Meades laughs, walks away a few paces, stride jerky and stiff, one hand rubbing at his lips. "Yes. I took it. Why shouldn't I? I was due something. After..." he falters, hefts his cane resentfully. "We always said we'd stay together." It's a whisper now, sad and infinitely broken. "He was going to sign up with me. I thought... I thought we'd be there together. But he was scared." Angry again, harsh, echoing from the hanging tree. "So I went to war and I fought alone while he stayed here and built himself a home. And when I came back, he had everything I'd ever wanted and all I had was a bastard or two, this wretched cane and a worthless scrap of metal." The officer grabs the medal pinned to his breast, tosses it at the girl, still crouched by the grave.

She flinches, fumbles, cradles it in her hands and stares down at it. Whispers, "You kill him because he left you. You kill my brother because he know what you done an' he promise the girl he keep her safe. From you." Lapses into mumbles that

sound incoherent, but aren't, whisper falling deeper. "Ogun, Yemaya, jawe." The air turns static, oddly heavy. "Come, bring fear. To the blood of this man, bring death."

"And who'll keep her safe now?"

"No one."

It doesn't sound defeated, the way he knows it should, and suddenly it's like there's someone else there in the trees with him, watching at his side. He catches a flicker of dark hair and darker eyes in the corner of his vision, knows, somehow, that if he turns to look there'll be nothing there, but as long as he keeps his attention riveted on the quiet scene playing out in the clearing, she can see. There's a bright flicker as he shifts forward, like a coin spinning between her fingers and he blinks down at the clearing, where the girl is turning the medal, over and over, so quick it blurs.

The confirmation feels like someone dumped a bucket of ice water over his head, instinctive fear of the spirit and the curse that had nearly killed him. But she doesn't feel angry, there beside him in the branches. He can almost, almost see her smiling sadly, a feeling of satisfaction and completion washing over him, driving away the fear.

It doesn't last long, in the face of the cold brutality he's watching.

The officer smiles at her near silent answer, cruel twist of his lips as he steps forward, until the toes of his boots scuff wet leaves over her bare feet. She doesn't look up from the medal in her hands as the officer raises the cane, doesn't look up as it whistles shrilly through the air.

The world stops, stops dead, pinned in place, a leaf trembled loose from its branch, frozen as it tumbles down, the clouds scudding across the moon rigid and still. Up in the trees, he can't tear his eyes away from the statues in the clearing, the presence at his side gone as suddenly as it came, and watches helplessly as they fade, as everything just fades away.

* * * *

Waking up felt like coming up for air.

He sucked in a breath, too-cold oxygen stinging his throat and he coughed raggedly, winced. Brought a hand up, probed tenderly at the bruises swelling the tender skin. Eyes still closed, he felt the mattress underneath his back, warm and just right, sniffed gingerly and smelled starch and bleach, stale sweat and a faint tang of rank astringency he recognized too easily. Antiseptic and blood. Somewhere off in the distance, he could hear tires on tarmac, the sharp rattle of a vehicle turning onto gravel, the sound building, getting closer until an engine cut out and he listened to doors slamming, a woman calling to someone called Jimmy to slow the heck down already and help her with the groceries.

He blinked open his eyes, stared at the crack in the plaster above him.

There's an echo in his memory, an overlay of bare branches and clouds, unmoving against the moon. A leaf, caught impossibly in the air. Silver, whistling through the shadows. Dark eyes, empty with loss, flickering to green and back again until he didn't know what was memory and what was dream.

He closed his eyes again, tried to shut out the layers, the sounds, the smells, too many of them to let him think.

The clearing by the hanging tree. We had to burn the... the fetish? I was dreaming and it was killing me, a curse. She cursed them all. We dug it up and... the cop. The cop showed up but he went nuts. Even as he thought it, slow and deliberate, he knew it was wrong. Not crazy. I heard him, he was talking in that language, from the dreams. Possession maybe? He cuffed Dean and I went for the fetish, then...

"Mornin' Princess."

He rolled his head to the side, saw a vague shape slouched in a chair next to his bed, feet propped up on the mattress by Sam's knees, crossed at the ankles.

“D’n?”

His voice cracked, disappeared completely and he swallowed with a dry click. His brother leaned forward, feet dropping to the floor as he reached above Sam’s head, came back with a tall mug. Sam took it, hands trembling as he sipped at the water, felt it slide like silk over the grit in his throat. “What happened?” he croaked, elbowing himself up against the headboard, water slopping over the rim of the mug. Dean pried it out of his hands, held it while he shifted almost upright.

“Fetish is toast. Looks like the curse is done?”

It was more of a question than a statement, and Sam hesitated, searched in the back of his mind where the dreams had lurked, a pressure he didn’t recognize until he found it missing. He sighed, tension unwinding in his shoulders and nodded.

“Super.”

“Where’re we?”

He pulled the mug out of his brother’s hands again, drank as Dean rocked back in his chair, crooked one arm behind his head, tucked the other into his lap.

“The Long Spoon Motel, Hobb’s Crossroads, Florida. “Seriously,” the older man added when Sam arched a brow at him. “First place I could find with a vacancy after the border.”

Dean paused, tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling as Sam watched him from the corner of his eye. Tension rippled along the arm behind his head, a muscle ticking in his jaw in time to a beat he couldn’t make out. He wondered how many motels his brother had driven straight past before there were enough miles between Damascus and the Winchesters. The younger man frowned a little, peered through the shadows.

“What happened?” he asked again, shifting forward. Dean shrugged lopsidedly, chair wobbling precariously, and Sam reached out, grabbed the corner of the seat and tugged it down onto four legs, lips quirking when his brother glowered at him.

“Fine. Mom,” Dean muttered, shoved restlessly to his feet and shuffled away from Sam, heading for a small kitchenette tucked neatly into one corner of the large room. “Coffee?”

Sam’s stomach flipped at the word and he swallowed again, thickly. “No. I don’t wanna see coffee for a month.” He saw his brother’s shoulders twitch in a silent laugh, heard the hitched gasp and pushed himself carefully up to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Dean.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t get your panties in a bunch, princess.”

He huffed out a controlled breath, tugged one hand through his hair, wincing as it caught in the tangles.

“Come on, man. What happened?”

Dean stopped, leaning against the counter, back still turned to him.

“You remember the cop?”

Sam nodded, realized Dean couldn’t see him.

“Yeah. He was... possessed?”

“It was the girl. The sister. I think. She... uh... she was tryin’ to stop us.”

The hunter trailed off into silence and Sam heard the quiet clink of his ring as he tapped it against the worktop. He waited until the hush grated at his nerves. “When I touched the fetish, I was...kinda... sucked into another dream. I guess.”

He watched tension settle onto his brother’s shoulders like heavy chains, knew if he could see Dean’s eyes they would be muddied with loss, remembered fear and hurt. Blinked away the afterimage of dark eyes staring down at the medal.

“He, the cop, he just. He was crying. She was crying.”

Sam blinked, tried to piece together the disjointed words.

“What?”

His brother half-turned, leaned hip shot against the counter, left arm tucked in across his stomach. His face was still cast in shadow, faint highlights glittering on his eyes, teeth white as he spoke so softly Sam strained to hear.

"I was gonna burn the fetish and he grabbed me, dragged me away from it. He was tryin' to hit me, to stop me, maybe, but he was cryin' like he'd..."

Like he'd lost someone.

Dean didn't need to say it, and Sam licked suddenly dry lips as the older man forced out a brittle, humorless laugh.

"You notice there's one hell of a lot of 'maybes' and 'I guesses' in all this, Sam?"

Sam huffed, let his brother change the subject.

"Yeah. Feels like we've been two steps behind all the way on this one."

The older man turned back to the counter, filled the coffee pot with fresh water and dumped powder into a mug. "This gig's been jacked right from the start," he muttered, rapping his knuckles impatiently against the counter as he waited for the water to boil. "That curse should've been finished, right? You said there were no more descendants of the original families, so what the hell was the girl's spirit still doing here?"

He shifted against the headboard as his brother growled quietly, snatched the pot from its stand and poured barely steaming water into the mug, stirring it with quick, stilted motion that clattered the spoon harshly against the ceramic. Sam probed absently at the bruise on his cheek, shivering when he blinked at the quick spike of pain and saw a silver blur in the darkness behind his eyes.

"When I came back, he had everything I'd ever wanted and all I had was a bastard or two," he murmured, didn't know he was going to say it until he heard it and felt more than saw his brother turn sharply to him as he narrowed his eyes, chased the memory back.

"What?"

"In the dream, the last one. I saw..." he broke off, frowned, carried on around the lump in his throat. "I saw her at the grave, like the doctor described. This guy showed up, the lieutenant. Lieutenant Meades."

His brother dropped back into his chair, stare locked onto Sam, the pressure of it grounding him when his vision started to shift into shadows and bare branches against the clouds. He swallowed hard, sucked in air with a gasp, barely heard Dean murmur his name, a low "Take it easy, Sam."

"He killed his brother," Sam breathed, couldn't look up, even when he felt Dean flinch away from him. "He said... he said they'd promised to stay together but when he signed up for the war, his brother stayed behind and he said when he got home, all he had was a medal, a cane and a bastard or two."

"You think the cop was descended from one of his illegitimate kids?"

Sam pulled his head up, met his brother's stare, shrugged helplessly.

"He could be. There's no way to trace them."

"So the curse might not be done yet? There might be more kids out there?"

He drew back at the bite in the older man's rising voice, accusation laced with something like fear.

"No. I... it's done."

As soon as he said it, he knew it was true, felt the wave of satisfaction that had eased his panic in the dream. Maybe she just wanted someone to know what he did. All this time, and maybe that was all she needed.

"You can't stop a curse Sam, remember? If that little bitch cursed all his family, forever, then any of his descendants, legitimate or otherwise, are gonna die!"

"It's finished, Dean, I know it is," Sam answered lamely, couldn't help but cringe when his brother shot up from his chair, looming over him.

"What if it isn't, Sam? How do you know?"

"I just.... I just know. Like in Lawrence. With Jenny and the poltergeist and... and Mom," he finished in a whisper, tried to smile and knew it was more of a grimace. "In

the dream, I saw what happened to her,” he tried to explain. “She told Meades she knew what he’d done, that her brother knew as well and that was why he was killed, to stop him talking.”

“A slave? Threatening a plantation owner? No way, Sam. No one would’ve believed him.”

“Meades didn’t own the plantation, not originally. It was his brother’s. When he came back from the war...”

Sam pinched at the bridge of his nose, felt Dean’s stare soften.

“What, Sam? What did he do?”

“He killed him. He killed his brother and took his home, his family. Everything he ever wanted.”

He heard Dean swallow thickly, draw back. The words kept on tumbling through his lips, unstoppable.

“He cut a strap on his brother’s saddle, but the girl and his niece, they saw him do it. You’re right, no one would’ve believed a slave’s word over his, but the daughter? He killed the boy as a warning to her, killed the girl... I don’t know why he killed her. But when I saw it, in the dream, I saw him kill her and it was like that was all she wanted, for someone to see, to know what had happened. She was there. Maybe... maybe I mirrored the curse back at her somehow. Like she’d been showing all the people she killed and none of them got it, none of them could ever see it as anything more than a dream but I could see it and show her what I saw as well.”

Dean deflated, staring at him, eyes wide and raw and open as he sank back down into the chair, the way they always were now whenever Sam mentioned his abilities. It was the same way his brother had looked at him when he first confessed to having dreams that came true and even though he’d thought they had both almost gotten used to his curse, accepted it if not exactly welcomed it, the run-in with his demonic other-self had catapulted them straight back to the same uneasy silence.

“Yeah. Okay,” Dean finally muttered, still staring at him. “Okay then.”

“We always said we’d stay together.”

Sam’s breath hitched as the memory curled through his mind, tried to look away from his brother and couldn’t, even as he wondered what he would do if Dean ever decided he’d had enough and left. His brother had changed, he knew that. Dean was still driven by the same determined loyalty that had kept their fractured family together for so long, but he’d seen uncertainty make the older man hesitate sometimes, like he wasn’t really sure he was doing the right thing anymore.

He wondered if his other-self had woken up one morning after months of uncertainty and taut silence, and found an empty motel room.

Abruptly, he found himself hating the shadows that filled the room, clouded the space between them and leaned over, flicking the switch on the small lamp on the wall between the beds. His eyes watered and he knuckled them clear, then gasped as he saw his brother clearly.

“Dammit, Dean.”

The older man scowled, blinking in the sudden glare. The warm light did nothing to soften the bruises and scrapes that marred his face, chalk-white beneath them, one eye darkened almost to black, the bridge of his nose puffy and torn. Sam sat forward, swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

“It’s fine, Sam.”

“It’s not fine, Dean. You look like you ran into a meat grinder.” As he spoke, Sam reached out, tipped his brother’s head towards the light with one hand, pressed the other against the shoulder he’d seen the older man favoring and felt the bulk of a bandage underneath the layers of shirts.

“Just wrenched it,” Dean murmured, hitching the shoulder against his hand a little. “It’ll heal up in a couple of days. Hell, I had worse sparring with you when you were still tripping over your own feet.” He heaved out a put-upon sigh, but let Sam poke gently at the contusions until he sat back, jaw so tight he could feel his teeth grinding.

"Humor me. You take anything for the headache?"

"What headache?"

Dean grinned cockily at him as he tried to sell the lie, but Sam just shook his head.

"I can see straight through you, man. The headache that had you sitting here in the dark when I woke up."

"You were sleeping!"

"Like that ever stopped you before," he muttered, levering himself to his feet with a soft hiss and padding across to the kit he'd already seen on the table. Digging inside, he pulled out a pill bottle, rattled it, made a note to re-stock the kit soon, and fumbled with the child-proof cap for a moment. When it finally clicked open, he tapped two pills into the palm of his hand and turned back, held them out to his brother.

Dean took them silently, chased them down with a swig of coffee.

"You know we're gonna have to go back there and torch her, right?" he asked, grinned brightly, falsely up at him and Sam chewed at his lip.

"You think we could ask Bobby if he knows anyone in Alabama?"

He really didn't want to ever see that town again, knew his brother felt the same when Dean's faked smile relaxed into something more genuine.

"Yeah. 'Bout time we kicked some work the old man's way for a change."

Sam smirked.

"Better not let him hear you call him old, dude. Or he'll set you sweeping the yard again."

Dean rolled his eyes and groaned at the old joke..

"Don't remind me."

It felt good to share the memory, lighter somehow and Sam dropped back onto his bed, bouncing comfortably. Watched his brother plant an elbow on his knee, prop his chin on his fist as he blinked heavily and gazed at nothing.

"Get some sleep, Dean."

For a moment, his brother's eyes flickered to his, relief warring with fading traces of fear that would never quite die away.

"I'm good, man," he went on. *It's safe. Stand down.*

"Yeah," Dean finally breathed, pushed up from his chair and tipped straight over to flop face down onto the other bed. Sam huffed out a laugh, flicked out the light and squirmed down into the tangled covers, still warm with his own body heat, welcome in the cool, damp Florida winter. He lay in the gloom, listening to his brother breathing, rolling over with a creak of springs, to the crunch of tires on the gravel lot outside, felt his own breathing start to slow down, even out as sleep crept up on him.

"Sam."

"Hmm?"

When Dean didn't answer, he lifted his head, peered across the space between the beds, saw his brother's profile in the shadows, staring at the ceiling.

"Dean, what is it?"

He watched the older man's throat working and propped himself up on one elbow. Waited.

"You really think I could turn?"

It was whisper quiet, almost lost under the sound of his own breathing, but he felt his lungs tighten, lock down at the stark fear in the soft words.

No, he wanted to say, felt the words piling up on his tongue. *Not ever, Not you.*

"I think... anyone could turn," he finally managed, tore his gaze away as he saw the bright sheen glittering in his brother's eyes. "If... if they went through enough, if they just..."

"Made the wrong choice," Dean finished for him, nodding fractionally in the corner of his vision.

"Yeah," he breathed.

"You shouldn't've finished the dream, Sam. It was too dangerous."

He knew they weren't talking about the toll the dreams had taken, squeezed his eyes closed so tightly, shapes danced across the dark. His abilities didn't come from demon blood the way the other Sam's had, but they were just as much a temptation as he'd felt when he reflected them back on that twisted version of himself. For every voice that called for him to use them, to help restore and maintain the balance Gudrun and the Einherjar had talked about, there was another in the back of his mind that whispered caution.

He hadn't realized until now that it sounded like his brother.

"I know."

He said it carefully, agreeing with the risk and nothing else and heard Dean's breath stop for a moment.

"Just... be careful, Sammy. Promise me that."

"I'm being careful, Dean, I am. But I can't stop."

"Why not? Huh? Why can't it jus' go back t'how it used to be?"

His brother's words were slurred a little, the pills and exhaustion taking hold, making him more open than Sam knew he'd normally be.

"It's just another tool, Dean. A weapon, that's all."

"It's not. It's dangerous, Sam, an' it freaks me out."

"Dangerous like trapping Haris on a sinking ship? Dangerous like melting down your amulet to make a bullet to kill him?"

"It's not the same."

"Isn't it? You could have died, Dean, on that ship. You did die, without the amulet!"

"I didn't choose - "

"Yes you did!"

The sudden shout startled them both and Sam blinked, found himself leaning out over the space between the beds, arms trembling as they held his weight, fingers digging into the edge of the mattress. Dean stared back at him, eyes wide, pale in the dark.

"You chose to lure Haris there, you chose to give up the amulet and I get it Dean," he overrode his brother's protest. "I get it, I do, I know you'd do anything you had to to save Dad or me, but it's not different just because it's you. It can't be. Not if we're going to go to war with the devil. It just can't."

"Sam, just hold on a second."

"No! Dean, you gotta promise me, too. You gotta be careful man, 'cause I don't know what's gonna happen if you're not, if you're not here to stop me - " Sam cut himself off with a snap of teeth, sucked in air as Dean's face turned even paler under the bruises, horrified. Sam's stomach churned and he swallowed thickly, ducked his head, forced out words with a strangled wheeze.

"If you're not here, there's no one to stop me going Darkside."

His nerves crawled in the silence and he picked at a loose thread on the edge of the pillow.

"Sammy."

He bit at the inside of his cheek, squeezed his eyes closed again, wished he could just turn back time. And choked down a sob when he remembered waking up with Jess in his arms, the moment when it had faded away to a dark alleyway littered with scraps of broken metal and glass.

"Come on, dude. Look at me."

Sam slid his eyes sideways, met his brother's stare.

"No one's going Darkside, okay? Not you, not me, not anyone. You're right, I'd do whatever it took to save you or Dad, 'cause that's my job. And if saving you means stopping you from turning, well, then fine. I will. But I won't have to, Sam. You're not him. You're nothing like him, and no matter what happens, you never will be. Alright?"

Dean held his gaze for a moment, frowning intently, eyes searching his. Sam buried the doubt and the fear deep, nodded slowly. Smiled when his brother did.

“Alright,” the older man murmured through a yawn. “Now are we done with the carin’ and sharin’? ’Cause dude, I’m beat.”

“Yeah. We’re done.”

It sounded hollow to him, but Dean just sighed and wriggled down into his bed again, good arm burrowing under the pillow and Sam knew he was gripping his knife tightly, watched as the tension melted away from his back. Waited for his breathing to slow and even out before he whispered to the dark.

“Whatever it takes, right? If I had to make another deal, I would. If I had to sign up with Gudrun and the Einherjar, I would. Because you’ve gotta be here, Dean. I need you right here. To save me. To do whatever it takes.”

He slipped into sleep, and dreamed of yellow eyes in the mirror, and a brass medal tumbling to the ground.

The End