Batcave Avengers (or, How Dean Winchester Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Fandom)

by snarklyboojum

Summary

The last time Dean had gone to a comic convention he’d wanted to kill everyone there. This time he was freaking Captain America.

Notes

This was written for the SPN Reverse Bang for a prompt by the wonderful lighththesparks. The original art as well as some more great stuff can be seen here. Her art can also be seen in the dividers below.

See the end of the work for more notes.

Inspired by Batcave Avengers by lighththesparks

Dean wasn’t sure what to call the noise Charlie made after she leaned over Kevin’s shoulder to look at his laptop screen, only that it was followed by the distinct slap of her hands shooting up to cover her mouth. Kevin slammed the screen shut before Sam could lean over for a peek, but the damage
was already done; Charlie was nodding and breathing noisily through her fingers, her eyebrows so high they disappeared behind her bangs.

Kevin looked like he was willing a hole in the ground to open up and drop him into an alternate dimension – which reminded Dean that he really should do something about the crack he’d found on level three of the bunker before someone fell into it. Locking the door and writing ‘do not enter giant vortex room’ on a post-it stuck to the handle wasn’t exactly foolproof security, especially with four of them staying there now.

Dean frowned, watching the arch of Kevin’s shoulders try to swallow his ears. “Jeeze, Kev. That doesn’t look like you were researching the angel tablet. What the hell, man?”

Kevin narrowed his eyes at Charlie, who was damn near vibrating off her chair. “I was researching. I just needed a break and was browsing the internet, that’s all. It’s geek stuff, leave it alone.”

Dean snorted and shared a look with Sam across the table. He knew they’d only just met when Charlie moved in the other day, but Kevin really had no clue what he was dealing with there. Looking at ‘geek stuff’ on the internet around Charlie was like waving a red flag at a bull and then wrapping it around a sexy naked lady. And come to think of it, that was a fantastically accurate image. Assuming the bull didn’t charge first and just got really into it instead. Which… was a tangent Dean’s brain needed to save for another time when his quasi-family wasn’t sitting around with the remnants of breakfast around the map table.

He blinked a few times to get back on track. Charlie was bouncing – honest to god bouncing, what the hell – and fanning her hands in the air around her cheeks. He hadn’t even seen her this excited after The Hobbit trailer leaked.

He blinked again, harder this time. “Damn, Kevin. What the hell kind of porn were you watching?”

Kevin thumped his forehead against the table. When he raised his head again his cheeks were significantly pinker than before. “I wasn’t watching porn, okay? God!”

Well, he’d sure been watching something and it was enough to push Charlie into spasms. She took a deep breath and snatched the laptop away from Kevin faster than he could protest, flipping the screen back up. “No, but this is so much better than porn! Kevin, you’re a genius. We have to go.”

Better than porn? Dean gave up finishing the newspaper he’d been reading and set it down over his empty coffee cup. Across from him Sam was doing the same, eyebrows raised. What could be better than porn? “Uh. BOGO burgers at the In-N-Out?”

Sam rolled his eyes at Dean and leaned back from the map table until his chair creaked, but Charlie was still too far away for him to see what she was looking at no matter how much the ginormous idiot stretched.

Kevin tried to wrestle his computer back from where she’d pushed her way to the keyboard and was typing furiously. “Give it back, Charlie, they won’t understand.”

She elbowed him viciously and smirked in triumph when he curled in on himself. “Oh, yes they will. Trust me; this is right up their alley.”

And that’s when warning bells started going off. Metaphorically speaking, anyway; the red lights in the corners had been quiet since he and Sam had first turned the lights on.

Sam let the chair legs hit the tile with a loud clack, finally drawing her attention away from the computer. “What’s going on, Charlie?”
She tapped a final time on the keyboard and spun the laptop with a flourish. “Planet Comicon is happening not five hours from here next month.”

And, yeah, those weren’t warning bells Dean was hearing. They were full-on hurricane sirens. “A comic convention? Yeah, that’s not gonna happen.”

Sam was shaking his head, too. “Not a chance, Charlie. You can’t pay me to sit through that level of crazy again.”

“Bet I could. And why not? You guys loved LARPing. You led the charge against the Shadow Orcs.” Charlie’s shoulders were curling inward, a little wrinkle emerging between her eyebrows. Her chin quivered. (Dean hadn’t seen that in someone over ten since Sam got cursed and lost his shoe that one time.) She looked at Dean, raised a fist for him to bump, and the look on her face when he didn’t made him want to cry. “But… handmaiden?”

Kevin snorted – and there was the self-satisfied smirk Dean was really starting to hate. He cleared his throat, trying to force down the blush he could feel blooming in his cheeks. “We’ve been to a convention before, ok? They’re full of weirdoes who dress up and – and talk about buttsex all day. We’ve got more important things to worry about.”

“They all frowned down at their hands. Kevin’s gloom swelled and filled the very edges of the map room, and a deeper silence settled like dust. Dean rustled his newspaper around a little; the scratch of it over the table seemed louder than it should have been. Then Charlie straightened from her slouch and took a deep breath. “We do.”

She pulled the laptop close and started typing again, her fingers clacking angrily on the keyboard. “We’re not gonna be able to save anything if we burn out before we get the chance to fight. I mean, look at Kevin! Look at him!”

“Thanks.” Kevin frowned and slid off the table, leaning back in his chair. Dean had to admit the kid looked like shit.

Charlie clearly agreed. “No offense, but those are some quality Prada handbags under your eyes, man. And, Sam, you’re not much better.”

Sam smoothed his hand through his hair, pushing it flatter against his skull. Since the first trial it’d been a little greasier than usual, a little thinner. He sighed and slumped until he was eye-level with Kevin. Dean could feel the waves of empathy pouring out of him from across the table. “Charlie’s right. You need a break, Kevin, we all do. The pills, the insomnia. It's not healthy. Hell, you ate one of Dean’s burgers yesterday.”

“Hey, what’s wrong with my burgers?” He thought they’d been heaven on a bun, actually; ground angus with little pieces of bacon and colby jack mixed into the patties. Delicious. Sam had eaten three.

His brother held up his hands and stuck out his lower lip, the universal gesture for don’t blame me, dude. “Nothing, they’re awesome. But, Kevin, you were a vegetarian when we met. Now you’re eating anything we put in front of you. What’s up with that?”

Kevin shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “What I eat doesn’t matter. I can’t afford to be picky about
something like that anymore, not when I’ve got angels and demons after me.”

Charlie covered his hand with hers, smiling. “You’re not on the run now. And there’s three weeks until the convention starts. We still have plenty of time to research the trials and kill bad things. Think of this as a reward. Something to look forward to, like a vacation. What’s the point of saving the world if you’re not going to live in it?”

He pulled his hand away, letting her palm fall against the table. "We can’t just drop everything to go play for a weekend! People’s lives are at stake."

“People’s lives are always at stake.” It was only when Dean felt eyes on him that he realized he was the one talking. Usually he kept thoughts like that on the inside, but this one had just slipped right out there. Everyone was staring at him now, varying stages of disbelief and sympathy mingled on their expressions. To hell with it.

He met Kevin’s eyes and realized how red they were, and how little sleep it meant he’d probably not been getting. “The LARPing thing happened because Charlie was in danger, okay? But it turned out to be awesome. I mean, normally I’m the first one to say play through the pain but this isn’t a sprint anymore, Kevin. It’s a marathon. And we can’t make the finish line if we’re running on fumes.”

Kevin shoved away from the table, nostrils flaring wide. “You don’t you get it, do you? This isn’t about me, or you, or anything other than stopping those sons of bitches and giving them what they deserve!”

“Yeah well, maybe it should be about you for once, you ever think about that? Now sit down.” Kevin hovered in place for a minute, wavering on his feet but glowering determinedly. Dean glared right back. “I said sit down.”

Kevin collapsed back in his chair, the heavy wood scraping on the tile. He looked away, sulking, and Dean realized for the first time since they’d met him that Kevin was still actually a teenager. “I’m going to wind up staying here anyway. The minute I step into a public place Crowley’s gonna sic his lackey’s on me.”

“We’ll think of something.”

Tension shimmered between them for a minute until Sam cleared his throat and tentatively asked exactly what it was they were getting into with the whole… convention thing. It occurred to Dean – a tad belatedly – that he’d just argued himself into something he actually didn’t want to do. Conventions. Like the nerd version of purgatory. Two men enter, one man leave, and all that crap.

Charlie shifted in her seat. “I know you had a bad experience once, but cons are great, guys, you’ll see. I don’t know where you got the butt thing from, that’s usually something you save for Strip Mario Kart in the hotel afterward—“

Uh. Wait, strip what?

“—but aside from that it’s pretty standard stuff. There’s all kinds of exclusive things for sale, free goodie bags, movie showings, guest appearances, presentations, cosplay, creator Q&A. Each con’s a little different. The list goes ever onward.”

“Uh-huh. And what list are we looking at for this one?”

Charlie tapped the mouse pad and waited for the page to load. “Um… well, there’s actually a lot of really cool people that are scheduled to show up. They got Margot Kidder, John Ratzenberger, LeVar Burton, Scott Snyder – ooh, Jewel Staite’s gonna be there, I love Kaylee – um, the guy who
played Chewbacca, that’s cool. And a bunch of random no-names, like Jason David Frank, Bruce Timm, Eric Kripke, Steve Bacic—“

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Dean was out of his seat before he even knew he’d meant to stand. And then he had to sit down again right away before his legs gave out. “Steve Bacic is coming? The Steve Bacic?”

Charlie flicked a glance between Sam and Kevin, who both shrugged. “Uh, yeah. Who’s Steve Bacic?”

God, Dean’s heart was pounding. Was he having a heart attack? A panic attack? Holy shit, how could everybody else not be freaking out? “Steve Bacic. Dr. Sexy, MD. The Dr. Sexy. The real one, not Gabriel in a lab coat.”

Holy shit. Steve Bacic. Dean was going to be in the same room as the actor who played Dr Sexy!

“Um,” Kevin said, looking concerned. “Should I go get a paper bag for him to breathe in?”

Sam shook his head and smiled tightly. “He’ll be fine.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad Dean’s on board with the trip and all, but why would a soap opera actor be invited to a comicon?” Charlie was typing again; Dean could hear the clacking in-between the deep breathing he was forcing himself to do. He was starting to feel stupid and a little lightheaded, but seriously. Steve Bacic. Could he be blamed?

He took a final breath in and tried to at least pretend he had it together. “It’s not a soap opera,” he protested. “It’s a serial drama.”

“Which translates to soap opera,” Sam smirked, the traitor.

Charlie’s face was falling the more she read on the computer. Dean made a mental note to work on her bluff; that girl had no poker face whatsoever. “It looks like he’s advertising a new show. It’s getting a lot of buzz on the internet. Tumblr’s practically frothing at the mouth.” She took a deep breath and hit the back button a couple times. Yet again, Dean had no idea what she was actually talking about. “So! There’s, uh. Huh. There’s a costume competition. We could do that. Hell, we could win.”

“Costumes? Do we have to?”

Charlie nodded, meeting Sam’s gaze with a little frown. “Cosplay’s a must, gentlemen. It’s half the fun. But who should we dress up as? I mean, obviously it has to travel across generations considering who we’re dealing with here—“

“Hey!” Oh, she did not just call Dean old.

“- and it needs to be a group, something popular. And cool, otherwise what’s the point?” Her eyes grew round and she sucked in a breath. Dean leaned back a little in case there was a chance the flaily hands would make a reappearance. “Oh! Oh, it’s perfect! We could go as the Avengers!”

Sam frowned. “Movie Avengers, comic Avengers, or British Avengers?”

“Movie Avengers, duh. This is gonna be so awesome! I have this seamstress friend who works out of LA – she totally owes me for throwing the Moondor contract her way. I’m sure her company can produce something decent given the time limit. I’ll just send her an email and we’ll be set.” Charlie’s fingers flew over the keyboard again (Dean never figured out how people could type so quickly
without watching their fingers) and Kevin threw his hands up with a sigh, obviously giving up hope of getting his computer back in the near future. "Bee tee dubs, I call dibs on Black Widow. She’s badass and a redhead, I have to play her. And I’ll finally have an excuse to wear a catsuit in public."

She needed an excuse? In Dean’s opinion, the more catsuits the better. “And she’s also a chick, so I doubt you’ll have a lot of competition for that. Problem though: there’s six Avengers and only four of us. You’re missing some pretty key characters there.”

Her shoulders slumped a little, but she clicked a few more times on the laptop resolutely. “We’ll figure something out.”

A thought occurred to Dean, like someone had shown a bright floodlight on parts of his brain that had been quietly sulking for years. A floodlight with a particular symbol placed strategically over the glass.

“Guys! I could be Batman! Problem solved!”

Charlie frowned. “No. Wrong franchise.”

“Seriously, Batman would be perfect! You could be Catwoman, or Batgirl or something.”

Kevin was finally looking interested in the conversation again, despite his slouch. “That’s only a duo —”

“I refuse to be Robin again!” Sam interrupted.

Dean blinked. “When have you been Robin before?”

“I was five. It was the only time Dad let us trick-or-treat and you made me wear tights.”

“You liked it.”

“Did not! I wanted to go as a dinosaur but you made me wear the outfit and talked like Michael Keaton all day.”

“You’re not remembering it right.”

“There were pictures!”

“Geeze, get over it Sammy.”

“Guys!” Kevin slapped his hand on the table to get their attention. Sam slowly relaxed back into his chair and Dean smirked across at him.

Now that he thought about it, Sam had made a cute Boy Wonder.

“The point remains that there’s only one or two decent heroes in Batman’s immediate universe. If we’re all going – and it looks like we all are – then some of us have to be villains.” Kevin cleared his throat and slumped again. “I don’t want to be a villain.”

Charlie nodded. “Yeah, I’m gonna pass on that, too. It’s Marvel or nothing, big man.”

Ugh. “Why can’t I be Batman and you guys be the Avengers? They do JLA/Avengers crossovers all the time!”

Charlie closed her eyes with a groan. “One, this is movieverse, remember? We all know JLA ain’t gonna happen until they make a Superman movie that does good box office. And don’t even get me
started on the travesty that is Hollywood’s blacklisting of Wonder Woman.”

Dean considered his options. Charlie was standing firm on this one, and Kevin still looked like a dejected pile of prophet held up by his chair. Sam just sat there blinking as if they’d slipped into a foreign language when he wasn’t looking, like Klingon or German. Crap. What was a Marvel superhero that didn’t suck? “Uh, Iron Man?”

Charlie tilted her head and frowned. “I don’t know…”

“Oh, come on! I’d make a perfect Tony Stark!”

“Maybe five years ago, but now?” Sam said, back in the game. “I don’t know, dude, you don’t nearly drink as much as you used to.”

“What do you mean? I drink like a fish. I just finished off an entire bottle of whiskey all by myself yesterday.”

“Yeah, but you spread it out over the whole week. Pretty sure Tony Stark does it all in one night.”

“And then dies of liver failure the next morning.”

“Are we really using alcoholism as judging criteria?” Kevin muttered.

Sam shook his head. “Dean, face it; you’re just not that guy anymore.”

“What guy? Is it ‘cause I’m not smart enough, is that what you’re saying?”

“No, you’re smart, you’re a genius, it’s just… Tony Stark is a sarcastic, hedonistic, philanthropist jerk, right? You don’t qualify anymore.” Sam shrugged. “You’re a jerk who’s mellowed with age.”

Dean gasped in a breath as his brain stumbled on a comeback. The only thing he could think of was: “Bitch.”

Charlie tapped him comfortingly (condescendingly?) on the arm. “It’s not exactly a compliment to be like Tony Stark, Dean.”

He exhaled. “This is stupid. If I can’t be a cool superhero then which one can I be?”

The others looked at each other for a minute, silently communicating in little nods and smiles, surely sealing Dean’s fate in the worst way possible. Sure enough, when the answer came they spoke it together: “Captain America.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

They smiled at him, all three of them. Oh, hell no.

“Seriously? Captain America? No way! I refuse. He’s… he’s all noble. He’s a fucking boy scout. See? I just said fucking, doesn’t that automatically disqualify me, or something?”

Charlie shook her head. “No such luck, my friend.”

He was getting desperate. “He doesn’t get any of the references! He’s-“ (uh, mental image, mental image… ooh!) “He’s Cas in a leotard, for Christ’s sake.”

Sam frowned. “I thought we agreed that Cas was Superman?”
Kevin frowned, too. “I thought Superman was DC?”

Dean could actually feel his blood pressure rising. “I thought since I’m not allowed to be Batman it doesn’t fucking matter?”

Charlie smiled and held her hands up, laughter dancing in her eyes. “Easy there, big fella. No ship wars before we get to the con.” And what the hell was she talking about now? “Actually, it’s a shame Cas has gone walkabout with the angel tablet. He’d make a great Coulson.” She scrunched up her face into a frown and lowered her voice to a growl, not even remotely in Cas’ normal register. “I’ll taze you and watch Supernanny as you drool on the carpet.”

Dean rolled his eyes, the last of the tension rolling down his shoulders. Sam smiled a little, charmed and obviously humoring her.

But Kevin’s frown had only grown deeper. “Uh,” he said. “Who’s Coulson?”

Charlie facepalmed so hard there were fingermarks on her forehead for hours afterward. Dean snuck a picture on his phone and used it as her contact image.

When it came to light that Kevin had missed Marvel’s reinvention of its movie franchise thanks to being Heaven’s buttpuppet and that Dean and Sam had only seen the Avengers and the first Iron Man on FX, Charlie declared a movie night (even though it had barely passed breakfast) and ushered them all into one of the Men of Letters lounges. She’d claimed it as the TV room her first night in the bunker after successfully hooking up a Frankenstein’s monster of digital cable lines and wi-fi routers to an old projector that had been molding in a corner.

Dean’d gleefully spent a week gorging himself on crappy television and corrupting Charlie’s Netflix suggestions, just because he could and he’d missed cable since they’d moved in. This set-up was nice, too, marathoning action movies with his friends. It was the first time he could remember doing that. Hell, it was the first time he could remember having friends.

Sam was sprawled out over an entire loveseat, and Charlie was curled on the other side of the couch from Dean, her toes occasionally poking into his leg during fight scenes. Kevin had loaded up an armchair with his laptop (victoriously reclaimed from Charlie’s greedy fingers) and notes on the tablet, but kept getting distracted by explosions and the awesomeness that was Peggy Carter.

They started with Captain America: First Avenger, of course. Charlie wouldn’t have it any other way.

Dean was a little surprised at how much he enjoyed the story. He laughed every time Steve punched Hitler and damn near cried when Bucky… well, when Bucky everything. Sure, the action scenes were fun but there was a lot he hadn’t known about Cap’s backstory and it all came together pretty logically for a superhero movie.

Still, Dean had his reservations on playing the guy. He lasted until Samuel L Jackson showed and then he couldn’t take it anymore. “Seriously, you guys? I would make a good Captain America? Me?”

Sam shushed him and threw a piece of popcorn his direction without looking away from the screen, bouncing it a cushion and hitting Charlie instead. She fished it out from her sleeve and tossed it the rest of the way.
Kevin shook his head with a sigh. “Dean, we just watched the movie.”

He shifted a little, knocking the kernel onto the floor where it would no doubt get kicked under the couch and colonize a small population of dust bunnies. The credits rolled and Charlie sat up, continuing the conversation like it hadn’t been interrupted by Chris Evans looking sad and well-lit in Times Square. “Okay, are we looking at this from a shallow physical point of view and ignoring literally decades of character development and storylines?”

Dean blinked. “Uh, okay, sure.”

Charlie raised an eyebrow and quirked up a corner of her mouth. Leaning over, she grabbed Sam’s water bottle from the floor and dumped some of the leftover backwash into her cupped hand. She carefully climbed across the couch until she was straddling Dean’s thighs. And holy crap that was the most awkward having anyone in that position had ever been.

She blithely ignored his sputtering protests and shoved her wet fingers into his hair, tugging it roughly over to one side. Dean scrunched his eyes closed and let her work, more concerned about where he should put his hands than what Charlie was doing to his scalp. She patted him firmly one more time, then he felt the weight of her slide away back to her side of the couch and a safe distance from his lap.

His cheeks were blazing and his hair felt weird – kind of like when he got zapped back to the 40’s and gotten a makeover, only damper and less helmety. He hesitantly blinked an eye open to find everyone staring at him again, instead of eyeing Charlie in her newfound insanity and lack of personal space.

Kevin snorted and went back to his book. Charlie’s expression was the facial equivalent of waving smug victory fists in the air. And Sam just looked unimpressed, though for apparently completely different reasons than the others.

“You don’t use any product at all, huh?” he quoted, bringing up a conversation they’d had ages ago that Dean could barely remember. “It just ‘naturally grows that way’?”

God, but Sam could hold onto a grudge about stuff like that. “Shut up, bitch.”

Charlie held up a fist, counting off points with her fingers. “You’re the most stereotypical American male in this room, Dean. Cap’s a soldier and a damn good one. He’s a leader and a friend. He puts the needs of others above himself but isn’t afraid to question authority when it’s the right thing to do. I mean, take away the miraculous muscle growth and he’s you. Plus there’s, you know.” She gestured at his torso, taking in the soft shirt he’d pulled on when he’d gotten out of bed earlier. “The flannel.”

Sam grinned and stared at the credits scrolling across the screen, suddenly engrossed in counting the number of animators it took to make Chris Evans look like he weighed ninety pounds.

Dean rolled his eyes. “Oh, what the hell, Sam, you might as well add your two cents in, too.”

His grin turned sly, a look of effortless and disarming charm. Dean had learned the hard way not to trust that particular expression. “Well,” he said, “you are the oldest one here. It’d make sense that you were the oldest guy in the Avengers, too.”

Dean was getting a headache. “I hate you.”

“Technically Thor’s a couple thousand years old, but I’ll allow it.” Charlie pulled the blanket that had taken to living on the back of the couch around her shoulders, commandeering the remote to pull
up *Thor* in the queue. Dean was pretty sure *Iron Man* should have gone next, but whatever. “I wasn’t gonna mention this, since I consider myself to have a decent amount of decorum but Sam just blew all that out of the water so—“

“Charlie.”

“You did kinda sleep for forty years. Or six months, depending on your perspective. And the world had changed when you woke up.” She shrugged. “It was meant to be, Dean. Put on the suit and accept the mantle of Steve Rogers. Hey Sam, pass me my tablet would you? I need to buy a pair of heeled boots that make me look taller but will still let me crush men’s heads between my thighs without twisting an ankle. It’s the only thing missing from my costume.”

Sam handed it over, smirk still firmly in place. “Does that mean you already have a catsuit?”

“You’d be surprised how often one of those comes in handy.”

Ugh. Dean couldn’t be a part of this conversation anymore, not after the whole lap thing. He headed to the kitchen for more popcorn, since Sam The Bottomless Pit had eaten all of the last batch despite having just had breakfast. He tugged a couple beers loose from the six pack in the fridge – he did too drink enough to be Tony Stark – and added them to the tray. He thought for a minute and pulled the rest out, too; he was pretty sure he was gonna need a lot of booze to deal with the rest of those movies.

He could just barely hear Sam and Charlie talking over the pop of the kernels.

“This Avengers thing is really happening, huh? I can’t believe we’re actually doing this. LARPing is one thing but this.” Dean just knew his brother was shaking his head at the end there.

Charlie’s tone was a lot more encouraging than Sam’s. “It’ll be great. There is one small problem, though. I feel like I might throw up a little saying this but Dean was right. We won’t really be the Avengers unless we have the full cast. Hulk and Banner made that movie and Hawkeye and Widow are, like, my fourth favorite BROTP.”

Dean frowned, fingers hovering over the microwave door. He had no idea what a BROTP even was, and Charlie had four of them? Whatever, he knew an opportunity when he heard one and shouted down the hall. “I could be Hawkeye! My aim is fantastic. And look at these!” He rolled up his sleeve as far as it would go – about to his elbow, unfortunately – and flexed.

“We’re not looking at your muscles, Dean,” Sam yelled from the couch without even turning to see what Dean was doing. He continued more quietly, obviously not meaning for Dean to overhear. “I think I have an idea for that, actually. Let me make some calls tomorrow and see what I come up with.”

Charlie’s grin was obvious in her voice. (She didn’t bother to look at him, either. Butheads.) “I told you it’d be awesome if you guys got into this! Go Team Venture!” The sound of a high five echoed perfectly down the hall.

He frowned and lugged the tray of snacks into the TV room, not entirely sure why he felt angry about Sam and Charlie getting along without him.

About thirty minutes later – as Dean’s luck would have it – Kevin and Charlie unanimously decided that Sam would make a perfect Thor, and there was no use arguing about it. Sam blushed – actually fucking blushed – and ducked his head under the praise.

Dean gave up on life and went to fix dinner before the badass robot from the trailer even showed up.
They ate through *Iron Man* and Kevin flat out laughed at Robert Downey, Jr outsnarking Colonel Rhodes. The sequel was less than perfect but Dean found himself drooling over the briefcase-suit and couldn’t help but wonder if he could rig up a collapsible gun or salt shooter, or maybe even something to organize the Impala’s trunk better like his dad had in that ugly-ass truck he used to drive around.

He fell asleep dug so deep into the couch cushions he didn’t think he’d ever move again. The last thing he remembered was Hawkeye attacking the helicarrier, which was a damn shame – it meant he missed his favorite part. Charlie was right: Hulk *did* totally make that movie.

Sam was as good as his word the next morning, spending breakfast texting someone – or several someone’s – and letting his cereal go all soggy. Dean plopped a spoon into the soggy mess and dug in himself, placing a fresh bowl in front of his brother. (He didn’t mind mushy Cheerios, and Sam would just throw the whole thing out anyway.)

They chewed quietly for awhile, the smell of coffee lingering in the air and waking up their brains. It’d been a long time since they’d had the chance to be quiet together so Dean took the opportunity to study Sam, marking all the ways he’d changed and stayed the same in the last year or so. Despite the clear eyes and flushed cheeks, there were circles under his eyes, deep ones, and Sam’s breathing caught on something wet every other inhale. He looked better than he had when he hadn’t been sleeping, but not by much.

Dean swallowed a particularly large spoonful and decided to go for it, to allow the anxiety and *big brotherness* to build into an awkward conversation he knew would irritate Sam and dissolve the peace they’d somehow managed to achieve however momentarily. But he had to know, so he cleared his throat and focused on the little floating circles of his breakfast.

“You feeling okay, man? You’ve been quiet lately, and with this trial thing…” He let the sentence taper off so Sam could fill in the blanks himself. There was less chance of it blowing up in his face if he didn’t actually say it.

Mercifully, Sam’s shoulders didn’t tense up and his forehead didn’t scrunch into a frown. He just kept eating and texting, answering Dean almost absentmindedly. “I’m okay. I’ve just been thinking about stuff.”

“Oh huh. What stuff?”

“You know, stuff. The trials. What we should do after they’re over and hell’s closed.” He shrugged and shook his head, huffing a little laugh. “That Charlie wants me to dye my hair for this stupid convention thing.”

“Mmm.” Dean had missed that particular conversation, being asleep at the time, but Charlie had filled him in as they’d stumbled off to bed later, mirth and the hint of desperation in her eyes. She’d tried to get him on board with the Project, as she called it, but Dean knew when to keep out of something. While occasionally the perfect vehicle for pranks and other meaningless jokes (re: his snarkiness about Dean’s Cap-hair the night before) Sam’s hair had been an issue Dean’d skirted very carefully since they were kids. Keeping it long had been Sam’s first act of defiance towards Dad’s rules, something that had irked John Winchester for years.

Besides, if he kept his nose clean and let Sam decide to go blonde all by himself then Dean reserved
full rights to laugh his ass off about it later on. He was honestly a little worried that the sight would be too much for his funny bone to handle; could you get an aneurism from laughing too hard? The mental image alone…

He cleared his throat and swallowed down the last of his Cheerios without chewing, then debated pouring more into the milk. Was he hungry enough for a whole other bowl? Dean eyed the box and then eyed his brother. “You really ok with this Thor thing? I mean, they mostly just said that because you’re a big guy with long hair.”

Sam shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. I mean, I don’t know. By the end of The Avengers Thor seems to be getting his shit together. He just wants to reconnect with his brother and protect the world. That’s not so bad. I wouldn’t mind…”

Dean knew exactly where Sam was going with that sentence, and why he couldn’t finish it. He also knew there were more similarities than hair between the god and his baby brother – a youthful recklessness, love of a world he’d never really be a part of, a distant father whose reasons were never made clear. He just couldn’t think of a way to say any of it without sounding like a jackass.

He kicked Sam’s shin lightly under the table, then a little harder when Sam ignored him. When he finally rolled his eyes and looked up Dean made a goofy face like he used to when they were kids and Sam was down in the dumps.

Sam snorted in surprised delight and his brother’s sadness dissipated like cigarette smoke in a bar. (*It lingered a little in his clothes but wasn’t strong enough to gag him anymore.* Dean liked that metaphor, and thought about it and Sam a lot.)

Sam shook his head and leaned back in his chair a little, letting his shoulders stretch across the back and his arm dangle over the side. “And Thor is the closest to me physically, there’s no denying that.”

He smirked, and Dean could have sworn he saw the muscles under his shirt twitch. Was Sam… flexing at him? Jesus. “It’s flattering, actually.”

“Flattering, sure,” Dean snorted and snatched the box of cereal. Fuck it, he was eating seconds. So what if he was a little doughy in the middle? “You get to be an immortal princeling and I’m stuck wearing a giant A on my forehead. I mean, I like apple pie as much the next guy – okay, more than the next guy but I just don’t get it. It’s not like I’m a hero or anything. And I make movie references, like all the time.” He chewed stubbornly on too big a mouthful of crunchy oats to curb the pout he could feel lurking around the corners of his face. “And there’s no way I could pull off that shoulder to waist ratio.”

Sam watched him eat for a couple minutes and then got up for another cup of coffee. He kept his back to Dean and stirred in the sugar slowly, watching the crystals dissolve into a dark swirl. "You want to hear why I think it’ll work? Aside from your Americanness, or whatever the hell it is Charlie called it?"

Dean sighed and plunked his spoon into the bowl, sloshing milk over the edge and dabbing at it with a corner of his sleeve. Sam must’ve taken his silence for consent – or at least for Dean not being totally averse to listening – because he took a breath and sat down across from Dean with his hands wrapped around the mug, looking him straight in the eye.

“Captain America is a soldier and a leader, so Charlie’s got you there. But he’s also a human that stands shoulder to shoulder with giants, and isn't afraid to look them in the eye and order them around. He’s not perfect, though that’s what everyone thinks about him. He was exploited for a long time by a higher power that thought it knew best. He's the loneliest guy around. Deep down under all that patriotism he's simple, selfless, and sad. And most of all he's willing to trade his body and soul
for what he values most and what he believes is right. He’s had absolutely no reason to love so much but he does it anyway."

Dean blinked at him for a minute, then closed his mouth and cleared his throat, looking down at his almost empty bowl.

Sam’s voice grew quieter than before, a whisper Dean could pretend to ignore if he wanted to. “Everyone knows you’re greater than you allow yourself to be, Dean. Why can’t you see yourself as a good person?”

Dean looked down at his Cheerios, swirling around the milk in a little dairy tornado. He huffed out a breath and stood to wash out the dregs. The fact that the sink was facing away from Sam and he could give himself a minute over the hot water had nothing to do with it. "When'd you get to be such a Steve Rogers expert?"

"We just watched the movies last night, dude."

He sighed and put the bowl in the drainer. What a mess.

It wasn’t like he’d see anyone important while he was masquerading as some lame superhero in spandex, right? (Except Steve Bacic was going to be there. Dean was trying his best to keep it together about that.)

"All right. But if I'm gonna dress up as Captain Douchebag then I'm gonna do it right. Let's hit up the armory and see what we're working with."

Sam grinned and followed him into the lower levels of the bunker.

In reality what Dean had taken to calling the armory was less of a battle station and more of a museum; everything was carefully packaged and put away, with some nonsense labeling system of numbers and letters that even Sam had trouble figuring out. He had no idea how the Men of Letters ever found what they needed quickly enough to use it let alone remember what would work when. There was a whole room full of knives, some rusted and falling apart, others wicked sharp and so pretty Dean wanted to hang them on his wall. (But no, that collection was for his babies only, the ones he’d personally picked up and managed to hold on to through the years. He was sentimental, sue him.)

They had a vague idea where the shields and other bits of armor were located, so they just started at one side of the room and went to the other, keeping track of what they found on the inventory Sam’d set up. He made Dean put on gloves before they started digging through any boxes, and Dean’d considered scoffing at the idea briefly - until he remembered the random vortex room on level three and the cursed rabbit’s foot they’d come across a few years ago. Plus, it was really dusty in there so gloves probably wouldn’t be a bad idea.

It was either the cloud of dust drifting into the hallway or the clang of metal being tossed around that drew Charlie’s attention. She stopped in the doorway with her arms crossed, frowning at the chaos the boys were making, and kicked a pile of gauntlets to get their attention.

“What exactly do you think you’re doing?”

“Organizing.” Sam shrugged, the hint of a smile on his face. “And Dean wanted a shield for the
convention. He’s agreed to play Cap.”

“That’s great, Dean, I’m really happy for you.” Somehow, Dean didn’t quite believe her. “You’re using a Men of Letters shield?”

“Yeah, if we can find one that looks halfway decent.” He needed one about two and a half feet in diameter and almost perfectly round. He’d been thinking about the design of the shield as he searched and it was actually pretty good strategy to have the star in the middle with the circles around the edges. It drew your eye and turned it into a proper target for bad guys to aim at instead of Captain America’s head. The guy wasn’t bulletproof, after all.

He dug back into trunk he’d been elbow deep in, shifting the hunks of metal and oddly shaped pieces of armor out of the way to get to the bottom. There was something very shiny down there.

Charlie sighed. “Dean, this is a comic convention, not Army of Darkness. The pizza vendor’s not gonna try to swallow your soul.”

“How do you know? Weird shit like that happens to us all the time. I happen to know for a fact that Death enjoys Chicago style, so why not Slenderman? Or angels? We said we’d think of something to protect Kevin, remember?”

“Guys. You aren’t hearing me. There’s no weapons allowed at comicon. Ever. The weapons inspector will kick us out before we even get inside. We’ll think of something else to help Kevin, okay?”

Weapons inspector? What normal person actually brought weapons to things like this? “But-“

“NO. WEAPONS. There are rules about stuff like this. Nothing that shoots, stabs, or maims. Even Nerf stuff isn’t allowed ‘cause people are dicks and shoot them into other people’s eyes.”

Sam pushed his hair out of his eyes, smearing a trail of grey dirt across his forehead. “A shield isn’t a weapon. It’s a defensive article of clothing.”

Dean bit down on all the ways he personally knew to take someone down with a flattened bit of heavy metal. Cap’s was even more badass, and so much more than a simple shield; that thing was like the world’s best boomerang for kicking ass. He smiled at Charlie instead. “Loophole, bitches.”

Charlie sighed and rubbed at the spot between her eyebrows. “Just… please don’t embarrass me by getting us kicked out. I have a reputation to uphold at these things.” And she walked away, leaving thoughts of catsuits and ‘reputations’ behind her.

Dean slumped against the box. No weapons? He hadn’t gone anywhere without at least a bowie knife on him for years. How were they going to get through the weekend defenseless?

Sam held up a hand, eyes lighting up before going distant in thought. “I have an idea.”

And he ran off down the hall after Charlie, leaving Dean alone with the dusty boxes and probably about a dozen dead spiders. At least, he hoped they were all dead. No weapons my ass, he thought, and went to get the bug spray just in case.

Sam never made it back to the armory but Dean eventually found a small, sturdy shield that didn’t
have any rust and wasn’t labeled as cursed or evil. He wasn’t actually sure what metal it was made of but it’d made a chiming echo when he’d tapped his knuckles along the edges, like a glass half-full, and Dean knew he had a winner. He was tempted to fling it around the target range a little… just to see what would happen, of course, not because he thought the Men of Letters might actually have a shield made out of vibranium or anything, that’d be stupid.

But how awesome would it be if it was made of vibranium? Or even adamantium? So awesome.

He gathered the shield under his arm and headed up to the machine shop to make a proper harness. (He was reasonably certain that it wouldn’t be too heavy to carry around on his back or forearm all day, but he had to find some way to attach it all the same.)

To his surprise he found Kevin comfortably ensconced at one of the stations there, for once sans tablet but surrounded by a flock of empty coffee mugs. They filled the space on the table that wasn’t taking up… whatever he was working on. All Dean could see from the door was that it was very red.

“Hey, Kev. What ya up to?”

“What’s it look like? I’m making an Iron Man suit.”

Dean whined a little bit in his throat without meaning to. But… but I wanted to be Iron Man. He felt the heavy weight sag under his arm and shook his head, heat blossoming in his cheeks. He’d already decided on Captain America. What was he, twelve? Kevin could play whoever he wanted. And he wanted… Tony Stark. Yeah, ‘cause that made sense. Kevin was the polar opposite of Iron Man. Sure, they probably had a similar IQ and Kevin was a little snarky bastard when he put his mind to it, but billionaire, playboy, philanthropist he was not.

And he didn’t seem to be much of an engineer, either. What Dean had taken to be just blobs of red turned out to be chest and leg pieces. They looked big enough to fit Kevin but that was about all they had going for them. The surface was rough and Dean couldn’t see any coherent system for movement in the joints or any way connecting them at all. And, horror of horrors, he was pretty sure the arc reactor had been drawn on with day-glo paint.

Jesus. Tony Stark built better in a cave. With a box of scraps.

Kevin was angrily ignoring the hot mess on the outside of the armor to meticulously carve something on the inside. Then he swirled a small brush through a clumpy mixture in one of the mugs and filled in the lines.

Dean frowned. Those symbols looked awfully familiar. “What’s with the paint by numbers, man?”

Kevin didn’t look up from where he was focusing on getting a cartouche perfectly straight. “It’s occult warding made out of oil, lamb’s blood, and cardamom. I found a book the other day that said the combination should make the wearer invisible to ancient foulness.”

“Sounds like Crowley, all right.”

“That’s what I thought. It’s not foolproof and it’ll only last until the mixture wears away but it should keep us hidden for a little while if I camouflage it as part of the suit.” He sighed and let the brush drop into the mug. “So long as I don’t take it off to shower or go to the bathroom, anyway.”

“Just another day at conicon, I guess.” Dean picked up an – arm, maybe? – that Kevin had set aside to dry. That’s where he’d seen them before; the thick lines reminded him of the wards Cas had
carved into he and Sam’s ribs all those years ago. “How long have you been working on this?”

Kevin shrugged. “It’s not really hard to translate stuff when you have access to a good library. And the enochian’s not perfect or anything. I’ll still probably get fried the second I get within range of a demon. Or an angel, come to think of it.”

Dean shook his head. “No, this is a really good idea; I don’t know why we didn’t think of it sooner. We’ll put some on the car and do a trial run to the grocery store or something to see if it works. Nice job, Kevin.”

“Oh. You’re gonna carve it into the impala?” The kid seemed… embarrassed, blinking up at Dean and blushing a little. It was like he wasn’t used to people complimenting him, anymore.

Huh. Dean made a mental note to work on that. He shrugged and tilted the armor to get a better look. “The floorboards’ve seen worse. And I can always replace it later if it doesn’t work out. Was this suit a trial run, or what? ‘Cause I gotta tell you, Kev, it looks like ass.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Kevin frowned and yanked the piece out of Dean’s hand. Crap, so much for being nice. “You’re right, it does look like ass. This whole thing was useless. I can’t be Iron Man in freaking papier-mâché armor.”

Oh, that’s what the suit was made out of. It certainly explained the texture, anyway. Everything else, though…

“You just need a little help, that’s all.” Dean tugged on Kevin’s arm. “Come on, I’ll show you how to use a blowtorch. And dig up a couple LEDs or something; that arc reactor’s gotta look good or we’re gonna get laughed right out of the convention center.”

Kevin stood up, a little wobbly until he got his legs under him properly. “You’re going to help me make a suit?”

Dean shrugged. “I’ve seen the movies, how hard can it be? I mean, RDJ did it and he was drunk half the time.”

“Actually, I think he’s sober now. And not really Tony Stark.”

Dean waved it off. “Whatever. And speaking of looking good, check this baby out.” He twirled the shield so it caught the light and slung it on top of the messy table. The metal vibrated, a resonant tone echoing through the stuffy room. God, his shield was badass. The grocery run would have to include a trip to Lowe’s, too – he had no idea what kind of paint worked on metal and he was completely out of stencils to keep the lines straight.

Kevin touched the shield’s quivering edge tentatively, then more confidently when he found it blunter than it looked. “Wow. Dean, this is almost exactly like the one from the movie.”

“I know, right? There’s a whole room full of stuff like this just sitting around down there. We could probably scrap some to make a decent Iron Man, if you want.” A decent looking Iron Man, anyway; even he wasn’t dumb enough to try making one that actually flew. Not within the time constraints, anyway. Repulsors had to be complicated and there was the whole arc reactor/power supply thing. He shook his head. “And if not we can always mold some heavy-duty plastic into the shapes we need. You know if the wards work on plastic?” They’d have to do tests and see which material worked best.

Kevin ran a finger along the edge of the shield, wiping away a little bit of dust. “Dean. You found
Captain America’s shield in your basement and just agreed to make me a full suit of Iron Man armor.” He blinked wide eyes and rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s like I’m living in a TV show. How is this my life?”

Dean snorted and chucked him on the shoulder. “I agreed to help you make a full suit of armor. Ain’t no free rides here, dude.”

“You really think this is a good idea? I just spent two hours building something we’re not even going to use and wasted all last night watching movies. That’s time I could have spent working on the tablet.”

“Yeah. And that’s important, we don’t want to stop doing that. But Charlie was right. It’s not fair to keep you locked up in here like some criminal. It may not ever be completely safe but… if you’re willing to risk it then we’ll be there to cover your back. Even if we have to look like idiots in leotards doing it.”

Kevin smiled – it was wobbly and small, hope turning the edges up ever so slightly, one of the saddest things Dean’d ever seen. He left the armor sitting on the table and walked past Dean out the door, resting a hand on his shoulder briefly as he passed. “Thanks, Cap.”

Dean groaned and followed him down the hallway. “Don’t call me that.”

“Why not? It’s the truth, isn’t it?” He bumped into Dean playfully as they walked. “Though I don’t know about those pants. Too many pies, not enough squat thrusts.” He leaned back to take in Dean’s ass, frowning.

His cheeks clenched without his approval, making his legs stiff and his gait even more bowlegged than usual. Which, in turn, made Kevin laugh and Dean feel like an idiot.

He punched him on the shoulder, a little harder than necessary. “Shove it, Shellhead.”

About a week later Sam marched into the room, interrupting the pow-wow Dean was having with the others about the latest set of armor they’d put together. (Charlie had been recruited for help with the arc reactor light.) He slammed the little box Charlie’d left strategically on the kitchen counter onto the table so forcefully the cardboard dented at the corners and wobbled back and forth.

They stared at the man blue-steeling at them from the front of the box. Then up at Sam, waiting. Sam stared right back. A muscle twitched in his jaw.

This was gonna be good.

He took a deep breath through his nose and swallowed, working his mouth a little before he could actually talk. “If we do this, we do it as a team.”

Dean blinked. Wait a minute.

“No one gets to make fun of me, or call me Barbie, or use pictures of me as blackmail for the next three years. Nobody, on pain of death, gets to make dumb blonde jokes.”

Sam sent a Jedi death glare Dean’s way. He blinked again, dumbly, and nodded.

“After this is over I get a whole month of free pranks and first showers. And everybody has to help
me find a dye that’s closest to my original hair color. And nobody ever mentions it again.”

Dean thought about mentioning that since the bunker had more than one bathroom the old IOU system of First One To Hot Water didn’t exactly apply, but he was pretty sure his brain was broken.

Charlie’s looked broken, too, if the way her mouth hung open was any indication. “Wh-what made you change your mind?”

Sam took another deep breath, for the first time looking something other than fiercely determined. “You guys’ve been working really hard on this and spending a lot of time together and everyone else has already agreed to show up in costume and… I don’t want to be the one to let us down. I want to be a part of the team.” He shuffled his feet, a little embarrassed. “And I want to win the costume contest.”

“But they haven’t even announced the prizes yet.”

“I don’t care.” Sam shook his head and tensed his shoulders, nostrils flaring, like he did before getting stitches. “Now are you gonna help me or not?”

Charlie startled and jumped from her chair, following Sam like a confused baby duckling on a windy day.

Dean and Kevin looked at each other, and then watched Charlie double back for the box of hair dye. She smiled and scampered away again.

“Well,” Dean sighed. That went better both better and worse than I expected.”

Time passed, as it was known to do. The armor slowly took shape and the paint on Dean’s shield dried to a glossy, glorious sheen. He stopped jumping every time he caught sight of Sam’s head out of the corner of his eye, and Sam himself stopped pouting around the library. (He still wore a selection of hats he’d randomly found throughout the bunker, though. The newsboy was Dean’s favorite.)

Then they packed up the Impala and headed out for the weekend trip to Planet Comicon.

It didn’t seem real.

Charlie’s seamstress friend had turned out to be more of an ally than they’d hoped; a friend of a friend had put together the stunt team’s wardrobe and sent her a few extras in their size with the proviso that no one connect it back to her or else. And they had to return them in one piece, freshly laundered and with no recognizable – or unrecognizable – stains.

Dean’s suit came in three different layers: a red and white striped undershirt, blue bolero jacket, and the aforementioned tight pants. There were belts and gloves and boots, and a cowl he saved ’til last. He tried it on in the hotel bathroom for the first time, using the cover of Sam figuring out how his own costume worked to slip away from the others for a little privacy. It went on surprisingly easy though the fit was a little loose in the shoulders and tight around the middle. The cut and heavy weave made him stand a little straighter than normal, which he supposed was the point. Everything had a structure of piping just under the surface that made the edges and forms a little cleaner, turning the softness of his body into something stronger. His shield nestled perfectly in a groove on one of the sleeves – it was beautiful, even in the shitty overhead light.
He studied himself in the floor length mirror, running hands down his sides to smooth out the uniform. For all that it was just bits and pieces of fabric sewn together there was something tangible in the way it *breathed*, how he held himself inside it. The suit was... a fantasy, an illusion of grace and dignity. The trappings of something bigger than himself.

All of a sudden and for no reason he thought of those two guys they’d met at the Supernatural convention, and how one of them had dressed up as him. About how he’d said saving the world every day with someone he loved was better than his normal crappy life.

Dean’s body looked good wearing the suit. He *felt* good wearing it. Like a goddamn superhero. He didn’t even mind the stupid A on his forehead.

He took a deep breath and pushed the bathroom door open, letting it bang off the wall on the other side. “You know the difference between you and me?” he called, stepping out, proud but not too cheeky, like a good Captain America would. He struck a pose as the others looked up from where they were wrestling with Sam’s cape. “I make this look good.”

They laughed and catcalled, his brother hopelessly entangled in a mile of red fabric. Charlie smiled and whistled, then traded places with Dean to put on her own costume. (Kevin offered to help her with the zipper, but she less-than-politely refused.) Then they headed out to the parking lot to meet the mysterious ‘others’ Sam had managed to pull together and Dean got his first good look at the team outside of the confines of the room.

They looked *damned good*, all of them. The sun sparkled off of Sam’s chest plate and arms, making his already wide shoulders vast and godlike. Kevin was almost a match for him, gleaming in the early morning light, the armor as glorious as it was cumbersome. A spark of pride burned in Dean’s chest at the sight; *he’d* done that, *he’d* made it happen. Kevin had helped, sure, and the warding that made it possible was all his, but the armor itself was Dean’s baby.

Today was going to be *awesome*.

Dean saw their fifth teammate as soon as he stepped outside and blinked away the sun glare – then had to blink again to make sure he was seeing things clearly, a bubble of laughter hiccupping its way up his throat. Garth leaned against his crappy Ford Ranchero a few spots down from the Impala in full-on Hawkeye gear, empty quiver, bow, and all. His scrawny arms looked ridiculous when Dean was expecting Jeremy Renner’s insane physic.

“That’s right,” he smirked at Sam’s whistle and whipped off his sunglasses CSI style to flex his non-existent muscles. “Welcome to the gun show, ladies. Look but don’t touch; this agent’s taken.”

Dean had to admit he’d missed the scrawny little dude. He kissed the back of Charlie’s hand (who only looked vaguely uncomfortable about it). Kevin hung back, uncomfortable, but submitted to a handshake instead of the two minute hugs both Sam and Dean had to suffer through.

They were just getting introductions out of the way when a ferocious bellow rang out across the parking lot, coming from an open window a few rooms down from theirs. Dean raised his shield instinctively, ducking behind it and shifting himself to cover Kevin – only to have the roar echo off the pavement and dissipate into nothing. Charlie snorted and her phone flashed in his direction... and Dean realized what he must look like, standing in the parking lot of a Holiday Inn and reacting like he was in a goddamn *action movie*.

“Thanks for the thought anyway, man.” Kevin patted him on the shoulder, the metal of the gloves giving it a little more gravitas than he probably intended.
Dean frowned and slid the cowl up from where it’d been resting against his back; at least it covered
the blush on his cheeks a little.

Sam cleared his throat and held up his own phone, a screen of text messages scrolling across it. “That
would be our last two Avengers. Dean and me’ll get ‘em. You guys hang out here. Just in case.”

He’d been remarkably cagey about who’d he’d wound up calling for this cosplay thing. Dean
supposed he understood Garth – he was always a little easier to deal with when Dean wasn’t
prepared for him, oddly enough – but he had no idea what to expect next.

They’d barely knocked on the door to number five when a small bearded man popped out, closing it
quickly behind him. “Hey, guys! Long time no see. How’s it hanging?”

Dean blinked as another roar shook the door behind him, and Aaron cringed until the echo died
away. “I am so not getting my security deposit back,” he moaned, and ducked back inside just as
quickly as he’d first appeared.

Dean glared at his little brother. “You invited my gay thing?”

Sam coughed into his fist, likely to cover the smirk Dean saw creeping along the edges of his mouth.
“Uh huh. Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Dean glared harder.

Sam rolled his eyes. “I asked Aaron if he could stick around Kevin for the convention. The Golem
can run interference if anyone attacks. I figured it’d pass the weapons check and people would just
assume it was all part of the cosplay.”

That… wasn’t a terrible idea, actually.

Aaron opened and closed the door again, sagging against it and squinting in the sun. “Sorry about
that. He’s been a little moody lately.” His eyes grew even larger than usual as he took in their
costumes. He took in the breadth of Sam’s shoulders and the way his blonde hair fell over them, and
then turned his attention Dean’s way.

“Dean. Wow. You look…” Aaron tapered off, smiled, and shook his head.

Dean couldn’t help but preen a little bit. Verily, Thor and Captain America totally just showed up at
his hotel room, looking fine.

A deep voice echoed from inside the room, the air from the Golem’s breath fluttering the curtains. “I
still do not see why I must cover myself in green paint. There is far too much to be done to spare time
playing at monsters.”
“You’ll play at Hulk because it’s the only way they’ll let you in the doors, clay for brains!” He cleared his throat and turned back to the Winchesters, mustering up a smile. “Sorry, again. Tensions are a little high right now. He started watching Doctor Who while I’m at work and now he’s pissed he’ll be away from Netflix for so long. I told him the convention would be worth it but you know how it is.” Aaron shrugged.

There was silence from inside the room for a moment and then a green head and shoulder loomed out of the window, sulkily. “The angels have the phone box.”

“Yes, I know the angels have the phone box. I’m the one who told you what a TARDIS was, remember? Finish your arms so we can get out of here.”

Dean was starting to expect the Hulk/Banner relationship was more complicated than he’d originally thought.

Aaron sighed, slumping against the door again. “He still doesn’t trust me. About everything, not just the BBC. I told him a break would be good and that he had whole seasons left to watch but the fucker doesn’t sleep and I’m about to lose it.” He sighed. “I’m hoping they sell quadruple-x shirts at this thing. Getting him one with Ten on it should make it up to him. Or maybe a poster, I dunno.”

Once again Dean had no idea what someone was talking about. Doctor who? Ten of what? If he didn’t know any better he’d think they were all just making up stuff to mess with him.

He was saved from asking by his cell phone vibrating from inside one of the pockets on his belt. Speak of the devil; it was a text from Charlie: OMG my hawkeye is hilarious. Is he always like this?

Dean snorted and glanced over his shoulder at the parking lot. Charlie waved to him from her perch on the Impala’s fender but Kevin and Garth were too heavy in conversation to notice.

The Golem squeezed out of the hotel room door (Dean had forgotten exactly how big the thing was) and they made their way back to where Garth was entertaining Iron Man and Black Widow with a story about root canals and the Easter Bunny (he really didn’t want to know). Once they formed a rugged half circle around the Impala’s trunk Charlie cleared her throat and called the Avengers meeting to order.

Charlie flicked a curl of red hair out of her eyes and handed them each a little bag and a small canteen of… Dean sniffed it. Gatorade?

“Okay. I’m aware that none of you have been to a con before, and as such have no clue what to expect. I’m electing myself Con Mommy for the duration of the weekend. The goal of this thing is to have fun and not die or kill someone else while we do it. Think you all can handle that?”

They nodded, Kevin chewing on a little bit of trail mix from his bag. Dean was quietly impressed he could even pick up a peanut with the gauntlets on. Had he been practicing?

“Each of your bags is a comicon survival kit. There’s extra deodorant – use it frequently – snacks, a drink, wet naps, hand sanitizer, pen and paper, an extra hotel room key, your phone charger, a map of the convention center, and a one-time use camera in case your phones crap out and you forget about the charger. Use your utility belts for their intended purpose and fill ‘em up with this stuff so you’re not lugging around baggies like a kid at a school lunch. Sam? You don’t have a belt so just… stuff them under your bracers, that should work. Stick together until we get our bearings but don’t be afraid to talk to people; remember, not everyone you meet wants to eat you. And we didn’t talk about this part of it but conventions are hella expensive, sooooo…” She ducked back into the trunk and pulled out six mighty wads of cash. Garth whistled when he counted exactly how much was in his.

Sam caught the hood before she could close it, rummaging around in his own bag and lifting out something so heavy the entire back end of the car bounced up a couple inches after it was removed. The hammer was blocky and silver in color with Celtic swirls knotting in the center to make an inverted T. Not what Dean would have gone with if he was Thor, but he guessed Sam could choose whatever he wanted.

Sam grunted and hefted it onto his shoulder, then tied a piece of leather thong around the handle and looped it through a bit of armor at his hip. He nodded, finally, and they took off down the street.

The trek from the hotel to the convention center was one of the strangest marches of Dean’s strange and weary life. Dean could only imagine how strange a crew they must have been: five dudes wearing brightly colored weirdness, a chick in a catsuit, and a shirtless Golem all waiting awkwardly at the crosswalk for the light to change.

But as they drew closer to the center of town more people joined them on the sidewalk, smiling, happy, some in costume and some not. Dean recognized a few characters but after awhile there were so many he could barely take in all of them at once; it was like walking through a rainbow of imaginary people. And robots, superheroes, supervillains, aliens, furries, manga babes, and whatever that guy was.

Dean was super-psyched and they hadn’t even made it in the door yet.

The team waited in line for post-registration tickets – only the first queue of many, Charlie informed them – and was presented with lanyards they were instructed to never take off and a small collection of programs, schedules, and maps of the exhibition hall. The guys working the booth had to connect two lanyards together so it would fit around the Golem’s not-neck and they kind of fizzed out for a second afterwards, shaking their heads in awe. They signed the whole group up for the cosplay contest without being asked and wished them luck on the way in.

The Golem’s frown when they touched him had been… well, epic was putting it mildly. Perfect casting, Sam, Dean thought. Well done.

Kevin and Aaron were so excited they could barely contain themselves, bouncing on their heels in line and chatting a mile a minute. Dean got a little worried about everyone splitting up later; it didn’t actually work if the chaperone was just as bad as the one being chaperoned. But Kevin hadn’t seemed happy since… ever, so Dean decided to just go with it.

They managed to make it inside with only one small hitch; Sam got pulled away from the group at the weapons check-in, no small surprise there. He rejoined them with a smug look on his face and a small tag wrapped around the leather grip of the hammer and no one bothered them the rest of the morning. No one official, anyway. They could barely walk five feet without someone stopping them for a picture or asking them if they’d made their own costumes. After awhile Dean got used to flashbulbs going off in his face and perfected his ‘Cap pose’. (It was pretty much how he’d held himself in the parking lot when the Golem went boom, just with the shield lowered down to his hip and tilted a little, so the flashes wouldn’t reflect all weird.)

They spent the morning just walking around together as a group, browsing the booths and ogling the other cosplayers. (Dean wanted to spend a significant amount of time ogling a specific Vampirella...
cosplayer, in fact, but got tugged away by Sam before he could do more than smile like an idiot and nod her direction.) The panels started soon after lunch – squished sandwiches from their belts, since Charlie had been right that the pizza line would be insane – and they split up promising to meet at six outside the grand ballroom for the costume contest.

The only thing Dean wanted to see was the Doctor Sexy panel. He’d kept himself from freaking out for weeks about it but the time had finally arrived. He refused to be upset that there was another presentation scheduled in the same room half an hour earlier, or that Charlie kept insisting that it wasn’t intended for Doctor Sexy MD but something else entirely. Nothing short of another apocalypse could keep him from getting a front (or maybe second) row seat.

Apparently, the first lecture was one Charlie had actually wanted to see, so Dean decided to just sit through it with her in order to make absolutely sure he got in to the second one. She gave him a funny look – what? – but merely nodded and demanded a potty break before standing in yet another line.

Dean had settled into a comfortable wait outside the ladies room (which had the longest line yet) when a girl wearing a flannel shirt and heavy boots ran out, almost hitting him with the door.

“Hey,” he called, but she continued obliviously by, her blondish hair cropped short and spiky, a glint of bronze hanging from her neck. Dean watched her down the hall, something tickling the back of his mind. She looked really familiar…

Right before the curve of the hall she met up with taller girl, also in flannel but with much longer hair. She sipped from a Nalgene and Dean fervently hoped the sloshy mixture was V8 and not something more sinister. They chatted for a minute or two and were soon joined by yet a third girl, smaller-built and dressed randomly in an old trench coat and messy tie. She pressed a hand gently on the blonde’s shoulder and pointed to a message board hanging on the wall in front of them.

Dean squinted and ducked around a cluster of girls in robes and school uniforms to get a better look, something catching his eye. The word WILL was written across the girl’s shoulders in red paint. The other two were FREE and TEAM.

Team Free Will, if the girl dressed as Dean Winchester stood in the middle, bracketed on either side by her friends.

He’s not sure how he feels about that. It’s somehow different than it was at the Supernatural convention. Maybe because he’d been preparing for it, had thought about the possibility of running into some ‘fans’ at the convention without really acknowledging that he’d done so. Maybe because Cas was involved, too, so there wasn’t anything skeevy implied between him and Sam. Maybe it was because they were girls, which Dean knew made him sexist but wasn’t sure how to stop having thoughts like that.

He wasn’t sure about anything anymore.

Dean thought about talking with them, about finding out why the hell they’d want to put all that effort into pretending to be him for a day, why they’d want to live his crappy life. He also thought about yelling and making a scene, demanding they take off the clothes and give him back his crappy life right now. He shifted his weight onto the balls of his feet and the shield scraped musically along the wall at his back, tugging the harness tight across his shoulder and making the bottom of the cowl dig into his neck. The sound made the Harry Potter kids and the three girls look his way.

It also served to remind him that Dean wore a disguise, too. They wouldn’t recognize him even if he didn’t.
Sam-girl saw the way he was looking at them and frowned over the other girls’ heads, tilting her chin up defiantly at him. He’d seen that look on other women’s faces, women like Ellen and Jody, women who were by themselves a lot and usually wound up being hunted by something nasty. Women who could rescue themselves, more often than not. It was a look that told the strange man to fuck off and mind his own business.

It was an expression, oddly enough, that looked right at home under his brother’s messy hair and Stanford bangs.

Dean didn’t want to hurt those girls, or make them uncomfortable in any way, and he didn’t want to look like the type of man who would, either. He conjured up a sheepish smile and mouthed sorry across the sea of people milling about the hallway.

Sam-girl’s shoulders relaxed a little and she smiled hesitantly back, her lips thinning until they were a straight pink line. She nodded, then huffed and pushed away the hunk of bangs that fell over her eyes.

Dean-girl seemed oblivious to the exchange going on over her head, her face lighting up at the sight of Dean’s costume. Her lips thinned when she smiled, too, and Dean hoped that meant they were actually sisters.

She grinned at him and Cas-girl stood next to her, beaming. She put a hand to her mouth and yelled, “Smile, Cap!” before holding up her camera.

Dean clicked his heels together smartly, whipping his right arm up and holding his back as straight as he could under the weight of the shield. He schooled his face into something serious under the shadow of his palm. Then he grinned cheekily, winked, and ended the salute with a flourish any USO show would be proud of. At least he hoped, anyway.

The girls smiled and saluted back – even Sam-girl – then turned to pick their way back through the crowd once more. They were nearly out of sight when he saw Cas-girl slip her arm around one of Dean-girl’s, folding their hands together as they walked. She leaned in to peck her friend on the freckled cheek and Dean was feeling all sorts of uncomfortable again.

“Hey! Hey, you can’t do that! We’re not – hey!”

But the girls had already gone and Dean was left standing confused and a little queasy around the middle. Maybe the girls were just dating, and who they chose to cosplay had nothing to do with it? But then, why did everybody always make jokes about he and the angel being… you know? Did people think that about Cas and him?

Charlie finally returned from the restroom to find Dean gaping after Team Free Will like a fish flopped onto the deck of a ship. He ducted into the men’s room himself, after, to splash some water on his face and hopefully wash away some of the mental images he’d accidentally come up with.

The first panel seemed to be a popular one, since there was already a line outside the door when Dean and Charlie got there. They still had a fair bit of time to wait before they could go inside, but Dean refused to budge. Charlie whiled away the minutes trying vainly to charge her tablet using a solar charger and the fluorescent light above them, since every outlet for miles had a group of nerds hovering protectively around it. Dean amused himself by going through the bag of random free shit he’d collected all morning (people were just giving stuff away here).
He was trying to decide the best place on his uniform to hide the little Batman symbol pin he’d nabbed when a heavy hand landed on his shoulder. He tensed and spun on his feet, reaching for the shield on his back in the same motion – and was quickly blinded by a flash of light.

He pulled back to throw a sloppy, disoriented punch but Charlie grabbed his arm before it could swing downward. She had to put her whole weight behind it, jumping onto his forearm and nearly toppling them both sideways. By the time Dean blinked the stars out of his eyes Charlie’d slumped back against the wall again and the blur in front of him resolved into a frowning Kevin, helmet tucked under his arm. He clapped him on the shoulder to steady him – a little gentler this time to make up for the metal on his hands – and another flash of light went off from behind his shoulder.

Did… did someone just take Dean’s picture? Twice? Without asking? That was so… rude.

He leaned a little to the left to see a couple of girls smiling eerily at him a few feet away. Kevin half turned as far as the armor would let him to wave at them, then leaned back to whisper in Dean’s ear. “Those girls want us to kiss, man. Help a bro out?”

“Excuse me?” Dean jerked back so quickly he bumped into Charlie, who was doing a pretty good impression of having swallowed her own tongue.

“Or hug or, I don’t know, stand close to each other so they can take pictures or something.”

Dean shook his head to dislodge the crazy, but Kevin was still talking.

“We don’t actually have to make out, I guess. It wouldn’t be so bad, kinda like spin the bottle in math club—”

He took Kevin by the shoulders, a hand on each spaulder, and shook him. “Kevin, I need you to look at me okay? How much sugar have you had? Have your drinks been with you the whole time? Do you need an adult? Christo, christo, christo.”

Kevin knocked Dean’s hands away. “It’s not like that, I’m fine. Look, they’re really nice and really cute. And…” He looked back at the girls, who giggled and waved, then leaned in closer to whisper in Dean’s ear. “I haven’t even talked to a girl since Channing got taken. I’m tired of being alone but I have no idea what to say to them. I’ve just been nodding and agreeing with everything they come up with. Do this for me and I’ll owe you big time. I’ll translate anything you put in front of me, no questions asked, and I won’t do mean things to your toothbrush anymore, I swear.” He held his arms out in a universal ‘hug me’ gesture. “Wingman? Please?”

Dean mentally added get a new toothbrush and put locks on his bedroom door to the list of things he needed to do after the con was over. He stepped a little further away and looked around. “Where’s Aaron?”

Kevin pointed over his shoulder. Aaron, being of actual normal height and the only one of them not wearing something shiny, had originally been hidden behind a very tall man dress as either a very colorful Gandalf or a very sedate Dumbledore. But the wizard shifted and Dean could see Aaron grinning widely and sharing what looked like a bag gummy worms with a couple other fans.

The Golem lurked just around the corner, a beatific smile on his own green-tinged face and the largest t-shirt Dean’d ever seen stretched tight across his shoulders. He still had no idea which doctor they’d been talking about back at the hotel (just that it wasn’t a sexy doctor) but the logo across the top and the picture of a phone booth underneath it seemed to have been the one Aaron was looking for. It made the Golem happy, anyway, so Dean assumed everything was all right in that particular neck of the woods.
Aaron saw him looking and raised the candy to his forehead in a salute. He yelled “science bros!” across the distance and Kevin waved back. One of the girls grinned evilly but the other continued to stare at Dean in a way that was really starting to creep him out. She held up her camera and flashed another hellishly bright picture.

Dean took a deep breath. “Kevin. I am not kissing you, okay? Not now, not ever. If you want to score with chicks, making out with another dude is not the way to do it.”

Charlie tapped him on the back with her stylus. “I dunno, Dean. There’s obviously a market for that sort of thing.”

“Not helping.” He turned back to Kevin, whose puppy eyes weren’t nearly as good as Sam’s. “Not a chance in hell. Good luck, soldier, ‘cause you’re on your own.” He clapped him on the slumping shoulders and sent him back to where the cluster of girls was waiting. (He also took a moment to admire the way the armor’s joints worked together as he moved, and how almost-silent the pistons in the calves were. Creepy Girl caught him looking and snapped another photo.)

Charlie shook her head and watched them fade into the crowd. “When fandom goes wild. I hope they don’t mess up any Q&As.”

Dean grunted and followed their progress down the hall until even the Golem’s towering height was impossible to distinguish from the dozens of other people milling around. In the distance, someone had gotten out an acoustic guitar and started singing about misty mountains. (Dean had enjoyed The Hobbit as a kid and tried reading Lord of the Rings in high school - because of Zeppelin, you know - but he hadn’t even made it through the first book. Sam had loved them, though, and the movies kicked all kinds of ass.)

Charlie nodded her head along to the tune. “You think it’s a good idea for those two to be by themselves? Those fangirls will eat Kevin alive. It’s a good death, don’t get me wrong, but a death all the same. I’m pretty sure he’s still a virgin.”

Dean just shook his head. “He knows what he’s getting into. If he wants to spend all weekend licking people because crazy girls tell him to than I say more power to him. The wards seem to be holding up okay, so that’s something.” He was about seventy-five percent sure they’d just looked evil and weren’t actually demons. Maybe sixty-forty. He should’ve thrown another christo their way.

The guitar player moved on to singing about taking his love and taking his land - and Dean jumped as the entire hall joined in. Every fan from the tall to the small raised their voices to the rafters, a wave of sound blossoming from one end of the massive room to the next. Everyone knew the lyrics without having to ask.

It was like some giant Disney musical where everyone was in on the choreography except him.

Charlie flung her hands in the air and swayed back and forth, her eyes closed in nigh religious reverence. Or possible o-face. She shouted the words at the top of her lungs.

“I don't care, I'm still free. You can't take the sky from me!”

Dean shrugged and flicked on his lighter. When in Rome.

Shortly after the sing-along (the chick next to him had been crying by the end of it; Dean did not
understand these people) the hall opened and everyone started filing into their seats. A bored convention center employee handed him a ticket to redeem for even more goodies after the panels were over.

As excited as he always was about free stuff, something had been eating at Dean. “Why the hell would someone want to see Iron Man and Captain America kiss?”

Charlie glanced at him from where she was scouting out the good seats. “They’re shippers, Dean.”

Shippers. He’d heard that somewhere before. A memory surfaced of his brother’s uncomfortable face lit by a computer screen. “As in Sam-slash-Dean... together.”

Oh. Oh, eww. “Shippers are in The Avengers, too? Those crazy bitches thought me and Sam were – ugh.” A full body shiver trailed down his spine. He might have thrown up in his mouth a little, but he manfully swallowed it down.

Charlie shrugged and claimed a chair in the exact center of the second row. She smiled victoriously. “People ship a lot of things, Dean, for a lot of reasons. You have to admit the two of you have a lot more codependency than your average siblings.”

“Wha – I – You-“

“Relax, I’m not saying you two are the real-life incest coffee commercial kids. I know he’s your hetero-lifemate. But other people – who don’t know you exist in real life, I might add – formed other opinions based on textual evidence and subtext.” Charlie grimaced and readjusted the zipper over her cleavage, moving things around so the metal didn’t pinch anything now that she was sitting down. Dean blushed even harder than he was already and looked away, tucking the shield carefully under his chair. “Don’t tell me you’ve never wanted someone to get with Doctor Sexy that the show never let happen?”

“Well, yeah. Nurse Stacey in season three.” Dean sighed. “They had a lot in common, since both of their parents were killed by the same guy. And she knew how he liked to run things; it was like they could read each other’s minds over that operating table. Plus, they were really hot together. Like, they used to have lunch outside on the patio and flirt constantly, but she was engaged to a neurosurgeon when she first started working at Seattle Mercy Hospital so nothing could happen until Doc caught him cheating on her with another nurse. Then they discovered Nurse Stacey had a brain tumor and died in surgery.” God, that’d been a hard episode to watch. Doctor Sexy should never have had to operate on someone he loved so much.

“I hate to break it to you, Dean, but you ship Nurse Stacey and Doctor Sexy. Welcome to fandom. The handbasket to hell departs every ten minutes.”

“But… Nurse Stacey’s a chick. You can’t ship two people if one of them’s a chick, can you?”

Charlie leaned backwards in her chair to look at him more clearly, the expression on her face clearly assuming he’d gone completely insane. “Dean, there’s a difference between slashing and shipping, you know that, right? Slashing is when two characters, usually of the same sex, are presented as having interest in each other that the original media never developed. Shipping is a shortened verb form of relationship, as in: you want them to be in one.”

He blinked, brain working overtime to assimilate the new information.

Charlie sighed and fiddled with the connections of the Widow’s Bite looped around her glove. (Dean had helped rig them so they’d spit electricity like a taser if she twisted her wrist the right way. He
wondered if the weapons check-in folks had thought to look for that one.) Around them the seats were filling up fast. Soon there wouldn’t be an empty chair in the house. He craned his neck to look behind him, then pushed the cowl down to see better, just in case his eyes were playing tricks. But no, there was definitely something off about the audience.

“Uh, Charlie? Where are all the guys?” In front and behind them were all women, some in costume and some not, though almost all of them were talking animatedly to one another. Dean hadn’t actually seen another testicle-owner within twenty feet of his current location.

“I don’t know, I guess most guys aren’t secure enough to talk about this sort of thing. That’s why I’m glad you decided to attend this panel with me. I’d feel weird if Hawkgarth or Sam stuck around. I mean, Garth seems cool and Sam could probably fake it but you know he’d really be uncomfortable about the whole thing. Plus, I think you might actually learn something here, so bonus.”

It was getting hard for Dean to breathe. He hadn’t had a panic attack in years, but somehow he felt one looming on the horizon. “So what was the name of this panel, again?”

“I knew it. You didn’t read the guide they gave you, did you?” She rolled her eyes and patted him on the leg, like she would a confused and slightly dim child that’d wandered into the girls’ locker room. She fished a pamphlet out of her belt and pointed to a highlighted entry.

_Homoerotic Subtext in Modern Media: Why Do We Think Kirk Wants the D?_

Oh, god. Dean was definitely in danger of a panic attack. He concentrated on his breathing – in and out, steady and deep – and fished underneath him for the shield so he could get the hell out of there. Where the hell was it? Had somebody taken it? What the _fuck_?

His hand had just closed around cool metal when Charlie leaned towards him casually, as if she were talking about the weather. “I heard Steve Bacic is going to be signing autographs after his panel is over. It’d be a shame to miss it ‘cause we got out of line and couldn’t find a seat. Wouldn’t it be a shame, Dean?”

He hovered in a half-crouch for a minute, wobbling with one hand on his exit strategy and the other flailing for balance. The lights started to dim and a small man approached the stage to a round of applause.

Dean flopped back into his chair. The shield clanged hollowly against one of the metal legs. “That’s dirty pool, Charlie.”

She grinned. “Maybe. But it worked, didn’t it? Now shut up and let me hear this.”

Dean pulled the cowl over his face to hide his burning cheeks. _Son of a bitch._

The little man turned out to be a professor of sociology who’d written a book about how people viewed themselves in relationship to modern media, and why subtext – whether intentionally included by the original creators or not – was translated into text by certain fans of said media. But first he had to establish what subtext even was.

“Subtext,” he said, “is any content not explicitly seen ‘onscreen’ discussed by characters or a narrator. Sometimes this can be knowledge the audience develops over time, like how a character
reacts to something based on past experience. Sometimes it’s a metaphor used by the creators to imply something political, emotional, or artistic. Sometimes it’s simply the way two people look at each other.”

The giant screen behind the professor lit up with black and white faces, clips from old movies Dean’d never seen before. They cycled through so fast he could only make out brief moments, two people holding hands in a park, a pretty girl smiling, two men glaring dramatically before a fight. It ended on the fuzzy, frozen image of two hands just barely brushing against each other.

“It’s all about connection, isn’t it? The chemistry between two characters onscreen can be a tangible thing, a weight pulling everyone along. Whether it’s the actors themselves wanting to bone – if you’ll pardon the expression – or the characters experiencing so profound an emotion together, be it lust or love or even friendship and gratitude, that for the time they are up there we feel it, too.

“The simple fact of the matter is that our popular culture belongs to us, though not in a strictly financial sense. The movies and television we watch become ingrained in how we see ourselves and the world around us. That’s what culture is, after all. But our culture reflects our fiction, too.”

The screen changed to brief clips from more recognizable films and TV shows, shifting from black and white into oversaturated color.

“Despite how often Hollywood is perceived as being progressive, producers and directors are well aware that certain points of view just don’t sell well. Homosexuality has always been one of those tricky things. We know it’s always been around. We know it’s a fact of life, a sliding scale of perception. But until very recently, no one talked about it in a positive context. Hell, no one talked about it.

“We are trained from a young age to look for subtext. Why is this puppet sad? What do you imagine that dog is thinking? Sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye. Where are you going through the woods by yourself, little girl? Is it any wonder that as adults we look for it in our stories, too? And if something has been subjugated under society for so long, then where else should we look for it but in the subtext of our lives?”

Dean became very aware of Charlie sitting next to him in the darkened auditorium, her arm just a few inches from his. He thought of her growing up reading Tolkien and Harry Potter and not seeing anyone like herself. Of a little red-headed girl wanting to rescue the princes and ride into the sunset, and not being able to find that story on a library bookshelf. He thought about those girls Kevin was mooning after, and again he remembered those two guys from the Supernatural Con, whose names he couldn’t remember for the life of him. They’d seemed happy together. The books gave them that. In a roundabout kind of way, Dean had given them that.

He thought about why people enjoyed dressing up as someone different, at the pride he’d found in creating the armor and the shield and getting them just right.

“That’s one reason for slash in its current context. Of course, another is the thought of two sexy dudes doing sexy things, and that’s also a valid cultural point. Another is the continued misrepresentation and subjugation of women. Don’t let the bald spot and testicles fool you, ladies, I am a fella. So I’ll never know what your lives are like. But I have been trained – like you – to read our media, to interpret our culture via stories. And what I see doesn’t give me a lot of hope.

“While there are a few strong heroines available – Buffy and a couple other action heroes spring to mind, though this isn’t meant to limit the definition of ‘strong’ to mere physicality – men outnumber women in central casting ten to one. If creators spend more time and effort making sure male roles are complex and interesting than females ones then why shouldn’t they expect audiences to become
invested in their relationships?

“Even canonical love interests aren’t enough to stop the shippers. They see what they see, and interpret it how their culture tells them to.

“Think about some of the most commonly slashed characters. Kirk and Spock. Jim and Blair. Sherlock and Watson. Just as examples. Think about some of their storylines. Now think, if you can, about how those stories would have been different if one of them had been cast as a woman. Take your time, I’ll wait.

“Do you honestly believe that Star Trek would have ended without at least one human/romulan kiss? How long until Jim and Blair get married and move to the suburbs? Mary Morstan? Hah! Sherlock’s gonna kick her ass!

“Here’s another example for you: Mulder and Scully. It wasn’t a case of would they get together but when would they get together. And personally, I don’t find that certainty interesting at all. It takes away the tension. It dulls the connection between them that the slashing keeps alive.”

The screen flickered back to the original picture of two touching hands. As the professor spoke, the image pulled back into a single frame of film.

“We have to ask ourselves: Is it connection we’re looking for… or is it context?”

The still frame shot to life, four seconds giving life to an old story. In the foreground the two main characters walked along a sidewalk, a man talking animatedly and a woman looking at him adoringly. And in the background, across the street and almost out of frame, two women passed each other going the opposite way. Without stopping their elegant stride they clapped hands, fingers pressing briefly together before they moved on again. One of them looked back; the other didn’t.

The film paused again, zooming in on that woman’s face. The image was too blurry for Dean to make out her expression, and he felt a physical ache in his heart for what might have been captured there.

The professor turned his back on his audience to watch the clip. Then he shook his head and looked out across the room. “I don’t know about you,” he said, “but that’s the story I want to hear.”

Dean sat quietly during the question and answer session following the presentation. He felt stunned, struck dumb to his chair like a moth with a pin through its guts, and he didn’t really have any idea why. Someone asked about the history of the clip they’d been shown but Dean’s brain just kept stumbling along a cliff face with a bunch of really nasty rocks at the bottom.

What if Doctor Sexy had been a woman? She’d be unbearable hot, that’s what. But would they have shown her dating all those interns and ex-patients, or would that have made her a slut and someone the network wouldn’t want to sponsor? Would there still have been all of that tension between she and Nurse Stacey?

He decided to give himself a break and focus on imagining what chick-Sexy and Nurse Stacey would look like together. He supposed some slash could be a good thing, after all. So long as it didn’t involve him and his brother. Or angel. ‘Cause that was just… weird.

Dean tuned back in when people started moving around him, one crowd leaving and the room filling
with another. More people stayed than left and he was actually glad he’d sat through the other panel, despite how weirded out he felt. Looked like he wasn’t the only one excited to see Doctor Sexy.

He flattened a hand over the cowl, smoothing out any lumps from his hair. Oh hell. Steve Bacic was going to see him dressed up as Captain America. He didn’t know why he was getting nervous; it wasn’t like Steve knew him personally or anything, or would even talk to him about the costume.

But still. He was going to see Steve Bacic, while dressed up as Steve Rogers. It was almost too surreal for words.

And then he noticed a certain similarity to the people getting comfortable in the seats around them. There was a lot of flannel. Like, a *lot* of flannel. And trucker hats. He turned his head just in time to see Team Free Will (girl version) sit down a few rows behind them, claiming the last three seats together.

The screen hanging behind the stage switched over from the professor’s last slide to a very familiar title logo. Charlie hung her head and refused to look him in the eye and *Dean wanted to throw a chair at her head.*

“Okay, so I didn’t want to tell you because I knew you’d be pissed. But I also knew that you’d want to be here more and I’m hoping this is actually gonna be a good thing, you know, shake up the canon a little bit so it’s not really the same—“

“Charlie!”

She curled inward a little more and a cascade of red fell down to cover her face. “They’re turning Carver Edlund’s books into a TV show. It airs this fall. They’re premiering the trailer after a Q&A but before the autograph session. I’m sorry, Dean, please don’t hate me and remember to breathe.”

He had a hard time doing either one of those things considering how hard he was clenching his jaw. “And Doctor Sexy?”

“Has a lead role. It’s actually kind of a big deal. There’s some concern online that he’s too old to play the character so everyone’s nervous they’re gonna screw it up. There’s only about a six year difference, though.” She touched him, lightly, on the shoulder. He couldn’t actually feel it through the suit. “Are you breathing?”

He was breathing just fine. He was taking in big lungfulls of air, forcing oxygen into his starving body very deliberately. It was the only thing keeping him from running, or maybe using the shield as a battering ram to tear down the motherfucking stage. “Who’s he playing?”

“Dean…”

“*Who*, Charlie? And don’t you lie to me.”

Her hand skittered away to settle on the pulse he could see beating in her neck. “You, Dean. He’s playing you.”

A man walked onto the stage above them to the polite applause of the audience – just some normal looking guy. A director or writer or someone as equally dull as they were important. Dean wouldn’t know who came on after him, since by then he’d already forced himself to dislodge the shield from under his chair and calmly walk out of the room, leaving Charlie calling after him from her spot in the second row.
Sam found him first, slumped and sitting against the wall at their afternoon meeting place behind the DC booth. (Aaron’s idea of humor, apparently.) Dean wobbled the shield back and forth on the ground in front of him, every so often making a sound like a wah-wah pedal and freaking out the comic nerds hovering nearby.

He wondered if the trailer had been any good.

He didn’t regret walking out, just wondered. Seeing his dad alive, seeing his mom. Watching himself make all the same dumb mistakes over and over. Watching Bobby and Ellen and Jo and Sam and all the others die again… Just the knowledge that it’d happened at all made his stomach go sour; he didn’t think he could take knowing someone else had to live through his life, even if it was just a bunch of actors playing pretend.

This cosplay thing was a fucked up double-edged sword, all right.

His brother leaned against the wall next to him with a sigh. Or at least, Dean assumed it was his brother based on the Nordic boots that filled up a corner of his vision. He supposed there were other Thors running around the convention somewhere.

“Hey, Dean. Where’s Charlie?” And yep, that was Sam, all right. He sounded out of breath and a little tired, like he’d jogged to get there.

“She’s back at the thing. Where’s Garth?”

“Um. I actually lost him back at the corndog vender a couple hours ago. I was hoping you’d seen him.”

“Nope. Do they serve booze here? I need to scrub something from my brain.”

“No, I don’t think so. What’s going on?” He grunted and his feet twisted a little. It was enough to make Dean finally look up; the blonde hair made Sam’s flushed and sweaty face even more worrisome. Dean had no idea how to tell him their lives were becoming a show on the CW.

“It’s not important. You feeling okay? Maybe you should sit down.”

Sam was working on untying the knot holding the hammer in place on his belt. He gave a mighty yank on the leather and gusted out a breath afterward. “Yeah, in a minute, it’s just – this thing’s really heavy.”

“Heavy?” An evil thought bubbled up in his mind, a scene from a video Charlie’d made them watch one time. “Why, Captain Hammer, is it getting hard to hold on to?”

“Very funny.”

“The hammer is your penis.”

“Oh, like I haven’t heard that one twelve times today already.” The knot came undone and the hammer dropped onto the floor with a mighty boom. Dean jumped and slid against the wall; something in the next booth over fell down and one of the comic nerds cried out.

Dean had felt the vibrations of the thing hitting the ground travel through his bones. It was like a mini earthquake had gone off a foot next to his butt. Or like a miniature Lars Ulrich was tuning up under
the carpet.

Sam sighed and his breathing slowly returned to normal. He slid down the wall, arms and legs akimbo and a look of relieved bliss smoothing out his troubled expression.

“Jesus.” Dean collected the shield from where it’d skidded away and leaned back next to his brother. “If it was that heavy why’d you bring it, man?”

Sam shrugged. “Protection. And it looked good with my costume.”

Dean lowered his voice so no one would overhear. “I still can't believe you managed to smuggle in a real war hammer. How’d you pull that off, anyway?”

Sam didn’t feel the need for tact – or had been getting way too into playing Thor to worry about his Indoor Voice – and spoke at a regular volume. “They couldn’t lift it.”

“What?”

He grinned. “I set it on the table for testing and the weapons inspectors couldn’t lift it. They brought in a couple security guards and even some guys in suits. All of them tried and no dice. They had a little pow-wow, put a tag on it, said well played, sir, and in I went.”

“Bullshit!”

“Hand to god.” Sam smirked and put a hand over his own heart. Very funny, douche.

“Did you put magnets in the bottom or something?” Dean fit his hands around the handle and hoisted the hammer as high as he could… which turned out to be a few inches of the ground before it fell back with a determined clang. (Something else fell over in the booth; this time the comic guy cursed.) He tried to lift it again but only managed to make himself out of breath. The thing absolutely refused to budge.

Damn. No wonder Sam was tired after lugging it around all day.

Sam watched his struggles with the hammer closely. “You remember that auction last year? The one where Crowley tried to sell his soul and the guy wouldn’t take it?”

He nodded. That particular memory was a bright spot in an otherwise horrible couple of hours. Hell, a horrible couple of months.

“There was a little squirrely guy there who’d bought Thor’s hammer. Things went down and I used it to squash him. Seemed dangerous to leave it lying around so I stashed it in the trunk under the axes.”

Well, the extra weight explained why his rear tires had gone bad six months before they were supposed to. But – wait a minute. “Are you telling me this is the real deal? Like, the actual Thor’s hammer? This is Mewmew?”

“Mjolnir.”

“Whatsoever. You can lift Thor’s hammer? Don’t you have to be worthy of that? Like Excalibur but for big dudes?”

Sam shrugged and pushed the hammer closer to the wall so he could stretch his legs out properly without bumping into it. That was just rubbing it in.
My little brother is worthy of wielding Meeowner, Dean thought. And he’d been proud when Sammy got on the honor roll.

He watched the comic nerds milling around, no idea of the glory hiding in plain sight that was his little brother. And then Dean got the best idea he’d had all day, maybe the best idea he’d ever had. Like, the type of idea that meant he’d probably be going back to hell for having it but was totally worth doing anyway. The most horrible and hilarious prank of all pranks.

“Dude. You’re carrying around Thor’s hammer, dressed as Thor, at a sci-fi convention surrounded by nerds. Grab your magic knob, Sam. We're about to be bigger trolls than Deadpool.”

Turned out? The only other person at the convention strong enough to wield Thor’s hammer was a little girl, maybe three or four, wearing a Darth Vader helmet under a pink tiara. She booped Sam on the nose with the hammer while her parents laughed and Dean videotaped the whole thing with his phone.

Combined with everyone else’s epic failures he was pretty sure it would be a Youtube sensation if he ever posted it. Not that he ever would, or anything. Unless he had a reason to.

Sam hadn’t said anything about not using this as blackmail, now did he?

Aside from Darth Princess, watching people take the hammer from Sam and immediately drop it still hadn’t lost its charm twenty minutes later when the rest of the group started trickling in. First Kevin and Aaron, both without the gaggle of girls but wearing… flower crowns? (Dean really, really didn’t want to know.) They were lugging bags of stuff, having forgone the day’s panels to demolish Charlie’s mad money. Or rather, the Golem was lugging it, looking less like the Hulk and more like a really pissed off butler with every step. He was wearing a flower crown, too.

Garth strolled in a couple minutes later, somehow maneuvering through the chaos without looking up from where his nose was pressed into the spine of a paperback. Sam saw the cover before Dean… and swung the hammer until it pointed dangerously close to Garth’s forehead. “Where. Did you get. That?”

“Geeze, overreact much?” For a guy with a mystical war hammer shoved in his face, Garth was remarkably mellow. But then, that was Garth. He pushed the hammer away and went back to reading. “These guys were selling them at some booth somewhere, I dunno. Hey, Dean? How’d you know to come back for Sam when the demon killed Jessica? Did you just see the fire or something?”

Dean’s stomach dropped down into his shoes. “What?”

Garth flipped the book in the air a little, a goofy smile on his face. “I know it’s stupid but I have this thing where I always read the ending first, that way I know if it’s worth my time before I get invested, and hey—“

Dean snatched the book away from him, sure now of what he’d find. And there it was, in all its airbrushed glory. Supernatural: Pilot. Except this time there was a sticker on the corner. Now a television series on The CW!
Sam leaned over Dean’s shoulder before he could rip the thing off and throw it back into Mordor where it belonged. “TV show? What TV show?”

Dean sighed. “Yeah, that’s what I wanted to delete from my brain earlier. Doctor Sexy’s starring me in a made-for-Lifetime special.” He looked up at Sam. “I didn’t stick around to see who was playing you. Sorry.”

“Stephen Amell, actually, if you are who the young lady says you are. It’s an experimental casting. Are you Sam and Dean Winchester?”

Dean knew that voice. Raspy but soft, like a mouthful of whiskey on a hot day. He turned, slowly –

Doctor Sexy was standing behind him. No, Dean hurriedly corrected himself, Steve Bacic was standing behind him. His hair was shorter, clothes artfully casual – no white coat or cowboy boots – but Dean still recognized him. He grinned, eyes crinkling in humor, and Dean’s heart fluttered.

Jesus. Get a grip, man. Dean cleared his throat a couple times but still couldn’t do anything more constructive than glance up through his eyelashes and smile like an idiot.

“Uh, Sam and Dean? From the Supernatural books? The redhead told me they were written about you.”

“Of course they were! With enough monsters thrown in so they couldn’t sue for libel, naturally. The story’s the same. More or less. Right, guys?” Charlie suddenly appeared next to Steve Bacic, a bright smile on her face but panic in her eyes. She nudged Sam and he nodded on reflex, his mouth hanging open.

Bacic’s eyebrows pinched in the middle. “I’m still not sure I believe that, actually. But your friend was very convincing.”

“And not once did I lie. I told him you were looking forward to meeting him under Sexier conditions – you know, not sexy sexy, but like Doctor Sexy – and that I’d sprung the last panel on you without telling you first. And you’d had negative experiences with the writer of the books so you freaked and ran off. And that you never even got your goodie bag from the panel. So… tah dah!” She waved jazz hands in front of Bacic’s face. “I brought you a goodie bag. Apparently, the truth shall set you free. Who knew, right?”

Bacic was frowning now, glancing between Sam and Dean. “Are they all right?”

Charlie deflated, pinching the skin between her eyebrows. “God, I hope so. I’m a sucky Con Mommy.”

Bacic patted her awkwardly on the shoulder.

Standing there struck dumb beside his brother it finally occurred to Dean that this was a real person. That there’d been a real person inside the mask of Doctor Sexy all along… or maybe vice versa… and Dean was being a real jerk by not acknowledging that.

A bead of sweat tickled down the back of his cowl and into the crease on the liner around his neck, itching the whole way down. And that was a good thought: What would Captain America do?

Dean swallowed and held out his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Bacic. I’m a big fan of your work.” He took a deep breath. “It’s meant a lot to me over the years to watch your show, and…” He swallowed, hard, against the thickness in his neck. “I hope you’ll do just as well on your next project. There’s a lot of chances to screw up being me, as I’m sure you’ll figure out.”
Bacic smiled again, softer around the edges this time. “Thank you. And please, call me Steve.”

They shook hands… and Dean’s brain did the mental equivalent of flipping tables. It was like there was an imaginary teenager in a band shirt throwing up her hands and screaming, then crying, then screaming again. Dean hadn’t even thought ‘squee’ was a real sound until that very moment.

He was on a first name basis with Steve Bacic.

Don’t faint, don’t faint, you’re Captain America, don’t faint.

Steve glanced around at the others, all of whom suddenly had much more important things to do than stare at the two of them. He rolled up his leather sleeve to check his watch, a shiny silver mess with a big face. “I have a press conference to get to, but… okay, I’m just gonna admit to having an ulterior motive for agreeing to accompany young Miss Romanoff, here. I am a huge fan of The Avengers, and yours is the best cosplay I’ve ever seen. I’ve been watching you guys walk around all day and practically drooling. Your costumes, the way you all wear them, the hammer – the shield – you’re all absolutely perfect. I was hoping you wouldn’t mind getting a picture or two with me? My wife would freak out completely if I sent them to her.”

Dean’s breath stuttered a little at the mention of a wife but it rebooted itself fast enough that he was pretty sure no one noticed. He’d never thought of Doctor Sexy as having a wife somewhere, as having a family. As being… well, as being Steve Bacic. He’d built him up as something … fancier. Something impossible. But in the end he was just a guy with a weird job that Dean liked to watch during marathons of TNT.

All eight of them piled in close for the photo, arranged in slightly awkward superhero poses. Steve was in the middle, naturally, and he just smiled. One of the DC nerds takes their picture with Steve’s phone – and then a stranger stopped walking by to snap a picture, and another. They broke apart before there was a flash mob of cameras (“Get it, Sam, flash mob?”).

Steve asked Dean for a couple pictures with just the two of them, and Dean – freaking out on the inside - tossed his phone to Sam so he could get in on the action. There was no way he was coming out of this encounter without something he could frame and put on his dresser.

The first photo Steve asked for was a ‘Dean’ face – Dean just stared at the camera, at a loss but thinking badass thoughts. Steve leaned in close to make sure they both fit into the shot and just… smoldered, was the best Dean could describe it.

So that was what blue steel looked like in real life. Huh.

The second setup was one Dean’d had a lot of practice with that day; he posed as Cap, shield in the air between them. Steve smiled after he checked the pictures and tapped his phone’s screen a couple times. Before he could put it away it vibrated softly. He laughed and showed Dean the screen.

He’d sent away the picture of Dean-as-Captain-America along with the text: your two favorite steves.
The reply underneath it, presumably from Bacic’s wife, simply said: hgurwhignlasifo asshole.

Dean could appreciate the frustration she must have been feeling; it was really hard to keystash when predictive text was turned on.

Before he could pass it back the phone vibrated again and a new text appeared in the window. You are dead to me. Say goodbye to the children and dog.

Another text popped up quickly after that. Jesus. Tell me those come in a goodie bag at the con. Maybe sell them at the marvel booth? Bring me one home and I won’t change the locks.
And still another. *You two look good together. Is he nice? Shame he wasn’t around when it was Research Time, eh? ;); ;)*

Steve yanked the phone away, thumb quickly locking the screen. He laughed nervously. "Sorry about that. We’re, uh, my wife, she wrote a book about — you know what, she's just messing with me. Sorry you had to read all that."

Dean tipped his head and smiled crookedly, an *aw shucks* grin casually employed most days to sweet-talk old ladies into telling him secrets about murder and monsters. Of course, in his youth it’d worked to sweet-talk *young* ladies out of all sorts of other secrets –

Steve was staring at him, flicking his gaze between Dean’s mouth and his eyes and – damn it, Dean still had the fucking cowl on. He yanked it down and brushed a hand over his hair, sure it looked a hot mess. He licked his lips – because they were dry, that’s all, just *really dry* all of a sudden – then cleared his throat and ducked his head again, rubbing at his neck through the fabric gathered there. (He was just one big ball of awkward today, wasn’t he.)

“Damn.” Steve’s voice was deeper than usual, just this side of too rough to be pleasant. “The Winchester thing may be debatable but you really do make a good Steve Rogers.”

Dean raised his head to see Steve smiling back at him, his eyes dark and molten – like in the episode ‘Heart Attack’ where Doctor Sexy pushed Nurse Stacey against the wall in the freight elevator and told her how much he wanted to…

Oh. Ohhhhhhh.

Dean was Nurse Stacey in that scenario.

He… wasn’t sure how he felt about that. But he did remember the lecture from earlier; if the story changed because a woman was substituted for one of the characters, then what happened when a man made the change? Was this subtext or text?

Sexy – Bacic – *Steve’s* smile grew impossibly bashful for someone who looked the way he did and he shrugged a shoulder. “My wife’s a sexuality historian. She just published a book on how to navigate threesomes and what they mean for established relationships.” He looked back up at Dean and raised an eyebrow. “Does anything about that bother you?”

Oh, crap. Text.


Sam coughed, loudly, from what seemed like a mile away. It jolted Dean from the labyrinth his thoughts were navigating but not quite far enough to present an exit strategy. “Well, I’m gonna go stand awkwardly somewhere else for awhile. It's been an honor, Mr. Bacic, don’t be offended if I never watch your show. Dean?” He paused, shook his head, and then patted him on the shoulder. “Good luck.”

Sam didn’t look Dean in the eye before walking over to where the others were blatantly ogling Dean and Steve standing so close together. Of course, it probably would have helped if Dean had looked away from Steve first. Or, you know, blinked.

A tiny electric beeping filled the air, and Steve looked at his watch again, turning off the alarm. "Actually, I really do need to get going before I miss my ride to the press conference and Kripke’s head explodes."
Dean, suspecting he was hovering on the edges of shock. Having no idea what a Kripke was, he said the first thing that popped into his head—“Like in *Scanners*?”—then smacked himself in the forehead, the glove *thwacking* against his slightly damp skin.

Steve laughed a little, shaking his head. “Exactly.” He fished in his jacket pocket and pulled out a white business card. He hesitated a moment and then passed it over to Dean. Their fingers brushed as he drew away. “That’s my agent’s number. If you’re ever up Canada-way, look me up. I’d love to… have your opinion on the character.”

And then Steve was backing away, taking his smoldering eyes with him. He waved at the other Avengers as he went by; Aaron, Kevin, and Garth were flipping through the pages of *Pilot* and looking alternately confused and amused. Sam was tapping angrily at his phone and Dean was pretty sure he was googling the actor playing him on the show.

Aaron clapped his hands together and let out a sigh. “Well! I still have no idea who that was but it was certainly the most entertaining thing I’ve seen all day.”

Garth grinned and peeked at Dean from under his bangs. “You could say that again. Good thing those pants aren’t actually spandex, huh, Dean?”

Dean rolled his eyes. *Here it comes.*

“I dunno. He could probably use a little stretch right about now.”

Sam punched Kevin’s shoulder, frowning, and Dean just rolled his eyes harder.

The Golem, who’d been reading an old Asimov novel in the corner and doing a pretty good job of ignoring them up until that point, said: “That’s to'eivah.”

Aaron flinched and turned to glare at him. “Oh my — I don’t believe you. How can you be so offensive?”

“Yeah!” Garth put the book down—finally—and frowned at the Golem. “I have no idea what you just said but it sounded mean. Love is love, man. You gotta hold on to it when it gets here. It doesn’t matter what shape its genitals take.”

“Oh god, don’t call them that!” Dean clenched his eyes shut, really not needing that mental image. “Can we please stop talking about hypothetical parts and stuff? There was no—nothing happened, okay?” And now Dean was uncomfortable. He walked a few feet away from the guys and leaned against another section of wall. When his back hit the plaster the shield clanged dully; the vibrations rippled through the meat of his shoulders and sunk into his skull.

Dean really didn’t want to feel bad about Steve. About… liking Steve. It wasn’t like he was gonna pick out curtains or anything—the guy was married, and *ew*. But now he actually *did* want to make a road trip up to Canada sometime.

You know what? Everyone had an exception to the rule, didn’t they? Doctor Sexy and Steve Bacic could be his. That made sense. Dean could be okay with that.

Charlie sidled over to lean next to him. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the show. I just wanted everybody to have fun for once.”

Dean shrugged and ran his hand through her hair, messing up the stylized curls she’d been playing with all day and generating enough static cling for Sam to harness with the power of Mewmew. She laughed and swatted him back. He supposed he could forgive her, just this once.
“So,” she said, carefully tugging on a knot right above her ear. Steve Bacic, huh? Wow.”

“Right? I can’t believe that really just happened.”

“Yeah. You just got objectified by a man who made a living being called *Doctor Sexy*. I don’t know whether to feel bad or proud for you.”

He took a deep breath and let it out again. “Go with proud. I’ve decided he’s my exception to the rule.”

Charlie – quick, smart Charlie – caught on right away. She grinned and smacked him on the arm. “Nicely done, Cap. My exception’s Data. The lieutenant not the information designation. I mean, I know he’s an android and a fictional character but damn, can you imagine having that synthetic skin touch you aaaaaall over? I mean, *hello*. And thanks to Tasha Yar we know he came anatomically correct and preprogrammed, if you know what I mean. Oh, *Tasha Yar*. Mmm. Now there’s a threesome I wouldn’t mind a sexuality historian publishing.”

“Gross, Charlie. I don’t want to hear about your imaginary sexcapades.”

“Yes, you do.” She tucked the frizzy strands behind her ear. “I’m glad he turned out to be a nice guy. He’s Canadian, you know, just lived up to the stereotype. And good thing, too, ‘cause if he was a dick I was going to hold his credit score hostage until he agreed to meet you. This whole indecent proposal thing turned out much easier.”

“Mm hmm. Still, good job having a plan B.”

“Yeah.”

Aaron’s shout was loud enough to cut through the throng of people beginning to make their way past the team’s meeting spot and into the great hall. Dean looked behind him to find Aaron practically nose to nose with the Golem (who was still sitting on the carpet). He still had no idea what to'eivah meant, but it was certainly pissing off their resident Bruce Banner.

“This isn’t the dark ages, Clayface!” he shouted. "There are certain things the community has no right to control. You can’t just go around *punishing* people for something they can’t help in the first place.”

“Of course I can,” said the Golem, deep voice echoing around them. “It’s what I was built for.”

“No, it’s not! Are you stoned? Too much BBC rot your brain away? You were created to *protect*, not to *punish*. I don’t care if it violates the laws or not, you do not have the right to hurt people. Especially innocent people.”

The Golem stood, all eight feet of him looming tall and forbidding. “Is that an order, rabbi?”

Dean was just about to throw the shield – nothing like trial by fire – when Charlie muscled her way between them, pointy elbows forcing them to gain some breathing room. Forcing Aaron to, anyway.

“All right, all right. Calm down, geeze. This is obviously a more complicated discussion than we’re capable of ending right this very second. Aaron, think about when your golem was made, what he’s been through. Stuff like this has to be hard for him to understand. *Help* him understand it, not just yell at him.” She turned to the Golem. “And… Golem-who-really-needs-a-name-guy. Quit being an insensitive jerkface. What would the Doctor do?” The Golem blinked, looking down at her. “Do you think he’d want to punish Captain Jack? Or River?”
Aaron was looking sheepish, but also mulishly stubborn. “He hasn’t seen Eleven yet.”

Charlie visibly regrouped. “All right. What about me? Do you think I deserve to be punished? Do you think I’m wrong?” They were all quiet, watching the Golem’s face go very still. Charlie didn’t even blink from where she was staring him down. “Any being able to travel through space and time has got to learn to accept diversity. To embrace it. So ask yourself, whenever you get confused or angry: What Would The Doctor Do?”

“Uh, I’m not sure that’s the best role model for—“

“Shut up, Garth.”

“Shutting up.”

The Golem’s shoulders sank slowly, until his whole body sagged with them. He nodded once and looked back to Aaron. “We shall discuss this later, rabbi, as I have been given much to consider. For now, I shall abide by your rules.”

Charlie let out a breath, her own body drooping from the stress. “Good. Now.” She adjusted the fit of the catsuit, tugging on the shoulders and plumping up her boobs so they fit correctly in her bra. (Dean felt momentarily horrified that he was familiar enough with it to recognize the gesture.) “We’ve got a costume contest to win. Are you two in or out?”

Once they’d discussed religious homophobia (apparently) and Chuck’s horrible writing style, there really wasn’t a reason not to spring for overpriced pizza on the way to the contest. They certainly had time to finish it off while waiting in line to take the stage; there must’ve been fifty or sixty people in front of them.

As each entry walked through the red curtain and out onto the main stage there was a roar from the crowd, hundreds of people cheering and whistling for their favorites. Everyone got two minutes on the stage to impress the judges (the Chewbacca dude and a bunch of random people Dean didn’t know).

While the others made last minute adjustments to their costumes, Dean developed an entrance strategy. They even practiced a little bit, ducking and weaving without actually going anywhere.

The closer they got to the curtain the more excited he became. He’d thought he’d be nervous, standing onstage in front of all those people, but when it got down to it he’d seen worse. What did he have to fear from a room full of strangers? Unless one of them was randomly a demon – which they’d taken precautions against – everything was cool.

And everything was cool. So very, very cool.

Each of them took their turn taking the stage one at a time (except for Aaron and the Golem, who went together). They showed off their weapons and their gear. Charlie’s wrists crackled with electricity and Garth stalked the stage, shooting invisible arrows at targets in the distance. Kevin prowled across the stage, a badass, repulsors and arc reactor glowing. (The armor was beautiful in the flashes of light, sleek and shiny and oh so dangerous.) Dean mock-fought a battle with only his fists and his shield, cutting down monsters in his mind. The Golem bellowed with the rage of its creation. And Sam... Sam called down the lightning.
They ended in a knot posed at the center of the stage, a little bit of smoke blowing around them and the rafters still mostly intact. The real Team Free Will. Defenders of the world that the world would never know.

Dean might have gotten a little dramatic in the waiting line. He’d had a hard day, it was a reflex.

The crowd erupted as soon as the first Avenger took the stage and didn’t stop until the lights dimmed and the next contestant shuffled out. *Good luck following that one, Waldo,* Dean thought, and followed his team off the stage and ducked around the weapons inspector making a beeline in their direction.

They were all still hyped up from the show, even after being stopped in the hallway for a million and one photos, so nighttime plans were flung about and discarded quickly in three different conversations at once. Aaron and Kevin volunteered to take the Golem back to the hotel... though Dean suspected they were actually planning to meet with a certain flower crown-making group of ladies. Or maybe just to play video games on the hotel TV; it was hard to tell with those two.

Charlie, in between giving Dean a panic attack and her duty as Con Mommy, somehow managed to score an invite to a party at Jewel Staite’s hotel room. The only time she hadn’t been with him had been during the *Supernatural* panel and the bathroom. He couldn’t quite picture it – who picked someone up in a bathroom? She left them on the street outside the convention center with a determined glint in her eye, killer boots on her feet, and a catsuit on her ass. Dean had a feeling it was going to be one hell of a party.

Sam shook his head and watched her go, then turned and headed for the hotel. “Looks like it’s just you and me tonight.”

“Um. Actually, I* may* have made a previous commitment.”

“Seriously? You got a date, too, in the middle of all this? Other than Steve Bacic and his wife?”

“No technically.” Dean felt heat rising in his cheeks – *again* – and fiddled with the cowl. “They’re showing anime on the big screen from eight to eleven.” He wiggled his eyebrows and leered. “No admission under twenty-one.”

Sam just laughed and shook his head. “Fine. Enjoy your weird tentacle porn. I’ll text you when they call my cell and tell us we’ve won the contest. In the meantime, I’m worn out and gonna go to bed. *Alone.*”

“Uh huh, I know what you’re gonna do in bed. Polish your hammer and watch normal porn.”

“Ugh, gross! Maybe I will!”

The crossed the street in silence, two of a dozen or so people leaving the comicon. Dean turned to watch the convention center shrink behind them as they walked, the electric lights never really fading from the sky. “These nerds aren’t so bad, are they Sam? I mean, some of them have serious body odor issues, but underneath that they’re actually pretty okay.”

Sam nodded, wearily lugging Mewmew on his shoulder. “Yeah. There’s nothing wrong with liking what you like, I guess, or being passionate enough to like it out loud and in a room full of people… even if it is weird Japanese fetish porn.”

Dean snorted and shook his head. He fingered the small business card in one of his utility pockets while they walked down the block.
“What do you say tomorrow we leave these monkey suits at home, track down the dudes running the Supernatural table, and give them something to really talk about?”

A smile blossomed slowly over Sam’s face, a wicked curl around the edges.

This was gonna be good.

End Notes

This was a different type of fic to write, because I was working on someone else’s idea, and had restrictions other than my own thoughts about where this thing should go. I wound up going places with it that I wasn’t sure would be appealing to my artist and that made me very nervous. But lightthesparks was awesome and very encouraging, and a fantastic person to work with. (And as a side note, timezones suck.) Be sure to check out this amazing art. No, seriously. GO.

I’m active in the Avengers fandom, too, though I haven’t written anything for that yet. I hope you all enjoyed the little nods I threw in there. FOR SCIENCE!

I felt kind of bad for not including Castiel in this – he would make a fantastic Coulson – so I decided to make an homage to Misha and Vicki in Steve Bacic and his nameless wife. These two characters were completely fabricated and probably show no resemblance to the actual people; I know nothing about them except for what I learned through imdb. (And, holy crap, this means I’ve kind of written RPF now, doesn’t it? I’ve crossed yet another fic line I never thought I’d go. It was worth it for Jen’s poster though. I mean, have you seen this thing?)

Is it strange to have headcanon for your own fic? I have that all the time, man. Example: despite her ovaries, Charlie has never dyed anyone’s hair before. Sam’s hair turned out a complete mess the first time and Kevin had to step in. He used to help his mom with touch-ups between salon visits.

Another headcanon? Dean has a clothes kink, and never gets tired of dressing up for cases or fun. Now that he’s older he puts a little more time in his appearance and gets clothes that fit a little better. He experiments a little more and doesn’t have to rely on the bad boy image for his masculinity anymore. He’s never thought about it that way, of course, but there you have it.

Headcanon #3: The Golem is reading I, Robot by Isaac Asimov, which he picked up at the con somewhere. Pretty sure he’d have a lot of opinions on that one.

The slash presentation was influenced in part by essays located on The Fanfic Symposium and is an amalgamation of other people’s ideas with a little of my own for seasoning. Specifically, this essay by The Brat Queen was awesome and condensed a lot of what I was thinking down into manageable chunks. (It could really have been a lot longer, and a lot more academic, which would most likely have happened at an actual con, but I went with the visual for this, so there. The final image the nameless professor uses was one I made up but I’m sure it exists on a reel somewhere, lost to time. Maybe one day someone will find it.

This piece was written out of love for fandom and the sense of community that can be found there. (And to assuage my love of crossovers without actually having to write a crossover.)
But I must confess: I HAVE NEVER BEEN TO A CON BEFORE. There’s one across the river every year, but I’ve never been and would be so awkward there if I did. Planet Comicon actually exists but the gang’s experience there has been cobbled together by various accounts from other cons and a bunch of comicon websites. Like all things researched but never actually experienced, there’s bound to be errors. I know there’s people reading this that have been to cons so if there are glaring errors then, um, sorry? Let me know? Remember it’s fiction? Please don’t hate me.

And don’t forget to MARVEL AT THE GLORY THAT IS THE PROMPT AND ARTWORK.

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