

*Crocodile Tears*  
*Season Four*  
*Episode Eleven*  
*By calUK*

*“Just say when, and you'll stop the pain of your life, bring it to an end. Just say when, and you could make amends, just say Hello, say Hello again...”*

The thin voice wound up into the dusk, into the silence that hung heavy on the air where the bullfrogs and muskrats should have filled it with raucous life. The sky burned bloody, shreds of cloud catching the dying light of the sun, streaking copper and gold across the vault of the sky. The terminus chased the sun, an arc of bruising that swept over the marsh, scattered stars in its wake, mirrored in the muddy water and on the small, glossy black device that lay, caught in the reeds, half submerged.

*“...lo again, it's not tha...ard. No dead ends, even wi...the scars.”*

The screen glowed eerily, flickered as water seeped in through the casing, found the electronics inside and the music stuttered out of the headphones, dangling, trailing through the broken stems.

*“You ha... no home... lost your throne, where ... Well... could all co...ack, but you're be... led by the walking dead. You s...umble an...crack ...ground, you're pinned down...”*

The faint glow wavered one last time, died with a final hiss of static and a low, tinny squeal of feedback. When it faded, the marsh was silent again, air dank and oppressive as the clouds covered the sky, smothered the stars and the thin moon.

In the darkness, the spark was easy to see.

Cold white, it grew, shifted, pulsed in rippling waves until it danced lazily above the rank water, the size of a man's head, glowing fitfully, trailing short streamers of pale gold with every twitching motion. The reflection beneath it was darker, the light in the water a sullen orange, a banked fire simmering below the surface, distorted by the waves that spread from a shadow, apropos of nothing. It reached out, the light spitting and hissing as it followed the shadow, until the cold glow fell across something white in the water, caught in eyes stretched wide, a rictus grin. A hand, that stretched up, rigid and motionless, fingers locked into claws that grasped helplessly at empty air. A few, tiny bubbles drifted between bared teeth, trickled up through the shredded weeds and silt to the surface.

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This had to be in the top ten.

Sam peered dubiously at the tiny room, wrinkled his nose as he filed it in his list of the *Worst Motel Rooms Ever*. The walls looked like they'd been painted with nicotine, wallpaper peeling away in ragged strips from the damp patches along the ceiling, the largest of them spreading out like wings from the bare bulb dangling on its cable. The beds were pressed close together, as if they were huddling away from the walls, just the smallest cabinet he'd ever seen tucked between them, missing its drawer, and the gritty, sticky carpet kept sucking at his boots every time he moved. Not that he dared move far; perching on the wobbly, least questionable chair by the listing table, the laptop open on top as he wondered just how far out of it he'd been the night before, for this dump to look appealing.

He tried not to look at the bed. The thought that he'd slept in it, woken up with his face buried in the gray, singed pillow...

Clenching his hands into fists, Sam sat and waited, wincing when the stitched and bandaged slash across one palm twanged with pain. He checked his watch, couldn't hold back the tut that echoed quietly in the silent room.

"I won't be long, Sam. Just gonna run to the diner down the block," he muttered to himself, rolling his eyes with the memory of his brother's words. "*Gimme a minute*," he'd called after Dean, hurried out of the avocado bathroom to hear the Impala roar away with a squeal of tires. Desperate to get out of the room, just for a minute, he'd actually chased out into the parking lot wearing just his jeans and a faded t-shirt, and watched as the classic fishtailed onto the road.

Dropping his head into his hands, he sighed, gritted his teeth and wondered if he had time to pour the peroxide from the first aid kit into Dean's shampoo.

"Hey Sammy."

A bag slid across the table and thumped into his elbow, almost before he'd registered the fan of weak light spreading across the floor. He shot to his feet.

"Dean! You could've waited, man!"

Sam winced at the whine in his voice, folded his arms across his chest and scowled. His brother stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, a half-eaten burger in one hand.

"Sorry, dude. Didn't think you'd want to come."

His lips pursed against the huff that built up in his throat. Dean just shrugged and rolled away from the frame, taking another bite of his lunch as he headed for the table, mumbling something incomprehensible around the mouthful.

"How does it take two hours to go to the diner down the block? Two. Hours. Dean."

"Was it?"

"Yes."

"Dude, I had to do something. You got any idea how boring it is, sitting here, watching you sleep 'til noon? How's your head, anyway?"

"It's fine."

It was, he realized. The headache that had plagued him for the last three days, ever since they'd put the Mexican border in their rear view mirror, was gone as if it had never pounded at the back of his eyes.

"Good." Dean sounded satisfied. "Told you you just needed sleep."

"What I need is to get out of this dump," Sam grumbled, dropping back into his chair with a sigh and reaching for the bag. He almost smiled when he found the neatly wrapped bagel inside, sniffed appreciatively at the grilled cheese oozing out over his fingers.

“Well, I think maybe I found us a gig.”

The younger man nodded, mouth full of cheese and ham, tilted his head to one side at his brother. Dean smirked, eyes warm for a moment before they slid away, down to the hand that sneaked into Sam's bag and came back with a fistful of fries. “Long Neck Village, Delaware. There's an old cannery there, been haunted for years, according to local legend. You know, weird lights, strange noises, usual kind've thing. Only now, word's gotten out and they decided to turn it into a tourist trap.”

Sam winced around another mouthful of bagel.

“Anyone hurt yet?”

“Yeah. A tour group went in there, four of 'em had to be carried out. The guide was pretty cut up, Casey said he was in hospital for a couple weeks.”

“Casey?”

“Chick at the bakery. Her uncle's sister in law's third cousin, or something, was on the tour.”

“Vengeful spirit?”

“That's an affirmative. I talked the clerk into letting us check out late, so we can hit the road soon as we're packed.”

He raised a brow at that. “You managed to convince the clerk of *this* crap hole of a motel into letting us check out late? As in; not pay for another night?”

Dean grinned.

“He's Casey's step-brother's uncle twice removed. I think.”

“Huh.”

The older man screwed up his empty wrapper, tossed it over his shoulder and rose as it rolled around the rim of the trashcan. Sam stuffed the last bite of his bagel in his mouth and followed his brother to the beds as he chewed, crouching down to heft his duffel onto the mattress. There wasn't much to pack. They'd hit the motel so late he'd barely even taken the time to kick his boots off before collapsing into sleep and all he had to do was fold the clothes he'd woken up in and stuff them into his bag.

And yank them back out again when the phone he'd forgotten he'd left in the pocket of his jeans started buzzing inside the bag. He felt Dean's gaze shift to him, glanced up and watched the older man still, one hand buried in his own duffel, knew it was wrapped around a knife or a gun. Dean just blinked at him, calm and outwardly so relaxed that Sam wondered if he really did see the edge of naked distrust in his brother's stare, of innate suspicion, directed at whoever was on the other end of the phone.

He looked down, only realizing his shoulders had hunched when they dropped at the name on the screen as he answered it.

“Hey, Bobby.”

“*Sam. How you boys getting along?*”

Dean grinned quickly, tension bleeding out of his eyes as he started packing again.

“We're good. Just heading out, actually. Gig in Delaware.”

“*Anythin' important?*”

His spine stiffened at the edge in the hunter's question and he straightened.

“Couple of victims, no fatalities. Why?”

“*I can get someone on it. Could use you boys on a job up here.*”

“Sam?”

He put one hand across the speaker, looked up at his brother again.

“Bobby's got a job he needs a hand on. He'll put someone on to the Long Neck thing.”

Dean nodded, slung his bag over one shoulder.

“I'll get this out to the car.”

Sam mirrored the gesture, turned back to the phone.

“You got us Bobby. I'll e-mail you the info once we're on the road.”

“*Good. That's good. Thanks, Sam.*”

“So what's the job?”

He tried to keep it casual, but Bobby's thanks and edgy pressure grated against his nerves.

“*Out East, in Wisconsin, place called Horicon Marsh. Got a long history of disappearances, but nothin' too unusual. Always kept my eye on it, but I never thought there was anythin' to it. Jus' bad luck or bad plannin'.*”

“They've picked up?” Sam guessed, scanning the room for a pen and paper, finally grabbing one of the tattered take-out menus on the table and diving into his satchel for a stub of pencil.

“*Yeah. Seven folk gone missing over the past year. Only the last few've been found, first time it's happened. They were torn up some. Cops haven't released details, but I got a hold've the ME's report. Says they died of natural causes, heart attacks and the like, and their hands were shredded. Like they'd died clawin' at somethin'.*”

His stomach churned as he scribbled notes in the margins, between meatloaf and minute steak, on the other side of an old memory; his brother's fingers, battered and bleeding as Sam dragged him from the ground in Elicott City.

*“Report puts the time of death at two to three days after the vics went missing. Cops are putting it down to people getting lost out in the marsh, saying the higher rainfall this year has made it more treacherous, but that's a load've crock. Somethin's out there, taking folks.”*

“Yeah. You got any idea what it could be, Bobby?”

He could almost see the grizzled hunter's annoyed shrug, jumped a little as the front door banged open and Dean stomped inside, headed for Sam's clothes, still strewn across his bed for the second time in as many hours.

*“Nothin'. There's a ton've lore came over with the Europeans who settled the area, and then some more from the tribes who lived there before that, but nothin' seems to fit the pattern.”*

Sam grinned wearily at the edge of petulance in the older man's voice.

“Okay, well, we'll figure it out as we go along. Thanks for the heads up.”

The mechanic hung up with a muttered grumble, and Sam snapped his phone shut, leaned back in his chair with a sigh. Lifted one hand to press it across his eyes, pinching at the bridge of his nose. He listened to the soft rustle behind him as clothes were rolled and stuffed into a duffel, denim scraping at canvas. His brother's ring *chinked* quietly against the small cabinet between the beds, gathering his belongings. Sam felt Dean watch him as he packed, gaze still for a long moment before he spoke.

“What's Bobby got for us?”

“People disappearing in Horicon Marsh, Wisconsin.” He sat up, pulled the laptop closer to him across the wobbly table, pecked at the keys, calling up a favorite mapping site. “It's near Beaver Dam. Looks like about four hundred miles.”

He could hear the frown in his brother's voice, but squinted at the screen, rubbing absently at the dull ache in his hand.

“He hasn't got anyone closer than us?”

“We've driven further for less,” Sam murmured.

The older man muttered under his breath and he grinned, powered the laptop down, sitting back with a wince. Rolling his head, his neck cracked and he stretched, peering round at his brother. Dean slung one duffel over his shoulder, hefted the weapons bag in one hand and looked steadily back at him.

“You sure you're up for this?”

Sam ticked one shoulder up in a shrug, nodded.

“Yeah. I'll be fine.”

“That's my line,” Dean growled, heaved out a put-upon sigh and trudged to the door, shifting the strap over his shoulder. “You comin' or not? I wanna get a few of Bobby's four hundred damn miles behind us before we stop again.”

“Get us checked out. I'll be right there.”

He waited for his brother's answering grunt, for the door to click shut between them before he propped his elbows on his knees and his head into his hands. His breath stirred his bangs, slow and even until he held it, lips thinned together. Heat pricked at the back of his eyelids, burned in his throat and he swallowed hard, let air out with a whoosh, emptying his lungs until they ached.

Sam listened to the familiar creak of the car doors, stared at the shapes drifting behind his eyes, tried not to see a figure with tiger-striped skin peeling away from its flesh sneering at him in every last one of them. He jumped when the door slammed shut outside, smiled weakly, knew his brother was trying to give him space and still keep them functioning. Doing their job.

Levering himself to his feet, he wobbled for a moment, caught himself against the edge of the table, waited for the world to settle again before he stuffed the laptop into its bag and tucked it under his arm. He walked slowly to the door, stopped at the small, fly-speckled window and peered out as Dean shouldered through the office door, jogged down the steps and paused at the bottom, staring at their room. Even across the lot, Sam could see his brow crease, one hand worrying at the ring on the other. He wondered if his brother even knew how easy he was to read.

He sighed, pushed away from the wall in the same moment that his brother started walking again.

“You want me to drive?”

Dean just looked up at him as they neared the car from opposite sides, one brow quirked. Sam huffed and folded himself into the passenger seat, slouching as the car rocked a little beneath him. Their doors groaned shut in unison, the engine rumbling to life with a quick twist of the older man's wrist, the radio burping static at them for a beat before Dean snapped it off with a growled curse and sat back, fingers wrapped around the wheel in the corner of Sam's vision.

They didn't move.

He stole a glance sideways, saw his brother's clenched jaw.

“Dean?”

The older man didn't answer for a long time, just stared through the windshield, white-knuckling the steering wheel. When he finally spoke, his voice was carefully neutral, rigidly controlled.

“You think Castiel really... turned back time? Just to give Ernesto another chance?”

Sam hesitated, felt the tension settle between them again. Remembered the ice in his brother's snarl when he'd held a gun levelled at the priest's head, Dean's eyes too dark in his pale face, even when he let the gun drop. And he wondered who'd really been given the second chance in Ciudad del Maldecido.

“Yeah. Maybe.”

There was more to the question than an old war hero's conscience, he knew, could almost see the shape of it in the half-glance Dean shot his way as he nodded slowly, dropped the car into drive. Almost, but not quite, and all he could do was watch the scenery slide past, wet fields turning to forests, to lakes and wide plains, stretching horizon to horizon.

The car slowed, woke him from a doze and he blinked at flickering strip lights, peeled his face away from the window.

“Need gas,” Dean muttered as the engine rumbled into the quiet buzz of insects. Sam nodded, yawning, rolling his shoulders as he followed his brother out of the car. The older man left the pump working and headed for the office, boots quiet against the forecourt.

Sam leaned against the car, elbows on the roof, buried his hands in his hair, fisting them tight in frustration. His hair caught in his fingers, tugged at his scalp until it itched, the stitches Dean had carefully placed in the cut on his palm stinging as they pulled beneath the bandage. He huffed out a slow breath, pulled in another and let his eyes drift shut. The pump clicked off in the same moment that his phone buzzed inside the car, and he reached in through the open door, snatched it from the seat. He scanned the screen, flipped it open as he headed for the trunk and hefted the nozzle out of the car, hooked it back into the holder on the side of the old pump.

“Bobby, hey.”

*“How you boys doin’?”*

“Uh... we're at...” he craned his neck back, squinted at the sign above the door, so faded he could barely read it. “Lake Puckaway. Some fill-up joint.”

A hinge groaned loudly and for a moment he blinked stupidly, sleepily at the front of the car, half expecting to see his brother there, leaning on the open door.

*“So you're a couple hours out still?”*

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess.” Sam frowned, fingers splayed on the roof of the car tightening. “Why? What's happened, Bobby?”

A heavy sigh crackled down the line and the furrows in his brow deepened, eased as a long tongue of light spread across the dark lot and he followed it, saw a broad shouldered silhouette swagger through the noisy door and head for the car. Sam smiled a little, relaxed into the metal, saw his brother's head tilt to the side.

*Bobby*, he mouthed, turning so that the older man could see his phone. Dean nodded as he neared the car, folded his elbows against the roof.

*“Whatever it is out there, it's steppin' up its game. Took someone else last night.”*

“Damn. That takes the body count to eight in the last year?”

Sam watched his brother straighten, jaw tight, eyes flat and hard.

*Yeah. Someone's gonna notice soon, Sam. We gotta stop it before a posse of damn fool civilians head out there, thinking it's a rogue bear or somethin' and get themselves killed for their trouble.”*

“Okay. We'll get there soon as we can, Bobby.”

The hunter thanked him gruffly, left him with the dial tone buzzing in his ear.

“It's taken someone else?”

Sam nodded “Last night.”

Dean pushed away from the car, yawned, digging in his pocket and tossing the keys to the younger man. Sam quirked a brow at him.

“You okay, dude?”

He smiled at his brother's snort, felt the expression tighten when Dean yawned so hard his jaw cracked, strolling around the car to shove lightly at Sam's shoulder.

“Your drivin' better be better than your snoring, Samantha.”

“I don't snore.”

The hunter smirked, folding himself into the passenger seat.

“Like a freakin' grizzly in winter, man.”

“Uh uh, no way.” Sam grinned again as he trotted to the drivers door, hauled it open and peering in at his brother, already slouched against the other window, squirming. “Must be echoes from your side've the room.”

Dean huffed, amusement sparking in heavy-lidded eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever lets you sleep at night, princess.”

The younger man rolled his eyes, slid behind the wheel and almost missed his brother's easy sigh as he turned the key, the engine growling to life with a throaty roar. He startled, scabbled wildly at the radio as a guitar howled through the speakers and shot a glance across the car, expecting to find Dean laughing at him, a curse ready on Sam's lips. It softened as he saw his brother, head tipped back against the seat, oblivious. He left the music screaming as he pulled out onto the interstate again.

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*Slap.*

“Freakin' mosquitoes.”

In the corner of his eye, Dean saw his brother's mouth twitch. He rolled his shoulders, scratched at one wrist. “You're sure Bobby didn't have anyone else who was closer than us?”

“Yeah, man. I'm sure.” The younger man shook his head, bent back into the trunk and the duffel he was packing, propped against his hip. “Like you would've said no anyway,” Sam continued in a low murmur. Dean scowled, threw a glare over his shoulder as he stomped to the edge of the parking lot. He crossed his arms and glowered out across the marsh, watching the dusk creep towards him as the sun dipped to the horizon at his back, stars fading in across the sky, reflecting faintly in the water.

It seemed to go on forever, stretching away and he wondered how many ghosts wandered out in the marsh, never finding their way home.

“Place oughta be crawlin' with spooks,” he murmured, felt his brother's gaze brush across his back. Chewed at his lip, shuffled his feet as something fluttered along his nerves.

“Dean?”

The hunter stared out at the twilight for a moment, until his eyes burned, trying to place whatever it was that had him on edge but there was just mud and water before him and mosquitoes whining around his head.

“Dean, you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, 'm good.”

Sam stepped up to his shoulder, peered uncertainly at him. The older man swatted another bug trying to land on his arm.

“Freakin' bloodsuckers,” he muttered, grabbed the duffel from his brother and headed for the narrow path winding out of the lot. “You comin' Sam?”

He could almost hear his brother's eyeroll and grinned. They walked in silence for a time, boots thudding softly against the path, picking their way through sections where rain and people had trampled the dirt to mud.

“Hey, Dean.”

Dean answered absently, watching a firefly waver in the distance.

“Yeah?”

“You think Bobby knows?”

He frowned, looked back over one shoulder.

“About what?”

Sam ducked his head, rolled his shoulders uncomfortably.

“About the dimensions. About us.”

Somehow, he wasn't sure his brother was talking about the weak spots they'd helped create. *About us*, Sam said, loaded the pronoun too heavily for him to miss it. *About them, the others, us in parallel dimensions. Wolfed out or Yellow eyed.*

“Sam,” he started, didn't get any further before Sam looked up at him, past him, eyes widening, a light in them that for a second, just for a second turned them pale and yellow and his heart stuttered, skipped back into rhythm as his brother lurched past him and started running. “Sam?”

Dean was already turning, pushing off, barely dodging around a patch of mud taking up half the trail but the younger man's long legs and longer stride were carrying him away, Sam sprinting after the light that dipped and bobbed in front of him. No firefly, too big and too damn smart, he thought, watching it weave away across the marsh.

“Sam!”

His brother yelled something back, indecipherable above the pounding rush in his head, damp air sawing in and out of his lungs.

“Dammit, Sammy! Stop!”

Breaking every rule in the book, Dean knew it, rushing headlong into who-knew-what, gray curling around the edges of his vision as he tried to suck in enough oxygen with the taste of swamp and the mosquitoes that had been an annoyance before were suddenly vital, lodging at the back of his throat. He choked, hacked it clear, eyes streaming so much that he never saw the dip in the raised pathway, the boardwalk following it faithfully, some recent flood leaving a coating of slime across the wood. His feet just went out from under him, too much momentum to control the fall at all and he hit hard, skidded and rolled straight over the edge of the walk, head clipping the railing as he spilled out into the marsh.

Water fountained around him, crashed back down and he sputtered, flailed at the trailing weed that tangled around him, pulled him down until he couldn't tell air from mud. Dean shook his head, blinked the stars out of his vision, came back to himself crouched in the edge of the marsh, side throbbing dully, his temple sparking with brighter pain. He probed it, hissed as his fingers pressed a lump already swelling in his hairline, a thin trace of blood on the tips when he peered at them.

“Damn,” he mumbled, panted, still breathless from the spring and the fall but already crawling for the raised path bed. Mud slipped through his fingers, ground thick and gritty into his skin, clogged his nails as he dragged himself up the bank, wind biting through his wet clothes and he shivered when he finally rolled onto the path, breath clouding in front of his face, thick fog that billowed against the stars. With a whispered curse, he rolled to his knees, flicking crud from his fingers and staring out across the marsh.

Something called, out in the distance, thin shriek of something dying, something else surviving, but there was nothing to see, no light dipping and weaving across the water, no tall figure loping away from him.

“Dammit, Sam.”

No one to answer the quiet prayer that slipped past him as he sank back to the ground, eyes pinned helplessly to the empty horizon.

## ***Chapter Two***

“He's gone, Bobby. He's just, he took off after that damned thing and he's just *gone*.”

“*Did'ja track him?*”

Dean scowled, scrubbed a hand through his hair, dried mud flaking away. He bit back the growl that bubbled up his throat, forced it into a sigh instead as he turned around and put his back to the wall, shoulder brushing the splintered door frame. He squinted out at the morning sun across the parking lot.

“Course I did, man. Nothing. I looked all freakin' night, I swear.”

*“Alright, okay. You called your daddy?”*

“Voice mail. I swear, it's like deja vu all over again.”

*“Last I heard, he was out in Texas, but that was a week or so back.”*

“Bobby, could you, uh...” he paused, gnawed at his lip for a moment. Didn't want to say it, but the silence at the end of every call was worse. “Could you call him? See if you can...”

*“Sure, kid. Get some sleep, okay? If you've been out in that marsh all night, you'll be all but useless if you run into trouble when you get back out there. Your brother's gonna need you sharp.”*

He didn't bother to tell the mechanic that he wouldn't be able to get to sleep, even if he wanted to.

“Yeah.”

The buzz of the disconnected call sounded harsh in his ear and Dean flinched, snapped the phone shut, leaning against the wall. Despite himself, he yawned, jaw cracking as he unlocked the door, rolled through it and stumbled to the small table, dumping the duffel bag from his shoulder onto it and letting it wobble behind him as he headed for the bathroom. He stopped inside the door, blinked at the bright yellow and green suite and blew out a long breath through gritted teeth as he shut the door behind him.

Dean reached into the shower, turned the faucets as far as they'd go and ignored his reflection in the mirror as he peeled off his clothes, dropped them in a heap in the corner and let the steam roll around him, chilling and warming at the same time. He breathed deep, let it fill his lungs, replacing the damp, rotten air of the marsh and stepped into the shower, the water turning to thick sludge as it sluiced the mud from his skin.

It was a weak, tepid flow at best, but as he sagged into the wall, let it beat down on the back of his neck, he thought it was the closest he'd been to heaven in months.

Drifting, he almost missed the low strains of Skynrd, *“Well, I'm going down to the swamp, Gonna watch me a hound dog catch a 'coon , You know the hound dog make a music, On a summer night under a full moon ...”* Swore at himself, remembered his brother huffing and rolling his eyes as he changed the ring tone and almost tripped out of the shower, stumbled, dripping for his jeans and tore his phone out of the pocket.

“Sam?”

*“Dean? What's goin' on?”*

“Dad.”

Told himself it wasn't disappointment that had him putting his back to the wall and sliding to the floor, sitting buck naked in a growing puddle of gritty water. He reached up with his free hand, snagged a towel from the rail above his head and draped it haphazardly across his lap.

*“Bobby called me, filled me in. What the hell happened? Where's Sam?”*

He couldn't help but flinch at the snap of anger in the rapid-fire questions, kept his tone even and steady through an effort of will that left him drained and shivering.

“I don't know. We were on recon out in the marsh, and he saw something. This... this light. It led him away, Dad.” Huddled on the bathroom floor, shivering, he could let himself say what he hadn't even let himself think until now. “They aren't supposed to exist. Just swamp gas or ball lightning, or rednecks getting drunk and seeing fireflies. They aren't supposed to be real.”

*“A Will 'O the Wisp? You're sure?”*

Was infinitely glad for the reluctant belief in his father's voice, still felt a shiver of fear edge beneath it as he recognized the bite to John's question.

“Yeah. It's gotta be.”

*“Dean, you've got to find him, okay? You've got to find Sam.”*

“I know, Dad. I will. Where are you?”

*“You've got to find him **now**, Dean.”*

“What's going on? Where are you, Dad?”

He sat up straighter, bleary gaze sharpening fast, head clearing of the draining fatigue.

*“I can't tell you Dean, not yet. I would but... just find Sam, alright? You find him, and you keep each other safe.”*

“Dad, what's wro - ” He gave it up when he realized he was talking to the dial tone again, pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it. “What the hell?” Weariness gone as if he'd slept for eight hours, Dean shoved to his feet, stepped back into the lukewarm spray and washed away the mud from his skin, scrubbing hard until his fingers wrinkled and the water ran cold. He climbed out shivering with chill and excess energy, rolled his shoulders as he dried himself, thin towel scratching across the flowering bruises on his side and he winced, skimmed careful fingers across the tender skin. Letting the towel drop to the floor, he stepped over it to the door and paused, one hand flat against the battered wood, the other tightening into a fist at the memory of that light, Sam pushing past him and leaving him behind.

“What the hell were you doing, Sam?”

Nothing answered his whisper except the faint hum of traffic on the road outside and he leaned into the door, let his head dip forward until his chin brushed his chest, trying not to get lost in the memories of too many empty rooms. He lifted the fist from his side, pressed it hard into his eyes until he saw sparks, shooting stars across the dark.

They looked too much like the firefly that had danced in the marsh, the light that had stolen his brother away and he swore again, pushed away from the door and hauled it open, striding to the table. Digging to the bottom of his duffel, he pulled out fresh clothes, yanked them on and blinked, then grinned at the handful of candy that scattered across the floor.

Snatching up the M&Ms, Dean chewed on them as he rummaged through his bag again, piling John's journal, his own Colt and a short, silver knife on the table. His stomach growled as he swallowed the last of the candy and he stopped, stood there for a moment before he realized he was waiting for his brother to chide him, to joke about *'bottomless pits'* and *'walking garbage disposals'*

and *'gettin' a little thick around the waist there, dude.'*

He smirked, lips twisting wryly as he paced to the tiny kitchenette in one corner, filled the coffee pot and drummed his fingers impatiently on the counter top, craving the rich, bitter jolt of caffeine.

“Will ‘O the Wisp,” he murmured, turning to prop one hip against the counter, staring absently at his bag, squinting a little at the vague memories of something behind the light, some shadow he hadn’t been able to make out as he sprinted after his brother. Behind him, the coffee pot clicked, steam curling over his shoulder again and he twisted around, poured the brew into a mug and sipped at it, mind fixed on the shadow he still wasn’t sure he’d really seen. Frowning, he pulled out a chair, dropped into it and tugged the laptop out of his bag, slouched as he opened it and waited for it to boot up.

“What’s European folklore doing in Wisconsin?” he breathed, blinked at the silence and started tapping at keys, a low buzz of adrenaline coursing behind the caffeine as he worked, itching with the need to be out in the marsh again, searching for the brother that was supposed to fill the empty space around him.

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He wasn’t sure, at first, if he was awake or not. Couldn’t tell if his eyes were open or closed, if he was looking or just dreaming, not until panic flushed an unwelcome thought loose in the back of his mind.

*What if I’ve gone blind?*

Disoriented, Sam flailed out in the absolute dark, pure instinct over-riding caution. His hand smacked hard against a flat surface beside him and he flattened his fingers against it, bandage scraping loudly, tried to slow the frantic race of air across his lungs, only then recognizing the deep, dull ache in his head. He reached up with his free hand, winced as he probed gingerly at the knot on his temple and felt something, blood or mud maybe, flaking away under his touch. Digging his fingers into the surface, he blinked hard and slowly realized he was lying down, the surface at his side a wall of pressed dirt, damp and rough. Dragging himself up, he crawled around, put his back to it and stretched a hand tentatively out in front of his face. He couldn’t see it, couldn’t even make out an impression of shape or movement when he waggled his fingers, the dark so complete it felt like weight against his skin.

He listened to the pounding in his head, the rushed susurrus of his breathing echoing around him and he thought that the space he was in sounded small but when he stretched out his hand, as far as he could reach, there was nothing in front of him. He rolled to his knees, kept one arm behind him, fingertips pressed up against the rough, wet wall as he shuffled forward and still found nothing but emptiness.

“Crap.”

He jumped a little, his voice too loud in the dark, echoing again and he sank back against the wall, lifted his hand up and yelped when his fingers stabbed hard into a cold, unyielding ceiling, just inches above his head.

*Smart, dude.*

The voice in his head always sounded like Dean when he was in trouble. Sam huffed out a low chuckle, leaned back on his heels for a moment, wondered how he'd ended up trapped wherever he was. In the corner of his eye, a shape formed, blurred, drifting across his vision and he startled, cringed back before he recognized it as just the ghosts of synapses firing in his brain, trying to make sense of the dark.

Somehow, it wasn't particularly reassuring, not when the shape seemed to multiply, black-light orbs that kept fading in and out, wandering towards his face and he found himself throwing up a hand, fingers splayed out invisibly, breath rushing again, gasping as he shrank back into the wall, shaking.

*Take it easy, Sammy. Slow it down.*

He nodded to himself, forced his lungs to slow, to hold each gulp of air for a moment until the trembling in his limbs eased. "What now, huh?" he muttered, tired exasperation leaving him spent and he huddled against the damp earth, tipped his head until his brow rested against his hand, still flattened against the wall.

*Come on. Figure it out, college boy.*

Sam smirked, sighed and pushed upright again.

"Yeah. Okay."

He dug at the wall beside him, carved a rough channel through the dirt from floor to ceiling, a marker, before he started shuffling forward on his knees, trailing his fingers along the wall, his other hand held out at eye-level. Sam counted under his breath, marking off time until he bumped into another wall, traced it into a corner. Pausing for a moment, he closed his eyes, frowned a little.

*So? How far?*

"Ten, twelve feet maybe?"

With his eyes shut, he could almost pretend his brother was there with him, the idea as comforting as it was unnerving and he was never, ever telling Dean that he took solace in his brother's imaginary presence.

*Always knew you were a girl, Samantha.*

"Shut up." He grinned and set off along the next wall.

By the time his fingers dipped into the channel he'd dug as a marker, he was exhausted, nerves shot with the anticipation of waiting for monsters to jump out of the dark, or for the ceiling to suddenly cave in and bury him alive. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the photos Bobby had sent them, the victims who had died trying to claw their way out of cramped, damp prisons, or their remains, rotting in the dark with him.

He gagged, forced his stomach to calm, tried to find reassurance in the emptiness of the cave. There was nothing in there with him, no bodies, no monsters and he crouched by his marker, dug his fingers into it, grounded himself with the feel of dirt under his nails.

"Eight victims this year. More, in however long this thing's been taking people," he muttered.

“There should be something left.”

*Maybe they're in another cave?*

“Yeah, 'cause that's reassuring.”

*At least they ain't in here with you, stinking the place up.*

“Another cave means you could be down here too,” he whispered, after a long pause, no longer caring that he was answering his own thoughts. He shivered, swallowed hard, his throat dry. “That... thing, whatever it was, could've gotten you too, and I wouldn't even know.”

Shaking his head, the hunter squeezed his eyes shut against the helpless tears, frustration bearing down on him.

*So what was it? Figure this out, Sammy. 'Cause if I am down here, you gotta get yourself out've this mess.*

“I know. It was...” he trailed off, scowled as he tried to remember. “We were in the marsh, you were bitching about the mosquitoes. I was,” *scared*, he thought, couldn't bring himself to say it aloud, even with no one there to hear. *I was so scared, that maybe we've done something we can't fix.*

And then he'd looked up, he remembered, tried to meet his brother's eyes and couldn't help but be relieved when he caught sight of something dancing over Dean's shoulder, an excuse to derail the conversation he'd wished he'd never started, the older man's gaze had been as broken as his for days and he didn't need to hear the answer. He'd started running, knowing it was beyond stupid, just thoughtless reaction to the shattered, weary fear waiting for him if he looked too hard. He'd run and heard his brother's startled cry, *felt* Dean behind him and let himself get lost in the chase, in the adrenaline that hummed through his veins, tunneled his vision, narrowed it down to the path at his feet and the light, the spark that bobbed and weaved, danced with him, leading him on into the night until it had winked out, disappeared in between one breathless gasp and the next. He'd skidded to a halt, only realized then that Dean was gone, nowhere behind him as he spun around, searching for the light, for his brother and found himself in the middle of the marsh, the path he thought he'd been following just an animal track.

He'd yelled, cursed at the top of his voice, and only just seen it from the corner of his eye; a shape rushing towards him, void where it had been bright before. He'd had time to turn a fraction, throw up an arm when it slammed into him and he'd felt himself fall hard, seen the stars pinwheel overhead as he tumbled in the instant before he slipped into the dark.

Sam sighed, lifted one hand to probe ruefully at the bruise on his temple.

*Never should've run off after it like that, Sam. What were you thinking?*

“I know,” he growled, rolled his shoulders against the wall as he turned to put his back to it, sliding down to sit on the wet ground. He shuffled a little, squirming around until the dirt loosened and gave, formed a shallow depression, his body heat warming the earth faster than it would the stone he'd found on his tour. Neat, tidy slabs, mortared together, weathered and old but still recognizably *constructed*.

“Some sort of basement. Root cellar, or something smaller. A coal bunker, maybe?”

He'd grown so used to his brother's voice answering back in his head, that he missed it when Dean didn't answer this time.

“Wonder how long it's been here. Trapping people. Sticking them down in these cellars and then just waiting for them to die.”

Still nothing, and he gnawed at the inside of his cheek, loneliness twisting in his stomach. He sighed, rubbed at the lump on his temple, jaw tight. It itched, felt almost more like a burn than a bruise, even with the swelling and the deep, dull ache that seemed to reach inside his skull. Without his watch, he had no way of knowing how long he'd been unconscious, just too many years of cataloging injuries. “Couple hours,” he muttered, wanting to fill the dark again. “Maybe three.”

Too long either way and he rolled back to his knees, sudden claustrophobia prickling down his spine. Sam leaned up against the wall, rigid control keeping his breath level as he ducked his head down and started digging at the ceiling, earth showering into his hair. He squirmed as it trickled down his neck, wriggled his shoulders but kept clawing at the dirt, tried not to notice how his hands were shaking and told himself it was just the effort when that failed. Blood pounded in his head, hard behind the knot on his temple and he tasted damp air and soil in his throat. He choked out curses, didn't even notice when they slipped into prayers, “God, please, enough goddammit, *please.*” The dark was unrelenting, pressure crushing him down, squeezing him, leaving him adrift at the same time and he shuddered, felt heat sliding down his cheeks and gasped, collapsed into the wall, pushed all his breath into a cry, so hard his voice cracked and the echoes filled the dark.

“*DEAN!*”

~~\*~~

His hands were shaking.

Dean balled them into fists, the hoodie he'd been about to stuff into his duffel balling tight inside his fingers. He squeezed it hard, until the tremors eased and he didn't feel like he was about to fall apart anymore. Cursing under his breath, the hunter dropped down to sit on the bed, his duffel rolling against his side as the mattress dipped under his weight and he reached over, jammed the hoodie inside. His knuckles rapped against the water bottles he'd packed and he let his fingers skim across the plastic, catch on the packets of power bars and freeze dried stew, jumbled with spare ammunition and cans of salt.

He sighed, scrubbed a hand through his hair and down his face, catching a long yawn in his fingers. Shifting on the edge of the bed, he stretched slowly, let his spine curl with a ripple of pops and cracks, loud in the evening quiet. The slow ache, bone deep, eased a little as he rubbed at the back of his neck for a moment, let his head drop low between his shoulders and stared at the carpet between his boots until his eyes burned and watered. Reaching out to the nightstand, still looking down, he fumbled around for a moment, let his fingers skate across the bone handle of a long knife, brush over the leather cover of the journal before they found smooth plastic and he grabbed his phone, flipped it open.

He scrolled down through names, stopped short on 'Dad', thumb hovering uncertainly over the keys.

*'Dean, you've got to find him, okay? You've got to find Sam.'*

His brows drew together, furrowed as he shifted, the bruise on his side twinging.

“What's goin' on, Dad?” he muttered, shook himself and flicked back through the list, tucking one boot up on the edge of the bed frame and picking absently at the mud crusting the leather as the phone rang tinnily in his ear. His jaw tightened when the call clicked over to voice mail.

*“You know what to do.”*

Dean rolled his eyes at the curt order.

“Man, you gotta change your message, Bobby. Ever heard of customer service?”

He laughed softly, tiredly and dropped his head into his hand, propping his elbow on his knee as he pinched the bridge of his nose, tried to knead away the ache building behind his eyes.

“Think I figured it out, Bobby. Thing's a damn Will-'O The Wisp. And yeah, I know they're not supposed to be real, but hell, up until a couple've years ago, I thought the same about vampires, and it's the only thing that fits. People disappearing out in the marsh, the light Sam and I saw. It's gotta be. I think he came over with the settlers, somehow. The stories, about the guy who tricked the devil, it's not just a legend. I think it's something real, something that happened to some poor sonofabitch, god knows how long ago. And now he's here, living in a freakin' Wisconsin marsh and takin' people. I don't get why, what he does with them, but I think I know how to find him. Only thing I don't got a clue on is how to stop him, but if he's got Sam, man, I can't wait for that. I'll just... I'll find them and get Sam out of there, and we'll go back later, once we can figure out a way to kill the bastard. There's lore about how to fight him, freakin' books of the stuff, maybe you can find something there? I don't know, Bobby, but I gotta get Sam back. I'll check in again 'round midni -”

The buzz of a disconnected call interrupted him and he pulled his phone down, stared at it. Muttered, “Thanks, I owe you,” under his breath and snapped it shut with a sigh, and then he just sat for a moment, let the burning urgency filter through him again, the drive he knew he'd need to keep going. Dropping his foot to the floor, he rolled forward, leaned out, snagged his jacket from the other bed and slipped the phone into a pocket. Standing, he turned back to the bed, rummaged through the duffel, checking the contents off against the list in his head, letting a running commentary whisper from his tongue, anything to fill the quiet.

“Don't know where he's keeping you, Sammy, so I've got dry clothes, food. Hell, I even found that old space blanket in the trunk, you remember that thing? Man, I forgot we still had it. You used to carry it everywhere with you when we were kids, every time Dad sent us off on his training camps. I used to laugh at you for having it,” he mused, lips twitching as he pictured his brother, still awkward in his own skin, not yet grown into his height, stumbling along the trails behind him as they hiked into the mountains.

“Guess you were right though, huh? That thing saved our asses more than once.”

*I just hope I don't need it to save your ass this time*, he thought, couldn't bring himself to say it aloud, even to the empty room as he slung the bag onto his shoulder and walked to the door. He paused once, a quick glance raking across the room, one last check for anything he was missing and then he slipped out, boots ringing softly against concrete.

Dean winced as the car door ground open, the creak loud in the evening and he looked up, saw curtains in the motel office twitch. Movement flickered behind them and he plastered a vague smile on his face as he eased in behind the wheel, dumped the duffel in the foot well of the passenger seat and hitched the door closed behind him.

He leaned against the seat back for a moment, tipped his head back to gaze blankly at the roof lining. He didn't see it, watched his brother looking down, away, whispering; *'About the dimensions. About us.'* The way Sam's eyes had flickered, just for a heartbeat as he looked up, reflecting moonlight, and something else he couldn't name. And then Sam was gone, pushing past him, sprinting away through the marsh instead, the light hovering just out of reach.

“That was damned stupid, Sam,” he growled, rolling forward in the seat again, fingers locking around the wheel. He could almost hear his brother huff in irritation, felt a grin tug at his lips but it withered as he looked over at the empty seat next to him. He stared at it for a long moment, swallowed down the memory of the photos Sam had shown him, the victims who'd died clawing at dirt, at the walls of whatever prison had held them.

Dean shivered, clung to the wheel. “Uh uh,” he breathed. “Not you, Sammy. No way. I'm comin' to get you, okay? If only so I can kick your ass for pulling crap like this.”

Blindly, he reached down, twisted the key and the engine snarled awake, roared as he pulled out onto the empty road. The sound rattled against his skin, comfort, familiarity and he settled in the seat, felt the twitching that had crawled under his skin for so many hours, ever since he'd turned his back on the marsh and the search for his brother that morning, fade into the background. Asphalt hummed under the tires as he swung the car through a turn, squinted at the sun that streamed through the windshield. He drummed his fingers on the wheel, the silence wearing, cloying, his mind circling back to those photos over and over again. His mouth dried when he blinked, saw the dark, cramped coffin close around him again, just as it had in Maryland and he flinched, snapped them open again to the blazing sunset and the empty car.

“Where's he keeping you, Sam? I looked all over that freakin' marsh last night.”

*Three counties worth of cops couldn't find any of the vics until they turned up dead, Dean. You never stood a chance of finding me on your own.*

He scowled at the murmur in his head, tried not to feel the way his stomach twisted at the fatalistic edge to it. It sounded like Sam, but he knew that kind of pessimism only came from his own mind, from the undercurrent of fear that kept dragging at him. He shrugged, rolled his neck until it cracked.

“Yeah, well I've got a plan this time. You're gonna hate it, but it's all I've got, Sammy.”

It didn't even seem strange to be talking to the seat anymore.

*You're going to something stupid.*

“Yeah, I guess I am. Found a whole load of accounts, people who got attacked by this thing because they drew its attention. Guess he doesn't like noise or something, but if I can find him, I can make him tell me where you are.”

*And if he won't talk?*

His lips thinned, pressed tight together.

“He'll tell me,” he growled as he turned into the same small parking lot they'd used the evening before. Dean barely even noticed the mosquitoes this time, climbing out of the car and slinging his bag over one shoulder, following the faint trail that led out into the marsh. When he found the

smearred mud across the boardwalk that marked the spot where he'd dragged himself back onto the path, he crouched, slipped his Colt from his bag and tucked it into his waistband, pulled a short, sawed off shotgun out and hefted it as he stood, eying the dusk silently.

There was nothing, again. No light, no firefly in the distance and he sighed.

“Yeah, 'cause it could never be that easy,” he muttered. “Alright then. Hey!”

His sudden shout echoed out through the marsh, startled a brace of ducks into flight. He followed their squawking flight, shrugged.

“*Hey!* Right here, you bitch! You pissed at people for making too much noise? Spoiling your freakin' bloodsucker infested swamp? Well how's this for noise, huh?”

He shouted so loudly that his voice cracked, roughened, until he was rasping insults at the swarming insects, trudging deeper into the marsh as the sun slipped behind the horizon, left the wetlands dark, stars scattered across the sky and the black water. Without the sun, the air cooled, chilled his skin and Dean stopped at a junction in the narrow path he was following, tugged his jacket a little tighter, shifted his fingers around the smooth grip of the shotgun. He swallowed drily, dug into his bag for one of the water bottles he'd packed, hours before, and uncapped it. The liquid was cold, sliding down his rough throat and he drank long and deep, loosed a heavy sigh when he was done. He let his eyes slide almost shut, two sleepless nights and a day spent pouring over ancient texts and the laptop making them gritty.

He tucked the bottle back into his bag and crouched, knees popping loudly, to shift the packets of field rations, rubbing absently at the sharp ache they'd worn against his hip.

In the corner of his eye, something flickered. He tensed, tilted his head to the side and watched the firefly drift in lazy circles, skipping back a pace when he turned to it, stared hard at the soft, warm glow. One hand lifted, brushed across the shotgun and the light winked, blinked dark and light again, only steadying when he snatched his hand back away from the gun. He breathed slowly, tasted stagnant water and wet earth as he stood, eased forward a step, gaze pinned to the spark as it wavered in the air, an arm's length away.

“Where's my brother?” he whispered, wanted to shout at it, fingers itching for the touch of the Colt pressed against his spine, metal warmed by his skin. “You sonofabitch, where's my brother?” He took another step forward, mud loose under his boot, the spark sliding away from him, the distance between them unwavering. He stopped after a few paces, squinted into the light, almost sure he could see... something. *Someone* standing there in the dark, deepest behind the glow and his blood heated, pounded in his ears.

“You think this is some kind of twisted *fun?*” he growled, remembering the old man sitting before him, *'the best hunt is human.'* He let his hand reach back, fingers curling around the grip. The sight on the muzzle scraped at his skin as he drew it, steadily bringing it up in front of him, pointing at the sky. “You hate noise, huh? Hate anything disturbing your damn marsh? That why you take them? What, you get your kicks out of watching them try and claw their way out of whatever freakin' hole you stick them in?”

He swallowed hard, shook away the image of his brother, lying battered and bloody on raw earth, long fingers torn. The light didn't move, hung motionless against the stars and his stomach flipped once, settled cold and hard.

“Well how's this for noise?” he asked, taking a long stride forward and pulling the trigger in the same motion, soaking up the recoil as it kicked into his hands. He grinned as the light shot backwards a few feet, stalked after it, firing into the air again. “You hate noise? Then come get me! I'm right here!”

It didn't, even when he threw one hand out to the side, open and inviting as he fired the rest of the clip into the sky, gunshots ripping the night apart. He snarled, ejected the spent clip, reached for another, slammed it into place even as he started running. The spark dipped away when he slowed long enough to sight on it and fire again, the bullet tearing through the reeds beyond and he snapped out a curse, then slid to a stop when the light just disappeared, winked out and left him blinking in the dark.

“What the...”

He turned, stared out into the marsh, panting a little. It was empty, again, just the stars above him and his fingers bleached around the grip of the gun.

“No, no no no, not again.”

He spun in place, peered desperately out along the raised path, back along his trail, his bootprints in the mud fading and he peeled one hand away from the Colt, raked it through his hair. “Dammit!” The curse echoed back at him, dying quickly as he stood there.

When it came, it came so fast he had barely enough time to throw up an arm against the light that was suddenly *there*, blinding him, searing heat against the side of his face. He cried out and flinched away, felt the air rush out of him when something crashed into his side, bruising force from shoulder to hip. It tossed him effortlessly back, clean off the ground and out over the edge of the small causeway. He twisted as he fell, pulled the trigger without even seeing what he was aiming for and then the ground slammed into him, shallow water geysering up against the sky. His head cracked into something hard and bright light detonated behind his eyes, dragged him down as it faded and the last thing he saw before the darkness swallowed him whole was a single, cold spark, drifting in front of him.

### ***Chapter Three***

*“This is Dean. Leave a message.”*

“You ever think about *answering* your damn phone, Dean?” Bobby growled into the handset and thought about hanging up. Heaved a sigh down the line instead, wiping the back of his wrist across his brow.

“I've come across some of that lore before, 'bout the man who tricked the devil. If it really is true, then you an' your brother are in one hell of a mess.” He leaned against the workbench, tools and a disassembled gear set clanking as they shifted. The mechanic scrubbed oily hands against his jeans, one after the other, switching the phone between them. “There ain't no way to kill a man who's already dead. If heaven and hell won't have him, then he's condemned, alright, and there's nothing can change that. You're right though, there's plenty of stories 'bout people fighting him. Most seem to hinge on using a reflection to distract him, but what you can do then... I got nothin' Dean. Sorry.”

He almost cringed; it was a bald, empty apology, his throat tightening when he looked down at his watch.

*One in the goddamned morning. He's late.*

“You call me when you find your brother, okay? And check in when you can. Take care, Dean. That's one nasty sonofabitch.”

Bobby snapped the phone shut, let it slide through his fingers, clattering onto the bench. He scratched at his scalp, tipping his cap back as he stared out at the photos pinned to the wall of the workshop, autopsy photos and crime scene records, and his stomach twisted sharply. He swore under his breath, reached down for his phone again.

“John, you're a damn fool,” he muttered, dragging his wrist across his brow and pushing away from the bench, heading for the workshop door. “You better hope those boys come out've this in one piece or I'll pull the damn trigger this time.”

~~\*~~

There was something tickling his nose.

He fidgeted, too comfortable to bother moving, warm and relaxed under soft blankets. He wrinkled his nose, felt something tug at his skin and scowled faintly, heard something beeping distantly over the buzzing in his ears. Dean rolled his head sideways, peered hazily at the window, trying to work out where the other bed was for a long moment before he recognized the smell of canned oxygen and antiseptic, bolted upright and groaned as the hospital room tilted wildly around him.

He clutched at the sides of the bed, sucked in dry air, blindly aware of hands grabbing for his shoulders, steadying him, a voice murmuring close to his head.

“Easy son, take it easy there.”

“Where?” he rasped out, pried one hand away from the rails and caught at the wrists of the man holding him up, couldn't help but lean into the touch.

“You're in Waupen Memorial Hospital. I'll call the doc for you.”

“M'brother.”

“What?”

“I was...” Dean frowned, dropped his chin to his chest, tried to slow the world down. “I was looking for my brother.”

“You were on your own when I found you, son. Let me go get the doc, huh? Get you some help.”

He sagged back, felt himself lowered back into the pillows and nodded, swallowed hard when the motion flipped his stomach again. A shadow flickered across him, a deep chill settling into him before it passed. He blinked, watched a figure walk away from him, blurring into triplicate and he groaned again, squeezed his eyes shut.

Then more hands were on him, cupping his chin, tilting his head up, thumbing his eyes open and he swore, flinched away when light seared through to the back of his skull.

“Goddammit, doc.”

“Good to see you back with us, Mr. Homme.”

“Yeah, wish I could say the same,” Dean muttered, twitching his jaw out of the doctor’s fingers. “Now how about you cut me loose?”

“Sorry, but I think you're going to be with us for a while longer yet.”

“Maybe he's right, son.”

Heat rolled through him and he felt his cheeks flush as he shot a glare past the man leaning over him, saw a second man leaning against the wall.

“I'm not your son,” Dean growled, squinting a little as he turned back to the doctor, lifting one hand to rub at the tightness in his head, felt stitches under his fingers and traced them from the end of his eyebrow back into his hair. He grimaced, waggled his other hand at the doctor, the IV line clattering softly against the handrails at his side and only then noticed the bandage wrapped tightly around his wrist.

“I can take this thing out if I got to, Doc, or you can let me sign out AMA. Your choice.”

“Mr Homme, I don't think you quite understand. If Jack hadn't found you and brought you in, probably no one would have. You've got several bruised ribs, a mild concussion and you're still going to be suffering the effects of exposure from lying unconscious out in the marsh for however many hours. None of that's anything to take lightly.”

He had to laugh at that, a reluctant chuckle that jarred an ache loose in his side.

“I know, doc, believe me I know.”

“Then you know I can't let you leave yet. You need to stay in overnight for observation.”

The hunter leaned back into the pillows behind him, let his eyes slide almost closed as he gritted his teeth, folded his arms across his chest, the light pressure easing the pain in his ribs, even when angling his wrist sent ice twanging up into his forearm.

“Not an option, doc.”

He heard the doctor sigh, could almost have smiled at the exasperation in the sound but he could feel the world turning underneath his bed again.

“Give me until this evening then. Just to make sure you're not going to keel over until you're out of the district.”

“What time 'sit?”

“Little after one.”

That wasn't the doctor. *Jack*, he thought, the older man's deep rumble almost tangible.

“You got me until five, then I'm signing out,” Dean murmured and watched through his eyelashes as

the doctor threw up his hands and stalked to the door, stopping to talk to the man still lounging against the wall. He couldn't hear what they said, but saw Jack shrug, gaze never quite leaving his. He shifted, froze as the ache in his side intensified, sharp pain stabbing deep.

“What's so important that you're gonna try and walk out of here in four hours?”

Jack pushed away from the wall, wandered towards him, thumbs shoved into his pockets, boots leaving dusty, grimy prints on the white floor.

“I told you,” Dean answered, rolling onto his side a little, gingerly testing the limits of his motion.

“Your brother, right. He's out in the marsh?”

*I don't know*, he thought, helplessness sliding along his nerves.

“Yeah. Somewhere.”

“When'd he go missin'?”

Dean frowned, peered up at the older man, took in the creases lining his eyes, weathered skin turned dark with age and sun. There was nothing there but idle concern but innate distrust checked his answer.

“What's it matter to you?”

He knew he was being rude, the surly mutter would have earned him a slap upside the head from his father or Bobby, but this man, this stranger, wasn't family. He lifted his good hand, pressed carefully at the stitches in his scalp, explored the tender swelling around them, jaw tight against the flare of pain.

Jack just shrugged, seemingly unconcerned.

“Nothin' much. Just I know that marsh better'n most anyone, and if he's been out there too long, well, I hate to be the bearer an' all...”

“Sam's fine.” He snapped it out before Jack could finish, turned away quickly, swallowed against the lump in his throat. “He's fine. Listen, thanks for the help, but really, *I'm* fine.”

Dean rolled away again, as far as he could, trying to signal some kind of dismissal to the older man. He heard clothes rustle, boots thud softly against tiles and felt someone come closer to stand at his side.

“Kid, I don't even know your name.”

He stared at the wall, kept silent.

“Hell, I shoulda just left you out there. Ain't my job to be picking up strays.”

Dean sighed, let his shoulders drop, relax back into the pillows piled behind him.

“Look, like I said, thanks for the help and all, but I'm - ”

“Fine, right.”

He rolled back a little, just enough to see Jack glowering at him, thick arms crossed across his chest. The older man's eyes were dark, almost black, sunk deep into creases that fanned out from them.

*Why do you care?*

He fidgeted uncomfortably, too aware of the awkward silence, the steady gaze never straying from his until it seemed as though Jack was seeing right into him.

“Dean,” he blurted, before he quite knew he was going to do it but there was something in that stare, something that felt like kinship. “My name's Dean.”

When Jack smiled at him in response, it was infectious and he found himself grinning back, even though it made the stitches in his scalp pull.

“Jack Lumen.”

The older man stuck out a broad hand and Dean shook it, felt hard calluses under his fingers, almost winced at the crushing grip. He cradled his hand surreptitiously in his lap as soon as it was released, saw by the glint in Jack's eyes that it was seen anyway and smirked ruefully.

“Listen, Dean. I told you I know that marsh. You ain't in any state to be traipsin' around out there lookin' for your brother.”

The hunter pulled back a little.

“I gotta find him,” he said flatly, dropping his gaze to his hands.

“Sure you do. He's your family. All I'm sayin' is, you need help.”

It grated, stung to admit it but he bit back the instinctive rebuttal, forced himself to wait and think before he answered. He hurt, pure and simple, deep pain beating steadily at him from his ribs and head, a chill lingering in muscle and bone, wearing him down.

*Dammit.*

“I know,” he finally whispered, fingers twisting into the blankets. He sighed, freed one hand to rub at the stitches on his scalp again, compulsively, like worrying a loose tooth.

“Well, okay then.”

Dean scowled, wriggled a little, trying to get comfortable.

*Quit fidgeting, Dean.*

He almost smiled at the cranky mumble in his head, a relic of too many miles spent squashed into the back seat with his brother, of too many squeaking mattresses in tiny motel rooms. It wasn't until they'd finally gone to meet a hunter rumored to be about the best demonologist out there that he'd finally remembered what it was like to have his own room, the tiny space at Bobby's quickly his alone.

The fledgling smirk died at the thought.

“Aw, hell,” he muttered, leaned over to the small cabinet beside the bed, biting back a groan at the strain the action put on his ribs.

“What is it?”

“Bobby. I was supposed to call Bobby,” Dean answered absently, yanking open the drawer and rummaging through it, breath catching as his wrist spasmed. He swore again as he pulled out a clear plastic bag, his cellphone inside, smeared with mud and grime. Resigned, he tried the power button anyway, unsurprised when the screen stayed resolutely blank.

“Who's Bobby?”

“My, uh, my uncle.” He frowned, hoped the older man wouldn't notice the slip. “I promised him I'd call around midnight. Don't suppose I could borrow your phone?” Dean glanced up hopefully, felt his heart sink when Jack shook his head.

“Sorry, kid, ain't never seen much use in me havin' one. I'll see if the nurses can find somethin' though.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

He leaned back as the door closed behind the older man, let a wince twist at his mouth since there was no one there to see. Unease tugged at his nerves, the almost-familiar worry when he had to rely on strangers, when he had to bring the dark right into their lives.

“Why'd you have to take off, huh Sammy?”

Dean swallowed hard, throat dry, hating the silence of the hospital room around him. Outside the door, he could hear people talking, working, grieving for the gone or almost gone, the reason why he'd always, *always* hated hospitals. It was inescapable here, the impact of mortality, when even the lives he'd saved weren't enough to balance those he hadn't. Not when every hushed whisper, or over-bright, glazed stare was a reminder of what was lost.

“Oh come on, Dean,” he growled at himself, pushing awkwardly up to sit on the edge of the bed, clutching tight to the mattress when the world spun around him. He rode it out, teeth clenched, eyes squeezed shut, breath rasping through his nose, stinging it with the scent of antiseptic and fear.

“Sit back down before you fall right off that bed, kid.”

He flinched at the voice, suddenly right there in his ear, too close. Jerking his head back, he peered up at a weathered face, dark eyes squinting at him. This close, he could see the years in Jack's stare, could see the age in it, recognized it. He pushed up against the older man's hand on his shoulder instead, forced himself up on to wobbly legs, hanging onto the bed when his knees tried to buckle. Jack cursed in his ear, shifted his hand to Dean's elbow, followed when the hunter tried to pull away.

“I'm fine.”

“You're a damn nut job is what you are.”

He had to laugh at that, again, ground out a low chuckle and tipped his body into a stumbling

shuffle aimed at the chair in the corner of the room, the IV stand dragging along behind him. The need to *do* something roiled under his skin, to prove to himself that he could still at least manage that, even when he had to accept a stranger's help. Catching himself against the wall, he turned awkwardly, sank into the hard seat with a sigh that came perilously close to a moan.

"Here."

A tiny pink box was thrust into his sight and he frowned at it, blinked until he recognized it as a cell phone. Lifting a slightly shaky hand, he took it, flipped it open, dialed haltingly from memory, trying not to look at Jack as the older man grinned and walked to the window on the far wall.

*"Hello?"*

Dean sighed in relief.

"Bobby, 's me."

*"Dean? Where the hell have you been?!"*

Tipping the phone away from his ear, Dean kept his voice low.

"Sorry, man. I, uh, it got the drop on me."

*"You okay? You found Sam?"*

"Yeah. I'm fine. Sam's still out there. I'm headin' back out to look for him, soon as they spring me."

*"Spring you? You're in hospital?"*

Cursing himself for the slip, Dean shrugged. "Yeah. Uh, Waupen Memorial. But I'm alright, really."

*"Dammit boy."*

"Bobby, you got anything on that..." trailing off, the hunter eyed the man standing in the window.

*"Not much. I left you a message on your cell, but I'm guessin' that's fried?"*

"Yeah, pretty much. It took a swim."

*"Okay. Well, like you thought, there's some lore out there about fighting the Jack, mostly seems to be folks using something to show it its own reflection. A knife, usually, but I don't think it's gotta be."*

"Anything on why it's taking people?"

There was a pause, long enough for him to wonder if the connection had been lost.

"Bobby?"

*"No. Nothing, Dean. Best guess? That thing ain't like the fuglies we normally tangle with. It don't need victims to eat, or for some kind of ritual. It's more like a demon than anything else, killing for the sake of it."*

Dean let his head drop forward until his chin brushed his chest, pressing the fingers of his free hand into his hair, scrubbing hard at his scalp.

“For fun,” he breathed, heard Bobby sigh heavily.

*“Yeah. Dean, Sam'll be fine, you know that. He knows how to take care of himself, fight that thing. He'll hold out until you find him.”*

“I know.”

It didn't help much, every time he closed his eyes, all he could see was bodies being dragged out of the marsh, hands streaked with blood, faces twisted in horror, his brother's expressive hazel eyes wide and blind.

“I know,” he repeated. “You got anything on how I can kill that sonofabitch?”

He would, he knew that much. No matter what happened, if he found his brother in time or not, he promised himself he would see the light go out of the thing's eyes.

*“No. Dean, I don't know if it can be killed. It's already dead, just condemned to walk the earth, right? It's not some kind of spell you can undo.”*

“There's got to be something, Bobby,” Dean growled, watched Jack twitch in the corner of his vision and dropped his voice again. “There has to be.”

*“I'll keep looking, kid, but just focus on finding that brother of yours, alright?”*

He didn't answer, just snapped the phone shut and leaned over to drop it on the mayo stand beside the chair. Jack turned at the noise, hands tucked together in the small of his back and the silhouette he made against the window was familiar, instantly snapping into place next to the memory of the age in those dark, dark eyes.

“Where'd you serve?” Dean asked, saw the older man tense for a moment and let a grin quirk his lips to one side. “My Dad was a marine.”

“All over.”

The answer was cool, distant, for the first time there was no smile in it and Dean wondered for a moment. *Classified, maybe? Black ops or something.*

*More likely he just doesn't want to remember it, Dean.*

*Yeah, maybe,* he thought at the whisper in his head, even as his brother's voice warmed him. He grabbed for the phone again, checked the time on the flowery display and sighed.

“So, Jack, you got any cards?”

~~\*~~

He sounded like a blues singer. Like a forty-a-day, spend the nights in underground bars playing the dark away with a six-string, blues singer.

Sam crouched against the wall, listened to the echoes of his shout fade away, throat burning, raw like he'd swallowed a tangle of razor wire. He sucked in air that tasted of wet earth and cold stone, shivered and hunched his shoulders up against the quiet. His vision had settled, didn't show him orbs and ghosts anymore but his ears were so sensitized by the dark that he kept hearing footsteps, dragging towards him, kept waiting for a hand to brush across his ankle or shoulder or head, kept cringing even when he knew there was nothing there.

“God,” he breathed, just to hear something else as he wrapped his arms around himself, the cold having long since sunk into his bones. He tipped his head sideways against the wall, felt the rim of the channel he'd dug into the wall hours – days? – earlier crumble a little and quickly reached up, retraced it. Left his fingers tucked into it, holding on.

“I'm losing it, man.”

His whisper shuddered, croaked, worn away until it was almost unintelligible.

*Don't. You hold on, Sammy, you're stronger than this. I'm coming, but you gotta hold on 'til I find you, okay?*

He closed his eyes, couldn't tell the difference but nodded anyway, shivered again, harder, side of his head bumping against the wall.

*C'mon, Sam. Get up, move, keep warm.*

Groaning, he pushed clumsily to his knees, crouched and started shuffling along the wall, one shoulder brushing it as he crawled, wished he could pace. The floor sloped away to his side and he kept veering off course, had to wonder what would happen if he lost touch with the wall, if he'd ever find it again.

Heard Dean snort in his head and smiled wryly.

“Yeah, I know. I'm being a girl.”

*You're being an ass.*

“You better hurry up, Dean.”

*You know I'm looking hard as I can, Sammy.*

“Give me the damn LoJack and I'll fit it myself,” he muttered, jumping when one hand bumped into the wall. Sighing, he turned around, started crawling back, felt loose dirt trickle down over his hands, knocked loose by his shoulder and stopped to press up against it for a minute, the edge of a stone solid under his arm. Tracing it, he forced his fingers into the corner, mortar crumbling away and he reared up onto his knees and dug at the top of the wall, clawing away earth and wiry roots. It showered down into his face and he spluttered, squeezed his eyes shut, cursed steadily. Pictured his brother, digging down through the soil, could almost hear Dean calling his name, voice harsh and rough with worry and choked on a sob, catching in his throat. Coughing, he sagged forward until his head rested against the wall, salt burning scratches on his cheeks.

He let himself drift in the dark, hazily aware of his own breathing echoing around the cell as it slowed, steadied in spite of the situation. Exhausted, he didn't sleep, just slipped into a stupor,

huddled against the wall until the image of his brother digging at the earth shifted, morphed into Dean clawing frantically at dirt and stone walls, until the slow trickle loosened by his hands thickened to a flood.

Sam came awake with a shout, flailing at the vision of his brother disappearing beneath a pile of soil. His hand smacked hard into the ceiling and he swore, snatched it back as he rolled to his knees again, panting heavily. "Dammit, Dean," he gasped. "You better be out there looking."

He knew his brother would be going crazy by now, knew when Dean found him he'd probably be greeted with a right hook and then a crushing hug that did nothing to hide the wildness in Dean's eyes, but that was still better than the image of the earth collapsing in on his brother.

"You better be out there."

~~\*~~

*Oh, come on.*

He almost buried his head in his hands with the thought, tried hard not to squirm in his seat as Jack settled back in his seat with a satisfied grin for the guitars twanging through the truck's speakers. The hunter focused on the unsteady rumble of the big pick-up's engine, picked absently at the tape around his wrist, wondering if it was clogged fuel lines or a faulty distributor cap.

*House rules, Dean.*

*Shuddup*, he thought at the murmur in the back of his mind, fought down a smile.

"Where are you and your brother from?"

Dean started at the loud question, the older man almost shouting to be heard over the road noise.

"Kind've all over. We moved a lot."

It was a stock answer, well practiced over the years and he shrugged as he always did, felt the ache pull deep along his side and schooled his features against a wince. He stared out of the window again, watched the scrubby, half-dead looking trees flicker past.

"Your father was a Marine, you said? Know where he served?"

Dean twisted in his seat, put the back of his shoulder against the door pillar, leaning into it as he searched the other man's face.

*He seems very interested in Dad, all of a sudden.*

The hunter didn't answer for a moment, let the whisper of his brother's suspicions settle into his thoughts.

"He never said," he murmured, and scowled faintly. The other man looked *old*, far older than he should do, broken down, the way he'd seen soldiers look in grainy, black and white pictures from the Civil War, or from the trenches of the first world war. Young men, who stared out at the world from ancient faces.

*You don't know what he's been through, he reasoned with himself, what he's seen.*

*What he's done?*

He didn't have an answer to the question his subconscious threw up with Sam's voice.

“House is just this side of town. You kitted out for heading into the marsh again?”

Dean blinked, pulled himself out of his thoughts and leant down, patted the mud-encrusted duffel that sat on the floor by his feet. “Everything I need in here. Change of clothes for Sam, blankets, rations,” he reeled off the list, kept quiet about the pair of handguns, loaded alternately with salt and iron, the small, hide-bound book and blackened silver chalice wrapped up in a pillow case he'd purloined from the motel on pure instinct.

*You're gonna kill me for this, Sammy, but it's all I got. I've looked for you, man, and if I can't find you, I can find that freaky glowing sonofabitch who took you.*

“Good. Sooner we can get out there, sooner we can find your brother.”

He nodded, only half listening to Jack.

“Great.”

The radio crackled with static as they crossed under a power line, the skin on the back of Dean's neck prickling as the tiny hairs stood on end. He squirmed, rolled his shoulders and Jack smirked wryly.

“Gets to me every time,” he chuckled and started drumming his thumbs on the steering wheel as the white noise cleared, a deep voice crooning; *“way out here you can see for miles. If there was anything to be seen, maybe I could tell the difference between where I am and where I've been.”*

Dean blinked, twisted around again to peer out through the windshield, more than relieved to see distant lights on the horizon. The big truck rolled and bounced as Jack swung into a rough track, stretching into the marsh, barely above the level of the mud.

“You live in the marsh?”

“Yeah. It's quiet. Kinda like home.”

He sat up, leant forward, scanning the dusk as it gathered around them, glancing back once to see the road and the lights of town already gone. The track led to a wide clearing in the marsh, a natural outcrop of rock worn flat. A low, tidy cabin squatted in the middle and Jack pulled up alongside it. The older man killed the engine then sat back, arms folded across his chest.

Dean fidgeted, reached down for the bag at his feet, his fingers closing around the handle as Jack spoke.

“How about you cut the crap now, kid?”

*Oh, hell, he thought, swallowed nervously. “What?”*

“I saw that stuff in your bag when I found you. That... book, and the cup. And the knife you had in

your boot, that ain't a normal hunting knife. What in all hell are they for?"

Dean twisted his foot slightly, felt the reassuring pressure of the ornate bone hilt in its sheath and eased forward in the seat, giving himself room to move if he needed to. One hand slid sideways, skated over the door handle and settled there, the motion hidden by his body as he sat up.

"It isn't what you think it is," he started.

"Really? So you ain't some occultist nut job comin' out here to find the Beast of Horicon Marsh?"

Dean gaped for a moment, then shrugged. "Okay, so maybe it kind've is what it looks like," he murmured. "Look, I'm just trying to find my brother."

"Yeah? I'm starting to wonder if you even have a brother. Or maybe you're just a ghoul, heard about the folks turning up dead out here and thought you'd try your hand at a little monster hunting."

Anger stirred at last, edged out hot along his nerves and Dean's jaw tightened.

"You don't want to help me find my brother, then fine, tell me now and I'm gone. You can go back to your damn marsh and pretend nothing's happening out here. But something's taking people, and you know it, don't you?"

He hadn't even recognized the suspicion forming in his own mind until he heard himself say it, knew it was true when Jack flinched. He swore under his breath and leant forward. "Look, man, I can stop it, whatever it is."

"*Whatever?*"

"Yeah," Dean growled. "Trust me, Jack. There's things out there you don't ever want to meet on a dark night."

The older man looked at him and he stared back, watched Jack's hands clench around the wheel and start throttling it.

"I've... I've seen things," he whispered, reluctance thickening his voice. "Told myself I never saw them, but I did. You know?"

Dean nodded as Jack seemed to shrink before him.

"I can stop it," he said again, low and solemn, and wanted to laugh, giddy with relief when the other man jerked his head in a nod.

"What do you need?"

"Right now? Not much. I can track the thing, I think. Just some salt."

He swung out of the cab as he said it, caught his weight against the side of the pickup when the ground wavered under his boots. He felt the blood drain out of his face, the bruises around his temple tight and too warm as he clung surreptitiously to the hot metal.

"Salt?"

The hunter heard the driver's door bang shut as Jack voiced the question, the other man's footsteps soft thuds against the dirt.

“Yeah. Much as you've got.”

“I... sure.”

Dean pushed himself upright, ignored the flare of pain from his ribs as he hefted his duffel from the foot well and trudged to the edge of the small island in the marsh. Fleetinglly, he wished he'd asked Jack to head on into town and find a store that could replace his drowned cell, wanted to hear a friendly voice, to hash out the intricacies of his plan with Bobby even though he knew the mechanic would tear him a new one for every day of the week if he knew what Dean was planning.

“Guess I'm on my own on this one, huh?” he muttered, scuffing a large circle clear of weeds with his heel. “If this gets me killed, Sam, I'm so gonna haunt your ass for takin' off and getting' me into this mess.”

*If this gets us both killed, I'll haunt your ass for not finding me, man.*

He grinned at the nonsensical mumble in his head, swung around as Jack called out behind him and saw the older man hefting two large canisters.

“Here. Everythin' I got.”

“Awesome. Pour it in a circle, 'bout ten feet or so across.”

Jack blinked at him for a moment, coming close enough to hand over one can.

“Why?”

“Protection. I'm gonna summon something, and you do *not* want it getting loose.”

He waited for Jack to start circling him before he knelt, pulled the pillowcase from his duffel and carefully lifted the book and chalice from within, setting them gently down on the ground. Then he clambered back to his feet with a stifled groan and started mimicking Jack's circle with another, concentric ring of salt, poured a pentagram inside that, the points of the star touching the inner circle.

By the time he'd finished tracing the sigils and runes in the vanes of the pentagram, the sun was kissing the horizon, the sky above it streaked with red. Dean straightened, one hand pressing lightly against his aching ribs as he checked the lines, crystals glittering faintly as they caught the light.

“That's it?”

“Almost,” he answered, sparing a quick glance behind him to where Jack leant against the pickup, arms folded tight across his chest, shuffling his feet nervously. “Trust me. I'm a professional,” he grinned, saw the older man's shoulders jerk in a snort but Jack didn't smile, just kept watching him anxiously. Stepping carefully over the lines, Dean made his way to the second, smaller pentagram he'd drawn in between the two circles, the chalice and book waiting for him. Kneeling, he picked up the latter, flipped through pages, the old hide and parchment rough against his fingers. Finding the page he wanted, he marked it with one thumb, sprinkled a last pinch of salt into the chalice, already half filled with anise seed and vervain.

He paused, looked out across the marsh one last time, hoping to somehow see his brother scrambling up out of the mud and reeds, a scowl on his face for what Dean was about to do.

*This is crazy, Dean. Suicidal crazy.*

“I know, Sam,” he breathed. “Trust me, I know, but I don't know what else to do.”

There was nothing but the fading sunlight and his shadow, thrown out in front of him and he sighed, reached into his boot for his knife and drew it, slicing it across his palm before he had time to think any more, a vague idea that he and Sam would have matching scars fading quickly in the back of his mind. Clenching his fist above the chalice, he winced as the gash oozed blood between his fingers, spattering into the herbs, smoke wreathing up around his hand as he lifted the book, read the short spell aloud, the sound echoing out across the marsh.

In its wake, everything went silent, just the thumping rush of his heartbeat in his ears and a startled gasp behind him as a shape eased out of the edge of his shadow, paced to the rim of the pentagram, black skin rippling as it moved.

“What the hell is that?”

He smirked at Jack's awed, horrified murmur, kept his jaw locked tight against the fear that pounded in his head and wondered faintly how the other man could even see the animal when he'd been the one to summon it, blamed it on the spell that hummed through his blood.

“Hellhound. If this fugly bitch can't track whatever took my brother down, then nothing can.”

#### ***Chapter Four***

“Two days.”

His croak echoed softly, scarcely more than a breath of sound and it still tore at his throat like razor wire. Sam winced, pressed a hand under his jaw and dropped his wrist back to his lap, the thin, faint glow of the luminous numbers on his watch almost gone by now. He thumped his head back into the wall, gazed blindly at the dark.

*Two freakin' days, Dean. Where are you, man?*

He winced at the thought, had done every time it had crossed his mind, always bringing with it images of his brother's body lying pale and still in the marsh or buried under dirt and stone.

Shaking his head slowly, he heard his hair scratch at the wall through the steady buzzing in his ears. His lips were dry, cracked bloody and he could feel the skin on the backs of his hands turning paper thin, loose across his bones for lack of water.

And the orbs were back, drifting across the dark to the slow beat of his heart.

He blinked at them, watched listlessly as the soil in the far corner of his cell crumbled away, a tiny patch of blinding light near the ceiling quickly growing, hands faintly visible as they scabbled and tore frantically at the edges.

*“Sam!”*

He turned away, felt precious moisture burn at his eyes but never thought the hallucination was anything other than a fever dream.

*“Sam! Are you there?”*

“Go away,” Sam murmured, burrowed his head down into his arms, where the dark was still absolute and where all he could hear was his heartbeat. When he finally dared to lift his aching head, he peered helplessly, uselessly into the unrelieved black.

*Hurry, Dean. God, please, hurry.*

~~\*~~

He could hardly lift his boots, they were so weighed down with mud. Dean stumbled on, the Hound baying at the thin crescent moon, impatient, straining at the tenuous command held over it. He knew that the moment it shimmered out of sight he would be lost. As long as the blood in the chalice kept burning, Dean could control it, praying desperately that it would last long enough, that Jack wouldn't interfere with the ritual

There hadn't been time to explain, he'd called out the order to the Hound pacing restlessly around and around the pentagram, *“There's an ember from the hellfires here, somewhere. **Find it.**”*

It had howled, snarled at him, wind springing up from the silent marsh to batter at him where he knelt above the chalice, flames licking up around his hand as he clenched his fist tightly, knuckles white.

***“FIND IT!”***

It had turned away, the wind dying as it leapt out of the pentagram and charged out across the marsh, leaving him to follow, snatching a shotgun and his duffel as he sprinted after it. It didn't stop, barely even slowed as it ran, nose up to the still air and he could only hope it would work, that a Hellhound could track the tiny, tiny piece of Hell that the sinner was supposed to carry.

*Dean, it's crazy. You don't even know if that's true!*

“I know, Sam,” he gasped out, one boot catching in a tangle of reeds and he staggered, windmilled his arms, trying desperately to keep his balance. Failing, reflexes shot, he crashed forward, landing on his bruised hip, elbow slamming into the ground so hard his fingers went numb and he almost lost the shotgun.

He yelled at the sky, swore at the top of his voice, faintly aware of the Hound circling him, snapping and growling, flame-red eyes glaring at him.

Dean laughed, gulping in air as he muttered at the beast, “Easy, Fido.”

It slunk away, sniffed at a boardwalk that angled across their path and for a moment, the hunter thought it was going to cock a leg and mark the post. Shaking his head, Dean clambered to his feet, trudged over to the narrow causeway, squinting at it in the moonlight. He cursed again when he recognized it, the same section of walk where Sam had stopped him, *“Hey, Dean, you think Bobby knows? About the dimensions? About us?”*

Splinters dug at his fingers as he wrapped a hand around the fence, hauled himself up onto the path with a grunt of effort. The Hound snuffled, growled low in its throat and the hunter sighed, knocked and scraped his boots clean against the end of the planks. Leaning into the fence for a moment he let his head drop down between his shoulders, still breathing hard and too fast, ribs aching, shadows creeping in around the edges of the world. He could feel the Hound's glare rake over him, hear it scratching at the wood, snorting out breaths foul with brimstone that clouded in the chilled air.

Dean pushed himself upright, rolled his shoulders with a wince. The Hound snarled, snapped at nothing, shadowy fur ruffling across its hackles as it stalked a few feet along the boardwalk.

“Yeah, yeah, I'm comin'. Mush.”

*Mush?*

The incredulous whisper made him grin, even though it was more feral than anything else.

“Whatever,” he muttered, blew out a quick huff of air when the Hellhound spun on its haunches and bounded off into the marsh again. “What kind've freakin' command do you give a Hellhound anyway?”

Gritty water splashed up around him, plastered his already wet jeans to his legs. Distantly, he knew that the marsh was utterly silent, eerily so, the presence of the Hound driving everything else into hiding. Even the clouds of mosquitoes seemed lessened, thinned, and he smirked as he panted steadily.

*Silver lining, huh, Sammy?* he thought, and ignored the way that made his heart twist in his throat. He'd have taken mosquitoes over this, any day. The hunter squinted as the marsh blurred past him, tall reeds and tiny copses of scrubby trees, clinging to the islands that poked through the water. He caught glimpses of eyes watching them pass, animals cowering in whatever cover they could find, hidden from the Hound that ran five or six yards ahead.

In the back of his mind he kept a rough track of where they were, hazily remembered maps of the Marsh marked with his brother's scrawled notes and the moon that oriented him as it arced across the sky, too fast, the night slipping by between the clouds of his breath as he stumbled on in the Hound's wake.

So when the beast, made as much of shadow as it was real, led him around a larger-than-usual stand of trees, struggling up out of the water to rake bare, empty branches at the sky, he wasn't really surprised at all to see the big island, the long, low cabin squatting in the middle of it, rust-red pick-up parked beside the house.

And Jack, lounging against one wall, arms crossed over his chest, watching the hunter scramble out of the water, step carefully across the salt lines to the middle of the secondary pentagram. Dean stopped there, stood gasping, trying not to let his knees tremble, hands steady around the stock of the shotgun he'd carried all through the night. Absently, he reached down, murmured a few lines of ancient Latin and scraped up a fistful of wet, sandy soil, let it trickle through his fingers, snuffing the cold white flames still devouring his blood in the chalice.

The Hound growled and muttered as it folded back into the dark, left behind a taint of brimstone on the air and a scorched set of paw prints in the ground and neither of them watched it go. Slowly, lazily, Jack rocked his weight from one foot to the other, rolling his shoulders along the weathered

shingles, paint flaking away.

“Hey, Dean.”

~~\*~~

He could hardly feel the dirt crumbling away under his hands, listened to it slip-slide down around his knees with a sound like tiny feet. Sam shivered, skin crawling, phantom touches trailing across the back of his neck. He stopped his sideways shuffle for a moment, leant against the wall, cheek pressed into it, tasting wet earth and stone with every shaking breath.

Blinking, he watched his brother lounge easily against the stone at his side, legs crossed at the ankle. Dean looked back at him, went on digging at his nails with his wickedly long bowie.

“Hey, you quittin' already?”

Sam shook his head, croaked out, “Jus' restin'.” His tongue felt like someone had wrapped it in layer after layer of cotton, thick and clumsy. “Y' could help.”

Dean smirked, spread his arms, palms open, worry furrowing his brow.

“Dude, I'm not real. You know that, right?”

He sucked in another metallic breath and pushed away from the wall, wished the light that flashed from his brother's blade would illuminate the cell. He closed his eyes, dragged his concentration back to the waning sensation in his fingertips as they crawled and skittered over the dirt. It clogged what was left of his nails, bitten raggedly down to the quick and ground into the dry, cracked skin over his knuckles.

He leant against the wall as much as he searched it, one hand clinging to the stone and soil as the other skimmed out in front of him. He'd stopped shivering hours ago, knew somewhere, vaguely, that he should have been more worried about that than he was and he tried to swallow, mouth and throat too dry to manage it. Sam sighed, licked cracked, bleeding lips, pulled one hand away to scrub it hard over his face, trying to summon enough energy to keep searching his prison for a way out.

“Keep lookin', Sammy, okay? You gotta keep lookin',” Dean told him, voice echoing and hollow and he nodded slowly, pressed his hand back against the wall, hard as he could manage, until his arm trembled and shook.

And then he felt it.

Deep in the soil, just the thin, hard edge of it catching against his fingertip, smooth and slick and he traced the root back, *up*, digging frantically at the dirt, barely noticing the burn when his nails tore and his skin split.

“C'mon, c'mon, c'mon,” he breathed, over and over, pausing just long enough to spit out the earth that collected on his lips when he finally managed to curl the tip of his pinky finger underneath the root and worked it deeper, forced his ring finger alongside it and pulled until the dark exploded in front of his eyes.

The root shifted, gave suddenly, then it tore free and he felt the jolt as it snapped somewhere,

crashed back onto the floor, landing hard on his butt, laughing breathlessly as he clung to the long, twisted length of wood. Scrambling up again he huddled against the wall, pressed his face against it and laughed again when he felt the tiny, fractional stirring of air against his cheek.

The relief and euphoria shattered when he heard the sound that drifted in with the air, his heart pounding against his throat. A hound, baying, howling and he knew that sound, even though he'd never heard it, knew nothing natural could ever make it. Despite the dehydration, he broke out in a cold sweat, felt it trickle down the back of his neck and his spine and curled his hands into fists, mind racing, raging so fast it left him dizzy.

He muttered to himself, thinking out loud, staring hard at the dark as he backed away from the wall.

“That, that doesn't make sense. There weren't any signs, no electrical storms, no crop failures, there was nothing, I checked. There shouldn't be any demons here, and how the hell can I even hear a Hellhound? It doesn't make *sense*,” Sam murmured, rubbing hard at his scalp, at the dirt engrained in his skin. Something tugged at the back of his mind, a distant thought that slipped away when he tried to grasp it and left him with just the tang of blood in his mouth and a sharp twinge of pain in the gash across his palm.

“What are you doing, Dean?” he breathed, not even hearing himself. “Don't do anything stupid man. Please.”

The baying stopped, the sound that had been scraping his nerves raw, faint and distorted as it was, fading away into silence and he froze, didn't dare even breathe, eyes squeezing closed as he listened to the hush and what he heard next turned his blood to melt water.

A low voice, old and worn and so, so cold.

“Hey, Dean.”

~~\*~~

“You lying sonofabitch,” the hunter growled, scuffing one boot through the salt line as he stepped forward, lifting the shotgun in his hand to aim unwaveringly at the other man's head.

“Well, not really,” Jack answered, shrugging a little as he slouched against the wall. “You never asked if I knew where Sam was.”

“Where is he?”

Dean tried to ignore the way his voice grated, caught in his throat. Jack quirked one brow, tilted his head to the side, regarding the hunter impassively.

“Gone.”

“You're lying.”

He dragged back the hammer on the shotgun, unnecessarily but the sound was loud in the quiet night and he fought down a feral grin as he saw Jack shift uncomfortably.

“That won't hurt me.”

“Oh, it'll hurt. It might not kill you, but I think it'll hurt like hell. Now either you tell me where my brother is, or we find out just how much it'll hurt.”

“I tricked the *devil*, Dean. You really think you can threaten me with a few rounds of rock salt?”

Dean smirked, shifted his weight back, settled it into his heels, trying to disguise the way his legs kept wanting to fold, gravity dragging at his shoulders.

“I wondered if that part of the legend was true. What'd you do? Trap him in an apple tree? Or, what was it, you tricked him into turning himself into a silver coin and then caught him in a purse with a cross?”

The other man laughed softly, smile creasing his face and for a moment the hunter could almost forget what he was.

“Does it really matter?”

Dean shrugged.

“Guess not. Tell me one thing though. Why'd you take them?”

“The 'victims'?” He could hear the sneer in Jack's voice and scowled, steadied the shotgun. “They weren't the paragons of virtue their friends and family would have everyone believe, Dean. They were all heading down the same road sooner or later, I just stopped them before they could damn themselves forever.”

He blinked, disbelief coloring his answer. “What, you think you were *saving* them?”

Jack spread his hands, palms open, that worn, soldier's face beguiling and innocent and Dean snorted. “Yeah, you're a real Henry Ford. So what about Sam? How were you saving him?”

“Your brother already made his deal with the devil, didn't he? He's just paying the price now.”

“You're a lying bastard. Sam - ”

“Dean. Come on. Stop kidding yourself. You know what he's done.”

For a moment, just for a moment, he could feel the ground shaking itself apart beneath his feet again, could feel the desert sun pounding against the back of his head as the sky tore in two, hear his father's cry, *'Take your brother and run! Now, Dean! Go!'*

And he could feel the way the air turned rigid around him, pinned him in place and he remembered the look in his brother's eyes later, guilt and shock and horror.

“*No*,” he ground out, put another ounce of pressure on the trigger. “I know what he did. But he's not like you. He's nothing like you, and he never will be.”

Jack pushed away from the wall, took two steps toward him, leaning forward until his face was all shadow, just two burning pinpricks left.

“Isn't he? The road to hell, kid. That's how it goes, right? Good intentions are everything down there, and your brother, well, he's just full to the brim with them. You see it every time you look at

him, don't you? What it does to him, the power running through his veins, the *temptation* of it. One day, he'll think he's doing the right thing, but he'll be the one who ends it all, Dean. He'll be the one at ground zero when the final war between Lucifer and God begins.”

Dean laughed, bright and brittle lie. “What, you think he's gonna start the apocalypse? Dude, you need to get out more.”

“The end of days, kid. It's coming and your brother, he's right there in the middle of it. I'm just stopping him.”

“So you're some kind of savior now?” He watched the other man slide forward another step, thin moonlight glittering in his eyes. “Oh, wait. I get it. If you save the world, then maybe St. Peter'll let you past the gates. Is that it?”

Jack stopped, actually flinched and the hunter pressed closer, keeping just one tattered salt line between them as Jack looked down.

“I've walked for so long, Dean,” he murmured. Dean swallowed down pity, dug for the anger that had kept him going all night. “You can't imagine it. Centuries, wandering on the edges and there's no end. There's never an end.”

“So you decided to start killing people?”

The ancient man tipped his head up so the moon caught in his stare, a furious snarl twisting his mouth and baring his teeth.

“Yes. I took them. All those people who lied and cheated like I did. Why shouldn't they know just a fraction of what I've been through? Just an ounce of the suffering your precious God and the Devil cursed me to!”

“Oh, cry me a river,” Dean muttered, tightened his aim and reached back with his free hand, fingers closing around the knife tucked into the sheath at the small of his back as the shotgun roared, belched fire and thunder and salt into the dark.

~~\*~~

The *crack* was unmistakable. Sam stopped, fingers of one hand jammed deep into the dirt, the other stretched behind him from the last scoop he'd tossed away. He didn't move, didn't blink, didn't even breathe as he waited, strained to hear the echo of the blast as it faded, left behind a heavy thud and a strangled gasp.

*Dean.*

He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat, a shiver chasing down his spine, and then all the breath whooshed out of him when he heard running footsteps, familiar as his own heartbeat.

It was a whisper this time, pure relief that left him lightheaded.

“Dean.”

Squeezing his eyes shut against the nauseating sensation of the cell spinning when he couldn't even see it, he started digging again, scraping out handfuls of the wet, icy earth and heaping them behind

him. Every few minutes he stopped, panting hard, two long days and nights without food or water or *light* leaching his strength away. All the time, he could hear the struggle above him, grunts and gasps and growled threats, the sound of blows making his muscles jump in instinctive defense.

He stopped when the sound of the fight did, gasping, fear thick in his throat, his heart pounding, lurching as he heard that cold, worn voice taunting his brother.

*“He's gone, Dean! Sam's dead and cold.”*

Shook his head, rasped out a useless denial, frustrated tears burning his eyes.

*“No. You're lying.”*

*“I buried him myself, weighed his body down with stones and took him out to the middle of the marsh! They'll never find him!”*

*“He's not dead, he can't be!”*

He winced, cringed away from the tiny hole, shaking, hearing his brother snarl the same furious, desperate denial. In the dark, there was nothing to distract himself with, nothing to hide the memories behind and he swallowed hard as he saw her tied to a chair in the middle of the Devil's Trap, smiling with Meg's mouth, *“He begged for his life with tears in his eyes. He begged to see his sons one last time. That's when I slit his throat.”*

“No!”

His voice cracked, dragged out of his raw throat and he coughed, let the sound and the pain burn through the memory. Stretching one hand out in front of him, he fumbled at the wall, found the lip of the hole again and crawled back to it, pressed his ear against it. He swore silently as he heard dull thuds, sharper cracks, could almost picture the fight, see his brother ducking and blocking, swaying back to deliver a kick that scythed the other man's legs out from under him and all he could do was hope that the heavy crunch of a body hitting the ground hard was Jack and not his brother. He never realized he was chanting under his breath, a low rumble of encouragement as he clung desperately to the wall, biting his lip when he heard Dean cry out once, grinning savagely when another voice loosed a pained yell.

And then it went quiet.

Sam's heart lodged in his throat, a fresh slick of mud coating his hands as chill sweat oozed from his palms.

“Dean?”

He breathed it, scarcely loud enough to hear it himself.

*“Where is he?”*

*“I told you - ”*

*“WHERE IS HE?!”*

Another cry, surprised and thick with hurt.

*“What is that?”*

*“Tell me where he is.”*

*“What is that thing?”*

*“This?”*

Sam blinked, the ice in his brother's voice sending a shiver trickling down his spine. He could count on one hand the number of times he'd heard Dean sound so coldly, venomously angry and every single time, remembered wondering if he really knew his brother at all.

*“Oh, it's just a little carving knife I picked up. Iron blade, silver scroll work to purify it. Blessed by a pope and cursed by a demon.”*

*“It... **burns.**”*

*“It's the end, Jack.”*

He frowned, wondered at the almost gentle note.

*“No.”*

*“I'll kill you.”*

*“You can't. I'm already **dead!**”*

*“Semantics. You see, when I figured out what you were, I knew I couldn't **kill** you, not like I would any other evil sonofabitch that crawled out from under its rock. But then, I realized I don't have to kill you. All I have to do is break the spell that's keeping your body walking after all these centuries. And this knife? Well, that's exactly what it's made to do.”*

*“It can't.”*

*“Feel it, Jack. It burns, right?”*

*“It **can't.**”*

*“Where is he?”*

*“No.”*

*“Tell me where he is and I'll let you go. Hell, I'll even buy you a plane ticket, anywhere but here.”*

*“He's the end, Dean.”*

*“I don't care. He's my brother.”*

Sam swallowed down a sob at the flicker of emotion in Dean's answer, snapping through the ice like flames. It was quiet again, for so long that he began to wonder if he'd imagined the whole thing, if it was just one last fever dream before he slipped away and he dug his fingers into the wall until he

felt what was left of his nails tear, blood oozing into the mud.

*“Behind the house. There's a flagstone, in the ground. The old cellar.”*

“Dean!” he croaked, thumped one fist into the corner where the wall met the ceiling, the joint between soil and stone bruising the side of his hand. “Dean!”

And faintly, so faintly he held his breath, wished he could shut his heart the hell *up*, just for a second; “*Sam?*”

Let his breath out in a rush, sagged against the wall. “God, Dean, get me out of here!”

*“Sam, hang on.”*

Sam drew his head back, squinted in the vague direction of the tiny hole he couldn't see, felt dirt trickling out of it, tumbling down over his hand, still splayed out against the wall beneath, trying to reconcile fever dreams with the reality of the thinnest, sharpest pinprick of light that speared through the dark. He winced, clapped a hand over his eyes, tears streaming down his cheeks as he cursed, backed away when the soil crumbling down over his fingers increased to a steady flow.

“Sam?”

And it was real, then, really, truly real, his brother's voice right there, not muffled, not distant, not coming from thin air or his own head, *there*, peering down through the fist-sized hole he'd dug through the dirt.

“Dean.”

Slumped against the wall Sam stretched up a hand, kept the other clapped over his eyes and squinted through his fingers, sucked in a deep breath of the fresh, cold air and started coughing, spluttering, throat so dry each hacking spasm felt like razor wire tangled in his lungs.

“Goddamned sonofabitch,” Dean growled, *snarled*, and it was so savage that it shocked Sam right out of the paroxysm and he looked up, caught a glimpse of a battered, bruised face, twisted with rage, teeth bared and stained red before his brother was gone, spinning away.

“Dean!”

*“I'll kill you, I swear to god I'll kill you, you piece of - ”*

“Dean, don't!” He wouldn't even have recognized his brother's voice if he hadn't heard it before, directed at Haris under the vultures that wheeled in the sky above Devil's Tower, at Mia as she taunted them with the threat she dangled over their friends lives.

*“I can't die, I can't!”*

*“I told you, you bastard, this won't kill you. But you won't take anyone else, you ain't gonna kill anyone else when you're just some damn spook wanderin' the marsh.”*

Sam stared blindly at the dark, horrified, knew that his brother's eyes would be almost black with fury and shook his head, begged in a whisper he knew was futile, “Don't do this.”

*“You promised.”*

*“I don't care.”*

*“You promised! I told you where he was and you **promised!**”*

*“I LIED!”*

“God, Dean no, no, don't, Dean.”

And then there was nothing, just the dirt under his fingernails as he tore at the hole in the dark, threw himself at it, wriggled and squirmed until he jammed his shoulders in, kicked hard, forced his way through, ribs crushed and heaving and he threw his head back, felt the muscles in his neck pop out with the effort. His throat seized around a cry, air stuttering, skipping past his lungs and spots began to burst in his eyes, against the tattered clouds and the stars, shining weak and pale beyond.

And he knew he was too late, long before his brother's hands wrapped around his wrists, long before he was hauled out of the hole in the ground to sprawl in the dirt beside it, gasping in air rank with the smell of stagnant water and rotting weeds and blood.

Dean huddled at his side, fingers still locked around his wrist, so tight he could feel the bruises forming under the skin and he didn't care at all.

“Dean,” he finally murmured, more of a rasp than a word. The older man flinched beside him and he cleared his throat, tried again. “Dean?”

Rolled his head sideways on the ground until he could see his brother as Dean looked up and Sam winced, breath catching at the sight of his brother's face.

“God, Dean, what happened?”

Dean blinked, reached up with his free hand to probe gingerly at the puffy swelling already closing one eye. “He... he took you... all of them. For... *years.*”

Sam frowned, levered himself up on his elbows, not liking the way his brother swayed on his knees, looking straight through Sam as though he wasn't there. “What did you do?” he asked, remembered the howls that had chased shivers down his spine. “Dean, what did you *do?*”

With an effort, Dean met his gaze slowly, one-eyed stare bloodshot and glassy, pupil so huge his eye looked almost black. “s okay, Sammy, 's over” he murmured vaguely, working his fingers loose and Sam missed the contact as soon as it was gone, had to stop himself reaching out for his brother's hand. *It's real, it is.*

“s all okay,” the older man went on, blinking owlishly again. “Jus' gotta... y' gotta burn 'im, Sam.”

He swallowed hard at the flicker of ice that hardened Dean's stare for a moment before it faded and his good eye rolled up. Sam scrambled to catch his brother as he crumpled sideways. “Whoa! Whoa, hey, hey, take it easy, man.”

He ended up on one knee, other leg stuck out to the side, hip twisted with the weight of his brother's shoulders pinning it down, one of Dean's arms trailing in the dirt, the other folded loosely across his chest as Sam curled a hand around the back of his neck, took in the older man's face, gray and

haggard beneath the imprints of fists and blows. “Dean? Hey, c'mon, Dean. You in there?”

Sam tapped gently at his brother's cheek, got only a mumbled growl for an answer and thought he heard *'burn it'* in there somewhere. He nodded. “Okay, okay, Dean. Let me check you out, alright?”

He eased the older man down, sliding Dean's shoulders down his leg, pausing just long enough to wriggle out of his jacket and bunch it under his brother's head. Skimming his hands down, he pressed carefully at Dean's ribs, scowled when his brother gasped and twitched away, murmured under his breath as he tugged up Dean's shirts, peered at the dark bruising already showing across the older man's abdomen and looked up to find Dean squinting distantly at him from a thin slit of green.

“Wha'ssa verdict, House?”

Sam smirked reluctantly, cracked lips drawn thin. “You'll live. Dean - ”

Dean just sighed and closed his eye again, rolling his head away and Sam huffed, pushed himself up to his feet and staggered as the world went white and loose around him. Tipped forward, caught himself with his hands on his knees and dragged in air, puffed it out through his nose until he could see again, felt his brother's attention on him and dropped his gaze down to where Dean lay on the ground, mud in his hairline. He felt watched even though his brother's eyes were either closed or swollen shut, shadows deep beneath them and Sam figured the last two days hadn't been easy for either of them.

He stumbled again a little as he turned, found his balance two steps in and then just rode out the way his head seemed to spin twice as far as he meant it to every time he turned it. The water and power bars helped, when he found them in Dean's bag, dropped beside the remains of a summoning ritual he really didn't want to think about. The salt and the sooty chalice caught the light of the flames that still made his eyes water and sting before he turned his back to them, scuffed deliberately through the scruffy white lines and loaded bag and brother into the battered red pick-up parked beside the low cabin.

Dean mumbled at him from the passenger seat as he drove away, dazed incoherency he could barely hear over the ringing in his ears but he thought maybe it was an apology, a “*Sorry, Sam. Sorry it took so long.*”

All he could do was think, *what did you do?* over and over and drink in the thin starlight and the space of the empty marsh that spread out around the road.

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## **Watertown, WS**

### **Two days later.**

The door clicked behind him, faint tinny ring of the bell inside jangling against his nerves, still shaky and twitching after the claustrophobic hours he'd spent shut away inside the tiny library. Sam stood on the steps for a moment, shuffling the strap of his bag on his shoulder, leather digging into thinly protected bone as his stomach growled. He rubbed it absently, wondered if they had time to stop at the diner Dean had found on the edge of town, mouth watering with the memory of the pie they'd been served.

“I’m turning into my brother,” he murmured with a smirk, scanning the parking lot as he trotted down the steps, satchel thumping against his leg.

He squinted, groped in his pocket for his sunglasses and scowled as he remembered leaving them in the Impala’s glove compartment. Shielding his eyes with one hand he blinked, hurried across the deserted parking lot to the trees shading the far edge, the black shape lurking beneath.

“Here,” Dean called when he was a few yards out, tossed something at him. Sam caught his shades, slipped them on with a sigh of relief. “Find anything?”

He waited until he could dump his satchel on the backseat through the open window, accepted the bottle the older man handed him with a grin. “Yeah.” Hitching one hip up onto the hood, Sam stretched, stared out across the valley, soaking up the open space. Perched on the end of the hood, Dean shifted restlessly, tucked one boot up on the bumper, dropped it back to the ground again with a low hiss and Sam slanted a look at him, took in the dark splendor that covered most of his brother’s face.

He took a long drag of beer, remembered the long drive out of the marsh, following Dean’s slurred, barely coherent directions to the Impala, leaving the cabin to burn behind them. An hour south he’d found Watertown, as far as he could stand to drive, all too aware that it should have taken him half the time and he’d checked them into the first motel he found, the Roadway Inn, patched his brother up and collapsed into bed.

Dean woke him up a few hours later with a bottle of water, a bowl of chicken salad from the diner and a bruised, pained smile under dead eyes. As he devoured everything set in front of him over the next two days, Sam watched his brother drag the emptiness back inside, lock it away again, the familiar grin slowly re-emerging, and wondered what it cost Dean to do that.

“Well?”

Sam jumped a little, cleared his throat.

“There was a house there, once. Some rich guy built it right after they tried to drain the marsh, back in the early 1900’s, then he just disappeared. Left it to some godson no one even knew he had. It was big news, back in the day.”

“Godson happen to be named Jack?”

He nodded. “Couple of years later, the house burned down. That far out in the marsh, no one saw it, no one called the fire service until the next day when they saw the smoke. Cops found a burned out shell with what was left of a body, figured it was the godson. The land stayed in the ‘family’ ever since.”

“So the cellar was all that was left of the original house?”

Sam sighed, squirming a little, rolling his shoulders against the glass as he stretched gently. Condensation pooled between his palm and the bottle, and he wondered if he’d ever get all of the soil out from his skin.

“Yeah,” he finally answered, slid his eyes sideways until he could make out his brother’s profile, tipped back to the sky as Dean took a quick gulp of beer. “Jack must’ve kept it as a place to stash his victims until they just...”

He trailed off, watched tension creep into the older man's shoulders.

“Until they died,” Dean finished for him, voice harsh and distant. He nodded again, just once.

“They were different though.”

His brother looked at him, not quite meeting his gaze, one eyebrow quirked. “Yeah? Why's that?”

“They didn't have anyone looking for them in the right places. Who knew where to look.”

Dean laughed, quiet and bitter,

“I didn't know where to look, Sam.”

Sam curled forward until he could see his brother's face, scowled as Dean just turned away. “You found me, didn't you?”

“I summoned a Hellhound to track him down, Sam. Not exactly ace detective work.”

Sam paused, chewed at his lip for a moment, remembered the slurred, dazed apology Dean had offered as they drove away from the fire. Then he smirked.

“Well, it was pretty stupid, I'll give you that,” he retorted, grinned outright as his brother swatted his arm with the back of his hand.

“Hey!”

“I mean, getting a Hellhound to do the legwork for you...”

“You think just anyone could call up a Hellhound?”

“It's kinda lame, really,” Sam rambled on, right over the top of Dean's protests until the older man dug an elbow back into his side, laughing.

“Okay, okay! I get it!”

“Good,” he muttered, rubbing his ribs, settling back against the windshield, staring up at the sky as the clouds thickened. “I know what you did, Dean. And I meant it.”

“Oh, god. Are we really gonna do this now?”

“Yes. No one else was ever found, man. No one else figured out who Jack really was, what he did. How to stop him.”

The air between them crackled for a moment and he felt his brother's gaze rake across him, knew Dean's eyes would be narrowed, the muscle in his jaw twitching as he braced himself for another argument.

*Shades of gray*, Sam thought, remembering the cry that he'd heard, cut off too sharply as he clawed his way out of the earth and couldn't bring himself to care.

“Thanks, man.”

He tipped his head sideways, watched his brother stare back at him.

“That's it?”

“What do you want? A ticker tape parade?”

Dean grinned weakly, winced as the stitches Sam had put in his lip pulled.

“Hot chicks throwing themselves on the hero of the hour? Hell yeah.”

Sam chuckled, took another pull of beer, rode out the brief wave of lightheadedness as the alcohol swamped his system, still recovering from days without food, without water or light. He waited for a while, until the clouds had shrouded the sky completely, uniformly gray, pressing down on them. Out in the marsh, he could hear birds calling, something scurrying and crashing through the water, running ahead of the rain. When he couldn't wait any more, he rolled his head across the glass, watched Dean toy with his beer.

“Did you call Dad?”

“Yeah. He, uh, he was kinda in the middle of something.”

He stared at his brother, waited for Dean to look back at him, to meet his gaze but the older man just stared down at his hands, twisting the almost untouched bottle around and around.

“He didn't answer, did he?”

In profile, he watched Dean flinch, saw his eyes squeeze shut for a moment.

“Not until Bobby called him,” the older man finally murmured, so soft Sam had to strain to hear it.

“God. *God*, it's just like before. What's he doing this time? I mean, Haris is dead and gone, right? What can be so important now?”

“I don't know.”

“There's no huge quest for freakin' vengeance now, is there? The thing that killed Mom is *dead*, so why's he still hiding from us?”

“I don't know!”

“What, does he think he still needs to protect us? What the hell from!?”

*“I don't know, Sam!”*

The echoes of their yells sent birds scattering into the air, wings whirring as they fled, calling angrily. Sam watched them go, fists shaking against his legs, jaw tight.

“I don't know,” Dean repeated. “But he, he said to find you and keep you safe. Keep both of us safe. Something's going on, Sammy. I don't know what or how he's involved, but...”

He trailed off into silence and Sam waited, watched the sun fall and fade behind the horizon, so long he thought his brother would never finish.

“He sounded scared, Sam, he sounded so scared.”

*So do you*, Sam thought, watched the older man lift the bottle to his lips and tilt his head back, draining the beer in one long pull.

“So what do we do now?” he asked, when the quiet grew too heavy, too cloying. Dean shrugged lopsidedly, a quick wince tightening his features into a grimace. He rubbed gingerly at his side and sighed.

“I don't know, Sammy. Hunt, I guess. Find the next fugly sonofabitch and kill it.”

“And just wait for him to call?”

Dean slid a glance at him, eyes cool, jaw set.

“Yeah. We wait for him, Sam. He'll call when he needs us.”

He hesitated, wanted so badly to just cram Dean into the car and start driving, start all over again.

*Back to square one*, he thought, *four years on and it's just the same*.

It wasn't, he knew, none of them were the same now and he dragged in a slow breath that tasted of sand and heat, pushed it out through his nose and felt the tension drain out of him with it. Pushed away from the car, stumbling a little, squeezed his eyes shut against the dizziness and muttered a low curse, then smiled as a hand eased under his elbow, steadied him, another plucking the half full bottle from his lax grasp.

“Lightweight,” Dean growled under the door's creak, nudging him back until he folded into the seat, tipped his head back and opened his eyes to squint at the roof lining. He waited for the other door to groan open, for the car to shift under him as his brother slid in behind the wheel before he spoke.

“So, Delaware?”

It was a peace offering, met with a long beat of silence and the weight of Dean's gaze on him, considering, assessing but when the older man answered, he could hear the smile in it.

“Long Neck Village it is. Can that spook's ass.”

Sam rolled his eyes, then groaned out loud when his brother turned the key, the radio blaring to life. “*Well, if you ever go back into Wooley Swamp, well, you better not go at night. There's things out there in the middle of them woods that make a strong man die from fright.*”

“Dude, seriously?” he ground out over the squalling music, heard Dean laugh. “We're going to listen to... to songs about *swamps* all the way to Delaware?”

“House rules, Sammy!”

Sam flung an arm over his eyes as the Impala peeled out of the parking lot, the throaty engine lingering with the fading echoes of a drawling voice.

*“...on summer nights, if the moon is right, down by the dark footpath, you can hear three young men screaming. You can hear one old man laugh.”*

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***Playlist:***

***Hello Again, LostProphets***

***The Middle of Nowhere, George Strait***

***The Legend of Wooley Swamp, Charles Daniels***