Flesh, Blood, Bone
by kronos999

Summary

After Jake kills Sam, Dean has nothing left. And there is nothing more dangerous than a man with nothing to lose.

Notes

Repost of fic written between AHBL part 1 and AHBL part 2 in Season 2. Canon, obviously, went in another direction with the crossroads demon, but there is more than one way to skin a cat and I figured there was no way Dean would leave Sam dead.

The echoes of Bobby’s car have barely faded in the distance when Dean stands, his face no longer buried in his hands, in front of the body of his brother. He pulls the Impala around, as close to the door as he can manage.

His brother is a dead weight, literally, and a good three inches taller than Dean. He manages, though, hiding the corpse under brown and orange plaid. The blankets are moth eaten and are far from clean, but they do the job well enough.

Dean just sits in the driver’s seat of the car, staring at nothing, deciding exactly what his plan is going to be. Because there is a plan, the Plan, and that was to fix this. Sammy shouldn’t be dead.

Dean has been a hunter all his life. He knows about all the bad things, all the things that should not exist. You have to, to survive the life he has. That is what makes hunters so deadly if they turn,
knowing just enough about a lot of things to be dangerous. Dean might not know the spells off the
top of his head, but he knows where to go, who to ask, and who to threaten to learn them.

Jamming the keys into the ignition, he brings the car to life and pulls out, speeding down the dirt
road as fast as he dares. What he is going to do is reckless, dangerous and just a little bit stupid, but
he has nothing to lose. New Orleans is a long drive and he’s spent far too long here already.

He just keeps driving, and doesn’t sleep. He can’t. When he pulled over to the side, afraid of
driving off the road in exhaustion, Dean wakes screaming and stares at his hands, searching for
traces of his brother’s blood. But this does not stop the nightmare. Sam is still dead in the back
seat.

New Orleans hasn’t been the same since Katrina, but the places he’s looking for are still there, will
probably be there long after the city disappears. There is one in particular that he knows the road to
by heart. It is outside the city by a good half hour and he skirts around the main routes. There is no
reason to take a chance that someone will figure out what he has in the back seat.

The building doesn’t look like much; there is no paint on the walls and the roof covering the porch
at the front has large gaps. It isn’t in the swamp, quite, but it’s close enough that it smells of it as he
steps from the car. The trees wave at him and the heavy air blows by him like syrup. Dean closes
his eyes for a moment, taking in a deep breath before climbing the stairs. They creak under his feet,
the loud squawks of angry birds.

He knocks at the door, even though it would be simple to push it open. There’s no lock. But there
are some places even Dean is wary of wandering into uninvited and this is one of them. The boards
of the porch squeak under his feet as he shifts his weight.

The door swings open under its own power and he takes that as an invitation, stepping across the
threshold. It’s dark inside, but some light filters through the dust-clouded windows and gaps in the
walls. Chicken’s feet and bones from things he doesn’t want to name hang from the rafters and jars
of unidentifiable substances sit of shelves crookedly attached to the walls.

“Well, I hadn’t been expecting to see you again for a long while.” It is a voice that makes his skin
crawl, no matter that he’s heard it before, and no matter that the one doing the talking owes him a
favor. Maria-Josephine is not someone you come to lightly. “What you doing back here, boy?”

There’s no point in dancing around the subject. He can see the bird-bright eyes watching him now.
“My brother’s dead.”

She doesn’t seem surprised. “And you're here to ask for my help with that.” It isn’t a question.
Dean doesn’t expect that she gets too many visitors looking for something else. “This’ll cost you,
debt or not. Raising the dead right and proper is no small business. You're willing to pay?”

She’s not talking money and he knows it. This is just one step down from the deal Dad had made,
if that.

“He’s my brother.” That’s all the answer there is. Whatever it takes, he’ll do. Dean is a small price
to pay for Sam.

He brings Sam’s body in from the car.
“This is no good.” She’s been looking at Sam, who is laying cold on the table. Eyes pierce Dean somewhat accusingly. “You didn’t mention demons.”

He hadn’t thought that would matter, not with this. “A man killed him.”

“Maybe so, but it's still got a grip on his flesh. There's nothing I can do.”

And that was it. He could practically feel his soul leaving with that last bit of hope. If he could, he would summon that damn yellow-eyed monster and make the same deal as his father, his life for Sam, no hesitation. The problem is, Dean isn’t his father, the living legend that Hell had tried to get a piece of for years, and he isn’t Sam with that damn psychic gift that makes… made him look like a tasty treat to anything from down under. He is just Dean Winchester, a guy with a ’67 black Impala, a trunk full of rock salt, and enough weapons to start his own sporting goods store.

That he’s managed to piss of most of the beings that people would get the kind of mojo he needs from certainly isn’t a point in his favor either.

Dean stares at Sam, who is already beginning to decay. He should burn the corpse; it is what his father would do. He should not even be here, listening to the wind rustle through the bayou. For a moment, is seems like everything is still, as if the universe is holding its breath. Maria is looking at him, the eyes, waiting, just like the rest of the world, for his choice. It really isn’t a choice at all.

If the demon still has a grip on Sam’s flesh, then Dean will just have to kill the demon first.

The world starts moving again as Dean turns to the woman, the witch, this queen of death, eyes burning feverishly. “Is there any way to keep him from rotting?”

The boards are rough under him, poking up at angles just large enough to jar. Dean sits on the porch and stares at the setting sun. The light is poring honey smooth over the trees and it's turning this land of green decay into something beautiful, but Dean can’t bring himself to care. He’s mentally going through lists of options. There is no point in flipping through Dad’s journal again. There’s nothing in it that he doesn’t already have memorized.

The ringing of his cell interrupts his thoughts and derails them mid-stride. He almost lets it go to voice mail. There is only one person left, maybe two, who have this number. Neither of them are the one who was important.

He answers it anyway. “Yeah?”

“Dean, it’s Bobby. I just wanted to see how you were holding up.” I just wanted to see if you were alive. I just wanted to see if you’ve finally decided to do the right thing and get rid of Sam.

“Yeah, I’m okay.” The answer is clearly a lie. There is no way anything could be okay when Sammy is still dead. “I’ve just finished…’ Dean pauses, trailing off. “I’ve just finished taking care of Sam.”

It’s true, in a way. Let the hunter assume what he wants, let him assume that Dean has stood vigil over his brother turning to ash, breathing in smoke instead of fumes from candles, herbs and potions that Dean can’t even put a name too as Maria prepared the corpse. It would last as long as Dean needed, until the end of the world if necessary. That might not be that far away, if the rumors
are true.

“You got anything?”

He can practically see Bobby shake his head over the phone. “Not yet. But I’ll let you know as soon as I find anything.”

“You do that.”

“Dean, take care of yourself, all right?”

“Sure, Bobby. When do I not?”

He hangs up the phone without a goodbye, without any well wishing. He just doesn’t have it in him right now. Yeah, Dean has always managed to take care of himself just fine. However, it was Sam that he was supposed to be taking care of.

He pushes himself off the porch and lands on his feet. Dean has a pretty good idea where he’s going to be headed.

It isn’t exactly practical to take Sam with him, risky enough that Dean brought him this far. He calls in the rest of Maria’s debt and leaves the body until he can come back and fix this. There isn’t anywhere his brother would be safer. No one in their right mind is going to come here to take him.

Dean knows what he needs is a plan and a hell of a lot more information than he has, but 20 years of work hasn’t yielded up its secrets the old way. He curses Ash’s reluctance to talk over the phone. Dean has no delusions that he’ll figure it out that way; his skill with computers sufficient, but not amazing. There are other methods of chasing this thing that they, he, have not tried, and this time he’ll use them. He’ll use them and damn the consequences.

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He makes sure that the car is far enough off the road not to be spotted. It is going to be here for a while and he doesn’t want anyone making off with his baby.

Dean opens the back door. There are a few bags in the back seat and a bucket on the floor filled with plants he’s spent the past week collecting, one for each night. He checks his watch. There’s still another 20 minutes before sunset, but he might as well get started and begins pulling off his boots and socks.

The broken branches and needles poke into the soles of his feet and it is too damn cold. Good thing it isn’t winter.

He strips off his shirt before pulling the replacement out of the bag. It looks too much like a rejected ghost costume or some sort of new age “druid” outfit for his liking and it’s far from warm enough. It is white, though, and stitched by his own hand all of three hours ago. The one shoulder is not quite level with the other, but it is so loose that when he has it one you can’t really tell. At least he hadn’t had to knit the thing himself out of nettle or his own hair because that would have taken awhile and he wasn’t going to wait another month for this.

He pulls off the rest of his cloths and checks his watch one more time. There are 12 minutes left until the sun will vanish completely, but the woods make it look like it has already gone.

Dean takes the watch off and places it in the back seat before carefully lifting out the bucket.
It has been 16 days and 23 hours since Sam.

**dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean**

His flashlight flickers off, and Dean had made sure there was a new battery in it before he left the car. He shakes it, flicking the switch on and off.

“Shit.”

He can’t see a thing; the woods are not quite pitch in color, but that’s not going to help him much. Dean’s arms and legs are covered in gooseflesh. The weather isn’t Canadian, but it’s close enough, especially with him wandering around in what amount to a damn sheet and bare feet. Without the flashlight, he’s not going to be going anywhere fast. There’s no moon tonight, something he has been planning around for the past two weeks, and he has no clue how he’s going to keep going. It had been hard enough stumbling over roots, dead branches and stones when he could see--something the bruises and cuts on his limbs and most especially, feet, can attest to.

He takes a step forward anyways and has a narrow miss with a low hanging branch. He raises a hand to steady himself, careful not to crush the crown of flowers that he holds in his left hand. Dean would rather be holding a gun, but given what he does for a living and whom he is trying to meet, projecting hostile intentions had not seemed like a good idea back at the car. He hears a coyote howl in the distance. That planning will no doubt come back to bite him in the ass when he gets eaten by wolves.

As if that was not bad enough, he’s wearing another crown on his head too, one made of cane and nettle, which itches like crazy. It is also leaving scratches all over his forehead, along with a few nasty cuts from when it caught in a branch and tried to take his scalp along in a daring bid for freedom.

Dean swears again, just to relieve the tension, shivering. “Shit. Goddamn fucking trees.”

The night birds have gone quiet and, at first, he thinks that it is his fault for marching through the woods like a wounded elephant. That is until he feels something brush against his back. It’s a quick touch from a small hand and Dean turns towards it, heart racing. He can’t see two feet--hell, one foot--in front of his face, so he can’t tell if there is anyone there.

Laughter like tinkling bells sounds out to his right. It makes his blood run cold, but he has come to this place willingly and under his own power for a reason. It is far too late to back out now.

Dean drops to his knees, wincing as they land awkwardly, one on a branch and the other sinking into needles of rotting pine. The flashlight rolls on the ground beside him as he holds the crown aloft.

“Lady, your servant beseeches you. Lend me your aid.”

There is no true ritual for the words he has chosen to speak. The ritual was before, the preparation, and the after, the price that he’s willing to pay.

She’s there, with him. The trees are sighing and he doesn’t know what direction to turn in. The voice comes from everywhere at once. “What aid do you seek?”

He wants to say vengeance, but if he does then that is all he’ll get. After all, the demon didn’t kill Sam with his own hands and it is not enough to take out the son of a bitch who shoved a knife in his brother’s back. For that, Dean doesn’t need any help.
He almost says power, but that has its dangers too. The power, the visions, hadn’t saved his brother. What good that would do him depended entirely on the being in these woods?

He wishes he could just ask for Sam, but he knows he doesn’t have enough to sell to bring him back from the grave. Even his soul would not be sufficient for this one. She has no need for them to be bought and sold. The ones she wants, she takes.

Hands clutch his face. They are delicate, fine boned, but he knows they can rip his head off with ease. They tilt his face upwards as if to look at him. Dean may not be able to see anything, but that’s not to say that she can’t.

His throat dry and scratchy, he answers, forcing air passed vocal cords which do not want to respond.

“Knowledge.” That is what he wants, knowledge enough to find the Demon, enough to kill it.

The nails on his face are talon sharp and they run down the sides of his neck, cutting just into the skin, before dragging down his arms and taking the crown, flowers crushed from his grip, from between numbed fingers.

“Are you willing to pay the price, little hunter?”

They seal their bargain on the forest floor. It should be no different from all the other times he’s done this, but it is and Dean isn’t the one in the driver’s seat, not even over his own flesh.

On the outside it feels good, but on the inside, worms are burrowing inside his brain. If he had any control over his body, he would not have been able to respond to her at all, no matter how perfect she feels against him. He would have been screaming instead.

The tendrils eat from memory to memory, swallowing all the emotions, all the feelings as they travel, picking their way through each woman in his life he has ever cared for, that he has ever loved. From one instant to the next, he can feel the tugging to go back to Cassie one more time, knotted emotions turning to curious detachment as those feelings are ripped from him, bleeding, turning into only a mere intellectual understanding that he had, at some point, cared for her. He struggles with them, trying to keep the power out now that he understands exactly what he’s sold, but that only makes it hurt more.

When she is done, when they are done, the Lady lays one final kiss over his heart and the voice of his mother singing him to sleep is no longer a cherished possession, but a strange quick of memory that it has managed to stay in his thoughts all these years. He can feel the lips burn into his flesh and knows that the scar they leave behind will not fade.

When he looks back, it wasn’t really that painful. Could have even been fun if he hadn’t been fighting it. Dean skims through the memories, trying to see why he made it so hard on himself and realizes that he doesn’t get it. It’s not as if they are that important.

As far as he is concerned, he’s gotten the better end of the deal.

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It is a moon and a day later when Dean Winchester walks out of the woods, the shadows under his eyes dark and his face pale. The car is still where he left it and he unlocks the door, grabs his abandoned clothes and puts them on with smooth practiced motions before slipping into the front seat.
He picks up his cell phone, turning it on and flips through to see if he has any messages from Bobby. There’s nothing there about new information, just a few checks to see if he’s still among the living. Dean doesn’t bother responding to them. He has places to go and someone to see.

The engine purrs to life like a contented cat, happy to have her rightful master back behind the wheel.

It’s been 49 days since Sam.

dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean

Jake is the man’s name. Dean hadn’t known that before, only catching a glimpse of him as the soldier fled Bobby’s wrath. Dean had been too busy concentrating on his brother dying. Well, this looks like it is going to be his chance to catch up on lost time.

“Hello, Jake.” His head tilts to the side, following the motion of the man groaning on the ground, looking up at him with pain filled eyes. Gut shots are a painful way to die, agonizing and slow. The cap that Dean has put in each knee probably is not helping. Super strength cannot save you from a sniper’s bullet.

Dean shows his teeth. It is not a smile, but a snarl. “I don’t think we’ve ever been properly introduced. I’m Dean, Sam’s brother.”

Understanding joins agony. “I’m sorry. I had no choice.” It was him or me. Well, asshole, you should have picked Sam.

Dean has the urge to plug the guy in the head until he runs out of bullets, but that will screw up all of his carefully laid plans. Jake seems to be inching towards him and Dean steps back out of range of the guy’s arms. He may be hurt, but this guy can rip through large chunks of metal using only his hands. Dean has no urge to find out what they can do to his legs.

Pulling out his knife, he lets the light play down its edge. The knife isn’t his. He had given it to Sam when he was 11.

“Did you know that I pulled Sam out of a burning building when I was four?” Jake’s eyes are following the knife, thinking he knows how this will all go down. There is no second apology. “That fire destroyed our lives. Yeah, the demon killed my mom. After that it was just the three of us.” Dean drops the bag he has been carrying in his other hand on the ground. There isn’t much in it. The best spells are always the simplest ones.

“Dad started hunting it, and Sam became my responsibility. It was my job to protect him.” Dean is sure that the pain in his own eyes can more than match the ones looking back at him. “Sam was all I had.”

He has it all planned out. Dean is Sam’s full brother, and Sam is, even in death, tied to the Demon. It isn’t enough, but it’s a start. A charm of flesh and bone, bound to its purpose by blood is what he has in mind.

He does not know its name, even the Lady had not known that, but she had shown him means and ways to find out, ways to find where it hid, and ways to gain the power he needed to destroy it.

The fingers aren’t really an option; they are too useful, too important for what he’s going to have to do. It’s a pretty easy choice.
Dean walks to the car, confident that Jack isn’t going anywhere. It doesn’t hurt nearly as much as many of the injuries he’s suffered in the past, the sharpened metal going through flesh easily. The bone is tougher and he grits his teeth as he saws through. Seeing no reason to risk infection, he carefully bandages where the last toe on his left foot used to be. As long as it is still warm, there shouldn’t be any problems. The flesh is only necessary for the ritual, to be culled from bone with deliberate strokes.

He doesn’t try to put his foot into his shoe, just eases the sock back over it. It might have been easier to cut his right, but that foot he needs to drive and this is going to be annoying enough as it is until it heals up.

He limps back to Jake who is, thankfully, still breathing. He needs living blood for what he has planned.

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Dean pulls out his map, laying it flat on the car hood and grips the string with one hand and holding the paper down against the with breeze with the other. His foot is aching and he leans back, taking the weight onto his right.

The charm whirls in a wide, loose circle. Dean goes at it for five minutes before giving up.

“What the fuck?” After all he’s been through the damn thing doesn’t work. “You’d think that a demon would be easy to track.” The demon’s connection to Dean’s family, to Dean’s life and his father’s death, to Sam and to Jake’s blood should have been more than enough, especially when added to Dean’s need and will when he carved the flesh from his own body and marked himself with Jake’s blood. Nevertheless, he does not know its name and, without that, you can never be sure.

He glances back at Jake’s body, thinking. Gordon had said that these psychics were soldiers for the coming war. Well, if he can’t get at the big guy himself, he’ll whittle down the troops until the demon stands alone or the trail leads to that yellow-eyed fuck. If the spell isn’t strong enough now, he would just have to renew it until it is.

Dean concentrates on the map again, this time not looking for the demon, but its minions, its “special children”. At first, he thinks that he is imagining it, but the circle the bag of cloth and bone makes is tightening. The string is bent at a good 20-degree angle as it circles the western states.

Well, just buy him a quartz crystal dowsing set, some spoons and call him Uri Geller.

Dean strings the charm around his neck where it falls beside the bronze head his mother had given him as a child.

It’s been 54 days since Sam.

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The second one is harder than the first, in more ways than one. It takes him weeks of searching, of sitting in hotel rooms with his map and his bag of cloth and bone, weeks on the road playing hot and cold. He’s almost sure he’s made a mistake.

Trisha seems normal. Friendly and outgoing, she gets along with everyone. The only thing weird
about her is the heat that burns at his neck when gets within ten feet of her and the way his
divining always points to her house.

It is almost a good thing that she makes the first move.

“Why are you following me?”

Dean comes back to reality with a start, realizing that he had dozed off at the wheel of his car. One
person cannot do a stakeout like this 24x7. It just is not physically possible.

He wants to lie, to come up with some blithe excuse. Me, follow you. You’re just imagining things.
He can’t. It is Andy all over again. “I’m here to see if I have to kill you.” Not exactly an answer
that will endear you to a girl’s heart. The kicker is that she doesn’t seem surprised.

That’s when Dean knows for sure that he has the right person.

“Who are you?”

“Dean Winchester.” Again, no surprise. He wonders how the demon knew he was coming here. Or
maybe it hadn’t, maybe the name doesn’t startle because she has never heard of it.

She gets in the car and tells him to drive. From the way she gives directions, it is clear that she has
done this before. She takes him out into the desert and Dean tries to stop her, tries to fight the
compulsion. It isn’t working too well. The only difference between this time and before is he
knows that she is putting the whammy on him, that she’s fucking with him and that this isn’t his
idea. It’s not much of an accomplishment if he’s still going to end up dead at the end of it.

They stop and he pulls the gun out from under his seat when he’s asked to. It wavers in his hand as
he puts it to his temple and she gets out of the car. He can hear her voice through the window
telling him to pull the trigger. He can feel it in his hand, under his finger as he starts to squeeze,
and this is the end, Dean Winchester’s big finale, just another depressed and troubled young man
taking his own life, a cry for help come too late. She tells him again, getting impatient, but her
voice isn’t as loud as the one that screaming “Sam is dead” and that he still has to fix it, because if
he dies here, there won’t be anyone left to fix anything.

Some other hunter might go after these things, these people, but no one else is going to try to help
Sam and, while Dean might accept his own death, Sam is something else entirely.

Dean’s finger eases off the trigger and he pulls the barrel away from his head, pointing it at the
petite brunette. Her mouth forms an “o” of surprise and Dean is sure that this is the first time this
has happened to her in months, when someone doesn’t do exactly what she asks them to. Too bad
for her it was over something important.

He doesn’t kill her. Instead, he clocks her in the head as she tries to run away. Heels really aren’t
meant for that sort of thing. The binding on the amulet calls for living blood and he pulls out the
knife, swallowing bile. Trisha is still human, after all.

The cuts are small, precise. He takes exactly what he needs and no more, the words thick in his
mouth as he calls on elements, on spirits, as he writes the names around him and is so careful
where he places everything, where blood meets skin. Wouldn’t it be a kicker to catch some sort of
disease from all this. He wonders if whoever came up with these rituals had thought of that.

Dean’s not sure what he’ll do when she wakes up. The pragmatist in him knows that he can’t let
her live. She’s already proved how dangerous she is.
But she isn’t Jake. She didn’t kill his brother.

One shot to the head, merciful, and he salts and burns, just as he’s been taught. He wipes himself off with part of one of the ugly blankets still sitting in the back seat and then throws up beside the car before getting inside. He goes back to the main road and just starts driving, pushing a tape into the player without checking who he’s chosen. Sam is still dead. Dean jacks the stereo up. Maybe it will drown out the voice in his head.

It’s been 68 days since Sam.

dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean

Dean has an even closer call with the third. The house has a green roof and white walls, and the barn, gray and weathered to one side, looks like it has seen better centuries. It isn’t a farm now, that’s clear enough. The only animal Dean can see is the chocolate brown dog pulling at the end of its chain. It’s barking at him, tail wagging, but the bark is playful and it lowers itself on its front paws as he walks by. Dogs, like small children, have always taken to Dean. A disappointed whine comes out of its throat as he walks towards the front door without stopping.

Dean turns, thinking to give it a consolatory pat, and that action saves his life as the sound of a gun tears through the air and pain flares on his left shoulder. Dean doesn’t pause; he dodges behind the large tree in the yard. Looks like he has the right place.

He glances around the tree. The dog isn’t barking any more. It’s lying still on the lawn. It’s too bad; it had seemed like a nice dog. It reminds him of the puppy Sam had admired for weeks back when he was 10, large, floppy paws too big for its body and wet nose pressed against the window of the pet store. Sam had begged and pleaded for weeks with Dad, but to no avail. It’s hard to have a dog that size when you spend your time living out of a car.

Dean starts mentally calculating possible trajectories, the skills that have stood him so well while hustling pool becoming useful in yet another situation. Moving his shoulder experimentally, he pulls out his gun with the other hand. The wound stings, but its small, just grazing his shoulder. Dean's coat is the worst casualty.

Little Miss Sith Lord had been surprised to have been followed. He hadn’t even started narrowing his search down this time and this had only been the second stop on his list. This is already turning into some kind of shitty Mexican standoff.

He smartens up quickly after that, not letting the unexpected get to him, going with the flow. Dean’s always been adaptable. Sam may have been the one who can spout occult trivia off the top of his head at the drop of a hat, but Dean was the one who could come up with a strategy in the middle of a fight.

It takes a bit of time, but he manages to work his way inside without getting riddled with holes, lucky as hell that the neighbors are a few miles down the road. When he leaves, he lets the barn go up like the tinderbox it is, taking most the evidence of his presence with it.

He gets better with practice. Dean has spent his whole life hunting things that are stronger, faster, hell, sometimes smarter. This isn’t really that different. The more experienced he becomes, the easier it ends up being. People will walk right into things any sane animal or monster would avoid.

The prescients, the ones like Sam, are still the hardest. They’re the ones that try to run or set traps, the ones he had to spend extra effort hunting down. They’re the ones it is hardest to fool. Still, he
doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to watch Firestarter again for as long as he lives… or Carrie for the matter.

It’s been 96 days since Sam.

dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean

He’s been on the road long enough to stop making accidental comments to someone in the seat beside him who isn’t there. This time it's his tenth state in two weeks and the hotels are all the same, always browning around the edges. The television signal is never clear, something that seems to annoy him more and more. He could swear it is getting worse, but how the hell does that make sense? The ache behind his eyes that he’d noticed a few weeks back is getting worse too, not quite a headache. Probably some goddamn tumor. He’s not too shaken. Dean never expected to die old and in bed surrounded by grandkids. He just has to last long enough to do what he had to do.

Dean does one more walk around of the room, checking the wards and protections on each entrance. His blade gets slipped under his pillow and he settles himself on the bed, staring at the television. He only watched the news now, looking for clues, for hints. The problem these days wasn’t finding signs, it was filtering out the ones that were unimportant. Earthquakes hit in places where no fault lines existed, freak weather washing small costal villages into the sea.

The static on the screen seems to get more intense as something catches his interest, but that’s probably just the weather outside. It has been raining for a week.

The water in the entire northeast region of China has turned red. There is not really much solid information on it. Would have been a different story if it had happened elsewhere, but the Chinese government is closed-mouthed as always, a few scientists muttering something about iron deposits. You can’t con a con. Dean knew they did not have a clue… or they did and that they were even more scared of the answer. He doesn’t make it to the end of the hour before nodding off into sleep.

The next thing Dean knows he’s turning away from the sun falling on his face. The rain has finally stopped in the night. He gives a quick look out the window and pulls himself out of bed. The television is still on and he glances at it on his way to the shower, then stops.

Energy, Illinois has experienced a bit more than a summer thunderstorm, thousands of frogs descending from the sky like some sort of biblical plague. It’s a new one on him. The part that’s funny is that is where he was planning to head today.

A week after that, he’s leaving Energy, the new frog capital of the US of A. The weight of the charm on his neck seems heavier than it has in a long time, and it bounces off his chest with the bronze head as he swings himself inside the car. He’s dirty and needs a shave and shower. Dean grimaces at the state he’s in. Yes, a shower is in order as soon as he can manage one.

His fingers beat in time to the music, pounding in time to drums leaving sticky fingerprints. There may have been a time Dean would have cared about the blood marking the seats, but that was when Sam was beside him, complaining about the volume and he would have yelled at him for getting shit on the leather. Dean looks at the empty seat before turning his eyes back onto the road. There is only so much one can do with a dry towel.

Dean hunts for more than the children, he hunts for knowledge. What he has gained is not enough. For the most part, the psychics he finds cannot give it to him. Either they know nothing, or he’s forced to kill them too quickly before they kill him.
This latest hadn’t known anything useful, but he’d had to be sure.

When he looks in the rear view mirror, he takes in the smudge of reddish brown on his cheek, and the eyes which look too large for his face and much too green. They reflect the world like mirrors, everything ugly and wrong echoing in their depths.

It has been 123 days since Sam.

Dean curses his own stupidity. He’d been careless, a bit too confident, and it has come back to haunt him. All it had taken was one cop with a touch of power stuck on traffic duty with an axe to grind to get him pulled over. One cop who’d been in St. Louis for that whole mess, visiting family from the accident, and it had all gone to shit. By the time he knew what was going on, he was surrounded by cruisers and the goddamn FBI were on their way.

Henrickson doesn’t want everyone staring in on them, and he is clearly eager to talk to Dean. Doesn’t want to give him another chance to escape before talking to him, most likely. Sometimes, being recognized for your genius is burden, and he really does not have time for this now. He needs to go; he can feel it.

“Can’t wait to get me alone? Hate to say it, but you aren’t my type.”

The man doesn’t reply, but turns a look to quell any potential snickers from the local cops. Apparently, Henrickson has not endeared himself with his winning personality. “I want him in one of the interrogation rooms. We don’t have time to waste with this bullshit. And remember, he may seem charming, but this guy is a hell of a lot more dangerous than he looks.”

Henrickson stalks off in the direction of some of the other agents, leaving Dean to be manhandled to wherever this room was. Wasn’t really the cops’ fault—Dean resisted the entire way and got to the room with an eye which would soon blacken, a split lip, and blood running from his nose. He resists the urge to wipe it away with his tongue as it snakes down his face when they chain him down at the table.

The boys clear out soon enough and he is left facing the impassive stare of the man who had been chasing him across the country for the past several months. He grins cheekily as the agent frowns. “Something funny, Winchester?”

Dean leans over to wipe the blood away with his thumb before settling back in his chair, idly tracing on the table.

“Just you.” His eyebrows lift upwards a little as the light above gives a half-hearted flicker. “You really have no fucking clue.”

Henrickson, again, doesn’t seem impressed with the attitude. “A clue about what, smartass? You mean the bodies found in Solitude, that kid up in Pahrump, or do you mean that little stunt you pulled back in Illinois? I could go on, but I’m sure you get the picture. At this point, we just need you to fill in some details. Starting with that wayward brother of yours.” The man’s gaze hardens, but the effect is lost as he glances up at the flicking light. “Where is Sam?”

Dean’s smile leaves his face and he looks down at the table, at his handiwork. Almost finished.

“Sam’s dead.” His voice comes out flat, all inflection missing. He looks up again and can read the
surprise there, perhaps a bit of understanding in an “ah, this is why the body count has been piling up so much faster”, sort of way. Then, the grin is back and the agent’s eyes narrowed at him warily. Dean looks down again and makes one last swipe of his thumb, a smooth, slow, deliberate motion.

The glass of the one-way mirror rattles.

dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean

This Henrickson guy might be an asshole, but he is just doing his job. Dean knows this. Doesn’t make much difference. He has to go. Dean doesn’t have time to play nice. His head is pounding and he wants to go east, just to get it to ease up. He also doesn’t have time to be dodging cops and other government agencies. They’ve already been enough of a pain in the ass.

Henrickson is gagged in the back of the Impala, the same seat where Sam’s cold corpse sat months ago. Dark eyes meet his in the mirror as Dean checks behind him, looking to see if he is been followed. Hasn’t happened yet and soon it won’t matter. They are probably still searching the building, trying to figure out how the pair of them walked through the walls. He wonders if anyone has noticed that the car is missing.

He pulls up a road that isn’t so much dirt as grass. Dean wants to get far enough from the road for what he has planned.

Henrickson notices the change and starts struggling again. At this rate, he’s going to knock himself onto the floor.

Dean sighs. “I know you won’t believe this, but I’m sorry it has to go down this way. I know you are just doing your job and all that shit. But you haven’t given me much choice here.” The pounding in his head and the burning around his neck is telling him East loud enough to be a distraction, and if Aspirin worked, he’d be chugging back the whole bottle.

It burns. It burns like fire. Before this, before his mission, before Sam’s blood bled out all over his hands, spells had been a job necessity, and the only proof he’d had in them was their tangible effects. Dean could never feel their power, was deaf to it. Now the amulets and charms burn on his chest as he writes words of protection, of concealment, of his love for Sam and his hatred of everything that separates the two of them, and it runs through his veins like an inferno as he marks them on body of the Impala and his own flesh.

He dumps the little silk bag filled with bones and feathers from the glove compartment on the agent’s body. These markings written in blood and pain are more powerful than any minor folk magic, turning away the eyes of overly curious deputies and bored kids keying cars in shopping mall parking lots.

It’s been 152 days since Sam.

dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean

The convenience store lights are harsh and artificial. Dean debates for five minutes on the virtue of bean versus meat and bean burritos before grabbing both kinds, along with a bunch of candles off the next shelf and heading up to the cash. The woman currently there is counting out change, practically in pennies, and the clerk looks like he’s ready to just hand her everything and tell her to leave without paying. Dean looks around for a distraction, resisting the urge to tap his foot when
his gaze came to rest upon the World Weekly News.

“Aliens Abduct FBI Agent and Prisoner, pg. 10”

He picks up the paper, flipping to the section. The picture of him is so small and grainy that even Sam would have had trouble recognizing it. It isn’t nearly as impressive as the alien that supposedly did the abducting.

“The power just went out in the building. We opened the door to check, you know? It’s pretty dark in there. No windows, eh. And there was no one there. Completely empty. There’s only one door and there were, like, three of us standing outside it the whole time.” says a source within the police department. The FBI have made no comment at this time.

Dean’s perusal is interrupted. “This isn’t a library. You gonna pay for that or what?”

The woman is gone, the door tinkling at her exit and Dean lowers the paper. He looks at the kid behind the counter. His hair is even longer than Sam’s, dirty blond and too greasy to have been washed in a few days. He looks 19, maybe 20 if you pushed it, but Dean knows that isn’t the case. This boy has just turned 24.

“Don’t see the point, Mike.” The boy, Mike, looks startled that a stranger knows his name. His tag says Andrew. He had forgotten his own at home in the rush to get to class. He’s wearing the spare from the kid who quit three months previous.

“Do I know you?”

“Nope, but I know you.” Dean sets the paper down. “And about the dreams you’ve been having.”

The kid goes pale and swallows, Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. “You work for him, that man.” Mike’s eyes glance around the store. There’s no one else there. Dean’s timing is not been coincidental.

“I won’t do it.” The voice is shaking, not like Sam’s after a nightmare, too high, too much like a cornered animal. Dean hears thunder rumbling outside the building. There hadn’t been a cloud in the sky when he’d come in.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone.” It’s probably even true. This kid might think every once in a while about slaying his manager or that annoying customer, or maybe even that professor who assigns that extra paper he doesn’t have time to write, but not seriously. He’s no killer. He’s just a kid working the late shift trying to pay his way through school, with a bad sense of hygiene and the occasional tendency to find himself in the vicinity of very odd weather patterns. There was a time when his innocence might have mattered. “I won’t help him.”

“Glad we agree on something.”

Dean doesn’t even glance at the camera as he pulls his gun. He knows that it has only been recording static where his face should have been since he walked in.

When he leaves, he grabs the paper just for the hell of it.

It has been 156 days since Sam.

dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean
He’s not getting closer, as much as Dean hates to admit it. He can find the demon’s spawn as easily as breathing, but the demon itself is still hidden from his sight. Even interrogations are coming to naught.

In lieu of that, he starts buying the knowledge he needs with near living flesh, still quivering, and names, words, blessedly forgotten by history, pass by dead lips and are written on dead skin. But it is never the name he needs. It is never the name of the thing that he hunts, that he lives to destroy. It is never the thing that took his brother from him. He hopes what he learns will be enough, empty eyes watching him as he strips, watching as he traces the words in the blood of his enemies and innocents on his body, burning with every stroke. Not all bindings call for living blood. He’s given up caring if he catches something. At this point, his life expectancy isn’t really that great anyway.

The first time he uses a human that has nothing to do with his job, other than Henrickson that is, is in Chicago. The guy is a drug pusher, selling shit to kids years younger than Sammy. He’s scum, and Dean doesn’t really feel guilty about it. He needs the protection. The next one is a pyrokinetic and they never go down easy. He still has scars from the first one he went after.

Dean’s using an old house scheduled for demolition. When the dealer comes to, he sputters, taking in the symbols painted on the floor and walls, the circles and lines of salt. He’s trussed up like a chicken on an old bed that probably has seen its share of ODs and quick fucks in back rooms.

“What the fuck?” He struggles uselessly against the ropes. Dean is no amateur and there is no way this guy is going anywhere, even if he is awake a little sooner than expected. “Man, what the hell is this shit?” It's then that he spots Dean and the fear in his voice turns to panic as he starts to scream. Dean shoves a bunch of dirty cloth in his mouth.

He ignores the muffled words even when they turn to whimpers. Guys like this may not be the monsters he used to dealing with, but that doesn’t make them any less evil.

“Dean.”

Turns out Dean is right about Tim and his passion for American classics. It is pleasant. Dean hasn’t had a decent conversation for months where he is not pretending to be someone else and not even Sam would have had the patience for the technical details and specs that pass between him and the hitchhiker. It’s too bad it can’t last. He glances at Tim’s animated face. Dean’s running low on supplies and he’s taking on a group this time. He needs all the protection he can get.

It’s been 209 days since Sam.

a loaded gun. It’s bad enough that his name has climbed up the federal wanted list since his last miraculous disappearance, Henrickson in tow.

He enters the bar in Busksnort without expecting anyone. He just wants a chance to relax and have a few drinks. This latest “child” two towns over hadn’t put up much of a fight, but he had traveled a long way to get to him.

The tavern is just like a thousand others he has been in, dark and smoke obscured. He walks up to the bar, ready to order a beer, when the back of his neck prickles. He has no trouble picking the gaze out. There are two men sitting at the table in the far corner, watching him. There is recognition in that gaze, though Dean could swear that he’s never seen them before. The pair look like they’ve seen harsh times. Anyone else would think that an animal was responsible for the mark on the dark one’s arm, but a wendigo doesn’t leave the same mark as a bear.

He watches them out of the corner of his eye as he waits for the bartender to fill the mug from the tap. Part of him thinks that maybe he should just walk out the door, but that other part of him can’t do it. It knows that they will follow him and mean him harm, and snarls in their direction. It wants to bait and tease them, show them what it is like to be prey instead of hunter.

He walks over, smiling amicably as they tense. “Something I can help you boys with?” he asks. He knows that both have a gun tucked in the back of their waistbands, and that the taller has a pair of silver knives strapped to his wrists under his long sleeves.

Silver works on werewolves, on certain monsters, but it isn’t really necessary on most things that are or used to be human. Steel is tougher and keeps a better edge. So, they weren’t hunting for him specifically. They just knew that something was passing through, killing seemingly innocent people. He bet they hadn’t even connected the bullets with him, just the knives, just the blood and ritual. Well, that’s a good thing. Maybe he can make this look like something else and throw any friends they have off track.

He settles in the chair opposite and raises his eyebrows, daring them to try something, knowing they can’t act in front of the civilians, knowing that even if they try, he is faster.

He finishes his beer and walks out the door.

They do follow him, just as he knew they would. It ends up, however, being his ambush, just outside of town when they stop to investigate his “abandoned” car. He doesn’t leave the bodies this time. He goes through the trunk, grabbing some of the more exotic supplies before he drives their car with the bodies, at least what’s left of them, into a swamp.

Certain demons, certain monsters don’t always leave bodies either, and he hopes that will be enough for anyone who comes looking.

It’s been 232 days since Sam.

dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean

He’s in L.A. when he gets the tattoo. This time there is no ghosts to hunt, and he has no interest in seeing the sights of Hollywood. Without Sam, there really isn’t a point. The beach is out too. Dead things have started washing up there faster than they can be removed, sea life rotting under the southern sun.

The parlor is a hole in the wall in an area of town most sane people would avoid. He sits there,
ignoring the discomfort as names taking form, curling round his neck and down his spine, words with a power in them that he has become all too familiar with. He knows the position of the needle, knows every letter.

This was easier than inscribing them in blood himself, more permanent, and reaching for some of them had been a bitch. Plus, he had to hunt more quickly then he would like, sometimes, in order to replenish his supply. Sharpies can’t contain the power, burning off, and he hopes that ink under the skin will serve his purpose better. If not, he’ll have to cut them into his skin and he’s good with a knife, but he’s not sure how good his control would be in such a position with no room for mistakes. It’s the kind of thing you need a partner for, but if Sam was here backing him up, he wouldn’t need it in the first place.

This isn’t the first time that he’s been in a parlor like this one. When Sam had turned 16, they had gone to a place somewhat cleaner and brighter than this. Sam had taken what seemed like hours to choose a pattern, all the while watching the guy ahead, grade A wimp if Dean had ever seen one, wince and whimper.

“Are you going to pick something or what?” Dean had finally asked. Sam had been wavering between protection sigils and names, not able to decide. Each was better in a certain circumstance. “You can’t get them all. The biker look just wouldn’t suit you.”

And that’s what he would have looked like, some sort of tall, baby-faced, Satanist biker. Pretty funny image, come to think of it.

“Well, if you can’t decide, why don’t you just get my name tattooed on your ass?”

After all, Dean would always, always protect Sam. Sam had just huffed indignantly and marched out. It had probably been for the best, though the idea of Sam with Dean’s name on his ass, trying to explain how it got there to his girlfriends had made Dean laugh for years. At least, when it hadn’t made him cry.

“You okay there, buddy?”

Dean nodded. It wasn’t the needle that hurt.

In the end, Sam’s 16th birthday present had been a fake ID that declared him above the legal limit and a night on the town with his big brother.

When Dean leaves the parlor, his back is stinging, but the itching in his head is worse. It is like that all the time now, angry hornets buzzing even when he isn’t hunting and sometimes the back of his eyes burn.

The artist had looked like he had wanted to keep a copy of the design, but he had seemed to finally believe Dean when he told him it would be a bad idea. It’s a good thing too. Another body would attract attention, something he would prefer to avoid until he was ready.

It’s been 251 days since Sam.

It is a surprising place to find one of them. The sanctity of the ground makes him itchy; it's mildly uncomfortable and Dean sits in the last pew of the near empty church. The one he is looking for is in the confessional. Dean thinks he might traumatize the priest if he just walks up and starts shooting. Today, he isn’t in a hurry.

There is a mother and her son lighting candles off to his right, and another praying in the second pew. She’s older, hair flecked with gray and Dean guesses that one of her relatives is in the hospital. He can’t say how he knows, but he’s sure all the same. His eyes pass over the stained glass, the beautiful representation of the Archangel Michael crushing the devil under his feet and Dean cannot help but approve. He’s not sure angels exist, but Michael is the patron saint of all demon ass-kicking and you can’t get much cooler than that.

The woman walks out of the confessional in high heels and a swing in her step. It isn’t something you would typically see in a church. She glances in Dean’s direction and freezes, almost twisting her ankle as her foot comes down wrong. She looks trapped, as if trying to pick which direction to run, and she rushes back to the front of the church, forcing the door to the back rooms open.

Dean follows her and catches up as she’s lost both shoes trying to climb out a window that’s too small for her to fit through.

“Stop!” she tries in desperation. He can feel the push behind her voice, but ignores it. It isn’t strong enough to even make him pause. He breaks her neck and she slumps to the floor. The only thing left is to find out what she told the priest.

He enters the confessional, looking at the screen separating him from the priest.

“Father, I need you to tell me what she said.”

There is a sputtering noise. “My son, the seal of confessional…”

Dean looks through the screen again and says more forcefully, putting all his desire into his voice. “What did she say?”

There is a pause, and then he hears it all. She had asked about the information she had wanted. It is a press of question and answer as it becomes clear the priest has been well and truly mind-whammied.

It looks like the rumors are true. There is a blade, a sword, that’s found its way into the country that has the potential to be deadly to just about anything. Even better, blades don’t have to be reloaded. It looks like the poor father had been recruited against his will to help find it, not even remembering what he was doing or why.

Well, that’s pretty damn convenient for him. He stands to leave the closet-like room, but turns for one last statement.

“I suppose while I’m here I should make a confession. The woman’s body is in your office. You might want to call the police.”

He opens the door into the light. He walks down the isle to the door of the church. The priest rushes out behind him and Dean turns. The man stops and stares, his mouth moving but no words coming out. Perhaps Dean should have removed the compulsion against talking about the sword with anyone, but it's too late for that.

The grey-haired woman turns and looks up, startled.
Dean turns and winks before walking away, and the woman crosses herself, knowing that the devil has just passed her by.

They find the body in the back. Dean can hear the scream outside, but he is long gone by the time the police arrive. Even having witnesses which place him at the scene isn’t that useful for them. None of them can remember what he looks like; the woman will only recall that his eyes were green.

It’s been 274 days since Sam.

dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean

Dean’s in Kill Devil Hills when his headache stops. It’s the first time in months that it doesn’t seem like something is trying to push his way into or out of his skull and he’s gotten so used to the pain that its absence is almost as irritating.

He spots the bronze head, its chain broken, rolling in the dirt. His mother had given it to him the day after Sammy was born and told him never to take it off.

He tosses it in the back seat of the car, not bothering to take the time to jury-rig a band for it.

Something tells him that the Demon didn’t pick their family by chance.

dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean.dean

Sam’s been dead for exactly 311 days and two hours and Dean is standing facing off with the thing he’s been chasing.

It is smiling at him. Somehow, that just pisses Dean off and he gripped the sword tighter in his hand. Cold wind whips through the graveyard and his hair. It’s long, almost as long as Sam’s. He hasn’t thought about cutting it in months.

“I had to start tracking you by the deaths, by human means.” It almost sounded impressed. Admiring, even. Well, Dean, you know your life is fucked up when a demon gives you a compliment.

“Good for you. I’m glad you’re finally getting caught up the modern world.”

It ignores his half-hearted reply, yellow eyes watching his as he waits for an opportunity to strike. He’ll only get one chance at this and he doesn’t want to waste it.

“Well, you’ve certainly gone above and beyond to prove yourself, Dean. I have to admit, you surprised me. I may have been overly harsh at our last encounter. You weren’t even supposed to be one of the contestants, but, here you are, winning the game.”

There is something in the way that’s said that curls in his stomach and dies. This whole thing is a set up. Well, fuck.

“It’s not a game. You’re not making it out of here alive.”

The Demon laughed, and it was worse than the screams that Dean had gotten used to hearing, that seemed like normal sounds in comparison. “You aren’t going to kill me.” The demon looks at the sword and Dean’s palms start to sweat. “Even if you could.”
Dean hopes its lying, hopes it is just screwing with him to try to make him give up the sword or all this has been for nothing.

“You know exactly why you came to me, exactly why Sam isn’t ash or rotting in the ground. That’s what you would have done if you were just coming to kill me.” The eyes boring into him are hypnotic and he knows he should look away, but there is something so compelling about them. “And you’re not going to turn him into some zombie. Not exactly what you really want, what I can offer you. You truly are your father’s son.” The demon smiled, taking in the amulets at his neck, the protection spells that wreath his flesh. “And your mother’s.” The demon looks like it is waiting for some sort of reaction at the mention of the late Mary Winchester and seems disappointed when it doesn’t get one.

Dean isn’t stupid. He knows exactly what’s being offered here and he knows, deep down, that he’s going to do it. Nevertheless, that doesn’t mean he is going to make a deal without hearing all the terms.

“Are you offering an exchange? My life for Sam’s?”

“Oh, not exactly.” That grin is too familiar. It looks like his father’s, paternal, and Dean knows it's from all the time spent in Dad’s skin. “I don’t want to kill you, Dean. You’re just like a son to me.”

“Each of my children is special. I chose them, their families… baptized them in blood. My blood. Each of them carrying a little bit of me with them.” And some little bit of him should be horrified by what he knows he’s done to himself. Maybe not the first time, or the second he killed one of the demon’s precious servants and marked himself in blood to hunt them down, to pick up that nearly invisible trail, but by the twentieth, the thirtieth... The Yellow-Eyed fucker doesn’t even need to explain it; it sees the understanding in his eyes. It sure would explain a hell of a lot. Yes, a part of him should be horrified, but mostly he knows this gives him a bargaining chip, something that can help Sam. That’s what this has all been about, hasn’t it? Because, with Sam at his side, everything will be all right, will be the way it's meant to be.

“Yeah, and I’ve been cutting your army to pieces. I somehow don’t think you’re going to let me get away with it.”

“No, my army is just fine. This offer I’m making you for Sam, well, you might say you could look at this more as a job opportunity.”

“I have no need for an army of human soldiers. In a way, you’ve been doing me a favor. It’s been tough culling the herd, picking out the dead wood. You’ve sped that up immeasurably. You see, I only need one soldier. One to lead my army here on earth. Someone who has proven themselves to be stronger than the rest.”

The blade lowers in Dean’s hands. The demon smiles at him.

“I’ll even give you some time to think about it. You, sworn to me, for Sam’s life and my promise that I will not, in any deliberate way, cause him to come to harm. Be here, with Sam, in one week if you accept.”

It, he, vanishes as if the containment Dean had laid meant nothing. Dean lowers the sword to the ground, point first, stunned.

Well, that hadn’t gone down how he’d expected.
He’s back in Louisiana, standing on the porch of a ramshackle building. Dean knocks at the door, indulging some notion of politeness. It isn’t something he usually bothers with any more, but this is the woman he’s trusted with Sam and that deserves something. The boards under his feet squeak as he taps his foot impatiently. It swings open and it strikes Dean as a bit overly theatric. Power shivers over his skin as he passes the threshold and he restrains the urge to brush it aside.

His eyes pick out the house’s owner immediately in the dim light.

There’s no point in dancing around the subject. “I’m here for my brother.”

White blinding light, fading so fast that Sam has only a glimpse, a taste, of something pure and maybe he isn’t supposed to remember.

He nearly screams as he jerks upwards, air flooding his lungs, eyes jerking open as he remembers the pain in his back, the knife sliding in and out with his vision blurring at the sight of Dean’s face, Dean’s eyes.

And Dean is still looking at him, the world tilted and strange, spots covering his vision and it seems that those normally green eyes are hard and gold. Sam blinks, trying to clear his sight, still gasping for breath as if he had been held under water too long and his body had forgotten what air was for. Dean looks at him, face thin, bones defined sharply enough to cut, and that wasn’t right, was it? The haunted, hunted look, not so different from the pain he’d seen there, but not right all the same.

Then Dean smiles at him, eyes green as summer leaves, not gold, not gold at all, and pulls Sam up into a heavy embrace. Sam grasps him in return and pulls him closer. Dean’s breath is in his ear as he talks, the warm moistness on his neck.

“Sam, Sammy… I told you that you were going to be okay, didn’t I?”

That was what was wrong about this. Sam knew that he should be dead, dead with a capital D.

“Dean. What happened?” Where the hell are we? What the hell did you do? The surroundings aren’t those of the abandoned town. He feels a stone settle into his gut as he looked at Dean’s smiling eyes – too alive, too bright, but maybe it is the tears.

Dean grinned cheekily at Sam’s regard and this is normal, so normal that Sam thought he’d imagined everything else. “Dude, don’t give me that look. You’re not a zombie or anything. I know better than to mess around with that kind of hoodoo shit.”

Well, he doesn’t feel like a zombie, he thinks. Sam’s pretty sure that the undead don’t need to breathe.

“That’s totally what you thought I’d do, isn’t it?” Deans let go of him, rolling his eyes. “Bitch.”

Sam shakes his head. This is Dean, alright, and some of his worry vanishes, the clenching of his insides easing. Dean’s right. Sam knows that Dean wouldn't do something that stupid.

“Jerk.”
He’s never seen his brother look so happy to hear that word.

“Don’t worry Sammy, I’ve taken care of everything. It’s all going to be just fine.”

FIN

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