

Reap the Wild Wind  
by Maygra

Characters: Dean, Sam, the usual suspects.  
Au, Future-fic (sorta), Wingfic (sorta), Deathfic (sorta).

This story is officially dedicated to  [technosage](#), for being so awesome. I ? her madly.

Riffing off the circumstances from [Dead Men Tell Great Tales](#). Also, I think I'm stealing from  [eighth horizon](#) again, among others. Myth-arc speculation.

(36,326 words)

*A footprint haunts an empty floor.*  
*(Take my hand. Take my hand.)*  
*A fading coat that I once wore.*  
*(Take my hand. Take my hand.)*  
*Oh, desolation where I once lived.*  
*I have seen in times gone by.*  
*I have felt a different shadow on the wall,*  
*A stranglehold on a certain feeling.*  
Reap the Wild Wind ~ Ultravox

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*Harvelle's Roadhouse*

"Hey, Ellen?"

Ellen glanced up to see Ash easing into the room. There was light streaming through the front window, scattered by the dust coating them. She needed to get the hose out and rinse them off.

"Early for you, Ash. You okay? You want some coffee?" she asked, continuing to unrack glasses and set them up under the bar.

"Uh, yeah," he said and pulled his skinny ass up on a bar stool.

He didn't look like he had slept which Ellen thought was strange given how much time he *did* spend sleeping. Or drinking. Or drinking until he slept. He didn't work enough around the bar to earn either his bed or his drinks, except when he did. He could fix pretty much anything that had moving parts and few things that didn't, and every now and then he did something that made him worth his weight in gold -- which giving how skinny he really was, wasn't saying much.

Ellen pulled a clean mug free and poured coffee, sliding it across the bar along with a half dozen sugar packets and the half and half from the cooler.

Ash took all three and began assembling his coffee like he would a computer. One sugar packet at a time, a little cream, stir. Another packet, cream, stir. Sometimes his OCD showed up in strange ways. "You heard from the Winchester boys?" he asked between sugar packet number three and four.

Ellen blinked. "Not since they headed back to Kansas." That had been a couple of weeks ago and she was a little surprised they'd bothered to tell her at all. Well, Sam had. They hadn't parted company on the best of terms, and she didn't blame anybody but herself for that. Worry over Jo -- dropping that bomb like she did. She should have told Jo earlier.

It didn't surprise her that the boys didn't know. John Winchester never told anyone anything they didn't need to know and that apparently extended to his own sons. And maybe she was being unreasonable to think the boys would take after their daddy in that way when there were obviously a lot of differences.

But still. That was her daughter out there with them. Her girl risking her life without knowing all she needed to know, without the experience to save herself if it went bad.

And it had. She'd come so close...and that was as much Jo's fault as anyone's. Hers too, if she was fair. And Ash had slunk around like a shadow for days, looking guilty and apologetic -- like Ellen didn't know that Jo had Ash wrapped around her little finger.

But it was done. They hadn't given her a chance to simmer down and she hadn't asked them to. It had been maybe a week later when Sam had left her a message saying they were headed to Kansas, see if they couldn't get some answers about his visions. She didn't know who they were going to see and she hadn't called back to ask. Sam's "I'm sorry," had sounded sincere and helpless.

She'd thought at first it was good thing. The roadhouse might not be the best place for them in the long term -- not if Sam was inviting things to him that other hunters might deal with first and ask questions about afterward.

But after a week of them gone, of Jo not talking to her unless she had to and constantly finding chores and errands to run, like this morning, that kept her out of Ellen's way as much as possible, and Ash slinking around, she found herself wondering just who had benefited by her then righteous anger. Not Jo -- who was even more confused by Dean Winchester than she had been. Not the boys, certainly -- already outside, she'd just pushed them further out, something she hadn't done to anyone else who'd come looking for the neutral ground the roadhouse offered. Hunters were by nature a cantankerous lot but Ellen had always maintained the Roadhouse like a supernatural Switzerland. If they had issues with each other, they left them at the door.

Then she'd gone and broken her own rule.

Ash sipped nosily at his coffee. "Why? You got something for them?" she asked him.

He shrugged and shook his head, leaned over the bar to find the TV remote and flicked it on. "Not me. Looks like CNN beat me to it," he said

He flicked it over to CNN news and Ellen looked at it, wondering what a weather report had to do with anything. And then it was over.

*"Leading in on our top story. Authorities are still investigating a mysterious and devastating explosion that took place last night in Stull, Kansas, where a historical cemetery was completely obliterated by a blast powerful enough to be felt two counties over.*

*Thus far, investigators haven't been able to pinpoint the cause, and theories include everything from a badly misjudged prank by kids to a meteor strike. So far, there have been no injuries or casualties reported as a result of the blast but..."*

The reporter went on but Ellen found herself walking toward the screen, squinting her eyes not at the reporter in the field but the images in the background of the camera shot.

The cameras shifted and then moved again so she couldn't be entirely sure.

Only she was. And that framed shot revealed a car in the background that Ellen knew all too well.

There weren't that many gleaming black Impalas around, even in Kansas.

"Mom!" she hadn't even heard Jo pull up but she didn't miss the concern in her daughter's voice. "I was listening to the news--" Jo stopped and watched the screen. "That's Dean's car."

Ellen nodded and then pulled her eyes from the screen to look at Ash. "You got nothing?"

Ash lifted his mug up and drained it. Set it back down. "Not yet. But..."

Ellen's eyes narrowed and she dug in her pocket for her cell phone as she nodded at Jo. "You try Dean. I'll try Sam...and then we find out who's closest."

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"Don't try to move just yet."

The voice was familiar, even in the dark, but he couldn't tell if the darkness was inside of his head or outside his eyes. A warm, dry hand pressed to his forehead and he felt the rasp of a damp cloth along his face.

"You're pretty beat up, but you're gonna be all right. You're gonna heal up fine."

The voice was familiar, but the hand wasn't. It was too small for one thing, too soft. And here was a brief touch of metal, the jangle of more of it. A ring, a bracelet. No calluses to the palm.

"Missouri..." he didn't recognize his own voice and just whispering made him cough, which tore pain through his chest and pretty much everywhere else.

"Yes, baby. It's me," she said and that same small hand cupped the back of his neck, pressed a glass to his lips. Water. He swallowed and then pulled back.

"Missor-- Sam? Sam--"

He hadn't forgotten. The pain from coughing didn't ease up the other ache that no amount of water would ease, nor healing remove.

"I know. I know, Dean. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry," she said and her voice wasn't nearly as steady as her hands.

"I gotta get up. I've got to--"

He pushed up, tried to but she pushed back down and at the moment, she was a hell of a lot stronger than him. "You need to listen to me. You're not going anywhere. You get up now and you'll be following your brother and your Daddy to the grave."

Dean felt his lip curve up. Felt like a snarl, might have been a smile, and he pushed her hands away. The cloth on his face was pulled back and he could feel his eyes trying to open; they felt sticky and swollen but he got them cracked enough to sense the low light...the shifting of shadows.

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I know you're grieving, Dean--"

"You don't know shit," he said.

"There's no need for that kind of language--"

"If ever there was a need, it's now," he said and finally got his hands under him, pushing up. There was a sharp lance of pain through his middle, he could feel the ribs shifting ways they weren't supposed to.

Missouri sighed and actually helped him sit up, shoved more pillows behind him when gravity and injury finally stopped any further upward movement. His legs weren't

working right and his arms felt like limp noodles. There was a pounding in his head that sounded like an entire drum corps.

"Sam and your daddy wouldn't want you to--"

"Well, they're both dead so it doesn't matter what they want, does it?" he snapped at her.

Her hands left him. He still couldn't see well or clearly, both eyes swollen shut. But he both felt and heard her get up.

"Maybe not. But if you're going to kill yourself, I'm not going to help. You just holler if you need anything," she said and she sounded cool and distant.

"I need my clothes."

She shifted and moved and a moment later, he felt a light weight drop in his lap.

He fingered his shirt, felt the denim.

He didn't have the strength to pull them on.

"I need..."

*<i>I need my family back.*

Missouri's hand rested lightly on his shoulder. "I know, honey. I know...but I don't have them."

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The Dean Winchester that walked into the Roadhouse three weeks later wasn't anyone Ellen recognized.

He came in early in the morning, looking a whole lot better than he had any right to, and still he was just starting to lose the bruising on his face, walked stiffly like he was nursing bum ribs or leg or both.

Jo went forward. "Dean--"

"Ash here?" he asked without preamble, staring at Ellen, ignoring Jo completely.

"Yeah, he's in the back. I'm sorry--"

"I came to pick up dad's research notes. Ash won't need 'em anymore," he said.

"I'll get him," Jo said, ducking her head when Dean finally looked her way.

"You want a beer?" Ellen asked even though it was only nine in the morning.

"No. Just the notes."

"Dean, about Sam--"

"Sam's dead," he said looking at her without flinching, a set to his mouth that pretty much stole the handsomeness right from his face. "My Dad's dead. That pretty much ends any topics of conversation we might have, Ellen."

She stared at him long and hard and he stared right back. She dropped her gaze first and went back to the bar, washing dishes that were already clean so he wouldn't see her hands shake.

It didn't take long for Jo to return with Ash, who carried a cardboard beer case box with notebooks and papers. Dean took it and without a word turned on his heel and walked out again. A few moments later the Impala's engine fired up and the tires ground gravel as he pulled out of the parking lot.

"Nothing ever showed up," Ash muttered.

"What?"

"All that stuff I was tracking -- the weather patterns, the cattle mutilations, none of it ever showed up. Not in Kansas. Not then...not when..." he said. "There were patterns. There were signs...there shoulda been signs," he said and then headed back toward the pool tables.

"You think he'll keep hunting?" Jo asked quietly.

Ellen dried her hands off. "He doesn't have anything else."

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It was the screams that woke Missouri.

Not until she woke did she know they weren't something she dreamed, nor something she heard.

She felt them all the way to her bones.

The she felt the rumble and shudder through the house. It came up from the foundations, rattled the windows, the pictures on her walls. Downstairs she heard glass shatter on the floors as things fell.

Then the tornado sirens went off even though it wasn't the season, wasn't a storm or rain or wind.

It lasted only a few moments and then it all went still. The sirens died away and the ache and hollowness in her bones faded with them.

She searched, in the best way she knew how, for anything lingering, anything riding the invisible currents of emotion and awareness that her gift let her tap into.

She caught only echoes of her own fear, fainter whispers from her neighbors as she pulled on a robe and turned on the lights.

She felt her house shudder again, a lesser aftershock, as she was coming down the stairs and then caught a backlash of sheer pain and grief and rage and terror so powerful she stumbled and sat down hard on the staircase, tears filling her eyes for nothing specific or focused, just...grief and pain.

Then it was gone too. So suddenly it left her gasping for breath for a moment before she could finally calm down enough to finish her descent.

The radio was closer than the TV and she turned it on and then headed outside.

There were people already on the street, nervously talking.

She didn't know what made her look west but she did and saw the glow, the sky lit up like it was dawn and not the middle of the night.

She could hear the sirens then -- not the tornado warnings but fire trucks, police cars.

It glimmered again, that feeling of loss, fading, fading...and she turned on her heel, almost running back into the house, shedding her bathrobe before she hit the door, running up the steps as she caught the tail end of the news report...

*<i>...explosion in Stull Cemetery that registered at the university's seismic monitoring center. Residents of Lawrence and the surrounding area are warned to stay clear of the area... </i>*

The I-40 was already crawling with emergency vehicles but there wasn't much choice until she got closer to where what was left of Stull gave her options for side roads. The glow was still there, tinged with red, what had been a clear night sky now obscured by smoke and fog created by the sudden expulsion of heat into the air.

She drove slowly, her head already pounding from trying to use her gift in a way that it wasn't meant to be, and that she hadn't tried to force since she was a teen-ager.

She was concentrating on that vague impression of loss and not on her driving that she almost gave herself whiplash when something appeared in front of her car.

It wasn't what or who she was looking for, and the whole form of it was half obscured by the shifting smoke. She caught a glimpse of shadows against shadows and for a moment, she wondered if something more had been unleashed than what she expected.

But no, no...if the gates of hell had opened, she'd be feeling a lot more than what she was. This creature in front of her made no movement, only stood, sometimes near disappearing, only to shimmer back into solidity. Not a ghost or a sprit. She was getting nothing from it. She put the car in park and got out.

The cemetery was still a good quarter mile away and she could see the lance of lights from the emergency vehicles -- blue and red and yellow -- playing against the smoke and fog. Reminded her of that movie, *Close Encounters*, but this was no alien invasion, no little green men.

Her guide waited and she thought maybe she should be afraid and she was, but not of it. It had that vague familiar feeling, like a face she hadn't seen in along time, even though there was no face there to look at. No glowing eyes to show sentience or awareness, but it moved, drifting back slowly, then a little bit quicker when she took a step forward to follow. Nothing she knew, but maybe something she would.

It didn't take her long to find him, a crumpled ball of blood and scorched clothing, laid out beneath one of the area's signature oaks, like he'd stretched out for a nap. Where he wasn't scorched and bloodied, there was mud and black dirt, bits of ash, but the area around him was clean, grass still green and shimmering from the early onset dew.

"Oh, honey," she murmured and knelt, letting her fingers slide along his throat. The pulse there was weak but steady, blood ran over her fingers sticky and warm. That same sense of loss and rage and grief -- it pulled down, pulled in, focused, became a tight little ball of pain that made her eyes water.

She looked around then, toward where the lights were. There'd be ambulance there, help-- and she needed to look for -- "I need to get help." She did. She couldn't get Dean back to the car herself, and he needed a hospital, a doctor, more than she could--

The shadow settled beside him, curved and wound itself around Dean. She stared at it.

Then she sat back on her heels and let the tears fall.

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About three days after they'd left Jo and Ellen and the roadhouse behind them, Sam got hit by a vision that drove him to his knees in the middle of a crowded diner. It was all Dean could do not to shoulder people back -- concerned, worried, frightened people -- but



he managed not to clock anyone, got a shoulder under Sam's and dragged him into the bathroom to wait for it to pass.

Only it didn't. It eased off enough for Sam to be semi-coherent, to relate what he saw -- open field, headstones, foundation of a building. No faces though. Nothing he could identify.

It eased just enough for Dean to get him to the car, to make a run back to their motel room, where he practically had to carry Sam inside.

Three hours. Three hours and twenty-two minutes later Sam finally came back to himself enough to be thoroughly and messily sick all over himself, the bed, and Dean.

And then he passed out.

Dean fingered his phone because this was more than he knew how to deal with. Not that he was great with dealing with Sam's visions at the best of times, but this was worse. He could almost think it was harder to watch than it was to feel but a glimpse at Sam's sweat-sheened, ashen face, he didn't actually think that was true.

But there was no one in his phone to call, no one to help. Ellen had made that abundantly clear.

So, he cleaned Sam up, got him conscious enough to move him to the other bed, washed himself off and started hunting for information.

By midnight he'd bundled up the soiled bedding and left it outside the room and used his coat and duffle as a makeshift pillow along the end of the bed. Sam slept, but it was restless and just watching him made Dean feel exhausted.

When Sam came awake around four, Dean thought maybe the worst of it was over, but he was wrong. The only good was that Sam didn't have anything left in his stomach to vomit up.

"I'm getting no details," Sam said when it finally passed. "Just an empty field. No faces -- no people...just fire and something dark, like a shadow only not. And just the is feeling... "

"Feeling? How do you see feelings, Sam?"

Sam giving him an eye roll and disgusted face made Dean feel better than anything else could have. "I'm not seeing them...just I get this feeling of...of..."

"What? Anger? Fear?"

"No...no. It's like...triumph, almost joy but not...not like winning something."

Dean stared at him and Sam looked just as baffled as Dean felt. "Okay," Dean said. "I don't even know where to start with this one. You feel up to a shower? You kind of reek."

Sam shifted to the side of the bed, still shaky, and reeking or not, Dean caught his arm and hauled him up. "I don't usually get feelings. It's not...I mean they aren't mine. I don't think. This is weird even for me."

"Everything about you is weird. It should be normal by now." Sam managed to get to the bathroom mostly on his own but he stopped, bracing his arms against the doorway.

"I need to talk to someone, Dean. And I know you don't want to, but I need to go see Missouri."

It wasn't so much Missouri Dean didn't want to see as the entire freaking state of Kansas again. He shrugged, pulled out clean clothes for Sam. "So, we'll go see her. Get cleaned up. I'll call her."

Dean didn't really like Missouri.

But he trusted her and that was pretty much all he had left.

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It had taken the better part of the day to find someone close enough to Kansas and who owed Ellen a big enough favor, for them to get more news than what they could find on the television or Ash could pluck from the internet.

Richard Harney did it more to get out of debt than curiosity. He wasn't and would never be her first choice -- the man had the imagination of a can of peas -- but he was a decent observer and he was in Jefferson City.

It still took him nearly another day to call her back, and she knew it was big just from the tone of his voice.

"I can't get real close. There's all kind of cops and scientists, I guess, crawling all over the place. They got it cordoned off nearly a quarter mile back."

"What about the car? You see the Impala?" Ellen demanded.

"No. No. I drove all the way around. Tried to listen in a couple of times...talked to one of them camera guys with the news crews. If it was here, it's gone now."

"All right. What else?"

"I don't know what to tell you, Ellen. They're saying it's a meteor strike but...even the m lab guys aren't sure of that. Have to be a big chunk to explode like it did, and there's a crater but it ain't that deep. And they got those radioactivity monitors set up all over but no body's wearing anything to protect them from it if it's there. It's a damn near perfect circle though -- scorched earth for about a thousand yards in all direction, scorched it right down to the bedrock. Flattened pretty much everything; trees, gravestones -- turned some of them into lightening glass, looks like."

"And nobody's saying anything about anyone being there?"

"Not that I'm hearing. Ain't much out here -- no witnesses or nothing. But if there was anybody in that cemetery when whatever this was hit, there wouldn't even be ash left of 'em. I will tell you that this whole place is screaming with EMF. I didn't even have to check it myself -- them university folks, they've got their own set up and they've been whining pretty steadily since they set 'em up, one of 'em said."

Ellen didn't know what to do with that information. Maybe the car hadn't been Dean's after all. Maybe they hadn't been there at all. If one or the other of them would pick up their damn phone she'd have an answer, but both of them were rolling over to voice mail which told her absolutely nothing.

"All right. Do me one more favor...just check out the police impound lot. If that was Dean's car, then if the police have it, they might have taken it there."

Harney agreed without giving her much lip, even offered to stick around for a day or two in case anything turned up. That, of course, would put her back on the owing side of things even more but she thanked him as sincerely as she could.

Jo had heard only her half of the conversation, but she was waiting for the rest. Ellen shook her head. "He's got nothing."

"Maybe they weren't there."

"Sam said they were heading to Kansas -- said his visions had gotten worse. Then this?"

Jo chewed on her lip. "I could go -- "

"Don't you even- "

"Then you go!" Jo snapped back. "I can handle the bar. Don't tell me you 're not worried," she said and it was almost a taunt. Jo had just enough respect for her not to push it that far, but the truth was she was right. No matter what John had done or not done or why, his sons hadn't done anything more than trust her.

"We'll give Harney another day. See if he comes up with anything. Maybe Ash will find something," she said and Jo looked unconvinced, possibly even a little resolute, but Ellen

pretended not to see it. Ash had gotten nothing yet...but then again, none of them were sure what they were looking for.

Harney's extra day didn't get them anything either and Ellen had a long argument -- with herself mostly -- about what going down there would gain her. She wasn't a hunter, had never wanted to be one. She wasn't even sure the boys had been heading toward Lawrence -- Kansas was big state. They could have gone to Wichita for all she knew.

But Jo made it pretty clear that if Ellen didn't go, she would. So she gassed up her truck, packed an overnight bag and let Jo close down the bar so she could get an early start.

She'd heard a lot of thing over the years, knew most of what her husband had gotten into, probably knew as much about the demons in the dark as anyone who didn't hunt could. But in all that time her own personal encounters with the supernatural had been few and far between. She preferred to keep it that way.

What woke her wasn't anything so easily identified as a noise or even the lack of it. No change in temperature and no bleed from dream to waking that she remembered. She woke suddenly and completely. There was nothing but the normal sounds of her bedroom at night, no rumble of car or truck on the road. The street light at the edge of the parking lot made her curtains glow without actually allowing much light in. Her bedside clock made the low whir of sound it always made when the numbers flipped over to let her know it was 4:31 in the morning.

She couldn't see anything out of place at first and even when she did find her eyes straying to the corner of the room between her dresser and closet, she couldn't *see* anything different other than the deepening of the shadow there.

Then she heard it -- nothing so obvious as breathing or actual sound, only the shift and rustle like a light breeze over leaves, or across a stack of napkins. She hit the bedside light almost immediately, blinking against the brightness. The shadow was far less but it was still *there*, just the faintest shape of it, stretching up and out along the corner of the room and along the walls, but there was no real form to it. No real reason for it to be there -- almost as if it were merely a shape being cast from outside through her drapes.

Then it moved, the edges of it dwindling as it moved across the room, leaving less of a pattern on the wall and more of frail opaqueness in the air itself.

She might not be a hunter but she was around them all the time. She was out of the bed and reaching for the shotgun loaded with rocksalt, pulling the drawer of her bedside table open for the holy water she kept there.

She had her finger on the trigger, and her other hand around the spray bottle, when the shadow or whatever it was faded completely. She stared, straining her eyes, looking around the room and seeing nothing.

The whisper of sound came again though and she blinked at the sudden appearance of something black and coiled on her bed. It was small and still, a perfect knotted circle of black. She set the bottle down and reached for it.

It was no more than a thin, wear-blackened bit of leather cord. A friendship bracelet of some kind of a remembrance and she knew she'd seen it before. More than once.

Dean and Sam both wore them. Sam had one, knotted loosely around his right wrist. Dean wore two. They were identical as far as she knew and this one...there was nothing to say which one it was more like -- no easy to identify name tag or charm -- just a thin band of knotted leather. She sat back down on the edge of the bed, still casting around for some clue, some hint of what or how it had been left. Wanting -- God help her -- that faint presence to return.

Then her cell phone rang.

She snatched it up, flipping it open to see the caller ID.

*<i>Sam W.</i>*

"Sam?" she said but there was nothing but tone on the other end.

She called it back immediately but got nothing but Sam's voice mail.

She hung up, and another number popped and dialed.

*<i>Dean W.</i>*

It rang twice and the third would be voice mail again, but someone answered.

It was a woman, with a low soft, sleepy southern accent. "Hello?"

"H...hi? I was trying to reach Dean?"

"Who is this?"

"My name is Ellen. I'm a...friend. I was a friend of John's too. We've been trying to reach Dean. Him and Sam. Who is this?"

"My name's Missouri. You want to tell me what you need him for?"

Something like relief flooded through her suddenly enough to make her head ache.

"I just... I was checking -- can I talk to him?"

"You know what time it is?"

"Yes. Look we've been trying to reach them for a couple of days now...and please. Are they okay?"

There was silence for a moment. "Dean....Dean isn't able to talk to anyone at the moment."

"What about Sam? Look, I don't really want to wake them up but if you could tell them...I mean Sam just called me."

"What?"

"He just called me...I mean, my phone rang and it was his number--"

"It wasn't Sam," Missouri said. "At least..." she hesitated.

"There was no one there but there's...a..."

"Ellen. I want you to listen to me very carefully. I want you to take a couple of deep breaths and relax."

"What? Can't you just--"

"No. I can't. Because I don't *<i>know* you." Missouri's voice was firm and Ellen stopped. Stopped and took two slow deep breaths.

"All right. Look...my number should be in his phone. I'm going to hang up. You find it, you call me," she said and she could only pray Dean hadn't deleted her from his phone.

"Fair enough."

Missouri hung up without a goodbye and Ellen did as well. When her phone chirped again, it was Dean's number calling her.

"Still doesn't tell me much but that he knows you."

"Are they hurt? Look, I know they were going to Kansas, and I've been watching the news."

"You someone they helped or do you hunt?"

"I don't hunt. But I run a roadhouse in Nebraska where hunters sometimes come. Harvelle's."

"You're William Harvelle's widow?"

"Yes. You know him?"

"Only his name. John--" she stopped again. "I'm sorry. For your loss."

"Thank you," Ellen said tightly. "Now, can we stop dancing around each other long enough for you tell me if the boys are all right? Were they there? At Stull?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Missouri said carefully, but Ellen heard her take a breath. "Dean's messed up pretty bad. Nothing that will kill him, but he's gonna be healing up for awhile yet."

"And Sam? He *called* me."

Missouri was quiet again. "Ellen, if he called you, it wasn't from this side of the grave. He's gone. He's...dead."

Ellen's fingers tightened on the thin strip of leather and she found herself looked around again. There were shimmering shapes at the corners of the room but it wasn't because of some presence. She wiped at her eyes. "Tell me what happened."

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It took a week of almost solid bedrest before Dean could even get up to do much more than make it to the bathroom. The first two days were the worst, and if he'd been capable of feeling anything at all, he'd have felt sorry for keeping Missouri tied to his bedside. She fed him tea with something bitter in it that made him sleep and the ever present ache grinding pain of broken bones bearable.

On the third day she called someone in, a friend of hers, but he had trouble staying awake for more than five minutes at a time.

The woman she called in was small and bird frail, possibly well past a hundred years old. She had skin as black and worn as old leather and what was left of her hair clung to her head in tiny little white curls. She had the bluest eyes Dean had ever seen and of all of her, they were the only thing that didn't look old. her hands shook a little until she laid them on his skin, feeling along ribs and muscles, down along his legs.

"He probably needs x-rays," Missouri said.

"Probably," Miss Lainey said, pressing along his lower ribs and belly. Dean sucked a breath in and those sharp eyes settled on his face, watching him instead of what her hands were doing. "Got a break, here and here," she said and Dean could swear he could feel the ribs on the left side shift under her hands. "There's some bleeding under the skin, in between the muscles but it'll drain off on it own. I've got some poultices and some herbs for broth you can give him to ease it out faster." She flipped the blankets back, down along his side and he made a grab for them.

She caught his wrist in a surprisingly strong grip. "I've buried two husbands, four children, and three grand-babies, son. Ain't nothing you got I ain't seen."

He resisted anyway. "You a faith healer? Because I've had my fill of them."

"Mm-hmm," she said. "You think if I could heal I'd have buried so many of my own?" She never looked down, didn't let him go, but her other hand felt along his thigh and calf, lingering over his shin below the knee. "Got a fracture there. Need to bind it and keep it wrapped. Stay off it for a bit." She felt along his other leg too then pulled the blankets up around his hips. She let go of his hand and Dean stared at her. The creases and lines in her face deepened, and he caught a glimpse of white teeth before she held her hand out for Missouri to help her from the bed. "Death ain't making a grab for you, yet, son. Ain't nothing you got broke won't heal in time. You give it the time and you'll heal up fine. Push it and you'll be predicting the weather off that leg and tornadoes with those ribs -- they'll give you a tickle when one's coming. You got bruises ain't come up yet but when they do, you ain't going to be so pretty."

"Just from touch," he asked, uncertain.

One of those frail hands rested on his forehead briefly. "Some gifts are kinder than others," she said. "The rest of what's ailing you won't heal so easy."

Missouri walked her out and Dean could only stare at the ceiling for the longest time before gritting his teeth and forcing himself to swing his legs over the bed. Pain shot up his leg when his toes touched the floor but he breathed through it.

Even so, he knew he should hurt more. Physically, he should be in such pain that he needed more than Missouri's teas and broth. Except Miss Lainey was right. What was broken in terms of bones and flesh would heal.

It wasn't even grief really. Not any longer, maybe not ever. He was angry. Angry at still being alive. Angry that Missouri had found him. Angry that he'd agreed to come back to this God-forsaken state when nothing good ever came of it and hadn't since the first time he left.

But mostly he was full out, no-holds-barred, blindingly, irrevocably furious with Sam. If he had him in front of him, Dean would have beaten him to a bloody pulp. Torn him down verbally and physically and emotionally and been totally satisfied to watch his little brother cry and beg for forgiveness.

But that was the problem, wasn't it?

Sam wasn't here. Sam was gone. Gone. Gone. Gone. And nothing Dean could do, no curse or bargain he could make would bring him back. Sam had died right in front of him



and taken out an acre of land, a dozen people, and twice that many demons, right in front of him and Dean hadn't been able to stop it.

It had been Sam's choice. No matter the circumstances, no matter the situation, Sam had made that choice. Dean knew why, might even have made the same choice had it been him.

But he would never, never in a million years have left Sam behind.

That Sam had left him behind, was something Dean could never forgive.

"You should be resting," Missouri said from the doorway.

"I should be dead," Dean said.

Missouri nodded, unsmiling. "Maybe. But you're not. And I'm thinking there's a reason for it."

Dean rubbed at his face. "How'd you find me anyway?"

Missouri looked down and Dean found that odd, uncomfortable. Missouri Moseley, as far as he knew, never did anything without taking it on straight forward and head up. "I heard you. Them...Got there quick as I could. I..I don't know that I expected to find anything. Found you, though. Clear of it."

Dean blinked, stared at the faded carpet beneath his feet. He could see the stairwell beyond the door. "How'd you get me here?" he asked. He couldn't remember anything past the point of....

"I don't know."

He looked up and Missouri was looking at him, brow furrowed. "I don't remember. I don't remember driving back. I don't remember getting you up here. I don't remember asking for help. Something brought me to you, Dean. And something else...got us both back here. Lainey was right. Death ain't ready to make a grab for you yet. You might want to think on that. What were ya'll doing out there?"

Dean stared at her. It came on him suddenly. The irony of it. That abso-freaking-lutely pointlessness of it. The laughter made his ribs hurt, sent pain up his spine and the taste of blood into the back of his throat. He welcomed it. Wanted it. It filled up the hollow places and shoved the anger aside.

"We were..." Missouri came forward, concern marking her expression and Dean held a hand up. "What do you think? We were saving the world, Missouri. All in a day's work. We were saving the world."

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They drove straight through, picking up the 880 through Iowa then south once they hit Omaha. Dean stuck to the highways which he didn't normally like to do.

"We can stop if you need to rest," Sam offered more than once. Not to swap off driving because although the headache had abated somewhat, Sam still had the pinched look from unrelenting pain, pulling the lines around his mouth tighter and making him sensitive to light and loud noises. Occasionally it got worse and Sam would get pale, hunch down in the seat and concentrate on not being sick in the car. No way either of them would trust Sam behind the wheel.

"If I need to I will." Dean kept any hint of anger or frustration out of his tone of voice. They were already pushing twenty-four hours of Sam like this. The visions and the accompanying headaches had never lasted this long and all without giving them a damn bit more information that what Sam had already related.

Stopping seemed pointless. Sam wouldn't be able to sleep, and if he was going to miserable he might as well be miserable in the car.

They stopped twice for gas and coffee, and both times Dean had fingered his phone to call Missouri, to give her a head's up. The first time he couldn't get a signal and the second it was so late he decided he could at least wait until morning. They'd be nearly across Iowa by then, reach Lawrence sometime mid-morning.

It was quarter of four when Sam's phone rang which pulled a grunt from him as he fumbled for it, eyes slitted in his face as he tried to focus on the display. "It's Andy..." he muttered and Dean had a second to place the name.

"Andy slow down," Sam said fingers pressed to his eyes. "When did it start?" he listened and then reached over to pat Dean's arm, pointing at him to pull over. "I don't know Andy. You said it was a dream but --" Sam winced again as the voice at the other end got higher and louder.

Dean could only barely hear Andrew Gallagher on the other end but he didn't need to hear the words to know the kid was outright freaking out. He eased the car onto the shoulder and then reached over to pluck the phone from Sam's hand.

"Andy, it's Dean. Talk to me, man. Calmly," he said, glancing at where Sam was trying to breathe slow and steady.

*"Oh, wow,"* Andy said, sounding perfectly calm. *"You just made this so much easier. So, Dean...I need you to bring Sam to Kansas. Stull Cemetery. Do whatever you have to do get him here. But keep it cool. Keep it frosty, man."*

Dean knew what this felt like, the compulsion behind Andy's voice and this time it was far stronger than what he remembered. He tried, tried so hard to look at Sam to let him know there was something wrong, but Sam was scrunched down, so caught up in the pain he didn't even look at Dean. "It's not going to be a problem. We should be there in a few hours. We'll see you there."

*"Good. Even after you hang up, Dean. You keep it to yourself...and if Sam starts asking questions -- whatever it takes, man. We need him here alive, but not necessarily whole, you know?"*

"I understand. We'll see you soon," Dean said and the phone clicked off.

He pulled the car back onto the road.

"He said..." Sam mumbled. "He's been having dreams. A man with yellow eyes. Like his brother."

"I know," Dean said and tried to make the car swerve, alert Sam to something, but his hands were steady, and the Impala's engine purred happily as he pushed her a little for some extra speed.

"We promised to help him."

"We will, Sam," Dean said. "He's gonna meet us in Lawrence. It's going to be okay. You just try and relax. We'll be there soon."

It had to be what possession felt like, to be fully aware that the Andy Gallagher he'd just talked to was a very different man than the confused and harmless guy they'd met only a few weeks earlier. To know that he was taking Sam to something that wanted to hurt him, to know he was being used. All of it in his brain and unable to stop himself. Unable to warn Sam.

Andy called them twice more and both times he played Sam for reassurance and then reinforced his orders to Dean.

Dawn broke just as they hit Kansas City and cut across westward toward Lawrence.

"You call Missouri?" Sam asked him, voice raw and raspy.

"Not yet. You should call her," Dean managed to get out quickly. Anything -- something. Don't make Sam suspicious...let someone know where they were.

Sam pulled out his phone, and Dean could feel his muscles tensing, fist forming.

"It's really early. Maybe we should stop for coffee in Lawrence, at least give her time to wake up."

"That works, too," Dean said. "We could stop now--" the last word was squeaked out, and his hands clenched the steering wheel, fighting through the compulsion that felt like a band around his throat, growing tighter.

"Dean? You okay?"

"I'm fine," Dean grated out, fighting two fronts. He just needed to break this -- push it off. He didn't know what Andy wanted, didn't know what the demon wanted, but neither of them wanted anything good for Sam.

"Dean!" Sam warned him as he crossed the centerline, narrowly missing getting clipped by an oncoming car. "Dude, what's going on?"

Sam's phone rang again.

"Don't answer it!" Dean managed. Pain lanced through his brain, made his heart pound too hard and he jerked the wheel, trying for the shoulder.

Sam didn't pick up the phone, too busy holding onto the dash and back of the seat as Dean struggled with the car. The phone rang shrilly as they bumped onto the grass and dirt at the side of the road.

"Dean, what the hell's going on, man?" Sam demanded.

He needed to tell Sam. Had to tell him but he couldn't. Couldn't get his jaw to unclench to get the words out.

And the phone kept ringing.

Sam gripped his shoulder and flipped it open with his other hand. "Sam -- don't!"

*"Do what you have to do, Dean!"* Andy's voice whispered across the front of the car.

"Andy? What are you--"

Sam never saw it coming. Wasn't prepared for it. Was already riding the thin edge of consciousness even with the adrenaline push of the last few moments. Plus, if you knew how to hit him right, Sam had a glass jaw.

Dean knew exactly how to hit him.

Even so, Sam almost dodged it, caught the edge of Dean's fist, but he didn't have time to recover and Dean hit him again, breath breaking in a sob as Sam slumped down in the passenger side of the Impala.

*"Pick up the phone, Dean."*

His knuckles were wet and red with Sam's blood from the split in his lip.

*"You're a lot stronger than I gave you credit for, but not strong enough. So, he's going to be onto you now when he comes to. Make sure it's not a problem."*

"I can do that," Dean said. There was rope in the trunk, handcuffs. "How'd you know?"

*<i>"Aw, Dean, Dean...Sam's wired to send and receive. Who'd you think he's been fighting off for the last two days? But really, don't worry about it. He's gonna be fine and you too. It's all going to be good, isn't it?"</i>*

Dean got out of the car and went to the trunk, getting what he needed. "Yeah," he said, into the phone. "It's all gonna be fine."

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He'd asked Missouri about his car, said nothing but thank you when she offered to have a friend of hers go pick it up on the side street where he'd left it. It got returned to him with a bright orange sticker flagged on the windshield for a parking violation. Another day or so and they'd have towed it.

There wasn't much he could do for the first few days but follow Missouri and Miss Lainey's instructions. He rested. He slept more than he actually had patience for. He drank or ate what Missouri gave him if for no other reason than the one driving goal he had was to get healed up enough to get out from under Missouri's worried eye.

And she was worried; he didn't need to be psychic to know it -- could even admit she had some right to be. She didn't snipe or smack him down like she was inclined to do. Then again, he wasn't inclined to give her any lip, verbally or mentally, that would prompt it.

Ellen showed up six days later, uncertain of her welcome. Dean was uncertain of how he felt about her being there. He wasn't even close to feeling gratitude or even anger with her, or Missouri for that matter. That was all reserved and stored up, bankrolled and stockpiled for use later. He didn't even try for the civilities of *thank you for coming*. He was only minorly glad Jo hadn't come along as well.

"What do you want?"

"I just wanted to make sure you are -- I'm just checking up on you."

"I'm peachy. Great."

He had to give Ellen points. She got the hint and ignored it. She also reached into her pocket and pulled out the thin leather bracelet. "This...this showed up in my room, a couple of days after. Something brought it to me."

Dean took it. Fingering it. He knew what it was. Why it had show up at Ellen's and exactly who and what had brought it there only threatened to open up the deep chasm of pain he'd only barely begun to build a bridge over.

"It's Sam's, isn't it?" she asked.

"Looks like it."

"Why me?"

"I don't know, Ellen. Maybe my baby brother had the hots for you. Decided to leave you a little token of his affection," Dean said coolly. If it was Sam, it was more than his brother had done for him.

"Was it the demon -- it found you? You found it?"

Dean set the bracelet on the bedside table. "I guess it got tired of waiting. So, you know, scratch one bad guy from the list," he said.

"What did it want?"

He still found it funny. No one could say he'd lost his sense of irony. "Hell on earth. World domination. The secret to the Colonel's special recipe. Doesn't matter. It didn't get it. It got everything I wanted, everything I gave a shit about. But the rest of you? You're all good."

She shifted uncomfortably. "Is there anything you need? Anything I can do?"

"Well, I'd offer to let you salt and burn the bodies but there aren't any, so you know...thanks for the offer."

She nodded and straightened her back again, met his gaze. "Roadhouse is still open to you, you ever need anything."

"I'll keep it in mind."

She'd left then, without a good-bye or a good luck.

The next day, Dean made himself get out of bed, get dressed and tackle the stairs. He was sweating and shaky when he reached the bottom of them, but he waved Missouri off. He made it as far as her back porch where he sat in the weak sunshine for the better part of the morning, fingering the third bracelet that now encircled his wrist. He'd had to cut the

leather and retie it. Sam's hands were bigger but his wrists were less thick than Dean's own. The knot he'd cut free was tucked into the corner of his wallet.

He spent the after noon testing out the crutches Missouri had found for him. They were awkward. His leg would bear his weight, but he was familiar enough with fractures to know that too much weight too soon and it wouldn't heal straight. Using the crutches put extra pressure on his ribs, but he was less worried about puncturing a lung than he was about having to spend one more day in bed or stay another day longer in this place than he had to.

Missouri didn't try and stop him. She pressed money into his hand and he didn't even protest taking it. "All I get from you is anger and more anger," she said. "That's your due. What happened out there -- that wasn't your fault," She said and tightened her grip on Dean's hand when he would have pulled away. "What your father did, what Sam did -- ain't so many people in the world that's got people that will die for them."

"I never wanted it. I never *asked* for it."

"No, you didn't. You'd have done the same thing for them, Dean Winchester. You've come damn close more times than even I can see. Now, you listen to me -- even though I know you won't believe me yet, maybe not for a long time. Your father's life was not worth more than yours. Neither was Sam's--don't you interrupt me, boy," she said and pushed him back. He was stronger now but Missouri caught him by surprise and he grunted when his back hit the wall by the door. "You're gonna walk out that door and I'm likely as not never going to see you again, so, I'm gonna say my piece. Your Daddy and your brother loved you like you loved them. Saw in you what you can't see in yourself. You can be as angry as you want to be at Sam for leaving you behind, but, if it had been you -- you'd have wanted him to go on."

"Sam didn't die for me," Dean spat out. "He never wanted any of this. He wanted this to be over, to end it more than anything."

"Yes, he did. But if you don't think that had anything to do with you, you don't know your brother nearly as well as you think."

"And I guess I never will," Dean spat and shouldered past her and out the door.

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The way things worked, it sometimes took a bit of time for news to get passed around. Usually the folks who stayed in the same place tended to get word quicker than those on the road. Nothing messed up a hunt faster than getting a cell phone call that the feller you bought a beer for last week or last month is cooling his heels in a jail in Albuquerque and needed bail money wired to him.

'Course there weren't that many people Bobby Singer would actually put up bail money for and of those he would? Most of them were dead now.

He hadn't wanted to take John Winchester's phone when the boys had offered it to him, but Dean looked like he didn't want to touch it and Sam kind of looked like he wished it were made of solid gold. Then again, Sam had always had a sense of obligation about him, even as a kid. Dean had manners, mostly because John had kind of drilled them into him, but Sammy, Sammy had *manners*, please and thank you came to him as easy as breathing which was kind of a miracle given who had raised him. Not that John, nor Dean either, hadn't done their best to make sure Sam didn't get what he needed and sometimes a little extra, but all that socializing and civilizing seemed to have stuck to Sam as a matter of course instead of being a tool to be used as necessary.

Lord knew John Winchester never said please or thank you unless he really meant it, and sometimes not even then.

So Bobby'd taken the phone. It was a fancy one -- John did like it when his toys had more worth to him than what he paid for them, especially if he paid for them. Most of the folks programmed in it Bobby already knew; the few he didn't he'd do a little hunting on, find out why John had thought them valuable.

What he really liked, though, once he got used to it, was that he could make different folks numbers ring different. He pent a couple of days on the internet after the boys had finally hit the road, downloading songs and jingles into the phone with a certain amount of glee. There was just something funny about programming Rudy Hale's number to ring under Pink Floyd's *Money*. Man never called but wanting a loan or something -- and Bobby wouldn't have bothered with him at all except Rudy came up with the weirdest shit that later proved useful, more than anybody else Bobby knew.

He kinda felt like Sam and Dean -- Dean especially -- might be a little put out to know he'd hunted up Kansas songs for them. Truth was, he'd called John Kansas when they first met until the day John showed him how much he really didn't like he nickname. But still, he liked the group, he liked those boys, it all fit together in his head one way or t'other.

He wasn't too sure the boys would appreciate the choices he'd made either so he'd just kept those to himself.

It wasn't no surprise, when he heard a tinny version of "*Wayward Son*", coming out of his pocket, though. It was a little late in the evening but not too late, and he was grinning when he flipped the phone open.

"Hey, Sam. How's it going?"

He was greeted by nothing but static in his ear. "Huh," he said. Must have lost the signal. He tried calling back and got through with no problem -- but all he got was Sam's voice mail.



Well, if Sam were calling, Dean shouldn't be far away and he thumbed the pad upward to call him -- only to have the highlight bar stall on Missouri Moseley's name. He cut it off before it could dial and tried again.

It stuck once more on Missouri's name -- dialed it without him touching it.

"Hello?"

He'd never talked to her before. "Ms. Moseley? Uh, you don't know me. My name's Bobby Singer. I'm a friend of the Winchesters -- John and Dean and Sam...and..."

"He called you didn't he?"

"What? Who?"

"Sam."

She sounded all tense and yet, hopeful. "Uh, yeah...but when I picked up...he was gone."

"Not as gone as I thought," she muttered. "Mr. Singer, I'm taking it you didn't hear what happened."

"Something happened?"

"I hope you are sitting down."

Bobby sat down.

It didn't take her long to tell him and Bobby had the same gut clenching feeling he'd had on seeing them all after the crash.

"But...but , if it's Sam...and he's...I mean why call me? Why call Ellen? Why isn't he calling Dean?"

"I ain't sure he can get through to Dean. I'm not sure anyone can, but if...if this is Sam...even just some part of him, sounds like he's got something to say."

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He'd meant to leave immediately. It didn't matter where. There were some places he could hole up but the idea of settling anyplace made him want to scream. He wanted to fight or fuck but he was in no shape for either. Killing something he could do, though. Hunt something, keep moving. Maybe catch up to something he couldn't kill.

He headed west, but found himself veering off the I-40, just outside of Lawrence.

What was left of Stull Cemetery was still cordoned off with police tape. There were a few people still there -- a van with a satellite dish and the university logo on the side -- but nobody in uniform. On the far side, down a side street he found Andy's van, looking incongruous and out of place in the middle of nowhere. It had two orange traffic stickers. It would be gone next time the cops cased the area. The plates would be run but no one would ever know what happened to Andy Gallagher, or the other people gathered into the field to unleash something that was never meant for the world.

Dean didn't even know what it was -- what it would have been. Legions of the undead, maybe. Lesser demons let loose to wreak havoc. Nightmares and monsters. All of the above.

All of it stopped dead in mid-birth, aborted before it ever got started.

There was nothing left of what had been there. Not the carefully drawn circle, not the standing pillars of flesh and bone and power that neither he nor even Sam with his guilt-ridden imagination had been able to foresee.

Besides Andy, he hadn't recognized any of the other eleven people who made up that circle, nor the faces and forms the demon and his children had occupied. Missing people all, now, and he could only wonder if their families would make peace with their absence, if any of the thirteen beyond Sam had family to even worry about or miss them. Andy didn't. Andy had killed the only blood family he knew. He'd saved Dean's life in the doing of it, but there was no one left to miss him.

"Not every seed planted grows," the demon had said to him. They'd left him outside the circle, bound and watched. Andy's talents were needed elsewhere.

It had crouched down next to him. "Survival of the fittest. The right soil, enough rain and sunshine, and you get a good crop," he said, gesturing at the array of people, all near Sam's age, standing on the delineated points of the circle.

And Sam in the middle. The others stood unfettered, unbound, there willingly more or less. All but Sam. Sam who was on his knees, tied up and still unconscious, head lolling against his chest, bound to a roughly put together cross.

And even then, Dean thought it had the look of a rush job, of something improvised, no matter how confident the demon in his ear sounded.

"I've got a fine crop. Look at them. Killers all. Most of them came to me on their own. Even Andy, but I should thank you for that one. His brother showed such promise. I was sorry to lose him, but I lost him and there was Andy, already a killer and I didn't have to do a thing."

"Sam's not a killer," Dean spat at him, and then felt the all too familiar compression inside himself, of muscles and bones grinding together, blood leeching out of tissue. The only thing that made it even bearable was that the demon wasn't wearing his father's face this time.

The pressure on his insides eased up as he was jerked upward. Not to his feet, because his ankles were tied, but he was held easily between the grip of two of the demon's children. The demon's eyes glowed yellow and he smiled. "No. No, he's not. Not yet. But we already know you'd kill for him. Don't you think he'd kill for you?"

"He won't do it," Dean grated out.

"Won't he? He's been off his game since Daddy died. Died for you, Dean. Died and *<i>is still dying over and over.</i>* Since pretty Jessica died. He came damn close to it when you were dying. You remember that? You think if he'd known about the little Reaper on a leash the preacher's wife was calling, he'd have done anything different? He'd do pretty much anything for you, Dean. It's touching really. It's also the weakness I wasn't sure of until he let me go for you."

"He didn't--"

"Of course he did. If he'd put that bullet in your father when Johnny told him to, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now. He's got a bad case of hero worship. A blind spot of faith when it comes to you."

They'd dragged him into the circle, right in front of Sam.

"What are you doing? What do you *<i>want?</i>*" he demanded, but his eyes were on Sam. Sam who still had dried blood on his chin from where Dean had hit him.

"Aw, now that would ruin the surprise." The demon stood beside Sam, stroking fingers through his hair, petting him like a dog. "Look at them, Dean. You know...it's not too late. You could be one of them. Join me. Let me put your talents to good use."

"Go to hell."

It chuckled. "Hell is a vacation home for me. You know, nice to look at. Great place if it weren't for all the damn tourists. But seriously, Dean. You could be part of this, of what's coming, instead of just a not-so-innocent bystander. I mean that's what you want, isn't it? Your family. You and Sammy forever, side by side."

"I'd hate to break up your perfect circle."

"You have a smart mouth, a keen sense of humor. I like that about you. Say yes and you can take the place of one of them, pick one. Maybe Andy since I know you aren't too happy with him right now," it said.

"I don't know. I don't think I fit your criteria. I'm kind of short on the whole freaky talent thing," Dean said, trying not to look at Sam, willing Sam to stay under, stay out, but already his brother was stirring, twitching under the demon's hand. And Dean could feel something, a prickle along his nerves that wasn't from the pins and needles dancing along his skin from his bound limbs.

"Oh, really? You know, you say that...I think you actually believe it. I know you want to believe it. But you know what it is, don't you, Dean? What makes these children -- Sam, <i>you -- so very special. Don't you? John thought he was being clever but I don't think it was just your <i>health he was worried about." It left Sam and stood over him. Nudged him with a booted foot. "You know what it is, don't you? It's in your blood. In Sam's blood. <i>In your mother's blood.</i> Your father was the real innocent in all of this, wasn't he? Marrying a woman and fathering sons on her to fight in a war that started long before mankind was doing more than howling at the moon and scratching its balls after feasting on raw meat. Mother Mary. Sainted Mary. Don't you wonder if she knew, Dean?"

Sam was awake, blinking groggily at his surroundings and registering them with a quickness Dean would be proud of any other time.

"You know, one of the first things my father taught me, is that demons <i>lie</i>," Dean hissed out. "You did something to Sam. This isn't anything to do with our mother."

"Really? Denial isn't an attractive look on you, Dean-o. Because you know it deep in your bones. Granted, your abilities aren't as useful to me as Sam's, but they showed up earlier. Too early for them to be able to be seen as anything but luck or a knack. But you can always find, Sam, right? Always know where he is. If he's in trouble. If you tried. Always knew when your father was in trouble, too, didn't you? How to find him. If you <i>tried.</i> What do you think Sam would think about that, if he knew. That you could have found John, anytime, if you'd just <i>applied yourself. But that would have fucked up your plans, wouldn't it have? Better to have Sam go with you...help you. Get your <i>family</i> back together."

"It wasn't like that," Sam said, voice grating out. The demon turned to him and smiled.

"See, Dean? He's got such blind faith in you. Didn't you wonder, Sam. Even once?"

"No."

"Really? Your brother's gift isn't really that different from yours, you know, Sammy. He's connected to you, to John. Always knows how to find you. Just like you know how to find them," it said and made a sweeping motion with his hand to encompass the circle. "Even if you didn't know that's what you were doing, you had most of it. They've all got their gifts, but you...you're the only one connected to all of them and more. The only one that brings them all in on something shared. And that makes you necessary."

"So I can watch them kill people? That's a pretty vicious case of voyeurism you've got," Sam said and Dean could see him straining, trying to free himself. The demon could see it too, and made no made no effort to stop him, even smiled at Sam's efforts.

"Aw, Sam. Killing people is the dues you pay to get into my little club, not the reason for it. Killing is the easy part once you've started. Ask your brother. He's got more than one life notched into the hilt of his gun -- even before he decided to put an end to my children and the bodies they occupied. Human lives, Sammy. Frail, fragile things that they are."

He'd whirled on Dean then, driven a booted foot into his side suddenly and forcefully enough to pull a cry out of Dean. "So, Sam...tell me again. Tell your brother again, that you won't kill for him. Die for him, yes. But kill? That's always been the line for you. The one you wouldn't cross, didn't want to cross."

The second kick didn't hurt any less, but Dean bit down on his tongue rather than cry out. He could taste the blood in his mouth.

"Stop it!"

"Stop it? I'm just getting started," it said and backed up. "I've got a door to open, Sam. You've got the key, you and your brothers and sisters here. Or cousins, if you like. Because that's what they are. Search back along your mother's family history far enough and you'll find all of them."

"Find what? What are you talking about?"

"The bloodlines, Sammy. Before the race of man found favor, there were others treading these grounds, walking this earth. Things without souls because no one needed them. Souls belong only to those who are mortal. But once upon a time, nothing ever died. So, you see, killing isn't just your destiny, it's your legacy. You and all the children who share the blood, no matter how faintly, of the ones who came before. *Because the daughters of man were fair, and the sons of heaven were weak.* Come on, Sammy. You're the scholar, the smart one. The Watchers were set among men, like shepherds. But they got bored, they got distracted. The first sons of God, the chosen of Ahriman, the Anakim...pick a culture and you'll find them, the ones who came before. But humans...humans are a prolific lot. Went at it like bunnies. You're also like a disease, infecting everything you touch. The conventional wisdom at the time was that you'd all end up killing each other in a hundred generations. Then a thousand. But here you still are." He looked past Sam, beyond the circle and smiled.

Sam tried to twist and Dean did as well, but it was dark and it wasn't until the demon's children were practically on them before he realized what they carried.

*Who* they carried.

She couldn't be more than twelve or thirteen, small framed and wearing jeans and a t-shirt, dark hair tangled around her face., She was bound like Dean was, at wrist and ankles, and she made little hurt sounds when they dropped her on the ground next to Dean.

"Takes blood to start this party off right, Sam," the demon said, crouching between Dean and the girl. He pushed her hair back off her face and she flinched, wouldn't look at him, but her eyes darted to Sam's face, panicked and scared. "And since you're the guest of honor, you get to choose. And just to make it all nice and tidy, lets pick a special way to offer up a sacrifice," it said and reached behind to pull out the Colt.

He pressed the muzzle of the gun to the girl's head and she whimpered and tried to duck away. "Your choice, Sam. Time to get your hands dirty. Lovely little Emily, here or..." he shifted and pressed a hand to Dean's shoulder, then pressed the muzzle of the Colt to the back of Dean's head. "Your father's favorite son."

Sam shook his head. "I won't do it."

"Then they'll both die."

"You need me to kill for this to work," Sam said quickly. "For my powers to work for you."

"Ah. No. Sam. No. I needed you to kill to let me inside. To give me an opening to persuade you. Train you. Your abilities are already there, Sam. You just have lousy control. Don't believe me?" he stood up.

"Time for you to greet your cousin properly, my children," it said.

The prickling along Dean's nerves increased, like static electricity. He glanced quickly at Sam who met his gaze with near panic.

None of the twelve moved, really, but Dean could see it, the first glimmering whispers of Saint Elmo's fire along their skin, spreading along their clothes and into the grass. It skittered and spread, following the demarcation in the grass for the circle. Filling it like liquid light, then it spread inward, filling patterns Dean could only barely see, circling and dancing its way inward like it was following the spokes of a wheel.

There was no way for Sam to get away from it. It crept up over his knees and legs like molten blue tinted silver, making his face look even paler, his eyes, bluer even in the dim light. Sam made a strangled sound in the back of his throat and squeezed his eyes shut, pulling hard enough against the ropes that he was likely to dislocate something.,

Even out of its path Dean could feel it, almost hear it hum against the earth, could hear he heard murmurs and whispers.

"*Dean!*" There was outright panic in Sam's voice and then his head snapped back, throat working its way around a scream of agony and fear that had Dean twisting and rolling, trying to get free and get to Sam all at once.

Sam's scream cut off as suddenly as it started, and he slumped forward, the odd eldritch light still dancing over his skin.

Dean would swear the entire circle was holding its breath. Even the girl, Emily was quiet, eyes scrunched closed, breathing rapidly but making no sound.

Sam lifted his head slowly, eyes opening, fixed on Dean. "Sam?"

"You can see them all, can't you, Sam?" the demon asked softly. "All the bloodlines and pathways. You just needed a little help focusing. A little extra something to make it all make sense," he said and he spoke so kindly.

Sam shook his head and blinked, like he was trying to clear his vision. There were tears streaming from his eyes and Dean didn't know if it were from pain or shock or what. His jaw was clenched tightly as he stared at Dean, the flickering glow on his skin making him look more ghostly than any spirit Dean had ever seen. He tilted his head, eyes tracing the perimeter of the circle, of the people waiting there. They all glowed. The whole circle sizzled with power, with pale light that blurred edges and bled the color from their skin, their clothing, from the grass. And beyond the circle, Dean could see shadows moving, like patterns cast by tree leaves and moonlight but there were no trees close by, nothing but open space.

Dean would swear that Sam's eyes glowed blue but he closed them again, rested his head back against the upright of the cross he was bound to.

Laying on the ground, Dean could swear he heard sounds beneath the dirt, the scratching and scritch of insects, or maybe corpses trying to dig their way free. Whatever was happening, it was making the dead unhappy.

"Time to open the door, Sammy," the demon said and stood again, between Dean and Emily. "Make your choice, or I'll make it for you."

When Sam opened his eyes again he was staring straight at Dean. He opened his mouth only to close it again.

"There's only one," Sam said softly. "I'm sorry, Dean," he said and the demon smiled, pressed the gun to Dean's temple.

Dean didn't know what to think. That Sam would try and save the girl, or try and save him. There was no good choice. "Sam..." he said it softly, closing his eyes.

"Forgive me," Sam said, evenly and steady and Dean's eyes flicked open just in time to see the gun fly jerkily from the demon's hand and hover. He caught only a glimpse of Sam's white face, mouth set and staring at the muzzle of the gun without flinching.

"No!" Dean screamed it at the same time as the demon, just as the gun went off and with horrible, horrible quickness, saw the blossom of red and black form in the middle of Sam's forehead.

It almost looked like Sam blinked sleepily, just once before his head fell forward, body slumping again. Almost immediately the blood started to drip, to fall. Striking the ground patters of it falling into the silver lit pattern that was sketched around Sam.

The light shifted and flicker, dimmed and flared red, spread backward, tracing the path it had taken, far more quickly than Sam's blood could fill the pattern.

"Sam. Oh, God, Sam... what did you do ...Why?" Dean said.

He didn't get an answer but the demon turned on him, eyes blazing gold, anger and something else contorting its face. Another kick drove Dean back, the demon blocking Sam's still body from his view.

The glowing red didn't stay with the pattern, it flared and spread. A another kick caught Dean along the temple, adding darkness to the spreading red, the flair of yellow, the rising heat.

The ground rumbled and erupted in fire. He could hear the screaming, wasn't sure when the kicking stopped, only barely caught a glimpse of the demon trying to escape its borrowed body only to be caught and snared in a flare of red and a burst of bright white.

Dean could feel the heat lick along his body, the earth itself steaming and the temperature rising.

He blinked the blood out of his eyes and stared at Sam. Would have crawled to him if he could. The air thickened and became hard to breath and Dean closed his eyes.

The earth heaved. There was a concussion of sound, like thunder, only right on top of him. He felt himself flung in the air as the earth rejected whatever sacrifice Sam had offered.

Dean could only thank whatever power was listening, that he wouldn't have to grieve a third time.

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It surprised no one when Dean Winchester fell off the already weakly aligned grid of hunters. It took a few months for that to really register with those who knew him. For



some it wasn't until when, calling his cell phone, they didn't get his message, only the far less reassuring response of, ...*the number you dialed is no longer in service. Please check the number and dial again.*

Weirder still was the fact that Sam's number still *did* work although as far as anybody knew, that phone was so much dust and slag and it was unlikely anyone was still paying the bill for it.

It was probably a kindness to call the assorted hunters and series of contacts and suppliers a "community". Common cause, maybe, but not so much with the common methods or even common knowledge. Even less so because the past year had seen the end of a lot of familiar names, a lot of points of contact: Pastor Jim and Caleb, Daniel Elkins and John Winchester. The Winchester boys. For a community as small as they were, those losses had an impact even if it was a merely an impersonal one.

There was no memorial. No universal remembrance. What there was was quieter, a drink between acquaintances, a toast to the fallen. A few swapped stories.

It got quieter for a time. There were still ghosts and hauntings, poltergeists, the occasional report of a werewolf or some other creature that crept in the dark looking for an easy meal, an easy target. Rats in the basement, bats in the belfries. The rumor of vampires became less rumor and more fact; another thing added to the list of creatures to be on the look out for. But the harder things -- the things that were clever or truly ruthless, the ones that were hard to kill or banish -- those seemed to be taking an extended sabbatical. Not too many of the people coming through Harvelle's Roadhouse found much to complain about regarding that, no matter the cause.

Ellen caught murmurs and whispers of things, hunters talking about odd occurrences -- odd even for them. She watched while Ash would be slumped over his beer, looking half asleep only to get up and go back to his room when the hunters passing through moved on. She watched Jo linger longer at tables she waited on, careful when she bussed the ones next to quietly talking men and women. She stepped up her practice with both guns and knives and Ellen tried to ignore the sound of gunshots echoing across the back lot of the roadhouse.

Rumors of a skin walker in Nevada had her thinking of Pete Ayles. Hunters tended to specialize. Oh, they all might know the best way to put a ghost to rest, a different method, maybe, for the various and sundry malevolent spirits, but usually they had one kind of creature they knew more about than others -- usually the same thing that put them on the hunter's lonely road to begin with. With Elkins gone, Gordon Walker was the man to talk to regarding vampires -- not something Ellen recommended, but the man knew his stuff. You ran across a nest or even a single operating succubus, you called The Preacher and she'd bring them to Jesus. You had fey lights or ran across soothsayers or stigmatics, you left a message for Alva Keel in Boston. You had a problem with elementals, Keith Ryan was the man to talk to.

You needed help or advice on an honest-to-the-Great-Spirit Native American skin walker, you left a message for Pete Ayles.

Ellen liked Pete. He was a quiet man, face that put him anywhere between forty and seventy. He had another name, one given to him by his tribe. He was a shaman without a people any longer but still called to do his work. She saw him maybe once or twice a year; he came once a year to purify the Roadhouse and usually the second time just for the company.

There'd been reports of something like a skin walker in Nevada, and Ellen hadn't really thought to call Pete -- that was his territory, he'd know.

Having him show up a third time in a year was unusual but not alarming and he didn't look nervous when he came in late on a Friday night. He smiled at her and at Jo, reached into the battered old leather rucksack he always carried and pulled out a couple of pouches. Jo sidled up to him like a kid on Christmas because Pete liked to bestow gifts. Sometimes it was bit of found stone or handmade jewelry, maybe a pouch of herbs. He brought Ellen bundles of sage every time he passed through.

He was one of the few that Ellen never bothered running a tab for. Pete's wealth was rarely in cash -- mostly in gifts and good will. He wasn't a heavy drinker though, so it was hardly a dent in Ellen's bottom line to offer him a beer and a shot of whiskey the few times she saw him, or even a bowl of stew or a burger. The man always looked like was a few months short of a good meal.

She set a beer in front him just as he was pulling out a small flat newspaper wrapped package that he handed to Jo. "Ona Keller had a few jokes played on her, coyote and raven setting up a bet. Bet got settled," he said with a grin. "She made me this," he said stroking a narrow necklace of fine bead work. "Not much need for these though," he said and sipped his beer while Jo unwrapped her gift to find the pair of long dangling bead work earrings in brilliant blues and black and tiny silver bells, that matched Pete's necklace. "Look much better on a pretty girl," Pete said and didn't resist Jo's hug as she pulled her own earrings out and replaced them, the bells making a soft tinkling sound.

Ellen scooped up a bowl of chili, and added a handful of crackers to the plate and set that down on the bar. "Heard you had a skin walker stalking the desert."

Pete took the offered food with good grace. "Did. Thought I had it. Nearly had me," he said without any sound of distress. "Young feller showed up. Knew how to kill it, didn't know how to put it to rest. I showed him."

"Another hunter?" Jo asked him and Pete nodded, took a bite of his chili.

"Heard...you might have interest in him. Dean Winchester said his name was."

"He's okay?" Jo asked, and glanced at her mother. Ellen tried to relax her hands where they gripped the bar.

"You ask that like there's only one answer to that question," Pete said. "He's still breathing or was a couple weeks back. But that's a man-ghost walking. That's the one, eh? The one that walked away from that fire down Kansas way, a few months back?"

"That's the one. We hadn't heard from him."

Pete nodded, munching on his crackers. "Yup. Not one for small-talk. Thing is...thing is...the *yee naaldlooshii* nearly had us both. Fresh one, powerful from the bleeding he'd done. That one, Winchester took a tumble down the arroyo, leading it away from me. May have broken his arm."

He washed his mouthful of food down with another swallow of beer and then reached in his pack again. "Thought maybe it was The Raven, come to settle a favor, but..." The cardboard box was slim, like one used for a necklace. He opened it to reveal a coal-black feather that was almost too long to fit in the box. "That's no raven feather, no buzzard neither."

Ellen reached in, eyeing Pete who nodded before she picked it up. Except for its length there was nothing odd about it at all. "You see something?"

Pete shook his head. "Nothing but shadows. Was dark. Hit my head pretty good. When I got up, the *yee naaldlooshii* was down and dead; silver bullets. Feller stuck around long enough to help me build a pyre, listened to me sing the spirit into the quiet. He left when the sun came up. No word, just gone. This was where he sat."

Ellen started to put it back but Pete gripped her wrist lightly, then reached in his bag again, came out with a small bundle of sage. A worn Zippo lighter came out as well, Pete setting blaze to the dried herbs until they smoked, filling the bar area with the sweet scent. The smoke curled and twisted upward and Pete gently tilted Ellen's hand down until the feather was horizontal to the bar, and passed the smoldering bundle beneath it.

The smoke still rose but it peeled away from the feather, spreading out and around but never touching the ridges or edges of it. Ellen stared and twirled it slightly, flattening the feather out and the smoke moved away. "Well, now that's interesting. More'n a parlor trick through," she said and laid the feather back in the box. Pete set the sage in an ashtray where it continued to smoke. "So what is it, Pete? Why bring it here?"

"I had a dream, that night. Of you and this place. That feller and shadows. It's not my magic. Not my ancestors. So, I came. He's a friend of yours, right?"

"Yes," Jo said. "Did he say anything -- where he was going?"

Pete shook his head. "No, honey. He didn't. Sorry."

Jo looked away, then back, smiling at Pete. "Thanks for the earrings," she said and went to check on some tables. Pete turned back to his meal and his beer.

Ellen topped off his mug and added another ladle of chili to his bowl. He took both with a grunt and a wink.

She didn't know what to think. Not easy to dismiss even without knowing what it was Pete had brought her. Dean was still alive, that was one thing. The other...she didn't know, but she might have Ash see if he could find out anything. She went back to pull more ice into the cooler. When she returned, Pete was gone. Bowl and mug empty. The box was gone too but in its place was a dream catcher, the black feather woven into the strapping.

"Now, what the hell am I supposed to do with this?" she asked of no one and picked it up, caught sight of a small tag on the frame. She had to squint a bit but what she saw pulled a sharp bark of laughter from her.

*<i>Made in Malaysia</i>.*

She set it aside and tried not to think too hard about what Pete had said, at least not until she had fewer customers and some time to herself. If she was lucky, that wouldn't happen until after she shut the bar down for the night.

She felt kind of silly, but she hadn't forgotten the phone call or the leather bracelet. Maybe she'd forfeited any actual right to call Dean Winchester a friend, but she worried about him anyway.

She tied the dream catcher to the ceiling fan over her bed and did her best to ignore it when she finally stretched out to sleep.

She was almost disappointed when her alarm went off a few hours later. She couldn't remember a single dream she might have had. No messages or glimpses of things beyond conscious awareness. At the same time, she was kind of relieved. There was a reason she didn't hunt -- she didn't have the heart for it, for all she might have the nerve. It had robbed her of her husband and Jo of her father. Staying out of it didn't keep her or Jo *<i>safe</i>*, but she saw no reason to invite trouble if she could help it.

She got up and pulled on her robe, grabbed clean towels for her shower and glanced back at the dream catcher swaying lightly in the air currents of the room -- and then clutched the towels to her chest and stared.

The dream catcher remained unchanged, leather and twine and beads and little totem stones.

But the feather itself, the one Pete had left for her, had turned snowy white.

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It still took him a few weeks after he left Missouri's, after he'd passed through the roadhouse one last time to get to either the fighting or the fucking -- it took one well placed punch over a forty dollar pool game to both knock him on his ass, and shards of pain through his whole spine to realize getting himself beat to a bloody pulp while possibly satisfying, really would slow him down more than he could deal with. The last thing he wanted was to be stuck in a hotel room waiting for his ribs to heal up again.

He might have wished he was dead, but actually going out and looking for someone to put him out of his misery was just so counter to everything he was, that it was hard to break the habit of pulling himself out of bad situations by the skin of his teeth.

Not surprisingly, he got back to fucking around a lot sooner than to fighting. The first time he got a *<i>come on, you wanna?</i>* look from a girl, some place in South Dakota, he hadn't hesitated.

He hadn't been able to do it either, although she only made minor complaints since he didn't need his dick to bring her off. Casual reassurances from a woman he didn't know didn't improve his mood any and he forgot her name the minute he was out the door. The second time he took the invitation it wasn't a problem and Dean made a half-to-himself comment about falls and saddles and horses that she didn't get.

It took the edge off -- although the edge of what he didn't even try to figure out, but it also reinforced in him that physical release or not, he really didn't want to be around anyone. The irony of it -- and irony was totally his new catch word -- was that after everything he'd done or tried to do to get his family together to not be *<i>alone* any longer -- to suddenly find that even people sitting to close to him in a diner or a bar annoyed the crap out of him was enough to pull laughter out of him every time he noticed it.

It tended to make people look at him like he was crazy, make them move away a few feet or a few yards. Fine by him.

He was some few miles out of Des Moines when his phone died on him and he realized he hadn't paid the bill. He hadn't checked the PO box in Topeka either before leaving Kansas and the fees were probably due on it. His father had always taken care of that little point of reference. Dean chucked his phone out the window along some unremarkable stretch of highway and watched as it shattered on the asphalt and was then run over by the car behind him.

The next time he stopped for gas he picked up a prepaid phone and fifty bucks worth of minutes. It was a little more aggravating, but it worked. It wasn't until he was pulling into a sleepy town south of Saginaw, calling to get the hours of the local library to do a little

background research on a ghost he had a lead on that he realized he didn't have a single number programmed into the phone.

The only two he could remember off the top of his head were his father's and Sam's. He could probably find Missouri's, even the number for the Roadhouse.

He left the contact screen blank.

The ghost wasn't much by all reports -- not even particularly dangerous. It was scaring people without actual harming them, hovering in the stairwell to the second floor of an apartment building. But there had been one death -- but Dean suspected it had more to do with a startled tumble down 42 steps than a shove from the ghost or a targeted scare. It wasn't a new ghost -- rumors of it had been around for years.

Not important until somebody died.

It didn't even take him long to figure out who it was or where he was buried. He could have done the job without going to the apartment building at all, probably, but he was a completist and plus, the opportunity to send a round of rock salt through it just for the hell of it was too much to resist. It wasn't a fight -- not yet -- but close enough.

He wasn't quite prepared for the sight of a sad-eyed little girl sitting halfway up the staircase, plucking at the hem of her dress. Everything he'd been able to find pointed to a man who'd fallen down the stairs a half-century earlier.

God, he hated it when they were kids.

The gun rested heavy in his hand, the EMF was squealing a blue streak. The little girl had looked up at him, expectantly and he'd sighed. "Time to go home, sweetheart," he said.

He really needed to learn to be more careful with sweet-faced, freaky, little ghost-girls. She came at him with a screech and bellow like a harpy, all distorted open mouth and reddened eyes, and it was a wonder more people hadn't fallen down the stairs and broken their necks.

She didn't *scare* him, but she startled the hell out of him, and between hands full and a leg that wasn't quite healed and ribs that were even less so, irony reached up to slap him in the face again with the idea that after all he'd been through, getting put down by the ghost of a cranky nine-year-old girl was almost too embarrassing to live through anyway.

Only he didn't hit the steps. He definitely slipped, lost his footing, tensed his body against the impact he knew was coming, but that's as far as he went. Something solid caught his back, braced his leg, managed to both hold him up and push him upward enough for him to regain his balance.

The little ghost girl was still screaming but instead of rage and anger, she sounded terrified. The distortion of her face snapped back to something more normal (for a ghost anyway) and then she stretched toward him, visibly enough for Dean to almost flinch back. The light's in the hallway flickered like a strobe, and shadows stretched wide and upward which freaked him out more than the girl once he thought about it because *ghosts didn't cast shadows* and of the things that did, none of them were good.

Firing the shotgun was more from reflex than thought, and the ghost girl misted away in mid-scream. The lights came back on steadily, and Dean found himself leaning against the stairwell wall, feeling more high on adrenaline and endorphins than he had in months.

The girl was gone, but apparently he was going to need to hit the library and look a little further, already trying to categorize the details of the girl's dress -- something to place her in history. Turn of the century maybe, but he couldn't be sure, and for the first time since it happened, he allowed himself to miss Sam just a little bit, because Sam would have placed her clothing probably within a decade or more and known just what book to pull off the shelf to confirm it.

When his breathing eased and his ribs only twinged instead of burned, he tucked the EMF meter back in his pocket and gripped the railing to take the steps a little more cautiously than he might have once upon a time. The brush of something against his cheek had him cursing spider webs but then a dark something flickered and fell and he watched a coal black feather drift down to the steps below him.

It was instinct that made him look up and around, practicality that made him wonder if the shotgun blast hadn't dislodge some previously caught crow feather. Curiosity had him pick it up, kind of surprised at the weight of it and the warmth.

It wasn't until he heard police sirens approaching that he realized he'd been lost in contemplation of the feather for longer than was wise. He tucked it under his jacket and took the stairs a bit faster, managing to pull away just before the cops got there to investigate the gunfire.

He gave half a thought to breaking into the town's small library and see what he could discover about the girl, but it was a lot of effort to go to with the local cops already wary of disturbances. He headed back to the motel without much debate with himself.. Chances were she wouldn't show again so soon -- although he wondered if it was him speaking to her that set her off. Cranky little bitch or not, something had happened to trap her there, and once he might not have cared but now he was curious. It wouldn't stop him from salting and burning her small bones, but he had to wonder how and why she'd ended up there. The most recent death had been a guy and nothing he'd found indicated that she'd deliberately tried to kill before so...

Besides, he had nothing else on the radar.

Getting undressed for bed dislodged the feather again, and he found himself holding it, kind of surprised by the size of it -- it was easily the length of his forearm. It was entirely black, not matte, but without the faint iridescent peacock sheen of most raven feathers. Damn big bird whatever it was. He left it on the bedside table.

For the first time since Sam's death he dreamed of him.

It was a dream, not a nightmare, he knew when he woke hours later. Nothing remarkable -- Sam weaving in and out of dream conversations, speaking but Dean couldn't make out what he was saying. Maybe *I'm sorry*, again or *Forgive me*, neither of which Dean wanted to hear or even think about.

It didn't take him long checking microfiched newspapers to know he'd been sloppy above all else. The apartment building had only recently been open to the general populace. Before that it had been a YWCA, and a woman's boarding house at its birth. The ghost only ever appeared to men and Dean, quite honestly didn't want to think too hard about why a little girl would have been so angry at men. It took more searching to find her, to guess that maybe her mother had been trying to make ends meet any way she could, sending her daughter out to sit on the steps while she entertained her gentleman friends.

The town's cemetery was small -- any longer most people found their final rest in the country run cemetery a few miles east. Kathleen Sutherland had been eight when she died, and eighty years later Dean hoped she found peace.

It was an odd thought for him. Ghosts were ghosts, whether they'd been kids once or not. Getting rid of the ones who lingered wasn't any different than scrubbing mildew off a shower stall, or excess grunge out of the barrel of a gun. It didn't need to be there.

Odd thought or no, he found himself rooting around in the trunk of the car for his father's journal. Planning to make an entry if nothing more than *research first, bitch* which also wasn't like him but he went hunting for it anyway.

Other than minor restocking he actually hadn't looked in the trunk in awhile. He kept his own duffel and favorite weapons in the back seat. In the trunk he tucked the box of his father's research, which he hadn't looked at once since reclaiming it, and pushed even further back, was Sam's stuff.

He'd thought about tossing it, chucking it into a dumpster somewhere without even looking at it. But somewhere in there was one of his two favorite Glocks, and probably a few other things that had slowly made their way from Dean's kit into Sam's over the months and miles.

He stared at it for a good long while before hauling it toward the edge of the trunk. The last time Sam had touched it was the night before they hit the road, heading back to Kansas. They hadn't even stopped to change clothes and as near as Dean could recall, Sam had been wearing the same clothes for days, the t-shirt marked with sweat, smelling sour



with fear and vomit. He had a half moments flash of fear that the scent of it would hit him of he opened the bag so he held his breath.

It smelled of clean laundry and a little dust, vaguely of the shampoo Sam used which may have leaked a little stuck in the close heat of the trunk. The book Sam had been reading before the last devastating visions and migraines had hit was laying on top. The gun and a box of ammo was tucked off to the side, books and notebooks, research or some damn thing settled underneath that his shaving kit wedged between the two stacks of clothes -- one clean, one dirty. Sam was the only person Dean knew who folded his dirty clothes.

He should give the clothes to Goodwill or something. Some other freakishly tall guy would be glad to get them. The extra duffel he could use to store supplies in. he pulled out the gun and ammo, heard the clink of metal against the blades Sam had tucked in the bottom of his bag. He pulled those too, fingering the plastic edge guards. Beneath that he found an oversized plastic ziplock bag of things that made his hands shake a little to even glance at. Pictures mostly, ones they'd managed to salvage from Sam's apartment. A lock of golden hair careful wrapped in a tissue.

The edge of black caught his eye and his hands stopped shaking long enough for him to pull out the long black feather. He left the trunk open when he checked his own bag and found the mate to it.

The morning was bright, no clouds to obliterate the sun at all, and still he felt the shadow that stretched around and over him, dulling the shine on the Impala.

He let go of the feathers like they burned him, slammed the trunk shut and climbed in, never glancing back to see if the feathers were disturbed by the rush of air formed by him peeling out of the parking lot like he was being chased.

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Jane Ellesmor was fourteen years old when her mother died, and it seemed like her daddy had brought her momma home from the doctor one day, set she and her two brothers down and uttered the word cancer, and her momma had died just a few days later. In truth, it had taken several months, her mother declining so quickly that they all barely had time to go from one state of caretaking to the next before there was nothing left they could do.

Her daddy had cried for days afterward, and her brothers, who had been as rough and rowdy and rude to her as boys (and brothers) often were, changed like they'd skipped five or six years of growing up. They'd all needed to pull together to take care of their daddy, who still went to work and came home and kept a roof over their heads and paid the bills, but he didn't eat unless Jane set food down in front of him and even the going to work and paying the bills had as much with her older brother Jacob nudging his father than anything her Daddy could be moved to do most of the time.

Jacob and Joshua both tried to talk to daddy. And even when Aunt Marion and Uncle Jimmy came for a week to help sort out the house, to help put together some of momma's things to give away and others to sort between Jane and her brothers and momma's sisters, her daddy seemed to have a hard time really being interested in anything at all other than what he was used to doing.

"I miss her so much, Marion," her daddy told his sister the night before they left.

"I know you do, Richard, but you've got to pull yourself together. Jacob and Joshua and Jane need you as much as they ever needed Elizabeth."

And maybe Aunt Marion's words helped a little, because her daddy had tried., started remembering to ask her how school had been, to ask her brothers about their classes and to even show a little interest in helping Jane make a dinner that didn't come out of a box or a can. But Jane still caught him sometimes, at night, with her mother's picture, sitting in the dark of the living room, crying like he couldn't stop, and she would sit in the living room and hold his hand and rock him until finally he'd get up and send her back to bed, and go to his own, but Jane could still hear him crying behind the door.

It got to be that she couldn't sleep all the night through. She missed her mother, and she felt tired because as much as she and Jacob and Joshua tried, they couldn't ever seem to keep the house as clean and neat as momma had. And none of them were very good cooks -- not even daddy when he tried.

The night she heard her father just talking behind his closed bedroom door, she fell asleep in the hallway to his voice and when she woke, cold and stiff a few hours later, he was quiet, but she could swear she'd heard her momma talking too.

But he seemed happier the next morning, and went to work without being reminded and came home, bringing dinner from the store and promised them it would be all right.

When she woke again that night, she heard him again, and this time was sure she heard her mother -- nobody laughed like her mother did. Only her momma was dead. So when she tapped at the door, and called for her father, she was a little surprised when he came to it, still smiling. "I thought I heard momma," she said.

He'd picked her like he hadn't since she was little and carried her back to bed. "Maybe you did, Janey-girl. But you sleep now and maybe she'll come to you in your dreams."

Her mother never did and Jane almost put it out of her mind because her daddy seemed happier now.

But then he got sick. It started out like a cold or a flu, just a little shortness of breath, he told them all. He'd be fine. But he never coughed and he wasn't running a fever, but Jane noticed he wasn't eating much either.

The next time she heard her father talking she dared to push the door open a little bit and wasn't as surprised as she should have been to see her mother lying with her father on the bed. Her father didn't notice her, but her momma did.

Jane didn't remember her momma's eyes being that color gold. They'd been kind of brown, like her own.

But just as she thought to come in, the lights had flickered and the door had slammed and she started screaming. It was Jacob who found her, tried to calm her, didn't believe she'd seen her mother.

Her father didn't come out to see what all the commotion was and Jacob realized it before she did and told her to wait.

She didn't sleep at all that night what with the ambulance people and the police and finally Aunt Marion and Uncle Jimmy.

It rained the day they buried her father in a grave next to her mother. It was only two months since they'd stood in this very spot.

She knew they'd be going to live with Aunt Marion and Uncle Jimmy, but her aunt thought it best they finish out the quarter of school where they were -- just few weeks away and then transfer. She needed to sort out her brother's estate anyway, and it would be just as easy from their house.

It was less than a week before Jane heard her mother's voice again, this time whispering out of Jacob's room.

She tried to ask Jacob about it, but he only got a red-faced and told her she was dreaming, to leave him alone.

When Jacob got sick some ten days alter, Jane tried to tell her aunt about the woman who looked like her mother, who was creeping into Jacob's room every night. Her aunt found her a psychiatrist to talk to for her stress-related hallucinations.

When Jacob died less than a month later, Aunt Marion started looking at Jane funny.

When the voices started coming from Joshua's room, Jane didn't tell anyone, but she pushed the door open the second time and stared into the golden-eyes of the creature that straddled her brother and looked like her mother and started screaming.

The creature vanished and her aunt and uncle came running in, Aunt Marion swearing like Jane had never heard and trying to cover Jane's eyes, while Uncle Jimmy checked on Joshua.

Granted, Jane had never seen her brother naked except by accident, but it wasn't like she didn't know that boys had different parts than girls.

Uncle Jimmy took Joshua to the hospital and Aunt Marion asked Jane what she had seen -- but didn't believe her. Or not entirely.

Joshua said he didn't remember, but he got the same flush of red to his cheeks that Jacob had and Jane didn't believe *him*.

She thought maybe it was a vampire, but neither her father nor Jacob had been missing a lot of blood so she went looking for something else.

It didn't actually take her very long to get an idea of what it might be. Joshua was all she had left. Aunt Marion and Uncle Jimmy were nice and kind but Josh was her brother, her blood.

Hers.

She wasn't Catholic, and her family had only ever gone to church on special days like Easter and Christmas. But her friend Julia was Catholic and Jane knew the big cathedral near her aunt's house was Catholic. She saved her money and bought one of the little glass bottles the church store sold and she had the priest bless it. She found a cross in her aunt's Christmas decorations in the basement -- and the next time she heard voices in Joshua's room and shoved the door open, she didn't scream.

The succubus did though.

Jane hadn't expected her to bleed real blood, hadn't expected the skin of the creature to shrivel and burn when the holy water touched her.

She recited the only prayer she knew by heart. The books had only said prayer, not what kind.

*Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray to God my soul to keep  
If I should die before I wake,  
I pray to God my soul to take.  
If I should live another day,  
I pray to God to guide my way.*

The succubus had shrieked and screamed and cursed every time Jane said "God". By the third time she'd recited the prayer the thing no longer moved or made noise. The screaming continued, of course, but this time it was her Aunt Marion who was doing it.

Child protection services wasn't too keen on giving the care of Jane and Joshua over to her aunt and uncle, no matter the blood tie they shared. By the time the police had gotten

there, there wasn't much left of the succubus but blood and shriveled flesh. Joshua didn't remember anything, or so he said, and Jane played dumb too.

The Methodist Children's home in Lebanon was nice enough, and she and Joshua were as good as they could be, both of them studious, quiet and respectful, for the two years they were there.

When Joshua turned eighteen he was awarded custody of his little sister and he found a sponsorship to enter the Catholic seminary in Richmond. Jane went into the Sacred Heart Convent at sixteen to finish her schooling and take her vows.

Joshua took his, but at eighteen Jane knew she didn't need to be Catholic to do what she'd planned to do ever since she'd buried her oldest brother and nearly buried Joshua.

She did study though. Six different seminaries over ten years and in between and when Joshua was on sabbatical, they went looking for things like those that had killed their father and brother. She got her first degree in divinity a few months short of her twenty-fifth birthday, which meant she could be rightfully called Reverend Ellesmor, but since she didn't seek a congregation to head, she just went by Preacher.

Thirty years later she mostly went by The Preacher.

Her brother Joshua kept her informed about odd things that crossed the desk of the research arm of the archdiocese in Boston, still occasionally joined her when his duties and his health let him. He'd never entirely recovered from the draining of his life force the succubus had managed. He was susceptible to all kind of ailments that only got worse and more frequent as he got older.

She worked alone mostly and it suited her. She still thought God had called on her -- she'd taken her oaths and her instructions with a clear conscience on that count. She confessed to her brother even though she hadn't converted to Catholicism and she knew his immediate superior on a first name basis.

She was never meant to be a pretty woman, even though she remembered her mother being beautiful. She was built spare and lean like her brother, and she kept her dark hair cropped close, passed for a man most of the time and a bull dyke for the rest of the it, and neither of those impressions bothered her at all.

She'd put down more succubi and incubi than anyone else hunting that she knew of, and occasionally she'd put an end to a few other things as well.

The thing about succubi and their woman-tempting brothers was that they were mean and vicious and tricky but they weren't terribly bright. Jane stayed a virgin because for the most part, the black hearted monsters didn't notice virgins at all. She'd discovered that by accident and in retrospect it revealed to her a little more than she ever wanted to know about the adolescent activities of either of her brothers. She couldn't be seduced or tricked

because there was nothing and no one she desired more than killing as many of them as possible.

The ones that went after grief stricken men and women were the ones she liked to put to rest the most.

Large tragedies tended to lure them in more than small ones, and she suspected the one that killed her father and older brother had been lurking around the hospital looking for inevitable and easy victims.

She'd spent a lot of time in New York in recent years, then more along the gulf coast. Times like this she kind of wished she had a partner or two when she hit a point where there was more of a feeding frenzy than opportunity going on.

The hurricanes were long past but there was misery enough still in Louisiana and along the coast to attract all kinds of things. She also knew she wasn't the only hunter to keep revisiting the area, but wishing she had a partner didn't actually prepare her for actually finding herself with one, even for only a few days.

She knew of John Winchester but had never met him. She had only a passing knowledge of his sons -- was actually a little surprised to realize there'd been two. Even so, running into Dean Winchester (who was literally chasing down a *ghul* while she was equally as literally chasing down a slippery bitch of a succubus through one of the more abandoned areas of New Orleans) would have been a funny worthy of the three Stooges or the Marx Brothers when they slammed each other coming around opposite sides of the same street.

The succubi's skin was already sizzling where Preacher had managed to douse it once. She'd weakened it with water and prayer and had kept it from being able to vanish by the use of church-forged brass chains usually meant for suspending presence candles or censers. She'd cast the light-weight chains over its head in a bizarre and painful necklace. It couldn't touch them to remove them and was too stupid to duck its head and let them fall off.

The *ghul* was already oozing black blood and limping along, missing most of its left arm and about half a foot.

Even chained and smoking, Preacher knew exactly when the succubus turned her charms toward a more susceptible victim -- the sudden slack face on the young man's face and other signs were pretty obvious, even if the withering bitch hadn't already had her clawed hands on his skin and her mouth on his.

Only the succubus didn't have time to get her second wind, it squealed and shrieked again, looking like it was convulsing, head snapping back and then bending in the middle like something had grabbed it and yanked it backwards, slamming it into the brick of the wall. The street got considerably darker, and Preacher heard streetlights exploding like firecrackers.

Preacher had lost her holy water, but she found her cross and pressed it to the squirming succubi's face, ignoring the stench of burning flesh. What didn't work on vampires worked just fine on creatures that never had souls to begin with. That and prayer -- concentrated, rapidly-repeated, prayer.

She didn't flinch as the creature clawed at her in ever-weakening strikes, raised her voice to be heard over the succubus's shrieks and watched it writhe and finally surrender any claim to a human form, which pretty much broke the illusion. Awareness came back to the young man's face--but only in time to reach up to grab at Preacher when she heard the low snarl and smelled the aroma of putrid flesh.

Thing was, she didn't know how to kill a *ghul*, although, had she more time, she could probably figure it out. Her companion was fumbling for the shotgun and machete he'd lost in their collision, scrabbling backward for the gun just as the creature reached out and wrapped bony fingers around Preacher's collar.

Best she could recall later, there was a kind of whoosh of sound, maybe a screech in there somewhere. She felt the rush of air against her face, the reek of the *ghul* momentarily replaced by something that smelled more like earth and river water, tasted like snow and cherry blossoms.

She had to blink to make sure she saw it as the *ghul* released her, and she felt other hands on her shoulders, pulling her back. She got shoved down, and at the same time she heard the shotgun blast, she caught a glimpse of a whole curtain of black wings and the flash of white teeth in a handsome face. Dark hair flopped over his forehead and nearly obscured bright eyes that she shouldn't have been able to see so clearly. Wings or not he seemed to be wearing nothing more outrageous than jeans and t-shirt, but she didn't see him long enough to see what the design was on the shirt before the shadow was gone, the *ghul* was in pieces and her companion for the evening was liberally spreading lighter fluid over both the remains of the *ghul* and the succubus before setting the pair of them ablaze.

Then he pushed her against the wall suddenly, his back to the fire burn. "Did it scratch you?" he demanded, arm to her throat and the muzzle of his shotgun pressed to her stomach. She knew enough about *ghuls* to know they were infectious like legendary zombies -- were the creatures most movie zombies were based on, rather than the walking dead that actually occasionally appeared around New Orleans, dragged to a dreaming state by less discriminating practitioners of *Voudon* or *Santería*.

"No. I don't think so. Grabbed my coat--" she said and wasn't surprised when the man pulled her forward and flipped her around to face the wall. His fingers pulled at her collar, exposing skin; pushed up into her short hair looking for scratches. He looked for tears in the leather, smoothed his fingers along it then rubbed them together to check for blood. She didn't fight the search -- he was thorough but not unduly rough.

"So, when you finish feeling me up, you want to introduce yourself?"

He eased back, put up one hand in a "whatever," expression. "Had to be sure. I got no cure for *ghul* guts."

"Well, luckily for you, succubi aren't particularly venomous -- not this kind anyway. But I'd clean those scratches on your face with holy water anyway," she said and dug into her pocket for the soaked handkerchief she kept in a ziplock bag in her pocket. "I'm the Preacher. And you are?"

He took the offered scrap of cloth and held it to his cheek, hissing when it burned just a little, like straight alcohol. "Dean Winchester."

"John Winchester's boy?"

He eyed her. "Used to be."

She didn't drop her gaze. "That mean he's dead or did he disown you?"

"By now? Probably both. But mostly he's dead."

"Sorry to hear that. He was good."

"Yeah, well, sometimes good isn't good enough. Succubus?" he asked looking at the smoldering pile of not-much-left-to-identify.

"Yup. Third I've caught this week. And a *ghul*."

"Yup. Second. I think there's another one around here somewhere. The Preacher...the preacher...Oh! Hey, sorry about the grope there, ma'am."

She grinned at him. "No harm done. You're lucky you didn't get more than groped there, Dean. What was that? You got a pet guardian angel looking out for you?"

He stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you see it?"

He spread his hands again. "I saw you. I saw the *ghul*, I might have seen Jesus when that bitch kissed me but...nothing else."

"Huh," she said and then looked around, finding her empty flask and her hat, and then not surprisingly, she found a couple of feathers. "Well, whatever it was, it left us a token," she said fanning them out.

He stared at them and went a little pale. "You saw it?"



"For a second...mostly I saw wings, a nice face and a big smile... well, that and a hell of left cross. Never saw anything hit quite that fast. Whoa, son," she said when he went paler and looked like he might fall over. "You okay? We need to hunt down your other *ghul* or should we just go have a drink?"

He shook her off but not violently and then reached out and took one of the feathers. "Close to sunrise. They'll be holed up till dusk again. I'm thinking a drink would be good."

The Preacher didn't drink, but she knew when a man needed one. "Well, it's New Orleans. I'm sure we can find someplace still open. My truck's this way."

"My car's back there."

"So, let's take my truck and we'll come back for your car. Deal?"

He shrugged. "Okay."

They kept a foot of space between them. When they hit the part of the street where the lights still worked, the Preacher felt a darkening cross the sky and looked up. She caught only the edge of shadow, at the top of a night-obscured building.

Dean was walking around to the passenger side when he saw her looking.

Out of nowhere, another feather fell, floating softly. Preacher reached up to pluck it out of the air. It smelled like river water and snow.

She didn't drink, but maybe this once..."How about I buy the first round," she said.

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No one ever expects the devil to tell the truth, so when it does, every word is instantly suspect, every motivation instantly called into question.

Everything about his visions felt like a curse to Sam. Every painful nuance, visual or physical, only reinforced that opinion. It didn't help that normal people didn't have visions. It helped even less that Dean and his father, who eschewed normal like it was the curse, could pass for that elusive state of commonality better than Sam could.

He really hadn't ever realized how deep the bitterness of that single fact ran. It was one thing to resent his father for the life he'd forced them to live, another to resent Dean for embracing it so fully. It didn't matter the cause, or how well Sam understood how the desire for revenge, for answers, for resolution, could drive a man to do things he might otherwise not do if he felt he had a choice. He even understood that his father felt like there wasn't a choice -- to choose otherwise would have been to completely deny the circumstances of his wife's death, and John Winchester was and likely had always been a

pragmatic man, not given to lying to himself no matter how many half truths or whole lies he might tell other people -- even his own sons.

He'd never been able to call his visions a gift. He could accept that Missouri saw her own abilities that way, could even accept why Andy Gallagher might have thought so. Their gifts didn't cost them anything they weren't willing to pay.

Sam felt like he'd never gotten that offer, that choice. He'd had things thrust upon him that he didn't want, that he'd outright denied and tried to avoid or return or bury. And still they were there, part of him, inside of him.

It wasn't just that he was forced to watch ugly, horrible, painful things, sometimes over and over, it was that he had no choice in them, no way to escape them once they started. And like his father, *denying* them, that they were real, was too much for a pragmatist like Sam to actually even contemplate. It was one thing to think maybe if you didn't *know* when horrible things happened to other people, you couldn't be expected to feel responsible for the death and pain that accompanied tragedies -- be they supernatural or more mundane everyday horrors.

It was another thing entirely to *see them happen* and then try to pretend you hadn't seen them at all. It had taken him nearly a year (and a not inconsiderable amount of reassurance and persuasion from Dean) to find enough forgiveness for himself over Jessica to stop thinking of the whole of his brother's arsenal as an open invitation to penance and oblivion if he could just decide which gun, blade, weapon, potion, or combination thereof would achieve enough punishment to cover the crime of seeing her die and not warning her because he didn't *believe* his nightmares were anything but nightmares.

In retrospect, he finally realized that really was true. He'd been no more plagued by nightmares growing up than any other kid -- well maybe slightly more, but there had never been anything even slightly prophetic about those dreams.

It wasn't beyond reasonability to think that no matter how much he wanted to not think about his life prior to Stanford and Jess, that the weeks leading up to early November had been perpetual periods of stress and grief throughout his entire life. If not his father's increased tensions (which showed themselves in any number of different ways from drinking too much to keeping them on the road for days on end), then Dean's solemn observance of the time period. He was always quieter at the end of October and (though Dean would deny it) clingier in ways that would go unremarked by anyone who didn't know him, but Sam had always been aware that at the end of October his brother tended to not want to let Sam out of his sight.

It didn't ease the guilt -- he was still the reason Jessica died no matter how he looked at it. But it lifted at least part of the burden of responsibility from him. In this case, hindsight wasn't 20/20, because Sam honestly couldn't claim the outcome would have been different had Jess known more about him, or if he'd confessed his dreams to her. Maybe

she'd have seen him as a freak and refused to have anything to do with him. Maybe they would have both sat up every night or avoided the apartment. Maybe he wouldn't have gone with Dean that weekend.

What he knew now of the demon that had been stalking his life since infancy, he hadn't known then. And even if he'd known what he did now, none of it would actually have been any use to him in saving Jessica. The best he might have offered was a bargain; *Yes, I'll go with you. Yes, I will serve you. Yes, I'll do anything, just don't hurt her.*

He thought he might have done that given the opportunity. He might have made that deal. Made a deal not unlike his father had made for Dean. Would have done anything.

Tied hand and foot in the middle of field in Kansas, with his cousins surrounding him and the demon in front of him and Dean and some innocent girl the option between damned and damnation, with his sight forced fully open -- Sam knew that even such a bargain would be a temporary reprieve at best. Then, now, ever.

Because the devil hadn't lied. Fed power and connected to others sharing his same bloodline had opened Sam's eyes not only to the power that lay semi-dormant in his blood, but also all the paths that led to and from it.

His gift was precognition. He could see the future.

It was specific, tied to others that shared a distant set of common *<i>not human* ancestors, but inerrant as far as they were concerned. His gift wasn't even particularly powerful; it was a passive thing, able to send as well as receive, but far less kinetic than the others who had fallen for the half-truths, promises, and persuasions the demon offered. His brief bout of telekinesis with Max hadn't been a result of his effort at all, only his desperation to *<i>get a message to Max</i>* that had caused the reflexive action on Max's part to move the hutch. Possible only because Max, at his core, hadn't been evil, only badly, badly damaged.

The demon was neither omniscient nor omnipotent. Sam already knew that. It had made as much a study of the Winchesters as they had of it but it had the advantage in already *knowing them*.

It was powerful. It was cunning. It had access to a frightening amount of power in its own right, even without its human allies. But it wasn't omnipotent. It couldn't do what it wanted *<i>alone</i>*.

Communication is the foundation of winning any war. Control the message and the messenger and you're already halfway to winning the war.

If Sam's psychically inclined kinsmen and women were the demon's own private arsenal; living, breathing weapons of mass destruction; Sam was his satellite network, his command center.

There was no way Sam could deny the responsibility of knowing he'd be the cause of not just the deaths of millions but the ultimate fall of mankind, even if he never laid a hand on anyone.

There was nothing quite like understanding how the bomb felt when it dropped on Hiroshima, or maybe the plane that carried it, had either of those things had any claim to sentience.

The other truth was that the demon didn't actually need Sam to kill anyone; making him choose had been no more than a petty cruelty -- a wicked yank of the leash that already held Sam helpless. Blood would be spilled regardless. Now or later, Dean or Emily, they'd both end up dead. Maybe worse for Dean; maybe he wouldn't end up dead, but with Sam's powers at their charged level and Sam a part of it all, there was no way the demon would miss an opportunity to use his brother in some demeaning way -- even as only a further hostage to Sam's willingness to serve until he didn't need a reason any longer.

He saw that too. The death of his own hope for an end to this.

It might have worked. The sheer guilt of having to be once more the reason why someone he loved died or was tortured was almost enough to make Sam promise anything, and he could feel his own fear and wavering despair feed back along those lines of connection, greeted with varying degrees of disdain or empathy from the other psychics.

He knew them now, all of them. From Andy with his gift of persuasion to the guy over there, Jack, with his firestarting gift and an arsonist's love of watching things burn. To the girl, Annalyn, who could pluck the thoughts from anyone save her own psychic-kin, to the woman beside her, Rachel, whose own telekinetic abilities rivaled Max's in sheer strength...

It hit him then...the connection went both ways. Always had, he just wasn't skilled enough to use it. It was why the demon had felt safe enough to taunt him about moving the Colt.

Things were a little different now, and Dean, God bless him, distracted the demon long enough for Sam to make those last few connections.

By the time the question was put to him again, he was past ready. The only thing he really didn't have time to do was somehow let Dean know there was no other choice and why. He had a hundred things he wanted to say to his brother that started with *I love you. Thank you,* and ended somewhere well past regret.

He hadn't been thinking about pain and was a little surprised when he felt it. A bullet to the brain was supposed to be one of the least painful ways to die, but it only figured that he'd feel the shock of every nerve screaming, rather than just shock and then nothing.

And then he had the fraction of a thought, *Oh, yeah. Magic bullet.*

He also heard Dean scream his name, which in a lot of ways, hurt more than anything.  
*Sorry.*

Then it was over.

Except for the part where it wasn't.

Hell for suicides really hadn't been part of Sam's thinking. He had an uneasy relationship with the whole concept of religion -- no matter what culture. There was the fact that ghosts existed, who could then be sent *somewhere*, which kind of argued for something past death. His mother died and then returned from somewhere after all. There were pretty obviously demons, which could be a kind of recidivist argument for the possible existence of angels.

He hadn't been entirely sure about the lake of fire part, or the Elysian fields.

He was a little surprised to discover that what came after looked a little bit like a scorched field in the middle of Kansas in the middle of the night.

There had to be a joke about Superman in there somewhere.

*...this is what's left...*

No one spoke to him. There wasn't a voice out of nowhere, nor a kindly or stern face ready to guide him into the light or to hell. He had a God-awful headache which seemed kind of unfair.

He would have liked a user's guide. A little pamphlet that said something like, *Death in ten easy steps: dying and the hereafter.*

He would have liked to see his father or his mother or Jess.

He really wanted to know if Dean was okay.

What he got was Emily.

She looked, now that he actually had time to do anything but regret her being dragged into this, like any other girl her age from middle America. Her dark hair was less tangled here and now, the tears on her face had dried, and she looked far less terrified. Her jeans were worn at the knees, her t-shirt frayed at the hem and looked like someone had been generous with the bleach.

She stared up at him, without speaking, and Sam dared to take a step closer and crouch in front of her.

"Hey. It's Emily, right? I'm Sam."

"I know who you are," she said quietly and had that small husk in her voice that would probably get deeper and sexier as she got older.

Only she wouldn't get any older.

"Oh, God. Emily. I'm sorry. I'm..."

Ultimately the demon had gotten what it wanted, even if it didn't work out the *way* it wanted.

There'd been one innocent life in that circle and it hadn't been any of the twelve, or the demon, or the demon's children, or Dean, or even himself.

"I didn't get to choose," she said. "But I get to choose now."

He'd slipped to his knees, feeling the heat in the ground. There was nothing he could say to this girl, to this *child*, that would make any of it right. He hadn't thought of her at all in making his own choice. If he'd had time, if he could go back--

"What would you give?" she asked, and put her small hands on his shoulders. "If you could go back?"

"I don't know. I don't know what I've got left to give. My life, my soul. I never wanted your death. I just saw..."

"No way out," she said and squeezed his shoulders. "It really is just that black and white, Sam. It's what you do, not what you meant. Sometimes not choosing is a choice."

"But I did choose and you died."

She nodded and pulled her hands back. "Would you give me your brother -- me for him?"

He stared at her and then shook his head. "No. That's not...his life's not mine to give."

"Neither was mine."

"Emily...if I could make this right, I would. But I'm dead, too. My options are kind of limited."

She smiled at him, but it wasn't all that joyful. "Will you give me the right to choose for you?"

It felt like a trick question and he knew nothing about her, then again, he didn't know much about anything apparently. "Black and white, huh?" he said and she nodded. "Then, yes. Your choice."

She held out her hand and he took it.

Compared to having his soul ripped from whatever remained of himself, dying seemed like a kindness.

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"This makes a lot of sense," Dean said, stepping up onto the low step of the camper door. The Preacher's truck was a pretty powerful GMC Sierra 3500 that only needed a rinse with a hose to look like she'd just driven it off the lot. The Gulfstream hitched to it had a few more miles and years on it, but it was comfortable for all that.

Half a thought then, as he glanced back at his own car, only to shake his head. It was all he had left. It was as much home as the Preacher's camper. He held up the bottle of Jack Daniels from the trunk, and the Preacher held up two glasses. "Come on in," she said and set the glasses down on the dinette.

Mutual idea, once Dean had seen that the Preacher rolled with her home on her back, so to speak. He had the booze, she had the space, and all it entailed was a drive across two city blocks to the parking lot where Dean had left his car. She shed her hat again, and the long leather duster she wore. Better light and less adrenaline revealed a lot of gray at the top of her head, salted through the darker curls, weathered skin gleamed a little pale under a lifetime tan, and the black button-down shirt (although a little dirty and stained along the front and sleeves now,) fit close to a set of shoulders and chest nearly as wide and flat as his own.

He didn't have to look down at her either. "Close the door and drop that box, would you," she asked, as she dug in her refrigerator for ice, plunking two cubes in one glass. Dean shook his head when her hand hovered over the second glass.

The door seal was tight, and his eyes flickered over the small, carefully scraped in symbols on the metal frame. Looked like Hebrew. The box was a long narrow thing that *shushed* when he let it fall in front of the door. "Salt," she said at his glance, and he tracked her gaze to the windows, that all had the same narrow boxes mounted. He'd thought they were ornamental.

It took him about three seconds to realize that it was unlikely the Preacher was given to fru-fruery ornamentation of her home any more than Dean was. He unscrewed the cap on the bottle and poured. She stopped him at a meager two fingers of whiskey. He was more generous to his own glass. "Sit down, son. Stop looming. This dinette converts to a bed if you need place to drop for the night." She glanced out the window where the first hints of dawn could be seen. "Or day."

He settled into the cushioned bench opposite her, and held up his glass. "Here's to more overcrowding in hell," he said.

The corner of her mouth quirked up but she raised her glass, tapped it to his. "I'd say overcrowding in hell is part of the problem." She drank but made a face. Still, she took a second sip. "So," she said, twisting around to rummage in the pockets of her coat. She laid the three feathers side by side on the table between them. "You want to tell me what this is about?"

Dean only glanced at the feathers and shrugged, downing half his whiskey and reaching for the bottle. "Couldn't tell you."

"Uh, huh. You killed two *ghul*, got macked on by a succubus--" she paused and narrowed her eyes at him. "--all without breaking a sweat. And those had you paler than my ass. Try again."

"I thought we were drinking, not setting each other up for the inquisition," he said. She could think what she liked. He polished off his whiskey in one gulp and set the glass down. Grabbing the bottle, he got up again. "Thanks for the assist. Good hunting."

"That succubus, it's attracted to the grieving. It's what it feeds on more than anything," she said, twisting her glass around in a circle. "This about your daddy?"

"Saving my ass doesn't give you the right to know anything about me."

"I'm not asking about you. I'm asking about those," she said, tilting her glass toward the feathers. "I've been at this long enough to know that I actually *saw* what I saw. And I know I haven't seen anything like it before. So it's good guess it wasn't there for me. And you -- you may not know anything much, but you know something about those."

"I don't. I've just seen them before," he said. "That's it. That's all." He should just go, he knew. He didn't want to know anything more about them. It didn't stop him for reaching for one of them. Still warm, still heavier than it should be. Maybe the warmth came from the Preacher's pocket. Maybe the weight was just because he was tired.

He knew she was watching him. She was relaxed, sprawled back a bit in the bench seat, age and weariness showing in her face. What he knew about her could be summed up on the back of a postage stamp. "You knew Pastor Jim," he said, laying the feather back down then crossing the three quill ends, making the feathers fan.

"I did. Not well, but I'd met him a couple of times. My brother knew him better. They used to correspond."

"You've got a brother? I didn't know that."



"Used to have two," she said. "My father, my older brother Jacob -- both of them died because of one of those hellspawn bitches that took such a liking to you. It almost got Joshua. She -- it -- was my first kill. I was fourteen. That was forty years ago."

That was a long time hunting.

It wasn't hard to figure out what she was doing. She wanted information, information she thought Dean had. He didn't, but it was *nice* of her to offer up something about herself. "I was ten." He said and poured himself another glass of whiskey before sitting down. "Sam was...twelve I think. Late bloomer."

"Sam is...your brother?"

That same tight clenching in his chest rose up and he took a swallow of whiskey -- let the burn push it back. "Was. He's gone. Just --"

"How long ago?"

"Six months, I guess. We were...the thing, the demon we've been hunting that took my mother, my father...it...got Sam too," he said tightly and wiped at his face.

"I'm sorry," she said and sounded like she meant it. She got up and put on a pot of coffee. "Dean, that thing I saw tonight -- I don't know what it was, but it pretty much saved both our asses. I'm long past believing in divine intervention, but *something* stepped up to the plate. I just want to know why."

It was -- if he were honest -- a fair question. But he shook his head. "I didn't see it. And these feathers. I don't know what they are or what they belong to. I worked a haunting, a couple of months back -- one of them showed up there after it was done and then...I was...I was cleaning out the trunk, my brother's stuff and I found another one. In a sealed bag," he said and looked up at her as she set down coffee mugs and cream and sugar. "What did you see?"

She took a breath and sat down again. "Only a glimpse. Black wings," she said and picked up a feather. "Otherwise, it looked human enough. Young feller, tall, broad shouldered. Looked like he was wearing jeans and a t-shirt. Dark haired, longish," she said, closing her eyes to try and summon up details. "He had a nice smile, almost looked like he was laughing, had a mole on his cheek next to his nose..." She was quiet for a minute. "Barefooted. Had one of those leather bracelets like you've got around his right wrist. Looked solid enough except for the fact that he kind of vanished." She opened her eyes. "You're gonna break that," she said quietly, nodding at where his hands clutched the glass.

Dean eased his grip. The Preacher watched him for a moment then got up to get the coffee pot, pouring for both of them. "Not a ghost?" he asked.

"I don't know. Not like any ghost I've ever seen," she said. "They don't usually show up with extra parts." She sipped at her coffee while Dean dug for his wallet and thumbed through the bills he had stuffed there to pull out a small picture. He handed it to her.

It was small, was cropped from a larger picture so it could fit in his wallet. A much younger Dean, arm slung around another boy, slim and sweet faced. Familiar, but not exact. She flipped the picture over; *Ozarks, 2001*.

She studied the face again, caught the hint of the mole, the dark hair, the sparkling eyes. "Your brother?"

At his nod she handed the picture back. "What I saw, who I saw -- looked older."

Dean could feel his jaw tighten and neither whiskey or coffee was helping to ease the tightness. He got up quickly, left the bottle and the Preacher sitting, and headed outside. He almost tripped over the salt box.

Dawn had turned the sky rose and pink and gold, obscuring the age on the buildings, hiding the damage done by water and wind. Rays of light fingered along the brick, across the asphalt, obscured the wear and damage done to the Preacher's camper with the illusion of warmth and shine.

He got in his car and fingered his keys, found himself squinting at the rooftops. No shadows passed through the light. He had the key in the ignition but stopped himself before he turned it, then reached across to open the glove compartment and pull out the box he had there.

He hadn't been able to throw them out, but he'd stacked them altogether and wrapped a rubber band around them, pictures facing in so he wouldn't have to see, every time he reached for an ID for himself. The rubber band broke when he pulled it and the laminated cards spilled across his fingers into the box. None of them showed Sam smiling, and in some of them he'd slicked his hair back to make him look more like the professional -- *like the lawyer* -- he'd wanted to be. He pulled two and grabbed his keys.

The Preacher was sitting where he'd left her, the feathers arranged to form a triangle in the middle of the table. He dropped the two ID's on the table top.

She wouldn't be rushed, but an eyebrow crept up at one of them and she glanced at Dean and nodded. "As near as I can tell, that would be who I saw," she said, holding up an ID for Wyoming Fish and Wildlife. "You said the demon got him."

"Had him. Prisoner. Me too," Dean said.

"Demons can be pretty good at illusions," she said carefully.

Dean shook his head and sat down. "No. Sam...it wanted Sam for something, to channel -- Sam was psychic. Visions -- mostly of people like him doing horrible things. Killing people. Sam could see them all -- sometimes before it happened. Time enough for us to get there and ...stop it. Not always. But...before it could do what it wanted, or make him do what it wanted him too -- Sam killed himself."

"You're sure."

"Yes, I'm fucking sure!" he snapped out. "We had a gun -- or the demon did. Something that could kill anything. *Anything*. There was one bullet left. Sam took it, right here," he said pressing a finger to his own forehead.

"Then what happened?"

"I don't know."

The Preacher's expression didn't change. She didn't offer him compassion, false or otherwise. If anything she looked thoughtful.

"Next thing I knew, I woke up in a friend's house, beat to hell -- but there was nothing where we'd been. The whole cemetery was blasted."

"Stull," she said as if something made sense. At his look she smiled a little. "It made national news, Dean. I just hadn't heard that was you."

"There were a dozen people there, a circle of twelve, plus Sam. Me. A girl they'd taken, the demon and his 'children' and the bodies they'd possessed. They didn't find a single body afterward. Not Sam's, not anyone's."

"But you survived."

He shifted uncomfortably. "My friend...she's a psychic too. She... found me -- clear of the circle. I don't know ...I should have died there. With Sam. With..."

"But you didn't," she said. "However it happened, or why, you made it out alive."

He sneered at her and got up, pacing the narrow corridor. The camper was too small. "Yeah. That happens to me a lot."

"And you're pissed off about it?" she asked. "Well, hell, son. If you aren't happy with the results, I'm sure you could find a way to change them."

He snorted. "Aren't you supposed to tell me there's a reason?"

She shrugged. "If you haven't figured that much out, me telling you won't change your mind. You said it happens a lot -- I'd have thought it was obvious. But you want to spit in

the eye of providence -- well, there's a reason God granted us free will. So you know. Go on being pissed off about it -- or guilty," she added.

"I never wanted anyone to die for me."

"Too bad," she said and finished her coffee. "That what you think? Your brother died for you?"

The laughter that escaped him was bitter. "No. I think he did just what you're saying -- took the easy way out. My dad too. It's harder to be left behind than it is give it up."

"And now you've got no one to leave behind," she said and got up. "My heart's just bleeding for you, Dean. Really. Why don't you ask him?"

"What? Ask who?"

"Your brother."

"He's dead."

She scooped up the feathers and held them out to him. "Apparently not."

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It hadn't been as easy as all that -- he still didn't get any kind of manual or user's guide -- but what he knew, made him kind of want to throw up and maybe run away, except he wasn't actually sure he was capable of either.

But when he lifted his head and opened his eyes, for a moment he was pretty sure Emily's choice had been hell after all. There was fire all around him -- fire and bodies. Except it wasn't just the red and gold and yellow of flames, it was the sheer white of something far more incendiary, pulsing with heat that made his eyes feel like they were drying in their sockets, and the only places where it wasn't pure white was where the flames hit bodies: some upright still, pillars of ash, that finally collapsed and scattered as the waves of heat decimated them, left nothing behind but the negative image burned in his mind.

Closer in, the bodies were crumpled on the ground, clothing smoldering, and he found himself staring at Emily's wide open, staring, terrified eyes. She was past seeing though, past caring -- and almost like a punch to the gut Sam realized why her and how...she'd been one of them, too young to come into her powers, her gifts, but potentially one of the kin-bound, sharing the bloodline, and it had been him pushing back along the line that had killed all of them as surely as if he'd shot them as well as himself. Next to her was the body of the man the demon had occupied and beyond him, Dean...

*Dean...* </i>

He was scrabbling across the bodies and the burning ground before he realized he was -- should be-- still tied to his pillion.

Only he was free. It was like watching a train wreck to turn around and look at himself, at the shell left of his body, to see the blood --his blood-- sizzling on the ground.

He made himself look away, to reach for Dean. And he encountered too warm skin and blood that was still trickling down Dean's temple. He shifted his brother and then went still when Dean coughed weakly, still unconscious, but alive.

Still alive.

The line of white heat was approaching steadily, scorching the earth, sending sheets of steam up as every ounce of moisture in the earth, who knew how deeply, was drawn up and evaporated. Like approaching lava, there was no way to escape it...no way to get through it.

*Up*.

Not a whisper, just a thought, and he pulled Dean to him, surprised at how light he felt, how easy it was to pick his brother up like a child and lift him.

*Up.*

The unfurling of those great wings from no where made him want to laugh like a crazy man -- which it was entirely possible he was. But he was dead too, so, what the hell.

*I don't know how to fly,* he thought as he took a step forward and then *launched*. Maybe he didn't, but the wings seemed to think that was entirely inconsequential as they beat, steady and powerfully, disturbing the air on the down draft and flattening the pale white flames briefly until he was well above them.

Once he couldn't feel the heat on the soles of his feet any longer he gave thought to what he needed to do. Dean needed help, a doctor, a hospital -- something.

And then he saw the lights of the emergency vehicles approaching. There would be ambulances, firemen...but Dean would need...they'd ask him...they'd suspect...

He tried to remember where the hospital in Lawrence was, but the city wasn't exactly known to him -- and unlike the wings, no other answers presented themselves. So he tried to think, if when they'd been here last, driving from their old home to Missouri's, if he'd seen any signs...

*Missouri.*

He didn't even know what he did, or how he did it, but he knew she was there, could feel the tickle of her -- *presence* was the best he can come up with. It wasn't that easily defined, but it's very much like and also entirely different from the sense of being he got from the others -- from his psychic kin, only he knows there's no similar kinship between himself and Missouri. Wherever her gifts came from, it wasn't from the bloodline he and Dean share. It was something else.

Just like he knew when bond between he and Dean started to fade and weaken.

"No...no, no...Dean. Don't you give up. Don't you dare..." he said, holding Dean tighter against his chest.

He didn't know what it was, the shimmer on Dean that he could see with something other than sight. It yearned toward him, looking for release or guidance. Not so much Dean's soul as a marker for it, the place holder.

He was on the ground, well outside the cemetery.

He didn't need Dean to tell him what he wanted. It was there. It had always been there even when Sam didn't want to see it or hear it or think about it.

There were others there too, suddenly, drawn to him like he was drawn to Dean. They weren't ghosts, they weren't wandering souls --

Choices made manifest. Stay or move on, even before the soul left the body.

"Oh, Emily. You little bitch," he breathed out, and he could swear he heard her laugh. He couldn't even be angry about it.

He put his back to the wavering flag of Dean's decision and leaned into the embrace of another, one more familiar, hand and body, and went to his knees as all of what was Andy Gallagher was, was laid open. It was like flipping through the pages of a book, too fast to read. He wasn't supposed to help them decide, and when Andy did decide...

The wings were less metaphor than mechanism. He doesn't get to choose where they go, only that they go.

And he only got a glimpse into the multiple choice question that was the answer to *what happens when you die?*

He could only go so far into any answer.

It was like having a door slammed in his face. He didn't get to choose. He didn't even get the option to choose.

There was more than a dozen. Every one unloaded the burden for him to carry, because whatever they chose, whatever choice compelled him forward, over, under, in, and around a dizzying array of options, even the darkest of doors, they started over. Even when choices were denied them. Those denials hit Sam like the worst of the headaches he'd ever had. He was escort and carrier and he thought he might be hampered by what he knew, by what he thought he knew.

When all the rest were done, Dean was still waiting for him. There should have been the compulsion there too -- to give his brother, of all people, the choice, only no such urge presented itself to him.

It took him a few moments --a lifetime-- to realize that it wasn't *him* that was denying the option. Whatever it was that drove him, that allowed him to become this, this, *reaper*, it wasn't ready to give Dean the option.

But there was no doubt that Dean was dying. There was bleeding that Sam could sense. There was an ache he could feel deep in his bones, in his heart. This was Dean's worst fear and it seemed cruel to force him to face it, to set him back in the world without family, without purpose.

*You don't get to choose.*

He could feel Missouri getting closer. The other rescue vehicles were too far away but she...

She sensed something about him. Enough to not be afraid, enough to follow.

Enough to put the pieces together and Sam felt both so grateful and so tired that all he could do was lay next to Dean and hope Missouri had the answers he didn't even know how to ask about.

She wasn't strong enough to move Dean herself and as before, Sam wasn't sure how he knew to do what he did, but he did it -- slipped inside her. He got nothing from her, no dump of information, no sudden revelations; he occupied the space of her but not the whole of her.

He only barely got them both back to Missouri's when he felt it again, the tug and pull along his consciousness, the need to *seek*, to *harvest*, to answer.

He couldn't fight it off, or deny it.

He had no choice at all.

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The Preacher's dinette *cum* bed wasn't any more or less uncomfortable than any other bed Dean had slept on. It was a little short, but the sheets she offered were clean, the blanket warm and it didn't cost him anything.

He hadn't settled in right away, fatigue or no. Taking the feathers, he'd driven back to the site, walked around and around the greasy smear of ashy remains, and found himself staring up at the rooftops. Nothing showed itself; the only shadows he saw were caused by clouds scudding across the sun.

He felt stupid for trying it, but the feathers were being left for a reason, he supposed. But holding his lighter under one of them only made it burn fast and instantly like tissue paper. It didn't even leave smoke or ash. Just gone.

And nothing answered his half-assed call.

He'd wandered back and the Preacher met him at the door. "Stay or go, I don't care. I'm going to be hunting down the last of the succubi tonight and I need sleep. I lock this door and I won't open it again until I leave."

He'd gone inside, helped himself to a sandwich and a shower when she offered, and took the clean sheets. The Preacher fell asleep almost instantly. Dean lay awake for a long time until the afternoon sun warmed up the camper and the next thing he knew it was dusk, and the Preacher was up and dressed and heating up a pot of chili.

He'd never really thought about hunting succubi. Everything he knew about them indicated that mostly people stumbled over them. The Preacher really wasn't that chatty about it, but questions got answered and he got that while they were all kind of vicious opportunists, not all of them were necessarily killers. She didn't much care about the distinctions even though she was aware of them.

"So how do you know where to look? And what are you looking for?" he asked her. They were in roughly the same area as the night before.

"This lot...they take advantage of grief," she said. "Men's grief. Wives, sisters, girlfriends, daughters... Tulane Cancer center is close by. They wait, they watch...men coming in with the women they love. Leaving without them at some point. That's all they need. They follow the grief like dogs on a scent, but they stay close to here. The last two did anyway. The third.. she might have moved on. How do you hunt for a *ghul*?"

Dean snorted. "By smell mostly. They feed on carrion mostly, human or animal. The fresher the better, relatively."

"Relatively?"

"A year maybe..." he said. "They'll go after living things, if they're hungry enough. Animals...this groups been killing pets as far as I can tell. Strays."



"And they come from...I've heard of them. They aren't zombies."

He shook his head. "No. They're a bit smarter than that. I don't know...the first of them. Usually it's because some animal somewhere has eaten something left behind by a feeding <i>ghul</i>. It gets infected or whatever, bites someone, scratches them...voila, a few days later, they've come down with something nasty and fatal. Most of them I've ever seen have escaped from morgues, or died alone. If they are taken to a funeral home, embalmed...it seems to stop it. But..."

"But the ones that don't get there fast enough..."

"Wake up hungry," he said, and then found himself stopped by her arm across his chest. They'd entered an area where four streets wrapped around a little park, a few blocks over from the medical center. Like a lot of parks in New Orleans, wrought iron edged the corners. There was a still standing but none too healthy looking oak in the center, a ring of iron benches around it.

One of those benches was occupied, a couple wrapped tight around each other, kissing in that full body kind of way.

"Got a voyeur thing going?" he asked softly.

She dropped her arm, and pulled out her cross and a flask of holy water. From her pocket she took more brass chains. "You said you can smell the <i>ghul</i>. What do you smell right now?"

He inhaled, took in a heavily floral scent, could have been magnolia or roses, except there was a musty, bitter under scent to it. "Stay."

"You think..."

"I'm pretty damn sure. <i>Stay</i>," she said softly. "You aren't immune to them."

It felt odd to hold back, not to take on something even potentially rotten and evil.

The Preacher didn't try to sneak up or even hide her approach; she got within a foot of the couple before the woman even noticed her.

And even from where he stood, Dean could see her -- not stunningly beautiful. She looked pretty average. The Preacher didn't hesitate, her voice rising up even as she flung first the holy water then the chains around the creature. It came off the bench with a screech and wail, almost levitating, thrashing as the Preacher continued to mutter her prayers .

The wailing increased, changed pitch and Dean found himself lurching forward even as the man on the bench rose as well, reaching for The Preacher, face contorted. He was weakened though, and she shoved him back and down.

The writhing creature on the ground wailed again, sobbing, the sound of it piercing and too familiar...

*<i>Dean!</i>*

It didn't look anything like Sam but it sounded like him, that cry --hopeless and scared and Dean unable to answer then.

She was hurting him. The Preacher was hurting Sam, and he had to stop her. He found himself reaching for his gun, pulling it free of his jacket.

*<i>Dean, please!</i>*

The shot went wild when something grabbed his wrist and jerked it upward. He heard the Preacher falter, saw the twisting, writhing form at her feet rising up.

"It's not me."

Dean blinked and for just a moment, he was sure Sam was right in front of him, felt the curl of his fingers around his wrist. Sam looking down on him, no blood on his forehead, on his chin. Sam in that ridiculous grey t-shirt with the stupid dog, in the torn jeans that were long past repairable. Blackness obscured his view of the Preacher but he could hear her still.

The screeching stopped, and Dean shook his head, no longer hearing Sam, no longer *<i>seeing* him. And yet he could still feel the imprint of Sam's fingers on his wrist, wore he could still smell him.

The Preacher was watching him. The succubus was nothing more than a pile of rags and skin, spreading out, dissolving like gelatin in the heat, even though it was call. She was on her cellphone, crouching by the man, who was still struggling weakly to get to what was now only filthy cloth and slime, only now he was sobbing, and the Preacher was trying to keep him back.

The aroma of rancid meat hit him like a punch and he whirled, eyes narrowed as he scanned the park, saw a shadow slip between two buildings.

*<i>Ghul!*" he shouted over his shoulder at the Preacher and took off after it.

He was pretty sure he heard her call after him, but he didn't stop, and only when he saw the shambling, lurching form slide through an already broken window did he pause. He had his gun with silver bullets which wouldn't do him a damn bit of good. He didn't have

his machete -- they'd been hunting succubi, not *ghul* -- and while he had lighter fluid in his pocket, you kind of had to force a *ghul* to stop moving by cutting off legs or other parts so it would stay still long enough *to* burn.

But the chance that this was where the thing was going to ground, where it might be leaving pieces of its meals and filth...a perfect place for rats to be nibbling on it's leftovers and then passing the infection or whatever it was on.

He shouldered through, what was left of the glass in the window frame crumbling and falling to the floor in a tinkle of sound, and even as he brought the maglite up alongside the muzzle of his gun, he knew he was being stupid and reckless. The 9 mm rounds might drive it back but it wouldn't do much more than blast rotted chunks of flesh free, leaving them for the rats to find too.

The floor beneath his feet was probably linoleum or tile but there was still signs of the storms and flooding, dried sludge and debris painting it dark delta mud black, stains on the walls and shelving still topple over. Store or storage, he didn't know. One of a thousand businesses that had yet to be restarted, or had been abandoned entirely. There were stairs on the far side of the room he entered, two doors leading elsewhere in the building, both closed although the nearest one looked warped and rotting, held closed by the weight of a rusted metal shelf leaning partially against it.

He stopped and held his breath, listening for any sound: the creak of floorboards, the creak of bones, and then whirled around to stare at the open windows.

*Ghuls* didn't hide from anything but the sun. They were still smart in that crafty, instinctual way of animals, of scavengers. Unlike zombies, they had a will of their own, even if it was driven by hunger. The younger they were, the more dangerous because some fraction of brain function remained. The older they got, the longer they survived, the less crafty, the less careful, bones and flesh brittle and dry. Walking corpses rotting while they hunted until whatever life force drove them finally drained away.

A whisper of sound to his left and the scent of rot increased enough to make his gorge rise. He kept to the edges of the room as much as he could.

Distantly he heard the sound of sirens, coming closer; the shot he'd fired or the call the Preacher had made, either one.

It had to be here. There was no place for it to go unless it had gone up and he moved as quietly as he could to the staircase, flicking his light upward only to find another closed door.

So, it was still here--

The thing came up at him from under the staircase, from a gap that looked too small to hide it. He got a shot off straight down, but already bony fingers were closed around his

ankle and he went down, half falling into the shelving, the metal of it digging into his back and shoulder. The *ghul* clawed upward, rasping moan sounding excited as it sought for flesh.

He put two rounds into its desiccated face, snapping the head back, but it only dropped back down, expression perpetually locked into a toothy grin. It lurched upward and grabbed and Dean swore as clawed nails latched onto the cuff of his jacket, pulling down to where the skin of his wrist and hand was exposed. He kicked and heard bone snap, ribs collapsing and the thing folded inward but it didn't stop.

It screeched and wrenched itself backwards, a shadow looming up behind it, stretched wide -- a darkness that should have been impossible to see in the already dark cavern of the room. There was more snapping and a tearing sound like leather being shredded.

It was instinct as much as desperation that made him fire again, as he scrambled to his feet. He thought he heard The Preacher yelling for him, but a glimpse of flesh twisting around the shadow made him fire again without thinking.

"Oh," was the sound the blackness made when it lunged backward, crashing into the shelving near the door and the maglite cast an odd arc of light across the floor, to where the *ghul* lay *in pieces*; five that Dean could see in a glimpse; limbs separated from torso, all of it still moving obscenely but aside from the hands trying to find purchase on the rough floor, kind of ineffectual and easily avoided.

"Need to burn it still," said a voice so painfully familiar Dean choked, flicking his light over.

His brother's face shone pale in the glow of the flashlight, blinking and squinting, still sprawled against the shelving.

Only not his brother because cushioning the long, lean body and the outstretched arms was a huge, wide expanse of black wings, end feathers rustling and twitching softly in the shadows.

"Sam?"

He got a flash of white teeth and saw a gleam and glow in the blue-green eyes that was neither demonic yellow or hell-hound red, just Sam's own eye color sheened over with moisture.

"Took you long enough," Sam said and shifted, only to hiss as he rolled his torso forward.

"Can't be...can't. You...you're dead. You are--"

"Yeah, I know. I--" He'd leaned forward to put his hands on the floor, to push himself up and Dean saw it then, the splash of wetness on the filthy floor, the glint of scarlet. The wings spread and contracted, Sam finding his balance, only to stumble forward.

It couldn't be Sam. There was no way, and yet the indelibly *Sam*-imprinted part of Dean's brain made him lunge forward to catch Sam before he could go to his knees. His hands connected with solid flesh, warm under the thin t-shirt that Dean had last seen dotted with blood and dirt and sweat, only now it was soaked with it, in gleaming blooms, around three dark holes where dean's bullets had punched through cloth and flesh. Sam's hand gripped his, broad palm and too oft-bitten nails, firm and sure, and the thin leather cord hanging loose around the bones of Sam's wrist.

"Sam. Sammy...this is..."

"I know...I know and I'll try to explain...Shit..." Sam said and his hand tightened. He met Dean's gaze steady on, and now the blue-green glowed more blue, luminous like the eyes of humans never could be. "You're still a good shot," Sam said with half a laugh, and a cough. "Silver shot. Blessed. Figures. I have to go, Dean. I'll be back. I need you to know, I'm not gone," he said but already his voice was fading and the shadowy wings behind him spread wide swallowing the weak light of Dean's flashlight. "I promise."

The last words lingered in the air but Dean was clutching empty air. On the floor, the *ghul's* pieces were still moving.

He had to be hallucinating.

"Dean? Dean!" The Preacher's flashlight caught him in the face when he turned and he raised a hand to shield his eyes. "Jesus! Are you hurt? Did it get you?"

"I-- No. I don't know...No, I don't think so," he said but his heart was pounding and his mouth was dry.

Her light flicked over to the animate pieces of the *ghul* then back at Dean. "Then whose blood is that?" she asked and Dean looked down to see the wide thin puddle of it, kept from soaking into the floor below by stretch of faded linoleum.

He could only stare at it...then reach out to let the blood paint his fingertips. He backed away from it suddenly, rocking back onto his calves and pushing up, sidestepping so quickly he stumbled and clutched at the shelving.

His fingers stroked over silkiness and warmth, and tacky wetness and he stared at the feathers caught in twisted metal. He pulled them free and then almost dropped them as the black bled from the quill and then the spread outward into the softer barbs, the color fading as if it had been painted with bleach. Only not entirely. Spatters of red dotted the now snowy whiteness.

His fingers clutched them tightly and he drew a breath, Shoved hand and feathers all and stuffed them in his pocket, pulling out the can of lighter fluid.

"We need to burn that," he said and flipped the tip up, dousing the leathery moving parts of the *ghul*.

She stared at the mass of twitching limbs. "You do that?"

"No," he said and tried not to think about what had torn the ghul apart. He dropped a whole book of matches on it, nudged some of the pieces and bits back into the pile with his boot.

They stayed until there was nothing but ash, until the small pool of blood had dried and cracked into muddy reddish brown, indistinguishable from the other dirt and mud on the floor. The Preacher had checked his hands and wrists, ankles and neck, for any scratches or scrapes and Dean submitted to it in a kind of daze.

He'd followed her out, barely glancing at the street and park behind him, finding that to be a preferable line of thought to what he'd seen, and felt.

Sam was dead. The dead don't bleed.

"What about the guy?" he mumbled out.

"Called an ambulance. May be too late," the Preacher said, walking beside him but not touching, not crowding. "What happened in there?"

"I think the *ghul* and the succubus were working together," he said, opening a wider gap between them. "She killed them. They got to the bodies before anyone else could. It's why they were all in the same area."

She gave him a look that spoke of both patience and crazy people. "It's theory. First time I've ever heard of succubi needing anyone to clean up after them."

"Maybe it was the *ghul*. New ones, they can be smart." He could see his car -- he didn't notice the Preacher stretch her legs to keep up with him. He fumbled for his keys as they got close, and felt the brush of silk against his fingertips, snatching his hand out of his pocket fast enough to send the keys flying.

The Preacher stared at him then walked over, picked them up and held them out to him. "You want me to drive?" she asked and he only stared at her for a moment before holding out his hand.

"No, I'm good."

"You've got blood on your hands," she said, pressing the keys to his palm.

He stared at his fingers, at the smears of drying blood. "I saw him. Sam."

"In there with *ghul*? You're sure it was Sam?"

Dean sucked on his teeth and tried to find the denial, the rejection of the idea that what he'd seen and touched had been his brother. Some part of his brother anyway. He nodded. "Yeah. I'm sure." Dean said and unlocked the car. He slid into the driver's seat and reached across to unlock the passenger side.

"What did you do? I didn't see--" she asked as she got in.

"I shot him."

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Dean didn't offer the Preacher much explanation. He hadn't lingered for coffee or a meal, for conversation, or even stopped long enough to do more than wash the blood from his hands. She didn't press for answers or ask more questions. Dean wasn't sure if that was a function of her personality or the look on his face. But she gave him her cell number.

He didn't reciprocate. He could feel her waiting for it, see it in the carefully guarded look in her eyes. What he did leave with her was one of his three machetes. "There might be more," was all he said, then he'd gotten in his car and headed north.

He drove straight through, not really knowing where he was heading until he realized he was skirting Kansas but still headed north, into Nebraska.

It was mid-day when he arrived at Harvelle's Roadhouse. There was one other truck there plus Ellen's, and a dusty mustang he thought might be Jo's. But the signs were lit and the door open.

It was Jo he saw first. She was pulling chairs off the tables in the back; sun-filtered dust lingered in the air, making her hair look a little glowy and clean. She stared at him for a long time, approaching carefully.

He didn't have anything to say to her. Didn't even know what he was doing here. He hadn't left on the best of terms.

He didn't know if he should be embarrassed or grateful when she stood for a minute a foot from him before finally closing the distance and wrapping her arms around his neck for a tentative hug. It was unlike her. Unlike him. And still he found his arms coming around her, first loosely then more tightly. She smelled of soap and shampoo and a little sweat. She was solid and warm, slim and yet sturdy.

She didn't kiss him, but she did smile at him. "You want a beer?"

"A beer would be good."

It was just that easy, but the awkwardness lingered.

Ellen didn't hug him when she came out. She didn't smile. She spent a long moment studying him, gauging him, judging him, and he supposed he deserved that. "You just passing through or staying?"

"I..." He suddenly felt more tired than he had in months. He rubbed at his face. "I have no idea."

She'd regarded him a moment longer. "There's a room if you--"

"Is there some place else?" he asked and saw the flicker in her eyes. "I just...I may be around for a few days. I don't want to put you out."

It was as close to an apology as she was going to get and she knew it. She nodded. "Yeah. I've got a friend, runs a fish camp a few miles down the road. You should be able to get a cabin cheap," she said.

"Thanks."

She disappeared then, for a little bit, returning with something in her hands. "You've been making friends, I hear," she said and laid it on the bar top.

It was a dream catcher and he eyed it, not recognizing the design, but his eyes lingered on the snowy white feather woven into the leather. "Pete Ayles left that for me. Says he ran into you in Nevada."

Dean remembered the hunt if not the man. "Shaman, right? Skin walker. Couple of months ago."

She nodded and stroked the feather with a fingertip. "Says you left that behind. It was black when he gave it to me."

He didn't get the same chill or hollow feeling he might once have but his hand dipped into his pocket and felt the feathers there. He pulled them out; snow white but stained by rust. "I'm not the one leaving them behind," he said quietly.

<b>::::</b>

Ellen was right. Off season the cabins were much more affordable, and a better choice for a few days than either a motel or the guest room above the Roadhouse. It didn't hurt that Dean was able to give Ellen as a reference to the old man who ran the place.



Only one other cabin was occupied and Dean took the one furthest from both the entrance and the lake, the one set back into the woods.

There were cobwebs in the corners of the small screened porch and dried leaves covering the steps but the interior was clean if a little dusty smelling. Two bedrooms with two double beds each, a large bathroom in between with a shower -- very industrial, very YMCA-ish. The front part of the cabin was one long room with a kitchen and living area that opened into one another. A standard unimpressive kitchen was supplied with a minimal number of plastic dishes and worn aluminum cookware. The furniture in the living area was sturdy, the upholstery both unimaginatively and unoffendingly plaid, in muted autumn colors. Guaranteed not to show signs or wear easily.

Dean examined every cabinet, every drawer, checked the closets and under the beds. He didn't want to be surprised by anything. He didn't unload anything just then, only made a mental list then drove the five point six miles to a small grocery *cum* hardware store and loaded up on supplies -- enough food for a few days, some beer, coffee, duct tape, and a couple of boxes of rock salt he found tucked back on the shelves, left over from the previous winter.

When he got back, he spent some time laying duct tape along the narrow windowsills, the idea coming to him from the Preacher's thin boxes. He wasn't up to a cabin renovation and he doubted the camp's proprietor would appreciate the improvements, but even as he worked, doubling the tape back on itself to make it stick, he constructed the boxes in his head. Be a good thing to have, to be able to throw in the trunk -- probably make the housekeeping staffs of any number of motels a lot less grumpy.

He could remember a time when laying salt across doors and windows hadn't been an automatic default every time they stopped. They hadn't done it much growing up -- apartments and motel rooms had been left without leftover trails of white in the corners or stuck in window tracks. The first time he'd done it, he thought it might help Sam ward off the nightmares that plagued him, might make the visions ease up some. Neither had been true, but it seemed like every time they turned around something was too close to them, something was taking their presence as a challenge -- the breach of doors and windows had become something to worry about, something they didn't need to worry about when there was such an easy remedy.

The next thing he'd done was spread a piece of canvas over the worn coffee table and laid out every single weapon he owned. He'd gotten lax and sloppy in keeping up with them; keeping them clean, keeping them sharp. It had actually taken him awhile before he even wanted to pick one up; gun, knife, bow...none of them had been the least bit of use to him when it mattered.

It was nearing dusk before Dean finished the guns. He got up long enough to heat up a can of soup, make a pot of coffee, then he started on the knives.

The first set he laid hands on were Sam's throwing knives, wrapped up in their oilcloth sheaths, tied with baling twine. He couldn't remember the last time Sam had touched them. He unrolled the set of five and was only half surprised to find a sleek black feather waiting for him. He picked it up and stared at it.

"You know, a phone call would have been better," he said quietly.

"I tried. You never answered."

Sam suddenly *being there* startled the hell out of him. He was there, standing between the bedrooms and the living area, leaning against the open frame. The dark wings were folded up neatly behind him, the crested folds brushing the top of the door frame even though Sam was kind of slouching, hands in his pockets. He looked much as he had last time, only in better light.

Except he wasn't bleeding this time. The shirt he wore still showed signs of it, stained and dark, the cloth torn, Dean could catch a glimpse of paler skin below. What blood there was, was long dried making Sam's t-shirt stiff.

The pounding of his own heart was so loud Dean almost winced from it. It echoed roughly in his ears, the pressure of it making his chest ache.

"Christo," he said.

Sam didn't move, didn't flinch, not even when Dean got up and started the first of the Latin to exorcise -- he didn't know all of it but he knew enough to start. Sam still didn't move, except to pull his hands from his pockets when Dean got closer.

"I'm not possessed."

Dean stopped. "You're not Sam either," he said coolly. He'd had a lot of time to think about this. Number one, Sam was dead. He hadn't dreamed watching the bullet enter his brother's skull. Number two, even if Sam wasn't dead, he didn't have fucking wings, he didn't damn well *molt* all over the place.

Sam's gaze didn't drop, and his eyes offered an apology. Whatever this was, whoever, whatever, it had Sam's eyes down, from color to expressiveness, to the tiny faint scar above the left that Sam had gotten when he was a kid. "Yeah, there's probably some truth to that," Sam said.

"Sam is dead."

Sam hunched a little, glancing down to where his bare feet made squeaking sounds against the hardwood floor. "Also true, more or less."

"What do you want from me?" Dean asked. "If I shoot you full of rock salt will you disappear?"

"I'm not a ghost."

"You aren't human."

"Not so much anymore, no," Sam admitted.

"What's holy water do to you?"

"Other than make me wet?"

The urge to turn that into some kind of sexual innuendo, to make a joke of it was right there on the tip of Dean's tongue, a throwback to a sense of humor he felt like he'd lost along with everything else. "The bullets hurt you -- silver and blessed," he said.

"Regular bullets would as well. I could tell was all. Dean--"

"What do you *want*?" Dean snapped out. "Whatever this is, whatever deal or bargain or revenge--"

"No. God, no, Dean," Sam said looking stricken.

"I buried my brother once -- you know, except for the part where *I didn't get to bury him*," Dean said. "Whatever you are, whatever you want, I'm fresh out of deals to make, so you can just take whatever it is you're selling, and peddle it somewhere else." He backed up and went to his coat, pulling out the feathers. "And you can stop leaving your damn calling cards."

Sam reached out for them, but at the last moment he gripped Dean's wrist. Dean jerked back but Sam held on. His grip was firm, solid, his flesh warm. "You asked me why," he said.

"Let go." Dean laid his other hand over Sam's prying his fingers free.

"After I took the bullet, you asked why."

"Fuck you." Dean lunged forward shoving the winged-freak backwards into the doorway, throwing him off balance and freeing himself, then twisting around, eyes glancing quickly over the arrayed weapons. None of the guns but his Glock were loaded, but the blades.

Machetes worked pretty well on the walking dead. The first swing had the thing with Sam's face dancing backwards, wings spread wide for balance. Two handed, Dean swung

and parried, then went low. A deep cut across the thigh sent not-Sam to one knee, blood staining his leg, his jeans, and dripping quickly to the floor. Maybe he'd nicked an artery.

*<i>The dead don't bleed... </i>*

Dean came back just as quickly and the blade was only barely turned with a flat-handed wrist twist that Dean had taught Sam himself, but it wasn't enough and more blood spattered the wall. The next blow was aimed at its throat, only to dig into flexed forearm. He felt it hit bone. A little harder and he'd have taken the thing's arm off. He jerked the blade back, expecting something. It should be fighting back.

He wanted it to fight back. Sam would have fought back. He should have fought back, fought for time, fought for another option -- anything but giving up and giving in.

"I couldn't win," Sam said, still on his knees, looking up. "I couldn't stop it, Dean. If I'd let the demon kill you or Emily, it would have ended everything. *<i>Everything</i>."*

"You gave up!" Dean snarled at him. "You could have bought us time!"

"It would have killed you."

"I wish it had!" Dean said and swung.

Nothing stopped him. Sam didn't move, didn't flinch and at the last second, Dean flipped the blade; the flat edge caught Sam along the side of the face, hard enough to knock him over, send him sprawling to the floor.

Dean dropped the blade and stared, then sank to his knees. "What do you want?"

Sam swallowed and pushed himself up on one arm, the other cradled against his chest. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't see any other choice. I didn't know what to do. It was going to use me to bring a hell on earth. It needed a sacrifice. One of my choosing. So I chose. I didn't want any more blood on my hands. I got it anyway."

Dean shook his head. "And so, what, now your penance is to come back and haunt me, or...what?"

"No. Not haunt. I'm not a ghost. I'm..." Sam faltered, closed his eyes. "Might be better if I was. I'm..."

"What? The angel of death? You've got the wings for it."

The faintest of smiles twitched at Sam's lips and Dean tried not to let it affect him but it was so damn familiar, so much missed. "Close...not an angel, even with the wings. I'm...I guess technically, I'm a reaper."

"Technically? And you're here to do what, escort me to the afterlife? You're doing a shitty job."

"I'm kind of a specialist," Sam said and dropped his head, his face was luminously pale and Dean didn't miss the amount of blood that was still pooling under his leg. "Shit...I need a bullet proof vest to talk to you."

"I didn't shoot you this time," Dean pointed out and got up, dug through his bag. "Wait. If you're already dead, how can you bleed to death?"

"I can't. But I'm more less dead than more...but I can't..."

Sam's eyes were starting to show that same bluish sheen, and Dean could swear he was getting fuzzy around the edges. "Dean, please. When I come back, could you not try and kill me--" Sam said sound both apologetic and amused.

Dean grabbed the length of gauze he'd been reaching for and lunged, grabbing at Sam's arms. "Sam...so help me God, you leave again, don't come back."

Sam stared at him, the bluish tinge fading from his eyes. "I'm not sure I have choice..." he said but his other hand gripped Dean's forearm.

The shimmer around the edges of Sam's body intensified and his hand went slack on Dean's arm. The wings flared outward stretching out like Sam was about to take flight and then they faded.

Sam didn't make a sound, only slumped forward. The weight of him, even now, was familiar. It took Dean a moment to react, to push him back and ease the lax body down to the floor. Sam was breathing shallowly and under his fingers Dean could feel a pulse. When he bent down he could hear a heart beat.

And the wounds in Sam's arm and leg still pulsed blood, slowly, but steadily.

*<i>The dead don't bleed.</i>*

Sam's hair felt limp and dirty under his hand.

He was losing his mind. There was no other explanation. He'd finally lost it; gone batshit insane.

It didn't stop him from getting a better grip on Sam by hooking his arms under Sam's shoulder and hauling him into the bathroom. Hell of lot easier to get blood off tile.

He felt like an idiot, tending the wounds of a dead man. Mostly dead, and that thought set him off laughing. If there was an edge of hysteria to it, well, there was no one around to hear it.

Sam was right. Holy water didn't do anything to the wounds but make the blood run thinly onto the tiles.

Sam came around when Dean was wrapping a length of gauze around his leg. "I can't bleed to death," he said. "I don't think."

"Well, it was this or just let you continue to make a mess on the floor," Dean said, and tied the gauze off then pushed back to sit against the wall.

Sam didn't try to sit up, but he made a face. "Is something burning?"

"Shit. Soup," Dean said and got up to go turn the stove off, but he hesitated. "You going to disappear again?"

"I'll stay as long as I can," Sam said and closed his eyes again.

"Great. Next you'll tell me that reapers punch a time clock just like regular Joes," Dean said in disgust and left but he heard Sam laugh -- just a short burst of sound.

His own smile was reflexive and kind of unwelcome. Crazy or not, he wanted to hear Sam laugh more than he wanted to breathe.

The soup was a loss, but he wasn't feeling particularly hungry. The coffee though -- he grabbed a mug and then after a moment's thought, grabbed a second, fixed them both and carried them back.

Sam didn't look like he'd moved much. He also didn't look like he was in pain which he should have been, but he was still pale. The bandages only showed some spotting though.

"Can you drink coffee?"

Sam opened his eyes. "I honestly don't know," he said and struggled to sit up. He took the mug Dean offered and sipped. "Oh, wow. That's, uhm...I didn't even know I missed this."

Dean settled down on the floor across from him. "I think I've lost my mind."

"You haven't. I swear, Dean. You haven't."

"Sam, I don't think there's anything you could say that would make any of this make sense. You've already admitted you're dead--"

"More or less."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Fine. And not human. Those two things alone make you not my brother. At best you're a revenant of some kind...or God, a manifestation I'm making up in my own brain."

"Which would explain how the Preacher saw me, how?" Sam asked.

"Hell, if I know. Maybe I dreamed her up too. Maybe all of this is...shit," Dean said. "Let me guess. I actually am dead and this is somebody's idea of a joke. Hell for Dean Winchester is being haunted by his dead brother."

"You're not dead."

"Yeah well, not from lack of trying."

"I know," Sam said looking at him over the rim of his mug.

Dean looked away. The worried look on Sam's face was never one he could stand having aimed in his direction. "Yeah, so, as a reaper -- if you were coming for me, you kind of suck at it, a lot, Sam."

"It's not your time."

"And it was yours?" Dean snapped back.

"Yes," Sam said evenly. "Dean...look, there's a lot I could tell you, a lot I want to tell you. I'm not even a hundred percent sure what I am now, only that I'm still me. That...I...you remember the girl, Emily?"

"Yeah. I do," Dean said.

"What the demon said about the bloodlines was true...about us sharing a bloodline with all those other people, the psychics, the gifted, the *children like me* and like you. Through mom."

Dean set his mug aside and sat up, crossing his legs. "I know..." he said. It made no difference to admit it now. Especially not to what could be a hallucination.

Only Dean didn't believe that. Not really. "Dad...Dad told me before he died. Not... he didn't have all the details, just that he'd found a link. Between mom's ancestors and some of the other families."

Sam dropped his gaze and took a deep breath before nodding. "Okay. Emily was part of that bloodline only...she hadn't come into her powers yet. She was an innocent. And I killed her along with the others."

"But not me," Dean said meeting his gaze steadily. "Because the demon was right about that. I share that blood. But I didn't die there."

"No."

"You did that."

"Yes," Sam said softly.

Dean nodded. "You really think that was my choice, Sam? Dad gone. You. You think that's what I wanted?"

Sam shook his head. "No. I knew it wasn't."

"And you did it anyway."

"What would you have done, if you'd had the chance?"

"That's not the question!" Dean said.

"No. It's not. But I'm not sorry," Sam said flatly. "I'm sorry I hurt you. Sorry I left you alone. Sorry for everything you've been through since then. But I'm not sorry you're alive, and not sorry that I got the chance to keep you that way. And I know you're angry--"

Dean let the bark of laughter escape him. "Angry doesn't start--"

"I know. Why do you think it's taken me so long to...so long for you to be able to see me? I've been here all along, Dean."

"What, you're Tinkerbell now? As long as I believe, you can appear?"

Sam smiled. "Something like that. I'm here for another reason too. I died and I got a choice. A choice to...atone. To you, to Emily, and I took it. But you're right. I'm not really human. And being alive is...different as I am. It's more that I exist as I am."

"But you can bleed."

"Like this, I can."

"And when you're not here? Tell me, what's it like when you die, Sam?"

Sam sat back. "It's a lot like Kansas," he said.

Dean suddenly felt very tired. "Sounds like hell to me," he said and closed his eyes.



He opened them when heard the rustle of wings. Sam was on his feet, the black wings were back.

"Can I come back?" Sam asked

"You're asking now? It hasn't stopped you before."

"It will this time. Can I come back?" Sam said and there was an urgency in his voice, even as he seemed to shimmer around the edges.

Dean licked his lips. "Yes. You can come back."

Sam was gone.

But there was blood on the floor and half empty coffee cup.

Dean pressed a tightly closed fist to his mouth to keep himself from adding, *<i>please.</i>*

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He doesn't know the man. He knows he's a hunter. Knows that thing slinking back into the restored swamps in the Limberlost isn't normal or natural, but he has less concern for it than he does for the desire to once more direct what's left of a hunter to the paths open to him.

The swamp will claim the broken and torn body and no one will ever know what happened to Leroy Vellin.

He doesn't even know what they see when they look at him. He doesn't give them his name, usually. Dean asked him if he were the angel of death and he was only half joking.

He doesn't bring death. Death's already there, or come and gone. He doesn't cause their deaths, he only gets to collect what's left after it's already made its claim.

He's never seen death either. He doesn't know if it's an actual presence like he is, or if it's just a random moment in time, the last ticking of a clock, the last grain of sand falling through glass.

Sometimes, in the dozen or so times he's been called to offer his hand and let them walk the paths open to them, they are still alive when he arrives. Just barely, and it's only a matter of minutes. Seconds maybe. When he does, there's no escaping what they feel, be it fear or anger or relief.

He's called to two kinds of people and he isn't sure how far the delineation goes; the first kind are hunters. Hunters he didn't even know existed, but only hunters who are killed while hunting. He knows, without knowing how he knows, that there are others. Few, but there. Older men and women who have merely given into time. Ones caught in random accidents, or caught off guard by heart attacks or other traumas -- natural causes; he isn't called to them, but he knows when they go.

He'd like to make some kind of equivalency between the hunters who fall in the pursuit of evil and soldiers who fall in the line of duty, but it doesn't hold up. He's called because whatever ended their lives tends to bleed. If there are certain times of the year when the veil thins between the mortal and mundane world and the realm of things that were never really meant to walk the world, then when a hunter is taken out, more so than any other victim, there's a different kind of rift created. Knowledge is power, after all, and that's more literal than not, Sam's discovered. If you stare into the dark, you shouldn't be surprised when it stares back. When you strike it, even if you destroy it, it leaves a mark - like a grease stain on your soul. It's something other dark things can see or sense. No one gets away clean.

But the paths Sam walks are off limits to such things. He's as much guardian as gatherer, and hadn't that been a surprise? That such things will try follow, will try to slip by, like they sense that somewhere beyond the doors Sam opens there are more doors. A way in. Into what, Sam isn't sure. He can't go past them either, but the first time one of them tried, he'd reacted from an instinct he didn't know he had.

He also discovered that while he might be more or less immortal (not unlike being more or less *dead*) he was not *invulnerable*.

It's not the ghosts of once living humans he ever needs to worry about. As destructive and evil as they can be, it's still a *human* evil. Vengeful spirits haunting lonely hallways or roads over past wrongs or inconstant lovers weren't under his charge. Not usually.

The ones that were, were the second kind of calls he answered. For those, he did feel more like some harbinger of death -- maybe because they recognized him, knew him -- not by name or face, but by blood. Shared blood, his own distant kin, if he could still call them that. Whatever name those distant ancestors went by, they hadn't been entirely human -- not of homosapiens. Whether they were the by product of some sleeping entity's dreams, or a deliberate creation by some all powerful being -- they had gone from nothing to fully realized. Gods, Angels or Demons, Sam supposed it didn't matter any longer what they *were*, only what they'd left behind.

That one glimpse Sam had had of all the bloodlines leading to and from his own, had extended far beyond the circle of the converted and the willing. From babes in the womb to people older than he would ever be, they were there, indistinguishable from anyone else unless they made themselves known.

Some of those remaining had turned already, despite not being in on the final bid for power, but they were out there, and it wouldn't take much for someone else to bind them together. Others had come to their powers but were more inclined to remain hidden.

But all of them, all the ones he'd felt or seen die, whether from natural causes or not, came to him. And all of them, like him, had only two choices...forward or back. After that, he didn't know what happened to them. He'd caught no random glimpses of others like himself but he knew they were there. Their paths didn't cross. There was no Reaper Social club, no Afterlife Family Reunion.

But they were more aware and of the ones who went forward, he felt only fear and trepidation. Of the ones who went back, only resignation.

Atonement or judgment -- it was as close as he could come to understanding it.

It was the same for all of them.

Except for one.

Dean had come too close to actually calling Sam to his side, rather than Sam trying to make his way there, enough times for Sam to see the paths laid out for him, as for all of their blood. Except Dean's path only led forward.

And maybe it was because Dean was his brother -- that would be more reassuring than believing his bother had only one option. There should be more choices for him when he'd been given so few in his life. Or maybe it was because Dean had hit the threshold of death one too many times so that *back* was no longer an option.

Sam didn't know what lay forward. He knew judgment, in this case, went far beyond right or wrong, good or evil. There wasn't actually a scorecard being kept...but it scared him. Scared him like few things could any longer.

It was that fear that had allowed him to intervene time and again, but he had the feeling he was being held on a short leash. Dean's denial of him had hurt far more than either bullets or blades. It was understandable, maybe even expected, and Sam couldn't claim he'd returned for Dean's sake alone, or even in part. But that his presence had been felt at all by Dean, much less the people he was with was a surprise. He'd thought Missouri was a fluke.

But he also can't help wonder if he wasn't being used still, in some far more subtle way. And if so, if he was being used for or *against* Dean.

It doesn't feel like he's betraying Dean. He knows what that feels like. Every time Dean looks at him -- now that he actually sees Sam -- Sam knows what betrayal feels like, what it looks like.

He'd told Dean once that at some point Dean would have to let him go. He hadn't meant it quite so literally -- and he's been watching Dean struggle for months with doing just that. But Dean's version of letting go didn't have any contingency plans for grabbing onto something else. Someone else.

It seems so obvious now, but Sam had never seen it before, or never wanted to, maybe. His own form of denial.

It's not that Dean can't let go, it's just that everything he's tried to hold onto has been taken from him.

Sam never wanted to be another one of the things Dean lost.

And even now, what he can offer Dean is an imperfect compromise at best, because while he may still be Dean's brother, Sam is something else too, something he *can't* deny, doing something he can't avoid.

"Do you have something against doors, now?"

Sam blinks, because he's there suddenly, back in the cabin, and Dean's sitting on the sofa with four empty beers in front of him and working on his fifth.

"Well, I wasn't exactly outside waiting to come in."

Dean only glances at him for a moment before pulling the last bottle from the case. "Can you drink beer?"

"Won't know until I try," Sam says and crosses the room to take the bottle.

Dean's staring at his arm and Sam looks down at the dirty bandage, peels it off. The skin underneath is unmarked or healed, he isn't exactly sure which. But there's blood on the bandage and Sam would bet he'll find blood-stained towels in the bathroom

Dean gets up so suddenly, Sam almost spills his beer before he finds out if he can taste it. Then Dean's hands are on his shirt, pulling it up, exposing his belly and chest, fingers pressed against his skin beneath where the holes in his shirt exposed flesh.

Dean drops his hands suddenly, and backs away. "If you can drink coffee and beer, you can probably shower and change."

"Do I smell?"

"Have you looked at yourself, Sam? I mean, I'm guessing you can't see yourself in the mirror because as near as I can tell, you've been wearing that shirt and those jeans for about six months. Your bag's in the other room. There're probably still clothes in it." Dean got up. "There's an extra bed too. Do you sleep?"

Sam felt a little -- no, a lot -- confused. "Am I staying?"

"I don't know, Sam. Are you?"

"I -- I want to, but, there are times when I'll--"

"Yeah, yeah. I got it. Reaper-shit. Bring out your dead. You can explain the rest of it to me tomorrow. Because even if you don't need sleep? I do."

"You believe me."

Dean looked away for a moment and Sam could see his jaw working. "Yeah, Tinkerbelle. I believe you. You want me to clap my hands?"

"No. It's okay. Dean--"

Dean held up a hand. "Tomorrow, Sam. Just...I've mopped up a lot of blood and had a lot of beer. If you have to leave, then just...I don't know. Leave me a feather or something."

He pushed past Sam and went to the bedroom.

Sam sipped at his beer. He could taste it. He wasn't sure he could get drunk, which might be cool, but tonight was not the time to find out.

There were clothes in his bag and for the first time he *did* look at himself. The wings looked much more strange than they felt and for a moment he actually wondered how he would get his shirt off over them, but in the end, he just pulled upward. By the time the filthy torn t-shirt cleared his head, the wings were gone.

The hot water was also a whole new revelation in sensation and he had to bite his lip to keep from groaning out loud in pleasure. It wasn't new, he'd just *forgotten*.

He didn't need sleep, though, but that didn't keep him from moving quietly into the bedroom. The lights were off and Dean lay on his stomach facing the door. Sam was pretty sure that despite his words, he wasn't asleep.

The bed squeaked a little, but Sam settled, not sure what he planned to do. Normally, when he wasn't out gathering or with Dean, there was nothing -- an absence of thought or even awareness. He had no sensation of time passing, although when he came back into the world he knew immediately if it had been hours or days or weeks.

*I am only as I exist.* And pretty much his entire existence now was tied to his duties, both as reaper and as Dean's not-quite-dead-yet brother.

"Hey, Sam?"

Dean actually sounded pretty sleepy. "Yeah?"

"Can you actually <i>fly?"

He chuckled. "Yeah. I actually can."

"Okay. So, you have to promise me something."

"What?"

"When it comes my time...we don't fly. Drive, walk, ride a parade float. No flying."

Sam smiled. "I promise. No flying." <i>I missed you too.</i>

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end