

**Title:** The Lost Ones

**Author:** Scribblesinink

**Rating:** Teen

**Characters:** Sam, Dean, OCs. Includes Tolkien Orcs.

**Warnings/labels:** Child abuse, oblique references to rape and cannibalism

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**Author notes:** Set in Season 3, after *3.04 Sin City*. Possible spoilers for anything that came before. Written for the [Case Story Big Bang](#). Make sure to check out the [amazing art](#) Deadflowers5 made for me! Many thanks to Tanaqui for handholding, plotting assistance and beta-editing.

**Summary:** With less than a year to live, Dean is worried about his brother. Sam seems determined to stop at nothing to break Dean's deal, no matter the consequences. And then there's the doubt Azazel planted in Dean's mind: is the Sam who was brought back still fully his brother? When Sam persuades Dean to check out a seemingly routine case involving hikers disappearing in the Cascades, Dean finds his worst fears are apparently about to come true....

## **The Lost Ones** **By Scribblesinink**

### **Prologue**

History passed into legend; legend became myth; and myth turned into fireside tales for children. Events faded from living memory and, eventually, the world forgot that which had once been. And so the race of Uruks, those fierce warriors who fought and lost the battle before the White City of Men was also forgotten.

Forgotten—but not gone.

The survivors fled into the wilds, where Men would never venture. They tended their wounds and bided their time, waiting for eons, while around them mountains crumbled and rose again, seas flooded the plains and ebbed away, and rivers carved deep canyons into hard rock before they ran dry. They were few, so few. They were eternal, and yet they grew fewer in numbers still: accidents and fights to the death over the last bone took their toll. Yet they held on, shrouding themselves in the Promise, made to them so many centuries ago.

Oftentimes, they were ravaged by despair, doubting ever to see the Promise come true. Oftentimes, they feared they would all be gone from this world before it could be fulfilled. Like those others had gone, before. Those who had once been their sworn enemies: Elves, Hobbits, Dwarves.

All of the peoples, but one: Men.

The race of Men had thrived, conquering the Earth league after league until at last they encroached even upon the Uruk's hiding places deep within the rockiest mountains. Sometimes, Men came so close, the Uruk-hai could not resist temptation: they took them, and feasted as they had in the Olden Days, which were now almost beyond recall. But most times, they avoided Men, withdrawing deeper and deeper into an ever diminishing wilderness.

Until one day, a Man came to seek them, to seek the last of the Uruk-hai. Though not truly a Man—he wore a Man's pale skin like it was a cloak, but on the inside, he was as black as any Uruk. Yet only from his eyes could they tell of the darkness within. Showing no fear, bold as you please, this stranger had told them to make ready. The time was near, he said. The time when the Uruk-hai would see the Promise fulfilled at last.

What Promise? The Promise that speaks of a General, who shall lead the Forces of Darkness into war and bring Victory at last. A war that will be fought alongside the Uruk's Brethren, the Raukh-hai. And He shall lead them on the Forbidden Road and into the Forever Land, where they shall cast out the Elves, and it shall belong to the Uruk-hai, as is their due and destiny.

So it was Promised....

oOo

"Thanks." Giving the barista a quick grin, Dean accepted the paper bag of bagels she offered him and tucked it under his elbow, before stacking the two paper cups of coffee she'd poured one on top of the other. Balancing everything precariously, he headed out of the coffee shop. The small bell over the door jingled but Sam, leaning against the Impala, was apparently so engrossed in a magazine he must've gotten from the newsstand that he didn't look up.

Dean paused for a moment on the sidewalk, watching his brother, looking for signs of—.

He broke off the thought. Signs of *what*? Sam not being Sam anymore? That was stupid.

He tried not to think about how cold Sam had looked, how unlike *Sam* he'd seemed, back in Elizabethville: apparently not caring one whit about the human vessels the demons were possessing back when he'd shot and killed the pair holding Dean hostage. On the other hand, if Sam hadn't shown up when he did, Dean would've been punching his own ticket to hell quite a bit earlier than

expected.

Shaking away the memories, Dean stepped off the sidewalk and approached the car. "That better not be my new copy of *Busty Asian Beauties*."

Startled from his reading, Sam glared at Dean. Dean grinned back, relieved in spite of himself. That annoyed look was pure Sam. Like Bobby had told him: there was nothing to worry about.

He indicated to Sam to take the top cup of the two he was carrying, before setting his own on the roof of the car. Sam's gaze never left the magazine as he set down his cup next to Dean's and flipped a page.

While his fingers worked to unfold the top of the bagel bag, Dean dipped his head lower to take a peek at the cover of the magazine. He was a little surprised to find fat headlines screaming back at him; he'd half-expected it to be the *Wall Street Journal* or something equally boring, from the vertical thought wrinkle that creased between Sam's brows. But while the magazine wasn't the *Weekly World News*, it did appear to be the same kind of rag. Definitely not Sam's usual reading material.

Straightening, Dean snatched one of the bagels from the bag and took a bite out of it, before he shoved the bag at Sam. "Eat up, Sammy. Wanna hit the road, so we can be in Kentucky by nightfall."

Absently, Sam accepted the bag and placed it on the top of the car beside their coffee cups without even looking at it. "We're not going to Kentucky."

Dean stopped chewing. "We're not?"

"No." Sam folded back the magazine and turned it around, showing Dean an article spread across two pages. "I think we should go to Washington. The state, not the city."

Stuffing the rest of his bagel into his mouth, Dean instinctively wiped his fingers on his jeans before taking the magazine from Sam. He nearly choked on the last bite of bagel as he finally caught sight of the headline. "You gotta be kiddin' me! Did that preacher whack you with a chalice or something?" He shook the article in Sam's face, quoting, "*Bigfoot, Fact or Fiction*. Dude, you really expect me to drag my ass halfway across the continent so you can go hunt Bigfoot? I hate to break it to you, but Bigfoot's a hoax." Not like Sam wouldn't know that.

"Uh-huh." Sam smiled mildly. "Read the sidebar."

Reaching to grab his coffee from the roof and take a cautious sip, Dean once again directed his attention to the magazine article. "*A significant number of people have*

*disappeared without a trace in the Cascades around Boston Glacier in the past decade," he read. "Last year alone, eight hikers and two rangers vanished. No bodies were ever recovered, although tracks discovered along the trails indicate a large bear might have been involved."* Dean looked back up to meet Sam's gaze. "So?" He still didn't see why Sam thought they should go to the Cascades. It sure as hell wouldn't be Bigfoot, and they weren't in the bear hunting business.

Sam ducked through the open window into the car, and reappeared holding their father's journal. He flipped through it until he found what he was looking for, and tapped the page. "Dad marked the same area as 'of interest'."

"Hm." Dean flicked the magazine through the window onto the front seat of the car, and peered at the journal page Sam had presented him with. His father's chicken scrawl had indeed marked the Cascades as a place that warranted looking into, but he hadn't written down much more than that. It didn't exactly give them much to go on. One thing was for sure, though: Dad would never have fallen for a Bigfoot hoax, and he'd had as little interest in bears as Dean did. "This entry is ten years old." Dean quirked a surprised brow as he noticed the date his father had added. He lifted his gaze to Sam's. "Any thoughts?"

"Wendigo, maybe?" Sam snapped the journal shut. "It's a bit further west than usual, but so was the one in Colorado." He shrugged. "Or could be a skinwalker. Or a blackdog. Werewolf...?" He paused, frowning. "No, the lunar cycle's all wrong for that."

Forest trails, missing hikers, wendigos—it all led up to one conclusion.

"Sam," Dean groaned as the implications sank in, "you know I hate camping." Between the lack of burger joints, the number of creepy crawlies that always seemed to take a special liking to Dean, and Dad riding their asses hard during training sessions, Winchester family trips into the woods were among Dean's least favorite childhood memories. And that was saying something. "Look, there's a nice, harmless poltergeist in Kentucky that's got our name on it." Dean wiggled his brows meaningfully as he tried to wheedle his brother into taking on the original job they'd had lined up. "Haunting that poor old lady. Picture this, once we get rid of it: home-cooked meals, apple pie, cookies for the road?"

Sam didn't smile back. "That poltergeist—assuming it's even real," he held up his hands to forestall Dean's protests, "hasn't hurt anyone." He jerked his head in a generally westerly direction. "That thing, on the other hand, kills people."

Dean's shoulders slumped as he finished his coffee. He knew when he'd lost an argument. Tossing the empty cup in a nearby trash can, he headed round the Impala to the driver's side. "Alright. We'll go bust the Sasquatch myth. Hop in. Washington's a long way away." He pulled open the door, the creak familiar. "And

don't forget those bagels!"

oOo

The trip from Ohio to The Cascades was long. Far too long to make in a single stretch, even for Dean, who was used to driving straight across the continent. He'd temporarily relinquished the wheel to Sam and, eyes closed but not fully asleep, was dozing in the shotgun seat when a mild shift in engine noise told him Sam was easing up on the gas. Yawning, he blinked his eyes open, feeling his joints crackle as he moved. His brain, still drowsy, took a minute to process what his eyes were showing him, and then he blinked again and snorted loudly. If not for the smooth blacktop stretching ahead of them, and a number of modern SUVs and little Japanese cars that had been left haphazardly in the parking bays, he'd have thought Sam had pulled a Doc Brown and taken them back in time. With its faded wooden buildings, covered porches running along the shop fronts, and old-fashioned typesetting on the various store signs, the town looked like it had stepped straight out of the Old West.

"Where the hell are we?"

Sam turned the Impala into an empty parking slot. "Winthrop. Last town before we reach the National Park. I figured we should stock up on a few things." He killed the engine and nodded at the *Outdoorsman Shop* visible through the front windshield. Its windows displayed all kinds of camping gear, from tents to sleeping bags to portable stoves, and several other bits and pieces Dean couldn't even begin to name. Twisting in his seat, Sam offered Dean a grin. "Not like you can run to the nearest Quickiemart if you get a craving for Twinkies. Not where we're going."

Dean rolled his eyes and groaned. "I hate camping. Did I tell you that?"

Sam snorted wryly. "Only about a dozen times in the last two days."

"Well, I do." Even so, Dean followed Sam as he climbed out of the car.

He suspected Sam was actually looking forward to this hunt. Though Sam always claimed he'd hated the trips into the wilderness with Dad as much as Dean had, Dean believed Sam secretly had enjoyed the tracking games, the hunting-for-the-sake-of-the-hunt and the meals cooked over an open fire. Of course, Dean grouched to himself, stretching his stiff spine again and taking another glance around at Winthrop's central street, it probably helped that Sam had never woken to discover he'd lain down to sleep smack in the middle of an ant highway, or ended up with a dozen bug bites that itched like a *mother* for the next few days.

"Sam?" As he looked around, Dean's gaze fell on a restaurant across the road. His stomach rumbling pulled his attention back to more urgent matters than itchy

memories. "Let's get some grub first." He dipped his head at the building, where a neon sign announced it as the *Grubstake Diner*.

Sam's brows drew together slightly in displeasure once he saw the place Dean indicated, but Dean didn't care about Sam's opinion on his food choices. If Sam wanted him to go camping in the wilderness for a few days, the least he could do was let Dean get in one last decent meal.

oOo

An hour later, after finishing a large plate of eggs, burgers and a lot of grease (for Dean), and a bowl of limp lettuce and indeterminate greens (for Sam), they crossed back to the outdoor store. Sam seemed to know what he was doing, and Dean was happy to let him stock up on purifying tablets, bug repellent, and whatever else Sam thought they'd need for their trip.

While Sam worked his way through the store and explained to the store owner that, no, they didn't need a tent—they'd made sure, earlier that Dad's old tent was still stashed deep, deep, *deep* inside the Impala's trunk—Dean mentally ran down the stockpile of the tools of their trade that they'd had to work through to find the tent. They had the Colt, of course, although the weapon would be pretty useless if it was a wendigo they were hunting. But the flare guns were a definite must-take, and they'd stocked up on salt before Elizabethville. Dean had also poured new silver bullets just last week, so they'd also be good if it turned out to be a werewolf or a skinwalker. Holy water was easy enough to come by, while regular guns would kill a whole slew of nasties. With enough hardware, they should be prepared for every eventuality.

"So, where you boys plannin' to go, anyway?" The question from the store owner, an older man with the lined face of someone who'd spent most of his life outdoors, pulled Dean from his mental inventory.

Dean shrugged. "Tricouni Peak." He squeezed the handle of a small dyno torch, grinning when the device answered with a brief burst of weak light that faded within seconds. Handy in a pinch, maybe, but not really useful when going through an abandoned haunted house—especially when the buzz of the little generator inside was also quite *loud*. Putting the flashlight back on the shelf, he turned toward the man. "We're thinking about hiking up Thundercreek Trail." That was the area where the most recent disappearances had occurred, so Dean waited to see if the man would tell them anything.

But the grizzled owner merely nodded. "Sure is pretty out there." He started ringing up the prices of the armload of supplies Sam had dumped on his counter. "You know you need a permit if you plan to go backcountry campin'?"

Dean exchanged a glance with Sam. "No, we didn't."

The man shook his head, a little sadly, as if he'd expected their ignorance. "You're supposed to get 'em at the information center in Marblemount, but if you're headin' there today, it'll be closed by the time you get there." He finished entering their purchases and the cash register gave an old fashioned *ding!* Dean blinked at the number on the display; good old Ivan Popodopoulos's Gold Card wasn't gonna last for very much longer if they kept this up.

Reluctantly, he handed the shopkeeper the credit card.

"So if you wanna camp tonight," the man continued while running Dean's card through the machine, "you'd best get one at the ranger station." He gave a vague wave of his hand. "Couple blocks down the road on your left."

Dean opened his mouth to reply, but Sam was faster. "Thanks. We'll do that."

Dean signed off on the credit card receipt and strode out ahead of Sam, leaving it to his brother to carry their supplies. As soon as they were out on the sidewalk and out of earshot of the old man, he heeled around to face Sam. "Now we need a *permit* to hunt Sasquatch?"

Sam gave him a faintly amused look over the armload of bags. "Dean, we got enough trouble with the law as it is." He indicated for Dean to open the trunk so he could drop the bags into it. "We don't need to add 'illegal camping' to the list." Dean snorted, but unlocked the trunk. Once Sam had stashed everything away, he turned back toward Dean. "Besides, the rangers might've updates on those missing people."

Dean had to admit Sam had a point. *Dammit*. He hated it when Sam was being sensible.

oOo

"Hi, how can I help you?" The single ranger manning the station glanced up as the chime over the door announced their arrival. She was a pretty blonde with an ample chest straining her neatly-pressed uniform and Dean perked up at the sight. Maybe this would turn out to be one of Sam's better ideas after all.

Trying not to stare at her chest—he'd learned a very long time ago women tended to get upset if you did that—he plastered on his biggest smile and made sure he reached the counter before Sam did. "Um, we need a permit."

Sam seemed to get the message without being told. From the corner of his eye, Dean watched him head over to where a large-scale map of the area covered one

entire wall from ceiling to floor. He pretended to give it his full attention, leaving Dean alone at the counter.

"Sure." The girl smiled back even as she ducked down under the counter. She resurfaced a heartbeat later with a dogeared notepad of preprinted forms. "So, where're you headed?"

Dean leaned an elbow on the counter. "Thunder Creek Trail."

"We were thinking about pitching up at Tricouni camp tonight," Sam added from across the room. Dean shot him a glare that Sam ignored.

The ranger glanced in Sam's direction, her smile fading slightly, before she turned back to Dean. "Gotta be careful out there." She started poking through the piles of maps and print-outs that littered the desk behind the counter.

"How's that?" Dean lifted his eyebrows in pretend-curiosity.

"We've had some suspected bear attacks in that part of the park this summer. Ah!" The last was a small cry of satisfaction as she unearthed a pen.

"Bear attacks?" Sam joined Dean at the counter, showing the ranger his most innocent face.

"Uh-huh." She indicated the map on the wall with her pen. "See those red and yellow flags? Confirmed and suspected recent bear sightings."

Dean glanced over at the wall. None of the flags had been pinned anywhere near Thunder Creek trail. With a frown, he pointed that fact out to the ranger. She followed his gaze, and then gave him a rueful grin.

"Just 'cause you don't see a bear doesn't mean it's not there." She browsed through the pad of forms until she found a blank page, glanced at the calendar on the wall behind her, and then filled out the date and their destination on the form. "There's two in your party?"

"Yeah." Dean nodded. "Just me and my brother." He'd discovered establishing Sam was family early on helped a lot with unfortunate misunderstandings. And the ranger was pretty. He wouldn't want her to jump to the wrong conclusion.

While the ranger continued to fill out the form, Sam picked up the questioning. "So, what makes you think there are bears around Tricouni, then?"

The ranger gave Sam a brief glance. "We've had a couple reports about tents being ransacked and destroyed." She scribbled something else onto the permit. "And a



few folks seem to have disappeared without a trace. I wrote out a permit for a couple just last month, really nice people..." She was quiet for a moment, her pen poised, before she gave herself a little shake. "Anyway, how long you planning to stay out?"

Dean glanced at Sam. "Few days, I guess."

"Out for the weekend, huh?" She wrote a bit more on the form, then tore off the top page, leaving the carbon copy on the pad, and stamped it. "Here you go." She handed Dean the slip of paper and he folded it roughly in half before tucking it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

"Um, about those missing people...?" Apparently, Sam wasn't done pumping her for information yet.

"Ah yes." She drew in a deep breath, and this time, her smile was a little strained. "Don't worry, I'm sure they're fine. The authorities are on it. They probably just upped and left without letting us know. Just—," She turned her back on them for a moment, and picked out a leaflet from a rack of brochures behind her. "—make sure you read this." She handed the flyer to Dean.

Dean glanced down at it; it was a *How To Behave In Bear Country* advisory. He suppressed a smirk. Bears were among the least of their worries, but she couldn't know that. "Thank you, Ranger—," He squinted at her name tag before meeting her gaze again. "Ranger S. Reynolds."

"Sandy," she offered. "Be careful, 'kay?"

"Will do." Dean gestured with the leaflet. "We won't let Yogi snack on us."

Sandy laughed, shaking her head, as Dean followed Sam out of the ranger station.

Once outside, Dean turned to Sam. "Bears, my ass."

"Yeah." Sam's brow furrowed. "But I don't think we're dealing with a wendigo either."

"Why not?" Far as Dean knew, they hadn't enough information yet to start eliminating possible suspects.

"Wendigos hibernate for years after they feed. That one in Colorado hadn't been active for decades, remember? But I've looked over the records." Dean guessed Sam must've done some digging around on the internet at some point during the drive. "Whatever this is, it goes back to the late 1800s. They found silver back then and started some mines. There are reports of people going missing all the time.

Never many in a year: two, three, a half dozen at most. But—."

"Regularly?" Dean suggested.

"No."

They'd reached the car, and Dean stopped with his hand on the door handle to peer questioningly at Sam across the roof.

"See, that's the thing." Sam looked back, meeting Dean's eyes. "It's *not* regular. There's no pattern to it. At least," Sam pulled open his door, "none that I can see."

"Hmmpf." Dean glowered at nobody in particular as he climbed behind the wheel. He was starting to like this job less and less.

oOo

"Turn off here." Sam pointed out the entrance to a graveled parking lot to the left of Route 20. A sign told Dean it was for Colonial Creek campground, where they'd be able to pick up the trailhead they needed.

Despite the weekend coming up, the lot was largely deserted, with only a handful of cars parked in bays marked off by half-buried lengths of timber. Dean pulled into a space and they quickly gathered what they needed from the trunk: the new supplies, Dad's tent, and an array of weapons that Dean stashed in his duffel. Once Dean was satisfied he'd packed everything on the mental list he'd made back at the outdoor store—flares, rock salt, silver bullets, the Colt—he made sure the Impala was locked up tight and nodded at Sam that he was ready.

Following his brother across the gravel to look for the trailhead, Dean hoisted the duffel high on his shoulder. The weapons were heavy, so Sam was carrying most of the rest of their kit. The campground proper proved as quiet as the parking lot when they passed through it, occupied only by a bright yellow tent next to an RV. As they passed it, the campers—a pair of gray-headed pensioners, knobby knees sticking out from under their shorts—greeted them with a nod. "Enjoy your hike, boys."

Dean decided to ignore the odd look they gave his duffel. He wasn't supposed to enjoy this, and he'd be damned if he'd get one of those fancy, brightly colored backpacks for his weapons. Way too hard to get at what you needed in a hurry, with all those zippers and ties and compartments.

At least it wasn't raining....

Even as the thought crossed his mind, Dean glanced up at the sky, half-afraid he might've jinxed it. But white clouds dotted the blue sky overhead, and the air was

warm and smelled clean, with a strong scent of pine. All around them rose snow-capped peaks, their lower slopes covered with evergreens or aspens and birches that were starting to turn yellow. Dean had to admit, if only to himself, that the store owner had been right: it was kinda pretty out here.

But they weren't here for the view. Shifting the duffel, half to put it in a more comfortable position, half to remind himself they had a job to do, Dean peered ahead. "There." He pointed to where a wooden arrow indicated a narrow trail through the undergrowth.

At first, the path passed through low bushes and shrubs, twisted around with brambles taller than Dean. Where thorny branches put them out of reach, heavy clusters of fat, dark berries hung, tantalizing him. Closer to the trail, the branches had been picked clean. *Bears or tourists, even money*, Dean decided, chuckling to himself as he continued on, mouth watering at the thought of blackberry pie.

He and Sam didn't talk much as they walked, used to each other's silent presence during long hours in the car. Hearing Sam's familiar footfalls behind him, punctuated by the occasional creak of a dead branch as his brother stepped on it, was enough for Dean. For the rest, he listened to the forest around him: the wind swishing through the pines, unseen critters scurrying away across the carpet of fallen needles at their approach, birds singing and cawing. He recalled the hunt in Colorado, where the forest had gone dead silent at the approach of the wendigo.

No, as long as there was noise, they'd be safe.

The trail was well-traveled and clearly marked, and it soon led them into dense forest, thick with shadows and filtered sunlight. The temperature dropped several degrees the instant they walked under the trees, and the wood smelled a little damp and musty. Insects buzzed around in the dappled sunlight, taking kamikaze runs at Dean's exposed face and hands. He cursed, flapping his free hand to chase away the bugs.

Sam tapped him on the shoulder. Dean turned and, without a word, Sam offered him a small spray bottle. The label showed a cartoonish drawing of mosquitoes lying on their backs with their tiny legs up. Dean glowered at Sam, trying to ignore the fact it wasn't his brother's fault he'd refused to put the stuff on when Sam had first offered him the bottle back in the parking lot. Far as Dean was concerned, Sam had stunk to high heaven every since he'd applied the repellent.

On the other hand—Dean slapped his cheek and glared at the small streak of blood it left on his palm—being eaten alive didn't seem so appealing either. With a grunt, he dropped his duffel, accepted the bottle and proceeded to spray himself liberally, trying not to scrunch up his nose at the chemical smell. Returning the repellent to Sam without a word, he caught a soft noise that Dean suspected was Sam

chuckling. He decided to pretend he hadn't heard it.

And he had to admit, the bug stuff might stink but it apparently also worked as advertised. In fact, now he was no longer being assaulted by the mosquitoes that he could still see dancing in the streaks of sunlight piercing the trees, the walk was almost enjoyable. The occasional glimpse of icy blue water through the trees told him the creek was somewhere to their left, its soft gurgling a comforting background to the rest of the forest sounds.

"Dean."

Sam's warning wasn't necessary; Dean had already heard it. Someone—or something—was approaching from the other direction, stomping through the trees. A heartbeat later, Dean blew out a breath and relaxed as human voices echoed through the forest. Half a minute after that, their owners came into view: a couple college-aged kids heading the other way. The girl wore shorts and a fanny-pack, a pair of sunglasses on her head keeping her hair out of her eyes, while the guy with her carried a small backpack.

Sam and Dean stepped aside to let them pass. "G'day." Dean offered them a nod, and the girl a smile. She smiled back, which caused her boyfriend to give Dean the eye. "A nice day to you too," Dean muttered after him, before turning to continue on down the trail. He realized several seconds later that he could no longer hear Sam's footsteps behind him.

He stopped again and looked back across his shoulder. Sam was staring after the couple as they disappeared among the trees. "Sam?"

"Huh?" Sam blinked. "Yeah."

Dean narrowed his eyes. "What was that about?"

"Nothing." Sam started in Dean's direction.

"Sammy?"

Sam gave him the sort of look Dean hadn't seen in a while. "Just... Nothing." He pushed past Dean and continued on down the trail, leaving Dean to frown at his back.

Shaking his head at himself, Dean moved the duffel onto his other shoulder, and followed, speculating about the kind of memories that were probably bothering Sam. It didn't happen so often anymore, not like in the early days just after Jessica had died, but Sam still had moments when something seemed to remind him of what he'd lost. After Dean had seen how happy Sam had been in the djinn's

alternate reality, he could understand his brother a little better. And that couple they'd just passed—well, Sam probably had gone on a few hiking trips with Jessica. She'd certainly had the legs....

oOo

Dean's mellow mood slowly dissipated as they continued along the trail. Though most of the time the slope was barely perceptible, the trail climbed steadily, following the line of the creek. Constantly pushing uphill made Dean's calves ache and, even though the sun had sunk behind the mountain peaks to the west by the time they approached the campsite, the hike had left him sweaty and grumpy. The duffel now seemed to weigh a ton, and to be growing heavier with every step. He couldn't wait to set it down.

Walking into the open ground of the campsite, Dean found another reason to mutter a curse under his breath. He'd hoped the site would be unoccupied, so they could figure out just what the hell had been taking people for years without any rubberneckers. But looked like even that was too much to ask: a bright red tent with blue panels had been erected on one side of the clearing, new enough that the creases in the cloth were still sharp.

"Just what we need," Dean muttered to Sam.

Sam merely shrugged: *What can we do?*

It wasn't the tent itself, of course, that bothered Dean, but the family it apparently belonged to. He counted four of them: two boys, one maybe five or six and the other perhaps ten years old; a teenaged girl wearing a heavy duty pout, although her face lit up with interest when she caught sight of Dean and Sam; and a man who was obviously their father, judging by the fact they all seemed to have inherited his carrot-colored hair. Dean didn't see a mother anywhere, but maybe she was inside the tent.

The father's face was red with sunburn and, unlikely as the possibility might have seemed to Dean half an hour ago, he looked like he belonged in a forest even less than Dean did. Most *definitely* the guy didn't belong in a forest infested with some supernatural creature. He and Sam could take care of themselves—Dad had seen to that—but this dude looked like he wouldn't know one end of a gun from the other. How was he going to protect his family if—.

Then Dean reminded himself that, for normal people, a weekend of camping in a National Park would seem like a perfectly safe thing to do. The worst dangers most fathers would expect to deal with were bug bites and skinned knees. Still, Dean wished he could tell the family to get the hell out and go home.

The father's nod in greeting was friendly enough, though, as Sam and Dean walked into the clearing; he clearly had no idea of what could lurk in those woods.

Shifting his gaze away from the big tent, Dean cheered up a little when he spotted the camp's other occupant. On the opposite side of the campsite from the family, a female hiker was unfolding what looked to Dean like a thick wad of nylon. With her faded zip-off pants, a shirt in muted green, and long, dark hair tied back in a pony tail under a Washington Huskies baseball cap, she couldn't have made a sharper contrast with the family if she'd tried.

Abandoning Sam and his struggle to unpack Dad's old tent, Dean ambled over. "Hey. Need a hand with that?" He nodded at the dark green wad in her hands.

She straightened, and Dean discovered his initial estimate had been right: she was pretty, and somewhere in her twenties. Her gaze boldly took him in from head to foot too, her mouth twitching when she got to his torn jeans and boots. Dean wasn't sure if it was a smile, or disapproval. "No thanks. I'm good." She shook her head, and bent back to her work.

There was a sudden popping noise, and much to Dean's shock, the wad of nylon unfolded itself into what looked like a very small, low tent. "What the hell is that?" He couldn't stop the words from tumbling out.

She gave him a grin from under the visor of her cap. "Bivy sack." When he shot her a puzzled look, she added, "Think of it as a tent for one."

"Huh." Dean peered down at the contraption with suspicion, as if he expected it to fold back in on itself again without warning. He couldn't imagine it was very comfortable to sleep in.

She chuckled at his obvious distrust. "Maybe *I* should give *you* guys a hand instead?" She dipped her head, her expression amused. When Dean followed her gaze, he realized she was looking at Sam, who had gotten Dad's tent out its bag, and was now trying to make sense of the collapsable poles.

Dean hesitated, pride warring with his desire to get to know her better. Sam, who must have been listening in, apparently had no such compunction. "Please." He strolled over and handed her a pair of pole parts. "I'm Sam. This is my brother, Dean."

"Nice to meet you, Sam. I'm Hazel." She expertly put the parts together and shoved the finished pole at Dean without looking at him. "Hold this."

She followed Sam the few paces back to where Dad's tent lay in a crumpled pile. Sam bent and picked it up so he could shake out the canvas. Dust rose in a cloud,

and it smelled musty. Dean's nose itched, and he pinched it to stop from sneezing.

"It's been a while," Sam offered by way of apology, shrugging in Hazel's direction.

"I can tell." Hazel grinned again, seemingly unperturbed by the dust. "So, you guys taking a weekend break?" She handed Dean another finished pole and started to help Sam with the canvas.

"Something like that." Sam frowned at the lines that over the years seemed to have knotted themselves together in a tight ball. Then, much to Dean's surprise, he added quietly, "We used to go camping with our Dad."

Dean gave Sam a startled look, but Sam ignored him. It wasn't like them to give out that kind of personal information voluntarily. He took another look at Hazel, reevaluating her with fresh eyes.

"I see." With her help, the tent had started to slowly take shape. "This his?" She nodded at the canvas.

"Yeah." Dean recalled how it never had seemed to be such a puzzle to put the tent together when they'd been kids. Of course, Dad had been there to give instructions then.

"It's broken." A small voice piping up unexpectedly kept Dean from traveling further down memory lane. Glancing over, he saw the two red-headed boys had strolled up to watch them fight the tent. The youngest, after making his pronouncement, had shoved his thumb back into his mouth and begun sucking it again. At Dean's raised eyebrows, he pointed with his other hand to where a tear gaped in the tent wall.

Dean knelt next to the tent, fingering the tear. It didn't look too bad. "Don't worry," he assured the boy. "I'll fix it." He ferreted out the duct tape they'd brought and tore off two long pieces, which he then pasted in a large X across the tear. "See? All done." The little boy giggled, while his older brother gave Dean a look that seemed caught between admiration and skepticism.

"Danny! Wade!" The boys' father flapped a hand at his sons from where he stood in front of their tent. "Stop bugging those people."

"They're no trouble," Sam called back. Nevertheless, the boys dashed off back to their own side of the campground at their father's hail. Dean wiggled his fingers goodbye at the youngest boy and he shyly waved back.

"Nice job." Hazel indicated the duct tape, smiling. "You might want to put some tape across on the inside too." She gave a small wave to indicate the camp. "I think

it's gonna get cold tonight, and you don't want the dew to leak in." She pondered Dean's repair another moment. "It'll do for now, though. Shouldn't be too hard to have patched properly when you get back."

"Will do." Dean gave her a nod. She was a bit bossy, but she was also right. His jury-rigged repair would be okay for tonight, but it wouldn't hold for very long. Of course, Dean had no desire whatsoever to prolong this trip any longer than necessary.

With the hole patched, they went back to work. A few minutes later, they'd finished putting up the tent, all the lines taut. Dean didn't think anything short of a hurricane would blow it over. Hazel straightened, puffing her hair off her face and readjusting her cap as she cocked her head and admired their handiwork. "There's something to be said for solid, traditional tents." She sounded a little wistful.

"Yours is more practical," Sam reminded her.

She smiled at him. "That's true."

Dean shot another look at her bivy sack, thinking it looked incredibly fragile next to the two larger tents. She had to have guts, he decided, to dare hike on her own and sleep in one of those things.

"Anyway," Hazel glanced across her shoulder, toward where the boys' father was struggling with a lighter and a pile of wood in the fire pit, "I better go make sure that lot don't burn the whole forest down." Dean made a noise of agreement. "And you two need to get settled." She dipped her head at the duffel bags. "See you around for dinner?" She was looking at Sam more than Dean.

"Sure thing." Sam nodded.

Dean watched her walk away, before turning back to his brother. "She likes you, dude." Sam gave him a *What?* Look and Dean smirked back, shaking his head. Sometimes he wondered how Sam had ever managed to lose his virginity, let alone get himself a steady girlfriend. He lowered his voice. "So, ya know, if you want to have that *solid, traditional* tent all for yourself tonight, just say the word."

Sam blew out a breath. "Dude...!"

Dean snickered as he crawled into the tent to duct tape the tear from the inside.

oOo

After he'd finished fixing up the tear as well as he could, Dean left the rest of the arrangements to Sam, telling his brother he'd take care of the kind of preparations



no regular camper would ever think of making.

Checking he had his knife, and that the gun was his back, he headed into the forest. A dozen or so yards from the campground, the woods turned more dense and the undergrowth was already thick with shadows as the sun set. Getting out his flashlight, Dean switched it on before continuing deeper into the woods.

A little further on, he found a suitable rock: reasonably flat and its surface covered with moss. Pulling his knife from its sheath, he started carving lines into the rock's surface. Those old Anasazi symbols from Dad's journal should at least keep a wendigo away—though Dean was far from certain that was what they were dealing with.

He'd have felt a lot better if he could've laid a circle of salt around the tents—it'd keep out most other kinds of monsters—but that would've required more salt than he and Sam could have carried with them. And besides, he scowled to himself, it'd be hard to explain to Hazel and the others.

She already didn't seem to have a very high opinion of him, and she'd certainly be convinced he was crazy if he tried to explain the salt. He smirked; judging by the way she'd looked at Sam, though, she hadn't found it nearly as worthy of her disdain when it was Sam who wore jeans and brought an old tent on a camping trip.

But he didn't begrudge Sam that. His brother didn't get laid nearly as much as he should do, and that? That couldn't be healthy for a guy Sam's age. Gotta keep the pipes clean, right?

The last stroke in place, Dean shone the beam of the flashlight straight at the rock, checking he'd gotten the symbols right. There wasn't room for error with these things. Satisfied with his scratches, he was about to set off to walk the quarter circle to the next point on the compass and make a second drawing when the sound of a branch snapping not far from him made him freeze. Crouched by the rock, he flicked off the light and gripped the knife hilt more firmly, wondering if he had time to exchange it for the gun stashed in his belt. Dammit, he should've brought the Colt....

More branches cracked, the racket loud in the quiet of evening. Whoever it was, wasn't very good at subterfuge. Dean started to relax a bit. A wendigo would've been a lot faster than this, and anything else would've been a heck of a lot quieter, at the very least. Another sound, this time like a branch slapping against flesh, was followed by a soft curse in a female voice, confirming Dean's suspicion.

Breathing out and flipping the switch on the flashlight back to the on-position, he rose to his feet, angling the beam in the direction of the intruder. The light revealed

a glimpse of red hair, and the girl let out a startled little shriek as the glare temporarily blinded her. He lowered the beam a little bit until he shone it at her feet. She was wearing tennis shoes, he noticed.

"You scared me." Her voice was a little shaky as she threw the accusation at him.

Dean snorted. "Maybe you shouldn't try to sneak up on people."

"Wasn't sneaking."

"You got that right." He scowled at her. "Could hear you a mile off. What are you doing out here in the dark, anyway? Shouldn't you be back at camp, doing..." he paused for a second, "doing stuff?"

It was the girl's turn to snort. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Whatever girls do when they're camping." Knowing she wouldn't be able to see past the flashlight, he slipped the knife back in its sheath and took a step away from the rock. He didn't want her to notice what he'd been doing, and he definitely didn't want her to disturb the intricate drawing. He gestured with the flashlight. "Seriously, you should go back. It's not safe in the woods after dark."

"You're afraid of bears?" There was a challenge in her tone.

Dean shrugged. "Let's see. There could be bears, yes. And cougars." He smirked. "Or zombie squirrels...." His brow furrowed as he wondered absently: *would* that be possible...? He'd have to ask Bobby some day.

She giggled. "You're funny."

"Yeah, so I'm told." Dean grinned at her for an instant, before his smile faded. "Either way, I mean it. You shouldn't be here."

"You're here," she objected.

Dean sighed. Okay, this conversation had lasted long enough. He had a lot more work to do, and he was tired and hungry. "I'm a grown man. You're a little girl. There's a difference."

It was the wrong thing to say. Even as she pulled herself up to her full height—the top of her head would just reach his shoulder, he reckoned—he could see her eyes fill with tears, gleaming in the glow of the flashlight.

Oh, crap...!

"I'm not a child," she spat, sniffing. "Why does everyone keep saying that?" She turned on her heel and started to stalk off through the underbrush, shoving blindly at the branches clawing at her clothes.

It took Dean a moment to realize she was heading in the wrong direction, away from the camp. He took a couple of strides and made a grab for her, snatching her elbow before the shrubbery closed behind her. "Hey! I'm sorry."

"Ow." She shook his hand off angrily, but at least she turned back to face him. "I'm almost fifteen." Though there was a plaintive note in her voice, she managed to sound put out at the same time.

"Okay, okay." He scrambled for safer ground. "What's your name?"

"Emma. Emma Gifford." She wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. "And I'm not a child."

"I guess not." Dean sighed. He'd learned to shoot when he was seven, knew how to drive the Impala at ten, and killed his first werewolf at sixteen. Then again, his life was hardly normal by any standard. "I'm sorry I said that. But Emma?" She glanced up at him through her lashes. "I'm not bullshitting you: it's not safe to be out here. Your dad will be worried."

"My dad doesn't care." But her shoulders sagged a bit, and Dean reckoned the fight had gone out of her already. She whispered, "He doesn't care about anything any more."

Dean frowned, unsure what that was supposed to mean. Was it just teenage angst speaking? He'd certainly seen enough of that with Sam, for whom railing at Dad had been an obsession for years. "I doubt that."

She scoffed, and wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. "Can't I stay with you?"

"Hell no." He had to bite his tongue not to huff a laugh. He could just picture Sam's face if he dragged a fourteen year old girl along while securing the perimeter. "Look, there's something I need to do that... that requires privacy. Okay?"

She peered up at him, scanning his face as if looking for signs he was lying to her. Since he wasn't—not really—it didn't take much effort for Dean to keep his expression sincere, and after a minute she nodded, a bit reluctantly. "Okay, I guess. See you later?"

"Sure thing." This time, Dean allowed himself to smile, and he was rewarded with a watery smile in return. She hesitated, looking around uncertainly, but the dark

forest appeared the same in all directions. Dean gestured with the flashlight. "Camp's that way."

She offered him a slightly embarrassed "Oh," before she started back toward the camp. He waited, listening, until he heard her cry out a greeting to one of her brothers, before he plunged into the underbrush himself.

Three more carvings to make before he'd feel satisfied he'd done all he could for now.

oOo

Half an hour and a number of new scratches to his hands and arms from thorny shrubs later, Dean finished the last protective sketch drawn into the dirt and made his way back to the campsite. He had a better sense of direction than Emma; even if he hadn't, the sound of the kids' excited voices would've guided him. Stepping out of the bushes into the clearing, he bent to brush leaves and twigs from his clothes before taking a good look around. Hazel had gotten a fire going in the pit and was puttering around with pots and pans—although a second look suggested she was working on a small camping stove while Sam poked at the logs. Sparks rose up and flitted into the black night.

Dean realized he was starving. He ambled over to the fire. "What's for dinner?"

Sam glanced up as Dean approached. Dean gave him a slight nod of confirmation in response to the question that was obvious in Sam's face. *All set.* They'd done as much as they could for tonight.

"We're gonna make *mash mells*," the little Gifford boy—Danny or Wade, Dean didn't yet know—informed him earnestly. He was sitting on a log with his big sister, his feet barely reaching the ground.

"*Marshmallows*," Emma corrected him. "And, Wade, you know you won't get any until after dinner." Wade stuck out his lower lip in a pout, and Dean winked at him, grinning. Toasting marshmallows had been one of the few perks of camping with Dad. No campfire would be complete without it.

When the rest of the Gifford family joined Emma and Wade on the log, Dean was startled to see the father appeared to be alone with the kids. Something niggled at the back of Dean's mind, something Emma had said, or perhaps it had been in the way she'd said it—but then Sam called his name, and Dean dismissed the thought as unimportant.

"Here." Sam held something out to him, indicating for Dean to take it.

Dean peered at the object suspiciously. It looked like a tin-foil pouch, with a picture of a mountain printed on it. "What's that?"

"Dinner." Sam smirked at Dean's bewilderment. When Dean didn't make a move to take the package, Sam shoved it into his hands. Dean found it was warm to the touch. "Don't worry, Hazel made it."

"Right." Hazel let out a snort at Sam's explanation. Twisting on her heel where she knelt next to the stove so she could look at Dean, she nodded at the pouch. "It's freeze-dried food. You add boiling water, stir, wait, and eat." She turned back to the small burner where clear liquid bubbled in a pot.

He shifted his gaze from the foil in his hands to Sam and back, unsure whether she and Sam were pulling a fast one on him, but Sam's expression was sincere as he dipped his head.

"Just open it," he prodded. He offered Dean a spoon. "I got you chicken and rice."

The packaging did say 'chicken and rice', so at least Sam hadn't made that part up. Dean's stomach rumbled at reading the words, and he decided to take a chance. He tore open the resealable plastic strip that held the pouch closed and peered inside. The contents didn't look very appealing, all mushed together.

"Doesn't look like chicken and rice," he grumbled. He dipped his spoon into it and took a cautious nibble. "Hm." He had to admit: the food tasted better than it looked. At the first hit of flavor on his tongue, his taste buds also reminded him how much time had passed since they'd had lunch at the diner in Winthrop. His mouth watered.

"Good, huh?" Sam grinned as Dean dug into the pouch for another spoonful.

"Yeah." Dean found himself a log to sit on and concentrated on scooping the goo from the pouch. It was a lot better than it had seemed at first glance.

oOo

They finished dinner with a dessert of a handful of blackberries each. Hazel had picked them during the day and was happy to share her haul with the rest of the camp. Swallowing down the last bite of the tart fruits, Dean slid to sit on the dirt and lean back against the log. With his belly full, Sam safe at his side and the presence of a beautiful woman who'd cooked his meal—okay, technically speaking, she'd poured hot water on it, but that wasn't the point—he was starting to think that perhaps this whole camping thing wasn't as bad as he remembered. Even those annoying bugs appeared to have let up some once the sun had set.

Now the group had lapsed into silence, their appetites satisfied, and the soft noise of the crackling fire and the way the flames danced and leaped was mesmerizing. The talk over dinner had been stilted, the way conversations between strangers thrown together at random tend to be, with hesitant where-are-you-froms and what-do-you-dos. The Giffords, it turned out, came from Seattle, where Albert—the father—worked as an accountant for a large firm. It reinforced Dean's impression the man would be more at home behind a desk. And then there'd been an awkward moment when Albert asked Dean in return what he did for a living. Dean had exchanged a panicked look with Sam—usually, they had their cover story worked out beforehand, but they hadn't expected to be needing an explanation—before Dean stammered, "Family business."

Sam had added, "Pest control," which had made Emma shudder melodramatically while she muttered something about spiders. Hazel laughed and tried to explain to her that spiders were useful creatures, before instructing Albert how to get to the high ridge that reputedly offered a grand view over the nearby glaciers and mountain peaks.

"Daddy, can we get the marshmallows now?" The silence that had fallen over the forest was broken by Danny Gifford, the older boy. He tugged his father's sleeve and Albert sighed wearily. It wasn't the first time the boys had reminded him of his promise they'd get to toast marshmallows after dinner.

"Okay. You can go get them."

While Danny let out an excited "Yay!" and ran off to the large tent, Dean took another look at Albert. One thing no one had mentioned during the earlier conversation, but Dean was now fairly sure of, was that Mrs. Gifford had died not long ago. He'd had enough experience talking to survivors of supernatural attacks to recognize the signs of loss. Their grief was obvious in the way they carefully avoided mentioning their mother and the way they'd start to say something and then trail off, their sentences unfinished.

Dean felt for the kids; he knew what it was like to grow up without a mother. At least, he mused, Albert Gifford's response hadn't been to take up hunting—or train his boys as soldiers.

Dean wasn't sure if that was good or a bad thing. The stuff he and Sam had seen, the deals they'd made to—his mind shied away from following the thought through to its end. Nobody should have to live like that. On the other hand, at least he and Sam knew how to protect themselves from the things that lived in the dark....

Danny came trotting back, carrying a large bag filled with puffy marshmallows.

"You shouldn't have left that in your tent." Hazel furrowed her brow at Albert.

"Bears, you know."

"Oh." Albert looked taken aback. "I'm sorry. I—."

She gave a little shake of her head, cutting him off. "Don't fret it. There've barely been any bear sightings in this area for years." She shrugged as she helped Wade put a marshmallow on a stick and showed him how to hold it over the fire without getting burned himself. "I guess bears don't much like it around here, for some reason. But better be safe than sorry, right?"

Albert nodded. "Yes." He shot a worried glance at his children. "Yes, you're right."

"Speaking off," Hazel climbed to her feet, "we better get those dishes washed and the garbage disposed off." She nudged Dean's thigh with the toe of her boot. "Wanna give me a hand, gorgeous?"

Dean blinked, his mind still processing Hazel's comment about the general lack of bears near Thunder Creek trail. That had to be significant, somehow. "Huh?"

She grinned. "Dishes. And garbage detail." She started to collect the empty pouches and spoons from around the campfire. "And someone's gotta string up the food after I pack it away, so any bear that might wander close can't get into it."

"Um...." Dean glanced at his brother. Sam was busy adding more marshmallows to Wade's stick. He shot Dean a grin, accompanied by a faintly raised eyebrow that told Dean Sam hadn't missed the bear information either. "Okay." Dean clambered to his feet. Away from the others, it might be easier to ask Hazel some questions and discuss things he didn't want the kids to overhear.

"I thought you just said there aren't any bears in this area?" He followed her away from the fire pit. The darkness outside the circle of light cast by the flames was intense, and they both switched on their flashlights. "And weren't bears supposed to be the reason those hikers went missing, earlier in the summer? So if it wasn't bears...?"

She gave him a look. "I never said: *no* bears," she reminded him. "And those hikers?" She shrugged. "It's dangerous country. People fall down slopes; there are rock slides, sometimes; people get lost.... Plenty of ways to disappear and never be found again." She packed away the empty food pouches in a plastic container she'd brought and pressed the lid down tightly. "Pity, though. Next time someone disappears round here, they might close this trail for a while." She put the container in a bag that already seemed to hold several similar items and handed Dean a length of rope. "Get that up over that tree limb over there, will you?" She pointed with her flashlight to indicate the branch she meant.

Dean cast up the rope. He misjudged the distance to the branch and had to duck out of the way when the rope came tumbling back. The second attempt went better; when the end of the rope flapped down, Hazel grabbed it.

"So," Dean watched as she tied the rope to the bag. "Sounds like you come out here pretty often."

Hazel checked that the knot was tight. "Often enough. I was up by Boston Glacier earlier, taking measurements."

"Measurements?" Dean had no clue what she was talking about, but he thought it sounded vaguely dirty.

She shot him a look. "I'm a glaciologist."

"A what?" Dean blurted out.

She gave a brief snort of laughter. "I study glaciers."

She got Dean to help her hoist the bag with the containers up into the tree, until it dangled a good ten feet over their heads, before she spoke again. "I measure the summer melt-off, see if the ice sheets are retracting." She admired their handiwork for a moment, before nodding in satisfaction and shifting her attention back to Dean. "Global warming, you know?"

"Oh. Right." Dean remembered the news reports, which had made it sound like melting polar ice caps was the apocalypse itself. He'd thought it was crap; much bigger chance the world would go up in flames in a demonic war before any ice caps could melt. But he could hardly tell Hazel that. "Um, sounds interesting."

She rolled her eyes at him. "No need to pretend, Dean. I know it doesn't sound very exciting." She shrugged, and indicated with a flick of her hand they should head back to the campfire. "But I like it."

oOo

It was an hour shy of midnight by the time the party finally broke up and headed for their sleeping bags. Sam went with Dean to string up the leftover marshmallows, while Hazel made sure no food or trash had been left lying about that could draw unwanted attention from the elusive bears or other wildlife. The two boys had long since been sent off to bed by their father, but Emma had held on until the very last minute—even though Dean reckoned she'd been half asleep on her perch on the log by the end.

When they returned from securing the food, Hazel was banking the fire. "'Night,



boys." She grinned. "Don't let the bedbugs bite."

Dean watched her wriggle into her bivy sack. A moment later, she was nothing but a shapeless bundle under the moonlit sky.

"Huh." Shaking his head to himself, Dean waited for Sam to crawl through the tent flap before ducking in after him. He made sure his knife, gun and a small bottle of holy water were within easy reach, and then clawed his way into his sleeping bag, trying to find a comfortable position. The ground was hard and smelled like dirt. "I hate camping," he muttered to himself.

"Dude, shut up." Sam's reply came sleepily.

Dean rolled his eyes at the canvas above him, invisible in the dark, and shifted again. Folding his arms behind his head for a pillow, he suspected he wouldn't get much sleep on the rocky floor. It was going to be a long night.

oOo

Turned out he was more tired than he'd thought, because the next thing he was aware of was faint shuffling noises approaching their tent.

A second later, a hand—Sam's—grabbed him and shook him. "Dean!" his brother hissed, his voice low.

"I hear it." Dean shook off Sam's grip, sitting up. He'd scabbled for his knife before he was even fully awake and the feel of it in his hand was comforting as he blinked owlishly in the darkness. Where the light of the moon caught it, the tent wall was a slightly lighter shade of gray, with the repaired tear a darker patch. There were other dark patterns on the canvas as well: huge, deformed shapes were moving through the moonlight, creating monstrous shadows that shifted across the tent.

Dean quietly peeled himself out from the sleeping bag. "What the hell...?"

He sensed Sam's shrug more than he could see it. "Dunno," Sam whispered back. "Sure as hell isn't a wendigo."

"Awesome deduction, Sherlock." Of course it wasn't a wendigo: Dean's carvings would've kept a wendigo from entering the camp, and the silhouette cast on the tent was all wrong. But whatever the hell it was that was crawling into the campground, there was more than one. And they weren't exactly quiet about it, either. Even as Dean attempted to cram his feet into his boots, trying at the same time to hold on to the knife with one hand and grapple for his gun with the other, he could hear them: snarling and growling in low voices, while branches snapped under heavy feet.

He swore at himself. No way he should've let them get this close to camp. He and Sam should've set up a watch schedule between them. Dammit, Dad would've skinned him alive for messing up something so basic.

He exchanged a look with Sam, the whites of his brother's eyes gleaming in the dim light. "Left, right?" He flicked the knife slightly, first in Sam's direction, then toward himself. Sam dipped his head in agreement: he'd go left, while Dean would turn right as soon as they got out of the tent. Dean nodded. "Let's—."

Before he could finish the order, a woman screamed—and the intruders abandoned all attempt at subterfuge. Howls went up, more people shouted, and Dean flung aside the tent flap without waiting another instant and burst into the clearing. He instantly veered to the right, toward where he knew Hazel had been sleeping in her flimsy bivy sack. He wasn't sure if she was the one he'd heard screaming or if that had been Emma, but he didn't stop to consider.

It didn't matter, anyway.

A quick scan of the camp as he moved toward Hazel's tent showed him a scene straight out of one of his many nightmares. Lit by the silver moonlight and silhouetted against the dull orange glow of the banked fire, a half dozen misshapen creatures were trampling through the clearing. They lumbered a bit, making Dean think of zombies, but they moved a lot faster than that as they tore the Gifford's tent off its stakes. Emma shrieked as one of the things dragged her by her hair from her sleeping bag and Dean realized she'd been the one who'd screamed earlier. Before he could see what happened next, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye.

He dodged the blow more out of instinct than through any conscious thought, the heavy length of wood that swished by his head narrowly missing his skull. It'd certainly have smashed his head in if it had connected. Instead, the club caught his shoulder and his left arm instantly went numb all the way to his fingertips. The gun fell from his now useless hand and Dean swore under his breath, even as he swooped with his knife at his assailant. He knew he'd struck home when the blade met resistance and something wet and hot sprayed over his hand. The thing went down without a sound, and it didn't move again.

Dean didn't stay to study it; he just grunted to himself in satisfaction. At least the bastards died easily.

But there were so many of them.

He took the chance to glance over at Sam, who was fighting off a bunch of the monsters a dozen yards away. Though surrounded by the critters, Sam was still on

his feet and seemed to be holding his own. *Good*. Then Dean no longer had time to watch Sam: another of the creatures lunged for him, jabbing with what looked like a rusty sword, of all things. Even as Dean fended it off, three more beasts joined the first.

Dean tried to keep them at a distance, but the creatures were humanoid in shape, each with two overlong arms that ended in gnarled claws; and though sensation had finally returned to Dean's left hand, his gun lay trampled in the dirt somewhere and all he had to defend himself with was his knife. He slashed whenever he saw an opening and the sharp blade made contact several times, eliciting grunts of pain, but he was beginning to understand that his first kill had been more luck than anything else. And worse, a few of the bastards seemed to be wearing some kind of body armor. He could feel and hear it when the knife glanced off of metal and leather instead of cutting into skin and flesh.

Bobbing low again, he threw a good left punch that connected as he came up. Pain shot through his hand from the impact, but he ignored it and took another swing with his knife. Then something hit him from behind, stunning him. He stumbled to his knees, shaking his head to try and clear it. But before he could get back to his feet, a large claw had snagged him by the collar. The creature hauled him back up until he dangled in its grip with his boots a foot from the ground. Yellowed teeth snapped together close to his face, and Dean gagged as the stench of the creature's breath hit him full on.

"Sheesh, anyone ever tell you you got a serious plaque problem, pal?" he wheezed, half-choked by his shirt collar cutting into his throat. He tried to wriggle free, kicking out blindly, but it was like hitting a tree. Next minute the creature smashed a fist the size of a small boulder under Dean's chin and he blacked out.

oOo

When he came to, something cold was pressing against his throat.

"No!" Dean recognized Sam's voice. He sounded desperate.

Blinking, Dean crossed his eyes and squinted down, barely recognizing the rusty, serrated piece of steel lodged against his jugular as a knife. *Oh crap*. Suddenly Sam's panic made sense.

"I got eight months left," Dean protested at nobody in particular. He fought not to struggle, knowing that would only make it worse. But he didn't want to die. Not here, not now. Not at the hands of something that he still didn't even know what the hell it was.

The pressure on the knife increased, the rusty blade digging into his skin. Dammit,

this wasn't fair!

"Stop!"

Dean didn't recognize the voice that gave the command, but the creature holding him obviously did. Its grip weakened a little and the knife let up a bit, just a hair short of cutting him. Dean swallowed.

"Let him go." The knife fell away, and the hold on Dean's collar loosened. Still dizzy from the blow to his head, Dean dropped to his knees, gasping. A shadow fell across him. "Get him up." The same voice, cold, emotionless.

Dean was hoisted back to his feet again. Once he found his footing, he blinked at the owner of the voice. "You?" He wiped blood from his lips with the back of his hand. "Shoulda killed you when I could."

"Duane?" Sam, a half dozen of the creatures shoving him ahead of them, stumbled up to where Dean was propped up by a firm claw holding his arm. "Duane Tanner?"

The guy Dean had let live in Rivergrove—against his better judgment, Dean crabbily remembered—smirked back at them, his eyes full of black smoke. "I prefer Croatoan."

"It was you."

Dean was glad to hear Sam sounded a bit more together than he himself felt. He peered up at his brother. There was a cut over Sam's right eye that was already scabbing over, and it looked like he'd have a whopper of a bruise on his jaw, but otherwise his brother was standing straight and unharmed. Much to Dean's surprise, Sam also towered more than a head over most of the creatures around them, misshapen and crooked as they were. He'd gotten the impression they were bigger than that. But then he glanced across his shoulder at the owner of the oversized claw digging into his flesh, and gulped. *Damn, Sammy got all the little ones.* Even as fuzzy-brained as Dean was, it didn't take much to realize that the monster behind him was different than the others: taller, bulkier, more heavily muscled. Its grin, however, was as evil as the rest.

"Why?"

For a second, Dean had no idea what Sam was talking about. But the demon did. "Rivergrove was a test." He grinned, revealing Tanner's even white teeth, but there was no humor in his smile. "You passed with flying colors, Sammy-boy."

A test? Dean tried to catch Sam's gaze, but Sam was staring with a guarded expression at the demon wearing Duane Tanner.

Dean was about to ask what the hell they were talking about, but he was distracted by the sight of the Giffords being herded over. The kids were huddled together, Wade's pupils blown with terror and his cheeks wet with tears. Emma was trying to be brave for her brothers, but Dean could see how badly she was shaking and she kept darting frightened glances at the monsters. Albert appeared more confused than anything, as if he couldn't quite believe what his eyes were telling him.

Where was...? Dean looked around and saw another pair of creatures dragging Hazel over. She looked pissed but, Dean was relieved to see, also unharmed.

"Azazel was rather pleased to find out you were immune to the virus," Tanner continued to explain to Sam, ignoring the rest of his captives.

Dean focused his attention back on Tanner. "Old Yellow Eyes? What's he got to do with anything?"

"He and Sam here were going to do great things together."

Dean remembered what Casey had told him, back in that basement in Elizabethville: Azazel had had a plan, and Sam was supposed to have been his general. Dean again tried to catch Sam's eye, suddenly wishing he'd told his brother what he'd learned from Casey. But at the time, with his worries about Sam not being himself, it had seemed wisest not to mention it.

"And then you killed him." Tanner turned his head until he was staring darkly at Dean.

Dean tried to come up with a scathing comeback, but his ears were still ringing and it was hard to think, so he settled for a scowl.

"Anyway, that was then." The demon turned away from them and barked something in a guttural language that made the hairs on Dean's neck rise. Whatever he'd said, it was clearly an order, as the creatures—dammit, there had to be two dozen of them at least, Dean reckoned as he did a silent count—jumped to attention.

They produced lengths of coarse rope and within minutes the three older Giffords and Hazel had been tied together in a row, lengths of rope running between them. Little Wade had been left free but one of the creatures scooped him up and slung him across its shoulder as another shoved at Albert, at the head of the line, to tell him to start walking. The boy let out a startled wail and the creature said something to the others that caused a howl of laughter as they disappeared into the underbrush, Albert and the others pushed along in the middle of the group.

"What...?" Dean started to ask, but his question was choked off when the giant

beast that had hold of him looped a rope around his neck, tight enough to nearly cut off his airway. Thinking he was about to get throttled, Dean clawed at the rope, but the creature only roared what sounded like a laugh, before wrenching Dean's hands down and behind his back and tying his wrists together.

A tug on the rope around his neck forced Dean to take a step forward, or risk being strangled.

"Dean..." Sam started forward.

"Don't." Tanner's order brought Sam to a halt. Only now did Dean realize nobody had bothered to tie Sam up. He frowned. What...?

He offered Sam an inquiring eyebrow, which his brother answered with a puzzled shrug, before another jerk of the rope forced Dean to give all his attention to keeping on his feet while being led like a goddamn dog on a leash. With his hands tied the way they were, he'd have no way to break his fall if he tripped, and with the way the rope was being held taut, he could easily snap his neck as well.

"Wait," Sam called.

Tanner turned back. "Sam, let's go. I'll explain when we get to camp."

"Why not now?" Sam stood his ground.

"Sam, don't—." Dean's objection earned him a smack against the back of his head that made his teeth clack together.

"Sun's rising." Tanner flapped a hand at the sky that was indeed growing lighter. "The troops don't much like being out in daylight. So, let's move." He nodded at the creature holding Dean's leash. It gave another, harder pull on the rope and Dean stumbled for a moment. Sam shot him a miserable look before directing a much darker glare at Tanner. Tanner wasn't impressed. He smirked back. "That's right. You try do anything funny, your brother pays the price."

oOo

Spurred on by the harsh cries of their captors, Dean and the others trudged through the woods for what felt like hours. Gradually, the forest emerged from the shadows and color slowly seeped into the world as the sun rose. Having enough light to see where he was putting his feet made the going a little easier for Dean, who'd tripped and stumbled to his knees a half dozen times. The monster's grip on the rope around his neck had been the only thing that had kept him from face-planting onto the mossy ground. He suspected he'd have nasty bruises to show for it later, but at least he was still walking.

As he got a better look at the creatures that had captured them, he realized he still had no clue what they were. They weren't like anything Dean could remember he'd ever seen, or heard about, that was for sure. Back at the campground, he'd already noticed most of them weren't very tall, but they were also quite a bit bulkier than the skinny wendigo they'd taken out in Colorado. Despite their black, leathery skin, they weren't hairy enough for werewolves (besides, as Sam had said, the lunar cycle was all wrong) or for skinwalkers of any kind. On top of that, they each wore a ragtag collection of scraps of leather and rust and dented metal armor—which kinda made sense, since he'd also discovered they could be killed with an ordinary blade.

Except he couldn't think of a critter that had learned to protect itself like that.

He shot a glance across his shoulder at Sam, who was bringing up the rear with Tanner. There was nobody else between Sam and freedom, and Dean's eyes narrowed. Could they use that, somehow...? If Sam got away, he could call Bobby, or some of the other hunters they'd worked with over the years. 'Cause this was definitely one of those cases where a little help would be more than welcome.

But first they needed to figure out what the hell they were dealing with. As he met Sam's gaze, Dean asked him a silent question. Sam gave a slight shake of his head in response: *sorry, no clue....*

Dean grimaced wryly and turned his attention back to the trail just in time to step over a fallen log that would certainly have tripped him up otherwise. Behind him, Sam cleared his throat.

"These creatures... what are they?"

Dean knew Sam wouldn't be asking *him*; he must have taken Dean's wordless question as his cue to fish for information from Tanner. Dean didn't much like they had to admit their ignorance to a damn demon, but, like Sam, he liked not knowing what they were up against even less.

"Orcs."

"What?" Behind Dean, Sam scoffed a laugh. "Orcs don't exist." There was a pause before Sam added, "That 'invented history' stuff? It's *invented*. An academic joke. Orcs are just a fairy tale."

"Uh huh." It was Tanner's turn to laugh, an unpleasant sound that grated on Dean and made the hair on his neck stand on end. "Like most people would say demons aren't real, huh?"

Sam was silent for a minute, and Dean could just imagine the irritated pout on his face. Sam sighed. "Point taken, I guess."

*Crap*, Dean thought. Next thing, they'd find out Bigfoot was real too. Could it be true? Was Sam just playing along with Tanner, pretending to believe him? After all: *demons lie*. Dean tried to recall if he could remember ever having heard of orcs, but all he came up with was a vague recollection of browsing through some of the fantasy novels Sam had read as a kid. He'd teased Sam about them, and warned him Dad better not find out Sam was wasting his time on that sword and sorcery shit. Not when there were plenty of real nasties around. Now Dean wished he hadn't been so dismissive.

"What do they want?" Sam continued to pump Tanner for details. Dean heard the underlying question Sam wasn't voicing: *What do you want?*

Pricking up his ears, Dean tried to slow his pace without it being noticeable. He was very interested to hear what Tanner might have to say. And, like most demons they'd met, Tanner seemed to enjoy hearing his own voice. He smugly answered Sam's question. "You, of course."

Dean stopped mid-step. "What?!" Didn't these goddamn demons ever take *no* for an answer? He'd thought he'd made his and Sam's feelings on the matter pretty clear when he'd put that bullet in Azazel. He tried to catch Sam's gaze again. The coarse rope around his neck drew tight in warning.

"Keep walking." Tanner shoved him in the back, and Dean took another stumbling step forward.

"What do they want with me?" That was Sam again.

"You're quite dim, aren't you?" Tanner heaved a sigh. "I do question Azazel's judgement in picking you. Anyway," he paused a moment, presumably to let Sam precede him on the particularly narrow stretch of the trail they'd reached. "These wretched strays have been waiting in these woods since before the dawn of time. Waiting for you, their general, to lead them to glory at last."

Dean wanted to snicker—oh yeah, that really sounded like his little brother—but one look at the broad back lumbering in front of him and the huge fist holding the rope made him reconsider. He waited to hear Sam laugh off Tanner instead, but Sam never did. Sam kept silent. Dean wished he could risk another glance backward to see Sam's expression, but the rope was taut and he didn't have the wiggle room.

Several minutes later, he sensed a presence close behind him. He didn't need to see to know it was Sam. "Dude," Dean hissed under his breath, "What are you still



doing here?"

As the trail widened again, Sam drew level with him. He gave Dean a puzzled look.

"Nobody's got *you* on a leash." Wasn't it obvious what Sam should do? "Think maybe you could escape and, oh, I don't know, get *help*?" It was a struggle, but Dean managed to keep his voice low enough that only Sam could hear.

Sam shook his head. "They'd kill you if I did."

"So?" Dean shrugged. "Not like my number's not coming up in a few months anyway. At least you might save those kids." He jerked his head toward where the line of humans struggled a little further ahead in front of them along the trail.

"No."

"Sam!"

The huge orc grunted something that sounded vaguely like, "Shut up." Dean scowled at its back.

Sam gave another shake of his head. "Dean, it's not an option. We'll figure something else out." He put a hand on Dean's shoulder briefly, before he let himself fall back, leaving Dean to fume at his brother's stubbornness, and worry about how the hell they were gonna get out of this.

oOo

At last, long after full daylight had come into the world, they reached the orcs' camp. The last part of the hike had been mostly uphill, with the orcs never allowing them a moment's respite but hurrying them on every step of the way. Albert was huffing and puffing so badly, his face red, that Dean was afraid he was about to have a heart attack. Emma and Danny were tripping over their own feet with fatigue. Hazel, used as she must be to hiking, tried to help the kids wherever she could, but there was only so much she could do. The youngest Gifford boy had been carried by one or other of the orcs for most of the way and he seemed all right—though he looked faint with fright.

Dean's hands had gone numb from being tied behind his back for so long, and his jaw ached where the big orc had knocked him out earlier, but he thought he was okay, otherwise. Hunting might get you roughed up every so often but it generally kept you pretty fit.

Not surprisingly, Sam appeared to be in the best shape of them all.

The orcs' hideout was situated deep inside a narrow gorge. Dean recalled how the demon had said the orcs didn't like daylight. Well, in that case, they should really like it here, he reckoned. It was gloomy and damp at the bottom of the crevasse—the sheer rock walls rising up on either side would keep the sun from reaching it for most of the day—and an unpleasant smell hung in the still air. It faintly reminded Dean of haunted houses with dead bodies buried in the basement. He didn't find the odor very reassuring.

At the far end of the canyon, a row of crude cages had been built, put together from heavy branches tied with coarse twine, and this was where the orcs took their captives. Untying the rope that had held the Giffords and Hazel together, the orcs shoved each of them into a separate cage. Even Sam didn't escape this fate, Dean observed. He swore silently under his breath as the big orc shut the last cage door and made sure it was locked tight.

Once all their prisoners were secured, Tanner and the big orc, who seemed to be some kind of second in command, headed over to a couple of rickety huts huddled in the shade of a rocky overhang and disappeared inside. A handful of the smaller orcs hung around the cages for a bit, catcalling in their strange tongue, but they soon dispersed as well. Dean figured that maybe, just maybe, the forced march had tired them out too.

Finally, they were alone. This was the best opportunity they'd had so far. And the orcs had been kind enough to untie his hands....

Dean rolled his shoulders, wincing at the way the joints crackled, and rubbed his wrists where the rope had chafed his skin raw. They'd taken his knife, of course, but as soon as the pins and needles had faded from his fingers, he snagged at the leash, which was still around his neck, the end of rope dangling loosely. He wanted to get the damn thing *off*.

"Let me try?" Sam suggested from the next cage over, as he watched Dean struggle to undo knots he couldn't see.

Dean dropped his hands and shook his head. "It's no use." The knots were pulled too tightly to unravel them with his bare hands. "Unless they let you keep your knife?" He shot his brother a hopeful look.

"Nope." Sam shook his head ruefully.

"Hmph." Dean made an unhappy noise. He hated having the rope hang around his neck. It made for unpleasant connotations. He shrugged it off; no use crying over spilt beer. Besides, he and Sam had more important things to discuss. "What the hell are you still doing here, anyway? I told you to get away when you could." Dean

dipped his head at the cage. It was too small for Sam to stand up straight in. "Now, look at you!"

Sam gave him one of his patented annoyed looks. "And I told *you*: I'm not going anywhere without you."

Dean scowled, but he knew it was useless to argue with Sam when he was in this mood. Instead, he crawled over to the front of the cage to study how the make-shift door hung from its hinges and give it an experimental shake. It felt as indestructible as it looked. Whatever these orc things were, they sure knew how to build a cage, he had to give 'em that. No way was he gonna take this thing apart with brute force.

He patted his pockets, already knowing he'd find them empty, but helpless to stop from trying anyway. They'd basically stripped him of everything he'd been carrying: not just the large bowie knife in its sheath, but also the small Swiss knife in his pocket, along with his set of lock-picking tools, his tiny emergency flashlight, and even the packets of salt he always carried in his pocket just in case. "They leave you anything?" he asked Sam.

Sam shook his head. "No."

*Dammit.* Dean turned away from Sam, toward where the others sat huddled in on themselves in their cages, a picture of abject misery. "Hey. Anyone got any tools? Pocket knife? Screwdriver?" They all looked at Dean, shaking their heads. "A pen, maybe?" He was growing desperate. "Hairpins? Anything?"

Hazel flapped her hands in frustration. "All my stuff's back at the campsite."

"I have a scrunchy." Emma held up her wrist to show Dean the pink elastic band she was wearing as if it was a bracelet.

Dean shook his head. What good was that gonna do them? He might be able to use it as a catapult, and pelt the orcs with pebbles, but he doubted it'd achieve anything beyond annoying them. It certainly wouldn't get them out of these friggin' cages. "Not right now, thanks."

He turned back to Sam, who had been studying the other joints of the cage. "Any ideas on how to get us out of here?"

Sam didn't reply right away. "Only one. But—."

Dean narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

Sam hesitated, and Dean instantly knew he wasn't gonna like what Sam had in

mind. But Sam never got around to voicing his idea. The big orc ducked back out of the hut it had been in and garbled an order. A couple of the smaller ones scurried up, following it as it strode across the valley floor, heading for the cages, and chittering excitedly in their unspeakable language until the big one grunted something. To Dean, all the orcs looked the same—ugly as fuck—but he thought he was beginning to be able to tell them apart by the various bits and pieces of clothing and armor they used, and he didn't think he'd seen these two before. Which meant they hadn't been part of the raiding party. Which, in turn, meant there were even more of the things around than the twenty-something he'd counted so far.

While the little ones took up position under the overhang across from the cages, where they had a good view of the prisoners—guard duty? Dean wondered—the big one opened up Sam's cage. It curled its clawlike fingers at Sam, the message clear: *Come*.

Sam glanced over at Dean.

"What do you want with Sam?" Dean pressed up to the cage.

The big orc snarled something at Dean that he didn't understand, but he figured it probably meant something along the lines of *none of your business*. Again, the big orc gestured for Sam to step out of the cage.

Sam gave Dean a small shrug and then ducked out of the cage. Dean couldn't fault him; he had first-hand experience with the brute's strength and, while his brother might be big too, and well-trained, Sam wasn't likely to win in a hand-to-hand with the orc. Besides, they hadn't hurt or threatened Sam at all so far; if Tanner was to be believed, Sam would be like... like their savior. Most creatures, no matter how ugly or evil, generally didn't go 'round hurting their messiahs.

Still, Dean couldn't keep the urgent, "Sam...." from leaving his lips. Sam had time to glance at him over his shoulder before the big orc gave him a push—not hard, but hard enough—toward the huts. Dean watched until Sam had disappeared into one of the structures.

Ignoring the orcs across from them, Dean focused once more on inspecting the cage's construction, hoping to find a weak spot *somewhere*.

"What are those things?" Albert had finally found his second wind.

Dean glanced up to meet his gaze. "Orcs." He ran his hands loosely over a few of the cage's bars. They were firmly tied together, no way to pry them apart.

Albert shook his head, the word clearly not meaning anything to him. "What...?"

"Like... in *Lord of the Rings*?" It was Danny who spoke the words hesitantly.

"What?" Abandoning his exploration, Dean blinked in the kid's direction.

Danny looked embarrassed. "The book. Mom...." His voice caught and he swallowed. "Mom read it to us, me and Emma, before she... before she died."

"Danny, don't be silly." Albert chided his oldest son. "That's just a story and you know it."

"It's not silly!" Emma seemed close to tears as she made her protest. "Mom said it was supposed to be a real story. Like, the guy didn't just make it up. He translated it from some really old book." She turned to Dean. "Did he?"

Dean shrugged. "Maybe." He didn't remember what book it was that he'd teased Sam about, way back when, but it could very well have been the same one.

"Orcs...?" Hazel sounded dubious. Well, she was a scientist. Scientists tended to be among the most skeptical of humans, Dean had always found.

"That's what Tanner said, at least." Dean plucked hopefully at what looked like a loose strand of rope, but it didn't go anywhere.

"Who, the guy?" Hazel asked.

"Yup. Ow!" Dean yelped as a large splinter lodged itself in the pad of his thumb. He cursed and pulled it out.

"What do they want with Sam?"

"Don't know." He wasn't about to tell her, or any of the others, what the demon had said, about Sam being their supposed general or leader, or whatever. Sam would never fall for that trick, anyway, and it might just scare them even more than they already were.

Dean finally gave up on the cage. He kicked at it in frustration, and while it creaked, it didn't give. Little Wade whimpered at his outburst, and Dean shot him a sheepish grin. "Sorry, kiddo. Didn't mean to frighten you."

"So, what do we do?" Hazel might have voiced the question, but the same hope for answers was obvious in all their faces as they looked toward Dean.

Dean settled himself on the cool, damp ground, leaning his back against the far wall of the cage, and drew up his knees. "We wait." There wasn't anything they

could do, and maybe, just maybe, Sam would learn something that could help them.

oOo

Sam wasn't returned to his cage until several hours later. Never good at dealing with feeling helpless, and with nothing left he could do to get them out of the jam they were in, Dean had fretted uselessly about his brother the whole time. Not like Sam couldn't take care of himself, but a lifetime of ingrained habit couldn't be easily dismissed.

So, once the orcs had brought Sam out, Dean let out a breath of relief. Pushing back to his feet, he waited for Sam to reach him. As soon as the big orc slammed the door shut behind Sam and had walked away, he asked, "You okay?"

"Huh?" Sam blinked, as if he'd been miles away in his mind. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

Dean scanned his brother from head to toe, looking for signs of fresh abuse. He didn't find any, just the scab over Sam's eye, now several hours old, and the bruise on his jaw that he'd gotten when they'd been taken. "What did they want?"

Sam shrugged. "What do you think?"

Dean blew out a breath. "For you to be their grand Poo-bah, I guess."

His brother blinked back at him, making Dean suddenly aware he'd echoed Casey, the demon in Elizabethville. The Sam huffed a wry laugh. "Got it in one." He sat on the floor and scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Same old shit, you know: some prophesy they call The Promise, demon war, victory, promised land...."

"Always with the big words," Dean snorted derisively. "Well, good luck to them." He fully expected his brother to join him in brushing off the demons' attempts to lure him to the dark side. Alarmed, he realized Sam wasn't laughing. He lifted an eyebrow. "Sammy?"

"I've been thinking...." Sam avoided meeting Dean's gaze. He rested his hands on his drawn-up knees and stared off toward their guards loitering across from the cages. "Maybe I should—."

"Do what?" Dean followed Sam's gaze. The orc guards were lounging in the shadows, playing what looked like craps, or some kind of game like that. What...? His mouth suddenly turned dry as what Sam hadn't said sank in, and he whirled back. "Dude, seriously?" *Please Sammy, tell me I'm a moron for even thinking this....*

But instead, what Sam said was, "He had some pretty convincing arguments—."

*Oh shit.* "Sam, no. No way in hell." Dean couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. If there hadn't been bars between them, he'd have grabbed Sam by the scruff of the neck and shaken him until he was talking sense again. Only last week Sam had killed two demons in cold blood, which had been freaky enough. Now he wanted to join them?

The cage was too small for pacing, really, but Dean made the best of the little space he had for a few moments. Then he stopped and grabbed the bars, putting his face close to them. "I didn't make a deal just so you could—."

"That's the point, Dean!" This time, Sam did look up, his eyes flashing angrily.

Dean hated himself for even thinking it, but he felt a surge of gratitude to see they were still Sam's usual blueish green, not black. He opened his mouth, but Sam continued before he could say anything, "It's been four months since you made that deal. Four months I've been trying to find a way. Four months with absolutely nothing to show for it. Zilch, nada."

"You're not *supposed* to find a way." Pretending not to have noticed the way Sam's voice had cracked on the last words, Dean crossed his arms in front of his chest. He glared back at his brother, suppressing the panic he always felt whenever Sam suggested they try to figure a way out of the deal. He recalled the terms the crossroads demon had given him: *If you try and welch or weasel your way out, then the deal is off. Sam drops dead.*

Sam barked a laugh. "Right. I'm supposed to sit by and watch you get dragged off to hell in eight months' time? That's the plan?"

"Yes." *Better than the alternative.*

"Well, it sucks."

"Beats you givin' in to those quasimodos over there. I'll kill you myself before I let that happen."

"Dean, listen." Sam's voice was low and urgent. He leaned forward and grabbed the bars of his own cage, his fingers curling around them so tightly that his knuckles turned white. "That demon, Croatoan. He *knows* things. About the crossroads demon, and—."

"Who told you that? Him?" Dean dipped his head toward the huts, indicating he meant Tanner. "Demons lie, Sam, you know that."

"Yes. But what if he's telling the truth?"

"Well, you're not going to be a demon army general with those goddamn orcs for soldiers, and that's that." Tired of the subject, Dean turned his back on Sam. He realized they'd raised their voices while arguing, and the other captives were staring back at him and Sam, their faces full of curiosity and confusion. He glanced away, not wanting to see their expressions. "Besides, we have the here and now to worry about," he reminded his brother. He couldn't believe Sam'd worry about Dean's future when there were innocent people just one cage over—kids, even—needing to be rescued. He scrubbed a hand across his face, palm rasping over stubble. Things used to be so simple: saving people, hunting things. But now...?

"If you have a better idea, I'm not hearing it." Behind Dean, in the other cage, Sam wasn't ready to give up yet.

"I'll think of something."

But as the afternoon ticked by, Dean was forced to dismiss one crazy plan after another for being either impractical or absurd. It didn't help any that he was getting more and more hungry, and that by the end of the day his throat felt so parched he'd kill for a sip of water. But none of them had been given any food or drink. Hell, they hadn't even been offered a bucket for their convenience, Dean realized when he caught a glimpse of Hazel crouching in a corner of her cage. He'd quickly turned his head away, to spare her further embarrassment. But it just confirmed one thing to him: they had to get out of here, and fast.

But how?

As the sun passed over the ravine and sank back toward the horizon, it left the canyon floor even gloomier for its absence. The orcs began to stir again. Soon, a large group had gathered around the prisoners' cages. At first, they were mostly just looking, pointing and chittering at one another in their rough language. But then one grabbed a stick and poked Emma through the bars. She shrieked, more in shock than pain, Dean thought, and slapped at the branch in a half-panic. The crowd howled with laughter.

"Leave her alone!" Albert flung himself against the bars of his cage in an attempt to defend his daughter. The wooden cage creaked under his weight but the orcs didn't pay him any attention. Instead, one of them shoved a hand into Emma's cage, snatching a fistful of her hair and hauling her close to the bars before letting her go again.

"Hey!" Dean hollered, hoping to distract them. If only he could get one of them to put a paw into *his* cage....



After a while, the orcs seemed to tire of the game and wandered off to do whatever orcs did when not bugging innocent girls. Only a handful remained behind to continue leering at them and licking their lips, revealing rotting teeth as they did so. Shortly after, the scent of roasting meat started to drift through the camp.

At last, when the sky overhead was turning dark blue, Tanner reappeared from one of the huts and made his way over. He headed straight for Sam's, his ugly lieutenant towering at his heel.

"Oi!" Dean cried. "Don't you think it's time you fed us?" He indicated the huts with a jerk of his head, thinking that was probably where the cooking smells were coming from. "Humans have needs, you know." He'd tried to communicate with the lesser orcs earlier, but they'd merely gaped back at him stupidly, before nattering to each other and ignoring him.

Dean's attempt at interfering with Tanner's plans seemed successful. The demon changed course and stopped in front of Dean's cage. He bared his teeth in a smirk. "Trust me, Dean, you don't want to eat what's cooking."

"Why not?" Tanner was likely right; he probably didn't, but the demon didn't need to know that.

Tanner's grin widened unpleasantly. "Although they say it tastes like chicken...." He let his voice trail off.

Dean stared at the demon, for a minute not comprehending. Then understanding sank in, and nausea filled the hollow pit in his stomach. "You sonofabitch...!"

"They... eat *people*?" Dean wasn't sure if it was Tanner's comment or his own reaction that had made Hazel reach the same conclusion he had. Her tone was incredulous, but Dean could almost hear the thoughts whirring in her mind: *oh God, those hikers who disappeared earlier....*

Tanner took a step toward her cage. "Don't worry, sweetheart. Won't be your fate." He looked her up and down, his expression amused. "Not for a while at least. They," he gestured at the orcs that were gathering in a big group behind him, "have other desires than just food."

Hazel gaped back at Tanner, before darting a horrified glance at the nearby orcs. A visible shudder ran through her. Wrapping her arms around herself, she backed away toward the far end of the cage—which wasn't very far.

"Oh, you're so dead," Dean swore in Tanner's direction. If only he'd had the Colt... but that was probably somewhere in the ravages of what was left of Dad's tent, back at the camp.

Tanner didn't answer. He turned toward Sam instead. "So, Sam. Made up your mind yet?"

"Dean's contract?" Sam tried to pin Tanner with a glare, but it wasn't easy with the way he had to stoop to keep from hitting his head on the cage's low ceiling. Dean could see Tanner wasn't impressed.

"C'mon Sam." The demon shook his head, as if disappointed. "You know I can't tell you about that. Not yet."

From the other end of the row of cages a sudden roar of laughter rose, along with a frightened child's squeal.

Dean twisted around to see what was going on. The orcs had taken Wade out of his cage and were currently tossing him back and forth between them. Like the boy was a goddamn football, Dean thought, his brows lowering in anger.

Albert pushed himself against the bars, reaching through them with his arm as far as he could stretch. "You bastards, let my son go!" It was a futile gesture and, as they had done earlier, the orcs simply ignored him. But Dean had to admit the man was showing more spunk than he'd given him credit for.

Tanner had turned to watch as well, observing the orcs almost fondly. "They remind me of cats, sometimes," he commented mildly, the words addressed at nobody in particular, though Dean was quite sure it was meant for their ears. "The way they play with their food...."

Again, Wade was thrown into the air, and he let out another howl that only made the orcs guffaw more loudly.

"Tell them to stop." Sam's voice was low, but hard. "Tell them to stop, and I'll do what you want."

"Sam, no!" Dean whirled back to stare at Sam.

"This isn't your decision to make, Dean. It's mine." Sam sounded as determined as Dad used to once he'd made his mind up.

"Please...." Dean wasn't beyond a little begging. But it did as much good with Sam as it always had with their father. Which was to say, none at all.

Tanner shot Dean a triumphant look, before crossing to stand in front of Sam's cage. Sam waited for Tanner to unlock it and then stepped out. As he straightened up, Dean noticed how he towered over the demon and most of the orcs. Only the

big orc was of a height with him.

The orcs, seeing something was happening, stopped their game and surged up to Sam, a sea of black, their guttural voices gradually falling away. One of the beasts had Wade tucked under his arm, the boy wriggling in vain to be set free.

"Sam, dude...", Dean tried one last time. Was this it? Was this what Dad had warned him against, right before he died? Had Dean's suspicions been correct: had Sam come back different?

Sam ignored him. He stared at the crowd for a minute, before seeking the big orc's gaze. He held it steadily. After another minute, the brute lowered its head, mumbling something that sounded like, "Master." There was another second of hushed silence, and then the orcs exploded into a clamor, their cheers bouncing off the cliff walls as they rose up toward the sky, where the first of the stars were popping out.

Tanner's eyes were black as he watched the crowd, his lips curled back in a satisfied smirk. He caught Dean's gaze, and mouthed a quiet, "I win, you lose."

Dean looked away.

o0o

Dumbstruck and horrified, Dean watched while Sam let his gaze wander over the cheering crowd. "Sam!" he tried again. He didn't want to believe what he was seeing; it had to be one of his nightmares. Sam could *not* be doing this. Not... not for *real*.

He wasn't sure if Sam truly couldn't hear him over the din or if he was just pretending he couldn't. Either way, Dean received no acknowledgment that his plea had been heard.

At last, as the orcs ran out of breath, the clamor started to die down. "So," Tanner reached for Sam's elbow when he could be reasonably sure to be understood without having to raise his voice, "let's get you up to speed. There's work to be done."

Sam shook off the demon's grip. "Not so fast." He eyeballed the orc who was still holding Wade. "You looking for some entertainment?" Sam's voice was deceptively soft. Dean's eyes narrowed. He knew that tone: Sam was up to something. But whether it was anything good....

The orc tilted his head, darting a quick glance at its neighbors before looking back at Sam. It nodded a little uncertainly and grunted something that to Dean sounded

like, "Want sport."

Sam smiled, slowly. "Then I'll give you sport." The orcs tittered excitedly and Dean spared a moment to consider that the damned things apparently *did* understand English. "Real sport," Sam continued. He wiggled a hand. "Not this child's play. Put the boy back in the cage. And you," he turned toward the big orc standing half behind Tanner, "get my brother out."

"Sam, what—?" Dean couldn't finish the question, because the orc had already reached in and hauled him out of the cage by the rope around his neck. Dean pulled in a rasping breath as he was set back on his feet in front of Sam, half-choked.

"What are you doing?" Tanner seemed as much at a loss about Sam's intentions as Dean was.

"A hunt." Sam spared the demon a glance. "A *real* hunt. Give me your knife."

"Ooh...." Tanner let out a long sound. He appeared to have caught on to Sam's plan. "You surprise me, Sam." He grinned. "I thought you wanted your brother to *survive*." He snickered, offering Sam his knife, hilt first, and Sam quickly cut through the rope around Dean's neck. Dean couldn't stop himself from rubbing at his throat as the blasted thing fell away. He tried to catch Sam's gaze, hoping to read his brother's intentions, but Sam had already turned away, back to Tanner.

Why would Sam do this? He must realize Dean could outsmart the orcs: he'd had the same training as Dean; Dad had seen to that. And Sam should know that Dean wouldn't rest until he'd stopped Sam, kept him from doing what he was about to do.

"Dean's pretty good at this." Sam didn't hand the knife back to Tanner but instead slipped it into his belt. Tanner glanced down at it, but didn't comment. "And if he's not good enough...." Sam shrugged. "Then I guess he was supposed to die anyway, no matter what I do. Either way, I don't want him around for this. And it gives me a chance to test my new... army at the same time." Dean wasn't sure anyone but him would have picked up on the slight hesitation in Sam's voice. He wondered what it meant. It sounded as if Sam might not be so sure of his chosen path as he appeared....

Sam raised his voice, addressing the orc crowd. "Pay attention now." He gave Dean a push, hard enough that Dean had to take a step toward the crowd to keep his balance. "I'm gonna let Dean go." A puzzled murmur rose among the orcs, and a discontented grumble from the big one. "Five minutes. And then...." Sam paused, letting the suspense rise. "The hunt is on!" The orcs were quiet for a heartbeat, processing Sam's words. Then another storm of approval burst from them.

Sam turned back to Dean. "Five minutes, Dean." For the first time since he'd told Tanner he'd agree to lead the orc army, Sam looked straight at Dean. "And remember: the best hunt is human...." Sam made sure he caught Dean's gaze and held it.

It took Dean half a second to figure out what Sam was referring to: that bunch of rednecks in Minnesota, the ones who'd been kidnapping people and hunting them down for generations. Relief so strong it made his knees go weak surged through him. He'd been an idiot to ever think Sam would turn; it was all part of a plan. He gave Sam a barely perceptible nod. *Gotcha, Sammy.*

"You're wasting time." Sam shoved him again, this time in the direction of the forest at the end of the canyon. Not needing any further encouragement, Dean loped off at a run, the orcs jeering him on. As he plunged into the undergrowth, he heard Sam's voice. "Whoever brings me his head has first choice of meat tonight." If possible, the orcs shouted even louder at that.

*Sheesh, Sam,* Dean muttered under his breath, clambering across the hillside as fast as he dared in the dark. Like those goddamn freaks weren't gunning for his blood enough already.

oOo

Some two hours later, Dean was doubling back toward the ravine. The orcs were somewhere off to his left, their guttural voices echoing in the silence of the night. He grinned to himself. They were vicious, he knew, but they weren't overly smart. Especially not without Tanner or the big orc to lead them. It had been simple enough to lead them on a twisting chase through the forest—up and down hilly slopes, across narrow streams, and with time to lay false trails for them to follow—without them ever getting close. A few times, by the sound of it, his hunters had even come to blows among themselves while arguing over which way to go. That certainly had made Dean's job easier.

At the sound of a branch snapping somewhere ahead of him, Dean froze and crouched in the bushes. It wouldn't do to let his guard down now. A moment later, however, he relaxed and shoved the branches aside to step out onto the deer trail.

Emma let out a gasp of shock at his sudden appearance, and Sam's hand shot down to the knife still lodged in his belt.

"Dude, put the pig sticker away."

But Sam had already realized it was Dean and let his hand drop. For an instant, Dean thought Sam was going to make a grab for him to hug him. Thankfully,

though, he just grinned, teeth white, relief in his expression. There was a fresh smear of blood on his cheek. Dean's brow furrowed when he spotted it as Sam turned his head.

"You're—you're alive?" Albert stammered, disbelieving. Even in the white moonlight that filtered through the canopy, Dean thought the man's pallor was unhealthy. He didn't know if it was from the shock of seeing him again or a reaction to everything that had happened. "How...?"

Dean resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He shrugged. "Nothing to it." Dad's escape-and-evade lessons had certainly paid off. He looked back at Sam. "You could've warned me, though."

"Couldn't." Sam, instantly understanding what Dean was referring to, shook his head. "Tanner needed to believe it was real." He shot Dean a meaningful look. "You're not that good an actor, Dean."

Dean glanced away, guiltily. Sam was right; he *had* believed Sam had turned. He cleared his throat. "Did you get it?" He wasn't even sure himself if he meant the information Sam had been after or the demon itself. He left it for Sam to decide how to answer.

"No." Sam paused. "The big orc's taken care of." From the way his fingers touched the hilt of the knife, Dean knew how. "Tanner's dead, too."

"Black smoke came from his mouth," Danny piped up. "And then the bad man fell down."

Tanner's meat suit, abandoned; Duane Tanner had likely been dead for a while, probably since before Dean had met him in Rivergrove. But not the demon; Dean understood that from Danny's description. Sam's small nod confirmed it: Croatoan was still out there, to rain pestilence and disease down upon humanity.

Somewhere off to the south, Dean could still hear the orcs shouting at one another. "We gotta go." Nothing they could do about that demon now.

"Wait." Sam's hand on his arm stopped Dean from turning on the trail.

"What?"

"We'll never make it. Not with them," Sam jerked his head in the direction the shouts had come from, "still running loose."

Dean cocked his head to listen. The orcs were at least half a mile away. But—he glanced at the group of refugees. They were looking at him and Sam as if expecting

them to have all the answers. And Sam had a point; with no sleep, no food, and the kids still looking scared shitless, they weren't exactly in the best position for a long, hard, stealthy hike back through the forest.

"We need to stop them," Hazel added, as if Dean needed further convincing. "After what they did..." She swallowed, and Dean knew she was thinking back to what they'd learned about the orcs' diet and the other things Tanner had alluded to. He didn't disagree with her, but what did she expect him to do about it?

"You take everyone back," Sam waved in the direction of the group, "and I'll handle the orcs."

"What? No." Dean grabbed Sam as he was about to plunge into the brush, as if their course of action had already been decided. "You're not going back there. Not alone." He glanced at Hazel. "Hazel can get the others out." She hesitated, then gave Dean an uncertain nod.

Sam shook off Dean's hand and walked a few paces away. Dean followed him. "Look," Sam said, his voice low, "I'll be okay. They—."

Dean scoffed. "They believe you're their Anti-Christ, yes, I got that. How long d'you think you can keep up that charade? I'm coming with you."

Sam puffed up his cheeks. "I won't be able to stop them from killing you a second time."

"So?" Dean shrugged. "I'm gonna be dead in a year anyway. At least, this way, I can take as many with me as I can."

Sam barked a humorless laugh. "Did you even count them? There's no way we can get all of them. Barring an act of God, like... like a forest fire."

Dean scuffed a toe at the mossy ground underfoot. It was damp under the trees. "Not much chance of starting a fire." He didn't like to admit it, but Sam was right about the numbers. Then again, he didn't know what else they could do. They had no guns, no weapons and one measly knife between them. And if they went back to the camp to get their weapons, the orcs might've disappeared before they could return. Assuming, of course, they even got that far with the Giffords in tow without getting caught first.

"I have an idea."

Startled, Dean looked up as Hazel walked toward them, her expression uncertain. Behind her, the Giffords huddled together, frightened and confused. Dean pulled his gaze back to Hazel. "You know how to start a fire in this?" He again toed the

damp moss.

"No!" The force of her denial took Dean aback a bit. She gave a slight shrug. "No fire. You can't control it. It could get out of hand too easily. There was—" She stopped what she was about to say, shaking her head. "Never mind. But there's an ice sheet on the slope of Boston Glacier that looks about ready to come down. We've been monitoring it for a while."

"And?" Dean quirked an eyebrow.

"We could create an avalanche."

"Doesn't that require explosives?" Sam sounded dubious.

"Yes, probably." Hazel nodded. "There's an abandoned silver mine not far from the glacier. Tunnels've been closed up and the area's off limits, but there's likely some old dynamite left somewhere." She peered up at them, the moonlight reflecting in her eyes. "I don't think it'd take much of a shockwave to make the ice let go."

"Great," Dean muttered. Old dynamite would be unstable, a bitch to work with. Yet, it was the best plan he'd heard so far. Better than suicide-by-orc.

"There's a catch, though." Hazel's determined air faltered and she hesitated.

"Someone needs to make sure the orcs are in the path of the avalanche." Sam caught on before Dean did.

She blew a few strands of hair from her face. "Yes. Or it won't make a lick of difference."

"I'll get them there." Sam nodded sharply "How long do you need?"

"Whoa, hang on. Why you?" Dean reckoned he could lure those orcs into position just as well as Sam. Wasn't leading orcs around by their ugly noses what he'd been doing for the past few hours?

Sam shot him a look. "How much time?"

"From here?" Hazel's attention turned inward as she did some quick calculations. "Three hours. Four, tops."

Sam turned to Dean. "You can't keep them busy for another four hours." Dean opened his mouth to object, but Sam added, "I can." Dean thought he didn't need to look so smug about it. And though he didn't like it one bit, he had to admit defeat. The orcs were likely to tire of the game before he got them into the right



place. Certainly before it was time.

"How are you gonna get away?" Dean protested, a last weak attempt to change Sam's mind.

"I'll think of something." Sam turned back to Hazel. "Tell me where to be."

She sketched a quick map on the damp ground with a stick. "This is Boston Glacier. It's over there, to the north-west of here. Once you get to the top of this hill, you can't miss it." She drew another line in the dirt. "This is the ice sheet. Once we set it off, it should come down... here." She jammed the point of her stick into the earth. "That's where those things need to be."

"They'll be there," Sam assured her. "Four hours from now." He glanced up at Dean, a world of meaning in his look, and wordlessly offered Dean the knife.

"What's that?" Dean demanded, not taking it.

"Take it." Sam shoved the knife at him, hilt first. "You might need it."

"Oh, and you don't?" Did he really need to remind Sam he'd be facing a few dozen murderous man-eaters?

Sam shrugged. "What's one knife gonna do if they turn on me?"

Dean swallowed, hard. "Dude...." Dean wasn't given to chick flick displays, but dammit, this could be the last time he saw his brother alive. He offered Sam a grin that was meant to be encouraging but he reckoned more probably resembled a sickly grimace, and accepted the knife reluctantly.

Sam nodded, understanding Dean's silent plea. "See you back at the camp." Without a backward glance, he set off into the underbrush, heading toward the orcs.

oOo

Dean kept on staring at the spot where Sam had stepped into the brush long after his brother disappeared from view. Hazel cleared her throat, softly. "Dean...?"

Dean shook himself. "Yeah." They had work to do. "Where to?"

She pointed north, where towering mountains shimmered against the starry sky, their outlines barely visible through the dense trees tops. "It's a hard hike to the mine."

Dean nodded. He was tired, hungry and longing for nothing more than a motel room with a soft bed and a coin-operated Magic Fingers machine to work out the kinks. Instead, he found himself faced with more uphill hiking. Well, Dean called himself to order, it couldn't be helped. Plenty of time for rest later.

His gaze fell on the Gifford family, clumped together a little further down the path, and he swore under his breath. He'd flat forgotten about them. He dipped his head in their direction, keeping his voice low. "What do we do with them?" One look at Albert Gifford and his kids was enough for Dean to know they'd never make it to the mine with him and Hazel.

And he needed Hazel to come with him to show him the mine and where to plant the dynamite.

Hazel pondered the family for a moment. "Come on," she waved for them to follow her as she turned to continue on along the deer track. "There's an old trail a little further on. That should take you back to camp."

Dean wasn't entirely sure that Albert could manage to get his kids back, even with the aid of a trail, but they didn't have much choice.

Ten minutes later, Hazel stopped. She waved Albert over, and pointed. "There. It's an old track, not much used, and badly marked. But you should be able to follow it." Albert looked dubiously at the overgrown path, barely recognizable as a trail.

"I, um...."

From far off, the clamour of the orcs suddenly swelled, their cries dully echoing through the still forest. Dean tilted his head, listening. Sounded like Sam had found them—or they'd found Sam. He just hoped his brother's control was as tight as Sam believed it was.

Albert darted a frightened look in the direction of the noise. Then, to Dean's surprise, he squared his shoulders and swallowed, hard. "I—I can do it." His voice shook. He glanced back at his children. "I have to."

Dean wished he could give the man the knife Sam had given him, but he knew he couldn't. He and Hazel might need it more. A knife wasn't the greatest tool to dig holes or set charges, but it was sharp steel; in a pinch, it could be used for a lot of things its makers had never intended. So, instead, he clapped the man's shoulder lightly, in silent support.

"If you do lose the trail," Hazel instructed Albert, "keep going north-east. You'll hit the main trail at some point for sure. Then turn left."

"North-east...." Some of the earlier doubt crept back into Albert's voice.

Dean saw Hazel bite her lip, and he could tell she was growing impatient. "You know how to find the North Star?" he asked. Not that they had a very good view of the sky at this particular point, but the forest wasn't this dense everywhere, and if they lost the trail, they should still be able to find a clearing.

"I can!" Emma blinked shyly as everyone turned in her direction, but she held her ground. "We learned about that in school." She flapped her hands. "The Big Dipper is easy, and once you find that, the North Star isn't hard."

Hazel grinned at her, relieved. "That's right." She turned back to Albert. "So, remember, north-east, until you hit the main track, then left."

Albert nodded, grimly. He made to start off, then stopped. "Good luck."

"You too." Dean watched them go, wondering if he'd ever learn whether they made it.

oOo

While the sounds of the Gifford family trekking down the old trail gradually faded away, Dean followed Hazel as she led him in the other direction, further up the mountain. She had a knack for finding animal tracks that went the right way, so the going wasn't as hard as it might've been otherwise. The forest around them had grown still; even the voices of the orcs had died in the distance. The only sounds Dean heard were the hoot of a night bird far off, the rustle of the canopy overhead, and the soft tread of their boots on the ground.

They walked in silence, Hazel only speaking to warn him about loose rocks or rebounding branches. At one point, she slipped on the steep slope, her boot sole not getting a good enough grip on the mossy forest floor. Dean caught her and steadied her just before she fell. "Thanks," she muttered, not immediately pulling away but taking a moment to catch her breath.

Dean mumbled something in reply. He had his arms full of pretty girl, but he couldn't seem to get happy about it. Instead, he was cold, hungry, exhausted, and worried sick about Sam. Every time he thought about his brother, alone among a bunch of murdering beasts, fear surged through him. And although common sense told him there had been no alternative, he kept wondering why he had let Sam go off by himself.

"How much further?" he asked, after Hazel had regained her balance and set off again, cautiously testing the ground before putting her weight down.

"Not much." She pointed up. "See that overhang?"

Dean followed where her finger was aiming. "Yeah." With surprise, he realized he could see much further in the dark forest than before, and it dawned on him that sunrise was approaching.

"The mine entrance is right under it."

He glanced at his watch—thankfully, the orcs hadn't taken it when they'd taken his knife and other tools. He frowned; they had less than two hours left before Sam would bring the orcs to the agreed-upon location and expect him and Hazel to set off an avalanche.

"Let's keep going."

Although the ledge had looked close, it took them another ten minutes to climb the last section of the hill, the slope rising up almost vertically until it flattened out in a plateau. The entrance of the mine was hard to miss: a gaping maw of black in the cliff that reared up at the far side of the plateau. At some point in the past, the opening had been blocked by a wooden barrier, but the planks had long since disintegrated.

Dean eyed the entrance, filled with doubt. That tunnel looked like it might collapse any second. And Hazel expected to find old dynamite left by the miners? It seemed mission impossible.

"Coming?" Hazel was already making a beeline for the mine.

"Sure." Dean set off after her. Mission impossible or not, they didn't have any choice.

The tunnel was dark and dank and, Dean sniffed, smelled like something had died in here not long ago. Behind them, the outside world was still visible as a lighter gray square; ahead, everything was pitch black. Dean waved a hand in front of his face, sensing more than seeing the movement. He dearly wished for the penlight he'd normally carry on a job like this.

"Careful." Hazel warned him as Dean took another cautious step. "I think the supports are rotted."

Dean scowled at her, although he knew she couldn't see him. Besides, she meant well. If they did bump into one of the support struts, they were likely to bring the ceiling down.

Abruptly, the darkness was pushed back a little by a faint, greenish glow, and he

could make out Hazel again, weird shadows playing across her face. It seemed as if the glow came from her left hand. Then he understood: Hazel's watch, like his, came equipped with a small light, designed to make out the time in the dark. In here, with no light at all, the backlight glow seemed as bright as if someone had turned on a spotlight. "Good thinking." He grinned back at her, admiringly.

He pressed the tiny button on his own watch, now even more grateful that the orcs, or Tanner, hadn't deemed their watches enough of a potential weapon to take them away. He only hoped the battery had enough juice to last until they'd done what they'd come to do. "After you." He was happy to let Hazel lead them deeper into the tunnels. She seemed to know what she was doing, and this had been her idea, after all.

But after they'd turned several corners, and the air had grown even more stale and suffocating, Dean began to despair they'd ever find what they needed. They'd come across some dented buckets with holes rusted through the bottom, a handleless pick-ax and the skeleton of a some small rodent, the bones eerily white in the ghostly glow of their watch lights. But they hadn't found any explosives.

"I don't think there's any dynamite here." He kept his voice low, afraid even the vibrations as his words echoed off the walls might set off a collapse. "And we're running out of time. We'll have to find another way to bring that ice down."

"I don't know that we can," Hazel whispered back.

"I thought you said it was about to let go?"

"Yes, but it's not that simple. It's still—What's that?" She pointed toward where the tunnel ahead widened slightly. On one side, a pile of boxes had been stacked, the wood cracked and slowly turning to sawdust.

Dean stared at them, hardly believing things might actually be going their way for once. He could still make out the words stenciled on the crates, though the lettering had faded, and was missing entirely in a number of places: *Danger. Explosives.*

"The jackpot," he muttered, answering Hazel's question as he brushed past her and knelt in front of the crates. Cautiously lifting a lid that threatened to dissolve into splinters in his hands, he discovered it was half full of dirty brownish sticks.

They'd found their dynamite.

"How big an explosion do we need?" Dean was careful not to touch the sticks or jar the crates.

"If set in the right place, not very big." Hazel leaned over him, and he shoved her back, a little more roughly than he intended.

"Don't touch it!"

"Sorry." She sounded subdued. "Anyway...." She paused a moment. "Somewhere between five to eight pounds?" She waved a hand. "At least, that's what they usually use to trigger snow avalanches in winter."

"This isn't loose snow," Dean reminded her.

"No...." She shrugged, helplessly. "I'm sorry, I don't really know. I do think we need to set off more than one charge, in two different places, to make sure enough of the ice breaks off."

Dean quickly calculated how many of the sticks he'd need. The dynamite looked to be standard issue, so between fifteen and twenty sticks. Well, that was twenty sticks more than he was comfortable with. The explosives were old enough that the dynamite was weeping, and he could see the nitro glistening on its surface. "You should get out of here," he told Hazel. There was no need for both of them to risk their lives.

"I'm not letting you do this alone," she objected.

He twisted around so he could look at her. "Listen, this stuff is unstable as hell. Anything can set it off. I mean, *anything*."

"So what are you suggesting? I stay, like, a hundred yards away from you from now on?"

"Yes." He was dead serious as he glared at her. He wasn't about to let her get blown to smithereens without good reason.

"Dean, that's not possible." She didn't back down. "You need me. We still need to get that stuff up to the glacier and set the charges. And besides," the glow from her watch disappeared and for an instant he could no longer make out her face. Then she reactivated the backlight and he caught her slight smile, "you need someone to help you with the light."

Dean opened his mouth to argue some more, before he snapped it shut. He didn't like it, but she was right. They had to keep pushing the backlight button on their watches every few seconds to keep the damned things from going dark. And he'd need both his hands for the dynamite.

He sighed. "Okay." He gave her his watch, so she could operate both their watches

and double the amount of light. "But stay back."

Once he was sure she'd do as he told her, and not get any closer to the unpredictable dynamite than she had to, he turned back, surveying the rest of the crates. Dynamite alone wasn't enough; if they were going to set it off in a controlled way, they'd need blasting caps and fuses. Much to his relief, he found both among the abandoned supplies. Gathering up what he thought they'd need, he handed the caps and fuses to Hazel, and she stashed them away in the various pockets of her zip-off pants.

Returning to the box of explosives, Dean puffed out his cheeks. Now for the really fun part.... Gingerly putting aside some of the sticks that glistened the brightest, he tried to determine which ones seemed to be in better condition. It was like a deadly game of jackstraws: one false move could blow the whole mine sky high. Laying the sticks on a bandana Hazel offered him, Dean ignored the little voice in the back of his head that kept jabbering at him that this was a Very Bad Idea. The voice sounded a little like Sam's, mingled with Bobby's gruff tones.

Once he had twenty sticks of dynamite bundled together, he slowly started to inch back. "We're done here."

Hazel blew out some air, telling Dean she'd been as tense as he was. "Okay." The glow from the wristwatches wobbled, making the shadows dance and Dean guessed she was turning around in the tunnel. He hesitated.

Would the number of explosives be enough? Did Hazel know what she was talking about? Shaking his head, he added two more sticks to his collection. What they were doing was dangerous as hell, bordering on the insane, but if he did this, he'd better make damned sure he did it right. If he failed... Sam would pay the price.

oOo

The sun had risen above the treetops by the time they reached the place where Hazel said they should set off the explosions. It was a steep, grassy slope made soggy with meltwater that gathered in places into small streams. Boulders and small birches dotted the incline, but no larger trees. Dean suspected the area suffered avalanches each winter, the snows building up until they could no longer hold on to the rocks and ice.

The glacier itself towered above them, clinging precariously to the ravine out of which it oozed. Its dirty, centuries-old surface was transformed into a sheet of sparkling white and blue splendor by the sun but Dean could feel the cold come off of it in waves: this close to the ice, the air had taken on a chill that even the sun couldn't quite dispel.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Dean twisted his head to look at Hazel, spots dancing in his vision from the afterimage of the ice's glare. He shrugged. "I guess so." He wasn't really in the mood to see the beauty; all he saw was something that needed blowing up so the resulting destruction would kill a bunch of murderous beasts and save his brother's life. And—he tilted his wrist so he could take another peek at the watch Hazel had returned to him—they had less than half an hour to set things up.

"So, any clue where to put this?" With a dip of his head, he indicated the dynamite he was holding. The climb from the mine to the glacier had been a hair-raising hike, with Dean struggling to keep his balance with every step while trying not to jar the sticks as he'd clutched them tightly.

Hazel turned away from gazing up the mountain. "Um...." She hesitated. "There's a hairline crack in this outflow, up there."

Dean craned his neck and squinted into the glare again. He couldn't make out any crack—or rather, any specific crack she might mean in the pockmarked crusty ice—but he trusted she knew what she was talking about.

She moved a few paces away, head swiveling as she scrutinized the mountain side. "We need to set off a strong enough shockwave so that this section," she flapped her hand, "will let go completely."

"Okay." Dean knelt to put down the bundle of dynamite carefully on a flat rock, clear of the water gurgling downward, before straightening and following Hazel as she headed further up the slope, searching for locations to set off their charges. Glancing back at the sticks, he glared at them. He couldn't get rid of them soon enough.

Maybe...." Hazel turned on her heel. "Maybe one explosion over there." She indicated a cleft among the rocks. "And then the other somewhere like that on the other side. At about the same level." She pointed toward the far side of the glacier's snout.

Looking where she'd first pointed, Dean nodded. She'd picked a good spot. Sheltered by a pile of large boulders on the downhill side, the rift would force the main shockwave to travel up the mountain, toward the ice. If they could find a similar gully on the other side, they should be able to break off the ice and create the avalanche. Assuming the dynamite didn't fizzle, of course, Dean thought glumly.

"How do we get out of the way? Up, I guess?" He gestured with a hand to the rocky slope leading up from the side of the ice.



Hazel nodded. "Yeah. Up, but also out." She gave him a wry grin. "The further, the better."

"Right." Dean huffed a laugh in reply, before giving Hazel his knife, and instructing her how to cut the fuses to the desired lengths. Once he was sure she knew what was needed, he trotted back, boots squelching in the mud, to where he'd left the bundle of sticks. He collected half and made his way back toward the crevice. He was almost there when he stepped on a loose rock half-hidden in the grass. It twisted under his ankle and Dean wind-milled to keep his balance. Even as he steadied himself, one of the dynamite sticks slid from his grip.

"Watch out!" he had time to shout in Hazel's direction, before diving for the ground himself, mindful he was still holding a couple pounds of unstable dynamite in his hands that he didn't want to jar—or get wet, either.

But the braced-for explosion never came. After several seconds had passed, Dean cautiously raised his head. The dynamite had rolled further down the mountain until it had come to rest to the base of a sapling, glistening innocently.

Dean's heart was pounding against his ribs and his mouth was dry. He swallowed, pulling in a shuddering breath of air. "Sonofabitch." He realized he was shaking. "That was close."

"You okay?" Hazel had climbed back to her feet from where she'd ducked behind the boulders.

"Yeah." Willing himself to stop shaking, Dean continued on to deliver the bundle of sticks he was carrying to the blast site, before going back to collect the one he'd dropped. "You best get out of the way while I set these." The sun provided plenty of light for him to see by, and he didn't need her help with actually setting the charges. "Just leave the caps and fuses."

It was a few seconds before she agreed. "Okay."

Her quick agreement came as a bit of a surprise to Dean. He had expected her to object more, but perhaps the near miss had scared her more than he'd thought. It certainly had freaked *him* out.

Moving even more cautiously, Dean continued to set the charges. Luckily, there were no further mishaps, and it didn't take him very long until he was satisfied he'd placed the dynamite on both sides of the icy tongue as well as he could. He straightened after a final check. He'd had Hazel shorten the fuses on the one charge a little more than on the other, which would give him time to light both in sequence and then get the hell out of the way....

Even as he finished the thought, he cursed violently under his breath, abruptly remembering how the orcs had stripped them of just about anything useful. *Goddammit.* They had no matches, and the beasts had also taken his lighter. How the hell was he going to ignite the dynamite in the next—again, he glanced at the time—five minutes? Dad had taught him how to build a fire in the bush, but it had been a while, and those old tricks needed a lot longer than that.

For a moment, Dean was tempted to simply bang on the dynamite until it blew up. It'd kill him, of course, but it'd create at least one shockwave directed at the ice and, with a bit of luck, would jolt the second charge enough to make it go up as well.

"Dean?"

He turned, disheartened, at the sound of Hazel's voice behind him. Then he blinked, rapidly. She was holding out a thin, dry branch, with flames licking at its tip.

"You might need this." She smiled at him.

"How—?" He gaped.

She shrugged. "They don't let you go out here alone if you don't have a few survival skills. I just remembered we had no matches, or anything. So while you put the dynamite in place, I made a fire."

Dean grinned back at her. "You're incredible."

Her cheeks tinted a slight pink, the first sign of bashfulness he'd detected in her since they met.

He took the branch with a word of thanks and waited until she'd jogged back across the clearing and was clambering further up the slope, where they hoped to be out of the way of the avalanche, before touching the flame to the fuse ends. They took instantly. Without losing a moment, he ran over to the second charge. Here, the fuses took a second or two before they caught, long enough for him to start swearing at them.

Once they were lit, he dropped the branch and followed Hazel up the slope, clambering over rocks and crags as fast as he could, not caring how the rough stone cut up his hands. Silently, he counted down the seconds. "Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty." He threw himself flat to the ground, even as a loud thunder rolled through the mountains, echoing off the slopes around them, and a hot wind blew over him for an instant. Once it had passed, he twisted around, peering up at

the ice. For a long eternity, it seemed to be as firm and unmovable as it had when he first laid eyes on it.

"Why isn't it—?" he began, but then, so slowly Dean at first thought his eyes were deceiving him, a thin crack opened up in the ice.

"It's working." Hazel's whisper was nearly drowned out by a sharp *crack*, like a whip, and Dean saw the gap in the ice widen. Another *crack*, and then the bottom section of the ice tongue started to slide down, picking up speed as it went. Dean stared, open-mouthed, as a deluge of ice and rocks the size of pickup trucks tumbled by, taking everything in its path with it.

He didn't know how long it lasted—couldn't have been more than a couple minutes, he reckoned—but then the barrage was gone. He stared out across the slope, smooth where the avalanche had sheered off brush and saplings and boulders, and a few last bits of scree were still tumbling down. From further down, the landslide was sending up a dull rumble as it continued all the way to the bottom of the mountain.

"Holy cow," he breathed out. He hoped to God Sam had managed to get out of the way of *that*.

oOo

Once the rumble of the avalanche had faded into the distance, Dean and Hazel started the long trek back down the slope. Stumbling and tripping to go as fast as he could, Dean followed the path of the ice and rock slide, only veering off when the slope was too steep. He gaped at the destruction as he went, his fear rising with every step he took. There was no way anyone could've survived this. Not if they had been caught in the onslaught.

At last, he reached the bottom of the slope, where the avalanche had finally lost momentum and petered out, scattering rocks and splintered trees and large chunks of melting dirty ice across a wide half-circle. It looked like a bomb had gone off.

"Sam!" Dean shouted, scrabbling through the rubble, turning over broken branches and peering into cracks where rocks and blocks of ice lay tumbled together. "SAM!"

Skirting a pile of boulders and trees the size of a two-story house, he finally caught sight of his brother. Sam was standing at the edge of the destruction, staring out across it.

Dean called his name again and Sam turned at the sound of his voice. Dean hurried across to him and, as soon as he reached him, grabbed him by the shoulders, looking him over. "You okay?" Sam's clothes were torn and his hair was

coated with mud and pine needles, but he seemed otherwise unharmed.

"I'm fine." Sam didn't sound very fine to Dean; in fact, he sounded a little shell-shocked. But Dean didn't care: Sam was alive and—he quickly checked again for signs of blood, but found none—in one piece. "It was—," Sam's voice shook. "When I saw that wall of debris come down, I thought—."

"Sorry 'bout that." Hazel reached them and she must've overheard Sam's last words. "I didn't expect it to be this... this big." Her tone was awed. She wiped at her face with the back of her hand and blew her bangs from her face, before turning her gaze back up the mountain. The avalanche's path was clearly visible: a jagged line straight down the slope.

Dean let out a laugh. "Understatement." At one point, he'd thought maybe they'd brought down half the mountain. Looking up now, he realized they'd barely managed to make a dent in the icy mass. "Good job, though."

She shrugged as if to dismiss the compliment, but then grinned, clearly pleased, and he smiled back at her. He didn't want to think about how things might've turned out if she hadn't been with them.

Dean realized he was sweating, despite wearing nothing but the T-shirt he'd gone to sleep in. The sun had climbed higher as they'd searched for Sam, and it was a lot warmer down here in the valley than it had been up near the ice. But he had more important things to worry about than the heat. "Did it work?" he asked Sam.

Sam nodded. "The orcs were—." He swallowed. "I told them to wait here, and they.... They just did. Didn't even move when that rockslide came down."

Dean gave him a sharp look. Was there regret in Sam's voice? "So, you're saying we got them?" He wanted to be absolutely sure that nobody else would ever end up in an orc cook pot. "All of them?"

Sam gestured with a hand. "See for yourself."

Dean looked at where Sam had indicated. It was only now that he noticed the crumpled, broken bodies strewn among the debris. "Huh." He couldn't help but feel gratified about that after everything the orcs had put them through. He sure as hell wasn't feeling any regrets.

He caught movement among the debris, a black limb shifting weakly. Dean pressed his lips together in irritation. One of the orcs had managed to survive. Leaving Sam and Hazel, he clambered toward it, pulling out his knife, ready to finish the job. Yellow eyes blinked up at him, more confused than vicious, and Dean instantly knew no further action on his part would be needed.

With its last breath, the orc tried to speak, a guttural croak from the back of his throat. Dean shook his head. "Save it. Whatever it is, I don't care."

The orc's chest heaved a final time, and then the confused look in its eyes turned dull. Shaking his head, Dean wound his way back to Sam and Hazel without a backward glance. "Let's get the hell out of here."

oOo

Much to their relief, they found the Giffords at the campsite; Albert had managed to get his family back safe and sound. He let out a sigh of relief at the news that the orcs had been destroyed. "Thank the Lord."

Dean grimaced; God had had very little to do with it, in his view. Hazel had come up with the plan, and they'd gotten lucky with the dynamite. But he didn't say anything. The man had only been trying to rebuild his family and he'd certainly hadn't deserved the crap he'd found himself in.

Besides, it didn't really matter who'd done what. What mattered was that the orcs were dead and they'd all survived. He'd worry about everything else later. Like his brother, and their future.... He glanced over at Sam, holding up what Dean recognized after a moment as the tattered remains of their father's tent. It was beyond salvaging after the orcs had torn it up. Sam looked a little sad as he bundled it up and stashed it in one of the camp's garbage containers. Dean thought he knew what Sam was thinking: it was another link to their father that was gone.

It wasn't one he was particularly sad to see go, though; Dad had left them more important things than that old tent. Like his journal and—Dean grunted happily when he discovered the Colt among the clothes and sleeping bags strewn about. He'd *really* have hated losing that. At first glance, the old gun seemed to have survived okay and Dean stashed it in his belt at his back. He'd give it a thorough cleaning later.

Soon, they'd collected what belongings they could salvage and everyone was trudging back along the trail to the parking lot at Colonial Creek. Hazel and Albert Gifford were discussing if and how much they should tell anyone about their adventures.

"I guess we should report this to... to the authorities?" Albert sounded dubious even as he made the suggestion.

Sam quietly suggested they didn't.

"But—," Albert objected.

Dean privately rolled his eyes; the man was such a goody two shoes.

Hazel voiced what they were all thinking. "Nobody would believe us."

Dean tuned them out, no longer listening to the rest of the discussion, and flicked a hand at a pesky fly that buzzed around his face. He couldn't wait to get out of here and back to the civilized world. Lukewarm showers, lumpy beds and cheese burgers had never seemed so appealing.

He really hated camping.

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