Under The Midnight Sun

by NorthernSparrow

Summary

Dean Winchester's been camp manager of a science research station on the Alaskan tundra for thirteen years. Dean likes his job; fixing the camp trucks, troubleshooting the generators, keeping clueless undergars and NSF bigwigs from walking into grizzly bears or getting lost in snowstorms — it's all in a day's work. It keeps him pretty busy, and this year his brother Sam's visiting too, so he's even busier. So it's really not any of Dean's business when some weirdo antisocial ornithologist sets up a tent a few miles away, a dark-haired blue-eyed guy who's doing a "very long-term" study on birds or wings or something, and who never, ever takes off his big lumpy backpack. But then the new guy starts dropping by camp for coffee and... well, he's not officially part of camp; he's not Dean's responsibility; he's really not Dean's problem at all, but when a strange blizzard comes sweeping in, Dean gets worried and goes to check. Thing is, Dean's spent years in the sweeping vistas of the Arctic. He knows all about the midnight sun and the northern lights, the ice caves and avalanches, the rough-and-ready Haul Road truckers and the even rougher-and-readier wild animals. But even so, what he finds is much more than he bargained for.
The End Of The World

Respectfully presented for your consideration

A tale of the Arctic

Written for the 2018 Dean/Castiel Big Bang

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The end of the world. Again.

Once again Dean was watching the end of the world unfold, right in front of him. And Sam was here to see it too, this time.
Actually, Sam had the better view. Dean had given him the window seat. This was partly so that Dean didn't have to see the 737's wingtip doing that stomach-churning wobble that it always seemed to do, but it was Sam's first trip to the Slope anyway and Dean had known he'd love the view.

Sam had been fascinated by the entire trip, in fact. For years he'd been hearing Dean's stories about the seasonal work in Alaska, but it was always different to see the country up here first-hand. Anchorage yesterday had fascinated him, the flight to Fairbanks this morning had fascinated him, and the very concept of Alaska Airlines' little Flight 143 circling around four different remote Alaskan airports every single day (Anchorage, Fairbanks, Deadhorse, Barrow, in a gigantic 1500-mile daily loop), had fascinated him. Everything had fascinated him. Even just the endless expanse of black-spruce boreal forest beyond Fairbanks, streaming below the plane's wings in a seamless flow of roadless wilderness, had kept Sam entranced long after Dean had started flipping restlessly through old reruns of Top Gear on the plane's little seatback screen.

Eventually Sam had turned his attention back to his laptop, but he'd kept looking out the window now and then, especially as they'd gone up and over the dramatic icy peaks of the Brooks Range to start the long sailing descent high over the Slope. The North Slope, that meant; ninety-five thousand square miles of gently rolling tundra that sloped gradually down, down, and down, to Alaska's most remote northern coastline.

They'd been flying over tundra for a while — the last of the black spruce had disappeared when they'd come over the mountains — and now they were at last nearing the end of the Slope. The tundra here flattened out into a seemingly infinite plain of iced-over ponds, separated only by thin ridges of windswept brown tundra grasses. Flashes of light made Dean glance over, to see Sam squinting out the window again. This terrain was like a fractured jigsaw puzzle of ice, and right now the thousand tundra ponds below were all catching the weak arctic sunlight in rapid succession, throwing a series of bright silver reflections up into Sam's eyes. The whole airplane cabin was flickering with light. Dean knew the effect could be dazzling; sometimes it was like flying over a gigantic broken mirror.

A small smile crept onto Dean's face as he watched Sam's expression, the laptop forgotten on Sam's knees once again. As they approached the tiny coastal town of Deadhorse, Sam had his nose practically glued to his little window, looking down at the wide landscape of brown-and-white below.

Then: "Oh my god," murmured Sam.

Dean leaned over to sneak a glimpse past Sam's nose, just in time to see the last little stretch of snow-dusted tundra glide past under the 737's wing. There was a brief glimpse of a narrow strip of snowy gravel (all that passed for a beach in this part of the world), a thin rumpled ridge of white shore-fast ice, and then the land was gone. Under them now was only black water, speckled with oddly geometrical shapes of shining white polygons - ice floes, Dean knew. In the distance the polygons coalesced into a lumpy sheet of purest ivory that seemed to stretch clear over the top of the world.

"Is that... the Arctic Ocean?" said Sam.

"You know of any other oceans at the top of Alaska?" Dean said, grinning at him.

"Yeah, but is that... the ice? The North Pole ice? I mean, the Arctic pack ice?"

Dean had to chuckle a little at the awed tone in Sam's voice. It was understandable, though. Even after all these years up here, Dean still found the sight impressive (impressive enough that it almost made him forget how that wingtip kept wobbling, and how their little 737 would sink like a stone if it ever crashed into that frigid water). The million tundra ponds, the Arctic coastline, the
shore-fast ice and the distant pack; the whole scene was undeniably impressive. And eerie, and even a little unsettling. That panorama of silent dark water, with the vast band of white on the horizon, really brought home the remoteness here, the uncaring wildness. One wrong step up here and a guy really could die.

Nowhere else was it so crisply clear that Mother Nature, and apparently God too, really didn't give a damn.

And nowhere else was it quite so easy to pull a naive kid brother's leg a little bit.

"If you squint, you can probably see Santa Claus, out there to the north," Dean said, nudging his brother a little. "And maybe his elves. And definitely his penguins. Look, there's some penguins, actually." He pointed.

Sam snorted. "Penguins, sure."

"No, really, penguins, I'm serious," said Dean. He pointed again, drawing Sam's attention to some tiny dark flecks on the ice floes far below the wingtip. "See those dots? Penguins. Two different species, if I remember right."

He watched Sam's face, waiting.

"What else could they be?" Dean prodded, carefully keeping his expression neutral.

Sam turned to him slowly, with an exasperated look. "There aren't any penguins in the Arctic," he complained, skepticism fairly dripping from his voice — but the faint look of uncertainty in his eyes made Dean burst out laughing.

"It is every bit as much fun fooling with you now as it was when you were six, you know that?" said Dean.

"I'm not a moron," Sam objected, looking back out the window. "Everybody knows there aren't any penguins in the Arctic!"

Dean shrugged. "Just trying to get your armor up. It's one of the classic new-guy tasks, and they'll probably spring it on you at some point, so be prepared. You know, they'll ask the new guy to go look for endangered penguin nests. Go clear the penguin eggs off the oil rig ladders, that sort of thing. Or...." He made a show of reconsidering, one hand stroking his chin. "Or maybe you Big Oil lawyer types are too high-and-mighty for arctic penguin pranks?"

"I'm not a 'Big Oil lawyer type'," Sam objected, turning from the window again to give Dean a slightly irritated frown. "I'm barely out of law school, you know that. I won't even be sitting for the bar till fall. It's just a six-month internship, just for the summer. I'm just supposed to watch and learn."

"Deal with the devil," Dean said confidently. "It's a deal with the devil. That's how they suck you in. I'm telling you, Sam, the second you finally went back to Stanford Law I was like, 'it's only a matter of time before they suck his soul right out through his ears'—"

Sam rolled his eyes. "That joke is getting a little old, you know that? I am not going to lose my stupid soul—"

"One little phone call," went on Dean brightly, "a nice happy interview, lure the naive kid—"

"I'm thirty-five—"
"— lure the naive little baby kid away from home, offer him a tasty summer stipend, maybe some free coaching for the bar exam, feed him a little demon blood or something, and next thing you know, boom! Deal with the devil!" Dean snapped his fingers for emphasis, and then waved his hand in a mock farewell. "Bye-bye soul!"

Sam turned back to the window with a tired sigh, shaking his head. To be fair, the joke probably was wearing a little thin — doubtless because Dean hadn't let this particular joke lapse for even a second since Sam had accepted AP Legal's summer internship a few months back.

It was partly just a joke, but there was a reason for it too.

Dean knew, painfully well, how badly Sam's life had been derailed when Dad had disappeared all those years ago. It had been awful enough to lose Mom, especially after that terrible bewildering decline she'd gone through. Sam had only been twelve years old back then, Dean sixteen. But then even after all that, after they'd adjusted (as much as they ever could) they'd had to lose poor Dad several years later. And on a totally routine hunting trip, of all things. Elk hunting, like he'd done every fall ever since Mom started her troubles. Two weeks without fail, every year when the seasons turned, Dad would go off hunting. Sometimes to Montana, sometimes Colorado, sometimes other places....

And then one year Dad had gone off on one last hunting trip to Alaska and he'd never come home.

They'd both been in their twenties by then. Sam had tabled his law school plans immediately and had bailed on his last undergrad year at Stanford, flying back to Kansas to help Dean try to figure out what had happened. Sam's law school enrollment deadline had kind of slipped by, and then Bobby had come down to help out, and then there'd been the whole thing with launching the Lawrence garage with Bobby.... Just for a little while. Just until they sorted out all the debts, and got all Dad's weird legal stuff taken care of and tried to untangle his bizarre real estate deals. Just till Sam figured out if they could keep the Lawrence house. Just till Bobby and Dean got the new garage running. Just for a little while, just till Dean got his feet under him....

"Just for a little while" had dragged on for years. Sam had sworn he was okay with it. Dean knew better.

The garage did okay, and it had let them hold onto the house at least, but it had never paid really well. It had taken many long, long years of North Slope summer-season work for Dean to save up enough to finally get Sam back into law school. Sam still didn't even know where the tuition money had come from (Dean had made up a story about finding some of Dad's old investments). But at last Sam had a shiny new degree from Stanford Law, and was well on his way to a real career, and a real life. A mere fourteen years later than originally planned.

And he'd been snapped up instantly by Alaska Petroleum. Big Oil.

Big Oil meant big money, big opportunity, big temptation, and completely nonexistent ethics. For a lot of young law school grads it'd be a great career move, but for an idealistic type like Sam — who'd had always seemed so hell-bent on "doing the right thing," so goddamned empathetic that Dean had often wondered how he'd ever survive the real world — it seemed a little bit of an odd gig to take, especially right out of the gate. So Dean planned on needling him about it all season, just to keep him on his toes.

"The first sign," Dean explained carefully now, as Sam reluctantly turned to face him again, "is when you notice your boss has blood-red eyes and that he sometimes blows fire out his ears. Pentagrams on the office floor are another helpful clue."
Sam gave another very tired-sounding sigh.

"Also the sulfur," added Dean. "Sulfur farts. Keep on the lookout for sulfur farts. They can never quite hold them in."

That, at least, made Sam laugh. "I am really doubting the CEO of Alaska Petroleum has sulfur farts. But I'll keep my eyes open."

"Keep your nose open too," advised Dean. "Probably more helpful."

"And my nose," said Sam, openly grinning now. "Dean, quit worrying about me, they're not gonna suck me in. Anyway, don't forget, that's exactly why I flew in four days early, remember? Just to hang out with you. Just to drive a hundred and thirty miles down a mud road to nowhere, with my weird-ass loner brother and his eighteen thousand cases of beer, to see his back-of-beyond ivory-tower environmental station out in the middle of nowhere and meet all his egghead greenie treehugger friends--"

"They're called 'sci-en-tists'," Dean said, enunciating the world helpfully. "No trees up here for them to hug anyway. And I'm no ivory-tower type, you know that. I just fix the trucks."

"Yeah, yeah. You're all no angels either, is my point," said Sam. "You guys burn gas and oil just like the rest of us, right? I mean how exactly is this plane flying, anyway? What powers everything at your camp? That huge generator you've told me about, Big Mama, it burns oil, doesn't it?" (Dean nodded, with a little shrug; Sam had a point.) Sam went on, "Maybe I might be able to help Big Oil do its job a little bit cleaner, you ever think of that? Work them from the inside. Worth a shot, anyway. At least I'll learn a bit about how they operate. How they think. I don't really have a ton of options, you know — I'm one of the oldest grads in my class. Not that many firms'll take a chance on me."

"You're just a kid!" objected Dean.

"Do I have to remind you again? I'm thirty-five," said Sam.

"No, that can't be possible," said Dean, shaking his head, "because that would make me almost forty."

Sam laughed. "Look, just stop worrying about me. It's just an internship and it'll help me get the next job. I'll put the whole experience toward a good cause in the end, I swear."

"I know you will," said Dean. "Just needling you. You know I can't resist." He'd already decided to let Sam win this round -- mostly because today Sam was sounding a little more embattled, and a little more impassioned, than usual. Maybe Sam was getting a bit nervous now that he was actually about to start the internship? Really done with law school at last, and probably feeling a bit uncertain about being a mid-thirties grad; really on a plane to Alaska; really about to land in Deadhorse, his summer internship locked and loaded. Booked for six months up in Prudhoe Bay with Alaska Petroleum, like it or not, no way out. Maybe Dean should switch to pep talk mode?

And maybe Dean'd been going after Sam a little hard anyway, about this whole career-planning thing. Sam had grown up long ago; he wasn't a kid anymore. He hadn't been since the day they'd got the call about Mom.

He was moving on at last.

It occurred to Dean that it might turn out to be a little hard to let go.
"Big-Brother-itis," Dean said, giving him a wry grin. "Just my job. Can't help it. Old habits die hard."

Sam snorted — but he was still smiling. "I swear I'll be fine," he said.

"Well, anyway, don't forget to check out the seals." Dean added, "The dark things on the ice."

"Seals..." Sam murmured, shaking his head with a smile. He looked out the window again. "Now they're *seals*. Right. Sure. What are they really, AP's fleet of snowmobiles or something?"

"They're actually seals," said Dean, and he laughed again at the now-extra-skeptical look on Sam's face. The dots were, in fact, real live seals, hauled out on the ice floes to bask in the pale arctic sunshine. "Ringed seals mostly," Dean explained. "A few other types, I forget their names. And there's probably a polar bear or two somewhere out there too, if you look long enough."

"I'm not believing anything you say now," said Sam, though he was peering at the little dots on the ice with renewed interest. The ice floes began to fall behind them, though, for the plane was banking now in a broad turn over Prudhoe Bay for its final approach. Dark sea wheeled beneath the wing, and soon they were passing over an unusually wide stretch of open water where the fragmented pack ice was almost gone - just a few lone icebergs and ice floes left, gliding slowly here and there as hidden deep-water currents tugged at them from below.

"Lot of open water this year," remarked Dean.

"I wouldn't know," said Sam. "All I can say is, it looks like the end of the world."

"Well, it literally is," said Dean.

Dean could never decide, actually, if this end-of-the-world setting, where the last stretch of barren stony land met the endless icy sea, was beautiful or ugly, peaceful or lonely, fascinating or utterly bleak. Maybe it was all of those things at once. But it suited some people. Or it suited Dean, at least. Sam would be up here just this one season. Dean was the one who kept coming back.

There was a slight thump and a shudder as the landing gear deployed. Dean, wanting to share in Sam's first view of Deadhorse, leaned closer, and Sam flattened back against his seat a bit so that Dean could get a look too, both brothers peering together out the little window.

As the plane lined up with the little Deadhorse airstrip, the Arctic Ocean vanished once again and the familiar (to Dean, anyway) brown-and-white patchwork of land swept back into view below. They were flying very low now, and the million shallow ponds, long wind-sculpted snow ridges, and lines of winter-brown sedge grasses shot past at dizzying speed.

"Is it too late for one more beer?" someone called to the lone flight attendant, who was already buckled into her little jump seat up front. There was a burst of laughter, but she just shook her head, giving a rather tired smile at the old joke. (There would be no liquor stores within a thousand miles once they landed. Everybody knew that. It was just the way things were on the Slope.) Dean glanced around; most of the other people on the plane were paying no attention at all to the tundra landscape outside. The passengers were the usual checkered mix that Flight 143 carried every day on its grand circuit of northern Alaska: a dozen or so burly oilfield workers headed up to their several-month shifts on the Slope, a few truckers flying in to drive the big rigs back south on the Haul Road, several
native villagers laden with bags of "outside" shopping purchases, and even a chattering set of high school students from Juneau who were apparently flying a thousand miles all the way to Barrow just for a high school basketball game. They'd all done this flight before innumerable times, as had Dean, year after year after year, and they were all chatting back and forth across the aisles right through the landing, as if they were just on a local bus. Which, in a sense, they were. There were only a few people who were, like Sam, peering with fascination out the windows.

The barren tundra disappeared, yielding to a scattering of ramshackle gray buildings and muddy unpaved roads, populated by even muddier trucks. The runway flashed under them, the tires hit, the plane bounced once, and they were down.

It took barely a minute for the plane to brake, turn, and taxi to the terminal. There was only the one airstrip, after all, and only the one terminal, and only one gate. Which, as the flight attendant was now announcing, they would reach on foot, once a set of stairs was pushed over to the plane.

"Do we actually get to walk down to the tarmac?" asked Sam, as Dean stood to get their gear out of the overhead compartment. "Like in the old movies?"

"Just like Casablanca," Dean said, grinning down at him. "You can be the squirrelly little French dude, and I'll be Humphrey Bogart." Sam was drawing a breath to object to that when Dean added, "And bundle up, kid, it's cold out." He tossed Sam's gear (parka, scarf, hat, gloves) down at him in a heap of fabric that landed messily all over Sam's head and shoulders. "Jerk," Sam muttered — though he was grinning as he said it.

"Bitch," answered Dean, grinning back.

They hadn't done that particular exchange of teenage-brother insults in ages. It was going to be fun to get to hang out with Sam for a few days. How many years had it been since they'd spent any time together? Too many to count, thought Dean, a little ruefully, as he shrugged on his own parka. Maybe they'd finally get to make up for that this summer.

The flight attendant, already muffled up in her own parka, popped open the 737's cabin door. Right away a brisk arctic wind blew an almost festive puff of light snowflakes directly into the airplane. Sam let out a surprised laugh, and he grinned up at Dean again, this time with such bright-eyed excitement that Dean couldn't help but grin back.

"Welcome to the North Slope, little brother," Dean told him. "Now get your hat on."
Soon Dean was standing at the top of the plane's little flight of rolling stairs, looping his woolen work scarf around his neck. A pale sun was rapidly disappearing behind a bank of low gray clouds, and as he stepped out of the 737, a stiff wind hammered into him with a physical blow. The wind was so cold it felt like a slap to the face, complete with a stinging spray of tiny snowflakes that had whipped up from the snowbanks near the building. A slender tongue of frigid air began exploring its way down the back of Dean's neck. It felt like a shower of ice-cold water pouring under his shirt. Dean rapidly tugged his wool scarf more tightly around his neck, but he took a huge appreciative breath.

"Smell that?" he said to Sam over his shoulder as he started down the little stairs. "Wild air. That's straight off the pack. North wind. Straight from the North Pole."

"You fooling with me again?" said Sam, taking a tentative whiff himself as he ducked his head to step fully out of the plane. Another icy gust hit him right in the face. "Jesus," he muttered, hastily pulling on a gray wool beanie as he scampered down the stairs behind Dean. "You weren't kidding about getting the hat on."

"And the parka," Dean reminded him. "And everything. You gotta respect the weather, here. Though, we'll be inside in a sec." They reached the bottom of the stairs and followed a straggling line of other passengers toward a low, one-story building. "You'll love the terminal," said Dean as they strode along side-by-side. "You've heard of one-horse towns, right? Well, this is a no-horse town. And I mean, they literally named it that."

The "gate" of Deadhorse's tiny single-room terminal consisted of a single battered aluminum door that was propped half-open with a large chunk of brown ice. They edged past the ice chunk and walked inside to the usual chaos. The single room inside was crammed totally full with parka-clad men squeezing past each other. A whole line of several dozen Barrow-bound passengers were edging impatiently toward them, ready to hop on the same plane that Sam and Dean had just departed from, while the newly arriving passengers squeezed in past the outbound people. A security line, consisting of two lonely poles linked by a single stretch of extendable tape, had fallen over long ago, the tape now trampled with mud. A little farther inside, a milling mob of new arrivals in various states of parkas-on and parkas-off greeted work buddies who'd come to pick them up. It was almost
impossible to push past people, and Dean and Sam had to come to a halt just halfway into the packed room.

"This is worse than the bus station in Lawrence," Sam whispered to Dean.

"You think this is bad, you'll love the general store," Dean replied. "And the post office. Guess what, I heard they're planning to put in electricity in town this year. Maybe AP'll give you a room with electric." He snorted at the look on Sam's face. "Kidding! They've already got electricity. Well, sort of. Most buildings. Though not always running water. Anyway, we gotta find Shelly; this is the hand-off moment." He started scanning the crowd.

"Shelly from your field station?" said Sam, looking around. "Shelly who you've told me and Bobby about?"

"Shelly from Kupaluk, yup," said Dean, trying to ignore the curious tone in Sam's voice. (There was a whole hidden topic here, and a whole conversation, that Dean was hoping to avoid for as long as possible.) Dean added, "She's leaving today. Can't remember if I mentioned, she's been here for all of April, so she's outgoing camp manager, and you know I'm the incoming one for May. May Day today, y'know."

"Doesn't really look all that spring-like," Sam murmured, still looking at the crowded room, everybody in parkas and snow boots, shivering as periodic blasts of snow flurries snuck in from outside.

"Yeah," agreed Dean with a nod. "Up here, May Day just means the snow might start thinking about melting off sometime. Anyway, Shelly and me are trading shifts as of today, and I gotta find her before she gets on the plane. C'mon." Dean pushed past a thick pack of chattering oil workers, trying to scan past all the parkas and hats, looking for Shelly's distinctive mane of long brunette hair.

"Dean!" called out a strong alto voice. "Heads up!"

Dean turned just in time to see a set of truck keys winging through the air at him from clear across the terminal's little room. He managed to snatch them, and gave them a quick glance: Chevrolet keys. An excellent sign.

Dean called back, "Damn, girl, you'll put somebody's eye out."

"Knowing you, you'd just look awesome anyway," said Shelly, pushing through the crowd toward him with a grin. "Pirate eye patch and all." Inevitably, she drew some appraising looks from the oil workers and pipeline guys along the way. Women were rare up here, and Shelly was striking enough that she always drew some attention. But she was a born-and-bred Alaskan too, as comfortable with a snow machine as with a shotgun, and on the Slope she was all business. The moment she reached Dean she hurled a rough two-armed back-thumping hug onto him, as perfect a bro-hug as Dean had ever received from a woman, and said with a grin, nodding toward the keys in Dean's hand, "You know my aim's good. If I'd wanted to hit you in the face, I would have."

"You brought the Chevy?" Dean asked, jingling the keys meaningfully in the air. "I mean, the '67 Chevy? The black Chevy?"

She rolled her eyes. "I brought your precious little baby truck, yes. Knew you couldn't drive even a mile without it. Anyway, this your bro?" She was already extending a hand to Sam, giving him a broad, friendly smile. Sam grinned back, reaching out to give her hand a friendly squeeze, and she shook his hand so vigorously that Sam nearly lost his balance. "Welcome to the Slope!" Shelly told him. "Heard a ton about you over the years from your brother here. So cool you finally made it up
"He's up here to sell his soul, actually," said Dean.

"Oh, Alaska Petroleum?" said Shelly easily, to Sam. "Cool, cool. AP's a good gig. We all end up selling our souls to AP sooner or later, you know. Money's good. Anyway, great to see you up here, Sam, and I hope you guys brought booze, because I already drank everything in camp."

"We only brought about eight cases of beer," Sam said. "I think it's half our luggage."

Shelly raised an eyebrow at Dean. "Only half your luggage? Dean, you sure you're teaching this boy right? Two-thirds your luggage should be booze, you know the rule."

"I'm easing him in," said Dean, laughing. "Hey, how's the road? Anything we should know?"

"You'll hit a bit of weather at the top," said Shelly. She rocked back on her heels a bit, set her hands on her hips and took a deep breath - settling in for a careful debriefing, Dean knew. Wilderness work always required a certain amount of detailed information transfer, and Shelly began with the weather, as was the norm. Up here, weather wasn't just a small-talk topic; it was always the most critical thing to discuss.

"Sleetstorm sitting near the coast today," Shelly said. "You'll reach it just past town. Wind's blowing south off the pack, so the storm'll try to follow you as you drive south, but you should be able to get ahead of it. Just be careful the first hour. Go slow and you'll be fine, it's really not bad, but it's definitely one of those don't-push-it, take-your-time, kind of Haul Road days. Then once you get past the Sag—"

"The river," Dean explained to Sam.

Shelly nodded, adding, "The Sagavanirktok River if you really want all the syllables. Once you get past the Sag Overlook it should lighten up, and 'round about Happy Valley you should get clear of it. But if you get stuck in the mud for the rest of your lives and get bored, there's a deck of cards in the glove compartment."

"Truck in good condition?" asked Dean. "She come through the winter all right?"

Shelly turned to Sam to say, laughing a little, "Don't know if he told you, but he's obsessed with this one particular camp truck. Very oldest one, a '67 Suburban." (Sam was already nodding — he'd heard about this truck.) Shelly added, "He's been fixing it up bit by bit for over a decade now. Every year the windshield gets busted all to hell at least twice, and every year he replaces it. It's just a goddamn wreck of a camp truck just like all the rest—"

"HEY," Dean objected. "She's got really good bones, and she runs great now—"

"That she does, actually," Shelly acknowledged. "Okay, so it actually is the most reliable of the camp trucks by now. Problem is, he won't let any of the rest of us use it! We only really get to put it into rotation when he's gone. The rest of the time, he hides the keys from us."

"A good truck matters up here," Dean explained to Sam. "This is the Arctic. You gotta have a truck you can trust. That Chevy may be old but she's built like a tank, and she's got some real power—"

"Sam, a piece of advice," said Shelly. "When he gets going about the Chevy you just gotta interrupt. Like this: So anyway, Dean, going on with the pre-drive safety stuff, not that I have a plane to catch or anything, there's two spares in back, full size, still good tread on both, pressure's been checked." She was ticking off safety items on her fingers now. "Gas - you'll need to fill up your precious baby,
I ran out of time, sorry. Extra twenty-gal carboy in the far back is full, though. Usual pile of sleeping bags and coats and stuff in the way back, just in case. I didn't have time for the post office run, sorry — outgoing mail from camp is on the dash."

"Food and water?" prodded Dean.

"Last of my crappy snacks in the front console, slim pickings though. But I unearthed that green cooler of yours out of overwinter storage and stuck it in the back for you, and there's some sandwiches from Teddy Bear in there for you, and some pie from last night." Shelly added to Sam, "You're lucky, Ted's the camp cook this month and next. Makes a damn good pie. But if you run out of pie, Dean, which I know you will before you're past Pump Station One, there's the usual pile of granola bars and chocolate in back under the jump seat for when you guys get snowed in or flip off the road or whatever." As Sam blinked at that, she went on with, "Satellite phone's under the passenger seat and it's charged. CB's working. First aid kit behind the driver's seat like usual. What else... Oh, there might be muskox on Franklin Bluffs — they were all there standing around up there a couple hours ago, anyway. Lotta caribou this time of year too, of course."

"Any wolves?" asked Sam.

Dean had to laugh. "He's dying to see a wolf," he explained to Shelly. "He's always loved dogs, and I've been promising him a wolf up here for years. Now I gotta deliver." It was a long shot, actually. Dean always saw a few wolves a season, sooner or later, and usually a few grizzly too. But Dean was on the tundra for months. Sam was only going to be at Kupaluk Research Station for a few days, and after that he'd be mostly based in Deadhorse, too far north for the wolves.

"I didn't see any wolves on the way up," said Shelly to Sam, a little regretfully. "You never know, though. They're around; they just know how to stay out of sight."

Sam nodded. "I know. I'm just hoping. But it'd be cool to see anything. Even the, uh, muskox or caribou or whatever. Anything'd be cool." (He avoided mention of bears. Bears were still a little emotionally loaded, after Dad.)

"Just keep your eyes open the whole drive," Shelly advised. "Scan super far. Farther than it seems normal to look."

Dean explained, "For any of these animals, you wanna look for, like, a moving pixel."

"A dot," Shelly agreed. "A wolf-dot, miles off maybe. A fox-dot, a bear-dot. And that's if you get a good view. Sometimes all you can make out is that it's moving. It's still a hundred-percent snow cover, at least, so they'll stand out pretty good against the background. Even birds will stand out pretty well. There should be shorebirds by now, the owls are back, some other stuff. Oh, that reminds me—" She turned back to Dean to say, "There's a new bird guy around somewhere but he's not part of camp. You might see him around but we're supposed to just leave him alone."

"New bird guy?" asked Dean.

Shelly nodded. "Ornithologist or something. Doing his own separate research project. He's not with the university or NSF or anything, and he's working farther away anyway, up around Topaz Mountain or Happy Valley or somewhere."

"Where's he housed?" said Dean. "There's no research housing up there. Most of Happy Valley's trailers were taken out last year." Dean just happened to know every single shelter that existed along the five-hundred-mile Haul Road, especially the two-hundred-mile stretch that went past camp, from Atigun Pass clear up to Deadhorse. He had long since memorized the locations of every little
hideaway and every pull-out. For reasons that he didn't need to explain. For... "socializing," was one way to put it.

Shelly didn't pry; she just shrugged. "Don't know where he's staying. Not our problem. Only mentioned it in case you see him around, because, the higher-ups said don't bother him. All we need to know is that he's got all the permits, AP's approved him being near the pipeline, he's legal. Some long-term research thing, but it doesn't involve us, and just leave him alone, was what they said. I guess he's been doing years of work all over the Arctic, and every now and then he circles through Alaska, and this is his Alaska year. Or something. Anyway, you probably won't even see him. You'll have a quiet time this week all around I think, actually. Not many researchers in camp yet, so it's just the usual early-season prep to do — fix the boardwalks, get the trucks running, the usual early-May stuff. But don't you dare use up all the sauna wood before I get back. Took me ages to chop it all."

"We'll be sure to leave you a twig or two," said Dean. The news about the bird guy was already fading from his mind as he started to picture the work ahead of him; the boardwalks, the trucks, the inevitable repairs from the brutal arctic winter that had just ended, the grad student tents that would soon need setting up, the trailers that would need leveling from the inevitable shifting of the permafrost ... Soon he and Shelly were deeply involved in a conversation about all the nitty-gritty of prepping camp for the coming summer-season influx of researchers. The bird guy was rapidly forgotten. An unaffiliated researcher who was working far outside of camp wasn't really of much interest.

An announcement through a rickety speaker finally caught their attention. "Hey, they're boarding," Dean reminded Shelly. "You gotta get a move on."

"Yep, just one more thing," said Shelly. With a wink at Sam she said, "Passing of the baton, right here. Important moment. For your — let's see, Dean, is this your thirteenth season up here by now?"

"Fourteenth," said Dean. It seemed unbelievable. "This'll be my fourteenth summer season up here."

"Jesus fuck, you're getting old," said Shelly cheerfully. "Fourteen seasons. Don't you have anything better to do with your life?" (Dean only laughed; Shelly had been coming up ten years herself.) With an air of ceremony she grabbed the Chevy keys back, just long enough to tap Dean on both shoulders with the keys, like the Queen knighting a commoner. "I dub thee Senior Camp Manager, henceforth responsible for any and all problems," she intoned.

"And I dub thee out-of-here," returned Dean, taking the keys back. "Get going or you'll miss the bus. Enjoy your time off, 'cause everything's guaranteed to go to shit as soon as you get back here."

Shelly laughed. Waving a quick goodbye to both of them, she hoisted her pack over her shoulder and hurried out the little door to Flight 143, which was outbound now on the rest of its enormous daily circuit around remote northern Alaska. After which it would deliver her to the rest of the world — and to her three weeks off. Camp managers rotated four weeks on, three weeks off at this time of year, in a complex schedule that would shorten and overlap more as the season got busier. May was "shoulder season", in between the dead-calm winter and the frenetically busy summer research season.

All of which meant that Dean was going to be working pretty much 24/7 for nearly a month before he got a couple weeks off.

Dean jingled the truck keys thoughtfully in his hands, watching Shelly trot out the battered terminal door. This was the moment of the changing of the guard, of stepping back into his favorite camp truck and heading back to the tundra — and to "his" research station. After so many years at this job, the moment always had a certain solemnity to it, and having Sam along this year seemed to make it
feel even more significant. At last he was really going to get to show Sam his life for the other half of the year, his life in the wilderness. He'd get to show Sam everything.

He'd get to show Sam almost everything, Dean amended privately. There were a few components of Dean's Alaskan life that he was still planning to keep to himself.

"She seems nice," said Sam as they waited for their luggage. Dean glanced over at him with a cautious look; Sam was watching Dean's expression. Sam then added, "Cute," in a deliberately nonchalant tone. But there was an alarmingly alert glint in Sam's eyes.

Damn. Dean recognized that look. It wasn't the "Sam's interested" look; there was too much curiosity in Sam's eyes for that.

It was more the "Is Dean interested?" sort of look.

"She's great," said Dean, as neutrally as he could.

"Hot, even," said Sam. "Don't you think?"

I should've been prepared for this, thought Dean, with a mental sigh. Even Bobby had taken to dropping hints during the last year or two, hints along the lines of, "There must be some girl up there in Alaska, or you wouldn't keep going back." Dean had never taken the bait, but now that he was getting a little more along in years, Bobby'd started getting a little blunter: "You gotta go somewhere where there's more girls, Dean. There's no women in Alaska, everybody knows that. We gotta get you settled down."

Then recently Dean had made the mistake of mentioning Shelly a few times —it was kind of difficult to describe camp without talking about the other camp staff, after all — and he knew both Bobby and Sam had maybe jumped to the wrong conclusion.

He hadn't really bothered correcting them, but the truth was, Shelly was a total red herring. There was no girl for Dean up on the Slope. Maybe there had been a few, in the early years, but that had faded away a while ago. For the last five years or so, Dean had been pursuing... other interests, one could say.

"You ever... uh...." Sam hesitated. "So, Shelly...." He cleared his throat. "You guys probably have to follow rules about stuff, right?"

Dean had to laugh at his hopelessly awkward phrasing. "The powers-that-be frown on fraternizing at work, if that's what you're attempting to get at. Sexual harassment and all that. Universities take that stuff really seriously now. The whole station's run by the Fairbanks university, you know that."

"Oh, right," said Sam. "But... couldn't two co-workers go out if they wanted to? If it was mutual?"

"I don't go there," said Dean, with a curt shake of his head. "Life at a field research station's too much of a hothouse already. Total soap opera."

"Ah," said Sam, nodding knowingly. He took a breath. "But I was just wondering if—"

To Dean's vast relief, the baggage guy chose exactly that moment to drag in a huge pile of snow-
dusted luggage: duffel bags, heavy boxes, gigantic Rubbermaid containers, and even some dog crates, incongruously packed full not with dogs but with plastic-wrapped toilet paper and paper towels (always cheaper down south). And, in a separate and slightly more secure cart, a typical Alaska assemblage of locked gun cases. Relieved at the interruption, Dean dug out his id and went over to the luggage desk to claim his guns. Sam trailed along behind, but, thankfully, he dropped the Shelly questions.

"Next up," said Dean briskly once he had the gun case slung safely over his shoulder, "a few errands. Post office, grocery store, then we gas up, then just a little hundred-thirty-mile drive over the worst road in the world through an arctic sleetstorm. Piece o' cake. Just gotta get our gear into the truck. Let's see...." He turned to check out the luggage situation. Almost everybody else had grabbed their bags while Dean had been getting his guns, and Sam's and Dean's luggage was now stacked in lonely isolation in the corner of the rapidly emptying terminal. Four gigantic Army-sized duffels (two each — the Arctic always required a lot of clothes), along with two enormous Rubbermaid crates duct-taped shut, one full of boots, the other full of beer.

"Let's pull it all over to the door, and I'll go get the truck," suggested Dean.

"And while you get the truck, I'll guard the beer," offered Sam, grinning at him. "Cause it's the only important part of the luggage, right?"

"You're gonna fit right in here," said Dean.

Outside was an absolutely minuscule airport parking lot, really just an unpaved square of mud that was peppered with about a dozen SUVs and pickups. Every vehicle was parked by a small upright charging station, and all had a short extension cord dangling out their front grills for their engine block heaters. Trucks up here wouldn't start at forty-below without a little assistance. But today it wasn't even sub-zero — just a mild 15F or so, Dean guessed, sniffing the freezing air again — and the Chevy should start easily.

*Spring in the Arctic means you can quit plugging your truck in,* Dean thought, with a mental laugh. To be fair, there were a few of those little black-and-white "snowbirds" winging around, and even one perched up on top of the terminal's snow-covered roof, singing his little heart out. Maybe spring really was coming.

Despite the small size of the little parking lot, it still took a moment to spot the old Chevy. It turned out its black exterior was totally hidden below a coating of light-brown mud so complete and even that it looked like it'd been painted on. Dean finally located the Chevy and stood a moment standing in front of it to check it out, frowning, with his hands on his hips. The only bare patches on the entire truck were two perfect half-circles on the windshield, carved through the mud by the wipers. The Haul Road must be a mess today. Dean sighed, finally walking over to open the driver's door. Seeing the Chevy muddied up like this always made his heart hurt a bit, but it was unavoidable. The permafrost meant that none of the roads could be paved.

But a quick look inside revealed that the Chevy had actually survived the winter pretty well. The new seat covers that Dean had installed last year still looked intact and even seemed to have come through the winter with no weasel or vole damage, always a welcome surprise. The green cooler was in the back seat as promised, and it looked like Shelly had even retrieved Dean's box of old cassette tapes from the Winter Lab and had put them on the front seat. Dean grinned at the sight of the cassettes, and he patted the old truck on the steering wheel, where there was a neat parallelogram of duct tape with "Baby" inscribed on it in Teddy Bear's best Sharpie calligraphy — along with a little Sharpie-art of a stylized leaping impala. Ted and Shelly had stuck the duct tape there as a joke a few years back, while trying to tease Dean one day about how he treated the beat-up truck like a classic
car. But Dean had kept the duct-tape emblem there ever since, even freshening up the Sharpie now and then whenever the impala drawing faded.

She wasn't an Impala, of course; that was just a joke. She was just an ancient Suburban. But she was a good truck. And what Dean had said to Sam was true: up here, trucks mattered.

"I'll give you a wash back at camp, girl," he promised the old truck, patting her on the dashboard. "We both know you'll only stay clean for five minutes, but those five minutes'll be worth it, I promise. Now, you take care of my brother, you hear?"

As Dean pulled the Chevy up to the little terminal, Sam was already dragging their gear out of the door. Together they loaded everything into the back, as chilly air swirled around them with occasional puffs of snowflakes.

Dean took a moment to crack one of the big Rubbermaids open in order to grab two beers for the green cooler. As he did so, Sam started peppering him with questions about the Haul Road, and the weather, and the sleetstorm, and possible wildlife sightings. Looked like Sam had truly forgotten (or had decided to abandon) the whole line of questioning about Shelly. And that was completely fine, because if there was one topic that Dean would be perfectly happy never talking to Sam about, it was the exact nature of Dean's social activities up here on the Slope.

Dean never did a thing in camp, of course. Professional standards and all that.

And Shelly, as it happened, was married anyway. To a lady. Who was right now awaiting Shelly down in Hawaii for a well-deserved three-week vacation.

It was true there were few women up here. But there had always been another option, hadn't there? Why, there were all those truckers going right past on the Haul Road. Fairbanks to Deadhorse, Deadhorse to Fairbanks, back and forth they drove on that five-hundred-mile road, dozens and dozens of big rigs roaring past every day. An endless flow of truckers and pipeline guys, and all mere moments away from Dean's field station, which was only about a half-mile away from the road. Yes, the truckers were almost entirely male, just as Bobby had pointed out. And, about one out of ten of them... Well, once one did the math, the Slope turned out to be not a bad place at all. From Dean's perspective, anyway.

This wasn't an aspect of Dean's life that he'd ever bothered to make clear to Bobby or Sam — or to anybody in camp, for that matter. But whenever Dean was up here, about once a week he took the old Chevy out on the road on his day off. "Going out hiking. Just gonna get a bit of a workout," he often told the other staffers, and he always took care to load some hiking gear in the back. He usually did stop for an actual hike (a short one), around Topaz Mountain or something, but his real destination was beyond Topaz, well past the prettiest hills and the prettiest hikes. The real destination was up around Happy Valley, right by the Sag River, between Pump Stations Two and Three. There weren't really any good hikes around there. There were, however, some handy pull-offs that circled down by the river, places where it was fairly easy to unobtrusively park even a large truck in the thick willows by the river's edge, places where there was some pretty tall cover. As it happened, there were often some other trucks parked around there too.

In spring it could still be awfully cold out, sure. In summer there were mosquitoes. And that was another reason why it was nice to have a big old truck like a Chevy Suburban, and keep it clean and
keep it fixed up. They'd made those old trucks pretty roomy, back in the day.

If anybody asked, it was a nice spot for lunch. Good wildlife viewing, too, down by the Sag. "Lunch," and "wildlife viewing" meant different things to different people, after all. Some vague rumors had spread over the years about those pull-offs — rumors that long pre-dated Dean's tenure up here — and there were quite a few jokes about "Happy Valley" and the "Pump Stations." But few in camp knew that there was actually a kernel of truth to the jokes.

These days nobody would really even care, but it just seemed easiest to keep a low profile. The way Dean saw it, nobody really needed to know his exact definition of "getting a bit of a workout." Least of all Sam, because what Sam didn't know wouldn't hurt him.
The mile markers on Haul Road began to tick downward as they drove south out of Deadhorse, accompanied by the slender snaking silver line of the oil pipeline, which paralleled the road off to the left. The pipeline was why the road had been built, and the pipeline would be their only companion for the journey, nearly the only other sign of human existence that they would see for the entire long drive. This was because the Haul Road was "the" road, the one and only road to anywhere, the single lone road that stretched hundreds and hundreds of miles through an almost unfathomable stretch of wilderness, cutting dead south across the North Slope and over the towering Brooks.

The little town of Deadhorse sat at Milepost 414, meaning it was "only" 414 miles southward to the junction with Elliott Highway. (Where there was still no sign of human life, and beyond which it was still another eighty-four miles to Fairbanks.) Kupaluk Field Station was their destination today, though, a mere hundred and thirty miles down the road.

But they'd only reached Milepost 408 — a grand total of six miles out of town, just past Pump Station One — when it began to come clear to both of them that they'd never actually done a real road trip together. Turned out Sam wasn't used to riding shotgun; he was soon arguing that he should drive.

It was totally out of the question for Sam to drive, of course; not on the Haul Road on Sam's very first travel-fatigued day here, definitely not with a sleetstorm ahead, and absolutely definitely not with this particular truck. Dean won that battle easily. But next they got into an argument about the music. There wouldn't be any radio stations for the next several hundred miles, obviously, and the Chevy was something of a relic, music-wise. 1967 Chevys were far too old for USB jacks, CD players or even the standard old "line-in" jacks. But the Chevy did have a functional cassette player — apparently this had been cutting-edge technology in 1967 — and Dean had been combing the Kansas thrift shops for years now on his off-seasons just to build up a little collection of classic-rock Haul Road driving tunes. He was inordinately proud of his resulting collection of vintage cassettes, and every September he carefully boxed them up and stored them in the Winter Lab. (It was the only trailer in camp that remained heated over the winter. Nothing but the best for the vintage cassettes!) Still, though, there was a decision to be made about which tape to start with, and Sam suddenly turned out to have all sorts of opinions.
"Driver picks the music, shotgun shuts his cakehole!" Dean finally said. It took him a little by surprise; the sentence had unreeled from his mouth as if it had been beamed into his brain from some other universe. Sam gave up then, with a snort, and Dean couldn't help grinning over at him. And, rather to his surprise, Sam grinned back. Dean shoved his favorite old Led Zeppelin tape in the player and soon Dean was singing along to "Ramble On."

\textit{Ramble on}

\textit{And now's the time, the time is now}

\textit{To sing my song}

\textit{I'm goin' round the world, I got to find my girl}

(Well, maybe not a girl. Not these days anyway.)

\textit{On my way... I've been this way ten years to the day....}

He was a little startled, and secretly delighted, when Sam joined right on in.

"Why've we never done this before?" Dean said once the song ended. "Road trips, I mean."

Sam shrugged. "Well, you know. Dad never really took us anywhere, right? I always figured he didn't want to leave Mom too long. Y'know, after she went into the hospital... when...."

Sam didn't bother finishing the sentence.

The "hospital" meant the mental hospital, of course. The psychiatric unit where Mom had spent most of the last decade of her life.

But they never talked about that much.

"Yeah," Dean replied a little half-heartedly. "And then once we were older...."

Dean didn't manage to finish his sentence either.

\textit{Once we were older, Mom killed herself}, was what he'd been about to say. \textit{Couldn't hack her "voices" anymore.}

And that had taken some dealing with.

After that Dad had never wanted to go anywhere at all. Except the local Lawrence library, where Dad had holed up day after day for years, his bookworm tendencies seeming to take him over. He'd gotten nearly obsessed with trying to figure out what had gone wrong with poor Mom, and why exactly she'd fixated on her particular weird delusions. He'd even consulted a goddamn "psychic," of all things. Then he'd blown quite a bit of money collecting those strange old books, and he'd wasted all those years wrangling that property-purchase deal way up in Lebanon, a pointless and crazy scheme to buy a worthless old farmhouse and its useless patch of woods, for no apparent reason at all.

Dean hadn't wanted to leave Dad on his own, and had ended up dropping out of high school... Sam had ended up going off to college.... Then, finally, the hunting trip....

Well, they rarely talked about Dad anymore. Or Mom either.

Dean shook his head a little, trying to get his mind back on the road ahead. "We should've been doing road trips all along," he said, forcing some cheerfulness back into his voice.
"I'm game," said Sam. "Especially if you really want to do all the driving." He made a show of settling back against the freshly upholstered seat, even taking his parka off to wedge it comfortably behind his head as a pillow. "I'll just relax here and read," Sam said, grabbing a Haul Road pamphlet off the dashboard, a tourist brochure that Dean had picked up for him in the Deadhorse general store. "You can do all the work."

Dean had to laugh as Sam let out a showy yawn and started flipping, with exaggerated vacation-speed slowness, through the little brochure. "All right, Princess," Dean said. "You just relax."

"I'll do that!" replied Sam cheerily.

About half a minute later Sam informed him, "It's not called the Haul Road anymore. You're supposed to call it the 'Dalton Highway' now."

"Tourist name," said Dean grumpily. "It was built to haul supplies for the pipeline. It was the Haul Road originally, and it'll always be the Haul Road."

"Not that you're turning into a crusty old codger or anything," replied Sam, with a snort. "Let's see here. Amenities are as follows." He began reading from the brochure. "Medical facilities: There are no medical facilities or emergency services along the four-hundred-and-fourteen-mile-long Dalton Highway. Banking: There are no banks. Groceries: There are no grocery stores along the highway. Fuel: There is no fuel available from Coldfoot to Deadhorse — that's what, like, two hundred miles?"

"Two hundred thirty-nine to Coldfoot," said Dean. "Up and over the mountains. And Coldfoot is only, like, a single gas pump. It's five hundred miles, total, to Fairbanks. Not that I've driven this road a million times or anything."

"Laundry: There are no laundry facilities along the highway," went on Sam. "Showers: There are no shower facilities along the highway. I'm sensing a theme here. Water: It is recommended to bring plenty of water, as there are no stores or potable water along the highway. Cell phones: There is no cell phone coverage from Mile 28 to Mile 410. Beware of avalanches, grizzly bears, moose, mosquitoes, severe blizzards that may occur without warning on any day of the year, flash floods, wildfires and oncoming large trucks. The road is not paved. Do not approach the pipeline. All-wheel drive is recommended." Sam laughed. "This sounds fantastic."

Right on cue the Chevy hit a patch of mud and went into a brief, but recoverable, skid. "Don't say I didn't warn you," said Dean, as he straightened out the truck. He'd been regaling Sam, and Bobby too, with Haul Road tales for years.

"No, I was serious, this really does sound fantastic," Sam replied, and Dean glanced over to realize that Sam was smiling.

It was a good look on him.

Sam put the brochure aside and looked out at the frozen tundra, the faint smile still on his face. "I mean, at last I'm going somewhere interesting! Somewhere new." He added, a little softly, "Maybe I did need a road trip."

Shelly had been right about the sleet. The overcast sky grew darker, the clouds crouched down
closer, and soon they drove into a freezing fog bank that began spitting a continual spray of razor-sharp sleet against the windshield. It wasn't too heavy, actually, but the road here hadn't been re-graveled in a week or so, and it was fast turning to a sticky, half-frozen mud. In places the mud was churned into a heavy morass of thick goo some four inches thick. Dean successfully got them through some dicey moments of skidding and slewing around, but they had to slow to a near-crawl. Eventually they passed a long line of several dozen big rigs that had already given up. The big rigs were neatly lined up along the shoulder in one of the Haul Road's rare pull-off areas.

Dean got on the CB to ask for trucker intel, and, not too surprisingly, it turned out the truckers had decided to pack it in for the day and wait out the weather. Some of the truckers had managed to limp back to Deadhorse, while quite a few others were camping here at the pull-off, most of them rendezvoused at one particular truck. From the sounds of it over the staticky CB, a rowdy poker game was well underway.

Dean drove on — though not without a faint twinge of lost opportunity. Bad-weather days were always promising times to find a certain type of trucker, ready for a certain type of workout.

But he found, rather to his surprise, that the thought of missing out on his usual Haul Road socializing wasn't actually too bothersome. Truth was, the last couple years had been starting to feel like a bit of "same old, same old." Also, he was actually looking forward to showing Sam around his research station. There'd be time enough later in the season to check out possibilities; maybe meet up with some old friends, maybe make some new ones.

It wasn't like he had anybody in particular waiting for him in any of those trucks, after all. Most of Dean's Haul Road "friends" never even learned his name, and Dean generally tried not to learn theirs. Dean rather prided himself on never getting attached.

The sleetstorm changed into snow, soon producing thin, swirling veils of white that blew around dramatically but that didn't do much to actually cover anything. The road was still very bumpy, but it was firming up as it re-froze, and soon they were making better time. The terrain started changing too, the flat tundra around them slowly bunching up into wide rolling hills. Eventually a line of high sandy ridges came into view on the far side of the road.

"The Franklin Bluffs," Sam read from his brochure. "We must be close to that river. It says here: Scan the gravel bars along the river for muskoxen and caribou."

"There they are," said Dean, pointing. "Bingo. Just as ordered."

"Really? I don't believe it," said Sam, peering through the swirling snowflakes. Dean pulled over and they both hopped out for a look. It was a little hard to make out much through the snow, which was blowing about more thickly now in almost artistic spirals and skeins, but the muskox were there, a line of hunchbacked furry lumps trundling along the riverbank. They seemed completely unaffected by the frigid wind, which soon had both Dean and Sam shuddering with cold. The brothers soon jumped back in the Chevy, Sam elated with the muskox-sighting, and Dean (who had already seen the muskox many times) equally elated just with Sam's elation.

They took a quick lunch break there, Dean pulling the two beers and some of Teddy Bear's sandwiches and pie slices out of the green cooler in the back. They ate there in the old Chevy, basking in the steady blowing warm air from its trusty heater (replaced three years ago by Dean),
sipping their beers in peaceful companionship, as they watched the muskox graze their way serenely through the snowy willows at the shore of the frozen Sagavanirktok River.

It felt good to be having a roadside beer with Sam, while camped out in the old Chevy by the shore of a river. Like a brief moment of calm, a pause in their long journey.

It felt almost familiar.

Again Dean thought, *We should've been doing road trips all along.*

There was still at least an hour's drive ahead. Dean deliberately left his beer unfinished, drinking only two-thirds and pouring the remainder outside into the slush. (He knew he actually had a pretty high alcohol tolerance, but he took no chances on this road.) They drove on, soon passing Pump Station Two. Dean had been planning to avoid discussion about the infamous Pump Stations, but of course Sam noticed the station. It was kind of hard not to — it was the only building they'd seen in fifty miles, and had a giant sign reading: "PUMP STATION TWO."

"The pump stations speed up the oil in the pipeline," Dean explained. "They literally pump it along. There's, um, six pump stations I think. Used to be ten or something, during pipeline construction? I forget." (He tried to make it sound like the pump stations were of no particular interest.) "Two and Three are between Deadhorse and my research station."

"Ever been in there?" Sam said, gesturing toward the pull-off to Pump Station Two, which happened to be a pull-off that Dean knew rather well.

"Ah..." said Dean vaguely. "Couple times. Like if we get a flat tire or something, or totally run out of gas and can't get back to camp, the guys'll help us out."

Sam nodded, without much interest, and Dean busied himself with selecting another cassette for the tape player. A little AC/DC, and they managed to get past Pump Station Two without any further inquiries from Sam. In fact he seemed to have gone into a thoughtful mood. Even the "Happy Valley" sign that they passed next, and Pump Station Three a little later, drew only quiet glances from Sam, and no joking at all — which was a little odd, because just about everybody cracked jokes at those signs. But Sam seemed a little thoughtful, just gazing out his window silently.

Maybe because it truly was looking like the Arctic now. They'd finally gotten ahead of the little storm and the clouds had lifted slightly. Everything was shades of white and gray, the tundra a limitless rumpled sheet of snow and ice under a pure white sky. Sam seemed almost mesmerized.

They had a few more wildlife sightings. At one broad turn in the road a huge black raven went flying just overhead, its glossy dark wings drawing Dean's eye. About ten years ago he'd had a somewhat spooky dream about dark wings, a dream that had lingered with him for the whole rest of that summer, his fourth season at Kupaluk. It hadn't actually been much of a dream, just sort of a fuzzy and confusing vision of black wings in a barn, but ever since he'd taken to noticing the black-winged ravens whenever they flew past camp.

And that reminded Dean to tell Sam about one canny old raven that still hung around camp, a raven Dean kept sneaking bacon bits to, even though it was officially frowned-upon to "interfere" with the wildlife. Dean wasn't a birdwatcher or anything, but he did still toss a bit of food now and then to the big old bird, just in memory of that strange dream.
That wasn't their only wildlife sighting. Dean pointed out a few ptarmigan that flew by next, all still in their snow-white winter plumage, their white wings barely perceptible against the snow. Sam spotted the next sighting, a flock of huge birds very far in the distance, making their way slowly northward — cranes of some sort, Dean thought. Sam turned out to have a pretty good eye; he also was the first to spot a herd of twenty or twenty-five caribou ahead. They were vividly outlined against the crisp white background, walking slowly north in a long single-file line, antlers nodding as they crunched their way through the hoof-deep snow.

Sam seemed interested in the raven and the ptarmigan, and he was dutifully impressed by the caribou, and even asked Dean to stop so he could take some caribou pictures. But increasingly he seemed a little quieter than normal. Mostly he sat silently, gazing out his passenger-side window, and Dean began to worry that he might be bored. This kind of landscape wasn't to everybody's taste. Right now it was a scene of white on white on white. White snow, white ice, white-crusted lichen on the hilltops, white-rimed grasses bowed in the wind. White clouds, and a pale white sun. The white was broken only by the thin gray line of the road, stretching far ahead as their black truck motored steadily along. It seemed as pure a picture of winter as had ever existed in the world.

"Pretty bleak, huh?" Dean ventured at last, as they drove on. "That what you're thinking? I promise you, though, once green-up hits you'll be amazed how different it looks—"

"It's kind of incredible, actually," said Sam. "It's really cool."

"You're damn quiet, though. Sure you're not bored out of your skull yet? Because there's only a zillion more miles of this."

"Nah, I'm good. Just keeping an eye out for a wolf-dot, I guess," said Sam. But then he added, after a moment, "And thinking a bit."

Dean raised an eyebrow, glancing over at him again. "Thinking what?"

Sam paused. "Thinking about why you really started coming up here," he said. He turned away from his wolf-dot quest and looked right at Dean. "Shelly said it's been, what, thirteen years or something?"

"Fourteen," Dean reminded him. "This'll be my fourteenth season."

Sam nodded. "Ever since Dad, then," was all he said.

For a long moment, there was just the growly rumble of the truck tires on the rutted road, and Ramble On warbling yet again out of the truck speakers from the cassette, which was well into its third play-through.

Sam reached out and turned the music down.

Dean wanted to make a joke. Something like, Wow, we actually talked about Dad two separate times in one day. It didn't seem like a very funny joke, though.

They'd rarely talked about it even when it had happened.

They'd talked logistics, then, of course. They'd talked about would go to Alaska to search for Dad's hunting camp (that had ended up being Dean). And, meanwhile, who would abandon law-school dreams to go back to Kansas to deal with Dad's debts, and go through his strange old books, and try to figure out the weird Lebanon deal, and find some way to keep the Lawrence house from being foreclosed by the bank... and all the other complications of wrapping up someone else's life. (And that had been Sam).
Later, once Dean had found the remains, down near Denali, there'd been more logistics. Figuring out cause of death. (*Bears don't usually do that,* the wildlife ranger had tried to tell Dean. At which Dean had punched a hole right through the poor guy's office door.) How to get the body home. (Dean had dealt with that one too.) Where to bury it. (Both of them had managed that together.) How to pay for the transport, and the burial, and the service. (Sam. Using, Dean had realized much later, all his savings — and that had been the end, for a while, of Sam's original law school dreams.) Which of them would end up researching Alaska endlessly, that first year, still searching for answers, and accidentally stumbling into a job offer from a certain North Slope research station. (Dean.) Which of them would end up with nightmares for years about the state of the remains, and the unknown bear that must have done it. (Also Dean.) Which of them would abandon all his career plans for frickin' years just to try to help Dean and Bobby run the garage. (Sam.)

Despite all that, somehow they'd rarely talked about it.

Sam took a long breath. "I wondered if you were trying to find Dad or something, at first," he said. He was staring out the window again as if still searching for his wolf-dot, but Dean was fairly sure that if a full-size wolf came trotting right up to the truck right now, right under Sam's nose, Sam wouldn't even notice it.

Sam continued, "I thought, maybe you were trying to follow his path or something, y'know? Be the big bold hunter." He was talking quietly, almost slowly, as if feeling his way through hazardous terrain. "Go on an even farther journey than he had, maybe?"

Dean considered that, and he nodded. "Maybe," he said, cautiously.

"Then I thought maybe you were trying to save the world," said Sam, still in that same thoughtful, quiet voice. "Save people, I mean. Save other people from the wilderness, and from snow, and from... Well, bears. Even if you couldn't save Dad. Sort of... saving people, hunting things, I guess?"

A longer pause from Dean. He hadn't really ever thought of his camp-manager job in that light, but Sam had a point. That was exactly what Dean's job really was, wasn't it? Taking care of his scientists — his people. Making sure they understood the weather and the risks; making sure they were prepared. And, yes, occasionally guarding them. From weather, from ice, from truck breakdowns, from sprained ankles... and from bears, those too. Bears, wolves, whatever might come along. There was a reason that Dean always brought the rifle and the shotgun.

Dad's rifle, and Dad's shotgun, as a matter of fact, and even Dad's ivory-handled pistol. Dean had found all three weapons at the hunting camp down by Denali, all those years ago, and he brought them up here to the research station every summer. Just in case he might need them. Just in case.

Dean finally replied, "Maybe that, too, a little."

"Then I thought you'd met a girl," said Sam. Dean was trying to figure out how to respond to *that* when Sam continued, "Then around about the eighth year, I thought maybe you'd just got stuck in a rut and couldn't figure out how to stop coming up here."

Dean broke out laughing. "Call it all of the above," he replied.

"Then finally it occurred to me," said Sam, speaking very matter-of-factly now now, "that you maybe you were also trying, all along, to save up enough money to get me back to law school." He looked over at Dean again. "The pay's better here than at the garage, right?"

Dean kept his eyes on the rutted road ahead, hands wrapped firmly onto the steering wheel.
Sam went on, "That's where my tuition came from, didn't it? It wasn't old 'investments' of Dad's at all. Everything he had left after Mom, he'd sunk into trying to buy that old Lebanon farm. There's just no way he had anything else squirreled away. And it sure wasn't the income from the garage that could've paid my tuition — I've seen the books, Dean. The place barely breaks even. Bobby's idea of running a garage is to do free repairs for all his friends, we both know that. Every damn friend-of-a-friend gets a discount, and I know you end up kicking in at least half your winter hours for free. It had to have been the cash from your summer gigs up here that got me back to Stanford."

Dean was still staring coolly ahead out the windshield, but he could feel Sam's steady gaze on him.

Sam said, slowly, "I just can't believe I didn't put it together till now. They gave me a printout of all my tuition payments after I graduated, last month, and I finally noticed that the payments only ever came in during the months that you're up here in Alaska."

Sam paused again. He was still looking at Dean.

"Thirteen years...." Sam said softly. "And you're still trying to make a couple more payments on my last year, aren't you? That's why you're back up here this year."

Dean was silent for another long moment.

At last Dean said, "I do like it up here, actually. A lot. It's a pretty cool place. You'll see."

Sam let out a quiet sigh. It sounded almost like a sigh of relief, like he'd been worrying about this. "Well, thank god for that," he said. "To be honest, ever since I saw that tuition printout I've been picturing you putting yourself through some kind of hell up here, for years and years.... I mean, just for me? Because... honestly, I'm not...." He couldn't seem to finish the sentence, and just shook his head.

"I wouldn't go spend years in hell just on your account, don't worry," said Dean, almost laughing at the melodramatic image, even as a small voice in the back of his head was saying Actually, I would. He took a breath and added, "But, yeah, that's where my summer money went. They do pay decent up here. Thing is, though, dude, it was my choice." He paused, still staring ahead down the road as he drove, trying to think of some way to explain that wouldn't send his brother down some classic Sam-path of totally unnecessary self-imposed guilt.

Dean finally said, "I just wanted you to have a life, that's all. You got yanked away from everything you were planning when Dad... well, you know." He let out a tight sigh. "I dunno, Sam. I just felt like you're meant for something more than doing the account books at a garage. Not that there's anything wrong with doing books at a garage, don't get me wrong. It's just... you're meant for something more. I know it."

"You're meant for something more," replied Sam.

"Not so sure about that," said Dean easily. "I'm pushing forty, dude, you know that. My life's not really gonna go anywhere else."

"Dean, you could do anything you wanted—" Sam began, predictably, but Dean shook his head.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but during the last few years Dean had become fairly certain that his life was a loss. Though he'd never say so quite that bluntly to Bobby or Sam.

It wasn't a bad life; not at all. It was fine. Really, everything was fine. But it had become clear to Dean over the last few years that his path was set, and it was a path that led only to solitude. There'd be no wife after all, no kids, no picket fence. No partner of any kind. He was going to turn into not
just a grizzled old bachelor, but a grizzled old north Alaska bachelor, and that was as grizzled and bachelor-y as it got.

Anonymous trysts with passing truckers were about all he could hope for.

And, maybe worse, it was all he wanted anymore. It'd been a very long time since Dean had felt more than about two minutes’ flickering of interest in anybody. There was a reason he never asked for names.

But if Sam found a way to a better life, it was all worth it.

"I'll pay you back someday," Sam said, his voice low and intense now. "I will."

"No, you won't," Dean said, shaking his head. "'Cause I don't want you to, and even if you tried, I wouldn't take it anyway."

"Then I'll make it up to you, somehow, I swear—"

"Just hang onto that goddam soul of yours, is all I ask," said Dean.

They would have talked more. Maybe a lot more, for when Dean risked a quick glance over, he found that Sam was shifting in his seat now, his hands gripping his knees the way he always did when he was thinking hard. He could practically feel Sam working up to say something. Sam even took a breath, about to speak again. But then —


The clouds were thinning out, scraps of blue sky showing through with an incongruous effect of cheerful color. A few bright silver sunbeams were even now managing to sneak down through the cloud cover, and here and there a patch of tundra was illuminated by a lone sunbeam, the snow shining dazzlingly white. Far, far ahead, the snowy peaks of the Brooks Range were coming into view, a dramatic jagged white wall that stretched across the entire southern horizon from end to end. The road in front was just an endless little gray line, thinning down to a distant vanishing point against the mountains. To either side, miles of rolling snowy tundra spread away from the road, the low rounded hills and valleys like great waves on a frozen white sea. And outlined there on the little thread of the road, silhouetted against the distant hulking mountains — and illuminated rather dramatically by a silver beam of sunlight — was a lone figure. It wasn't a caribou, and it wasn't a wolf. It was a person.
The person was about a quarter mile off.

"Hiker?" said Sam. "He's got a backpack."

A hiker with a backpack, sure enough. Facing away, walking south, the same direction the brothers were driving. Whoever the hiker was, he seemed to be the only sign of life for miles. Oddly, he was walking right down the middle of the Haul Road, dead center, as if it were his own personal sidewalk, apparently unaware that huge trucks — and the occasional old 1967 Chevy Suburban — regularly came barreling down the unpaved road at a good sixty miles an hour or more.

"I'll just stop and say hey," said Dean, already beginning to brake.

"Do you know him?" asked Sam.

"Nope. But I gotta tell this dude to walk farther off the road," Dean explained. "He's walking right down the center, see that? This is basically a one-lane road. One-and-a-half at best. I know there's not much traffic today, but there's barely enough room for us to squeak past him, and there's not even really a shoulder here." (The road was slightly elevated along this stretch, perched up on a gravel berm that had a steep dropoff of several feet on either side.) Dean added, "What if a semi comes blowing past? He could get annihilated. Or at the very least, covered in mud. Also, I wonder if he knows about the weather... I better just stop and check."

This was routine. Well, it wasn't exactly routine to find a person on foot, but it had long been Dean's policy to stop and check on any random stranger that he encountered along the road. A pulled-over truck, a guy or two standing a little ways off the road, a tent in an unexpected place — he checked on everybody. And it wasn't just because of the potential "social activities." This was wilderness, after all, and it was Dean's job to keep everybody safe. (Or it was his self-appointed job, at least.)

Fortunately they were on a long straight stretch here, and they'd spotted the distant figure in plenty of time. Dean had time for nice gentle braking, a slow enough deceleration that the truck only gave two or three of the very mildest of fishtail skids.

"Seems like a rough road to walk on," pointed out Sam.
"Suicidal road to walk on," agreed Dean. "He's gotta be walking back to his truck. Maybe just a tourist who stopped for a little hike."

The hiker had heard them coming and was now turning to face them, moving over to the side of the road. They pulled up a few feet away, with the hiker on the passenger side.

"Not really dressed for the conditions," Dean muttered, gesturing to Sam to roll down his window as he automatically assessed the hiker's gear. Old tan corduroy coat lined with sheepskin — common enough in the Western states in winter, but not a true hooded parka. A black hat and a blue scarf, both wool at least, but neither really looked especially thick. Dean had noted the guy's old-school duck-hunter boots as they'd approached (the classic kind, with rubber feet and high canvas tops, laced up with stout canvas laces). At least he had what looked like semi-decent black snow pants, but those duck boots were old-school, not like modern snow boots. Everything looked a little old-school, in fact — the duck boots, the sheepskin overcoat, the wool. There was no polarfleece in sight. Even the guy's big black backpack looked lumpy and a bit beat up, and there was even an old-fashioned leather waterskin hanging from his belt. It was like the fellow only ever been shopping in vintage 1970's Army-Navy surplus stores and had never even heard of REI.

It was all a workable enough get-up for, say, a spring hike somewhere like Washington State, but to Dean's eye it looked near-lethal for northern Alaska in the first week of May. Presumably the guy must have more layers in his backpack, which was the big overnight-camping type that extended well down to the hips. Even as Dean watched, the hiker put both his hands on the straps of the pack, holding it even more firmly to his body.

"Hey, how you doing?" Sam called out.

The hiker studied them curiously from a few feet away. He gave Sam a rather piercing look first, and then stepped closer and leaned over a little to peer through the truck cab at Dean, hands still firmly on his backpack straps, the blue scarf dangling from his neck.

Bright blue eyes in a wide, tanned face; scruffy stubble across his chin and jawline; rumpled dark hair poking out from the edges of his black wool hat. It was always hard to make out people's body types under layers of cold-weather gear, but Dean had the impression of someone tall, fairly fit, broad-shouldered, with decent muscle. The hiker's hands looked weathered and strong, as they wrapped firmly around the pack straps. His expression was alert, curious, and somewhat guarded.

Not a bad-looking guy at all, Dean couldn't help noticing.

Not bad at all. Not at all.

"Good afternoon," the hiker said, glancing back and forth between Dean and Sam. "Can I help you?" He had an extraordinarily rough voice, low and gravelly. It seemed to fit the tundra setting, somehow. A wilderness sort of a voice.

"Just checkin' in," Dean cheerfully. "We couldn't help noticing you're a hell of a long way from the back end of nowhere. Your truck up ahead? We could give you a ride to it."

"I don't have a truck," said the hiker.

Dean blinked at him for a moment. "You don't have a truck? But how did you get... oh, are you on a snow machine?"

"Snow... machine?" repeated the man slowly.

That was a little odd. The guy couldn't be an Alaskan, or even a seasonal worker, if he hadn't
recognized the classic Alaskan phrase "snow machine." Snow machines were more common up here than cars.

"Snowmobile," Dean clarified.

"Oh," said the man. "No. No snowmobile. No vehicle."

Sam suggested, with a grin, "Sled dogs?" He was probably joking — in addition to his obsession with the wolves he'd also been hoping to see a real dogsled up here at some point. It wasn't out of the question. Some people did bring dog teams up here to run them alongside the road for training. It was even pretty routine to find a few sled-dog booties scattered randomly across the tundra in spring when the snow melted out.

"No, I don't have domestic dogs," the man said to Sam, sounding a little regretful. "I have no companions. I do see the local wolves from time to time, but they're quite independent. We're on fairly good terms, but I doubt they'd be willing to pull a sled."

There was a slight pause.

"I could inquire," offered the hiker, a little uncertainly.

"Sure," said Dean slowly, trying to picture one of the unfathomably wild, lean tundra wolves harnessed to a dogsled. "Why not? You could just ask."

"Yeah, check on that, would you?" said Sam. "Might be worth a shot."

The hiker nodded, slowly, as if he were seriously considering the idea. "I'll inquire. It's an interesting idea, actually. I wonder what they'll think."

Okay, so the guy had an odd sense of humor. But he seemed nice enough. Dean didn't pursue the wolf joke, though; he was still trying to figure out where the hiker could possibly be headed. This was the absolute-zero of "middle of nowhere", after all, alone on the only road in the middle of ninety-five thousand square miles of trackless wilderness. Where had the guy come from, and where could he possibly be going?

"Uh... can I ask, are you on some kind of walking trek?" was Dean's next guess. "Walking to Tierra del Fuego or something?"

Sam shot Dean a puzzled look, asking, "People do that?"

Dean nodded, saying to them both, "Every year there's a few. Usually on bikes, though. Adventure-tourists trying to go all the way from the Arctic to the Antarctic. They usually give up on about day three. Right around here, in fact." To the hiker he added, "You're not trying to get south over Atigun Pass on foot, are you? Over the mountains? 'Cause that'd be pretty nuts."

"No, I'm not going that far," replied the hiker, shaking his head. "I don't need to get over Atigun Pass anyway. Actually, I just came the other direction. I walked over it about six weeks ago to get up here. I'm camping nearby now, in an old... well, there's a little, um, campsite that I set up some time ago, and I hadn't been back here for a while, so I thought it was time for a visit this year. Anyway, I'm just walking back to my camp."

Dean fell silent a moment, looking at him.

This unassuming hiker, who didn't even seem to be wearing proper arctic winter gear, was not only tent-camping somewhere here on the Slope before snowmelt had even started, but had apparently
walked over Atigun Pass six weeks ago. Atigun was the only driveable pass over the Brooks, and the Brooks were gigantic. Atigun was one of the most formidable and icy mountain passes in the entire state of Alaska.

And "six weeks ago" had still been hard winter. There'd still been a true night then; the sun had still been legitimately setting, for several solid hours each night. Night-time temps would have been twenty below or lower.

Dean said, slowly, "Over Atigun in March? On foot?" The hiker nodded, and Dean shook his head in amazement, saying, "You must be one hell of a tough dude."

"I'm really not at all," the man said softly. For a long moment their eyes met, right across Sam.

The blue of his eyes was really quite shockingly intense.

He was really rather attractive.

And his frickin' ability to hold a stare was really pretty unnerving. Dean soon found himself stammering, "Um, anyway, ah, we just pulled over to see if you wanted a ride or something. There's a bit of weather up north, and it's supposed to come down this way later tonight. Not a real blizzard, just some light snow, maybe sleet. Couple inches, maybe an ice crust. Not too bad but it'll be getting cold."

"I'll be all right," the hiker said. "I'm used to the cold. It doesn't bother me. Well...." He hesitated, a doubtful expression crossing his face. "It doesn't bother me much. I'll admit I seem to be losing some of my former... abilities. I have felt the cold sometimes, a little bit, this year."

"Happens to the best of us," said Dean, with a grin. "Things get tougher every year, you know?" As the hiker nodded thoughtfully, Dean scanned the guy's face again, wondering now about his age. Faint crow's-feet at the corners of the eyes and the edges of his mouth.... bit of a life-weary look to the expression in his eyes. Late thirties, or early forties, maybe? Hard to say. (Whatever his age, he wore it well. Quite well.)

Dean added, "Anyway, you got some layers in that pack of yours?"

There was a short pause.

"I...do," said the hiker slowly. "I do have... a layer. In my pack. Um, one layer."

Sam prodded, "A warm layer?"

"Um.... Yes." Again the odd hesitation. "It's warm, yes, if I... fold it around... or, I mean, extend... well, yes, it's pretty warm."

"Well, if cold bothers you at all," said Dean, "you're gonna be glad you got that. Even so, you should get back to your camp pronto, I think." He'd already made up his mind about the next step: "We can give you a ride. You're walking the same way we're driving, so why don't we get you a little closer? Closer to wherever your camp is, I mean. Take that pack off your shoulders and hop on in. Hey, Sam, can you make some room—"

The rear seats were full of their duffels and the cooler, while the far back held the beer, boots, and all the emergency blizzard gear, but there was plenty of room in the broad front seat. Sam was already cracking the door open and was now shoving the box of cassette tapes into Dean's lap and scooting over to the middle to make room on the passenger side. He gestured for the hiker to jump in. Cold air swirled into the cab, so cold that Dean shivered. (How on earth was the hiker okay in just that old
sheepskin coat?) But the hiker didn't move. He looked at the space that Sam had just vacated with what seemed a distinct touch of longing in his expression, but he shook his head.

"I'm afraid I can't," he said.

"Come on," urged Sam, waving him in. "Plenty of room. Take that load off."

The hiker shook his head again, more slowly. "My load doesn't really... come off that easily. But thank you kindly for the offer. Besides, I'm, ah, I'm really quite close. In fact I was just about to leave the road anyway. I'm very close to my campsite." He gestured vaguely with one hand toward the broad rolling expanse of snowy tundra to the west — where there was very clearly no camp at all, not for miles. The low hump of Topaz Mountain was the only thing in sight, and it was a good three or four miles away.

Dean said, a little doubtfully, "Well... I guess if you hiked over Atigun, you probably know what you're doing. But, you sure you can get back to your camp in the next couple hours?" The hiker nodded — though as Sam slowly shut the door again, the hiker's face again seemed to take on a distinct expression of regret.

Maybe the guy just didn't want to hitch a ride with strangers? But hitch-hiking was pretty common in Alaska, especially up here, and extra-especially-common when there was weather coming. Or maybe he was trying to stick to some self-imposed bucket-list goal of walking on foot everywhere? Or of always staying out of doors? Alaska did tend to attract some odd types. Over Dean's many years driving this road, he had encountered dreamers, hippies, vagabonds, loners and the certifiably insane, in about equal measure. At least this guy had some legitimate backcountry winter experience.

But Dean still couldn't resist trying to give him some safety advice. "You do know there's semis that come down this road pretty fast, right?"

"Semis?" repeated the hiker blankly. It almost sounded like he'd never heard the term before.

"Big rigs," said Dean.

"Big... rigs?"

"Trucks," clarified Sam. "Semis, you know?"

Now the hiker looked even more confused. "I've seen trucks on this road, yes, from farther away," he said. "But they don't look partial. They're not semi-trucks. They look like complete trucks."

Dean had to laugh, and Sam gave an uncertain chuckle too. It seemed it must be a joke, like the thing about the wolves pulling sleds, and yet again the hiker seemed totally serious. Briefly Dean wondered if the guy might be from some other country, but his English sounded totally American. Yet it was definitely starting to seem like he'd grown up somewhere unusual....

A likely explanation suddenly came clear: This guy must've grown up in a remote Alaskan bush village. It would explain the wilderness survival skills, and his casual attitude toward winter camping. And one thing about the bush villages was, they didn't have any roads at all. Which meant, no trucks, and certainly no semis. There were quite a few such towns that were serviced only by plane — to such an extent that in some communities it was more common for folks to know how to fly a small plane than to know how to drive a car.

"You grow up flying, by any chance?" Dean guessed.

The hiker went absolutely still. He stared at Dean for a long moment, without blinking at all.
"Bush planes?" Dean continued. "Cessnas? That why you haven't seen trucks much?"

"Oh," the hiker replied, slowly relaxing. "Um... correct. I haven't been around road vehicles often. I, um..." He hesitated. "I grew up flying, yes. Though..." His hands tightened on his backpack straps. "Not any more. I haven't flown in years. Now I just walk."

"Well, semis means semi-trailer trucks," Dean explained. "Semi because the trailer doesn't have its own front wheels. Semi-supported. Anyway, they come along here fast. You gotta be really careful walking on this road; they're not too maneuverable and they can't brake fast, and thing is, they can kick up rocks that fly at you at like fifty miles an hour. If you're gonna be walking on this road any, you need to walk on the side, the left side's best, and stay alert and get the hell off the road when they come by."

"Get... the hell... off?" said the hiker slowly.

"Like, get totally off, even if you gotta scamper down into a snowmelt ditch. Gotta keep your eyes open, okay?"

"My eyes are always open," said the hiker, quite seriously; he was taking this all in as if it were fascinating new information. "I didn't realize about the rocks," he said. "This is actually the first day I happened to have been walking along this road. Thank you for the warning. I'll be more careful."

"Cool, cool," said Dean, nodding. "Don't want you to get hurt, after all."

That earned him a slow smile. A rather dazzling smile, Dean couldn't help noticing; it seemed to utterly transform the hiker's face. Again the hiker looked at Dean for what seemed an unnaturally long moment.

"You don't want me to get hurt," he murmured, as if this were an odd concept. "Yet you don't even know me."

"Easy way to fix that, isn't there?" said Dean, and at this point he discovered that, for once, he actually wanted to know a Haul Road stranger's name. "I'm Dean Winchester, and this is my brother Sam," he said, gesturing to himself and Sam in turn.

As Sam nodded and smiled, the man straightened up, removed his hands from his backpack straps and visibly squared his shoulders, as if for a formal introduction. "My name is Castiel," he said.

"Never heard that one before," thought Dean, carefully repeating the unusual name to himself as he stretched out a hand for a handshake. Shaking hands meant that Dean had to lean over pretty far (the old Chevy was built pretty wide). Castiel had to lean a little into the window too, to reach all the way across Sam. He shook Dean's hand slowly, again with that almost formal air, as if they were meeting one another at a high-society diplomatic function. His hand was astonishingly warm, so much so that Dean found he wanted to hold on for a while. Maybe this "Castiel" did have some kind of cold resistance? And with that odd name... Part native, maybe? Dean had heard how some native Alaskans had super-warm hands; wasn't it some kind of arctic adaptation?

So... maybe part native... maybe grew up in a bush town... wilderness experience... cold-adapted, though less so recently... had never seen a big truck... wearing old 1970s gear, like he didn't get to the cities much to go shopping...

But had never heard of "snow machine?"

While Dean tried to puzzle this through, Castiel released Dean's hand and shook Sam's (quite formally, again). Politely, he inquired of Sam, "Where are you both going? South over the
mountains?"

"We're headed to Kupaluk," said Sam.

"Oh, Kupaluk Lake?" asked Castiel. He cast a rather worried glance at Dean. "Where the scientists work?"

"The research station, yeah," said Dean.

Castiel hesitated; he definitely looked a little worried. "My... family has requested that I not bother the Kupaluk scientists," he said. "I'm not supposed to interfere. At all, actually." He actually took a small half-step away from the truck as he said this, and both his hands went to his backpack straps again.

Dean frowned. It was Dean's prerogative as camp manager to invite camp visitors in when he judged it best. Outsiders didn't get to decide; this was Dean's job. So Dean couldn't help asking, "You always do exactly what your family wants?"

"Ah..." Castiel said, hands relaxing slightly, "Not exactly. No. In fact, very often not, now that you ask. In fact that's why I was...." He hesitated. "That's why I was sent here. But, I did agree not to bother the scientists."

"Well, I'm not one of the scientists, so you can bother me," Dean found himself saying.

Castiel gave another searching glance at Dean. "Well. If you'd like me to...." There was another moment's hesitation (and yet another moment of that weirdly long eye contact) and then he seemed to come to a decision. Castiel stood up a little straighter to declare, "If you wish to be bothered, Dean, it would be my pleasure to bother you."

"Yeah, drop on by someday," Dean said, as Sam stifled a chuckle.

"Will you be at Kupaluk too?" asked Castiel, now turning his attention back to Sam. "Do you wish to be bothered too?"

"I'm only visiting for a few days," said Sam, still chuckling a little. "Dean's the one who works down here. I've got an internship up at Deadhorse with Alaska Petroleum."

"He's gonna sell his soul to the devil," Dean put in.

It was obviously a joke — Dean was grinning as he said it, and Sam just rolled his eyes. But Castiel gave Dean a rather shocked look, and then he reached his left hand right in through the open window and gripped Sam by his near shoulder, even putting his head half in the window again just to look Sam right in the eyes.

"That's not a good idea," he said to Sam, his voice very low.

"Oh, I'm still considering the deal," Sam joked. "Haven't signed yet."

"Do not sign," said Castiel intently. "I strongly recommend against it. Most strongly. I can see, even at a look, that you have a good soul. Don't sell it. No price they can offer can make it worthwhile."

Sam gave a slightly confused laugh. "I know, I know. It's just an internship. I'm just gonna do the summer there and get out. Everybody seems to think I'll burst into flames if I just set foot into AP Legal, but I'll be fine, I swear." He gestured out at the barren tundra beyond the windshield. "In fact Dean brought down here to show me some wilderness first."

"I was hoping for a wolf," said Sam.

Castiel nodded, slowly relaxing his hold on Sam’s shoulder (though still not quite letting go). "You'd like to see God's creation," he said, as he began to straighten up. He glanced at the tundra, and back at Sam. "I think I understand. It's much why I'm here as well, of course. And... you'd especially like to see a wolf?"

"It'd pretty much make my whole summer, yeah," said Sam.

"I'll see what I can do," said Castiel, finally letting go of Sam’s shoulder. "Just, do not sign that deal."

"I won't, I promise," said Sam, who somehow seemed to have slid into discussing this "demon deal" as if it were a real possibility, and not just a silly joke that had been dragged out too long.

Castiel nodded, and finally he took a full step back from the truck. "It was very good to have met you both," he said, again slipping into that serious formal tone. "A most unexpected pleasure. I won't delay you further on your journey. And, Dean. I will try to come bother you at some point, as you requested."

He raised a hand; it seemed a farewell, so Dean waved goodbye, and so did Sam. Dean pulled away slowly so as not to spray any gravel up. As they drove off, Dean kept an eye on Castiel in the rearview mirror for quite a while. Castiel was standing still, just watching them, his hands again on his backpack straps. For as long as Dean watched, he stood still there, just a tiny figure receding into the distance.

"Well, that was an interesting guy," said Sam.

Dean had to laugh. "Alaska attracts all types. And breeds some types of its own, actually — I'm starting to think he might've grown up in some bush town."

"With a super controlling family?" suggested Sam.

Dean nodded. Again he remembered, though, that Castiel hadn't recognized the phrase "snow machine." What bush town didn't have at least a dozen snow machines?

"Nice enough guy, though," said Dean, adding, "and he must be a frickin' badass to do Atigun on foot in March."

"And he's on a first-name basis with the local wolves, apparently," Sam said. "Maybe he can order me up a wolf."

Dean laughed a little, sneaking one last glance in the rearview mirror. Castiel was still just visible, a tiny dark figure already a half mile off, still standing watching them drive away. He seemed terribly alone, the only living thing visible for miles in any direction.

"Damn, I hate to leave him there," Dean said. "I know he said he has a camp nearby, and he didn't want a ride, but it must be an hour's hike or more if we can't see it from here...." Dean hesitated. He still felt vaguely worried, even though the guy seemed to have enough wilderness skills to take care of himself. It wasn't even that uncommon for Dean's own scientists to hike a few miles daily over open tundra — some of the Kupaluk scientists logged a solid twenty miles a day on foot sometimes, and over very rough terrain. And occasionally they did walk along the road for short stretches
But the scientists worked in teams, didn't they? Castiel was alone.

"I wonder if he's checking in with anyone," said Dean, finally realizing that this was what was bothering him. He explained to Sam, "The rule up here is, there's gotta be somebody who knows where you are, always. Usually you're in a team. And if you're not in a team, somebody's gotta know where you went and when you'll be back. There's a whole checkout system we use at Kupaluk — I'll show you, and by the way, don't you even think of going out for a walk without signing out on the board, or I'll rip you a new one. A whole set of new ones."

Sam was nodding. "No ripping needed," he said, looking out at the snowy hills. "I can imagine how things could go bad fast out here."

"You better believe it. Weather comes up, or you sprain your ankle, or your truck gets a flat, or some mama bear and her goddam cub come along. Or just, you know, you go out on a pond and — you know how all Alaskan jokes end?"

"How?" Sam said.

"The punchline's always, 'and then he fell through the ice and died!'"

It was the classic old black-humor joke of the Arctic. They both laughed for a moment, but Sam had clearly gotten the point; he nodded, slowly, as the laughter faded.

"I'll give you the whole hypothermia lecture later," said Dean. He was still thinking about Castiel, and he added, "Anyway, thing is... didn't it sound like he's camping completely alone? He didn't mention anybody else."

"Maybe he's radio'ing to somebody?" Sam suggested.

"Radio only carries a few miles here—" Dean started to say, but then, as the truck crested a low hill, he suddenly realized exactly where they were. "Oh, jeez, we're here already, I didn't even realize we were this close. Look, look, thar she blows."

He pointed. A distant lake had appeared, identifiable only as a wide expanse of perfectly flat white that was nestled between some slightly-less-flat white hills. A tiny scattering of little rectangular dots on one side of the lake were the only sign of human habitation. The rectangular dots, of course, were the camp trailers; labs, dormitories, the ever-warm Winter Lab, the dining hall, the fancy new shower trailer. Dean could pick out the big winter-storage snow shelters for the freezable equipment (the Chevy had spent the winter there, up on blocks with her battery carefully removed and a few key fluids drained), and of course the huge camp generator Big Mama, tucked away in her private sound-proofed trailer. A couple of tiny flat helicopter pads were still just squares of empty snow; the two research choppers wouldn't arrive for a few more weeks. A few taller structures were the inevitable two-story outhouses, perched up above their collection tanks.

"Home sweet home," said Dean, slowing for the turn to the access road up ahead. "Kupaluk Research Station. I didn't realize we were so close." And then, at last, a final clue clicked into place.

"That was the bird guy!" Dean said. He was amazed he hadn't put it together till now. "Castiel! He has to be the bird guy, don't you think? The one that Shelly mentioned, remember? We're so close to camp — that had to have been him."

"Oh, right!" said Sam. "An ornithologist working somewhere to the north of your camp, right?"
"Gotta be," said Dean. "Funny that we got instructions to leave him alone, and he got instructions to leave us alone, huh? The higher-ups must be worried about overlapping field sites. He's closer to Kupaluk than I was picturing. He was only about eight miles north. Almost radio range. Let's see... if he's camped near Topaz...."

A thought struck him. It would be a little unusual. It wouldn't be standard protocol, but Dean could always chalk it up to personal time.

"You know, if it turns out he doesn't have anybody to check in with," said Dean, "he could just check in with me. Now and then. I mean, if he wants."
It was nearly dinner-time when they pulled in. After dumping their duffels in the dorm trailer and doing a bit of unpacking, soon Dean was introducing Sam around to the early-May camp staff in the dining hall. There was only a skeleton crew on staff this week, but even so it was gratifying to see how warm a greeting Sam got. Ted the cook (aka Teddy Bear), Nicole the EMT (and part-time cook's assistant), Matt the Mapper (the GIS-mapping guy), and even camp assistant Ryan, who was only starting his second season, all greeted Sam as if he were their own long-lost kid brother.

"Guess I've told them about you once or twice," Dean confessed to Sam, once the round of introductions was all done.

Ted the cook, nearly Sam's match in height and easily twice the width, let out a booming laugh. "He only talks about you like, all the time," he said to Sam, pushing dinner plates into both their hands. "You should've seen him when you got into that law school. We all had to drink for like, six hours, in celebration."

Sam glanced over at Dean with a somewhat surprised look. Dean shrugged, hoping to downplay it. Normally he would've rather dropped dead than let Sam know just how proud Dean was of his kid brother getting into Stanford Law. (Getting into Stanford Law twice, as a matter of fact. Twelve years apart.)

"You know me, any excuse for a beer," Dean said, pushing Sam bodily toward the dinner buffet. "Now eat up, Sammy, 'cause remember I'm putting you to work in the tundra slave mines tomorrow."

They loaded their plates with heaping helpings. It was standard field-station food, dished out of big cafeteria-style aluminum warming trays, but well-prepared and lots of it. Tonight's meal was grilled chicken and mounds of rice pilaf. A huge salad bar nearby had a array of fresh vegetables, which up here were as precious and as coveted as gold (and nearly as expensive). A big bin of fresh-baked warm dinner rolls and a bowl of whipped butter sat on a side table, along with three fresh hot pies and some tubs of ice cream stacked in ice-filled chillers.

"We're lucky to have Teddy Bear," Dean whispered to Sam as walked over to a long table to join
Ryan, Nicole and the other staff. "Ted, I mean. I won't tolerate bad food at camp. Made the university pony up a bit of extra cash last year just to pay Ted a little better so he'd stay another couple seasons. Gotta keep people well-fed."

"Let me guess, well-fed includes pies every night?" said Sam, chuckling a little as he glanced at the dessert table.

"As senior camp manager," said Dean loftily, "I do have a certain amount of input into Teddy Bear's dinner menus, yes. Just wish we could bring the pies out in the field for lunch. But he makes these awesome muffins too. I'm telling you, it's huge for morale. People gotta be eating well if they're gonna be hiking around all day, especially if it's cold."

As Dean said this, a thought flitted through his head: What was that guy Castiel eating? Was he making his own dinners? Dean had done his share of tent-camping, and he knew how grueling it could be to try to cook up a truly filling meal after working outside all day. Trail mix and instant oatmeal could only keep you going for just so long. It really helped to have full-time cooks at a field camp.

Actually it really helped just to have anybody else around. But from the looks of it, that Castiel guy was working entirely alone.

"I was expecting more people," said Sam, breaking into Dean's thoughts. Sam was looking around at the mostly-empty dining hall. Most of the staff, along with Sam and Dean, were lined up at a single long table by a bank of windows with a lovely view of the white world outside. A couple scientists who'd just entered at the main doors, still shedding their parkas out in the little "mudroom" lobby, were the only other people. All the rest of the tables — a dozen at least — were empty.

"It's just the beginning of May," explained Dean. "We're still on winter staffing because most of the researchers aren't here yet. They'll start pouring in at snowmelt in a couple weeks. Late May's when it really takes off. Whole place starts changing, fast. Green-up, flowers—"

"Don't forget the mosquitoes," put in Ryan.

"—mosquitoes, yeah, when June hits," acknowledged Dean, "And grad students. Who are kind of like the mosquitoes actually; they arrive at about the same time. So far we've just got a few of the scientists. Like, those two sorry-lookin' dudes who just came in, Phil and David—" (Dean started pitching his voice a little louder, so that the "sorry-looking dudes" could overhear.) "They're the only ones here so far from the U Penn stream ecology team. You see that hopelessly scruffy look, all sunburnt and muddy and beat-up, and that confused look in their eyes? That's what a Ph.D. looks like. They spend all day, like, staring at the bugs or the snow or something and thinking deep thoughts."

The "sorry-looking dudes" both laughed as they heard this, waving a friendly hello to Sam from across the hall. They were both still half-clad in their cold-weather gear as they clumped across the wide room to the dinner buffet; the parkas were off now but they were still wearing snow boots (though with the laces undone) and snow pants (now unzipped down the sides). Each had a small, battered yellow notebook tucked under one arm as they loaded their dinner plates. Phil, a white-haired older man, spoke up with, "Your brother's not lying about the confused look. Though I don't know about 'deep thoughts'."

The other ecologist, David, added, "We just spent literally all day walking through snowdrifts going, like, 'yep, the snow is starting to melt here. Yep, this snow over here is melting too.'"

"Cutting-edge science," put in Phil, with a sage nod. Dean and Sam both laughed, and Phil added,
"On the plus side, we get the best intel about when the lake ice is going to break up." He waved his little yellow book. "Got the inside scoop here, Dean."

Dean said to Sam, "Which is why they're not allowed to bet on the breakup date. We got a whole betting pool on this, every year, but these two are always disqualified. They know too damn much."

The ecologists laughed again and Phil said, waving the yellow book again, "Gold mine of info here on the lake break-up, dude. Gold mine. God bless Rite-in-the-Rain."

"God bless what?" said Sam.

"Oh, that's these yellow books," explained Phil. "Rite-in-the-Rain field books."

"They're waterproof," added Dean. "Everybody uses them here."

Phil said, "Been up here goin' on forty years now and I'll let you two in on a little secret. Cutting-edge science, if you guys really want to know, boils down to having a Rite-in-the-rain book, a couple of Sharpies, a GPS, and about ten fistfuls of hot-pink flagging tape. Don't know how I ever got anything done without that stuff back when I started. 1978, remember that, David?" David nodded thoughtfully as Phil added, "That was before hot-pink flagging tape was available! Can you imagine? Pre-GPS, too! It was torture."

Dean and Sam both laughed, and the two ecologists then headed to a corner table to pore over their little yellow books as they ate. Dean watched them paging through the field books, thinking, Everything that Castiel dude had looked like it was from the 1970s.

If he really grew up in some backwoods bush town... and if he's always worked alone... I wonder if he even knows about Rite-in-the-Rain books?

Or Sharpies? Or pink flagging tape, for that matter?

Or critical navigation equipment like a hand-held GPS?

After dinner, Dean took Sam back to the little mudroom-lobby to point out the sign-out board. This was a huge whiteboard marked off permanently with neat lines and columns that were labeled Who, Where, How, Time Out, Time Expected Back, and Overdue.

"You gotta swear you will ALWAYS sign out here if you go out on your own," Dean said, pointing out the tub of dry-erase markers sitting at the bottom of the board. "If you're gonna step even one foot outside of camp — beyond the perimeter trailers, I mean — you grab a marker and fill out a row, no matter what. Like this." He filled in a row on the whiteboard:

**Who: Dean & Sam**

**Where: Sauna**

**How: Feet** ("Or you'd put truck," Dean explained, "or snow machine, rowboat, whatever vehicle you're using." "Wolfsled?" suggested Sam, with a grin.)

**Time Out: 8 pm**

**Time Expected Back: Midnight**
Dean looked over what he'd written, hands on his hips. "You get the idea. We need to know where
you went. The feet, truck, bike column is so we can look for the parked truck or the bike or
whatever, to see where the bear jumped you or whatever happened. Or if you went by foot, then we
kind of know how far you might've gotten. And the "overdue" is basically to give us a clue about,
when should we really start to worry? Like, right now, the two of us might hang out at the sauna a
while longer than I planned, but if it gets past the overdue time and we're still not back, that's when
the other staff would swing into search mode."

Dean then led Sam into a side door of the camp manager office — Dean's domain, now, for the next
several weeks. "I got a whole bunch of safety lecture stuff we'll go through tomorrow," Dean said.
"Including an entire bear video, and yes, you gotta watch the whole thing or the university won't be
happy. And neither will I."

"But bears are rare here, right?" said Sam.

"Pretty rare, yeah, thank god," Dean agreed, tossing Sam's pack down at his feet. "Well— they're
around, but we have good bears here. We take care of our trash, so they never get anything to eat
from humans, so they don't associate us with food and they just mind their own business. You never
know, though. I always carry pepper spray. Always. And I always got my gun." He leaned down to
his own pack and tapped the rainproof pistol holster that was already strapped securely to the left
shoulder strap. Dad's ivory-handled Colt was in there, and it would stay there all season. It had been
the very first thing that Dean had unpacked. The shotgun had been the second; it was in their dorm
room now, in its own long rainproof case, ready to take out on the snow machines tomorrow. The
hunting rifle, now stored here in this very office, had been the third thing unpacked. Bear safety
always took priority.

Sam was quiet as he looked at the holster. He knew who had owned that ivory-handled pistol. And
where it had been found.

Dean went on, as casually as he could, "The grizzlies up here keep to themselves. They don't want
trouble, any more than we do. But a mama with a cub can come along and then you gotta watch it.
But it's unlikely, so don't worry too much. I'll make sure you have pepper spray. Anyway, we'll go
through all that later. For right now, there's weather to think about. There's stuff you need to always
take with you, even on a little bitty walk. Fog can come up, you can get turned around... it's amazing
how fast you can get lost." He looked Sam sharply in the eyes as he said all this, hoping Sam was
getting how critical this was. This was actually a major reason that Dean had wanted Sam to start off
his arctic summer with this four-day visit with Dean: Dean wanted to be the one to give him the
safety speech. Because this stuff mattered.

"There's a saying here," Dean went on. "And it's this: It only takes one mistake. One
little mistake.
One problem. Truck breaks down. Sprain your ankle. Lose your GPS. One problem, and then if the
weather turns, things can go bad fast. So, lemme get you squared away so you won't have any
problems. Come over here." Dean beckoned his brother over to a long table that held a row of little
devices on a table all sitting neatly in charging stations. Picking them up one at a time, Dean started
placing a series of pieces of equipment in Sam's hands, checking items off on a clipboard as he went.

"Radio," said Dean as he handed Sam one of the several dozen Kupaluk work radios. "Your basic
two-way. That one's yours while you're here, and here's the charger. Charge it every night."

"Looks the walkie-talkies Dad bought for us when we were kids," remarked Sam, turning the radio
over in his hands. It was a compact model with a long, slender antenna and a little belt clip, with a
foot-long streamer of pink ribbon tied to the end of the antenna.
"Yep, just like those except it's a pro version," explained Dean. "Better battery, waterproof, and that's a whip antenna for better range. We get up to three miles' range here if you have direct line-of-sight, like, hilltop to hilltop." Sam was still looking at the radio, twirling its little knobs curiously, while Dean selected a second device, a squat, gray brick-shaped device with a small LCD screen. This, too, had a pink streamer, tied onto its belt clip. "GPS," said Dean, handing it to Sam. "Your cell phone won't work up here, remember, so this is the thing you gotta use if you want to know where you are on an actual map." Dean then handed him a third device, this one bright yellow. "This one's an emergency transmitter that talks to the satellites. It's basically instead of 911. If you're ever in trouble, hit that red button and the satellite folks'll get a ping with your lat-long — your exact location. We've got it programmed to relay the ping straight to me here at the office. Then don't you dare move because I'll be going to exactly the lat-long the ping came from. Oh, also, you can send little texts to me through that, too." Sam's hands were already full, but Dean stacked on a few more things, "Here's a compass, an actual magnetic one, old style. It'll still work even if everything else dies. Oh, and, this is the pepper spray, that's for the bears, and just remember, spray with the wind at your back. We'll have you practice that tomorrow. Last rule, you gotta always bring your pack with some food, water, layers, and I always like to have an extra pair of socks—"

"What's with all the pink?" Sam said, juggling his increasingly large armful of navigational tools. He had no less than five devices now in his arms, each one with a neck strap and a small antenna, and each also festooned with a foot-long hot pink streamer.

Dean grinned at him. "That's the flagging tape that Phil mentioned. When you inevitably drop one of those in a snowbank, which, knowing you, will happen instantly, with any luck the end of the pink will still be visible. And that's what'll save your neck from me killing you, like if you lost that satellite beacon, just for example. You got fifteen hundred dollars of equipment in your hands right now, so don't lose any of it." Dean stopped, laughing a little, for Sam had already gotten some of the little straps and pink strips tangled with each other. Sam looked up at him with a slightly harassed look.

"You're off to an excellent start," said Dean, with an approving nod. "The pinnacle of arctic hiking is to try to get every single piece of navigation equipment tangled into your sunglass straps all at once. The bird team always wins, since they get their binoculars tangled up on top of everything. We're always finding them half-strangled in a willow bush."

"Do you also provide pack mules to carry all this crap?" muttered Sam, now trying to disentangle the GPS's neck strap from the compass's pink streamer.

"Gotta be your own mule," said Dean with a shrug. "It's a pile of annoyance, yep. But we've never had a death here yet, and I sure don't plan on the first one happening on my watch. And definitely not you."

Sam managed to separate the electronic devices into two clumps, which he stuffed into his two jacket pockets. He heaved a little sigh, looking down at the little compass. "At least the compass just points north," he said. "I think I can handle that."

"Actually it'll point kinda northeast," said Dean.

Sam looked up at him. "What?"

"Magnetic north isn't exactly at the North Pole," Dean explained. "We're so far north here that magnetic north is due northeast."

Sam just blinked at him, and Dean laughed. He clapped Sam on the shoulder. "It'll all make sense later," he promised. "Right now it's sauna time! C'mon, this is that home-built sauna I've told you about, right on the lake, it's awesome. It's the best way to get clean — you sweat out all the Haul
Road dust, and then you go out on the lake—"

"And fall through the ice and die," said Sam.

"You learn fast," said Dean. "C'mon. Let's go grab pj's. And clean undies while you're at it."

"We're gonna wear pj's in the sauna?"

"We're gonna wear nothing in the sauna," Dean said. "The pj's are what we change into after." At Sam's slightly startled look, Dean laughed again, saying, "It's the best way to get clean, trust me."

The cold wind hit them hard when they stepped outside, even with all their layers bundled back on. The snowstorm had indeed followed them south to camp; the Brooks had disappeared behind a wall of dark gray clouds while they'd been eating, and snow was pelting at their faces now. They both had to pull up their parka hoods for just the quick dash to the nearby dorm trailer, where Dean grabbed his sauna bag — a mini-duffel containing a bundle of towels and soap and shaving gear that he'd pre-packed before they'd even left Lawrence. It even already contained his fleece pj's and a change of underwear. Sam tossed him a set of his own sleeping clothes, Dean stuffed those in the little duffel too, they grabbed some water bottles, and in moments they were out again into the bitter wind.

They set out walking straight into the wind, boots crunching through the snow, Sam winding his scarf around his face for extra insulation. The churned-mud truck tracks in the broad parking area had already vanished under a thin dusting of pure white. Dean pointed to their destination: a quarter mile away, on the very, very edge of camp, was a little wooden structure. It had a short squat chimney, which was puffing out a steady stream of smoke.

"The Kupaluk sauna," Dean said. "Built back in the day, back before the shower trailer existed. I helped do the reno on it my first season here. Used to be it really was the only way to get clean. And still the best way, if you ask me. I started the fire while you were unpacking before dinner; should be nice and toasty now."

They passed Baby, Dean's beloved old Chevy, now neatly parked with the other camp trucks. It already had a half-inch coating of snow, as did the line of other beat-up trucks behind it, many of them also vintage forty- and fifty-year-old vehicles. ("Kupaluk's where the university sends trucks to die," Dean remarked. "But I'm not about to let that happen if they've got good bones.") They passed Kupaluk's six snow machines, then a tarp-covered line of four-wheelers and mountain bikes that were all still awaiting snowmelt, and then three upended skiffs that wouldn't be put to use till the lake ice broke up.

Dean automatically started looking around camp as they walked, scanning everything they passed for signs of potential winter damage. Sam, of course, was looking around curiously too, and Dean started naming the structures they were passing, and explaining their functions — the winter storage, the huge Weatherport tent frames where the grad students would stay, the experimental greenhouses, the machine shop, the newly installed shower trailer that could dispense precious short "showers" — really just a thin mist of water drops that only lasted five minutes, but sometimes that was five minutes of bliss.

The whole station was something of a miracle. Here in this patch of wilderness, where there had
been nothing at all but tundra (no running water, no electricity, no phone service, no internet, no buildings, no plumbing, no sewer, no nothing), Dean and his forerunners had managed to build a fully functional scientific research station. It had food, water, and beds; it had some reliable little pockets of warmth; it was as environmentally friendly as they could get it (they trucked all the waste and graywater out, and every week Ryan drove the recycling all the way down to Fairbanks). It had labs, and centrifuges, and ultralow freezers. It had every mode of transportation imaginable, from boats to snow machines, and a fleet of trucks that actually ran (thanks to Dean). Hell, it even had two little research helicopters — currently mothballed at Fairbanks, but they'd both be up here by the end of the month.

Somehow it all worked, and up here that was saying something. As they passed Big Mama, housed within her massive sound-proofed trailer, it actually warmed Dean's heart to hear the trusty generator purring away. Food trucks and water trucks drove hundreds of miles up here, carefully scheduled for regular deliveries, while graywater and trash and sewage trucks all were carefully scheduled out. PI's, the "principal investigators" who ran the National Science Foundation grants, and their fleets of post-docs and grad students, would all be flooding in soon.... and everybody would be well-fed and healthy and safe and warm.

"You know," Dean remarked to Sam, "When I first started here I was so intimidated by all the scientists. Didn't want to admit it, but I was sure they'd be looking down on me."

"And did they?" Sam asked, a faint scowl creasing his face, as if he were already prepared to get angry at the scientists.

Dean snorted. "My second hour here, three of the top Ph.D. ecologists in the entire continent, like, really big-league dudes, came slogging up to me covered in mud, begging for help to get their truck out of a ditch. They'd already been hiking an hour just to get back to camp to look for me. Super cool guys. Got the truck out and they were so grateful. Gave me a bottle of whiskey in thanks and we spent all night drinking. Never worried about it since." He added, thoughtfully, "It's like they're my people now."

And it was true. They were almost like Dean's summer-season family. The scientists, and the staff, were Dean's responsibility, and it was Dean's job to take care of them. Despite bears, blizzards, flat tires, broken bones and the icy lake, he'd never lost a one of them yet.

Maybe it wasn't the life he'd originally had in mind, but that was okay. Sure, he still had dreams, sometimes. of some endless road trip down south, of wild adventures down in the lower forty-eight, driving from state to state on the long back roads, drinking his way from bar to bar, a life straight out of Kerouac. He even had dreams, sometimes, of driving an actual Chevrolet Impala. (Black. It was always black, in his dreams. Just like the truck.) But somehow he'd found a job up here that he was good at, where he could use his hands, and his mind, where he wasn't stuck at a desk, and where he could even have his guns. It always felt good to know he was taking care of his people.

Maybe Sam was right; maybe, all along, Dean had been looking for people to protect. From weather, from bears... from.... something.

But what would it all look like to Sam? They were nearing the scattered storage areas at the edge of camp now, and Dean looked around a little doubtfully, trying now to see it through Sam's eyes. Yes, in one way the very existence of this camp was a miracle, but in another it always looked a bit like a disaster area. The ramshackle trailers seemed to have been dropped almost randomly from the sky. Winter damage and weather damage were constant; sometimes the whole camp seemed held together only with duct tape and cable-ties. Equipment was stacked all over in strange ungainly heaps — a pile of lemming traps here, a stack of caribou antlers there. Even the world-class, NSF-funded, long-
term experiments always seemed to have a pretty jerry-rigged look, the tundra seemingly littered with hand-built plexiglass boxes and odd assemblages of rebar, wires and plywood. Here in camp there weren't even any sidewalks, and no pavement at all. Nothing but mud and gravel, with conduits and piping running haphazardly all over the ground.

It all looked pretty messy. Sam would probably think it was nothing much—

Sam said, "This is an amazing place, you know."

Dean felt a wide grin spread over his face, and turned to him to say, "You think so?"

"It's crazy," said Sam, glancing around. "I mean, look how much you've built here. This is wilderness, and somehow you got all this stuff here. It's incredible. And, really... I can't believe I'm in the Arctic. The Arctic, Dean. I'm in the Arctic! I know it's no big deal for you, but... this is all just so cool!"

"Literally," said Dean, and they both laughed.

The sauna was just a simple, short wooden cabin situated just on the edge of the frozen lake, with a row of hand-built wooden steps that led down to a narrow pier jutting out into the lake ice. A hole had been chopped in the ice at the side of the pier, with an axe and a stack of buckets nearby. Dean grabbed the axe and gestured for Sam to get the buckets, and after chopping the hole in the ice a bit bigger, they filled four buckets with icy lake water and carried it all into the sauna.

They stripped in the sauna's little antechamber, a tiny room lined with towel hooks, and, as Dean had warned Sam, all clothes came off. This really was the best way to get clean. The sauna had been designated a clothing-optional zone since the earliest days of camp, and Dean had already posted a note on the main board tonight that from eight to midnight, the sauna would be "Men or mixed-sex, clothing optional." All others in camp had, therefore, been warned. So the brothers stripped, and then they basked on their towels in the blistering heat of the inner sauna room, sweating out every speck of dust and grime. Now and then Dean dumped a bucket of water over the hot stones that ringed the squat iron wood-stove. Billows of steam rose up then, drenching them both.

For the first ten minutes they just basked in the warmth, letting it sink into their bones, each brother sprawled out separately on a long towel stretched out on the wooden benches.

Eventually they began to talk. About Sam's summer job with Alaska Petroleum, and what little he knew about it. He'd already gotten another email today from his "mentor," some gal named Ruby who'd be overseeing his internship. She'd confirmed that she and her boss would be awaiting Sam in Deadhorse in three days' time.

Of course Sam started asking about Kupaluk and its history, and Dean found himself taking a surprisingly deep pleasure in regaling Sam with the best Kupaluk camp stories he could remember. Some stories Sam had heard before, of course, like the time an angry grizzly had torn up a helicopter pad while the whole camp watched — but now Dean found himself wanting to add all the showy details. Like how he'd had to station himself between the bear and all the other people with his Winchester Alaskan rifle (a model he'd originally bought just because of its absolutely perfect name, and which had since become one of the major camp defense points for bear safety).

"So this grizz is standing up on its hind feet just a hundred yards away," said Dean, still sprawled out
on his towels gazing at the wooden ceiling. "They stand when they're assessing whether to charge, you know. And I'm yelling 'Get inside!' to everybody. And this damn Brit, chair of biology at Oxford University or some damn thing, is just taking all these pictures and finally I'm like 'what the fuck are you doing' and he's like 'This is literally the most American thing I've ever seen, and I just gotta take one quick picture of an Alaska Winchester holding a Winchester Alaskan to protect me from a grizzly bear'."

Sam laughed; he was laughing at every story, actually. So Dean told him about the time a tent full of precious research notes had blown loose in a gale-force wind and had rolled, still completely intact, right onto the lake ice like a gigantic hamster wheel, with a desperate grad student dashing after it ("Did they fall through the ice and die?" asked Sam. "Not on my watch," said Dean. "I went out in the snow machine and picked her up, and then we had to chase down the tent. That thing was really rollin', man, thirty miles an hour at least."

They talked a little about Bobby. Dean made a mental note to send Bobby an email late tonight, to tell him that Sam and Dean had both arrived in Kupaluk safely. They talked about the garage, and Dad's old patch of property up in Lebanon — a nearly worthless old farm with nothing but a tumbledown ruin of a barn. It always been a mystery (and a hassle) why Dad had bothered buying the place.

It was even good talking about that old mundane stuff. It was just plain good to have Sam around, in fact. It had been years since they'd hung out.

They didn't talk about Dad other than that, though.

They didn't talk about Mom. At all.

And they didn't talk about girls. Dean managed to casually drop the fact that Shelly was visiting her wife. After that Sam didn't ask about anybody else.

That was about usual. Sam's awkward questions up in Deadhorse had been an anomaly. Normally Sam didn't ask, and Dean didn't tell.

And as for Sam himself... well, the poor kid gone through a string of unlucky relationships over the years, and nothing much had ever really seemed to work out. Whenever he was in a dry spell he never really wanted to talk about it. Dean always kind of wanted to offer support, but he knew he was probably the worst person in the world when it came to useful tips about relationships.

At least there was still plenty of time for Sam.

By ten o'clock they'd both sucked their water bottles dry and were nearly baking. "Time for the best part," Dean told him. "You know that hole in the ice where we filled the water buckets, remember?" Sam nodded, and Dean said, "You might've noticed I chopped it wider. Two people wide, was the idea. Here's the deal. The way this sauna works is, you wait till you're about to die of heat stroke. Then you run to the lake and jump in."

"Into... the lake?" said Sam, glancing doubtfully out the sauna's little window to the completely frozen lake, which from here looked like just a seamless plain of white. Snow was drifting down heavily now. "Literally? The frozen lake?"

"Yup. By the way, hang onto the railing going down the steps to the pier, it's slippery. Oh and, grab
The grin on Sam's face, and his eager nod, was all the answer Dean needed.

They pelted out of the sauna into the falling snow in their bare feet, naked as the day they'd been born, the rolled-up towels clutched in their hands. After the broiling sauna, the frigid air outside felt fantastic, the snow like dots of blessed cold on Dean's overheated skin. Down the wooden steps they went, slipping and sliding down the ice and hanging on to the rail for dear life, both whooping with excitement. They dropped the towels on the pier, and at the hole in the ice Sam didn't even hesitate; they both jumped in simultaneously, side by side.

The water, as always, was a shocking blow, like being gripped by the hand of Old Man Winter himself. Dean deliberately went fully under, holding his breath.

He surfaced a moment later to a bloodcurdling yell.

"HOLY FUCKING SHIT THAT'S COLD!" Sam was hollering. "COLD! COLD! COLD! FUCK, FUCK, FUCK!" Sam was exactly correct, but Dean couldn't stop laughing at his horrified yells, and soon Sam was laughing, too. Sam seemed to nearly levitate back onto the pier, hauling himself up in a single great lunge of his long arms. Dean, though, despite feeling almost blindsided with the cold himself, knew from experience that it was mostly a skin-deep sensation — his body core would still be warm for another couple minutes. He made a point of swimming a bit in the water — two entire strokes, back and forth, saying calmly, "Why, Sam, I don't know what you're talking about, the water's lovely," — while Sam, still cursing at top volume, stood on the pier wrapping his towel frantically around himself. Finally Dean pulled himself over to a little wooden ladder and scrambled up to join Sam. The wintry air, and even the falling snow, seemed almost warm after the bone-chilling lake water.

"Okay, I'll admit it, that felt amazing," said Sam, who now had a second towel wrapped around his shoulders. "Or I mean, it feels amazing now that I'm out. Jeez, look at us, we're steaming!" They were indeed both steaming; thick wreaths of water vapor wafting off both their bodies, the falling snowflakes literally melting on their skin. As Dean reached for his own towel, wrapping it snugly around his waist, Sam said, "Dean, this was—"

Sam stopped in mid-sentence. Dean looked up to see Sam staring toward shore. Sam's eyes were wide and round, his mouth actually hanging half-open. Dean turned to follow Sam's gaze, and there on the pier, blocking the brothers' path back to shore, was a wolf.

It was sitting on its haunches right where the pier joined the shore, a few feet away from the sauna door. The wolf was only about twenty feet away. It was white, with soft tinges of dove-gray on its ears and back. It was sitting absolutely still, and it was staring at them with bright green eyes.

Tundra wolves weren't actually all that big. Dean knew they were smaller than the wolves down south. But they always seemed to make up for it with an air of toughness, a lean wiriness, like they could take on absolutely anything Mother Nature could dish out. And the look in those eyes... Calm. Cool. Intelligent. As Dean met the wolf's green-eyed gaze, a chill ran right down his spine. It was focusing right on Dean.

The wolf was so close that Dean could see the black pupils in its green eyes. He could see every toe on its front paws, every tuft of fur on its shaggy neck, and even the way snowflakes were drifting down to land, unmelted, on its dove-gray tips of its ears.

It looked at each of them in turn: Dean first, who was closer; and then Sam, who was right next to
Dean.

Its eyes fixed on Sam.

I don't have my guns, thought Dean.

I don't have my pistol. I don't have the shotgun. I don't even have a knife. Miserably, he eyed the sauna axe; it was behind the wolf, propped by the sauna door. I've got nothing. I'm not even fucking dressed. All I've got is a goddam towel.

Wolves pretty much never attacked people. Or that's what everybody said. Wolves weren't supposed to get nervous or unpredictable like bears, and they weren't ornery like moose. They just left people alone. Or... that's what everybody said. That's how wolves were supposed to act.

But there was always the rare exception, wasn't there? Normally a wolf wouldn't even get this close in the first place. So just from the fact that the wolf was so close, already it was clear that this was a wolf that was not acting normal. What did that mean? An unusually aggressive wolf? A wolf with cubs nearby? A wolf with rabies?

The wolf blinked slowly at them. It lifted its long white nose, and it let out a long howl into the falling snow.

Dean had heard wolf howls before, but never from so close. It was shockingly loud, with a throatiness to it that was positively spinetingling. The howl started low and warbled higher, the wolf's voice breaking mournfully in the middle and leaping to a high pitch. The hair rose on the back of Dean's neck and gooseflesh prickled all the way down his arms, and it wasn't because of the cold. Beside him he heard Sam draw a shaky breath.

The wolf finished its howl and looked around, ears pricked.

Its attention now seemed fixed on some willow-bushes about a quarter-mile away along the shore, which seemed to be rustling slightly in the wind. A flock of little white birds burst out of the shrubs, as if something had startled them. They winged away across the lake and were soon lost to view in the falling snow.

The wolf shook itself, stood, and began trotting directly toward Sam and Dean.

Dean took a few hasty steps toward Sam as the wolf drew near, and he reached out to put an arm on Sam's shoulder. He had a plan: if the wolf attacked, Dean would shove Sam back into the water. Sam would be slightly safer there and then the wolf would focus on Dean. I can wrestle the wolf, Dean was thinking. If it jumps I'll let it jump me, and I'll fend it off with my arm; I'll let it chew my arm, and I'll pull it farther out along the pier, and then Sam can get out at the ladder and go for help. At least he'll be safe then.

All this ran through Dean's mind in a moment, a flashing mental-movie of the hypothetical wolf-attack and what he would do. He hovered there by Sam, poised and ready — though, it turned out, Sam was not helping, at all, and in fact Sam seemed to be trying to maneuver around Dean as if he'd had the exact same idea but in reverse, of pushing Dean in the water. Within one second the brothers were soon locked in an absurd and tiny shoving match, each trying to reposition to get himself between his brother and the wolf. But the wolf just gave them both a doubtful look, edging sideways a little as it came closer, and Dean realized it was moving over to the far edge of the pier as if to give them a wide berth.

The brothers both went absolutely still, still clutching at each other's arms. The wolf trotted right past
them, just a few feet away. Dean had succeeded in getting himself on the closer-to-the-wolf side, and in the end Dean could almost have reached out and brushed its fur as it went past. It glanced at Dean as it passed, and sniffed the air slightly.

It moved on.

When the white wolf reached the edge of the pier it soared out in a lazy, long jump, landed without a sound on the snowy ice, and simply kept trotting away, right across the lake ice. It was moving now with efficient long strides that left a perfectly straight line of tracks behind it. Dean and Sam stood side by side, mouths agape as they watched the white wolf leave. It got smaller and smaller in the distance, till it began to fade into the haze of falling snow. Soon it was only a faint gray shadow, and then even the tip of its tail vanished from view.

Both brothers were shuddering with cold now, but for a moment neither spoke.

"Holy crap," Sam murmured.

"Holy fucking crap," agreed Dean. Taking a shaky long breath, he said, "Well, dude, you wanted a wolf story, and god damn, now you got a wolf story. You got the best Kupaluk wolf story I've ever heard of."
Nothing could top the wolf on the pier.

The rest of Sam's three days in camp did have plenty of other good times and high points, of course. He'd soon had the doubtful pleasure of the tiny five-minute "mist showers" in the shower trailer, and he got to try Ted's marvelous peach-blueberry pies and the apple cobbler. By late Sunday he'd put in quite a few volunteer hours helping Dean repair the plywood platforms for the Weatherports, he'd stumbled to the frigid outhouses in the middle of the night through both snow and incongruously blazing two-in-the-morning sunlight, he'd zoomed around on the lake ice on his very own snow machine, and he'd fallen, on snowshoes, into thick drifts of soft snow, flailing around uselessly while Dean (and Sam too, eventually) roared with laughter. He'd found his first caribou antler. He'd seen the midnight sun. He'd seen his first ice caves, down south by the Brooks, the huge tubes of ice that formed when fast-running mountain streams froze and then dried up over the winter. They'd spent an eerie and beautiful hour together one Saturday evening, clambering through the green- and blue-tinged ice caverns before re-emerging to the strangely sunny night.

They'd seen caribou several more times by now, too, the big tundra deer invariably plodding steadily north in their patient, slow, single-file trek. They'd had a great sighting of a handsome cross-fox — not a cross with another species, as Sam had first guessed from the name, but rather a dark-colored red fox, his fur a smoky-tinged russet with a vivid black cross down his fluffy back and across his shoulders. Sam had taken a good twenty minutes of video of the cross-fox pouncing through an ice-covered patch of tundra at some unlucky little vole. They'd seen the camp raven several times, and had even tossed it a few pieces of bacon; they'd seen a golden eagle, and some kind of an owl. Just this Sunday morning, Sam's last full day here, they'd even seen a huge white falcon go winging by at what seemed like a hundred miles an hour. Dean didn't know a lot of the little birds, but after fourteen years up here he did know some of the big ones. "Gyrfalcon," he told Sam.

"Deer falcon?" Sam said, eyes wide. "Don't tell me it can carry away the caribou?"

"GYR-falcon," Dean repeated more slowly, emphasizing the "jeer" part, before they both burst up into laughter.

There'd been a lot of good moments. But nothing topped the wolf on the pier. The rest of camp had
all been regaled with the story several times by now, and all agreed it was the wolf-encounter to top all wolf-encounters. Sam couldn't stop talking about it.

The brothers had even joked, a couple times, about the bird guy Castiel "sending the wolf". Late on Sunday evening at the dining hall, while Dean was re-telling the whole story yet again for a newly arrived ecology grad student, Sam said, "I should have specified that I wanted to see a wolf while I was in the truck."

Dean nodded, taking a swig of beer. "Both of us inside the truck, wolf outside the truck, would've been perfect."

"Also, next time I want to have some clothes on," remarked Sam. "Next time you see that Castiel dude, Dean, can you order up a wolf encounter that includes clothes?"

"Will do," said Dean, grinning. "If I ever see him again."

Of course it was impossible that Castiel could've had anything to do with the wolf, but it made a great story anyway, a tall tale that began to take on mythic dimensions the more Dean retold it: first, a strange encounter on the road with a mysterious hermit dressed in nothing but 1970s Army-Navy surplus, who'd said he'd "inquire" of the wolves. And then, the wolf turning up that very evening, just hours later. In the continued re-tellings of this story, Castiel began to morph into a somewhat Gandalf-like figure. A cartoon soon appeared in the upper corner of the sign-out whiteboard labeled "NEW TRAVEL OPTION: WOLFSLED". It depicted Sam and Dean being pulled along in a dogsled drawn by a huge white wolf (helpfully labeled 'WOLF NOT DOG'), complete with a backpack-wearing, dark-haired Gandalf figure waving a magical staff in the background. The Gandalf figure had his own label: MAGICAL BIRD GUY. Dean wasn't even sure who had drawn it, but the cartoon stayed.

But they'd seen nothing more of Castiel. None of the other camp staff had ever laid eyes on him. Nobody even seemed to know exactly where Castiel might be staying or what exactly he was researching, and since he was apparently the only neighbor within a hundred miles, Dean's and Sam's lone sighting of the guy became a topic of some interested discussion. A consensus emerged that since the road had a good two-mile line of sight on either side, the mysterious Castiel's campsite must be farther away from the road than that, maybe on the west side around Topaz Mountain, where the birdlife was more diverse and where there was drinkable stream water in summer, or possibly to the southeast where there were a lot of nesting ducks that could conceivably draw the attention of an ornithologist. But wherever he was, he stayed well out of sight.

Dean could only hope he'd weathered the little snowstorm the other day in good shape. It had been a minor snowfall really, just an inch or so. It hadn't even resulted in much of an ice crust. Nothing major for the Arctic. Surely an Atigun-Pass hiker could deal with an inch of snow. Also, the sun was now staying up twenty-four hours, which meant that the lowest temperature of the "night" rarely dropped below about 10F. Cold, yes, but not necessarily lethal.

Even so, despite the midnight sun, the temperatures still did drop. And ten-above, while certainly better than winter's forty-below, was still sub-freezing.

Tonight, though, Sunday night, was a little colder. Tonight was Sam's last night, and as Dean lay on his cot listening to Sam's faint snoring, he knew the midnight sun's rays were dimmed behind banks of low, dark clouds. A stiff wind had been picking up all evening and heavy clouds had come rolling in from the west, trailing long tendrils of chilly fog. The wind was making mournful whistles now as it slid past the little dorm window. Inside, their dorm room was comfy and warm. It occurred to Dean, as it often did, that Kupaluk Research Station was a tiny bubble of safety in a very hazardous environment. A bubble of safety that Dean had helped to create... and that he always felt somewhat
responsible for. It was second nature for him to worry about anybody still out on the tundra who hadn't made it back to the dorm rooms. His last act tonight before bed — his last act every night, for his whole thirteen (going on fourteen) years here, actually — had been to check the big whiteboard, to make sure that everyone who had been out had checked back in. Even so, once Dean got into bed he always tended to do one last doublecheck, running through a mental checklist of where everybody was.

There was Sam, snoring in the bed across the room with his feet tangled in his half-kicked-off sleeping bag. Teddy Bear the cook had called a goodnight to Dean just a half hour ago. Nicole the EMT had last been seen watching a DVD in the dining hall's tiny TV corner, along with Shawn the lemming grad student (not the first time they'd been spotted together, actually). Ryan, Dean's camp assistant, was curled up with an iPad on the beat-up sofa in the dorm trailer's muddy little lobby, talking in a low voice to his Anchorage girlfriend over Skype. Phil and David, the two stream ecologists, had been out all day arguing about melt-off rates again with their new grad student Jeanette, but all three had turned up safe at dinner. Jeanette had gone to bed early and the ecologists were now at the sauna along with Matt, the map guy.

Everyone was safe and accounted for.

...except for the Haul Road hiker. Castiel. The bird guy.

Dean sighed. Rolling onto his side, he stuffed his pillow under his head and tried to forget about other random stray people who weren't his responsibility. Castiel wasn't a camp resident. He wasn't even in the official Kupaluk research zone. Instructions had been very clear to leave him alone.

But they'd met, hadn't they? They'd shaken hands, they'd exchanged names, and they'd looked into each other's eyes. And just that brief encounter somehow had made Castiel stick in Dean's mind. The wolf at the sauna, of course, had made Dean think about Castiel a few more times, and now, days later, it seemed that Dean could still recall Castiel's face almost perfectly. The vivid blueness of his eyes, the way that dark hair had been blowing in the wind, the expressive wide mouth, the slightly-sad eyes, the scruffy look to his chin...

That look he'd had, cautious and intelligent and curious.

The warmth of his hand.

And the sound of that low voice.

They'd met. Dean knew his name now. And somehow, in that one brief meeting, Castiel had immediately slid onto Dean's private mental list of 'people to check on.' Just to know that he was probably alone (likely with no radio! Did the guy even have a GPS?)... tent-camping without a vehicle, not far away from Dean's little patch of tundra... It was like a nagging itch.

Dean knew it was a little silly to be worrying about him. They'd only met just the one time, and Dean didn't really know him at all. Yet tonight, just as on the past two nights, Dean fell asleep thinking, I wish I knew if that Castiel guy is okay.

The next morning as Sam was packing up for departure, he returned the field equipment that Dean had checked out for him four days earlier: the radio, the bright-yellow satellite transmitter, the GPS, the old-fashioned little compass, the pepper spray, and more. Sam kept pulling more things out of his
field pack, and they were both soon laughing at how many items Dean seemed to have loaned him in just a few days. Out came crumpled fistfuls of the hot-pink flagging tape (Sam's first Sharpie had instantly gone missing in the snow, much as Dean had predicted, and Sam had already adopted the tundra veteran's habit of tying a long pink strip to everything he owned, from his gloves to his backpack to his spare scarf). Out came several more Sharpies, and Sam's very own Rite-In-The-Rain notebook (bequeathed to him by Phil and David), along with a surprising number of half-squashed granola bars and Fig Newtons, and even a pair of beat-up loaner binoculars that Shawn-the-lemming-grad-student had loaned him out of the bin of Cornell bird equipment. Sam also returned some extra layers that he'd snagged out of the Kupaluk finders-keepers pile. This was a stash of miscellaneous abandoned gear that Dean had accumulated over the years, from which Sam had borrowed an extra sleeping bag, the backup scarf, a "size ginormous" pair of Xtra-Tuf mud boots, several sauna towels, glove liners, a spare pillow and more.

As Sam handed over the big bundle of clothing and gear, he said, "Hey. I was thinking, maybe that Castiel guy could borrow some of these, now that I'm not using it?"

Dean snorted.

"What?" said Sam.

"Guy's been on my mind too," confessed Dean, with a shrug. He began checking Sam's gear off on yet another clipboard. "Keeps bugging me that I don't know where he is. Or if he has any decent equipment."

"Well, if you see him again, maybe you can loan him some of this stuff," said Sam. He hesitated a moment, head cocked as he watched Dean ticking off items on the loan-out sheet. Sam added, as he thought it through, "Though... I guess you probably have to keep these for official camp visitors, right?"

Dean nodded, a little glumly. He set the clipboard back on its nail on the wall. "Yeah. You were signed up as an official camp visitor, so I could check stuff out for you. Castiel isn't an official visitor, and it sounds like the higher-ups don't want him to be — all that stuff about "not interfering.". And, y'know, it's not like I know how to find him anyway. Nobody's seen him."

"Very mysterious and Gandalf-like," commented Sam. "He's probably running around with the wolves. Like Kevin Costner."

Dean laughed again. (The Gandalf joke had turned out to have some serious legs, and Dances-With-Wolves references were holding strong too.) He picked up Sam's little two-way radio, turning it over in his hands. It would need charging tonight, and Dean noticed, now, as he glanced at the long line of radio chargers that were lined up on the office table, that there were really quite a lot of other radios.

"If I ever do run across him again..." Dean mused, "it's not impossible that a couple of these things might go missing. We do lose stuff now and then. If the pink falls off and then it gets dropped somewhere in the tundra... you know, we lose about two radios a year, actually."

Sam grinned at him. "Be a pity if you lose another one. Especially if you lose it right when you see the guy."

Dean nodded, thinking. But then his cell phone buzzed in his pocket; it was time to go. (Cell phones were pretty pointless here as phones, but they still were perfectly good alarm clocks.) Dean powered down Sam's radio and GPS, set all the devices back in the row of charging stations, and they headed out to Baby.
Delivering Sam to his Alaska Petroleum internship required another long drive north, right back up the Haul Road. Last night's freezing fog had burned away, and the sun was blazing overhead now in a seamless bowl of deep-blue sky. It was a beautiful day. The road was in much better condition now, and they made good time.

Halfway up they stopped for lunch by the Sag River, where the muskox herd was again waiting for them. This time the muskox were loafing at the river's edge, most of them lying down enjoying the sunshine, and they were both enchanted to spot a tiny, light-brown muskox calf that was bouncing around in the snow next to its huge placid mother. With the sun shining, it was even warm enough that Dean popped open the back doors of the Chevy so they could sit in the sunshine, perching on the muddy rear bumper while they ate their lunch, watching the muskox calf play.

The air was chilly but perfectly still, without even a touch of breeze, and the sun was beaming at them so steadily that both brothers soon shed not only their parkas but their hats, scarves, mittens and even the top layer of sweaters.

"It's beginning," Dean remarked, as he munched through a couple of slices of Teddy Bear's most recent pie. "That calf's just the first sign. Hear that?"

Sam squinted, listening. There was a sound of running water. It wasn't the big Sag River, which was a half mile away and sheathed in ice; rather, there was water running very close to the road. Dean stood and peered over the edge of the road's high gravel berm, and he pointed down. "Open stream," he said. "Snowmelt's starting. That'll be a full creek in a couple more days."

"Ponds, too, look," said Sam, pointing at a small patch of open water a little farther away. "That wasn't here when we stopped four days ago, was it?" The "pond" was only about fifteen feet across, more just a puddle, but it already had accumulated some birdlife. Several brightly patterned ducks were nosing around at the water's edge, and two tiny dark shorebirds were spinning in busy circles, scaring up some kind of prey.

"That's new, yep," said Dean. He nodded toward the crests of the hills. "And, see, it's not a hundred anymore," he said.

"Not a hundred what?"

"Not a hundred-percent snow cover. It's about..." Dean squinted at the hills. "Ninety-five, maybe ninety percent." This was the most common way of monitoring progression of spring in the Arctic, and Dean added, "The tops are melting off, see?" Sure enough, spots of brown and gray were showing through on the crest of almost every tundra hill, with lichen and cranberries and heather peeking through the thinning snowbanks. "Spring's coming," Dean said, turning to Sam with a grin. "You'll see changes fast now. Though, it'll be different up north. Deadhorse, and the whole Prudhoe Bay area really, doesn't get as nice a spring. You get one good day up there and everybody'll be all, 'well, that was a nice summer. Remember last year when summer was on a Wednesday?' It's much prettier down here. We get so many wildflowers."

Sam chuckled dutifully, though he looked a little saddened too. "Guess I'll miss most of that," he said. He lowered his half-finished sandwich, looking around at the thawing hills.

Dean watched him for a moment. And then he had an idea.
"You really oughta come back down to Kupaluk now and then," said Dean. "It's only a three-hour drive when the road's decent. Spring's really nice at Kupaluk. There's all the cool flowers, and all these little birds singing and stuff. Ducks and owls and things. Sometimes there's wolf pups. Also mosquitoes won't really hatch out till second week of June. There'll be a couple of really nice weeks coming up soon." He folded his arms and added, casually, like it didn't really matter, "You could come on down again."

Sam stared out at the pond, thinking. "You know," he said, sandwich seemingly forgotten in his lap, "Maybe I could swing a weekend down here every now and then. You're right, the drive's not bad."

"It's the sauna, isn't it?" said Dean. "You just loved that sauna. I knew you would."

Sam laughed. "That is a draw, I admit. Though mostly I loved that wolf! But, actually..." He paused a moment and said, almost shyly, "Also, I was thinking, it wouldn't be too awful to hang out a little more."

Dean snorted. "So apparently road-tripping down a middle-of-nowhere highway and sharing a crappy room with your brother, and running into bloodthirsty savage beasts now and then just for fun, is really what you've been waiting for your whole life?"

Sam laughed, but he was nodding. "I'll confess, it hasn't been as totally terrible hanging out with you as I was braced for. Not a hundred-percent terrible, anyway. Only ninety-five-percent terrible."

Dean threw a crumpled napkin at him, and Sam fended it off with a laugh; it bounced to the road. "Goddam, you littered," said Dean, leaning down to scoop up the paper napkin. "See, you're going evil already. Bitch."

"Jerk," Sam responded immediately. It made Dean laugh; it was the same old jerk-bitch exchange they'd fallen into on the plane. It was a like a shout-out to their childhood years. They really hadn't done that in ages.

Since Mom, really. They'd kind of stopped joking after that.

"But also, I was already thinking," Sam went on, "Alaska Petroleum really oughta be keeping more on top of the work you guys are doing down here. The science, I mean. Those stream guys... I had some pretty interesting talks with them. They told me the scientists start giving weekly talks? Once there's more scientists, I mean?"

Dean nodded. "We got a little seminar series, yeah. Fridays after dinner, usually."

"Well, I'm gonna be making a little pitch to AP that they ought to be sending someone down to see the seminars," said Sam. "My internship's supposed to involve some 'community outreach' anyway."

"And just coincidentally then you can stay for the weekend and hit up the sauna again?" said Dean, grinning at him.

"That's the idea," said Sam, smiling back. He hesitated a moment and added, "Actually I already floated the idea to Ruby over email, last night. You know, Ruby my internship mentor. I've mentioned her, right?" Dean nodded, and Sam went on, "I've been, uh, been emailing her every night just to keep her posted on where I was. Anyway I mentioned the seminars and I heard back this morning. She liked the idea, of me coming down now and then, and she's gonna pitch it to her boss. She said something about, they've been meaning to keep closer tabs on the scientists."

Dean nodded again. It made sense; AP really ought to be doing exactly this sort of thing, and Dean
was already betting that NSF and the university would trip all over themselves too, to count it as their own form of "community outreach".

"Yep, nothing the bigwigs love like 'outreach,'" Dean said, waggling his fingers to make mocking air-apostrophes.

They left it there, as if the sauna and the "outreach" were the main reasons for Sam to visit.

But actually that wasn’t the best part. The best part was, he and Sam would get to hang out a little more.

Though, if Sam would be coming down on weekends, Dean would probably have to skip a few of his Sunday hiking trips. Or, "hiking trips", if he were to be honest about where the air-apostrophes really needed to go. The trips to Happy Valley, and to the little pulloff spots by Pump Stations Two and Three, would have to wait a bit. Dean could’ve even done a "hiking trip" yesterday if Sam hadn’t been visiting. Oddly, though, the "hiking trips" hadn’t even been on Dean's mind much, what with Sam’s visit and the wolf and all. And that guy Castiel.
On returning alone to Kupaluk that evening, Dean found himself a little at a loss after dinner. All had gone well up in Deadhorse; Dean had delivered Sam safely to Sam's "mentor" Ruby. Who had turned out to be rather decent-looking. (Okay, smokin' hot, as a matter of fact. And she'd greeted Sam with quite a bright smile.) She'd whisked Sam away, promising him an offshore tour of the Arctic Ocean coastline, and then a tour of the nice new AP dorm. Looked like Sam's internship was off to a good start.

Which meant Dean was on his own. That had been the plan all along, of course, but it was beginning to sink in now that there'd be no Sam to tell arctic tales to for at least a couple weeks. It was good to know Sam might be back at some point, but for now, no more Sam. No Sam to take out on the lake on the snow machines, or take to see the ice caves, or hang out at the sauna with, or laugh at (laugh with, to be fair) while he flailed around in snow drifts on a pair of loaner snowshoes.

Nothing for Dean to do now but do his job.

Which meant he also had to switch rooms. For the last few days, Sam and Dean had been sharing a big dorm room with two twin beds. NSF preferred people to double-bunk where possible; it meant fewer rooms had to be heated. It had worked pretty well to share a room with Sam. (Surprisingly well. The two brothers hadn't ever actually shared a room before, and Dean had been a little surprised by how rapidly they'd settled into a smoothly functioning "roommate-brothers" daily flow.) But now it was time for Dean to switch to a smaller room, to clear out the multi-bed rooms for all the teams of scientists who would soon be arriving.

As Dean hauled his duffel bag from the double room to his usual single room, it was hard to fend off a certain feeling of isolation. Which was really quite silly, because the new room was the exact same room that Dean always had in summer, the camp manager room in the corner of the trailer. He had always liked it. It was quiet, and peaceful. But it certainly was solitary. Almost lonely....

None of that, now, Dean told himself sternly, hefting his duffel onto a little table against the wall. You've bunked here for thirteen seasons. The fourteenth season'll go just fine. It was even a pretty plush room by Kupaluk standards. Small, sure, but it was private. Grad students got bundled onto rickety cots eight to a tent in the giant outdoor Weatherports (with completely inadequate space
heaters), and even the world-class PhDs and high-faluting NSF guys from DC had to share two to a room, like Sam and Dean had been doing. Dean, though, as senior camp manager, had a coveted single room. Tiny, yes, but private, and privacy could be pretty rare in a field station. The room even had a real mattress on an honest-to-goodness bedframe, instead of the foam-on- plywood deal that the grad students had to tolerate. Its other ample amenities included a small table, a minuscule desk (with two drawers that actually worked), an equally minuscule wardrobe (with not just the regulation four coat-hangers, but an ample eight coat-hangers), pretty reliable electricity (courtesy of Big Mama), an overhead light, an almost-steady wi-fi signal, and a window that very often even closed and latched properly like it was supposed to. There was no sink, bathroom or running water, of course, but the outhouse was a mere thirty feet away across only a very minor stretch of icy mud and gravel, and after that it was only another thirty feet through the snow to the sink in the dining hall. It was downright luxurious, really.

*Four-star room for the tundra,* Dean reminded himself, as he set up his things. The first task was always to divide the room into the muddy part by the door, where all boots and outerwear would go, and the non-muddy part farther into the room. There were different schools of thought about this, but Dean had always been of the philosophy that though the dorm trailer's hallway clearly belonged to the tundra — perpetually covered in mud and gravel and melting snow, utterly impossible to keep clean — there could, and should, be one small section of one's bedroom that was mud-free. It was part of being a civilized human being. Dean rapidly designated the usual corner just inside the door as the mud corner, where he levered off his snow boots, which were a favorite old pair of heavy leather Sorels lined with thick felt. He unpacked his mud boots from the duffel, too, soft rubber calf-high Xtra-Tufs that he would switch into when the meltoff really started running, and he also set out his hiking boots for the later weeks when the tundra would finally be dry and snow-free. The Sorels, Tufs and hiking boots were soon joined by muddy snow pants, his only-slightly-less-muddy parka, and a full set of rain gear, all of which he hung in a neat row on coathooks above the row of boots. The soft-gear pile (multiple hats, scarves, gloves, glove liners, down vests, sweaters and other layers, and a full-face fleece balaclava) were then laid in another row on the little table by the duffel, with an overflow pile extending onto the beer-filled Rubbermaid bin at the foot of his bed. He plunked Sam's caribou antler on the bookshelf by the window — it was just a little juvenile antler, but Sam had asked Dean to hold on to it until the end of the season.

And that was almost it for the unpacking. There were very few personal possessions apart from the clothing. Dean always spent several months out of the year here, but he'd never really been one for "moving in" or setting up decorations or posters, like some of the other staff did. For some reason, he usually felt a bit like he was really on that perpetual nomadic road trip of his dreams, even though he was really just coming and going repeatedly from the very same place, and so he always had a feeling that he should only have as much stuff as would fit in the back of a car. Whatever the reason for that rather illogical impulse, he only allowed himself just as many personal items as would fit on the room's tiny bookshelf.

The first item he set on this shelf was a single bottle of whiskey. He had plenty more in the Rubbermaid, but one bottle at a time was all he needed out and available. He also set out two glasses; there were rarely any guests in this room, but it felt more grown-up to have two glasses, rather than a bachelor-standard single glass. (Though the bachelor-standard single glass was really all he ever used.)

He'd brought only one book on this trip, Jack Kerouac's *On The Road,* which he'd read twice before. It seemed like Season 14 might be a good time for a re-read, so he had brought it along, and he set it now on the little bookshelf, propped up by the whiskey bottle. Other books would probably join it over the summer, borrowed from the tiny bookshelf in the muddy hallway, which held a constantly changing collection of dog-eared and water-stained paperbacks brought in by various grad students.
Dean's only other personal possessions were a pair of small objects that he dug out carefully from two thick clean wool socks. He'd had both socks coiled up in his carry-on aboard the plane to keep them safe. The little objects were both quite small, and he worked them out of the soft socks with great care, even setting the socks down on the bed so that the two little items wouldn't tumble to the floor.

One was a huge curved bear claw with a broken-off base. Even broken, it was as long as Dean's index finger.

The second was a small, but heavy, chunk of mottled-brown ivory — part of an old tooth. A very old tooth.

Dean set the claw and the tooth on the bookshelf, a little ways apart from each other. Bear claw on the left, tooth on the right, with the whiskey bottle and *On The Road* in-between. The tooth and the claw were mementoes of very different times, one good and one not-so-good, so, driven by some superstitious impulse, Dean liked to keep them a little separated from each other.

Dean regarded the tooth and the claw thoughtfully for a long moment.

He reached out and touched the claw with one finger.

He turned away.

The firearms were next. The hunting rifle, that sturdy Winchester Alaskan, was in lock-up already in the camp manager's office. As Dean had told Sam, he'd bought it originally because of the irresistible name, but it had also turned out to be a very reliable bear gun. Phil and Ryan were both approved to use it in a crisis, if something happened when Dean wasn't around.

The shotgun, Dad's sturdy old Remington, had been strapped to Dean's snow machine for the past couple days in a locked rainproof case while he and Sam had been out and about. But Dean always brought it inside every night. He opened its waterproof case now to wipe it down, and after checking it over carefully, he locked it back up and set it in the wardrobe for safekeeping.

He checked his ivory-handled pistol, too, pulling it out of its waterproof holster for a quick once-over just in case any meltwater might have seeped into its little case.

The shotgun came with him when he was using vehicles, the rifle usually stayed in camp as an emergency bear gun, but the pistol never left Dean's side. Truth be told, though, he'd never actually used any of the three firearms on anything other than aluminum cans and similar target-shooting practice targets. Twice in the last decade he'd had to shoot a warning round over a curious bear's head, but both bears had run. He'd never actually shot an animal. But he was ready.

At last Dean turned his attention to the last critical task before sleeping: the window.

Dean had his own little window, which was just above his tiny bookshelf. It faced directly south to an absolutely stunning view of the Brooks — though the view was hidden now by a heavy black windowshade. With one finger he hitched up the windowshade to peer out at the view. It was shaping up to be a lovely sunlit night, the entire sky a perfect cloudless blue. The sun at this time of night was almost directly to the north, and its rays struck the southern mountains full on, turning them into a shining white wall that was almost dazzling. Dean took a moment to admire the view. The mountains stretched across the southern horizon from end to end, a magnificent curtain of jagged white peaks. The outline of those peaks and valleys was deeply familiar to Dean's eyes by now — the long slope in the center, the jagged ridge on the left — and after thirteen seasons the mountains looked like old friends. Usually it cheered Dean to see that gorgeoust vista.
Tonight, though, even the Brooks looked a little lonely.

Dean let the windowshade drop with a sigh. And then he frowned at the edge of the windowshade. He was inspecting the window for a reason; the arctic midnight sun, as lovely and exotic as it was, posed considerable problems for sleeping. All the dorm windows were fitted with thick windowshades to block the sunshine at night, but inevitably the windowshades started to develop rips and holes. It didn't take much sunlight to ruin a night's sleep, and right now, Dean's windowshade was hanging loose at one side, an inch-wide strip of light peeking through at one side. This was going to be a problem. He dug out a roll of duct tape from his duffel and taped the windowshade carefully back into place, making a mental note to fix it properly tomorrow.

A half hour more of unpacking and the room was as well-arranged as Dean could make it, with neat stacks of undies, long johns and wool socks nested in his duffel, his work backpack ready to go with all the extra layers and equipment already in place, and his binder of daily camp logs and to-do tasks for the next day laid out on the desk. He checked his phone. Nine-thirty p.m. Time to change into his fleece pj's; time, too, for the last swing past the camp manager's office to brush his teeth, tape up tomorrow's National Weather Service weather forecast next to the whiteboard for all to see, and check to see if everybody had signed back in for the night.

Clad now in his usual tundra evening attire of fleece pj's, snow boots and parka, Dean clomped his way across the icy parking lot, squinting in the bright sunshine. The sign-out whiteboard was clear except for two people, Nicole the EMT and Shawn the lemming grad student, out at the sauna — an allowable, and mostly-non-hazardous, outing at this time of night. Dean took a quick peek into the dining hall and waved goodnight to the stream ecology trio (looked like the two PhD's were playing Trivial Pursuit while the new grad student worked her way diligently through all three little yellow books of field data.) Ryan and Matt-the-Mapper were involved in a detailed argument about the most likely lake ice break-up date, with Matt brandishing complex maps of the local streams to bolster his case. Teddy Bear the cook was curled up with his laptop watching what looked like a cheesy rom-com on Netflix.

And Sam, of course, was safe up in Deadhorse with that Ruby chick.

And as for that bird guy Castiel.... Well, at least it was a little warmer now, with such a nice sunny night. As long as the good weather held, Dean wouldn't have to feel quite so worried.

Dean got back to his room, kicked off his snow boots, shed his parka, crawled under his sleeping bag, and plummeted directly to sleep.

He surfaced to a confused wakefulness some time later, blinking his eyes open to discover that a laser-bright shaft of blinding sunlight was slashing through the room like a lighthouse beacon. Half-awake, Dean assumed it must be time to get up. The sun was up; therefore it was morning and therefore it was time to get up. He was already on his feet, yawning and shuffling over to the mud corner and reaching for his snow boots, when he remembered to check his phone for the time.

Midnight. Oh, right; this was May above the Arctic Circle, where blinding sunlight didn't mean dawn at all. It just meant the duct tape had come loose.

With a sigh, Dean set his Sorel snow boots back down in the mud corner, wedged the duct tape back into place, and lay back down on his sleeping bag, trying to fall back asleep.
He'd just begun to doze off at last when there was a puff of wind from the window (which, Dean now realized, had blown open a little overnight). The duct tape flopped loose again and the white-hot dot of sunlight pierced into the room once more, the entire room lighting up as brightly as if someone had flipped the overhead light on. Dean sighed. It always took a couple weeks to get used to the arctic midnight sun again. While Sam had been here he'd never had a chance (Sam had constantly been jumping out of bed and staggering outside just to take in the novel sight of bright sunshine at one a.m. And, Dean, consequently, had never really gotten to sleep either). Once Dean had been awakened like this, especially when he wasn't adjusted yet to the twenty-four-hour light, he knew he would never really get back to sleep.

"Laser pointer of God," Dean grumbled at the bright dot of sunlight on the wall. "Dammit. All right, all right, I'm up."

He was feeling a little restless anyway — and a little too isolated in this empty little room. *Might as well get to work*, he thought; he'd already fallen a bit behind on the spring-prep camp repairs anyway, what with Sam's visit. He stood, yawning, shed his fleece pj's, and pulled on a fresh pair of underwear, long johns, snow pants, and a pair of thick wool socks. Shuffling to the mud corner, he pulled on the felt-lined snow boots yet again. And his long-john tops, then his sweater, and down vest, and scarf, and hat, then his parka, then the pack with his own radio, pepper spray, granola bars, extra layers, compass and all the rest. He checked the radio, the yellow emergency beacon, and the GPS. It was a production; now he felt committed. Time to go march around in the cold and do something useful.

Tiptoeing down the muddy hallway carpet as gently as he could, Dean eased open the outside door, hoping not to wake up any of the other staff.

The blazing bright sunlight felt like a stab to the eyes. The sun was sitting on the horizon dead ahead, squarely to the north, and though Dean knew its light must be a little softer at this time of night, its color a little oranger from its current position low on the horizon, it still seemed to be unbelievably bright. The sun seemed almost annoyingly cheerful; Dean had often had a mental image of the arctic midnight sun as an irritating neighbor who kept singing at the top of his lungs all night long.

The problem was that sun was, of course, not setting. It would only circle endlessly around the sky for the next several months. At night it would simply slip a little lower to glide slowly along the northern horizon as it was doing now, and after some hours of lazily sliding across the northern hills, its path would edge up higher into the sky and the "night", such as it was, would have ended.

"Another goddamn sunny night," Dean muttered, yawning as he walked toward the dining hall to make a thermos of fresh coffee.

On his way back out ten minutes later, thermos in hand, he paused at the whiteboard and wrote:

*Who:* Dean W  
*Where:* Boardwalks north of lake  
*How:* Baby + feet  
*Time out:* 12:30 am  
*Time expected back:* 4 am  
*Overdue:* 8 am
Ten minutes later Dean was jouncing north along the lake perimeter road in the black Chevy. He'd decided that a boardwalk check would be the most useful thing he could do in his sleep-deprived state. It was a simple enough task: just walk the boardwalks and take notes about which needed repairs.

The boardwalk system was a network of skinny wooden walkways that snaked here and there over the tundra. The purpose was for scientists to be able to walk to their various experimental sites without trampling the fragile vegetation in different random walking paths (and accidentally stepping on bird nests in the process, which had apparently happened a few times in the past). With the boardwalks, at least the damage was confined to one defined strip, the boardwalk itself.

The first boardwalks had been built here decades ago, but now there were miles and miles of the rickety little walkways meandering this way and that across the tundra, all around Kupaluk Lake and up the surrounding hills. It hadn't originally been planned all that well — it had been one of those half-assed ideas at first, just jerry-rigged with one boardwalk here, a second there. Inevitably it had slowly expanded all around camp without really being very well-organized. Dean now had the neverending task of trying to keep the little walkways all safe and operational. The old ones were mostly wood, and they were constantly rotting away under the snowmelt of spring, not to mention getting crushed under occasional ice-slush flows and, more recently, tipping and sinking at odd angles as the permafrost thawed and shifted underneath. ("If it thaws, it's not 'perma' frost, is it?" Dean had asked the ecologists the other day. "Isn't it 'tempa-frost'?" Phil had just shrugged, as if to say, *Lot of that going around these days.*) One of Dean's early-season tasks was to check all the boardwalks as soon as snowmelt got underway, to see which boards would need replacing. He and Ryan would then spend a good chunk of next week working on the repairs.

It was mundane, it was routine... and it took him well out of camp. Boardwalk-checking was actually one of Dean's favorite jobs, for it required that he get out and about, circumnavigate the entire lake, and get not just one hill away, but two or even three hills away from camp. By about the second hill, he knew, the low drone of Big Mama's generator would finally fade away, and he would at last be in true wilderness.

Soon he was on the far northern side of Kupaluk Lake, pulling the Chevy over at a spot where a huge snowdrift completely blocked the lake perimeter road. He tossed the Chevy's keys on its dash and closed its door. (Trucks were never locked here, and keys always stayed in the vehicle. This was in case a bear, or blizzard or whatever, came along, such that somebody might have to dash to the truck for safety.) Slinging his work pack across his shoulders, Dean clambered carefully over a six-foot-high snowdrift that had piled up at the side of the road, managing to make his way to the start of the first boardwalk with only a little bit of snow in his boots. He eyed the boardwalk, which stretched ahead of him in a thin wooden line, going directly up a mostly-white snowy hill. The hill looked deceptively small and gentle from this angle; Dean knew it would be a hike to get all the way up that long, gradual slope.

The golden midnight sun was almost directly in front of him as he walked, hanging in the sky just above the hilltop. There was an undeniable chilliness in the air as he marched up the sloping hill, boards squeaking slightly underfoot. The wind had picked up and was soon stinging Dean's cheeks. It was bitterly cold, in fact. But he had a good set of layers on, and it was fun to be out— the bright shock of sunlight and the cold air against his face were doing wonders to wake him up, and the walking was warming him up too. The endless expanse before him, the rolling tundra and the limitless sky overhead and the gleaming orange sun, all lifted his spirits. It was bleak out here, and cold, and snowy, yes. But it was also beautiful.
He paused now and then to take notes in his book (a yellow Rite-in-the-Rain, of course) about certain iffy-looking boards, marking bad boards as he went with a tiny spritz of orange spray paint from a paint can that was jammed in one jacket pocket. Occasionally he pulled out his tape measure too, to get a length and width on a rotted board. The work went smoothly. He went up and over the top of the first hill, down the long snowy slope on the other side, and started going up the next hill. It was peacefully quiet now, Big Mama no longer audible at all.

He was crossing a tiny wooden bridge over a little two-foot-wide snowmelt stream between the two broad hills when a scramble of noise and a blur of sudden motion made him jump. Three scruffy-looking caribou bolted up from a resting place in the willows where they’d been sleeping, just a few paces away. Dean had startled them, and they all blasted to their feet as if rocket-propelled. All three burst into a gangly, leggy gallop for several strides, Dean almost laughing at their scrambly long strides and at how fast they’d shot from zero to sixty. Once they were fifty yards away or so, halfway up the second hill, they stopped and looked back at him.

"It's just me," said Dean quietly. "Not gonna hurt you."

The lead caribou snorted doubtfully, and all three animals turned away and settled into a high-kneed, ground-eating trot, noses in the air and antlers tipped back. Dean stood still, watching them move; he’d seen caribou many times before but it was rare to get a view from so close. Maybe a caribou sighting wasn’t as cool as a wolf sighting, but nonetheless it was impressive how easily they seem to glide across thick snow and over the incredibly bumpy tundra. "Don't you guys ever trip?" he murmured to them, but they just kept going. They were going north, straight up the second hill toward the sun, paralleling the boardwalk.

They went right up over the crest of the hill, until only their heads and antlers were visible — and then all three caribou stopped dead simultaneously.

All three swung their big heads to look left. Three sets of antlers turned in synchrony. Three pairs of ears focused on something. The lead caribou snorted again, then the middle one snorted, and then the last.

Dean thought, *Maybe it's the wolf? Or...could it be a bear?* He reached back to his pack and fingered the edge of the pepper-spray, which was always clipped on the side of his pack for easy access. His other hand drifted over the pistol holster, too.

But, no; it couldn't be a bear; the caribou would have run. Actually, they would run from a wolf too, even from a single wolf. Not a bear, not a wolf.

The cross-fox, maybe? Or some wolverine that was passing through? Or maybe just some human-scented thing that some scientist had accidentally left here? Something had definitely caught the caribou's attention, something they were a little nervous about. But whatever it was, it wasn't quite enough to scare them — they weren't running from it the way they'd run from Dean. Which meant that whatever they'd spotted, it wasn't something they thought of as a predator.

In fact the caribou were inching closer to their unknown target, step by cautious step. One caribou at a time would take a small step, then the second caribou, and then the third. Bit by bit they worked their way out of view, for they seemed to be stepping down into a snowmelt-depression that was at the very top of the hill. This tundra hill had the distinctive rounded top of a pingo (a hill with a huge lens of permafrost ice deep inside) and Dean knew that there might be a little depression at the top. By some fluke of permafrost-mechanics, pingo-hills tended to be topped by rocky lichen patches that often had pronounced depressions some ten or twenty feet across. Once melt off started, these areas collected open water, like little swimming pools at the top of a snowy world. The caribou were now inching their way down into one of these low spots, and from Dean's current angle, he couldn't see
what they were moving toward. In fact soon all Dean could see was the upper tips of their antlers.

Definitely can’t be a bear if they’re that curious, thought Dean. Just to be on the safe side, he unclipped the holster and drew the ivory-handled pistol, which was loaded, as always, with the last of Dad's armor-piercing bullets. There was a ninety-nine percent chance that this wasn't a bear, but Dean was taking no chances.

He began working his way up the last boardwalk as quickly and quietly as he could. The icy wind was in his favor, blowing in his direction, and in fact it seemed the caribou might have forgotten that Dean was even there.

Slowly he tiptoed up to the top of the pingo-hill. The boardwalk ended here — this was, in fact, the very end of Kupaluk's research area — and Dean stepped off the last board onto a frozen grass tussock. He maneuvered from tussock to tussock, trying to avoid crunchier patches of snow, creeping ever closer to the very crest of the hill, pistol held in both hands, one thumb on the safety. He could see all three caribou's heads and antlers now, though still not their bodies, which were obscured by a small rocky ridge with a line of willow shrubs about twenty feet ahead. He inched closer, and closer.

A pair of gigantic black wings lifted slowly up from behind the willow-shrubs.
Dean froze still.

He couldn't see the rest of the bird, just the top halves of the uplifted wings. They were a glossy perfect ebony, and they seemed to be wet, shining almost silver where they caught the evening light. They shook a few times; drops of water flew, glittering like diamonds. Some kind of huge bird was taking a bath. *Raven?* Dean thought. But the wings were far too large, eagle-sized at least. What other black-winged birds were out here? He racked his brain to remember what other big birds might be possibilities. *Some kind of hawk? Eagle?* No, the eagles up here weren't black, Dean knew that much. *Gull?* No, gulls were white, weren't they? *Gyrfalcon?* White. *Snowy owl?* White. *Mutant snowy owl?* Whatever it was, the caribou seemed quite impressed by the upraised wings, for all three had backed up a step. Soon, though, they'd regained their courage and began inching forward again, noses outstretched now as if they were hoping to get a cautious sniff of the huge wings.

With one hand, Dean fumbled his phone out of an inner jacket pocket and snapped a quick picture. He shoved the phone back into the pocket and then crept closer, with long, careful steps from tussock to tussock. One step, two, three —and a human head came into view.

There was a person there.

Dean lowered the pistol at once.

There was a man, right next to the wings, somehow. Dean couldn't quite figure out the scene, what with the back-lighting from the sun, but there was definitely a guy there, and very close to the guy was some kind of gigantic bird with its wings up.

Squinting at the confusing scene, Dean took one more step. But he was no longer watching his feet; he mis-aimed his next step, tripped over the top of a tussock, and landed not on grass, but on soft snow crusted with ice. It made a faint, but crisply audible, crunch.

The black wings folded down in a flash, out of view behind the willow-shrubs. The caribou flinched and all three of them spun to stare at Dean, as if they'd suddenly remembered his existence. A moment later the three caribou took off at top speed to the north, galloping away in a noisy crunching of ice and snow. Dean cursed, abandoning his attempts at stealth, and he ran a few more feet up onto
a mound of lichen-covered rock, hoping to get a clear view of the big bird before it got away.

But the bird was already gone. The guy was still there, though. He had spun to face Dean. Dean took a few steps closer, pistol lowered now, still squinting against the bright sun.

"Oh, hey, sorry to bother you—" Dean said, walking a little closer still. The man was now in full silhouette, outlined almost exactly against the low orange sun, and Dean was only about five paces away when he finally realized two important details.

First, it was Castiel, the hiker from the Haul Road.

Second, Castiel was completely naked.

He was frickin' nude as the day he'd been born, naked to the world, right there in the frozen Arctic tundra. And he was up to the middle of his thighs in ice water of, sure enough, an icy pingo-pool, a hilltop swimming pool of half-frozen meltwater that was hidden away up here at the very top of the hill. Castiel was facing Dean directly, and he was clutching a sodden-wet towel around his shoulders, like he'd maybe been using it to scrub himself clean. It hung a little oddly over his shoulders, the wet tails of the towel billowing out in the wind behind him.

For a long, confused moment Dean could only stare at him.

"Oh," said Dean at last. It slowly occurred to him that he didn't need the gun. "Hey," he said, fumbling the safety back on and shoving the pistol back in its holster.

"Dean," Castiel said, a smile spreading over his face. "Dean Winchester, right? Good to see you again." Oddly, he didn't whisk the towel around his waist to cover himself up, the way most guys would have done when surprised in the nude by a stranger — the way Dean himself had done just a few days ago when facing just an animal, in fact. Instead Castiel drew the damp towel even more tightly across his shoulders and back, crossing the corners of the towel over his chest and holding it securely with both hands. He wasn't even remotely trying to cover his groin at all. If anything, he was squaring up a little to face Dean more directly.

Full frickin' frontal, thought Dean, somewhat in shock. This wasn't a big deal given that they were both guys, of course. What with locker rooms and saunas and all, guys did see each other naked from time to time. Seeing another guy nude was not itself a crazy experience (and Dean, of course, had seen more than his share). But still, strangers usually covered up, especially when taken by surprise. Yet from the way Castiel was standing, facing Dean full on with his shoulders squared, it was almost as if Castiel were totally unconcerned. Almost as if he would rather hide his back from Dean than hide his front.

"It's good to see you again," said Castiel, as he stood there completely nude in a freezing arctic tundra pond of ice water, just past midnight in a bitter wind. "How are you?"

"Uh, f-fine," stammered Dean. He automatically added, "Good to see you too," before it occurred to him that maybe that wasn't quite the right thing to say to someone who he'd just surprised in the nude. Dean realized, then, that the poor guy had probably been trying to take a midnight dip in this isolated little pool. He'd probably just been wanting to have himself a wilderness moment, much like Sam and Dean had done at the lake by the sauna. And though it was one thing to be at the sauna with a brother or some work buddies, when mentally prepared for a skinny-dipping moment among friends, it was quite another to have a total stranger blunder onto one's private little midnight swimming-pool outing.

Not that Castiel looked too uncomfortable or anything. And not that he looked bad at all. Not
remotely. In fact, with the glowing midnight sun behind him... and the glittering water of the snow-melt pool, and the snow and heather all around... well, it was a nice setting, and, as it turned out, he was pretty fit, rather well-built all around, muscled and lean, and even despite the silhouetted-against-the-sunlight factor, Dean couldn't help noticing that he didn't seem to be much affected by the cold, for in fact he had really quite a nice—

"Um, would you mind," said Castiel, nodding toward his backpack on the side of the pond, "if I took a moment to dress?"

The embarrassment suddenly hit, and it hit hard. Dean realized he'd been actually gaping at Castiel, jaw even slightly hanging open. He dropped his gaze to the ground, muttering, "Sorry, yeah, of course, jeez, sorry."

"I don't know if you've noticed, but as it happens I'm unclothed at the moment," Castiel explained calmly, both hands still tightly on his towel-corners, yet still facing Dean perfectly squarely as if this were all a routine occurrence. "I was bathing. If you could just give me a moment—"

"Really sorry," stammered Dean, turning half-away. "I just saw the caribou were looking at, um, at something, so I came up to see what it was — jeez. I'm so sorry." Dean tried to hurry back to the boardwalk, tripped on exactly the same tussock that he'd tripped on before, and pitched over sideways into the snow. He scrambled to his feet, calling over his shoulder, "I'll just wait over here then," and he dashed back over the hill to the top of the boardwalk.

He waited there just over the crest of the hill, sitting on the end of the boardwalk and shaking the snow off his hands, biting his lip. And suddenly Dean was fighting back giggles. Not because of what Castiel had been doing (skinny-dipping at midnight was actually something of an arctic tradition) but because of his own reaction. He'd seen naked dudes many, many times before, yet something about surprising Castiel like this, and then gaping at him helplessly like a... well, like a deer in headlights, and a very sleep-deprived deer... a deer who, to be clear, had quite liked what it had been seeing.... it soon had Dean fighting his way through alternating waves of cringing embarrassment and helpless giggles.

Then he realized he'd dropped his phone somewhere in the snow. "Shit," he muttered, patting his pockets. Nope; the phone wasn't there. Damn, it must have slipped out of the unzipped jacket pocket when he'd fallen—

"You've dropped your little rectangle," said a rough, low voice behind him, and there was Castiel, fully dressed now. He'd somehow gotten right up to Dean without making any noise at all. He'd even got his pack on already, the same big black pack he'd been wearing on the road. It looked weirdly stuffed full, a little lumpy even, and it seemed to be dripping water at the corners. It must've been sitting too close to the side of the pond.

Cas was holding out Dean's phone. "Your... rectangle?" he repeated, a little uncertainly.

"My phone, uh, thanks," says Dean, standing to take it. (Cas darted a quick, puzzled frown at the phone, as if somehow he hadn't realized till now that it was a phone.) The phone was wet, but Dean barely noticed, shoving it in his pocket hurriedly and saying, "Jeez, man, I'm sorry, I really didn't know you were here."

"Quite all right," said Castiel, and there was a little half-smile quirking up one corner of his mouth, as if being caught nude by a near-stranger wasn't the least bit embarrassing. Castiel added, "I was just taking a quick bath."

"It's frickin' freezing, dude," Dean blurted out. "That's ice water."
"You've done the same at the lake," Castiel said. He hesitated a moment, an uncertain expression crossing his face, and he quickly amended, "I mean, you... probably do the same at the lake. Or so I've heard, from, um, somebody. Don't you?"

"Well, only after overheating for a frickin' hour in a hundred-twenty-degree sauna," explained Dean. "It's a totally different thing at midnight out on the tundra! Aren't you freezing? Haven't you ever heard of hypothermia?"

Castiel said, "My cold tolerance is still fairly good. Though...." He paused, looking at his hands, and Dean realized then that Castiel was starting to shiver. His hands were shaking visibly, and even as Dean watched, a visible shudder ran across Castiel's shoulders. Even his backpack seemed, oddly, to be vibrating. Castiel added, with a touch of confusion, "You may be right... I seem... I seem to have gotten a little chilled. Ah... hm. That didn't used to happen."

"Who'da thunk it, when you were just rolling around naked in ice water in the open wind," said Dean, allowing a touch of friendly sarcasm to creep into his voice. "You got that extra layer of yours? The one you keep in your pack?"

"Ah..." said Castiel, glancing doubtfully over his shoulder at his backpack. "Um. It's wet."

"Well, here, take one of mine," Dean said, swinging his own pack off and digging into the main compartment. "Take this, it's an extra." He tossed his backup fleece jacket at Castiel. It was a favorite old fleece, actually, a classic black North Face that Dean was rather fond of, but right now Castiel needed it more than Dean did.

Castiel caught it, but then just stared at it uncertainly. "Um... Thank you."

"Don't thank me, put it on."

"I'm fine, really," said Castiel.

"Dude, hypothermia's no joke. If you're shivering, put it on."

"I promise I'm fine," said Castiel.

Dean paused, frowning at him. "Well, take it for later," he said at last. "Then at least you'll have a layer if you start feeling really chilled. Put it in your pack. You can return it later."

Castiel looked at Dean a long moment, and finally he nodded. He didn't take his pack off, though, but instead reached back over his head, flipped the pack's top open and stuffed the fleece jacket into the pack from the top. The entire maneuver looked awkward, and Dean started to walk toward him, saying, "Here, let me help—"

"No, no no no no, I've got it, I'm fine—" said Cas, backing away so rapidly he almost tripped. He managed to get the last part of the jacket stuffed into the pack. "See? Fine."

Dean watched him for a moment, still a little doubtful that Cas would be okay without putting the fleece on. Castiel did look a little better now, but his hands were still visibly trembling. Dean asked, "You got any hand-warmers?"

"Hand... what?" said Castiel, giving Dean another puzzled look.

"Hand-warmers. These things." Dean dug into his pack again for a chemical hand-warmer. He ripped off the outer plastic layer, gave it a good shake to get it going, walked directly up to Castiel and grabbed his right hand (which turned out to be ice cold, not at all how it had felt the other day on
the road). Dean plunked the hand-warmer flat into Castiel's palm.

Dean held the hand-warmer there for a moment. Castiel's eyes widened at the sensation. His fingers reflexively curled onto Dean's, and a moment later he closed his other hand over Dean's hand as well, holding both Dean's hand and the hand-warmer firmly in place.

Castiel held Dean's hand there for a long moment.

Dean thought, *Hm*.

"I must admit, that does feel nice," says Cas. He was staring into Dean's eyes. His voice had gone a little soft.

Dean thought again, *Hm*.

The shameless full-frontal had been kind of a clue right there, of course. The lingering eye contact, too... which, now that Dean thought about it, had also happened a few times during that meeting on the road. And now this warm two-handed clasp?

*Hm. Gaydar's pinging,* realized Dean.

However, hypothermia took priority over potential gaydar pings. Dean watched him carefully; Castiel's shoulder-shivers were definitely decreasing and soon even the hand-shivers were slowing.

"Better?" said Dean.

"Yes," said Castiel. "Thank you." He released Dean's hand almost reluctantly, inspected the hand-warmer for a moment and closed both his hands over it again. Castiel peered over Dean's shoulder then, and Dean saw his eyes widen slightly when he caught sight of the boardwalk. Castiel turned back to look at his little pool, looked once again at the boardwalk, and he said, "I see. I'd drifted farther toward your territory than I realized. I couldn't see the edge of your walkway from my pool. My apologies, I didn't realize I'd gotten so close to your territory."

"My... territory?"

"The boundaries of your camp," Castiel explained. He gestured with both clasped hands (and the hand-warmer) toward the boardwalk. "I didn't realize you'd extended the boundaries of your research area to this hill. That's been a recent change, yes?"

"Uh," said Dean, trying to remember when that particular boardwalk had been built. "It's been here eight years, I think?"

"Ah yes, quite recent," said Castiel, with a little sigh. "It's not on my maps. I didn't realize. I'll just retreat a little. Sorry for any bother."

"Like I told you before," said Dean, "You can bother me anytime."

Castiel looked at him.

*Hm.*

How soon after potentially hazardous hypothermia was it allowable to hit on a guy?

Dean said, a little at random, "So you're doing own research here, aren't you? Bird stuff?" He winced at the phrase as soon as it was out of his mouth. *Bird stuff. Very scientific.*
Castiel just nodded. "Avian... stuff, yes. I've been monitoring the arctic birds for quite some time. But I haven't been in exactly this area for a while. The environment is..." He glanced around. "... changing. I haven't observed a full nesting season here for a while, and I thought it was time I returned to this particular site."

"Long-term study?" Dean asked.

Castiel hesitated. "Long-term... yes," he responded slowly.

"Like, one of those five-year NSF studies?"

There was another little pause.

"Longer than five years," said Castiel.

"How long you been doing this, then?"

Yet another pause. "Six... years?" said Castiel, with a distinct air of uncertainty. "Or slightly more. More than five."

"On what?" Dean asked. "Like, what topic?" (He felt determined to keep the conversation going, despite Castiel's slightly hesitant answers.)

"On... birds," Castiel said, an offhanded vagueness in his tone. "Various... birds. Um, winged creatures, and.... some other things...."

Dean finally remembered the big black wings. "Oh, what was that big bird?"

Castiel blinked at him slowly. "What bird?" he said.

"There was a big black bird," Dean insisted. "Just a minute ago. Those caribou were looking at it. Looked like it was right next to you? Big wings? Were you banding it or something?"

"Yes... I was... banding it," Castiel said. Odd pauses were starting to pepper his speech. "It... got away."

Dean frowned at him. "You were banding a bird while you were in the nude in a pond of ice water?"

"It was... in the pond," says Castiel. "It was... injured, actually. Quite fortunate that I found it, really."

"I didn't see it fly away," Dean objected.

"It flew horizontally," Castiel said. "Low. Fast. It got away. I, uh... I lost my grip on it while I was banding it."

"So, do you often band birds in the nude?" Dean couldn't help asking, a smile tugging at his lips.

Castiel was looking rather uncomfortable now, and Dean began to feel a little sorry for teasing him. Obviously this had been one of those totally weird tundra situations — which, granted, did come up from time to time. People fell in the lake, people fell in snowmelt puddles, clothes got wet, people had to strip unexpectedly sometimes. And strange animal encounters happened too. There'd been that time that a post-doc had actually climbed up onto a sleeping moose, thinking it was a boulder; there'd been the grad student who had run out on the ice to break up a fight between some goddamn gull and a frickin' eagle of all things, and all three had fallen through the ice together. (All three had survived.) There'd been the incident in the dining hall with the weasel and the ketchup bottles; there'd
been the ground squirrel that fell in love with the old Ford pickup. And on, and on. It was a given on
the tundra that weird stuff just tended to happen. Especially, for some reason, at night, under that
eerie midnight sun.

*I just met a wolf myself, thought Dean, outside a goddam sauna while I was dripping wet and
wearing nothing but a towel. Case in point.*

"I had to... swim over to the bird," Castiel was saying now. "I took off my clothes so I could reach it.
It was injured. In the pond. I had to wade over to it. And then I was banding it and the caribou
startled me and it flew away."

"It was injured but it flew away?"

"Yes," said Castiel evenly. "It was caught in the willows. But it was fine once I got it loose." He
seemed to have regained his composure and was almost staring Dean down now.

"Hell of a big bird," said Dean.

"Perspective is difficult to judge on the tundra," says Castiel, chin lifting a little. "It was a... gull."

Dean frowned, puzzled. "Aren't the gulls up here all white?"

"It was a jaeger," Castiel said smoothly. "They're related to gulls. Jaegers are darker."

He'd pronounced it "yay-ger." The word was familiar; Dean knew there was a type of jaeger that
was pretty common around camp. In summer he saw them every day, flying around and calling.
But... "Wait...." objected Dean. "They're pretty little. I'm sure this thing you were banding was
bigger."

"Some jaegers are larger," said Cas. He added, "Like for example, pomarine jaegers. Pomarines are
bigger than long-tailed jaegers. You've probably seen long-tails. This was a pomarine."

Dean frowned, trying to remember any scrap of information he could manage to summon up about
jaegers. For, rather suddenly, Dean was discovering that he wanted to know stuff about birds. Or
more precisely, he wanted to look like he knew stuff about birds. Castiel was a bird guy, and so,
clearly, Dean needed to know stuff about birds. "Right, pomarines, right," said Dean, with a casual
air, as he racked his memory for any scrap of information about jaegers. The scientists had mentioned
them tons over the years; why hadn't Dean been paying more attention? There were three types of
jaegers, weren't there? Dean was fairly sure there were three types, and so he said, "Yeah, jaegers,
I've seen all three of' em a bunch..." (Oddly, Castiel was starting to look a little worried.) "Pomarine,
long-tailed... and...." It came to him. "Parasitic!" said Dean triumphantly. Another tiny scrap of
information wafted up from his Deadhorse trips, and Dean added, "Wait, aren't pomarines light-
colored?"

"This one was dark-phase," said Castiel. "Melanistic."

"And don't they only occur farther north? Up by the coast?" Dean added. As casually as he could, he
added, "I've seen 'em up around Deadhorse, y'know," hoping he was coming off as fairly jaeger-
knowledgeable.

"Usually, yes," said Cas. "This one must have been lost. You know, it was injured."

"So, um, you found an injured lost melanistic pomarine jaeger," summarized Dean. He began to
laugh a little as the unlikeliness began to sink in. "You were just skinny-dipping here at midnight and
you found a injured lost melanistic pomarine jaeger, stuck in the willows in a snow-melt pond?"
"Yes," said Cas, who was now staring Dean down stonily, as if daring him to disagree.

It was a crazy story. But, Dean reminded himself again, crazy things happened all the time up here. And, of course, there had been a big bird here. Dean had seen the wings. There had definitely been a big bird here. And obviously it had somehow gotten away. There was no reason for Castiel to be making up the details.

Dean said, "Y'know, Sam and me had this weird thing happen with this wolf at the sauna."

Castiel's eyes narrowed. "Did you see a, um... pomaire jaeger there too?"

"The wolf was enough," said Dean, shaking his head. "Point is, the tundra's a hell of a crazy place. Remind me to tell you someday about the girl who climbed the moose." Castiel seemed to be relaxing slightly at these words, and Dean added, "Anyway, um... you sure you're okay? People can get hypothermia pretty easily. You want to come into camp and warm up?"

"I'm not allowed," said Castiel uncertainly. "Am I? I received orders not to interact with your camp."

"I thought you just weren't allowed to interfere, right?" said Dean. "But you could come warm up. That's not interfering." He pointed to the south, over the hills. "I've got my truck just over that hill. You could come warm up in the truck, at least. Get that wet pack off."

And this, of course, was the come-on moment. The invitation to shelter. This was very often how Dean's roadside encounters began; one guy would invite the other to some sort of shelter, shelter from the cold or from the wind (or, later in summer, from the mosquitoes), and the resulting "yes" or "no" usually clarified everything. The Chevy was just over the hill, a perfect shelter from cold and wind, and it could be warmed up in just a minute or two. It had a couple of sleeping bags in the back, and even a camping pad. Dean even always carried certain strategic supplies in the very, very bottom of his pack, just in case.

What would the answer be? Yes, or no?

But Castiel looked doubtful. Dean's heart sank a little.

"That's... appealing," Castiel said. (Dean's heart rose a little.) "But I'm fine, really." (And Dean's heart sank again — much farther than he'd been prepared for.)

The answer was a no. Had his gaydar been wrong? As Dean tried to recover from a weirdly strong crestfallen feeling, Castiel then added, "The hand-warmer is very nice, however. Um... you wouldn't happen to have another hand-warmer, would you?"

"I've got two more," said Dean immediately, rummaging in his pack again. (Just because Dean's gaydar was apparently broken didn't mean he was about to abandon the poor guy here in the cold.) "I always carry a few. Here—" He pulled out his last two hand-warmers, ripped open their plastic wrappers, shook them to get them going, and gave them to Castiel. To Dean's dismay, though, Cas reached up behind his head with one hand, to the top flap of his backpack, and he dropped both hand-warmers into his backpack, apparently wanting to save them for later.

"Oh, shit, I shouldn't have started them!" said Dean. "I thought you were going to use them immediately. Sorry, now that I've opened 'em and shook 'em, they'll start up. They'll only last four hours."

"Oh, that's quite all right," said Castiel, who was already looking more comfortable. He let out a sigh and rolled his shoulders, rolling his head around a little. "They're already warming my, um, my back, actually; they'll still be useful. Thank you very much. I promise I'll make it up to you someday."
"You don't have to," said Dean, waving a hand dismissively. "They're like a buck each. My treat. I've got a bunch more back at camp, actually. I could get you some more."

"That would be very kind," said Castiel, and he smiled at Dean, almost shyly. "Ah... I should probably return to my own campsite now, though. I should dry off more thoroughly."

"Where is your camp, anyway?" said Dean.

Castiel hesitated a long moment, looking at Dean. His eyes flicked up and down, scanning Dean from head to toe, and then his gaze lingered on Dean's face for a long moment.

_Hm_, Dean thought, yet again. That extended eye contact again.

Yet Castiel didn't say where his camp was, and there wasn't even the least hint of "you should drop by sometime, Dean."

This was getting confusing. _I'm really misreading something_, Dean thought, after the silence had ticked on for a few more seconds. Then Dean remembered that Castiel was working alone. His camp would be vulnerable. Maybe he was worried about theft? About word getting out about where his camp was?

"Hey, never mind," said Dean. "Didn't mean to pry or anything —"

"My campsite is near Topaz Mountain," said Castiel, turning and gesturing to the north, where the midnight sun was now hovering directly over a low hulking rock ridge. That hummock of blue-gray stone, Dean knew, was Topaz Mountain. Dean also knew it was much farther away (and much higher) than it looked, for he'd hiked it several times in previous years.

"It's... rather a primitive camp," Castiel said. "Nothing much, compared to yours."

And still Castiel didn't invite Dean to visit.

He also hadn't been very precise about the location. "Near" Topaz Mountain could mean a lot of things.

"Well, you should feel free to come hang out at Kupaluk," said Dean. Trying to shake off the lingering disappointment and get back to some kind of normal camp-host behavior, he beamed his friendliest, most inviting smile at Castiel. "We've got movie night coming up, by the way. This Thursday. You could come by and pick up some more hand-warmers, and have some coffee. We've got this great cook, too. He makes these amazing pies." The hungry look that passed over Castiel's face at this description made Dean laugh, and he added, "You definitely should drop on by. Remember, you promised to come bother me."

"I did, didn't I?" Castiel replied, with a little smile. "I'll try to keep my promise. Um, I really should get going; I need to dry off my, um, the contents of my pack before they — before it dries. I mean, before it dries... wrong. I mean, before it dries on its own. In the wrong shape. I mean — well, I'll be going now," he said. With a sudden, almost awkward lunge, Castiel took two quick steps forward, reached out and closed one hand (now much warmer) around Dean's.

"Thank you for the hand-warmers," he said, squeezing Dean's hand lightly.

"Oh, yeah, sure thing," said Dean, taken by surprise at how suddenly Castiel had closed the gap between them. Then that stare again, those stunning blue eyes — but before Dean could decide whether, and how, to make any sort of next move, Castiel had released Dean's hand, and he was turning and walking away.
Dean was far too confused by now to even manage to call out a goodbye. Castiel strode away fast, long strides leaving bootprints in the snow, his pack still dripping at the corners, and all Dean could think was, *He's getting away.*

Dean took a few steps in Castiel's direction to call out one last thing. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he hollered into the wind, "HEY!"

Castiel turned and looked back.

"YOU MIND IF I CALL YOU CAS?" Dean yelled.

That half-smile appeared again, quirking up one corner of Castiel's mouth. "Not at all," he said. "Please do." It seemed he didn't have to raise his voice at all; his low voice floated on the wind right over to Dean. Cas raised one hand in farewell, turned, and walked away. Soon he had dropped out of view over the far side of the hill.

Too late, Dean realized he could've asked Cas whether he had any radios, and GPS's, and Sharpies. *Maybe I'll get another chance later,* he thought, turning to leave. The misfiring-gaydar issue was starting to fade into the background; in one way it still seemed a pity, but in another way it was irrelevant. For already Dean was starting to feel like Castiel might become some sort of a friend. And maybe that was more important.

Dean glanced one more time at the pond as he turned to leave, and he did a double-take. Something was floating in the water. Dean leaned closer to peer at it. A feather.

It took a little effort to fish it out. It was out in the middle of the little pond, and Dean had to get down on his knees, hang onto a willow-shrub with one hand and reach way out with his other arm. Even then it was a struggle. Dean eventually managed to snag it with the end of his radio's long whip-antenna, coaxing the feather to drift a few inches toward him, and at last he plucked it out of the water.

Clambering back to his feet and wiping the damp snow from his knees, he looked at his prize. A black feather. A slender glossy black feather, about four inches long.

"Melanistic pomarine jaeger," Dean murmured to himself, for he wanted to remember the species. He was determined to be a bona fide jaeger-expert the next time he and Castiel met. *I'll keep it,* he thought, stroking the feather lightly. It'd be a nice little memento of a distinctly memorable evening.

*Midnight sun. Never fails.* Strange things always happened under the midnight sun. He tucked the jaeger-feather in the pocket of his inner vest, zipped the vest carefully closed and started the long hike back down the boardwalk.
As soon as Dean got back to camp, he was annoyed to realize that he'd totally forgotten to take any notes on the condition of the last stretch of boardwalk up by the pingo-pond. There'd definitely been some rotted boards, too — Dean would soon have to go all the way out there again.

He found himself thinking, as he got back into his bed just after four in the morning, *I could go at midnight. Maybe Cas might be there again.*

After a few more hours of uneven sleep, Dean woke to find that his little room was actually quite dim for once (at last the duct-tape was mostly holding, with only the very faintest of glows coming from around the edges of the windowshade). He groped for his phone to check the time, but the phone wouldn't come on. He doublechecked the charging cable. The phone was indeed plugged in, but it stubbornly refused to power up.

*Oh, right; the phone had fallen out of his pocket right near the edge of the pond. It must have gotten wet.*

Damn, thought Dean, flopping back on his pillow with a sigh. Rookie mistake; he should've put it in its waterproof field case the moment he'd gotten to Kupaluk. *Damn, damn, damn.*

Well, Teddy Bear would probably have some rice that Dean could put it in for a while. Maybe it would dry out. And fortunately Dean had an iPad as well — provided by the university, for work — and also a regular old wristwatch. The iPad was on his desk right now, and Dean hitched up on one elbow and grabbed it to check the time.

Eight a.m. Now it really was time to get up. Ted would still have a hot breakfast available for another hour, but Dean was still bone-tired, reluctant to haul himself out of bed.

The discovery about the phone was discouraging, but it made him remember the whole strange scene
by the pingo pond last night. Setting the useless phone back on the desk, he then groped around in the dimness with one hand until he felt the cool, sleek little jaeger-feather. Clicking the iPad back on for some illumination, Dean lay back down on his pillow and lifted the feather up for a closer look.

It had been a little unusual for him to scoop the thing up and bring it all the way back here. Dean had long gotten over the impulse to collect miscellaneous stuff from the tundra. Everybody went through that phase early on, the tundra-scout phase, but by about his third season Dean had realized that there were only so many caribou antlers, stray hunters' arrows and fox skulls that one could collect. Caribou antlers in particular were always the irresistible tundra-souvenir (so much so that Flight 143 even allowed them as carry-on luggage), with freshly shed ones scattered around temptingly every spring. But these days, whenever Dean found a good antler he just brought it back to camp, to put in the antler-stack by the parking lot for the new grad students to pick through. The only souvenir Dean had been planning on holding on to this year was the little antler Sam had found, and he was only holding onto that because Sam wanted it.

But there were rarer finds sometimes, really unusual discoveries that seemed like they might be worth hanging on to. Dean had winnowed down his souvenirs to the two he'd put on the bookshelf last night, the claw and the old tooth. The claw was from a grizzly bear, of course.

But the tooth was even rarer; it was part of a genuine woolly mammoth tooth that had eroded out of an old stream-bank just last year, right here at Kupaluk, a relic of a prehistoric era.

Those were the only things he planned on keeping. Occasionally, he picked up other stray discoveries, but he never held onto them. Whenever he found an interesting-looking feather, for example, he usually just kept it until evening, when he could show it to the scientists to see if they could id it. He knew the scientists got a kick out of that sort of thing, so he sometimes brought back a feather as a little bird-identification conversation starter. "Short-eared owl," they'd say, or, "Peregrine falcon, maybe?" or "Ptarmigan, see how it's actually two feathers attached at the base?" It was fun to get the things identified, but Dean didn't keep feathers after that. He always tossed the feathers back out on the tundra once the scientists had had their little discussion. In fact there was a federal law about that, apparently; the scientists had to have some kind of permits to keep feathers, and Dean knew he didn't have the right kind of permit.

He twirled the black feather around, looking at it. Cornell's bird team wasn't here yet, but Shawn the lemming grad student and both of the stream ecologists were pretty good with the local birds. *I'll show them the feather at dinner*, thought Dean. Maybe they'd know something about jaegers, some kind of fun jaeger facts that Dean could casually drop into conversations with Castiel later. All that Dean knew about jaegers right now was just there were birds called long-tailed jaegers that nested locally. The long-tails had always been very obvious at Kupaluk; once nesting season started they'd soon be looping around overhead in big showy circles, constantly giving their yodeling cries. They were a little hard to miss, actually, the kind of self-advertising birds that got noticed by even the most oblivious of camp residents, and even the most non-birdy staffers (like Dean, just for example).

But what about pomarines? Cas had said the one he'd been banding had been a pomarine jaeger. (Or the one he'd been wrestling, rather, or untangling from the willows, or whatever reason he'd been tussling with the thing while stark naked in an icewater pond). Dean knew literally nothing about them.

The university had installed several apps on the camp iPads for Kupaluk tundra ecologists. There were Peterson field guide apps for mammal tracks, wildflower guides, fish identification apps, dozens of mapping and navigational tools, and quite a few different apps for bird-watching. Dean wedged another pillow behind his head to prop himself up a little, set the feather on his chest, picked up the iPad and fired up "Birds of Alaska."
Soon he was looking at an illustrated entry for "Jaeger, Pomarine," complete with a range map and eight or nine different illustrations. But Dean frowned at the bird in the first picture. It was clearly a chocolate brown, not black at all, and it had white in the wings, and a white belly and a yellow head. There was a little note in the corner of the illustration. Dean zoomed in on it:

*Image shows a light-phase jaeger, but about 10% of adults are melanistic; see next figure,* said the little note.

So Cas had been telling the truth about melanistic jaegers being a thing. (And why *wouldn't* he have been telling the truth? Why was Dean even wondering about that?)

He scrolled down. Farther below was a picture of a melanistic jaeger in flight, but even though it did indeed have a nicely dark body, it still had a bit of white in its outstretched wings. Dean thought back a moment, remembering the scene at that little meltwater pond, with the big wings and the three caribou. He was positive the wings he’d seen last night had been totally black. He almost grabbed for his phone to check the photo he’d taken, before remembering, with a sigh, that the phone was dead.

Well, maybe it’d been an extra-melanistic pomarine jaeger.

And what about the size? He studied the pictures in the "Birds of Alaska" app again, and eventually found wingspan listed up at the top: fifty-two inches. That sounded about right. Each of those wings last night had been several feet long.

Wait, no, wasn’t "wingspan" *both* of the wings together? Dean then ended up wandering through a long Google search about the definition of the word "wingspan", and soon he’d learned that fifty-two inches was apparently the length of *both* of the bird’s wings, measured wingtip to wingtip including the body. In which case... the wings he’d seen last night had been much, *much* bigger than fifty-two inches. Each wing on its own must have been at least four feet. So, with both wings outstretched, and the body, that would be... 

At least a hundred and ten inches.

Dean thought a moment. He swiped back over to Google and carefully typed in: "Biggest wingspan".

It turned out that a hundred-and-ten-inch wingspan would mean that the bird he’d glimpsed last night had been one of the biggest birds in the world.

A wandering albatross could be that big, and certain Andean condors, barely. But neither of those two species occurred anywhere near Alaska.

*Perspective is difficult to judge on the tundra,* Cas had said. Could Dean have misjudged the bird’s size that badly?

Dean picked up the feather again and looked at it more closely.

It was dry now, and yet it still had a shimmer to it under the iPad’s soft light, a glossiness. And somehow it didn’t quite seem to stay black. When the iPad light hit it one way, the feather almost seemed to glow a bluish-white. Dean began turning it back and forth, admiring the shine of the color. He happened to tilt it a little farther and the feather suddenly seemed to go vivid shining gold. The effect was startling, so much so that Dean jumped a little. Dean started turning it more slowly, experimenting with different angles, and found that he could sometimes get the feather to reflect back quite a different hue. Black.... blue. Black... gold.... green! Blue from this angle... black from that angle... a briefest flash of deep vermilion!... then golden from another angle....
The colors, when they happened, were startlingly vivid. Clearly it was some kind of iridescence, like a hummingbird, and Dean gave a laugh when he thought, *Maybe Cas found the world's biggest hummingbird.* As he twirled the feather slowly around, it became clear that the feather's most common iridescent color, the one it showed from the widest variety of angles and positions, seemed to be a soft glowing gold. In fact, the more Dean held it, the more the feather seemed to want to reflect gold, rather than one of the other iridescent colors. Soon Dean couldn't get the vermilion or the green to reappear. Even the blue was getting rare; the feather was now only flashing gold occasionally, never any other color, as he turned it around. He frowned at it, turning it more slowly, and then the feather disappeared.

He could still feel the feather-shaft in his hand, but the feather had somehow become completely transparent.

Dean flinched, sitting up so suddenly that the iPad fell over on its side. The angle of its light changed, and at once the feather was visible again.

Dean blinked at the feather wide-eyed. It was just sitting in his hand like normal now, not transparent at all, a perfectly innocuous glossy black feather with every part plainly visible. Had he imagined it? It had only been for a split second. Dean spun the feather around again, very slowly now, and he did get the flashes of iridescent gold now and then, but the spooky transparency effect didn't happen again.

Dean jumped to his feet, opened the windowshade wide and took another look at the feather in full sunlight.

In sunlight it just looked like a normal glossy black. Now Dean couldn't even get it to shine gold. *Must've imagined it,* thought Dean, shaking his head and rubbing his eyes. Sleep deprivation did the damnest things sometimes.

"You're a tricky little thing," Dean muttered, setting the little feather down on his work desk.

He looked at it for a long moment, and then he picked it up again and set it carefully up on the little bookshelf next to the bear claw and the mammoth tooth. It was already clear that this little unassuming feather, this little four-inch-long black feather, was not going to be tossed back out on the tundra. Federal law be damned; this feather, he was going to keep.

He did bring it to the dining hall later to show to the other staff and scientists, but none of the camp scientists could identify the little black feather.

Raven was everybody's first guess. "It's not a raven," Dean insisted. "The bird was way too big. I swear it had to be eagle-size."

"You get a photo?" asked Shawn, the lemming grad student.

Dean just sighed, pointing to a table by the window where a little ziploc bag full of rice was now sitting in the evening sunshine, a corner of the phone visible sticking out of the rice. The others laughed. Dean gave them all a rueful smile, and a shrug. "Meltwater pond," he explained, and they all nodded knowingly. "Anyway, the guy, Cas, he said it was a melanistic pomarine jaeger," Dean went on. "But it seemed to me like the wings were way too big for that. I didn't get a look at the rest
of the bird though, and I only got a really quick glimpse anyway. It got away before I got close."

Dean held out the feather again, and the two "birdiest" of the scientists, Phil the ecologist and lemming student Shawn, edged their chairs closer for a better look.

"Pomarine's possible," said Shawn. "They do get dark."

"But are they that big?" asked Dean.

Shawn gave an uncertain shrug. "Depends what feather type that is. From where on the bird, I mean. Could be a lateral tail feather, maybe?"

Phil pulled out a pair of reading glasses, set them on his nose and held out a hand for the feather. Dean suddenly found himself very reluctant to hand it to somebody else, but after a moment of oddly intense internal struggle, he managed to set the feather in Phil's hand.

Phil peered at the feather so closely that it almost touched his nose. "Maybe a secondary. Secondary flight feather? No, it's too pointed... secondaries have those square tips..." He turned it over a few times (handling it very gently, Dean was relieved to see). Phil finally said, "I almost want to say alula-feather, but it's way too big."

Dean hadn't heard that term before. "Alu-what?"

"Feather from the bend of the wing," explained Phil. "All birds have a short feather there. Evolutionarily it's actually the thumb. They can even move it a little bit." He held up one arm to his side, moving his thumb to illustrate. "Ancient birds could probably hold stuff with it, grab on to branches and stuff, like the wing was their hand, y'know. Anyway, this has kind of an alula shape. But it's way too big for that." He thought a moment. "Dunno. This is a puzzle."

Shawn suggested, "Innermost primary, maybe?"

Phil shook his head. "A bit skinny for a primary. And even the dark pomarines have those light-colored shafts on the primaries. I like your tail-feather idea, Shawn. Could be a dark pom's tail feather. But, no, wait, pomarines have a kind of unique tail-feather shape. Hm. Definitely a puzzle." He handed the feather back. Dean actually had to restrain himself from lunging for it, and made himself pick it up calmly. While Phil had been holding it, the feather's glossiness seemed to have dulled a little, to a flat matte black, but now that Dean had it in his hand again he caught a glimmer of glossiness once more.

"It changes color in the light," said Dean. "Sometimes goes gold. And some other colors. And, um... almost transparent, if the light gets it right."

They both looked at him, a little skeptically. Dean twirled the feather around for them, still hoping to find the right angle for the gold, or for the transparency effect. But in the bright sunlight the feather was now staying stubbornly black; it wouldn't even do the gold flash. It was a handsome black, glossy and perfect, but just black.

Dean said, "You gotta get the light at just the right angle for the transparency thing," knowing how unconvincing that must sound.

Phil suggested, "Might have just been a reflective flash. Feathers can reflect light sometimes, and they can definitely be iridescent. Haven't seen that on pomarines myself, but I've never had them in the hand. Anyway, if the guy said it was a pom, must've been a pom. I mean, you said he's a bird guy, right?"
"Yeah," said Dean, nodding. "He's a bird guy. He was banding it, even."

Phil nodded. "POJA," he said.

"What?" said Dean.

"P-O-J-A," Phil spelled out. "POJA. Bird-banding code for a pomarine jaeger. Every species has a four-letter code, you know. Banding's this whole thing. If this guy's a bander, and if he was banding it, he must know his jaegers."

Shawn was nodding, and he put in, "If he was working on his own like you said, he's gotta have a master banding permit. And they only give the master permits out to people who can prove they really know their birds."

Dean nodded, tucking the feather safely back in his down vest. It had to be from a pomarine jaeger. That's what Castiel had said, and why would Castiel lie?

That evening, Dean took several minutes to duct-tape his windowshade back together before bed, this time anchoring the duct tape with a couple of thumb tacks jammed straight through the tape into the wall. The sleep deprivation had been really hitting him hard today. He was pretty certain now that he must have hallucinated the color-changing effect of the feather, and definitely that moment of total invisibility. He must've slid into some kind of waking dream for a moment. Like narcolepsy or something. The twenty-four light messed people up in all kinds of ways.

Now that the room was dark, maybe he'd be able to get some real sleep. He slugged down two melatonin pills and a sleeping pill with a swallow of whiskey, and passed out at last.

Only to wake up yet again, just a couple hours later. Midnight sun again. Dean groaned in frustration; a little beam of sunlight had once again speared its way into the room, this time illuminating the jaeger-feather in its own personal beam of golden light, right where it sat on the shelf beside the bear-claw and the mammoth-tooth. Dean sighed; the duct tape must have pulled free again somehow, even despite the thumbtacks. Tomorrow I'm stealing a good windowshade from another room, he thought. Woozy and yawning, he kicked the sleeping bag aside, clambered to his feet and staggered over to the window again. But after a few confused moments of prodding at the windowshade, he realized the beam of light wasn't coming from the window at all.

It was coming from the feather.

The feather wasn't just changing color this time. Now it was glowing.

He picked it up and stared at it. The entire feather was glowing with a steady, golden light. He rubbed his eyes, and even pinched his own arm, hard, trying to convince himself that he was really awake this time. Dean turned the room light on and off, wondering if it was a trick of lighting, but no, the light had definitely been off; the glow was coming from the feather. The feather's golden light turned out to be quite faint, though, fainter than it had seemed at first. Once Dean had flipped the light on and off a few more times, he had to sit in the dark on the edge of this bed for a minute for his eyes to re-adjust before he could detect the feather's faint glow again.

He left the light off, and sat quietly in the dark for a while, watching the feather, till once again he could see that even steady golden glow.
"What the hell are you?" he muttered.

Was it some kind of bioluminescence, maybe? Maybe when the feather had fallen to the tundra, it had picked up a speck of some bioluminescent moss? Not that Dean had ever heard about bioluminescent moss in the Arctic. He wiped the end of the feather with a corner of his sleeping bag, but the feather continued to glow. In fact it seemed like it was starting to glow more strongly the longer he held it. After a few minutes, the glow had brightened so much that Dean could almost read his camp to-do list on his work clipboard just by feather-light.

Some kind of lensing effect? Could the feather be somehow taking in faint ambient light and re-focusing it somehow? Dean had never heard of such a thing, but he knew perfectly well that he was no feather expert. Cas, in fact, would be the feather expert, wouldn't he? Dean should just ask Cas, next time they crossed paths. Maybe it was some weird quirk of pomarine jaegers, some arctic specialty, like how polar bear fur acted like little fiber-optic cables. (Or was the polar bear thing just a myth?)

Strangely, sleep was tugging at Dean again, for as he sat in this dim room gazing at the bizarrely glowing feather in his hand, an almost soporific feeling was stealing over him. It was, in fact, downright soothing to gaze at the feather, as if it were exuding an aura of peace and tranquility along with its little stream of light. *My own private night-light.* Dean thought, slouching back onto his sleeping bag, still holding the feather. He started to tug the edge of the sleeping bag up around his waist again, still gazing at the feather in his hand, but then he realized he didn't really need the sleeping bag right now. Though the room air was a bit chilly, Dean seemed to be comfortable without another layer. *The feather's warm,* Dean realized, as his eyelids drifted shut. *It's like it's warming me up.*

He slid into a dream, a strangely formless dream that at first had no plot and not even a clear setting. It was more just a peaceful sensation of sun and wind and air. There seemed to be song, or music somewhere, as if a distant choir were singing in the far distance. After a time, Dean decided that this was simply the sound of wind.

Wind moving through wings, specifically. For there was a sensation of banking and turning, of rising and falling... of flying. *I'm flying,* thought Dean, and at this point he became aware that there were feathers all around him, a sea of black feathers that seemed to spread away on either side. They were soft, and dark, and tipped with gold on the tips, and farther away vast wings spread almost out of sight on either side. Huge wings, not just a "fifty-two inch wingspan," not even the several-foot wingspan of the weird mutant lost pomarine jaeger Castiel had gotten hold of, but even bigger still. These wings were bigger than an airplane's.

Somewhere a great dark head lifted, and turned to regard him; blue eyes stared, unblinking.

The flying sensation stopped abruptly, and it gradually became clear to Dean that, somehow, he was no longer flying (if he really ever had been at all) but was now standing in the lair of some enormous hidden beast. He couldn't even see it, but he knew it was there. Very, very close. Dean could feel it. And then there was a moment of bottomless and chilling fear.

He was in the thing's private lair. In its den. He'd somehow blundered into the private space of some vast and powerful creature, and for an infinite breathless moment it seemed that this was something more terrifying than the grizzly that had gotten Dad, more alien than the formless monsters that haunted his dreams, more powerful than the mammoths of old. He sensed it begin to turn toward him, and then *he actually saw it,* a great dark shape shifting around *right beside him.* The view was still dark and muddy, but Dean saw motion, a shifting of black and gold. He knew then this great beast that was turning toward him was something immense beyond reckoning, something ancient,
and something very powerful. And Dean had woken it, accidentally.

It could destroy him. Dean knew that at once. It could destroy him, body and soul.

But after a long terrifying moment, the creature merely bent its huge neck around and regarded Dean with large sapphire eyes.

It was strangely hard to get a handle on what exactly it looked like. There was a massive shoulder near to Dean, and there was a great curved shape overhead and a big arched neck, and there were shining silver claws somewhere and a heavy head and those glowing eyes, but Dean couldn't seem to put the pieces together to get a clear impression of the exact shape of the thing. Webs of color and shadow seemed to be passing over it, the planes and contours of its huge head constantly shifting, dissipating into fragments of color, reforming into a slightly different shape. Dean rubbed his eyes, trying to focus. It was a like a double exposure, or a triple exposure. For one moment it looked like a lion; in the next, it seemed feathered like an eagle; a second later, silver horns like a bull's seemed to flicker in and out of existence. The only constant seemed to be those sapphire eyes, and the persistent sensation of feathers somewhere nearby.

It didn't attack.

It just sniffed him. Almost cautiously, its head low, the fractal colors slowing and darkening, as if the beast had been startled by Dean's arrival.

The huge sapphire eyes blinked, slowly, and blinked again.

There came a soft wind, then, and on the wind was a scent, a infinitely soothing scent of cedar, and grasses, and wildflowers. It was a little like that wild air that had come off the pack ice, or like a north wind moving through the heather on the tops of the tundra hills.

Something dark and warm extended overhead, some sort of very large cape. As it began to wrap over him, Dean drifted into a deep, dark, dreamless sleep.

When Dean woke the next morning he'd long overslept his alarm. It was ten a.m. already, and he'd already missed two hours of his work shift. It was the best he'd slept in days.

And the little jaeger-feather was gone.
"Where's the next batch of boards?" Dean called, through the open woodshop door. He turned to frown down at his snowmobile sledge. The sledge, not yet attached to the snowmobile, was sitting slightly tipped in a patch of snow a few feet away, still only half full of neat stacks of boards. He turned back to the shop door, leaned inside and said, "Been waiting. Get a move on, would you?"

"Sorry, had to change saw blades," said Ryan, as he came staggering toward the door laden with a big bundle of freshly cut boards. "Here's another dozen."

"What happened to the first blade?" Dean said, frowning. "That was a new one."

Ryan gave him a sheepish grin. "Me 'n' Shawn were trying to cut some of the old scrap wood this morning to make him some more lemming boxes. Might've forgot to pull the old nails out. Sorry."

"Damn, you'll put your goddamn eyes out," Dean said. "And besides, that's why you're supposed to pull nails out before putting stuff in the scrap-wood pile."

"Yessir," Ryan said agreeably, nodding. "For the record, we did have goggles on, like you're always telling us. Ah... one of the safety goggles might need replacing, just by the way."

Dean could only sigh again as he helped Ryan load the new boards into the sledge. "We don't really have the budget to keep replacing stuff, you know that," Dean said, trying to keep the edge out of his voice. "Anyway, get a move on; we don't have all day."

The last bit was a lie; they did, in fact, have all day. Ryan mumbled some apologetic noises and hurried back inside. Dean sighed again, this time at himself. He knew he'd been snapping at his young camp assistant a little too much today. About minor things, too, but today Dean just seemed to be in an irritated mood.

Ryan was a decent kid. He was an Anchorage college student, going to school part-time down at U Alaska-Anchorage, and like a lot of UAA kids he'd taken to working seasonal jobs on the Slope in summers to sock away money for school. Much as Dean had been doing to cover Sam's tuition, in fact. This was Ryan's second season at Kupaluk, and Dean had broken him in pretty well last year, but the kid still tended to make some boneheaded errors sometimes.
Ryan still seemed like such a youngster, in fact, that Dean had been a little startled to realize that Ryan "the kid" was actually twenty-four years old already. And Dean was further confused to discover that Ryan was apparently considered fairly good-looking, and quite mature, by the other undergrads, and even by some of the grad students.

These days, to Dean they all looked like sixth-graders. And sometimes they seemed to act like the sixth-graders, too. And do a sixth-grade kind of job.

Right now, just for example, something was wrong with the boards. Dean was trying to strap them into the sledge, and he frowned down at the new batch. They weren't lining up exactly right with the previous boards. He grabbed his tape measure and checked the length of the closest board: two inches short. He checked another: two inches short. He measured a couple more, heart sinking.

"Dammit, Ryan," he yelled into the woodshop, over the whining saw noise. "Every damn one of these is a couple inches short. Did you do the whole batch this way?"

"Oh, shit," came Ryan's voice. The saw sound stopped, and Ryan came back outside to take a look. "Aw, dammit," he said. "I'm sorry. I had the length wrong. When I switched blades I must've reset it wrong." He looked up at Dean with a dismayed expression. "Shit, man, I'm sorry. But..." He picked up one of the short boards, looking at it. "It's almost long enough. Couldn't it still work?"

"Needs to be twenty-four inches," Dean said. Another goddamn mistake; what was wrong with kids these days? "These are twenty-two."

"Couldn't we just... make them work?" Ryan suggested.

"NO," Dean snapped, getting annoyed now. "I told you twenty-four inches and I meant twenty-four inches. Twenty-two doesn't work." He picked up one of the short boards to demonstrate what he meant. "The bracket'll be too close to the end, see, the end'll split in the first freeze-up we get, and then the board'll flip up and somebody'll pitch ass over teakettle. Put these in the scrap-wood pile." He tossed the short board at Ryan so roughly that the kid almost toppled backward catching it.

Dean took a breath, trying to remember that this wasn't a big deal. (And even if it had been, flinging boards at junior staff wasn't going to help anyway.) "We gotta re-do it. We got like fifty more of these to make, remember. I don't want to be here all night."

Ryan hung his head, chastened. "Yeah, I know. Sorry. I'll do the replacements. I think it must be just the last twelve."

Twelve wasn't too bad. But still — it was twelve wasted boards. Dean couldn't quite keep the irritation out of his voice as he said, "Even if it's just twelve, we can't afford to waste lumber. Wood doesn't grow on trees, you know."

Ryan looked at him blankly for a moment. The corner of his mouth twitched, as if he were stifling a laugh, and then Dean realized what he'd said.

"Okay, wood does grow on trees," Dean admitted, as Ryan struggled to keep a straight face. "But it doesn't grow on trees up here, is my point. We can't just run to the local Home Depot. We gotta order all this stuff in on the long-haul trucks and pay two arms and a leg for delivery, or drive a day to Fairbanks and pick it up ourselves. Wood's precious."

"Yeah, I got it, I got it," said Ryan. "I know." The half-smile had disappeared. He poked at the other short boards with one hand, looking a little disconsolate.

Dean had to remind himself, Kid's still learning. He's young. Give him a break. He's trying. Would
Dean have been this rough with Sam? Probably not. He made himself add, "It's cool, man. At least you never make the same mistake twice."

"I do seem to find a lot of brand-new mistakes to make, though," said Ryan quietly, as he picked up the twelve too-short boards, piling them all back up in his arms again to take to the scrap pile.

"Don't worry about it," said Dean. "And I shouldn't be throwing boards at you anyway. I just got some stuff on my mind, is all. Sorry."

"Stuff?" said Ryan, looking up at Dean. "Something wrong?"

"No, no," said Dean, shaking his head. "Nothing wrong. Just... lost something, that's all."

*I lost a goddamn feather and it's been driving me nuts* wasn't really going to make much sense, was it? So Dean kept his mouth shut.

It had been bugging him much more than it should have. The feather had been missing for a day and a half now. Yesterday morning, when he'd first woken to find it missing, he'd only had about fifteen minutes to poke around looking for it. There'd been some major truck drives scheduled, and Dean had had to take Kupaluk's biggest all-wheel-drive van up to Deadhorse to meet the wolverine team that had just flown in on Flight 143. It had been a busy day. Dean hadn't even had a chance to say hi to Sam while up in Deadhorse — Sam had been out with his supervisor Ruby somewhere, which had kind of been a bummer. So Dean had gotten back to Kupaluk late, and had still had to give the safety-talk and dole out radios and do the whole camp tour with the wolverine students, not to mention all his other work. He hadn't had a chance to look for the jaeger-feather till late last night.

But even then it had stubbornly remained missing, even when Dean had shaken his bedding out and looked under the mattress. It *had* to be in the room somewhere.

He hadn't slept well.

This morning he'd just about torn the room apart doing the most complete sweep possible for the lost feather. He'd taken all the bedding off the bed, shaking it all out carefully, even taking the bottom sheet off the mattress for good measure. He'd checked his sleeping bag again, turning it all the way inside-out in case the feather had gotten wedged down in the bottom of the bag. He'd shaken out all his outer gear and checked all the scarves and hats. He'd even emptied everything out of his big duffel bag on the table, in case the feather had blown around the room in some freak puff of wind and had floated down into the duffel bag. He'd dragged the bed-frame away from the wall, and had gotten on his hands and knees to look underneath it.

The feather was gone.

Oddly, he could have sworn that the bear claw and the old chunk of ivory had shifted a little bit too. It wasn't like he really took all that much trouble arranging his few personal belongings incredibly precisely, but he was fairly sure that the tooth-fragment had been a little ways apart from the bear claw. Now the claw and the tooth seemed to be closer together than he usually had them. Just an inch or two closer together. Maybe there had been a really strong puff of wind? The window did tend to fall open now and then, and Kupaluk wind could get severe. Not that ivory or claws "blew around" all that easily, normally, but maybe they had slid a bit.
Dean knew he was probably imagining things, but it was almost as if somebody had been in his bedroom the other night.

But he'd been sleeping in that very bed all that night, the night the feather had gone missing, and even though he'd been having that bizarre dream about that fractal-colored lion or dragon or whatever it had been, he'd always been a pretty light sleeper. Especially here at Kupaluk. Dean always slept lightly here. Suppose somebody fell through the ice; suppose a bear came wandering into camp, or a rabid fox or something, or suppose Big Mama broke down, or there was a fire in the kitchen grease trap or a truck stuck in a ditch somewhere. The on-call camp manager always had to be ready to snap awake in an instant. Dean had been sleeping like that for thirteen years now, always ready for a crisis, backpack always packed and ready to go with the pistol and pepper-spray already clipped into place, shotgun always nearby in his little closet. Even just that faint glow of weird feather-light had woken him the other night (and what the hell had that been, anyway?). There was no way somebody could've opened the dorm room's creaky door, letting the hallway light stream in, without Dean waking.

Though, that feather had sort of made him feel a little sleepy, hadn't it? But... that couldn't have been because of the feather, obviously. It must have been just regular old sleep-deprivation that had made him conk out so thoroughly.

"Damn," said Ryan now, studying Dean's face. "You look super tired, dude. Why don't you take a break?"

"Nah, I'm fine," said Dean. But he knew he probably did look tired. "Just getting old," he added with a forced laugh. "I'll help you cut the new boards."

"No, you won't," said Ryan, shaking his head. "It was my mistake, and I'll fix it. It's just twelve boards; it'll only take me fifteen minutes. You go take a break."

Dean let himself be shooed away. He had every intention of taking just a brief coffee break, yet not ten minutes later he found himself back in his corner room in the dorm trailer, hands on his hips, gazing sourly at his disarrayed bedding. Where was that damn feather?

And why on earth was it bothering him? It was just a feather. Just a random tundra-souvenir that he was clinging to needlessly like a first-year grad student.

Thing was, though, the feather was also a memento of a rather lovely sight, up there at the pingo pond on that second hill to the north. It wasn't every day that Dean ran across a naked guy just standing there out in the open in the beautiful landscape, let alone a guy who was that comfortable in the nude, not to mention that easy on the eyes. And though Cas had not accepted Dean's invitation to "come warm up in the truck", and had very notably not extended any sort of additional invitation to "drop by my campsite sometime," and though Dean's gaydar had clearly been misfiring a bit... hadn't there been something there? Maybe? Possibly?

The more Dean thought back on it all, the more he felt certain that there'd been some little flash of mutual recognition. Maybe not overtly sexual, but there'd been something. He almost felt like there'd been a sense of familiarity.

Or in other words, there'd been a spark.

And it had been a very long time since Dean had felt any sort of spark. With anyone, of either sex.

It wouldn't have been so bad losing that stupid feather, and dealing with the mis-firing gaydar, and the probably-imaginary "spark," if it hadn't been for the recent string of emails from Sam. At Dean's
request Sam had been sending daily emails ever since he'd left. It had only been about a week, but already a pattern was emerging: the emails always just happened to mention that red-hot-babe supervisor of his, that Ruby chick. Ruby'd said this, Ruby'd said that, Ruby and Sam had been "hanging out the other night," Ruby'd said something hilarious or insightful, Ruby and Sam "happened to have been watching a movie" (after just four days!) and Ruby'd made some totally clever comment. Ruby liked the seminar idea, Ruby'd got the boss to approve it, Ruby might come down to see Kupaluk too. Ruby might drive down with Sam. Ruby said there was no need for Dean to drive all the way up just to fetch Sam. Ruby'd offered to drive, in a plush new Alaska Petroleum SUV.

Dean could read between the email-lines as well as anyone. He knew this could be a good thing for Sam. Potentially a really good thing. It'd been a pretty long time since his kid brother had really been with anybody, at least in terms of any kind of real relationship. (Not that Dean was doing any better himself, actually, but he still had hopes for Sam.) The fact that Ruby was technically his supervisor was possibly a little borderline, but Sam seemed happy enough. Maybe Dean ought to be cheering Sam on, pushing him forward, giving him advice. Like, Dean could have sent a reply along the lines of, "Absolutely, bring Ruby on down too, it'll spare me the drive." He also ought to be officially extending the camp seminar invitation to include Ruby too.

Yet somehow Ruby had set Dean's teeth on edge, even just in that brief meeting up in Deadhorse. He hadn't been able to put his finger on what exactly had felt off, but even now it was still bothering him. Something about the look in her dark eyes. Something distant in her manner, something dismissive... There'd been one especially odd moment, up there in Deadhorse, when Dean had caught a glimpse of her in his peripheral vision, and for the briefest moment it had almost seemed like the whites of her eyes had gone dark. He'd even jumped a little and had turned to stare at her, but of course she'd actually looked totally normal, beaming at him with a sugar-sweet smile.

Probably just the light. They'd been walking through the hallways of AP's main office at the time and she'd just spotted her big boss Crowley down at the end of the hall. The hallway had been kind of dark anyway.

Yep, probably just the light. Just like how that thing with the jaeger-feather had probably been just the light. Probably just the light and the sleep deprivation.

I'm imagining things, Dean told himself. A little half-heartedly he pulled his bedding around a bit, still hoping the feather would turn up somehow. But he'd shaken out the bedding several times already. The feather was gone. With a sigh he bundled his rumpled sheets into a big arm-load to take to the camp laundry.

Ruby has totally normal eyes, he told himself as he walked down the dorm-trailer hallway. It was just sleep deprivation, and a trick of the light.

But it was more than that.

I'm hanging on to Sam, he realized. He paused at the entrance door to the trailer, gazing almost sightlessly out at the mountains.

It was time for Sam to grow up and leave. Really grow up and leave, for good. It was time for Sam's life to take another path.

And it was a path that would leave Dean behind. It was time for Sam to find a partner. Not just a college fling, either. A real partner.

But, if Sam had Ruby, where did that leave Dean? What would Dean have?
What Dean had right now, not to put too fine a point on it, was the occasional anonymous blow job in a frickin' roadside pull-off in a muddy old truck. And one frickin' stray feather... and a mental spank-bank whose one and only functioning video at the moment seemed to be a sharp memory of a weird bird guy doing nothing at all but standing bare-ass naked in an icewater pond. A weird bird guy whose only relevant action in real life had been to turn down Dean's invitation to go to the muddy truck.

And the truck's really all I've got to offer, isn't it, thought Dean, as he made his way across the parking lot toward the little laundry annex. Hey, dude, come hang out in my muddy fifty-year-old truck. It's even got a ten-year-old sleeping bag in the back. Maybe we could even split a pack of Fig Newtons, only half-squished.

Lap of luxury. Do I know how to treat a guy right or what?

Sam was going to move on at last. This was good. This had been Dean's goal all along. It was okay. Dean was gonna make it be okay. Dean would force it to be okay.

And Dean was gonna find that damn feather. Maybe it had fallen into one of his boots?

The feather remained missing. Dean finally concluded, with a weirdly deep sense of regret, that it must have fallen into the room's tiny trash bin yesterday morning. This was the only remaining possibility. And, tragically, Ryan had emptied all the trash bins yesterday afternoon.

Dean would've even been willing to go through the camp trash. But at dinner that night Ryan told him that he'd burned all the camp trash already. Recyclables and compostables were hauled away, but everything else was burned on site, and yesterday had been burn day.

Ryan's face dropped when he saw Dean's expression. "Shit, man, was that the thing that you lost?" he said. "I'm sorry — did I get the wrong day for burning? Damn, I could've sworn I got the days right for trash burn. This year I even put the burn days all in my phone, in my calendar, I swear I thought I got it right—"

"You had the day right, kid," said Dean. He forced a wan smile at Ryan. "No prob. Just had something in there. Something I think I dropped in the trash. I mean, by mistake. Just my own dumb fault."

"Aw, fuck, man, I'm sorry." Ryan looked stricken.

"Don't sweat it," said Dean. "Not your fault. Go watch the movie."

The rest of the staff and scientists would be gathering after dinner to watch a few selections from Kupaluk's catalog of winter-themed movies, a set of DVDs that Dean had been compiling for years. Tonight's vote-winning double feature, after some competitive lobbying between the wolverine team and the stream ecologists, was going to be "The Revenant" followed by "The Thing," both set in appropriately frigid winter scenery.

But after dinner, Dean found he couldn't summon up much enthusiasm for either movie. "The Revenant" had no appeal at all, for it was famed for its horrific bear-attack scene. (Just hearing about that scene had been more than enough.) As for "The Thing," the classic horror movie about a strange shapeshifting monster that could take human form, only to pick off scientists one by one in a remote
snowy field station... somehow that sounded like it might be a bit of a downer too.

Dean ended up wandering alone back to his dorm early that evening. As he made up his bed with the clean sheets and flung his sleeping bag over the top sheet, he thought, *At least the whole stupid feather thing made me do my laundry. Bright side to everything, right?*

The others were deep into "The Revenant" by now. It occurred to Dean, then, that the dorm trailer would be empty for the next couple hours. The sauna was also empty. Such opportunities could be rare at Kupaluk, and would get rarer as the season progressed. Moments like this offered a chance to take care of certain private matters. There was that new spank-bank mental video, just for example. Dean could just sorta... lie down here, and think about the naked bird guy out on the tundra.....

But it didn't feel right to deliberately fantasize about someone who'd told him no.

No matter how appealing the image, there had to be a yes. Or at least the hope of a yes. *Never fall for a straight guy* had been Dean's cardinal rule for quite some time, and part of that philosophy meant not using spank-bank mental movies of straight guys.

He tried, instead, to think of something else, to summon up some other enticing image from his (rather large) back catalog of enticing memories. There were some choice videos on his laptop, as well, but somehow nothing caught his interest. He ended up pouring himself a glass of whiskey and, rather to his surprise, curling up with the iPad to flip through "Birds Of Alaska." Hell, maybe he'd turn into a genuine birdwatcher one of these days.

Dean was idly swiping past illustrations of some surprisingly flashy-looking ducks when a soft tapping came at the door.

Damn. This always meant something was wrong. The kitchen’s gray-water piping had backed up, or a truck had broken down, or somebody up at Deadhorse had flown in on the wrong day and only just now realized that nobody was there to pick them up. Or there was a bear—

Dean padded in wool socks to the edge of the room's little mud corner, reached carefully across the muddy bit of carpet, and opened the door.

It wasn't one of the camp staff. It was Castiel. With his black backpack on, as always, and his tan coat, his blue scarf, his black hat, the old black snow pants and the vintage duck-hunter boots. Apparently he only had the one set of outdoor gear. Once again he looked rather like he'd stepped out of an old 1975 western.

It was a good look on him.

Cas still had one hand raised, as if Dean had caught him in mid-knock. In his other hand he was holding Dean's black North Face jacket. He flinched slightly when Dean opened the door, as if he hadn’t expected it to open.

"Oh," said Cas, a little uncertainly. "You're here?"

"I'm here," said Dean, smiling at him.

"I thought this was your movie night?" said Cas. "Aren't you supposed to be watching a movie?"
Dean shrugged. "Usually, yeah. Everybody's in the dining hall. But it turns out it's The Revenant tonight. Not really my thing." Belatedly, he remembered that he had mentioned the movie night to Cas earlier, and therefore that Cas had probably come to join in on the movie-watching. Dean added, "Do you want to see it, though? We could go over. I could... uh..." (Dean really didn't want to see the bear-attack scene.) "I'd be happy to watch it if you want to."

A puzzled frown had crossed Castiel's face at the mention of the movie title. "The Revenant?" He didn't seem to recognize it. "As in... a person who's returned from the dead?"

"Yeah, that DiCaprio flick from a couple years back, remember?" said Dean. "Lots of freezing to death and rolling around in the snow."

"That sounds... um... delightful," said Castiel, a very doubtful expression on his face.

Dean had to laugh. "We specialize in snow movies," he explained. "But, to be totally honest, that one's not really my style. It's got this bear attack scene... you might've heard of it?" Cas shook his head and Dean explained, "Apparently DiCaprio gets totally mauled by a grizzly and is left for dead and then he staggers around in the snow for two more hours. I think. I'm probably not doing it justice. It's supposed to be really good. Did you want to see it?"

"Ah.... that sounds.... quite appealing," said Castiel, even more uncertainly, "But perhaps I'll see it some other time."

There was a hesitant moment then, as Dean and Cas stood looking at each other.

*I just talked him out of watching a movie with me,* Dean realized.

He could have kicked himself.

*I really suck at this, don't I,* Dean thought, as a wash of depression started to settle over him like a heavy cloak. *I should just take him to the dining hall. Get him some snacks, get him some coffee, introduce him around, and then get the fuck out of his way and leave him alone. He could find way better friends at this camp than me.*

Dean opened his mouth fully intending to say "I'll take you to the dining hall," but the words that actually came out were, "Wanna come in and have some whiskey?" and he found himself swinging his bedroom door wide open in invitation.

"Yes," said Cas instantly, walking right in.
Cas stopped just inside the doorway, looking around.

"Take your pack off," Dean suggested.

"Oh, no, no, thanks, I'm comfortable," said Cas. "I, um... don't want to get your room muddy."

"Don't worry about that," said Dean, finding suddenly that muddiness didn't matter in the least if it was Castiel who was tracking the mud in. "Get a load off your feet, anyway." He swung one of room's two little chairs toward Cas.

Cas backed up a step, looking at the chair with what seemed mild alarm.

"C'mon, sit down, dude," said Dean. Grabbing the second chair, Dean swung one leg over it so he could sit in it backward, cowboy-style, straddling the seat and leaning his arms on the seat-back. *I'm showing off*, he realized, with a mental eye-roll at himself.

But Cas then did exactly the same; he watched Dean's little chair-straddling maneuver with an air of alert attention, and then he mirrored the move precisely, turning his own chair around and straddling the seat. He settled his arms on the seat-back a little tentatively, as if he weren't used to sitting in chairs this way, but he soon relaxed, looking around the room.

He even relaxed enough to take off his black hat and blue scarf, setting them on the little table by the duffel, along with Dean's North Face jacket. But he kept his tan sheepskin-lined coat on, as well as the backpack. In fact, this chair-straddling position worked well for keeping a backpack on, as Dean well knew. Field workers often would sit this way for exactly that reason, if they were only briefly coming into the dining hall and didn't want to go through all the effort of shedding all their gear.

Which all meant Castiel probably wasn't planning on staying long.

Dean grabbed his bottle and the two glasses, cracked the bottle open and poured them both a few finger-fulls of whiskey. He handed one glass to Cas, saying, "So what movies *have* you seen recently?"
Gah, I'm asking about movies, he thought. How lame was that?

Castiel sniffed the whiskey and looked at it with some curiosity. He took a cautious sip. "Actually," he said, "I haven't really seen any movies in a while."

"Oh, right, because of doing fieldwork?" Dean guessed.

"Um," said Cas. "Yes. Exactly."

"So what's the last movie you saw, then?"

Cas hesitated. "It was called Star Wars, I believe."

"What, like the prequels? Or the recent ones?"

Cas looked up from the whiskey glass with a slightly confused look. "There was just one movie. It was called Star Wars. I saw it... some time ago."

"Rogue One?" Dean guessed, but Castiel's eyes just narrowed.

"The name of the movie was Star Wars," Cas insisted.

"Yeah, but what was the subtitle?"

"Subtitle?" said Cas, now looking more confused.

"Like, A New Hope. Or Rogue One, or whatever," explained Dean. Cas just blinked at him. Dean tried to clarify, "Which other Star Wars movies have you seen?"

"I... didn't know there were others," said Cas slowly.

Dean had to laugh. "You been living under a rock or something?"

Cas looked down at the muddy carpet, blinking a little, and Dean could have kicked himself. Castiel had clearly grown up in some distant isolated bush town, and probably with some kind of "hyper-controlling" family, as Sam had put it. Maybe a religious family or something. There were never any movie theaters in those tiny backwoods communities, and Dean was starting to wonder if there'd been little access to the internet either. Maybe the guy really hadn't had much exposure to pop culture.

"Sorry, really didn't mean that in a bad way," said Dean. "Wilderness living's cool too." Cas looked up again, a little more hopefully, and Dean added, "You grew up somewhere kinda isolated, didn't you?"

Castiel hesitated, watching Dean's face, but at last he said, "Very much so." He looked around and added, "This whole... world..." (He waved his whiskey glass around, as if gesturing at all of Kupaluk at once) "— it all still seems quite unfamiliar sometimes. Even though I've been down here for a while now."

"Down" here. That was interesting. It sounded like he'd grown up pretty far north, maybe in the bush villages along the coast, or one of the scattered mountain towns in the foothills of the Brooks.

"Gotcha. Cool. That's cool," said Dean, nodding, trying to convey that it really was totally, completely, absolutely fine if Cas wasn't up-to-date on pop culture. "Anyway, you gotta see the other movies someday. A couple of 'em are awesome. Rogue One for example. I can catch you up."
"I'd like that," said Cas softly, and this seemed enough of a triumph that Dean reached his glass out and clinked it against Cas's.

Cas gave him an almost shy smile. Dean grinned back at him, and they both took a drink — still with some lingering eye contact, which Dean tried his best not to over-interpret.

*Back on track,* thought Dean.

Cas cleared his throat and asked, "So you don't like bear-attack scenes?"

"Not so much, no," Dean said, taking another sip.

"Why not?"

Dean took another swallow while he tried to decide how best to fend off this line of questioning. He never talked about this much. Or at all, really. Several of the camp staffers had noticed that Dean was cautious about bears — Dean was the only person in camp who *always* carried pepper-spray every day without fail, and not buried in the bottom of the pack either, but always clipped to the side for quick access. He'd never needed it (most bears in this area were actually pretty shy, as he'd told Sam) but he always carried it. But only Teddy the cook and the old ecologist Phil had any idea of the backstory, and they'd kept it to themselves. Dean didn't talk to strangers about this.

Yet nonetheless Dean found himself saying, "My dad was killed by a grizzly." He took a long swallow, draining the rest of this glass.

This was typically where people would react with sympathy, or shock. Or both. But Cas only nodded. He said calmly, "I see. That makes sense, then."

"Yep," said Dean. "I found the body." Somewhat to his confusion, he found himself adding a detail that he had never mentioned to anyone, not even Teddy or Phil. "Pretty much eaten alive, they said."

Again Cas seemed oddly unfazed. "That's unusual," he said. "Grizzly bears don't usually eat people. I'm told humans don't taste good. They prefer salmon."

Dean blinked.

"Yeah," Dean said, nodding. "It was unusual, actually. The rangers said they'd never had a bear in that area before who'd done that. They said you usually only see that happen, maneaters I mean, if people have been deliberately feeding bears. I mean, like, feeding them sandwiches and stuff. So that the bear associates people-scent with food, I guess. But nobody'd been doing that. This was way far away from the tourist areas, really out in the backcountry. The real bush, way out back of Denali."

After another swallow of whiskey, Dean added, " Took me ages to find Dad's campsite. I hiked every damn trail in the whole park before I found him."

Castiel nodded, gently. His expression was quite sympathetic, but, rather than spouting the usual homilies, what he said next was simply, "Did you find the bear?"

Nobody had *ever* asked that particular question. And it was one that had haunted Dean for years.

"Nope," Dean answered. He refilled both their glasses and took another swig. "Never found that fucker. Never did. And I looked. Man, did I look. I stayed a couple weeks and worked with the rangers. Mother-fucking huge bear, too, absolutely gigantic paw prints. Grizz all have big paws of course, but this one was off the charts. Some of the other rangers did have a couple sightings... big old bastard, yellow eyes, scarred up, limping. I never saw it, though." Dean sighed, looking into his whiskey glass. "And, y'know, I know Dad got off a few shots. Shotgun had been fired, pistol too.
He even had these special bear bullets in the pistol, super hard metal. Gun shop said they'd never seen that kind of bullet before, actually... titanium or something? Armor-piercing was their best guess. Grizz have super thick skulls, you know. You really need serious ammo for them. I still have some of the bullets."

Dean was a little astonished to hear himself talking so much about this, let alone to a relative stranger. And he kept talking: "I think Dad wounded it. Think he got it through the paw, at least. 'Cause, I found some fur, some blood. I mean, there was blood all over but I'm sure some was from the bear. And I found half a claw, see, it's here, I kept it—" Dean started to get to his feet but realized immediately that he was getting a little unsteady. Not only was he talking a lot, he was drinking a lot. He decided not to risk walking the two steps across the room. Instead he just pointed to the claw and sat right back down.

While Dean took another sip, Cas set his own whiskey glass down, stood from his chair and moved to the little bookshelf for a closer look.

"Ah, yes," Cas murmured, touching the claw lightly. "I understand now why you have this."

"Kept it ever since," Dean said. "Nobody else knows. They think it's just a cool bear claw... never told anybody it's from THE bear. Sam doesn't even know. Don't know why I even keep it, really. That's why it's off on its own. Not with the tooth, I mean. I keep it separate."

"Why do you keep it?" asked Cas, turning to look at Dean.

Dean paused, thinking. "I really don't know," he said at last. "Just a reminder...."

"A reminder of what?"

Dean shrugged. "Don't even know. Watch out for bears? Carry pepper spray? I don't know. Take better care of my family, I guess? Carry a gun?" He gestured to the pistol holster on his backpack, which was sitting near the door.

Cas looked over at the pack, a thoughtful expression on his face. "You always carry a gun?"

"Pretty often," Dean said. "Not always the shotgun — that's in the closet there, behind you — but I always have the pistol in that holster. It's in there now."

"And have you killed many bears?" said Cas, looking back at him.

Dean gave a short laugh. "Not a one. You want to know something funny? I carry those guns around, two long guns and a pistol, I lug 'em everywhere, and I've never shot a damn thing. Never shot a bear, not even once. Never even shot a caribou or a ptarmigan." He confessed, then, "I aim at 'em sometimes for practice. Even got a hunting license. But I never shoot. Not sure why. I always used to think of myself as a hunter, but I guess I'm really not." He hesitated, and finally added, "I just want to be ready. I just, y'know..." He faltered a moment, and at last said, "I just don't want what happened to Dad to happen to anybody else. I mean, I still think about it."

Cas nodded slowly. He reached out, but not to the bear claw; instead, he picked up the mammoth tooth and turned it over in his hand, tracing one finger over the rippled lines of color in its surface. "Everybody dies," he said quietly, looking at the ancient tooth. "Sometimes violently. Sometimes in pain. But once it's over, it's over." He turned to look at Dean, holding the tooth in his hand. "In your memory, does it feel like it's still happening? Do you envision your father still suffering?"

That stopped Dean cold. Because, the thing was, it did sometimes feel like it was still happening. Even now, fourteen years later, Dean still dreamed about the day he'd come across that terrible place,
the awful campsite in Denali, and whenever the dream happened it seemed as fresh and immediate as ever. He sometimes couldn't help but run the whole scene through his mind like a horrible little movie, trying to imagine what it must have been like for Dad to face such a fearsome beast. The pain, the terror, the desperate attempt to fight it off....

And in those moments when Dean was reliving it, it did feel like it was happening all over again.

Dean nodded, wordless.

Castiel met his eyes. "It's not still happening," Castiel said. He pulled his chair a little closer and sat back down, straddling the chair seat again, now very close, with one of his knees brushing one of Dean's. He was still holding the mammoth-tooth, and he looked at it for a long moment, turning it over in both his hands. Then he looked up at Dean.

"Your father is at peace," Castiel said, looking Dean directly in the eyes. "He is in Heaven. There is no pain now. No fear. The moment of death may have been awful, but it was brief, and it ended. Once the death is over, all the pain is gone for good. Then there is only peace. There is no more suffering."

Dean had no idea what to say. He slowly took another swallow, and then he had to stare down into his glass for a long moment, blinking, trying to hide the tears that had somehow gathered at the corners of his eyes.

"You'll never guess what that's from," he finally said, a little thickly, gesturing at the tooth.

"It's part of the sixth molar of a woolly mammoth," Castiel said, looking down at the heavy chunk of ivory. "A fragment from the anterior face." Dean looked at him, a little startled, before remembering that Castiel was an arctic scientist who'd been doing fieldwork for many years. He'd probably seen things like this before.

"Yeah," Dean said slowly. "Eroded out of the stream banks right by the dining hall last year. There's been a lot more erosion recently, you know... old things are turning up. Apparently they used to be all around here, you know. The mammoths."

Cas closed his eyes, cradling the tooth in both hands. When he spoke again, his voice had slowed, and his throaty, low-pitched tone was pitched even lower than usual.

"Adult female," Castiel said slowly, eyes still closed. "Died of starvation. One of the very last mammoths left in this region. About eight millennia ago. Her baby died first, and she knew what that meant. She knew she was one of the last. She grieved the loss of her child. She called for other mammoths, but she was alone; her family had all died earlier. Then she died too. It was very cold...."

Cas opened his eyes.

Dean could only stare at him.

"Or... something like that," Castiel added, his expression sharpening as he took in the look on Dean's face. He broke eye-contact, looking down at the tooth with an almost embarrassed little half-laugh. "I sometimes like to... imagine what animals' lives might be like," he explained. "And the mammoths, I miss them— I mean, what I mean is, I think it's such a pity that we missed seeing them, don't you think?"

Dean nodded, a little confused.

"But my point is," said Castiel, holding up the tooth-fragment, "this mammoth, she isn't suffering
anymore. She's in Heaven too, like your father. She's in Heaven, with her baby. With her whole family. Her suffering lasted only a week or two. Since then, she's been in Heaven, at peace, for eight millennia. You see, the suffering doesn't last."

"Woolly mammoths go to Heaven?" said Dean slowly.

"Well, of course," answered Castiel, as if this should be obvious. But once again he seemed to notice something in Dean's expression that made him hesitate, and he added, "Or, I mean, that's what my... family has told me. My, um, family believes that certain animals have their own Heavens. When you think about it, it seems rather unlikely that humans are the only creatures with souls that have ever evolved. Don't you think? There are certain animals that... that have a mind. A consciousness. They make their own decisions. They have their own sort of soul, if you wish to think of it in those terms. And they have their own form of free will."

Dean thought, immediately, of the wolf on the pier, and the intelligent look in its eyes. It had chosen to walk on past, rather than attack. The wolf had clearly had a choice. The wolf had been in total control of the situation, and it had chosen not to attack. It had been a deliberate choice.

Dean nodded.

Silently, Castiel held out the tooth-fragment; silently, Dean took it. Maybe it was just the whiskey, but the vivid memories of Dad's death seemed to have quieted, and Dean was able, now, to think instead about the frickin' woolly mammoth, of all things. Now and then he'd thought about the mammoth before, of course. When he'd first found the tooth, he'd entertained himself for a few evenings picturing its huge owner, gigantic and shaggy, walking across these very hills, sweeping the snow away from its grazing-grounds with those immense curved tusks. But he'd never actually considered whether it might have had some kind of inner life. Or whether it had been intelligent, or social. Elephants certainly were. What had this particular mammoth's life really been like? How had it died?

Once the death is over, all the pain is gone for good.

"Um, I'm sorry, I'm intruding," said Cas. He was watching Dean's face again. "Maybe I should be on my way?"

"Oh, no, no, that's fine," said Dean. "Why'd you come, anyway? To see the movie? Or, um, did you want... some coffee, maybe? I could get you some coffee. Want some coffee?"

"The whiskey has fueled me sufficiently," said Castiel. "Perhaps I can try the coffee some other time. I really came to return your jacket. Well, and also..." He hesitated. An uncertain look crept across his face, something almost embarrassed. "Also I came to give you this," he finally said, and he put one hand in the pocket of his tan sheepskin jacket and pulled out a little black feather, four inches long.

Dean stared at it for a long moment. "I had one just like that!" he finally said. "But I lost it! It was bugging me like crazy. Where'd you get that one?"

"I... found it," said Castiel. "I found it where the... jaeger was, the other night. I thought..." He hesitated. "It occurred to me that you maybe you might want it? You seemed, um... interested in the jaeger."

Dean nodded, saying, "I was so bummed about the other feather. I think it must've fallen in the trash or something. And we just burned the trash last night."

"What a pity," said Castiel. "Anyway, here's another one."
He held it out to Dean. Oddly, Dean had to stop himself from actually snatching it out of Castiel's hand. It was the same sensation he'd had in the dining hall the other night, wanting to snatch the feather back from Phil, wanting to get it back into his own hand (where, somehow, it seemed like it belonged). Instead Dean made himself put out his own hand casually, palm-up, like this was no big deal.

Slowly, Cas set the feather into Dean's hand. He gave a tiny, tight intake of breath as he let the feather go, rather as if he, too, were having a little trouble letting go of the feather.

Dean held the feather up for a closer look.

The second feather looked exactly like the first. It could have been the very same feather.

"Funny that it dropped two feathers," Dean remarked. "Two exactly the same, even."

"It must have been molting," said Castiel, folding both arms around his waist.

Dean felt delighted to have another jaeger-feather in his hand — and even a little confused at how very delighted he was. "This is awesome," he told Cas, who was sitting now with both arms wrapped tightly around himself, watching with an almost riveted expression as Dean handled the feather. Dean explained, "I know it's just a feather but it's the weirdest thing — I really liked that other one and it just totally bummed me out to lose it. And I don't usually collect stuff, either. Silly, huh?"

"Quite," murmured Cas.

"I'll put it up on the shelf," Dean said, rising and turning away from Cas in order to set the little feather on the bookshelf. "But this time I'll make sure it doesn't blow away." He pulled the edge of the tooth onto the very end of the feather. He couldn't resist lingering a bit longer, just to stroke his finger along the length of the feather. It didn't do any of the color-changing tricks, but Dean said over his shoulder to Cas, "The first night, I swear it was kind of glowing. Trick of the light, I guess. Then it just fell into the trash somehow. Wind, I guess. Anyway, if there's another feather... does that mean the jaeger's molting or something?"

Cas didn't answer immediately. Dean turned to find that Cas was standing just a few feet away. He had risen from his chair soundlessly, and had moved a bit closer, while Dean had been adjusting the feather's position on the shelf. Dean looked at him, and found himself a little breathless from the sudden proximity.

"Molt can take you by surprise, I find," Cas said softly. His eyes fixed on Dean's for a long moment. "Feathers drop when you don't expect them to.

Then his gaze slid down. Down Dean's body... and back up.

It was unmistakable, that look, the way Cas's gaze had drifted up and down. He's checking me out, thought Dean, and though he knew now that this whole line of thought was pretty unlikely, he found himself straightening up, and even angling his shoulders a bit, in case that might set him off better. Dean was aware that he was showing off again, which was totally silly. But, of course, it was fun, too.

And he was automatically appraising Cas right back. Dean deliberately let his own gaze drift up and down Cas's body in return. All those features that Dean had noticed out there on the pond were again on full display. The tousled dark hair, the solid muscled height, those piercing blue eyes, that tanned skin....
Well, not *all* the features from the pond were on full display. Not yet.

A tiny, breathless moment of silence stretched out in the little room, as they gazed at each other, and Dean thought, *Maybe I was right the first time.*

That whole tundra encounter had been weird, after all. Cas might have felt off-balance about being caught in the nude. Or maybe he'd been distracted by the bird. And Dean had been practically comatose with sleep deprivation, and embarrassed about catching Cas naked like that. Maybe they'd just kind of missed each other's cues. But here Castiel was, and he'd come all the way to Kupaluk, and had sought out Dean's room specifically, and maybe Dean should just... well, test the waters again.

But "testing the waters" had to be done cautiously. There was a reason Dean used the subtle invitation to the truck, the roundabout hints. Down where there was internet and cell phones they could've both just been using Grindr and clarified everything right from the start. But up here, things were different. And, when dealing with people from isolated bush towns... well, Cas seemed cool enough (if, admittedly, a little unusual) but Alaska could be a conservative place. People could react unexpectedly. Not to mention, people up here tended to know how to fight. And they were usually armed. They carried pepper spray, they carried hunting knives, and they almost always carried guns. Stuff could happen.

So there was a dance that Dean had learned to do, over the years. A little series of clues, of dropped breadcrumbs, a sequence of cautious hints and jokes, so that they could both be sure of each other's intentions before either of them risked too much.

He hadn't really had enough time at the pingo-pond to go through the whole routine. Time for the dance, then.

Dean deliberately widened his grin into a lazy smile, and he took a precisely measured half-step toward Cas, looking him right in the eyes.

Just a half-step; not a whole step. A deniable move, in other words. Years of experience at the pull-offs by Pump Stations Two and Three had shown that a half-step was exactly enough. A straight guy would automatically back off a tiny bit, in an intuitive guarding of personal space. A bold gay guy would recognize the move immediately and lean in for a kiss. (The especially bold might even reach straight for the crotch). A shy gay guy might be unsure what to do, but there'd be some tell-tale clues; maybe he'd color a little and glance at Dean's lips, or scan up and down Dean's body again. There was always some kind of tell, some sort of little reaction.

But Cas didn't do any of that. He didn't back off, he didn't go for a kiss, he didn't blush, and he didn't look at Dean's lips. Instead he stayed planted exactly where he was. He even squared up a little, much as he had in the pond, standing straight and tall with his chin lifted a little. He was facing Dean almost like a drill sergeant, and he simply stared right back at Dean, tilting his head a bit, with a slightly puzzled frown creasing his forehead. It was as if he hadn't even recognized the invasion of personal space.

Dean was a little nonplussed. This was hard to interpret.

"So..." said Dean. "Did you have anything else in mind when you dropped by here tonight? Anything else you... wanted?"

Castiel considered that for a long moment. He looked back at Dean; he nodded. "Coffee," Castiel said.
Dean blinked.

"You mentioned coffee," Cas reminded him. "But as I said, now that I've had the whiskey I suppose the coffee could wait until later."

**Well. Okay. Like, a coffee date, maybe?**

"Coffee, huh?" says Dean. "I can arrange that. Anything else? Any... hobbies?" Discussion of "hobbies" usually brought out a couple of clues, even in the shyest closet cases.

But Cas shook his head. "I don't really have hobbies," he says. "Other than watching the birds, of course. But I like coffee."

"Coffee," Dean repeated slowly. Was this code? Some new sex act, some slang word he hasn't heard? "Is that what kids are calling it these days?" he joked.

"It's always been called coffee in English," Castiel informed him gravely. "Well, for several centuries. Since coffee beans were first imported to Europe." Once again he was studying Dean's face, his eyes tracing their way over Dean's features. Dean was more than a little mesmerized by Cas's eyes, by the way the slanting light from the window picked out that bright, almost glowing blue. As Dean waited breathlessly, Cas said, in a deep and downright sultry voice, "The word is from the Ottoman Turkish kahve, in turn derived from Arabic qahwah. A Moroccan sufi mystic was the first to try drinking it, in the ninth century A.D. He was sainted for the discovery. There's also a tale about a goatherd feeding coffee beans to his goats, but that's apocryphal."

"Really," said Dean. "Ah...." He decided to double down on the obviousness of his hints. "You ever go to Pump Station Three? I hear they've got some... coffee up there."

"They do," Castiel says, nodding. "I've been by there sometimes. But it's usually old and has been sitting in the coffeemaker for a while. It gets very bitter."

Dean hesitated, confused.

"We are talking about Pump Station Three, right?" Dean said at last.

"I... believe so?" said Cas. "The third of the pump stations, by Happy Valley?"

"Yeah, Pump Station Three," said Dean, finding his rhythm again. He sidled another half-step closer, but Cas merely shifted to square up to face him again. Dean added doggedly, "Up at, yeah, Happy Valley. Or, heh, Happy Ending Valley, some of the boys around here call it. Heh..."

Now Castiel was just looking more puzzled. "I've seen Happy Valley from afar, but I've never stopped there," he said. "I've really only stopped in at Pump Station Three."

"And... what did you do there?" Dean asked. "At Pump Station Three?"

"I had... coffee?" said Cas, clearly confused now. "Is there anything else to do there?"

Dean was getting just as bewildered. Throwing caution to the wind, he finally said, "You know, sometimes I really wish we had cell towers up here."

"Oh, those communication towers?" Cas asked. "I've seen them south of the mountains. Why would you want them here?"

"So I could just get online and see if you're on Grindr," Dean said. *Hell with it. Those eyes... it was*
worth the risk. "This is confusing, man. Sorry to be blunt, but, are you DTF or what?"

"Grind...er?" Castiel asked, dragging the word out a little like he's never heard of the app. "D...T...F...? What is that?"

This was going farther downhill every second. *Win some, lose some*, Dean reminded himself. *And whatever you do, don't fall for a straight guy.* To Cas he just said, with a laugh, "I guess in this case it means, Don't Tempt Fate." Which just earned a very confused look from Castiel. "You don't do Grindr, do you," Dean asked, hopefully. "Look, don't take this the wrong way or anything, and sorry in advance if I'm just super confused, but just to clarify, you're not gay?"

Castiel blinked. He broke eye contact at long last and glanced over to Dean's little bookshelf — to the bear claw, and the mammoth tooth, and the little jaeger-feather.

"I must confess not," Cas said slowly. "I think it's not in my nature." He looked back at Dean and added, almost wistfully, "It must be nice to be gay, yes?"

"Nice?" Dean repeated stupidly. It must be nice to be gay? What on earth did Cas mean? Was this some awkward attempt at saying he wasn't a homophobe? Dean could feel his face starting to heat, and he blurted out, "Sorry, dude, really sorry, my gaydar's totally broken these days." His voice came out a little rattled, almost a stammer. He backed up a full step — taking back the original half-step, and another just for insurance. "I just thought you might... I don't know, I just misunderstood —"

"Are you able to feel gay, yourself?" asked Cas. "In this modern era, with all... this?" He waved a hand around at the room; he seemed to be including the electric light overhead, the iPad on the desk, the four walls around them, the mud boots and equipment stacked in the corner. Castiel added, as Dean blinked at him, "Often I feel it was more possible to be gay long ago, in the past. Life was rough then, of course, hard even, sometimes violent, but... simpler in some ways." He added, a little sadly, "I didn't know as much, back then." He looked back at Dean. "Do you consider yourself gay?"

"I, uh... sometimes?" Dean said. "I kinda go both ways," he confessed at last. "Um... up at... Happy Valley, y'know. Now and then."

"Ah," said Cas, nodding. "Happy Valley must be aptly named. It looks to be a most lovely site. Such a beautiful river valley." He added, solemnly, "I'm glad you're gay at least sometimes, Dean, in spite of everything. That's nice to hear."

"R-right," stammered Dean. "Cool. Thanks. Yeah, it's not so bad."

Cas was looking solemn now. "I should be going," he said. "I just wanted to return the jacket, and give you back my — the — feather." Dean had to make an effort to re-focus his attention on what Cas saying, as Cas went on, "I realized today, it seemed like you should be the one to have the feather. If you found it before — I mean, if you found the first one — maybe you're supposed to have... whatever other feathers the jaeger may have dropped. When it molts. Which it seems to be doing right now. Whether it planned to or not." Cas was backing slowly toward the door as he said all this, picking up his scarf and hat off the table as he edged backwards, and soon he'd reached the door and was swinging it open. Dean groped for something to make him stay a little longer.

"Wait," Dean said, and he grabbed for his own pack in the mud corner. Cas turned at the door, puzzled. "Keep the jacket," said Dean, tossing the North Face jacket back at Cas. "You need one more layer. And take these." He dug in his duffel for some more hand-warmers. He'd restocked his pack with six more today, and he gave them all to Cas, saying, "Don't take the plastic off till you're
ready to use them. They'll start up when they feel the air."

"I understand," said Cas. He tucked the hand-warmers into his pocket, and folded his arms around
the North Face jacket, looking at Dean thoughtfully. "Thank you. It's much appreciated."

"Another thing," Dean said, realizing this was his chance to get Cas fully set up at last — and,
hopefully, to be able to stop worrying about him. Dean was already reaching to his pack strap to
unclip his two-way radio, the nice new pro model with the long whip antenna. "You got a two-way
like this? I mean, can you communicate by radio?"

"Um," said Castiel. "I... used to be able to. Not so much anymore, though."

"So you don't have one of these?" Dean asked, holding up the radio.

Cas frowned blankly at it, shaking his head.

"Take it," Dean said, holding it out. "The charge should last a few days. I can get you a couple
battery packs. We'll figure out some way to swap them. You ever get in trouble or anything, or if you
just wanna check in, you give me a call. Let's use... ah, let's use six if it's non-emergency. Nobody
uses channel six around here."

Dean reached out and flicked the radio's channel selector to 6, as Cas looked on with a rather
befuddled expression. Dean then explained, "Power button's here; turn it off when you're not using
it. The push-to-talk button's on this side. This clip on the back is so you can hook it to your belt or
backpack or whatever. But you know the drill, right? You've used radio before?" Cas nodded,
though he looked a little confused. He took the radio, staring at it; gently, he stroked the long whip
antenna.

Dean said, "Maybe just check in now and then, like, after dinner. And if a storm comes up, just let
me know if the snow is a problem or anything. All right? Or else I'll worry."

Cas nodded, glancing back up at Dean with a thoughtful look on his face. "I'll do so. And I'll return
sometime," he said. "For coffee. And perhaps a movie. With no bears."

He raised one hand, as he always seemed to do when saying goodbye. Dean echoed the gesture, and
at last Castiel left. Dean took a step out into the hallway to see him go, and he watched Cas walk
down the long hallway and out the door into the whipping wind, shouldering the door open with the
radio in one hand and the black North Face jacket with the other, and with his big black backpack, as
always, securely strapped to his back.

Dean ended up drinking another glass of whiskey in his room alone. He sat at the little desk as he
drank, looking at the little feather where it sat on the bookshelf with the mammoth tooth.

Cas wasn't gay at all. Not remotely. He'd made it crystal clear this time. Dean had already known
this, of course, but he'd felt compelled to make sure.

It was rare for Dean to put much effort into this sort of awkward is-he-isn't-he puzzle. And he didn't
hold with pressuring people anyway. Normally, the first time a guy said no (or even hinted no), Dean
dropped the whole topic immediately and moved on. Cut your losses, he'd always thought. That's the
rule. Never fall for a straight guy. Cut your losses and move on; there'll always be another guy.
But it was starting to seem like there wasn't going to be another guy like Cas.

*I wanted this more than I realized,* Dean thought, and he took another long swallow of whiskey, draining the glass.

At least Cas had taken pains to make clear that he didn't have a problem with Dean being bi. Cas's phrasing had come out a little odd, maybe a little old-fashioned, but he'd definitely gone out of his way to clarify that he thought "gayness" was just fine. It's just that he wasn't gay himself. He'd said so very clearly.

Maybe he just wanted a friend.

*Well, I can be a friend,* thought Dean. He set the empty glass on the desk, reached out to the bookshelf and picked up the little feather, twirling it in his hand thoughtfully. He jumped when it flashed gold.
A few nights later, Dean was dreaming about mammoths, watching their great shaggy forms move across a distant horizon, when a burst of static came echoing through his dream.

"—ean?"

Dean woke at once, peering around his little room. He'd finally fixed the window latch the other day, and had installed an entirely new windowshade for good measure. There was no light from the window at all. The room was blessedly dark.

Even the mysterious feather hadn't woken him. It did still have that bizarre habit of glowing gold from time to time, from that bioluminescence or whatever it was, but Dean had draped a black t-shirt over it so that the faint golden light wouldn't wake him up. (It had never done the disappearing trick again; Dean had written that off as a sleep-deprived, half-awake, dream.)

But if the midnight sun hadn't woken him, and the bioluminescent feather hadn't woken him, then what had?

Another burst of static, then:

"—n, the loons are b—"

Cas. That was Cas's voice.

"—ean, since you like jaegers, I just thought you might want to kn—"

Oh, right — the radio! The radio that Dean had loaned Cas several days ago. Cas was finally using it! Dean's own radio was sitting in a charging station on his desk now. He'd taken to leaving it turned on overnight, tuned to channel six, and for the first time it was crackling with static.

Dean kicked aside his sleeping bag and swung his feet to the floor, glancing quickly at his wristwatch for the time (he'd had to revert to a wristwatch, since his phone was still uselessly sitting in the dining hall in its bag of rice). He did a double-take. It was three in the morning.
"—n, are you hearing this transmission? This radio is rather primi—"

Laughing a little, Dean shook his head. Cas had said he knew how to communicate by radio (Dean had been careful to ask about that) but it seemed Cas knew little or nothing about standard radio protocol. This was a little odd for a wilderness scientist. But, of course, everything about Castiel was a little odd.

Dean grabbed the radio off its charging station, pressed the talk button, waited the critical one second for the transmission to start, and said, "Hey Cas, this is Dean. Go ahead."

"—n! I was just calling to tell you that the loo—."

Dean waited, smiling, until Cas's fragmentary transmission had ended, and then said, "Okay, so, you need to wait one second before talking. Press the button down and wait one second. The radio needs a sec to start broadcasting. Same thing when you end, don't cut yourself off or I'll miss your last word. Over."

There was a short pause.

"Over what?" said Cas. (At least he'd sorted out the button timing — his words were now fully audible.) "What are you over?"

Dean frowned. "Um, say again? Over."

"What are you over? Are you on top of something?"

Dean was grinning again. "Over's just a way of saying my transmission's over — I've finished saying what I wanted to say, and now it's your turn. And if I were ending the conversation totally I'd say over-and-out. Except, not just then, obviously, because I was only explaining it. Over."

"Ah, so I should say over when I —" Cas paused. "Oh, wait. I just said over, didn't I? Oh, I said it again! I didn't mean it. Over." There was a one-second pause, followed by "I meant it that time. Over."

Dean, sitting alone in his dark room, had to allow himself a couple seconds to finish laughing before he replied. "No sweat, dude. It doesn't really matter much anyway, since nobody else is gonna be using this channel. There's only ten people in camp right now and I happen to know they're all on channel four. Radio protocol's mostly for if it's a busy channel that lots of other people want to use."

"Protocol? It's a whole protocol?" (Cas had immediately forgotten the "over's" again.)

"Yeah, on-air protocol," said Dean. (Dean decided to let it slide too.)

"It's your custom?" asked Cas. "A... cultural tradition, as it were? A tradition of the modern era?"

That was rather a strange way to describe it, but it wasn't inaccurate. Dean considered a moment and said, "Guess so. The military use it, police, fire, truckers... it's pretty common."

"What else does it involve?"

Dean paused, thinking. "Well, there's a couple other phrases, like, 'go ahead' when you're first replying to someone, to let them know you're able to hear them; 'say again' if you want them to repeat something; 'roger' if you just want to convey, I heard what you said, I acknowledge it. There's the emergency stuff too, of course, y'know, like Mayday if you're in a boat or a plane that's in real trouble, Sécurité for an important safety announcement, Break if you have to break in to other
people's conversation for something important. Oh and, normally we would also have call signs. Over."

"Call signs? Over."

"Nicknames. Like, our helicopter dispatcher here uses Chopper Central, and the two choppers are Chopper One and Chopper Two. So normally you and I would have call signs too."

"What's wrong with Castiel and Dean?"

"Nothing's wrong, it's just kind of tradition," explained Dean. "Official radio stations have call signs. It's like we're each a little mini radio station."

"Oh. What's your call sign, then?"

"Well... I haven't had a call sign of my own in a while," Dean said. He leaned back on his pillow and swung his stockinged feet back up on the bed, propping one arm behind his head as he settled in. "Usually I'm just 'Base'."

"Base like, bottom? Then what should I be? Top?"

Dean was momentarily paralyzed by a wave of giggles. He fought back a sudden urge to say, "No, I'm always top," and instead managed to say, "Um, no, Base is just for the official camp radio when I'm on duty. Kupaluk Base. Technically I should be using something else if I'm gonna be on my own radio when I'm not on duty. And for you... it's nice if it's something that conveys something about who you are or what you do. But you can have some fun with it too." He thought a moment and added, "So, for example, you could have some kind of birdy call sign. Like...."

In his mind, Dean saw those wings again. Huge, dark, lifting to the sky... gleaming like black satin under the midnight sun.

Rather like that dream he'd had so long ago, in fact. The dream of the black wings.

"You could be Blackbird," Dean suggested.

There was a very long pause.

At last the static crackled again, and this time there was a good long three seconds of static. Dean knew that sort of long-static sound; it meant Cas had pressed his button down but was still thinking about what to say.

"Why Blackbird?" Cas said at last, slowly.

Dean shrugged in the darkness, forgetting that Cas couldn't see him. "You're a bird guy, right? And... I don't know, I guess I was thinking of that black jaeger you banded? Those black wings. And the black feather."

Another pause.

Maybe Cas didn't like Blackbird? Dean asked, "You want something else?" He tried to think of some other bird-related call signs. "Feather Boy?" He suggested. "Wingman? Arctic Angel?"

"Um, no, Blackbird will be fine," said Cas hastily. "Actually... I rather like it. But in that case, you should have a call sign that's more personalized than Base. Something like...." Cas was quiet a moment.
The faint static continued; Cas still had his button pressed down. Which meant Dean couldn't speak up right now, and couldn't suggest anything. This was probably just as well, since some of Dean's very worst Haul Road call signs were suddenly leaping to mind, including some particularly unwise choices he'd fooled around with years ago ("Haul Road Hottie" and "Sausage Delivery Service" both jumped to mind immediately).

Castiel said, "Hunter One."

Dean blinked. "Why Hunter One?"

There was a brief silence. Finally Cas said, "You carry those guns. You carry the pepper stuff. You always carry weapons and you say you do the target practice and you have a hunting license. I know you haven't shot anything yet, but... you're clearly a hunter at heart." He paused for a long moment and then added firmly, "You're a hunter. You're just looking for the right thing to hunt, I think."

Cas released his button, and the static stopped, but Dean had nothing to say.

>You're a hunter, he heard again.

>You're just looking for the right thing to hunt.

Cas finally spoke again. "So I think Hunter One is appropriate. And perhaps Sam could be Hunter Two."

"Sam isn't really a hunter, though," said Dean, his voice quiet.

"He was hunting something too," said Castiel, though a little more tentatively. "I know I've only met him once, but... he had the air of someone who is also seeking something. Knowledge, maybe? He has started a new field of study, correct? Yet he also wanted to see the white wolf. He wanted to travel, and see God's creation. So I suspect he's also searching for something." After a short pause he added, "Perhaps you have more in common with your brother than you realize?"

Dean was silent for such a long moment that Castiel belatedly added, "I'm done speaking. Over."

Hunter One.

And Hunter Two.

It kind of fit.

"All right then," said Dean slowly. "I'll be Hunter One, and you'll be Blackbird." Though then he remembered that Cas probably didn't even know how to use call signs. Dean explained, "So then, if I call you, I'll say: Blackbird, Blackbird, this is Hunter One. It's like saying Cas, Cas, this is Dean. You repeat the first call sign twice just in case the reception is crappy and they don't quite hear you the first time. Like, if your radio battery's dying — which will probably happen to yours in a few days, by the way — you might have to try a few times."

"So if I were to call you, I'd say... Hunter One, Hunter One, this is Blackbird?"

"Exactly. Which reminds me, by the way, amazing reception we've got right now. Where are you, anyway?"

"I'm on the summit of Topaz Mountain," said Cas.

Dean blinked. He checked his watch again. "In the middle of the night?"
"I came up here to radio to you," said Cas. "I tried calling you earlier from my camp but it didn’t seem to work. I thought I might need to be a little higher, so I came up here."

"Yeah, reception's best with direct line-of-sight," said Dean. "Especially if the battery starts to fail. But, wait, isn’t that a long hike?" Topaz wasn't actually a real mountain like the big peaks of the Brooks, only an isolated little foothill really, but even so, it took a bit of time to get to the top.

"Only forty minutes," said Cas.

Cas had hiked forty minutes up to the top of Topaz just to call Dean?

Dean sat up a little, propping himself up on one elbow. "Is anything wrong? Why did you call, anyway?"

"The loons are back. I heard them calling. I was just wondering if you'd heard them too."

"The... loons are back?"

"Yes, the yellow-billed loons. There's an open spot on the lake ice now in the southwest corner. Not very big, just a few dozen yards in diameter, but it'll open farther. The yellow-billed loons spotted it when they were doing a scouting flight, and they've landed. In the little bit of open water. They're planning to nest again, as soon as the lakeshore melts out further. They've been discussing nest sites."

"You don't say," said Dean, slowly lowering himself back down to the pillow.

"I just thought you might like to know. Since you seemed to be interested in birds. Their call carries quite a long way. You'll undoubtedly hear them from your camp."

"Uh, Cas, I'm totally thrilled about the loons, but I was just wondering, are you aware it's three in the morning?"

"Yes, you said to call after dinner."

"It's... been quite a while after dinner. It's, like... eight hours after dinner, dude. It's closer to breakfast than to dinner."

"Oh... wait... " Cas said slowly, like he'd just had a brand-new thought. "Oh — um — by any chance, Dean, were you... asleep?"

"Just a bit," said Dean, grinning now at the dismayed sound in Cas's voice. Under this twenty-four hour light, it wasn't uncommon for people's sleep cycles to get so scrambled that they entirely lost track of the time — including losing track of when other people would be sleeping.

"I forgot about that!" said Cas. "I'm so sorry. My apologies."

"It's okay. I'll survive. Maybe."

"My deepest apologies. I'm quite sorry. I completely forgot about the sleeping issue. And I should have been aware of that after seeing... Well. In fact I've been needing some sleep myself recently; I know now how that feels. I should have thought. Anyway, I just thought you might like to know about the loons."

"I'm totally happy to hear about the loons."

"I'll call closer to dinner next time."
"Just avoid, like... midnight to six a.m., or so, okay?" Dean suggested. He thought to add, "But don't get me wrong, it's great to hear from you. Especially if you had to hike all the way up Topaz."

"Oh, it's worth it," said Cas. "I'll let you get back to sleep. Um... over? Is the conversation over? Do I say over now? I forget how to end. Over."

Dean was chuckling as he added his most formal sign-off: "Roger that, Blackbird. This is Hunter One signing off. Over and out."

Dean set the radio back in its charger and lay back down on his pillow, still laughing a little about the whole conversation.

He was drifting off when he thought, *Wait... how did Cas know that Sam and me saw a "white wolf"?*

Dean had never mentioned the wolf's color. But Cas had said just now, *Sam wanted to see the white wolf.*

Well, maybe Cas had wandered into the dining hall, on that brief visit of his a few days ago, and had seen the cartoon on the whiteboard. Probably that was it.

"—ter One, Hunter One, this is Blackb—"

Dean grinned, glancing over at the radio from his camp manager's work desk.

It was two days later. At least Cas was calling during normal waking hours, but this time he'd called right in the middle of Dean's work shift. Dean was, in fact, at work, at his desk in the camp manager's office going over Big Mama's maintenance schedule and the Deadhorse airport pickups.

He took a moment to stand and swing the office door shut for a bit of privacy before he went to the bank of charging stations. One of the camp radios was always on scan, scanning through all the channels regularly, but just in case Dean had also tuned one of the spare office radios specifically to channel six, and he headed for that one now.

"—ter One, Hunter One, this is Blackb—" echoed through the room again as Dean picked up the channel-six radio. Dean frowned a little at the crackly sound of Cas's voice. The sound was a little more staticky this time, the signal weaker.

"Blackbird, this is Hunter One," said Dean, lifting the radio to his mouth. "Press the button first, remember? Go ahead."

"The button, of course, my apologies. Dean, the wolves have cubs," said Cas.

Dean waited. Eventually Cas added, "Over." That seemed to be all he had to say.

"Which wolves again?" said Dean.

"Oh, sorry, I forgot you haven't met them both," said Cas. "The Topaz Mountain wolves. The white wolf and her mate. Their den isn't far away from—" (His next few words were lost in static.) "—north of the old road. They're a young pair, you know; it's a new den, and this is their first litter."
This was actually pretty cool; nobody had been sure if the white wolf was local or not, or whether there were any wolves denning near Kupaluk this year. But Dean frowned again at the staticky sound in Cas's radio. "Are you down at your campsite?" Dean asked.

"No, I'm up on Topaz again," said Cas. "I came right up to tell you." He kept talking, but static began to hiss through his words again, and Dean could barely make out what he was saying: "I thought you m------nterested because your br-----ikes wolves. I just found out. The cubs have been undergr-----  but they just—"  Static. "—today for the first time."

"You're breaking up, Cas."

"I am?" A short pause. "I know I'm not fully intact, but as far as I'm aware I'm not breaking apart any further—"

"I meant, your radio's getting weak. Lot of static. Get up on higher ground if you can," said Dean.

"Oh, I see. Okay, hold on."

After about twenty seconds, Cas's low gravelly voice spoke up again, much clearer this time.

"I'm standing up on a boulder now," he reported. "I can see your camp."

"Much clearer. Go ahead."

"Anyway, the cubs came out for the first time. I think the parents actually might have brought them up specifically so that I could see them. Or maybe so the cubs could see me. There are four, Dean, all healthy. Very fuzzy, too, all four of them. And curious. Very interested in everything." After a pause he added, "I just wanted to tell you."

Dean found himself smiling. Not just about the wolf cubs (which, granted, was very cool), but also just because... well, Cas had wanted to tell him about the wolf cubs. Cas had climbed all the way up Topaz again just to call Dean and tell him about wolf cubs.

"I thought Sam might want to know too," added Cas. "The female is the one that you both met before, you know. At the lake, by that wooden structure where you jumped in the lake. She's the wolf you met right after, when you were wearing the towel."

"The sauna, right," said Dean. "How do you know it's the same wolf?"

"She tol—" There was the briefest hesitation before Cas continued with "She's white. The male is black. You said you saw a white wolf, right?"

"Yeah, white, for sure," said Dean, but he narrowed his eyes. He was increasingly certain he'd never mentioned the wolf's color to Cas. And also... "Wait, how'd you know I was wearing just a towel?"

A slightly longer pause this time.

"You must have mentioned it?" said Cas, uncertainly.

Dean had to laugh. "Nope," he said. "Actually I kind of skipped over that detail when I told everybody in camp. I kind of left it out on purpose."

"Well, somebody must have mentioned it," said Cas.

"Like who? Who else were you talking to?"
"Um... somebody... I don't recall...." said Castiel vaguely. "It must have been somebody, or else I wouldn't have known. Obviously. But, why did you leave out that detail when you told the others?"

"Well...." Dean hesitated for only a moment, before confessing, feeling slightly shy about how prudish this was going to sound, "If you really gotta know, I kinda didn't want camp to realize that the wolf pretty much saw me bare-ass naked. I mean, not that the wolf would care, but still."

A short pause, then a click; then two long seconds of static. Castiel had his button pressed down, and he was thinking.

"Is there something wrong with being bare-ass naked?" he finally said.

He sounded a little puzzled, and also a little worried. And only now did Dean remember that Castiel himself had been "bare-ass naked" not that long ago, and not just in front of an animal, but right smack in front of Dean. Bare-assed, and bare-something-else.

Sure enough Cas then added, "May I ask, did I do anything... inappropriate, when we met earlier? Should I have been clothed?"

"Oh, n-no—" said Dean, stammering a little. "No, nothing wrong with that at all. That was fine. Just fine." Really quite fine. Really quite spectacular. Filed that one away in the mental video collection immediately, as a matter of fact. He found himself adding, thoughtlessly, "You looked just fine."

"You looked just fine too, on the pier," said Castiel, now sounding a little bit relieved. "It was a, um.... a pleasant sight."

Dean blinked.

"I mean," Cas added, a touch awkwardly, "I would imagine that it was a pleasant sight. It must have been. Because... you give the impression of being.... um.... quite... " He seemed to stall for a long moment, and finally added, "Healthy?"

Dean found himself blurting out, "Are you positive you're not gay?"

Another pause.

Cas could easily have brushed it off as a joke. In fact Dean had tried that exact joke as an opener sometimes: Sure you're not gay, dude? Straight guys (at least, the ones who weren't freaked out by the very idea) would either just laugh with a Ha ha, nope!, or they'd chuckle and zing a joke right back. And a gay guy, of course, would say something like "Wait, let me go check. Oh hey! I am!"

Instead the pause lingered. Dean cringed, pressing one hand to his forehead. Cas was taking the question seriously, and the length of the pause told Dean the answer. An answer he'd already known.

"I think I've already told you," said Cas slowly, and Dean let out a quiet little sigh, his shoulders dropping.

Cas said something more, but another hiss of static broke up his words. When his voice was finally clear again, what Dean heard was: "Some days it's hard for me to imagine how anybody could truly be gay."

"Oh," was all Dean could come up with. At least Cas didn't sound freaked out — it would have been a blow if he'd turned out to be a homophobe. But he did sound like he was trying to be totally truthful as well, as if he really couldn't comprehend what it might be like to be gay.
Dean could almost feel himself deflate. He'd been hanging onto a little bit of hope, he realized. A little *maybe, maybe*, had been bouncing around in his head, hadn't it? There was no maybe. The answer was no. *Just let it go*, Dean told himself. He knew was breaking the cardinal rule: he was pushing. He was pushing a straight dude who had already said he was straight. *Never fall for a straight dude*, Dean repeated to himself grimly. Rule number one.

*Leave him alone. He just wants a friend. Just be a friend.*

"So... not gay, I'm afraid," said Cas, through another burst of static.

"Sorry, dude," said Dean at last. "Really didn't mean to push. Just a random question." He switched the topic fast then, trying to move on. "Hey, you're breaking up again. I think your radio battery's dying. Probably won't last another day. Is there some place I could drop off a battery for you? And where you could drop the dead one? I can recharge the dead one for you."

"Radio batteries," said Castiel with a sigh. "Right. Of course. I can't just recharge it from my own power any more, can I? It's embarrassing how often I forget that sort of thing." While Dean puzzled over that, Cas added, "I hate to put you to any trouble. It was already so kind of you to loan me this device. I do miss the days when I could just listen to the radiowaves by myself, but this device certainly is handy."

So he *had* had his own radio at some point? "No prob, I'm sure I've got a spare backup battery around somewhere," Dean said. "Just don't lose it — or the radio either, actually. I'll need them back at the end of the season. But you can use them all summer if you'd like. And the battery thing's no trouble, I can just bring the battery over to wherever you're camping. I can just run it over on the snow machine."

But once again Cas didn't say where his camp was. *No means no*, thought Dean, but this time he managed to accept the thought with equanimity. Cas just wanted a friend, and Dean could be a friend.

So Dea hastened to add, "Or I can just drop it off somewhere. Also I've got this emergency satellite beacon thing I can give you, one of those yellow guys."

"Yellow... guys?" repeated Cas.

"Little yellow hand-held thingy. It talks straight to the satellites. It's got this emergency button, and it can send me a text from anywhere, whether you're up on Topaz or not. Costs an absolute shit-ton for the satellite time though, so it's strictly for emergencies only. But, y'know, I just want to be sure you can reach me in an emergency, so I'll drop off my spare for you, all right? Like, if snow comes or something. It'd be good to know that you're okay in the snow."

There was a little pause. Cas said, almost thoughtfully, "Why would you want to know if I'm okay in the snow?"

"Are you kidding?" said Dean, raising his eyebrows. How long had the guy been working alone? This was basic tundra protocol. Before he could stop himself, he said the truth: "Dude, I've been worrying about you already, even without snow."

When Castiel replied, he sounded like he was smiling. He still didn't tell Dean where his camp was, and he still didn't invite Dean to visit. But he said, "You truly needn't worry. But if a yellow hand-held, um, 'thingy' will assuage your worry, I'm most willing to take it. So... for a location, how about that pingo pool where we met the other night? You still have repairs to do there, right, to those wooden boards? It wouldn't be out of your way, I hope."
"Yep, got some necessary repairs," Dean said. "That's straight south of you, right? More or less? I'll drop the batteries there. Maybe tomorrow."

"I have transects tomorrow to the east," said Cas. "I won't be able to meet you." (Was it Dean's imagination that he sounded a little bummed about this?) "There's some nests that are due for a check tomorrow out to the east — they're overdue, actually. I can't skip them."

"No sweat, you don't have to meet me," said Dean, making sure he sounded like this was all totally casual. "I'll just drop it off near the pool. I'll stick it in a baggie with a pink streamer on it. Look for the pink streamer." He was actually rather pleased with this plan, mostly because it should demonstrate quite clearly that Dean had no ulterior motives. (Not to say that he didn't have some ulterior wishful-thinking, but that was Dean's problem, not Cas's.) He wasn't trying to track Cas down at all; he wasn't trying to finagle an in-person rendezvous; he wasn't trying to wrestle Cas naked back into that icewater pool; he wasn't even trying to meet Cas at all. Dean was just trying to deliver a single radio battery (and a yellow hand-held thingy). That was all.

That was nearly all. Except for that wishful-thinking issue.

"Pink streamer by the pingo pool," said Castiel. "I understand."

"What you say is Roger," Dean explained. "Like, roger that. It means you heard and understood."

"Roger that," said Castiel.

"I'll drop them off tomorrow," said Dean. "Soon as my work's done. Okay, dude, I guess that's a plan." Then, just to demonstrate how platonic and hands-off this interaction was going to be, Dean decided to bring the conversation to a close. As tempting as it was to chatter on, to ask Cas more about the wolf cubs and the bird nests and whatever else Cas might to talk about, Dean wrapped it up with a deliberately brisk, "I gotta get back to work now. You have a nice day, okay? And that's awfully cool about the wolves."

"You have a nice day too," said Castiel. "Have a very nice day."

"Hunter One over and out," said Dean, smiling to himself a little, for it was cool just to hear Castiel wishing him a "very nice" day.

Cas's voice was starting to break up again — presumably he was getting down off of whatever rock he'd been standing up on. His last sentence faded into scraps of partial words in a hiss of static, but Dean could make out a throaty, low, "Blackb.......ver and out."
Dean woke the next morning worrying about potential problems with the battery drop-off plan. He'd told Cas he'd put "pink streamers" on the new batteries, and had been envisioning putting the batteries in some sort of plastic bag, which he would leave on one of the outcroppings of lichen by the pingo-pool.

But now all sorts of problems with this plan began presenting themselves in his mind. What if it snowed and the bag and its pink streamer both got completely covered up? Or what if the pink streamer just wasn't high enough for Cas to spot from far away? Also, Dean should have been more precise about the drop-off location; "by the pingo pool" was too vague. Maybe Dean should put up a tall pink flag or something... except that he didn't have any tall flags. Also, the new battery would only last a few days and soon Cas would have to replace it too.

While Dean dressed, reviewing the camp battery inventory in his mind, he calculated there were actually two extra batteries that he could reliably free up for Cas. Even so, they really ought to be planning for periodic weekly battery swaps, not just a one-off exchange. A baggie plunked randomly somewhere near the pool wasn't going to cut it, especially not with all the unpredictable weather that would be blowing through Kupaluk periodically. Heavy snowfalls could happen, melt-off and rain could wash things down into the little melt-off streams, and even hail was a possibility.

Then Dean had an idea.

At breakfast he waved Ryan and Nicole to come over to the whiteboard.

"Boardwalk time," he told them, picking up a dry-erase pen and starting to fill in a line on the sign-out grid. "We've got necessary repairs on the north hill today."

Ryan frowned at him. "I thought we weren't starting boardwalks till next week? I've only got the first sixty boards ready. I did re-do those short ones, by the way, but there's still a lot to go. Weren't you just shuttling the new ones over to storage for now?"

Nicole put in, "Isn't the snow, like, still seventy percent?" Seventy-percent snow cover, she meant.

Dean gestured out the windows of the big bay doors to the tundra hills in the distance. "The south-
facing slopes are getting pretty well clear now, though," he said. "Come take a look."

The two junior assistants moved to his side and all three looked out across camp toward the distant hills to the north. It was a time-honored Kupaluk tradition, one that everybody here engaged in several times daily: staring at the tundra assessing the snow cover.

Dean pointed to the eastern hill, which was close enough to study in detail, and while they all frowned at it he said, "See how the south-facing side is partly clear. We had some good melt yesterday and it didn't even go sub-freezing last night. Weather's good right now and we can get a good chunk of the boardwalks done. Ryan, this is as high priority as anything else you've been working on. And, Nicole, I just happen to know you've got some time free still since we don't have a camp full of people all spraining their ankles yet, and Teddy just told me he doesn't need you for dinner prep either. So we might as well get a jump on boardwalks before you get too busy." He added to Nicole, with a grin, "I also happen to know that the lemming team is working to the north also." He nodded toward the sign-out board, where sure enough Shawn had already written a line indicating he'd be out on the north hills all day. "If we work north boardwalks," Dean added, "maybe we could catch lunch with the lemming team."

Ryan snorted and said, "The lemming team consists of exactly one person, Dean."

"Oh, who would that be?" Dean asked innocently, watching with considerable amusement as Nicole's face slowly began to flush red as she stared down at his feet. "I've lost track. Wait, would that be Shawn?"

"That would be Shawn, I believe," said Ryan. He added, completely deadpan, "Nicole, you've met Shawn, right? I think I remember that his lemming team and your emergency medical team were watching some movies together, isn't that right?"

"And inspecting the sauna together," added Dean calmly. "The sauna frequently needs inspection. It's an old building. I'm sure there's lemming infestations periodically. And splinters and safety issues that the medical team has to monitor, isn't that right, Nicole?"

Nicole had gone beet red. But she didn't seem to mind the teasing too much, for finally she broke into a smile, though still staring at her feet. Ryan burst out laughing at her expression. Dean just shook his head with a grin, thinking, If I can't get any, at least somebody can. And at least I can get some fun from teasing them!

He turned back to the whiteboard and filled in:

**Who:** Dean, Ryan, Nicole

**Where:** North hills (on the line to Topaz)

**How:** Snow machines over lake + gangways

**Time out:** 8 am

**Time expected back:** 4 pm

**Overdue:** 8 pm

"All right, team," he said, snapping the cap back on the dry-erase pen and tossing it unerringly back into its little bin. "Go get your gear and saddle up the snow machines." The Chevy would actually be a bit faster, but with snow machines, Ryan and Nicole could be free to move on and do other work. While Dean stayed at the north hill a little longer, to do... certain other tasks.
"I'll load up the wood," Ryan offered. "There's another new batch of boards ready in the shop."

"Nah, you go grab your gear," said Dean. "I'll bundle the wood." This was because he was planning to bring a few extra materials. Namely, the short boards that Ryan had ruined the other day, along with a couple of additional scraps. Dean had a plan.

"Remember, drive *straight*," said Dean. He was standing at the lake edge, balanced a little precariously with his feet spread on two different tussocks. If they were all going to be on snow machines, they weren't restricted to having to use the lake perimeter road. They could go anywhere there was snow. This meant they might as well take the shortcut, straight across the lake ice — which was almost always, conveniently, covered with a layer of snow.

Phil the stream ecologist tracked the lake’s ice thickness daily, and Dean had just double-checked with him that the lake ice was still an impressive four feet thick. The long winters up here resulted in quite a solid ice layer on the tundra lakes come springtime, so thick that even once spring melt-off really got going and the stream-fed part of the lake began to open up (and even once the yellow-billed loons were back), the northern two-thirds of the lake always remained solidly ice-covered well into summer. The lake wouldn't truly break up until June, when the little marker that Phil had placed out in the middle of the lake finally toppled over and sank.

The only problem with snow-machine lake crossings in spring was just that a narrow strip of open water always formed right by the shoreline as the lake expanded with snowmelt. Right now, this "lead" of open water was only about four feet wide. It was so shallow they could have waded across it, but of course snow machines couldn't wade. The reason Dean was balancing on his two shore-side tussocks right now was so that he could set two long sturdy boards right across the stretch of water. The boards would extend from the frozen tussocks across the four feet of water right to the ice edge, like tiny twin gangways crossing a miniature medieval moat. The result was a minuscule bridge, perfectly sized and spaced for the front skids of a snow machine. The broad slede full of wood that Dean's snow machine was pulling should slide neatly across the two boards as well.

He put both boards in place without too much effort, checked the gap between them with his tape measure, adjusted one with a careful foot-nudge, and doublechecked that the lower edges of both boards were well-braced against the still-frozen tussocks. Turning back to the two junior assistants, he explained, "Straight and slow. You definitely don't want the skids to slip off. Ryan, you've done this before, right?" (Ryan nodded.) "But Nicole, I know you haven't. You want to line up well back from the shoreline just to make sure you're on an absolutely straight approach. Then go slow. No need to rush it. I'll guide you both over. Remember, it's not a disaster if you go in — it's only a foot deep here. You'll be fine, and your machine'll be fine. It just means we'll have to haul it and drain its oil pan. You'll both be fine. Anyway, take it slow and steady. Then we'll leave the boards here till end-of-day, then put them on shore and tarp them for the next user." He added, as he walked back to his own snow machine and slung one leg over the saddle, "And don't do anything dumb."

"You mean, don't do anything *fun,*" corrected Ryan.

"That's exactly what I mean," agreed Dean with a nod, as he pulled his gloves on.

Nicole was eyeing the boards skeptically. "This is so old-school."

"If it were old-school we'd charge the snow machines at top speed right over the water, no boards or
"nothin'," Dean said. "And we'd be calling them 'iron dogs.' And I'd be dragging you guys around by a tow rope too, just for kicks." He added, grinning as he recalled his first season on the Slope, "Tow rope from an iron dog to a canoe, another tow rope from the stern of the canoe to a piece of plywood, one of you in the canoe and the other hanging onto the plywood for dear life, and I'd whiplash you guys all over the lake. Hell, we used to do two canoes and then the plywood. We sent people absolutely flying a couple times. Good times! And hardly anybody fell through the ice and died." He revved his snow machine. "Can't do that these days. Goddamn 'unnecessary risk to life and limb' or some stupid NSF regulation."

"We could tow one canoe," said Ryan wistfully.

Nicole suggested, "Or just one piece of plywood?"

Dean said sternly, "We're going over the lake and fixing the boardwalk and putting in a precise eight-point-zero hours workday with OSHA-approved safety protocols at every step."

"No fun then?" said Ryan.

"Absolutely no fun," agreed Dean. "NSF doesn't allow fun. However, we may need to do a few training runs of the snow machines. Just to check the turning radius and the maneuverability, you know."

Wide grins spread over both the assistants' faces. Dean grinned back at them, put his machine in gear and gently goosed the throttle, and steered it unerringly toward the boards. After a few lurches crossing the bumpy frozen tussocks and then the wobbly little bridge, the snow machine's treads bit firmly into the packed snow layer on the lake ice, and soon Dean was sailing over the ice. He steered in a broad turn back toward shore to await the others. Ryan and Nicole followed cautiously, with Dean doublechecking their line-of-approach and waving them each forward.

A minute later all three were safely on the ice. Dean gestured for the others to bundle up, and they rearranged their parkas, set their goggles on, got scarves or balaclavas firmly wrapped over their noses, and all donned thick outer pairs of wind-gloves. Then Dean led them forward, calling, "Remember, don't have any unapproved fun!" Soon they were roaring at top speed across the huge frozen lake toward the distant northern hills.

Kupaluk Lake was over a mile long. It was sunny but frigid today, with blustery clouds blowing by overhead. The lake stretched ahead like a vast white canvas, the northern shore just a thin line in the distance framed by some low white-and-brown hills — the north hills. The distant mound of Topaz Mountain hunkered far beyond, a big bulking shoulder of white snow and blue-green rock that loomed far beyond the low hills.

The lake ice was, as usual, coated with a crisp packed layer of snow. Dean cut a few gentle turns, leading the other two in easy broad curves through the snow. A glance behind confirmed that Ryan and Nicole were following his tracks unerringly, and Dean began taking them through figure 8's and serpentine at increasing speed.

He soon heard a whoop from behind him.

"No fun, now!" he yelled over his shoulder.

"I swear I'm not having fun!" hollered Ryan.

"Neither am I!" yelled Nicole. "But are you?"

"I'm testing the sledge's turning radius!" hollered Dean back. "Not having any fun at all! I swear!"
They made it to the far shore breathless and cold, the two young camp assistants grinning with delight. Dean talked them through the placement of another gangway, this time on their own, using another pair of big two-by-eight's that Dean had packed on his sledge for the purpose. They crossed with no incident, and soon they were cutting across a stretch of open tundra toward the perimeter road and the northern hills.

Patches of open ground were showing through here and there, and they avoided those carefully, Dean pausing now and then to point out that some of the safe, flat-looking snow patches were actually deep puddles of half-melted snow. Only a few willow twigs poking out at the top gave them away. Willow shrubs were usually several feet high; if only twigs were visible, that meant the innocuously flat snow was actually hiding a deep depression, often with several feet of icy slush-water underneath. It wouldn't do to have a snow machine get stuck in one of those.

Higher ground was safer, and so Dean led his little convoy along a ridgeline that had only bits of short heather poking out from the snow. Zigzagging here and there to avoid the increasingly large patches of open ground, they made their way onward. A ptarmigan burst up in front of them in an explosion of wings that Dean jump. A few sandpipers flushed too, big skinny brown birds with long curved bills and dangling legs. Twice Dean spotted a slender object sticking up out of the snow. They stopped to investigate, and soon Ryan and Nicole each had a prize antler bungee'd on the backs of their snow machine seats.

"Don't need another antler, Dean thought, leading them onward. Antlers are a dime a dozen. Got me a jaeger-feather. It really seemed to be the only tundra-souvenir that he had any interest in.

In just another few minutes they arrived at the perimeter road by the northern boardwalks. They parked right where the Chevy had been the other day, and got to work, Ryan and Nicole unloading the supplies while Dean cleared loose snow from the first stretch of boardwalk with an old frayed broom.

Dean then strode back over to his sledge and un-bungeed a heavy bag of work equipment. He announced to the others, "Okay, work time. You guys grab some new boards off the sledge, walk up to every old board that's marked with orange, and put a new board next to it. And I'll get the tools out, and then we'll work our way along and replace them all — all the ones that aren't totally under snow, I mean. I'll come back later and finish the rest on my own." (This was actually part of Dean's plan; he wanted to be able to return on his own later.) "Now get to work, kids. No rest for the wicked."

It would be a solid day's work. Dean even started to believe his own story about how the repairs really needed to be done today. A week earlier it would've been uncomfortably cold for outdoor work — in really low temperatures power drills slowed down, batteries died rapidly, fingers started aching with cold, and everything became just that little bit slower (and that big bit more dangerous). And waiting till later in the season wasn't that much better — camp would soon be getting busy, and Dean's time would book up. Not to mention that the mosquitoes would soon hatch out. Today really was the perfect day to do this. It was even the perfect working temperature, low forties. Brisk, sure, but there'd be no frostbite danger, and Dean knew a little physical labor would soon warm them up. Sure enough, within twenty minutes they'd all shed their outer layers, and were stuffing hats, scarfs and gloves into packs.

The morning's work went smoothly. Near noon, Dean spotted a figure to the southeast, just a barely visible human-shaped speck moving across the ridgeline of a distant hill. Dean strode a few steps over to his pack and pulled out a pair of binoculars (he'd recently taken to carrying the Cornell binoculars everywhere, in case there might be a jaeger he needed to look at). The speck-person wasn't much bigger in the binoculars, but seemed to be moving little square objects around. Whoever
it wasn't have Castiel's distinctively large backpack. "Shawn, and his lemming traps," Dean decided.

They hailed him on the radio and invited him over for lunch. Shawn started walking their direction, and a mere twenty minutes later he'd finally arrived at their boardwalk. Coincidentally, Nicole just happened to have brought some extra lunch and even some extra slices of pie. Also coincidentally, Shawn then discovered some lemming-related work that he could do near Nicole's current boardwalk.

Dean and Ryan manage to restrain themselves to some mild eye-rolling, and the work continued. By four p.m. they were mostly done.

"I'll finish up," Dean said. "We started early and you guys've already put in eight hours — you don't need to put in overtime. I'll work the last hill by myself. Just don't drop the snow machines in the lake, okay?"

"You sure you're okay out here alone?" Ryan said, looking at him a little doubtfully. "I could stay."

"When have I never not been okay out on the tundra alone?" said Dean. "Besides, you already put in extra time prepping the boards."

"You got your safety stuff?"

Dean rolled his eyes, grabbing his work pack. "I'm fine, kid. Get lost."

Ryan didn't budge. "You told me to always check what safety gear people've got if they're out alone," he persisted. "You gotta show me your pepper spray. You got extra radio batteries? You set for bears?" Without waiting for an answer, Ryan flipped open Dean's work bag and discovered a bag of not one but three radio batteries. (One for Dean, and two for Cas.) "Oh," he said. "I guess you're set then. Jeez, you even brought a beacon?" The vivid bright yellow of the satellite beacon (also for Cas, of course) was hard to miss.

"Yeah, I've started carrying it around sometimes," Dean lied. "Just in case. Especially when on the snow machines, y'know? And, see, I got my pepper spray, right here on my pack, like always. Got my pistol on the pack too, got batteries, got the beacon. Happy?"

"And he's got dessert," said Nicole, laughing a little. "Quite a lot of it." She pointed; next to the batteries there were indeed a couple slices of pie just like Nicole had brought for Shawn, though Dean's slices were triple bagged in ziplocs. Nicole asked, "You bringing extra for somebody too, Dean?" She made a show of scanning the horizon all around, one hand shading her eyes, and said suspiciously, "You got your own Shawn, or I mean, Shawn-ette, squirreled away out here somewhere? Where is she? Oh wait, over the northern hill, right? Because you wouldn't let us work there."

This was dangerously close to the truth. "Would you just get going," grumbled Dean, flipping the work bag's top flap closed. "There's nobody over the northern hill. I just brought more food 'cause I knew I'd end up putting in a ton more work once you losers took off. You guys get lost and just leave me and my dessert alone already, would you?"

They'd noticed the spare batteries, they'd noticed the pie slices and the satellite transmitter, but not
even Ryan had noticed the bundle of scrap lumber. This was the most important part. Once Ryan, Nicole and Shawn had all left, whooping and hollering as they steered their snow machines back toward the lake (Shawn, not surprisingly, riding with Nicole), Dean hefted his work bag over a shoulder and loaded his arms with the scrap lumber. These were the too-short boards that Ryan had ruined the other day. The hill here was a bit too melted-off for the snow machine, so he carried it all up and over the first hill, and then up to the top of the second. It took a couple trips to get all the wood to where he wanted it, and Dean was soon out of breath and panting, but eventually he was standing at the very highest point of Cas's pingo-hill with all his supplies.

He walked past the pingo-pond, searching for the perfect spot. (He also gave the pond a careful look, just in case there were any more jaeger-feathers floating in the water. But he saw nothing.)

The wind was still strong, clouds scudding over the sun, patches of deep shadow and bright sunlight whipping by. Dean's footprints from last week were still faintly visible here and there, just a series of half-formed depressions now in the rapidly melting snow. The caribou's hoofprints were a long messy series of sunken, blurry divots in the white, while Cas's trail was detectable as a perfectly straight line of little depressions.

In fact, it looked like it might be possible to follow the trail of Cas's half-melted footprints.

In fact it would be very easy. Cas might as well have paved a road directly to his camp. Dean stood for a long moment at the top of the pingo, tracking the line of footprints with his eyes. The prints seemed to be heading out to open tundra, but they disappeared over the crest of the nearest hill.

He hesitated.

Would there really be any harm in just seeing where Cas's camp actually was?

Dean set down his work bag by the little stack of lumber, and followed Cas's trail.

Only for a little while. In just a quarter-mile or so, Dean crested the next hill, the one over which the bootprints had disappeared. Here Dean came to a high, wide windblown ridge of heather and lichen and rock, all snowfree, and he had a clear view.

Cas's prints turned slightly here, and then the prints made a beeline straight for the base of Topaz Mountain.

Topaz, though "just" a foothill, did have a broad base that was a couple miles long, and Dean had been uncertain about where exactly Castiel might be camped. But now that Dean was on a high enough spot of land with a good view, he could just make out a tiny speck of color just off to the right side of the mountain's rocky base. He raised the binoculars to his eyes. It was a little blue tent.

It actually wasn't all that far from the road, Dean realized. The Haul Road made a looping turn near here; Dean scanned east, binoculars to his eyes again, following the horizon, and soon he located the Haul Road, which from here was just a barely visible muddy line in the tundra with the pipeline glinting just beyond. There was even a tiny pull-off there, near a stub of an old abandoned road that, Dean knew, had once been used for lake access back in the early days of pipeline construction, before Kupaluk had been built. That small lake-access road had been blocked off for decades, barricaded with a line of big boulders. It hadn't been used in some forty-odd years. But the tundra was slow to heal, and even after all these years the old access road was still somewhat visible, a thin tendril of gray that meandered halfway to Cas's camp before turning to the south.

It'd probably be possible to get to Cas's camp with just a thirty-minute hike or so from the Haul Road.
One could, say, drive the Chevy to that old pull-off, park there, walk past the boulders, follow the ancient access road to where it made its turn, and then just another fifteen-minute hike over the tundra would do it.

Dean scanned back and forth a few more times, inspecting the distant Haul Road until he was absolutely sure that he’d remember where, exactly, one would want to pull over on the Haul Road if one wanted to go check on the bird guy Castiel.

Just for, say, emergency planning, really. No other reason. No other reason at all.

Dean lowered the binoculars at last, and glanced back to the tiny blue tent. And this time he realized there was now a small figure moving closer to the speck of blue. It wasn't a wolf-dot, or a bear-dot. It was a human-dot, a tiny vertical slash of dark against the endless white landscape.

Dean raised the binoculars again.

It was Castiel. Even from here Dean could make out his tan coat, and dark snow pants, and his dark hat, and even the lumpy black backpack. Dean even caught a glimpse of blue from his distinctive blue scarf. Cas seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. Dean was pretty sure he hadn't come out of the tent, for Cas was walking toward the tent; it was more as if he'd simply materialized at the base of Topaz. Maybe he'd just come down from the summit.

And then Dean realized Cas had stopped walking.

He was facing Dean's direction.

He was looking right at Dean. And Dean now realized that he might have been able to see Dean all along, from Topaz or from wherever he'd been.

It could be a little startling, on the tundra, to find that someone had been watching you. It was such a wide-open landscape and felt so utterly remote and solitary, yet at the same time it was actually very exposed. There’d been times Dean had been positive that he was absolutely alone, only to discover that a whole set of scientists or truckers had him in view, monitoring his progress from a mile or more away.

It could even sometimes feel a little embarrassing, and Dean could only hope that Cas didn't mind that Dean was taking a look around.

Dean tried now to hail Cas on the radio, but Cas didn't respond. Either his radio was dead already, or he hadn't brought it with him today. So instead Dean lifted one arm high, waggling it in a high wave. Two arms up would have meant he needed help, but one arm was well-understood to be just a hello, so Dean raised just one arm.

There was a pause. A gust of wind went puffing past, ruffling the little heather-bushes and the willow twigs that were sticking up out of the snow.

The distant figure raised an arm in return. Dean nodded to himself. That was the usual exchange. And from this distance, at least a mile off, without the radio, it was about all the communication they could do.

He made himself be satisfied with that, and he headed back to the pingo. Cas looked to be at least a one-hour hike away, but at least Cas knew now that Dean had definitely been working on the battery drop-off site. Hopefully he'd come check it out later tonight.

Construction took more than an hour. By the time Dean was done, the sun was getting lower, the
wind colder. The sky was now brushed with wispy cirrus clouds that were all taking on the pink and yellow cast of the tundra's long, drawn-out, never-ending summer sunset. Dean stepped back at last and assessed his creation: a blocky wooden box, something like a large wooden mailbox, elevated off the ground on stout wooden legs. The legs were to keep it safe from ground squirrels, and voles, and weasels, and all the other critters, but he was still a little worried about stability. It was impossible to set posts into the ground at this time of year — the ground was still a concrete-like mass of ice. But Dean had instead brought his high-powered cordless drill, along with some sturdy drill bits, and he managed to drill a few narrow holes some eight inches down into the frozen tussocks to secure a few diagonal bracing wires. He knew the crude mailbox would still end up tilting once the ground melted — everything always needed to be re-set and re-secured several times in spring — but it would do for now.

The box had a slender wooden dowel that could be stuck up vertically in a little hole drilled for the purpose, and a stout lid on top that could be flipped open. Dean's last tasks were to put the hardware on: anodized hinges for the lid, an inner chain so that the lid wouldn't flop open too far, and a stout clasp to hold it all shut, secured with a little clip. Then he lined the whole interior of the box with several layers of large plastic bags that could be sealed over the box's contents. These were rather expensive bags, actually, odor-proof ones to hide food from bears. (Dean took no chances about bears.) They'd also help keep any rain out.

He tested the lid a couple times, flipping it open and back, and at last he dragged over his work bag and dug out the extra items that he'd packed this morning. There were more items in there than Ryan and Nicole had noticed. The full list included: Two freshly charged radio batteries, the bright-yellow satellite beacon (along with a notecard about how to use it), the extra pie slices, and also a Tupperware container securely packed with an assortment of Fig Newtons, granola bars and other snacks from the dining hall.

It was not a coincidence that there'd been pies last night for dinner, and it also wasn't coincidence that there'd been enough extra for Nicole to be able to bring some slices for Shawn. Dean had suggested the pies to Teddy yesterday, and had also hinted that some extra pies would be appreciated.

It had just seemed like Cas might need some food.

Last of all, Dean tore a page out of his yellow Rite-In-The-Rain field logbook, and pulled a fine-point Sharpie out of his back pocket. The wind had picked up again and it was getting quite cold, cold enough that Dean's fingers were starting to get clumsy and slow, so he took his time with the Sharpie, wanting to make sure the letter was legible. He wrote, in careful block lettering:

Hey Blackbird

Sorry, didn't mean to be nosy, just was here fixing our boardwalks and took a bit of a look around and spotted your tent. So, I had an idea for a way to make sure the batteries stay dry: this box. I had some scrap lumber lying around here after fixing the boardwalk. It just took a minute. I figure I can put the fresh radio batteries in here, and you can put the old ones here, and I'll pick the old ones up now and then and recharge them. We could swap them about weekly. So - hopefully now you got a working radio again. Just give me a buzz if there's snow or something, so I know if you're okay. Non-emergencies, use the radio; in a real emergency you can use the yellow guy. And don't feel like you gotta hike up Topaz all the time or anything, but if you happen to be up there and want to chat, I'm around.

Also, our cook happened to make some pie last night and there was extra, and I thought maybe you could use a snack or two? I threw in some snacks from the dining hall too, Fig Newtons and stuff. I'll
be out here now and then doing more repairs, and if there's extra desserts I usually bring a few along for lunch, & I can pop a few here if you like.

I'll put a pink streamer on the little wood rod if there's something in the box for you. Take the streamer down once you've picked stuff up, and then I'll be able to see from pretty far away if you've been here or not. Let me know if you need anything else.

Dean dithered a few minutes over how to sign it. He almost wrote "Take care," but that seemed too mother-hen. "Best" was too formal, "see you around," too breezy. And just plain "Dean" seemed too cold. Finally he wrote:

- Hunter One

He read the note a couple more times, hoping it didn't sound too chatty and that the pie thing wasn't coming across too weird. But he finally folded the note, set it on top of the Tupperware, closed the three layers of outer plastic bags, and flipped the lid shut. It closed with a snug little thunk, and Dean secured it with the spring clip on the latch.

Last of all, he tied a long pink streamer to the little dowel and set the dowel upright, its lowest inch securely braced in the little hole. The pink streamer fluttered brightly in the wind; it'd be visible from at least a mile away.

When Dean straightened up and looked around, his eye was drawn once again to the north. Cas's blue tent was out of view from here, but another patch of tundra a bit to the east was still visible over the shoulder of the next hill, and, to Dean's surprise, Cas was right in that patch of tundra. He'd moved, apparently to keep Dean in view. His tiny dark form seemed smaller somehow, and when Dean checked with the Cornell binoculars, it turned out that Cas was sitting down now, perched on a rock with his arms around his knees, still facing Dean's direction. He didn't seem to have any binoculars of his own with him (quite an odd lack for a "bird guy," actually); he must have been just watching Dean’s distant figure from a mile away.

*Has he been watching this whole time? Dean wondered. Just watching me work?*

Dean lowered his binoculars, and for a moment they simply watched each other across the vast stretch of wild tundra. From this distance, it was impossible to make out any detail at all, and yet it seemed clear that Castiel's attention was entirely focused on Dean. (Just as Dean was entirely focused on Castiel.)

Castiel seemed, to Dean, to be nearly infinitesimal in that gigantic landscape. Against that great spread of white-and-brown tundra, under the vast expanse of cirrus-covered sky, he seemed just a fragile speck of life in an infinite frozen wilderness.

As Dean watched, the tiny figure seemed to thin and extend upward a bit. Cas had stood up.

There was the faintest wisp of motion, barely visible. Cas had raised one arm, and he was waving his hand slowly overhead, copying Dean's hail from earlier.

Dean could feel an answering smile spread across his face. Across such a huge stretch of open arctic tundra, across the endless snowy wasteland, it seemed piercingly meaningful to see that distant
human figure make such a simple gesture of greeting.

For a moment the frigid wind seemed to warm.

Dean raised a hand in return.

After a moment they both put their hands down. That seemed to be that. Dean hesitated a moment longer, tempted to zip on out there in the snow machine and say hello for real, but Cas had not given the emergency two-arm wave, nor the big come-here circular one-armed motion. He must still be wanting his privacy, and Dean didn't want to intrude any further. Don't want to be nosy, he thought. Don't want to be a stalker or anything. He hasn't invited me. I already was pushing it just looking for his tent.

But it was nice to wave hi, he thought.

So Dean packed up his gear, carried it all the way back to his snow machine, and loaded it all in the sledge. Firing up the engine, he maneuvered in a careful wide arc to head back the way he came. He went slowly at first, picking his way from snowpatch to snowpatch, headed away from Castiel. Away from the pingo pond and the caribou tracks he went, away from the boardwalk, all the way across the tundra flats to the frozen shore. There he steered his snow machine carefully over the gangway, kicked the gangway boards up onto shore for future use, got back onto his snow machine, and revved it forward for the long crossing over the wide white lake, and then over the final gangway, and all the way back to camp.

The frigid arctic wind was in Dean's face the entire time, stinging and harsh. The sun had sunk even lower, and it was getting very cold. Yet the whole way back Dean hummed to himself, singing an off-key little tune into the wind, a smile on his face the whole way, as he kept picturing that tiny distant figure waving one arm in greeting.
When Dean came back to the north hill the next day, the pink streamer was gone.

He paused near the end of the boardwalk, using the Cornell binoculars to look ahead at the crest of the pingo. From here, the top of the box first became visible, just sticking up above the horizon line beyond the pingo-pool ahead. It was still a good fifty yards distant, but he was pretty sure there was no pink streamer. He marched farther, and farther, up the boardwalk, to its very end where he had first spotted Cas at the icewater pool. The streamer was definitely gone.

Cas had been here. Cas had been to the box.

He slung the binoculars diagonally over his head and one shoulder, wearing them bandolier-style like the Cornell team always seemed to do, and kept walking. Long strides of his Tufs took him safely through some heavy half-melted snow, then over some heather and past the pingo-pool, and then two minutes' more marching over lichen and rock and he finally arrived at the wooden mailbox. Yes, the pink streamer was definitely down. It turned out the dowel, and its pink streamer, had been removed and had been tucked inside the box. It looked deliberate. Cas had been here, and he'd moved the streamer out of view, to let Dean know that he'd been here.

It was just another little speck of tundra-communication, like the waving of an arm from a mile away. And just like the arm-wave, it made Dean smile.

Unlatching the lid, Dean peered inside. There was a battery inside the bags — Cas's used battery, as expected — but Dean was surprised to see that the Tupperware was still there too, and that it still had something inside. For a moment he was a little crestfallen, thinking Cas hadn't wanted the pie and the Fig Newtons and the other snacks. But when he opened the three nested bags and cracked open the lid of the Tupperware, it turned out the Fig Newtons were gone. The pie slices had disappeared too. The Tupperware was now full of mounds and mounds of tiny wild blueberries. There was even some snow carefully packed around the Tupperware in one of the outer bags, presumably to keep the blueberries chilled.

Dean picked up the Tupperware, weighing it in his hands. It had to contain several pints of berries at last. He tried a few, taking care not to spill the berries. They were tiny wild berries, a little tart but
somehow also sweet, each one like a bright spark of flavor on his tongue.

They were quite good, in fact. He ate a few more, looking around. These were definitely wild berries; where had they come from? There were low cranberry bushes all around Dean's feet, nestled in among the heather and lichen. Cranberries grew wild on all these pingo-hills. But wild blueberries were scarcer, and even when Dean found a patch of them now and then, they were sparse — a tiny berry here, a tiny berry there, almost invisible, and always so low down that he had to crawl on his hands and knees to spot them.

The several pints of berries in the Tupperware must represent hours of berry-picking labor, if not a full day. Also, berry season was weeks away. Were these berries from last year?

He re-closed the Tupperware carefully and at that point he noticed a note that had been sitting underneath it in the wooden box. It was written in some kind of shimmering purplish ink on a tiny scrap of paper barely a few inches square, paper that Dean soon recognized as a corner of the Rite-in-the-Rain sheet that his own note had been written on. (Didn't Cas have any paper of his own? No binoculars, no paper... what kind of scientist was he, exactly?) The writing was in an elegant style, almost like formal calligraphy from an old-fashioned quill pen. The note read:

Dean -

I watched you building this, as you know. (I would have used my radio to call to you, but the radio seemed to be completely dead). You were working only two hours (which is longer than a minute, by the way), and yet this box is so well-constructed, and the idea so clever. I never cease to be impressed at humanity's ingenuity; you are certainly a prime example. And I'm delighted to have the batteries! I think I understand how to put them into the radio. I'll do a trial call soon. I am leaving the dead battery here.

And thank you very much for those little fig treats, and the pastries! The pastries were astonishingly good! And the fig treats delightful as well. I fear I have little to offer in return, but perhaps you could use some berries? I have a good amount from last fall's harvest still left over from my winter stores. I went back to my camp and fetched some, in case you might like to try them. I hope you like them.

Thank you kindly,

Castiel

Dean winced a little at the thought of Castiel going "back to his camp" to get the berries. He glanced over at Topaz Mountain and the little blue tent. A mile and a half at least, and over very bumpy tundra and through some heavy snow. Cas had gone to some trouble to bring the berries back for Dean.

The mention of "last fall's harvest" also was interesting. Did Castiel stay in the Arctic clear through fall? (Which, granted, only meant August, up here.) It occurred to Dean to wonder where Cas spent the rest of the year. The "winter stores" comment sounded almost like he spent the whole year up here.

Alaska had more than its share of survivalists — backwoods guys, inevitably holed up in some sort of tidy wooden cabin, usually with a dozen sled dogs or so to keep them company. But those guys always wintered much farther south in the black-spruce forest over the mountains. The tundra was
just... harder. Everything was harder. There was no timber for firewood, there were no trees to slow
the howling wind, and there was very little game after fall. The birds all left, the squirrels and bears
went down into their dens to hibernate. The caribou migrated away, the salmon went back out to sea,
and even the lake fishes were safe deep under the lake ice. It was a very rough place to overwinter.

Did Castiel march back over Atigun Pass in fall to some kind of winter cabin? Was he in the Arctic
year-round?

What kind of "research" was he really doing, anyway? Why was he checking bird nests? Why didn't
he have binoculars, or a two-way radio, or any kind of paper? Why were all his clothes so old?

Dean knew, from overhearing many worried conversations at Kupaluk, that science funding was
tight these days. NSF was only interested in high-tech science now, big collaborative studies using
the fanciest new techniques and every possible buzzword. The Cornell team had been moaning for
years about how nobody would fund good old-fashioned ornithology anymore. Who on earth could
be funding Cas's bird-nest studies?

Or... maybe he didn't have any funding.

Maybe he was exactly as broke as he looked.

Cas didn't radio in that night. Dean tried initiating a call from his end, but of course all he heard was
static; even assuming Cas had put the new battery in, he'd only hear Dean's call if he was up
relatively high, on Topaz or at least up on the pingo hill. He probably just hadn't had the time to
climb up Topaz. Dean had even made the point to him, pretty clearly, that there was no need to
check in unless a snowstorm was coming through. But even so, it was frustrating not to hear from
him.

I'll just drop off some new batteries in a few days, just in case, Dean told himself. Don't push.

Meltoff continued over the next few days, the snow cover inching down to fifty percent. On the flats,
huge patches of scrubby short willows and last year's pale blond sedge-grasses were now exposed
between rapidly melting snowdrifts. Up on the slopes of the long, low hills, acres and acres of
bumpy round cottongrass tussocks were coming into view, each tussock a foot-wide wad of old
brown grasses that always seemed to trip Dean no matter how carefully he tried to walk. The meltoff
streams, too, were really starting to roar. Every tiny hill and hummock, no matter how small, had
several meltoff streams bubbling steadily down its slopes, feeding a web of creeks between the hills.

Several new grad students had just arrived in camp, including the advance wave of the Cornell bird
team, three senior grad students who'd been at Kupaluk before. (Dean showed them the feather at
their first dinner, and they were all properly fascinated. But they seemed just as puzzled as the others.
A "pom's" tail feather still seemed the safest bet.)

It was all starting to feel like spring. But spring in the Arctic was a two-steps-forward, one-step-back
affair, and a few days after Dean had built the box, a blustery snow shower came rolling through
camp just before dinner. Dean hovered by his computer in the office that afternoon waiting for the six p.m. National Weather Service weather update, hoping it wouldn't have the bold text and red font and capital letters that meant a serious blizzard. But when the six p.m. update finally posted, there was no red or bold, just a cautionary note. This storm was relatively minor. It would only drop two or three inches. Not catastrophic but, nonetheless, still qualifying as a decent spring snowstorm.

Temperatures would only drop to the teens. Cas had certainly been through worse. But then... hadn't he also made those odd comments about feeling colder than he used to? As Dean taped the new NWS advisory next to the whiteboard, he couldn't help remembering how Cas had started shivering at that pingo pool.

Castiel was on Dean's mind all evening, but of course there was not really that much to be done about it, other than to keep the channel-six radio by his side at all times. Dean could charge on out to Cas's little blue tent to check on him, but that seemed like a bit of an overreaction. Dean just had to hope for the best, trust in Cas's wilderness skills, and try to get some sleep.

*If I don't hear from him in twenty-four hours, though, I'm heading out there,* he thought, before drifting off.

"Hunter One, Hunter One, this is Blackbird."

Dean snapped awake, lunging for the radio before he was even fully awake. He only managed to bat it off its little charging station, and it clattered to the floor.

"Hunter One, Hunter One, this is Blackbird."

Dean scooped up the radio. "Blackbird! This is Hunter One. You okay, bud? Go ahead."

"Yes, I was just calling to report that I'm okay in the snow."

Dean heaved a heavy sigh. "Glad to hear it, Cas."

"I hope I didn't wake you?" said Cas.

"Nope," Dean lied. "Wide awake."

"Good!" said Cas. He sounded pleased. "I was trying to wait until six. But it turned out to be a bit difficult to estimate the time accurately when the sun isn't visible. I've been sitting up here for a while, but I really didn't want to wake you. Is it six yet?"

Dean blinked, sitting up in bed. Cas didn't even have a watch? And... what did he mean he'd been "sitting up here"? He checked his wristwatch and reported, a little confused, "It's five in the morning, actually, but that's cool. But, wait, where are you?" Dean scrambled to his feet as he said this, lifting up the windowshade to look outside.

The mountains were gone behind a bank of heavy white cloud that covered the sky from end to end. Even the tundra was gone, lost in a blanket of fresh white, and snowflakes were still drifting down merrily.

"Oh, I'm so sorry that it's not six yet," said Castiel, and at this point Dean realized his signal was
astonishingly clear, especially given the state of the weather.

Dean asked, dreading the answer, "Tell me you're not on the top of Topaz?"

"Oh, yes, actually I am," said Cas. (Dean now realized that there was a distinct howling noise in the background. Wind?) "I remembered that you'd asked me to check in if it snowed, and I tried some lower hills but I think the snowstorm was blocking reception. So I came up the mountain to call you, to tell you that I'm okay in the snow. But then I realized it was probably before six o'clock. So I've just been waiting here for a little while. You're sure I didn't wake you?"

Dean took a breath, pinching the bridge of his nose with one hand. "Cas, are you up on top of Topaz in the blizzard? With no shelter?"

"Well, there's a small ice cave here," said Cas. "An ice tunnel, really. There's a stream that goes down the side of the mountain. It's... um... " (Dean heard some splashing, and a faint buzz of static.) "It's not entirely out of the wind, but there's some shelter. I sat there for a couple of hours. Though the radio doesn't seem to work as well in there, so I had to come out to try to call you. I'm up on that boulder again now. Anyway, I just was calling to let you know that I'm fine."

Dean rubbed his forehead with one hand. "Wait a sec. You just hiked forty minutes up a mountain, at, like... three in the morning, during a blizzard, and then sat in an ice cave for two hours just to tell me that you're okay? And now you're on the highest point? But doesn't this mean you've been, like, out in the weather the entire time? Getting cold? And now you gotta hike down?"

"Well, yes," Castiel admitted. "I suppose it does all seem a bit counterproductive, now that you describe it like that. But it's really just a minor snowfall, not a true blizzard. Though... now that I'm up here I suppose I do seem to be getting a little chilly. It's quite lovely, but the wind's a little bit strong up here. You know, it really seems my cold tolerance isn't what it used to be—" He caught himself, and concluded, "But never mind about that. Really, I'm fine."

Dean groaned. "And you have a forty-minute hike back down?"

"It's faster going down. Only twenty minutes or so. Don't worry, I've got your hand-warmers."

"Okay, dude, listen to me," said Dean, starting to pace back and forth in his room. "Get those hand-warmers started, get your extra layer out and get it on, and get on back down to shelter."

"All right. But, Dean, I'm fine. The whole point was that you shouldn't be worrying about me."

"Well, get used to me worrying," Dean said. "It's my job."

"I'm not part of your job," said Cas, "and I don't want to interfere."

"You're not interfering with anything."

"I just interfered with your sleep."

"I was awake," Dean lied. "I always wake up at five. Anyway, I want you to head back down. Go. Now."

"Well, if you really insist. But Dean, remember, I've been living in the Arctic for many years. On my own. I'll be okay, I promise. And anyway, I have your jacket now, that black jacket you loaned me, as well as the hand-warmers."

Dean was only slightly mollified. "I guess you do. Just... take care of yourself, okay?"
"I will. Oh... I hope you don't mind if I modify the jacket a little bit?"

"Modify away," said Dean. "I don't need it." (This was not exactly true, but Dean could get another one.) Making a snap decision that he really wasn't ever going to need that North Face jacket ever again, he said, "It's not a loan; it's a gift. I never wear the same jacket twice."

"You — what? How can you possibly—"

"It's a joke, Cas. But seriously, the jacket's yours now. Listen, you get going. Gimme a call again tomorrow, would you? Once the weather's good, I mean. Also we really gotta figure out some way to get more batteries to you, or maybe a relay station. You may not have to climb as high if your batteries are stronger."

"All right. Have a good evening, Dean, and you take care of yourself as well. Over."

"Roger that," said Dean. "Now, scoot. Over and out."

The snow stopped at noon. A pale sun emerged through a thin icy haze, and over the afternoon the clouds slowly drew higher, and higher, and brightened. At last the sun broke through. By dinnertime the sun was shining brightly in a light blue sky, and the merry sounds of the snowmelt streams had all started up again. Some birds even started singing, as if spring had sprung all over again in just the last few hours. But Dean was still worried. Cas had sounded pretty much normal over the radio — meaning, he hadn't had any signs of the slurred, slow speech of hypothermia. But as the day dragged by with no word, Dean started getting more and more concerned about whether Cas had managed to get down from Topaz successfully.

By five-thirty, Dean was making plans for a rescue expedition. The only decision was whether try to get the Chevy out there or to go in his snow machine. Either way, he'd head out the moment the six p.m. weather forecast came in.

Dean was sitting in the camp manager's office, one foot tapping restlessly on the floor as he stared out the window at the snow, waiting impatiently for the six p.m. forecast, when the radio crackled.

"Hunter One, Hunter One, this is Blackbird." There was a lot more static this time.

Dean snatched up the channel-six radio. "Blackbird, this is Hunter One, go ahead," he said, with a sigh of relief. "So you're still alive?"

"I am indeed. I used two of your hand-warmers, and the jacket. I'm quite fine."

"I am indeed. I used two of your hand-warmers, and the jacket. I'm quite fine."

Dean heaved a sigh. "Glad to hear it. But shit, man, let's establish something here, don't hike up Topaz during a snowstorm. All along I meant, go up Topaz after a snowstorm. After it passes. Jeez, man, I was about ready to send a rescue mission out."

"Oh, I'm fine," Cas said. He let out a sigh, though, and added, "I'll admit, though, it's been something of an adjustment to have to pay such attention to the ambient temperature. I never used to get cold. Or hungry, for that matter. They're such... uncomfortable sensations, aren't they? But really, I'm fine. I'm up on Topaz again right now, by the way, but it's quite warm now. It's a lovely evening, don't you think?"
Dean let out a quiet sigh. But as he looked at his office window at the mountains, he realized Cas was right: it was a lovely evening now.

Cas went on, "Did you notice that the white-crowned sparrows have returned? They say that they — um — I imagine that they came over the mountains just now, right after the storm. They've been waiting on the south side for the weather to clear. A huge mixed flock. I've been listening to them. They all came over together just a few hours ago and they've already spread all over this area. There's a dark-eyed junco who got a little excited and came with them. He's rather confused now. He's a forest bird, you know. He was supposed to stay south of Atigun Pass, and now he's flown all this way and he's not sure what to do."

"Yeah, that's great about the birds," Dean said, only half-following the story about the sparrow or the junco or whatever it was. He was mostly still thinking about how Cas had just referred to hunger and cold being uncomfortable. "I did hear some birds singing, yeah," said Dean belatedly, for Cas seemed to expect some kind of response. "That's great about the, uh, about the junco. But, Cas—"

"I told him that — I mean, he might go to your camp if he needs help," said Cas. "The junco. He might show up. You'd feed him, right? I think you have food that's probably more suitable for juncos than what I have."

"Uh, sure," said Dean, blinking a little. Cas wanted him to feed some kind of bird? "Yeah, roger that. I'll feed any juncos that show up, absolutely. I already toss food to this raven that comes by sometimes. I think Cornell has some birdseed or something for little birds. But, Cas, wait a sec, I gotta ask something: what's your setup out there, anyway? I mean, what kind of camp you got? Like, what do you do for heat, and for food and water? You're not..."

Dean paused. What was the polite way to ask someone if they were too broke for proper camping equipment and enough food?

Finally Dean said, "You're comfortable out there, right? Once you're at your camp, I mean?"

There was a longish stretch of silence.

"Not trying to pry," added Dean. (Well, not much, he amended internally.) "Just was wondering."

"Oh, that's fine," said Cas, cheerily enough. "I was just... considering how to describe it. I have a... well, a shelter, you could call it. There's a small tent where I keep some extra supplies."

"That blue tent, right? I saw it from the pingo."

"I'm well out of the weather," Castiel said. "I'm safe from the elements. Quite warm, in fact. You needn't worry."

"Okay, but, what's your setup for water and food? You got a kitchen?"

Another pause. Dean waited.

"A campstove, at least?" suggested Dean.

"I built a small fire-pit, some time ago," said Cas. "I melt snow for my water, for drinking and bathing. When the stream starts running off of Topaz again I'll be able to get my water from there."

Dean frowned. He had been expected that Cas would at least have one of the little backpacker stoves that ran off of little fuel canisters. But instead he had a fire-pit? On permafrost?
This didn't quite make sense; fires would only melt the permafrost and would cause the whole tent to sink into a puddle eventually. And where on earth could he be getting fuel? This was tundra. Tundra meant no trees, and not even any peat. And that meant no fuel.

Dean asked, "What do you use for fuel?"

Yet another pause. Dean bit his lip.

"I have... some methods of fueling a fire," Cas said slowly. "Actually, there's two members of my family who bring me wood now and then. Two of my brothers. And they bring some stores of oil. The wood keeps my fire going, and I use the fuel in a little oil lamp." There was a soft laugh, and Cas added, "It's not really supposed to be used as lamp-oil but it works very well."

Dean frowned. This was all starting to sound less like off-the-grid backwoods skills and more like true poverty. "You burning kerosene or something?" he asked, half-braced for Cas to say he was using whale-oil or seal-oil, the old-time traditional fuels that had been used by the natives here a century ago.

"No, actually, it's... " Cas hesitated, and finally he said, "It's holy oil, if you must know. And the firewood is Lebanese cedar."

Dean blinked, as Cas added, a wry tone in his voice now, "I have rather a religious family. And as it happens, the cedar makes my camp smell quite nice."

"I bet it does," said Dean, grabbing a pad of paper and a pen. He scribbled down, More firewood. Lots hand warmers. Campstove + Fuel. He thought a moment and scribbled Flashlights, batteries, as he asked, "And food?"

Dean rolled his eyes at the inevitable ensuing pause. He was starting to get the picture: Cas was scraping by in absurdly primitive camp conditions, probably with no funding at all, trying to do his research on the thinnest of shoestrings, and he was a little embarrassed about revealing the details. Maybe it was all something to do with his religious family. Could his family possibly be Amish or something, some sect that didn't allow modern camping equipment?

As Dean pondered the unlikely idea of an arctic branch of the Amish, Cas finally said "I've got food."

"Like what?" said Dean, tapping his pen on the pad of paper.

No answer.

"Dude," Dean said. He dropped his pen and leaned back in his chair, looking out the window again at the seamless blanket of snow outside. "Talk to me."

"Oh... you know... my brothers are usually able to drop me some supplies at the start of each year. Olives, some goat cheese, dried mutton." (Dean's eyes narrowed; this was sounding downright Middle Eastern. So much for the Amish theory — and the native-Alaskan theory as well.) "They didn't know if I would need any food, but they thought maybe a little sustenance might be helpful. And I've been able to find food on my own. Recently a caribou offered itself — so touching when they do that, you know, when they know they won't last the winter and they just want a peaceful end. And I can give them that, at least. And so I have some dried meat. And there's berries, and sometimes fish." Cas added, "Dean, I really don't need to eat much. It's only rarely that I get hungry. I even forget to eat sometimes, when I'm doing my transects."

"What are these transects, anyway?" asked Dean. "I mean, what are you doing exactly?"
"I'm monitoring all the wildlife within a ten-mile diameter," said Castiel. "All the bird nests, all the large mammals, and all the lemmings and voles and squirrels that are along my walking route. Just... asking them all how they're doing, really. Like a little snapshot of the Arctic wildlife here."

"Ten-mile diameter," repeated Dean.

"Yes."

"On foot?" asked Dean, already knowing the answer.

"On foot, yes."

"Roger that," said Dean slowly.

Cas was going hungry.

Dean closed his eyes, trying to think back on the pingo-pool moment, which obediently leapt to mind in crisp and vivid detail. (As it often did, actually.) Cas had actually looked pretty healthy at the pingo-pool. He'd had a good amount of muscle, his eyes had looked clear, his teeth strong, his skin had looked good. (Various other things had looked good as well, but Dean tried to set that aside.) At least Cas wasn't starving to the point of being truly skeletal. But it did sound like a bland and narrow diet, probably just barely enough given all his hiking, and it seemed clear that a little more "sustenance" would definitely come in handy.

Dean scribbled down on his little bad: Granola bars? Fig Newtons? muffins? + Real food. - sandwich fixings, canned soup? Nonperishables. As he wrote, a thought floated to mind, and Dean said into the radio, "You know what, I just thought of something. Why don't you drop by next Friday for our seminar? Camp officially allows guests then, and nobody'll notice if there's one more person at dinner. Sam's probably gonna come down too. You could grab dinner with us, meet everybody — oh and, I'll be firing up the sauna later that night." Dean brightened as this idea struck him. Castiel in the sauna! This had to happen.

Dean added, "You gotta come. The sauna's awesome. Toasty warm and you sweat out every speck of dirt. You'll love it." Dean couldn't help also adding, "Especially if your usual method of bathing is an ice-water pingo pond, or a sponge-bath in meltwater from a fire-pit. And if you really miss your ice water, you can go jump in the lake. Whaddya think?"

"That's... tempting, actually," said Cas slowly.

"You gotta come," Dean said. "I've got towels and everything. Friday next week, okay?"

"It's... very tempting. Very," said Cas. Now he sounded a little sad. "But... I'm afraid I should decline."

"Why?" Dean couldn't help pressing. "It's not 'interfering,' if that's what you're wondering. We always have extra food on seminar days. And I know what a hassle it is to stay clean when you're camping. The sauna'll be lit anyway; it's not like it'll cost us any extra wood to have one more person in there."

"It's... extremely tempting. But, I shouldn't."

He must be shy about the sauna. Dean took a slow breath, making himself think it through. Of course. Cas was still trying to keep some clear boundaries, while Dean, like an idiot, kept accidentally pushing.
Dean hastened to clarify, "The sauna's optional. But you should at least come for the seminar and grab some dinner. I know Sam would love to see you again."

"Well, you see... um...." Cas paused. Finally he said. "I can't do the sauna. But actually, could I clarify something? Is the seminar indoors?"

"Yeah, it's in the dining hall."

"With... chairs? Everybody sits down?"

At that point something clicked: Cas didn't like to sit down.

The very first day they'd met, Castiel had turned down Dean's offer of a ride in the Chevy, even though he'd clearly wanted a ride. Later, he'd been very hesitant about sitting down in the chair in Dean's room, and had only finally sat when he'd realized that cowboy-style was an acceptable option. He'd have to sit in the sauna. He'd have to sit in the seminar.

He'd have to sit, and that meant he'd have to take his pack off.

On a sudden hunch, Dean asked, "Cas, you don't like to take off your backpack, do you?"

There was a pause.

"N-no...." said Cas slowly. "You see, I have... I have a... sort of a ...."

Dean waited, quietly, for a very long moment. Static crackled faintly on the line; Cas was still holding his button down, thinking, and Dean was almost holding his breath waiting for Cas's next words.

Cas finally spoke up with a hesitant and halting, "You see... I... have... a... uh... condition."

"A condition?" Dean repeated, not sure he'd heard it correctly.

"A condition."

He stopped there. Dean waited a moment, and then asked, as gently as he could, "What do you mean? What sort of condition?"

"An... anatomical condition. A back condition. You could call it a deformity." Cas took a breath and said, more firmly, "I have a spinal deformity."

"What, like, scoliosis or something?"

"Or something, yes."

Was that all it was? Was that the source of all his shyness? Maybe he just had a hunchback or something — which, Dean discovered immediately, didn't matter at all. Not in the least. Dean said, "Dude, I so don't care about that. Nobody's gonna care at all, I swear. You'd love the sauna. Sam and me can look the other way."

"I appreciate the thought. I do. I really do. But, I must decline."

"Well.... okay. Just for the record though, I really don't give a damn about any 'conditions.' Honestly. We could go really late. Just the two of us, if you want." Once more Dean rolled his eyes at himself, and he warned himself mentally, Would you stop frickin' pushing! Just stop it! It was ridiculous how often Dean kept sliding into offering these little invitations.
"Thank you, Dean. But I don't think it's wise."

"Okay. I won't bug you about the sauna. But think about the seminar, okay? We can just sit in the back. Cowboy-style, like we did in my room. We could sit backwards on a couple chairs in the back. I'll keep my pack on too, and if anybody asks, we can say that we're about to head out to do some work."

There was a long pause.

"Roger that," said Cas thoughtfully.

"Just think about it," Dean suggested. "No pressure at all. Just an option. It'd be fun to have you here, is all." To make sure he kept the topic light, he decided to end the conversation here. It seemed like it'd be good if Cas could feel like Dean wasn't pushing him about this, at all. So Dean said, "You just take your time and think it over. Like I said, no pressure. So... I guess I'll let you head on back down to your camp now, okay? I just wanted to hear that you got through the storm okay, but I don't want to trap you up on Topaz forever."

"Oh, this isn't a trap," Cas said easily. "I enjoy talking with you."

Dean allowed a small smile to creep onto his face. "Well, I should let you go anyway. But think about Friday, okay? We usually all eat dinner at six, and have the seminar at seven."

"Roger that too," said Cas.

"Hope to see you Friday, Blackbird. Over."

"Thank you so much, Hunter One. I'll try to come. Over and out."

There were still a few days till Friday, though, and Cas's description of his completely inadequate camp situation wouldn't leave Dean's mind. The next day he drove the Chevy around the lake, hiked up the long boardwalk, up and over the first hill and up the second, past the icewater pool to the wooden box, which he unlatched and swung open. Into the box he placed three charged batteries (he'd started borrowing a third from a little-used radio), a twelve-pack of Fig Newtons, six cans of tuna and a can opener, a jar of peanut butter along with sturdy stainless-steel knife, a loaf of bread, several granola bars and a couple of apples, and the Tupperware, which this time was packed full of banana bread and oatmeal cookies.

Last of all was a rare and precious six-pack of Alaskan Amber beer, taken from Dean's Rubbermaid booze stash. The beer wouldn't fit in the box, and Dean ended up propping the whole six-pack at the base of the mailbox.

He wrote a new note:

Hey Cas,

Here's some more batteries — got a few extra this time. They're all charged. And we had some extra food in this week's delivery so I thought maybe you could use some extra grub.
But I think your berries represent way more work than my Fig Newtons and stuff. I'm adding a few extra supplies as a bonus. Those berries were awesome. I think some of them may be coming back to you soon - stay tuned.

- Dean

PS Don't forget, Friday is seminar day — dinner at six, seminar at seven. Me & Sam will be expecting you.

"Hunter One... Hunter! One!...HUNTER ONE. This is... BLACKBIRD."

Dean nearly jumped at Cas's loud-voiced announcement this time. He'd been lying on his bed swiping through his "Birds of Alaska" app again, this time trying to find the page for juncos. (Coincidentally, a tiny dark-gray bird had indeed shown up at the dining hall a few hours ago, hopping around with a distinctly hungry look. Dean had finally gone all the way over to the Cornell team's storage trailer to dig out a bag of birdseed and toss a handful to the little thing.)

Dean reached out to his desk to scoop the radio from its charging cradle. Before answering he sat up a little, propping his back against his pillow and checking the time quickly on the iPad. It was only nine p.m.; Cas had nailed the timing of his call for once.

"Blackbird, this is Hunter One," said Dean. "Go ahead. Your signal's loud and clear. Really clear, actually."

"I got the new batteries!" said Cas. "I put one in!" He sounded very pleased with himself. "I'm up on Topaz now. I'm drinking your beer. It's very good."

"Ah, yeah, the Alaskan Amber!" Dean said. "Glad you got it. Do you like it? Thought you might be an amber kind of guy."

"I'm multicolored," said Castiel mysteriously. "In my...true...." He hesitated, and then added, "Well, now I'm more gold, recently. I guess that is amber, so, yes. Yes, I like th' beer. And the figgy things..." There was a rustling of a wrapper. "The newts," Cas said. "Newts made of figs. So ingenious! The fish cans. The mashed peanuts. Mashed peanuts, Dean! I've been eating all evening. Everything's so good, Dean. Sooooo... good."

Dean was laughing now. The slightly slurred tone in Cas's voice was unmistakable. "Let me guess. You don't drink much, huh?"

"Oh, I used to drink lots," said Castiel.

"Did you now."

"Drank quite a bit," said Cas, "Drank whenever I flew. From th' river of th' throne of God. Water o'life, y'know. Technically that river's a, a, a wavelength, right, see, a wavelength of ether, so, obviously, just th' stuff after a hard flight."

"Obviously," said Dean, laughing a little at this disjointed commentary. "Yeah, whenever I fly, though, you know what I have? I have a beer."

"Just th' thing," agreed Cas. "It's just th' thing! But...there was no Alaskan Amber at the throne of God." He let out a hiccup. "Quite the oversight."
"Quite," said Dean, valiantly stifling another laugh. Super-religious family, indeed, as Sam had guessed; some kind of dedicated churchgoers, and into some elaborate flowery metaphors from the sound of it. And now here Cas was slugging beer on the top of a mountain, "interfering" with non-religious ne'er-do-wells like Dean.

"I was just thinking, before I called you," said Castiel, "that my brothers sometimes bring me holy-oil, and, y'know, myrrh 'n' stuff, an' the cedar, but they've never brought me any beer. Isn't that sad?" He let out a long sigh, and added, "It makes me wonder if they truly care...."

"They might still care anyway," said Dean. "Even without any beer."

"I'm really not sure sometimes. When I was exiled, though, they did try to stand up for me."

So far this had been shaping up as a funny story: Castiel being drunk, Castiel's religious upbringing clashing with the modern world. But the word "exiled" made the smile fade from Dean's face. "Exiled?" he repeated, sitting up a little. It seemed a clue.

"Long story," said Cas. There was a distinct swallowing sound, the glugging of beer being sucked out of a bottle, and then he added, "Looong.... story. Very dull. Very very dull. Very very very dull."

"Let me guess," said Dean, "A little case of rebellion against your parents?"

"You're such a good guesser!" said Cas, apparently blown away with admiration. "I bet you've figured everything out already. Have you?"

"Definitely not."

"Well, I did rebel. Boy, did I ever rebel. Boy, howdy."

"Gee whillikers," said Dean. "What did you do?"

"I went to Illinois!" says Cas. "When I'd been expressly told not to! Against direct orders. All the way to Illinois."

"Illinois," repeated Dean slowly. "Yeah, real cesspool of sin and depravity."

"You have no idea," said Castiel. "Apparently it's the fulcrum on which the world turns. Anyway I fell and everything. Put on trial, snip snip, out you go! And all I'd done was try and look around. I just wanted to get a good vessel for a week or two..." (Dean thought, Vessel? Was he looking for a boat?) "...just to look around a little bit... Dean, I just wanted to save the world, a little bit. Do my little part if I could. Figure out what my little part even is. But, one foot in Illinois, barely three days there, and BAM. Blew my vessel to bits — my brothers put it back together for me later, against orders really, but the others let it slide in the end. Decided it'd teach me a lesson, I think... wanted to stick me with it... with a, a wrecked vessel...." (At this point Dean was picturing Cas rowing a half-ruined wooden dory around, somewhere on Lake Michigan.) Cas went on, "Joke's on them, I like a lot of it. The physicality, you know, the...uh... hedonism. But I still feel bad about the vessel, you know? Poor vessel... didn't deserve that... but now here I am. Anyway... snip snip and off to the Arctic! If I can be perfectly frank—" He hesitated, and his next words were loudly slurred, his gravelly voice echoing through Dean's office as he breathed heavily into the radio mic, "It didn't seem fair."

"It never does," said Dean, who was half-laughing at Cas's slurred words and half-appalled at this confusing story of exile and Illinois and the ruined boat. Whatever had happened, it was clearer and clearer that Castiel had barely escaped from some kind of a religious cult.
"Just because they saw whatever out in that... rip thing, or whatever," said Cas. He added, with a sigh, "Religious visions here, prophecies there, it's so hard to keep track, you know?"

Definitely a cult, Dean decided. Cas had grown up in some kind of a cult, and he'd been kicked out. Just because he'd tried to take a peek at the normal world. In Illinois.

And this wasn't really a funny story at all. This was a tragedy. The thought of poor Cas being booted out on his own, totally unprepared for the modern world, and dropped in the Arctic of all places, nearly made Dean's blood boil.

Cas said, "I suppose I should just be glad they didn't kill me instantly."

"You're better off on your own," said Dean firmly. "You survived, didn't you?"

"I did," said Cas. "Touch and go there for a bit. Touch... and... go. I do like the birds, Dean. I've gotten so fond of them. They're so talkative. Though this week of course, all they talk about is sex, really so single-minded. Also this week, quite a lot of arguing about territory boundaries. The sparrows around my camp won't shut up about it."

"Sparrows are always such drama queens," agreed Dean.

"They really are," agreed Cas. "But, truly, they're all so curious and inquisitive and really quite good company. The birds are great, Dean, and the wolves, their pups are so charming. But the humans! Don't even get me started on the humans! Wait, wait, this one's empty, I need to open another one."

There was the distinct ksssh sound of a beer bottle opening. Cas paused a long moment, presumably taking a swig of a newly opened beer. "Humans are so fascinating," he declared, and he added, his voice slurring more now, "Maybe I... maybe I should...shhhhould... not go into details....about that..."

The slurring in Cas's voice was making Dean laugh again. "So, can I ask," Dean said conversationally, "just how many beers did you have?"

"That was... nummberrrr.... wait a min't," said Cas. Another pause, with some clinking of glass. "This one is number six," he said. "I think."

"What, all six? Are you serious?" Now Dean was getting concerned.

"You know, I used to be able to slug down soooo much alcohol," said Cas. "Rakia, ouzo, whatever they had, I'd just... you know, act grateful, in that superior way they trained us in of course, all the we-accept-your-humble-offering business, do the big ol' display thing, add backlighting, few trumpets maybe, thunder, explode some glasses or clay pots or whatever, gratefully accept it, quaff it down." (Dean was frowning at all this, totally puzzled; was Cas describing some kind of religious ceremony?) Cas went on, "Never affec-- hic! --affected me then. But now, you know, everything's different. Dean, I want you to have my other feather."

"What?"

"My other feather. There's another one. Off the right wing. As soon as it falls off."

"What, off the jaeger?" Dean asked.

There was a pause.

"Oh, right, the jaeger!" said Cas. "Forgot about that. Yeah, from the jaeger! Pomarine jaeger, right? Melanistic! As soon as it falls off of... the jaeger, is what I meant, I'll give it to you."
"The jaeger's still around?"

"That jaeger is *always* around," said Castiel. "It's like, *on me*. All th' time. Anyway, I'd like you to have that feather too. It's pretty clear now, you're supposed to have all the feathers."

"I'll take another jaeger-feather if you're giving one away, sure," Dean said, "But, dude, you don't have to give me all your feather specimens or whatever you've got. Don't you need them for your research?"

"I want YOU to have it. I really do." Cas sounded very serious now. (And still rather drunk.)

"Sure, I'll take it. But Cas, I'm thinking maybe you oughta stop drinking and head on back to your camp."

"S'good weather," Cas said. "No shnow. But okay."

"Head on down, take your time, and drink some water," Dean advised.

"Okay. Oh! Did the junco show up?"

Dean chuckled, glancing down at his birding app — which sure enough had a picture of a little gray bird labeled *Dark-eyed Junco*. "You know what, it actually did."

"It did?"

"Hopping around the dining hall deck. I gave it some seeds. It gobbled them right up."

"I *told* him you'd help!" said Cas. He sounded delighted. "I'm so glad he took my advice."

Dean laughed. It was a cute joke, the idea of Cas talking to birds, and sending birds to Dean for help. "Well, the Cornell team's got all this birdseed," he explained. "We got tons. If you find any other lost birds, you send them my way."

"Excellent," said Castiel. "Roger that. Roger... that. I'll recommend you to the towhee as well. There's a robin around too. Thank you, Dean. You're a..." (There was a hiccup.) "You're a *case in point*. Humans. Mortal life. All the appealing experiences. *Case in point*, you are. Been thinking about it."

He hiccuped again, and as much as Dean wanted to see where this conversation might end up, he gently reminded Cas, "You gonna be okay getting back down that trail? Down Topaz? There's no fall risk, is there?"

"I already fell," Castiel said. "Years ago."

"I mean, tonight? Can you walk?"

"Oh, you mean, like, a *physical* fall," said Cas. "Noooo, no no no no no, no problem, no problem. I can walk fine. This trail's wide, you know. Sun's shinin'. Air's warm."

Dean knew the Topaz Mountain trail from hikes in previous years, and it was actually a pretty gentle slope, lined on both sides with moss. Dean said doubtfully, "Okay, but take it really slow. Sit down and nap if you need to." He was doublechecking the latest NWS forecast on the iPad even as he said this. "Should stay sunny."

"Yeah, a nap might be good," said Cas. "Like a nap *right now*. You know, I feel like the beers might be affecting me a little bit."
"Life's full of surprises."

"Case in point, again," said Castiel again. "Life's full of surprises. Such a pleasant surprise, you are. Such a very nice discovery."

"Not sure what you mean by that, but if you like discoveries, check the wooden box again tomorrow. And don't forget about the seminar."

"I won't. And I'll recommend you to the towhee. You will be highly recommended to the towhee. Good night, Dean. Oh, wait, I meant, good night, Hunter One, over."

"Take it easy, Blackbird," said Dean, laughing again. "This is Hunter One, over and out."
Seminar Friday rolled around at last, a blustery day with a stiff wind blowing in over the lake. It was a balmy 42°F according to the camp weather station, mud-boot weather now, and the creek by Kupaluk's long dirt driveway was running fast. Sam and Ruby were due to drive down by late afternoon in Ruby's Alaska Petroleum truck. (Dean had finally convinced himself to extend a formal invitation to Ruby.) Early evening found Dean walking along the long rutted Kupaluk driveway to meet them at the turnoff from the Haul Road.

Sam had called fifteen minutes ago to announce that they were pretty close. Alaska Petroleum trucks, it turned out, all came equipped with full sat-phone access and apparently an unlimited budget for satellite calls, and Sam had called straight to Dean's Skype number and had actually managed get a voice call to connect to Dean's iPad a few minutes ago. Dean had thought it'd be fun to greet them at the turn. He could pile into the truck with them and guide them in. It would be Ruby's first view of camp, after all.

Dean's boots crackled through sliver-thin ice coatings on the driveway's muddy puddles as he strode along. He zipped up his parka as he walked — this walk to the Haul Road always seemed to be a little longer than he'd thought, and it was maybe a bit chillier than he'd thought. He resettled his binoculars across his chest so that he could put his hood up (bandolier-style binoculars was his new look, but did require some hood-adjustments now and then). Pulling both gloves on his hands, he still found he had to tuck his gloved hands in his jacket pockets for some extra warmth as he walked along.

Yet even despite the chill, the signs of spring were unmistakable. As Dean walked along, he eyed the tundra slopes on either side, judging the pattern of white and brown on the hills. *Sixty percent*, he decided. The light snowfall from a few days back was completely gone, and even more of the winter snowpack had melted off. Increasingly large patches of lumpy brown tussocks were opening up now on the south-facing slopes where the sun angle was stronger. And on some of those snow-free areas of the south-facing slopes... was that a hint of green?

Dean paused, peering at the featureless brown slope on his left side. He walked a little closer to the road edge and bent to examine a little bare-branched willow shrub.
Yes. Tiny green leafbuds, just beginning to open. And down on the ground, in a nearby tussock, four or five tips of green were poking up from the brown frozen clump of last year's sedge grasses. The new growth had started. It gave the faintest touch of green to the open areas, like a faint blush of life starting to creep over what had seemed a frozen wasteland.

*Green-up's almost here,* Dean thought, a smile spreading over his face as he turned back to his trek down the road. Things would happen fast now. The arctic summer was ridiculously short, and everything had to grow as fast as it could in the brief few weeks of warmth, taking full advantage of the twenty-four-hour light. There might still be snowstorms, big ones even, but all the plants up here were very freeze-tolerant. Spring storms might blow in but they'd melt off soon enough. Nothing could really stop the green-up of an arctic spring once it had started.

And the animals, of course, were all doing the same, taking full advantage of the warmth and the light. Even now a fat brown arctic ground squirrel, fresh out of his hibernation burrow, was sitting up alertly at the crest of a nearby little pingo, barking a warning call at Dean.

"Oh, go chase a female or something," Dean called to it cheerfully. Because that was what green-up was all about, wasn't it? Finding a mate. Finding a companion.

And, most definitely, gettin' it on.

In fact, birdsong was pouring down from all around. *All they're talking about is sex,* thought Dean, grinning to himself as he remembered Castiel's drunken comments about the birds. In past years Dean had only dimly noticed the local birds and their songs, his birdwatching mostly confined to tossing a bacon-scrap or two to the raven. But this year he seemed to be taking a lot more notice. Not just of the raven, and the local long-tailed jaegers, but the little birds too. Right now, song seemed to be cascading down from overhead, and a glance upwards revealed dozens of tiny black-breasted sparrows sailing around doing some kind of spiraling display flight, each bird letting out cascades of exuberant, elaborately bubbling song everywhere it soared. Some kind of blue-throated bird was hopping around in a nearby bush with a totally different song. Flashes of red shot by overhead as yet another species shot past in a bouncing flight, chasing each other with buzzy little trills. The more he looked, the more he saw; the more he listened, he more he heard. And right now, all of them were singing. Singing about sex, if Cas was to be believed.

"Dirty minds, all of you," Dean commented to the birds spiraling around happily overhead. He added to them, with a grin, "Not that there's *anything* wrong with that."

With the green-up and the animals came the people. Camp had already gotten more populated. Eight new grad students and a pair of post-docs had arrived just in the last two days, including the rest of the Cornell team. Earlier this morning the helicopters had arrived, two spindly little mini-choppers that were each barely big enough to hold a pilot and one (skinny) passenger. The pilots had brought the choppers up here in two careful jumps from their Fairbanks winter hangars, flying first to Coldfoot last night and then over Atigun Pass this morning. A dispatcher and an intern had come two days earlier to prep the pads.

Camp was increasingly busy, and that meant Dean was increasingly busy too. Almost every day now he had to give some freshly arrived crop of newbies the safety talk, and the camp tour, and the recycling lecture, and the stern reminder about always carrying pepper-spray (which, he knew, they would all ignore). More of the giant Weatherport tents would soon have to be mounted and raised to house the dozens of grad students that were even now on their way, some flying to Alaska this very week, some en route on the weeks-long drive up the Alaska-Canada Highway from the lower forty-eight. A lot had to be done before they all arrived. The seasonal transition from snow machines to ATVs was approaching fast — snow machines would only be useable for about one more week, so
Dean had spent all morning getting the stubby little ATV four-wheelers, the "all-terrain vehicles," up and running. The first of the lake skiffs had been launched today too, its icy nine-month crust of snow carefully chipped off, its canvas covering removed, and the outboard motor retrieved from the Winter Lab. Only about a fifth of the lake had melted out so far, but the little skiff had been launched just a few hours ago (with great fanfare; every year Phil insisted on the traditional bottle of champagne). Grad student Jeanette had steered it around happily in little circles in the patch of ice-free water by the lake's inflow stream, while Dean, the ecologists, and Ryan all toasted her from shore. And instantly the outboard had died and had needed some tuning. Dean's schedule was really booking up.

Yet he'd still squeezed in time for regular runs to the north hill, every other day at a minimum. He'd made three visits since the Alaskan Amber evening. The last repairs to the boardwalks up there had been going quite slowly, and needed constant attention, just about every other day. Or so Dean had been telling the other staff.

Dean's plan had been to drop off a freshly charged radio battery (plus snacks) every other day. On one priceless occasion Cas had actually been there waiting for him, just in the process of dropping off his own used radio battery, and there'd then been the pleasure of watching him devour three packs of Fig Newtons in about sixty seconds flat. (Dean had ended up handing over his entire lunch that day, pretending he'd brought it all for Castiel.)

But, Cas had explained sadly, he couldn't always be at the wooden box to meet Dean. On most days he had those "transects" to run and "nest checks" and "focal observations" to do. It turned out he really was quite committed to his long-term research project (though still a little vague about exactly how "long-term" it was). Castiel was, Dean had decided, a truly dedicated field biologist. If a little quirky.

And one of the quirks had definitely turned out to be that he still seemed to have a nagging worry about "not interfering." Not taking too much of Dean's time, that seemed to mean, and not coming onto camp territory if he could avoid it.

As long as Castiel would accept the batteries and food, Dean could tolerate Cas's reluctance to visit Kupaluk. Ensuring a steady supply of batteries and food for Castiel had become Dean's top priority. The constant supply of fresh batteries had meant that Cas had been able to call in on channel six in almost nightly. Of course this also meant that almost every night, Cas had been climbing all the way up Topaz Mountain. He'd said there were other reasons to go up there, something about there being a gyrfalcon nest that he "wanted to check on," and Dall mountain sheep that were apparently "seeking input on optimal foraging strategies." He'd insisted there were other reasons to climb Topaz than just to radio Dean, but nonetheless Dean had been getting the distinct impression that Cas had been climbing Topaz rather more often than he used to. That meant an hour of hiking, not to mention the time sitting up there in the cold.

As Dean stood now at the very end of the Kupaluk driveway listening to the birds singing, it occurred to him that it would be awfully handy if Cas could just radio Dean straight from his own camp without having to hike up all the way up Topaz. In fact... it might be possible to put a radio-boosting repeater station up on that little pingo hill by Cas's icewater pool. *Just a few solar panels and a little dish antenna would do it,* Dean thought, scanning toward the north, trying to judge the height of the hills. The first hill had direct line-of-sight to the Kupaluk dining hall, didn't it?

*Couple solar panels, maybe mounted up on a frame,* Dean thought, thinking it through. *And a little dish antenna. And some weather-proofing. Maybe another booster on the next hill too? A twelve-volt car battery for when the sun's not shining.* Then Cas could radio in straight from his little camp at the base of Topaz. He wouldn't even have to leave his tent.
Okay, then: couple of solar panels and a dish antenna and some weather proofing and a second booster with another dish and another solar panel and, let's see, two car batteries...It'd be easy, really, thought Dean, hands on his hips as he surveyed the distant hills. *Just a two-day job. Two or three days to put it all together. Piece of cake.*

It would eat up all of Dean's free time, but it'd be worth it. Because then Cas could check in every night. Every morning too, if he wanted.

A crackle of static on the radio interrupted Dean's thoughts. But it wasn't Sam or Ruby — and it wasn't Cas on channel six, as nice as that would have been. There was a semi trundling past on the Haul Road, and a cheerful basso voice over channel four called, "Kupaluk Base, Kupaluk Base, that you standing out there all on your lonesome? This is Big Seven."

Dean let out a short laugh. He recognized the voice from last year. And the truck, and the call sign "Big Seven" — which was, Dean happened to know, not inaccurate. it was one of his old Happy Valley friends.

Dean pulled his radio off his belt clip. But even as he said, "Go ahead, Big Seven," he was still scanning the top of the hills far to the north, still half-thinking about solar panels and car batteries.

"Just happened to see you standing out there," drawled Big Seven. "I might be stopping for a snack at Happy Valley if you want to drop by. Got some beer, too. Should be some good wildlife viewin'."

A smile tugged at a corner of Dean's mouth. It was a good memory. Last summer had been fun. Big Seven had been by several times. It had been fun, sure.

Yet somehow it wasn't as tempting, this year.

"Copy that, Big Seven," Dean said "Sorry, I got family coming to camp today. That'll be a rain check for me. You go have fun without me, though."

"I'll do that," came the drawl over the radio — slightly disappointed, maybe, but mellow and unworried. (After all, it's not like they'd been close or anything.) "Some other time, then. You take care."


"Over and out."

*It's not like I even ever bothered to learn his real name, thought Dean.*

As he clipped the radio back onto his belt, it occurred to him that he hadn't been up to Pump Station Three, or the turn-off at Happy Valley, even once yet this year. There'd been several opportunites by now. It'd been weeks since Sam had left, and Dean had even had several days off, and there'd been free evenings as well. But somehow most of those free moments had ended up involving hikes up the boardwalks to the north, building the wooden box for Cas and taking the batteries and snacks up there. And, it had to be admitted, there'd been a certain amount of lounging on his bed in the evening too, listening to the faint hum of the radio, always ready for that rough voice to speak up on channel six.

Not that Dean had been a complete monk or anything. There'd been what he liked to think of as "self-care moments." Discreet self-care moments in the sauna once or twice, self-care in his room in the dorm trailer. Both of those locations could be a little dicey, though. (The sauna could be invaded by anybody at any moment, which presented obvious problems. And the dorm trailer, annoyingly, was far too shaky. Literally; the entire trailer could vibrate, if one weren't careful.). So increasingly
Dean just went out on the tundra. It was an open landscape, sure, but it also had a surprising amount
of shielded depressions, with some shelter to be found, here and there.

Self-care meant solo, of course, and solo meant a certain amount of creative imagination was
required. Dean usually kept some favorite old videos on his phone, but ever since the phone had died
Dean had been limited to good old-fashioned fantasizing. This had turned out not to be a limitation in
the least. As it happened, a certain recent image, of a certain bird guy naked in an icewater pool, had
continued to dominate the mental spank-bank video pool a little bit. Well, more than a little bit. Pretty
much every recent jerk-off session had started with Dean reliving that one brief memory. The
icewater-pool image had even spun off some sequels. Purely hypothetical sequels, of course, with
hypothetical plots and lots of slo-mo technicolor detail and completely imaginary close-ups.
Sometimes it all felt a little borderline — the "no" issue had really been quite firmly settled, and Dean
had never been one before to get lost in fantasies that could never become reality. Yet somehow he'd
let himself run the "sequels" to their natural conclusions, once or twice. (Or three or four times. Or
five or six.)

He knew he'd been indulging, and he knew it was a little questionable that every single self-care
moment recently had been starting off by thinking about Cas.

*Just this once*, he'd told himself. *Just this one more time.*

He'd been telling himself "just this one more time" literally every time, for three weeks now.

All of which meant that, Happy Valley's Sag River pulloff, up north just past Pump Station Three,
was just... less interesting, this year.

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Dean was still thinking about solar panels when at long last a big, glossy, brand new, flame-red, all-
wheel-drive Mercedes-Benz GLS popped into view over the Haul Road's distant northeastern curve.
Dean blinked at the sight; he'd known Mercedes made an all-wheel-drive SUV, but had never seen
one here at Kupaluk. Dean happened to know it retailed for a cool $95,000. Trust Alaska Petroleum
to have the priciest SUV on the market.

Dean waved an arm in the air, unclipped his radio, and hailed the Mercedes with, "Hunter Two,
Hunter Two. This is Hunter One."

He'd already told Sam about the new call signs, thinking Sam would get a kick out of returning to the
walkie-talkie days of their youth. It was just a little joke, of course. Nobody cared all that much about
call signs up here, and it wasn't like the FAA was going to come down on their heads. Yet as Dean
repeated the hail (the Mercedes still hadn't responded) — "Hunter Two, Hunter Two, this is Hunter
One. Come in," — he couldn't help imbuing some significance into the words. There was no
denying that the idea of Dean and Sam as a pair of hunting brothers had a certain appeal. (Though
what exactly they might be "hunting" was still pretty poorly defined).

There was still no reply, not even an answering crackle of static. The flame-red Mercedes (which
was, impossibly, completely free of mud) drew closer and slowed for the turn. It maneuvered neatly
off the Haul Road and onto the Kupaluk driveway. It had to be Sam and Ruby.

Dean repeated the hail one more time, wondering if their CB was off. "Hunter Two, Hunter Two,
this is Hunter One. Come in." There was still no reply, but the Mercedes pulled up next to Dean.
Dean stepped up to the driver's door, but when the smoked-glass window rolled down with an
almost soundless purr, it was Ruby sitting in the driver's seat, and she and Sam were busting up in
laughter. They obviously must have seen Dean — Ruby had pulled up right next to him, after all —
but neither looked at him.

They were in the middle of some joke. Ruby had the Mercedes' CB mic in one hand and she was
playing keep-away with it, jerking it away from Sam's grasp as he grabbed for it, both of them
laughing.

"MY truck," Ruby was saying. "MY radio, and don't you forget it, and MY call sign is not 'Hunter
Two.'"

"So what is your call sign, then?" said Sam, with another ineffective lunge at the CB. "You never
said."

"Guess," she said, laughter bright in her voice. Sam switched tactics, trying to tickle her waist now to
get her to drop the CB; she jerked away, giggling in a playful, high-pitched voice that somehow
made Dean instantly irritated.

"Um... " said Sam, miming thoughtful guessing, one hand on his chin. "Hot Stuff?" He snatched for
the radio suddenly; she jerked it away. "Foxy Lady? Red-Hot Mama?" (Dean had to stop himself
from visibly rolling his eyes. There it is, he thought. It had been kind of obvious all along from Sam's
emails, but apparently it was for real.)

Ruby was giggling almost helplessly now. "My call sign's actually Smoky Three," she said at last,
"and no, you still can't use the radio."

"Smoky?" Sam repeated, eyes narrowing. "Like Smoky and the Bandit?"

She shook her head. "It's an AP thing," she said. "My boss is Smoky Two, I'm Smoky Three. We all
have call signs like that. Kind of an inside joke. Except the CEO — he oughta be Smoky One but
instead he goes by Yellow-Eyes for radio comms. Don't ask me why."

"Hey guys," Dean said at last, setting one hand on the driver's door.

"Oh, hi, Dean," said Ruby, but she still had her back to Dean. She was looking only at Sam.

"Hey," said Sam, but he didn't look at Dean either. He slapped Ruby's knee, saying, "Smoky Three.
I like it." She swatted back at him, he started tickling her again, and soon they were both laughing
once more. The CB mic eventually clattered to the truck floor, forgotten.

"I'll just get in the back," said Dean.

Be happy for him, Dean repeated to himself, dozens of times over the next hour. Be nice. Be
hospitable. Be happy. But there was something grating about seeing how head-over-heels Sam was,
how thoroughly Ruby had gotten him wrapped around her finger in just four short weeks.

And then there was her attitude. Dean gave them the whole camp tour, but Ruby just gave
everything a cursory glance.
"You only have the five-minute mist showers?" she asked, glancing at the shower trailer with one perfectly-plucked dark eyebrow raised. She ran her fingers through her shining hair as she said, "AP's got a desalination plant and we run full half-hour showers. Boy, I'd hate to have to wash my hair in a five-minute mist." As they came around a corner in view of the outhouse towers she added, "Oh wow, you guys actually use outhouses, Sam wasn't kidding!" She turned to Dean with a bright laugh. "Do you guys wash your clothes on a rock, too? Haul water from the lake? Communicate by carrier pigeon?"

Be nice, Dean repeated to himself. "We've got laundry," he said, with a gesture toward the laundry annex.

He didn't mention that laundry time was strictly rationed, and that not long ago they indeed had been washing their clothes by hand at Kupaluk. Not on a rock, but in a big washbin. Dean even still hung his own clothes on clotheslines when the wind was good. And he did still haul water from the lake sometimes, like for the sauna.

And where was the shame in that? No shame, Dean instructed himself. No shame at all. The clothes got clean, and it was honest labor, and there was never any shame in honest labor. The whole point of Kupaluk was to try to step lightly on the land. Study the world without harming it, was the idea.

But Alaska Petroleum, of course, had quite a different philosophy.

They'd gotten past the shower trailers, Ruby still making jokes about washing clothes by hand, when she caught sight of the helicopters and gave another merry peal of laughter. "Look at your tiny helicopters! They're so adorable! I didn't know helicopters came that small!" Taking out her phone to snap a picture, she said to Sam, "AP's got a fleet of twenty. Full-size. Oh, I still need to take you out on the pack ice in those, don't let me forget to schedule that."

Sam explained to Dean, "Ruby's got a chopper available for private use."

"Of course she does," said Dean evenly, leading them across the parking lot as quick as he could. He was now hoping to finish the tour as quickly as possible, wrapping up with just a view of the lake, but inevitably Ruby noticed the line of old trucks that they were walking past, all neatly parked in a row by Big Mama. Dean had been feeling good about the trucks this week — they'd all been running great, hardly any cracked windshields, and Baby in particular was in great condition. But they nonetheless had mud on them, and next to the shining Mercedes they all looked pathetically old. Ruby said, "My god, are these from the Dark Ages or something?"

She was looking directly at Baby. Sam was silent.

"Nineteen-sixty-seven, that one," said Dean. He added, cautiously. "She runs great—"

"I'm sure she does, every other month or so, between breakdowns," said Ruby, chuckling.

"That truck never breaks down," Dean snapped. He heard the sharp tone in his voice and sighed mentally, giving an apologetic shrug to Sam.

"Is that so?" said Ruby. "Never breaks down? Remarkable. And look, it's so clean, too." Laughing a little, she walked over and trailed a finger through the mud on the Chevy's windshield. Her own Mercedes seemed to have stayed inexplicably clean on the drive down, almost as if charmed somehow, while the Chevy was, of course, coated from bumper to bumper with a perfect coating of brown mud. It was melt-off week, after all, and mud puddles were everywhere, but Dean was already kicking himself for not having washed it earlier today.
Ruby's finger left a sharp line in the mud as she drew a little doodle on the corner of the windshield.

"What's that?" asked Sam curiously.

"Oh, just for luck," said Ruby. She pulled out a Kleenex and fastidiously wiped the mud off the tip of her finger, and she added, glancing at Baby again, "Well, I suppose this kind of truck is fine if you don't really need, y'know, decent mileage, or air bags, or anti-lock brakes or satellite radio or like... everything, ha ha! I bet it doesn't have heated seats, either, does it?" She turned to Sam and gives him a wink. "Those heated seats come in real handy sometimes, don't they, Sam?"

"They're, um, nice, yeah," said Sam. He was avoiding Dean's gaze.

"Not just heated seats, remember," Ruby said. "Massaging heated seats. And don't forget the fourteen-speaker sound system."

"Dining hall's this way," said Dean shortly, turning on his heel to point them back the way they'd come. "Seminar starts soon. C'mon." He'd originally been planning on taking them out for a quick drive around the lake and maybe showing Ruby his vintage cassettes, but it was clear that the tour was over.

Seminar set-up was well underway by the time they got to the dining hall. Shawn and Nicole were lowering blinds over all the windows to try to dim the main room a bit from the endless light, while Ryan set up the little projector, various other grad students bringing out extra chairs and tables. The rest of the chattering crowd were eating dinner, downing heaping plates of Teddy Bear's beef stew with slabs of his warm fresh-made bread. Dessert included peach cobbler and, an especially rare treat, a fruit salad.

Dean found good seats for Sam and Ruby, steered them through the buffet line, and got them squared away with a couple of the priceless Alaskan Ambers. (It actually hurt to put one of the precious beers in Ruby's hands, but Dean was determined to be a good host.)

Ruby was subtly, but constantly, in physical contact with Sam. She alway seemed to be draping an arm across his shoulders, leaning against him, or, as now, resting a hand casually on his knee while she looked around the hall, making a string of increasingly annoying comments.

"Alaska Petroleum has better black-out blinds," she mentioned, glancing at Ryan and Nicole struggling with another torn windowshade. "Maybe we could get you some." Next she was poking at her fruit salad. "No mango?" she said, a disappointed frown briefly marring her perfect face. "Boy, these peaches have seen better days, haven't they?" She speared a chunk of peach and held it up critically. "Is this... out of a can?" she asked Sam.

Dean put in, "I can get you a fresh apple or something, if you'd rather." He was sitting across from them trying to eat his own stew, but with every comment from Ruby, his appetite faded more and more. He forced a cheerful-host smile back onto his face as he said, "We've got apples, and oranges, and some grapes I think. All fresh. All the way from California." He couldn't help adding, "All the way to Anchorage and then to Fairbanks and then up and over the Atigun Pass. Apples survive the journey pretty well. Mangos and peaches not so much."

"Oh, that's fine, never mind, canned peach is just... great," Ruby said, nibbling a small corner off the peach chunk and setting the remainder down. She pushed the little bowl of fruit salad away
delicately, leaving the rest uneaten. "Did I mention, Sam, AP's got cargo ships coming straight up from Panama now? Now that the pack ice melts off so fast in spring, the tropical cargo containers can come right into Prudhoe Bay and dock out by the rigs. Oh and, by the way, anything you want from Central America I can order for you. Papayas or pineapple or whatever. Or mangos."

"Thanks," said Sam, carefully not meeting Dean's eyes.

Dean said politely, "You want an orange or something, Sam?"

"Yeah, that'd be great," said Sam. He took a big spoonful of his fruit salad and wolfed it down, canned peach and all.

"They're only from California, though," said Dean, lacing his fingers together and looking only at Sam. "For some reason, papayas from Panama aren't super common on the arctic tundra. But we do have California oranges."

"A California orange would be awesome," said Sam.

Ruby ignored this whole exchange. She was looking around the whole hall now, fruit salad still untouched. "You know," she said to Sam, one hand on his forearm, "I've got an idea. This place definitely looks like it could use some more stable funding."

"We do pretty well with NSF, actually," said Dean. "We're one of NSF's long-term research stations."

"Well, you know, that's just federal money," she said, with a dismissive little sniff. "I was just thinking, what if AP offered some base funding? We could spruce the place up a bit, get it up to MHS — minimum habitable state, you know — maybe provide some base funding for the research. I was talking to Crowley about it. My boss, I mean. Regional head of the Prudhoe Bay operations. He's just under the CEO."

Dean said, as calmly as he could, "You mean, like... take over?"

"Well, just from a management and funding perspective," Ruby said, with a little shrug. "NSF and the university could certainly still be... around."

"And who'd control the research?"

"Oh, the scientists, of course," said Ruby immediately. After a very brief pause she added, "We might offer comments on the manuscripts. Oh, and, you know, the manuscripts might have to go through internal review, but that's just a formality."

"Interesting," said Dean, who was now having to remind himself repeatedly not to flip the little bowl of fruit salad right into her face. "So... you think it'd be a good idea if a major oil corporation took over the US's top climate-change research station and controlled all the publications?"

For a moment a scowl flitted over Ruby's face, and there seemed to be a shift in the light that made her eyes almost seem to flicker to a darker black. Just for the merest microsecond. It was a very spooky microsecond, though, almost as if the whites of her eyes actually had turned black, the same optical illusion that Dean had noticed once up at Deadhorse. But it was so brief Dean wasn't even sure what he had seen — or if he had seen anything at all. The very next moment there was no scowl at all, certainly no change in her eyes, and the charming smile was back onto her face. "Just an idea!" she said airily, waving her hand. "Just trying to think of ways to help."

Dean blinked, looking around. It must have been something to do with the light. Ryan and Nicole
were still fiddling with the windowshades, and shadows were flashing across the table now and then. A shadow must have hit her eyes. Also, a light bulb had just burnt out overhead, coincidentally.

"Interesting idea," said Dean. He stood and shoved his chair back.

Sam asked, his voice a little quiet, "Aren't you going to finish your dinner?"

"Not hungry," said Dean, grabbing his half-full plate. "I'll save it for later. I gotta help set up anyway. Nobody else can ever seem to remember how to hook up the damn projector cables."

It was just an excuse; as he walked away he realized he was more rattled than he wanted to admit.

It must have been a trick of the light. Like up at Deadhorse. And like with the feather. What else could it have been, after all?

Dean stuffed his uneaten stew in a fridge to have later, and strode over to the middle aisle where Ryan and Phil were now tussling with Kupaluk's little projector, which was perched up on a small stack of boxes. Sam caught up with him a second later.

"Dean, she's just trying to help," Sam said in a low voice.

"Last thing Kupaluk needs is AP wading in and screwing everything up," Dean said shortly. "An oil company? Running an ecology station? Is she frickin' serious?"

"Maybe it's not such a bad idea?" Sam suggested, almost in a whisper. "You're always saying how you need more funding—"

"Goddam projector's dead," snapped Dean, for it wouldn't turn on. He was grateful for the chance to change the subject, and just said to Sam, "Hold on, I gotta fix this." Sam fell silent, watching as Dean flipped the power on and off, but the projector still wouldn't come on. Ryan even ran to fetch a new cable. But nothing worked.

"Gotta be the bulb," Dean concluded reluctantly.

"Just when that ceiling bulb overhead blew, too," remarked Sam. "What are the chances?"

Dean shrugged. "Chances are excellent, because my luck seems to be crap today." He swore, his shoulders sagging as he looked around at the chattering crowd. This was supposed to be the inaugural seminar of the season, and setting it up was Dean's responsibility, and nothing was working. This evening just wasn't going well at all.

"Got another bulb?" asked Sam.

"No," said Dean, with a heavy sigh. "I am just now realizing that no, we don't have a backup bulb, because this is the backup bulb that I put in at the end of last season, and I forgot to order more. That is, unless Ruby can pull a projector bulb out of her ass—"

"Can I help?" said a gravelly voice from behind him. Dean spun; there was Castiel.

He'd just come in the main door and had come up behind Dean, hat and scarf in one hand but his pack (inevitably) still on his back.
He looked good; his face had gotten more tanned over the last couple days, a healthy wind-burned glow on his cheeks, his hair tousled. He met Dean's gaze with a warm smile, and, like magic, all of the annoyance about the burnt-out bulb and about Ruby and about Sam all just faded away. Cas was here. Dean had invited him, and Cas had actually come. And he was smiling at Dean. Dean felt a broad smile spreading across his own face too, in return.

"You made it," said Dean, beaming at him.

Cas nodded, still smiling back. "I arranged my transects so that I'd be doing nest surveys in this direction today," he said. "It was only an hour's walk from the end of my last transect line." He gave Sam a warm smile too, extending a hand in greeting. "Good to see you again, Sam."

Sam shook his hand with a laugh. "Good to see you, dude! Castiel, wasn't it? Do I remember that right?"

Castiel nodded, and Sam said, "Glad to see you're still alive. Hey, you'll never guess — after we ran into you on the road that day, guess what happened? We had the best wolf sighting EVER. It went right past us!"

"I heard," said Cas, with a nod. "The white female, correct? She has pups now. She and her mate. You should come see them."

Sam looked at Dean, who nodded in confirmation. "Cas knows where their den is," Dean explained. "He's seen the pups."

"Holy smokes, that's awesome," said Sam to Cas. "You actually know where it is? Like, you could find it again?"

Cas nodded. "I might be able to take you out to see still more of God's creation, if you're interested. And, yes, specifically, perhaps I could introduce you to the pups. You haven't signed that demon deal, I hope?"

Sam gave a short laugh, and said, "Nope, not yet. Actually, I gotta introduce you to my supervisor, she's super cool—" He turned toward Ruby's chair, already calling, "Hey, Ruby?"

But Ruby was gone.

A little asking around confirmed that she'd apparently hurried out to the AP truck. And for some reason she didn't seem to be coming back, as the minutes dragged on. Sam soon went outside to check on her, while Dean continued to fiddle with the projector.

"Technical issues," Dean explained to the waiting crowd of scientists. "You all just take a seat and I'll see what I can do." To Cas he muttered, "If we can't fix this, seminar may be off. Unless the Princeton guy — our speaker — wants to do an interpretive dance about his data. Bulb's dead and I don't have a backup." He looked down hopelessly at the burned-out projector bulb in his hand.

Cas plucked the bulb out of Dean's hand and held it up to the light, squinting at it as if he could peer inside. "I don't think it was ever alive," he reported.

Dean laughed. "Filament's broken, I mean."

"Ah, yes, it is," said Cas, still peering at the bulb. "Dean, I fear this may be my fault. I don't have full control any more——"

"It was already dead before you picked it up," Dean explained. "It's an ancient projector — the new
ones don't even use this kind of bulb. It's hard to even get bulbs for it anymore. Hey, careful there—"
For Castiel, after scowling at the bulb for a moment, was now wrapping it firmly between both his
heads. His eyes closed.

His face paled slightly.

"Try it now," he said a moment later, his voice a little hoarser than usual. He held out the bulb to
Dean.

"I'm sure it's dead—"

"I think the filament might be back in position," said Cas. "It might have just been a, what do you
call it, a short? Try it again."

"Bulbs don't really work like that," Dean started explaining, but to humor Cas he put the bulb back
in the projector and pressed the power button again. This time the projector lit up at once, a
Powerpoint logo splashing brightly onto the big screen at the front of the room. The whole crowd
gave a smattering of applause and the chatting people began to head to their seats. Dean just stared at
the screen for a moment.

"Man, do you ever have the magic touch," he finally said to Cas.

"I used to have the magic touch with a lot of things," remarked Castiel, shaking out his hands. "So to
speak. These days I'm lucky if I can manage to open a bottle of that beer of yours without straining
my fingers."

People were sitting down now, and the Princeton guy was firing up his Powerpoint file, and so Dean
hustled Castiel to the back of the room. "Got two chairs for us in the way back there," he whispered,
pointing out the two chairs — already arranged backwards, their seatbacks facing the screen. "I put
'em kind of near the door where it's cooler, so it'll make sense that you're keeping your jacket and
your pack on. But, hey, where's Sam?"

For Sam had not come back from checking on Ruby. Their two seats were still empty. A moment
later Sam came hurrying back through the front door, letting in a puff of cold wind along with a flash
of bright evening sunlight. Hurrying over to Dean, he whispered, "Ruby's not feeling well. She's
gonna hang out in her truck."

"Is she all right?" asked Castiel, standing up from his chair. "Maybe I could help. I used to be able to
do a little bit of human health care, from time to time—"

"She says she's fine," said Sam. "Said, don't send anybody out. She wants to just chill out there and
get some peace and quiet. Told me to watch the seminar anyway. The truck's on and it's warm; she'll
be okay. Said she'd radio me if she needs anything. Just a little sick to her stomach, she said. Maybe
it was the peaches?"

"There's nothing wrong with the peaches," Dean couldn't help snapping. He reined himself in a
moment later, saying, "I mean, we all ate them and we're all fine. Sorry she's feeling bad, though. I
was gonna introduce her to Cas here. Sure she's okay out there? She need anything?"

"She says she's fine," said Sam, looking glum. "I might just watch the seminar and then take off,
though." He took a breath, and said, looking quite disappointed, "Dean, I'm sorry."

"It's cool, it's cool," said Dean. "Seminar's only fifty minutes long. You'll be outta here in no time."

"I wanted to hang with you a bit," said Sam sadly.
Dean clapped him on the shoulder. "This isn't your only chance. Just grab your seat, the speaker's about to start. Let me know if Ruby needs anything. We got an EMT here and everything."

"Will do," said Sam, the worried look on his face easing a little. He held up his cell phone, saying, "I'll text her now and then to be sure she's okay."

"No cell service on the tundra—" Dean began automatically.

"—but Alaska Petroleum's entire fleet of Mercedes all have their own wi-fi," said Sam with a grin.

"Of course they do," said Dean with a sigh.

As soon as Sam sat down, Cas took a step closer to Dean and whispered, "Did I hear correctly that there may be peaches available?"

"They're just from cans," explained Dean, a little glumly.

"Peaches from cans sounds fantastic," said Cas. There was something a little shaky in his voice, and Dean took a closer look at him. It almost looked like he'd even gone a little pale under his tan, and he was sagging a little as he stood there, looking quite tired. He was even bracing himself with one hand on the projector's little stack of boxes — and he'd been standing that way, Dean now realized, leaning heavily on the boxes, ever since they'd fixed the projector.

Well, he'd been hiking all day, and he'd arrived so late that he hadn't eaten yet.

"You hungry?" Dean asked.

"Extremely," Cas confessed, a rueful smile on his face.

The Princeton guy was still getting his files in order, so Dean dragged Cas's backwards-chair over to a table at the back of the room and set up him in a corner with a huge bowl of beef stew. Cas dove in like he was starving, and he was soon hunkered down intently over his his stew bowl, holding it carefully with one hand and taking in spoonful after spoonful with the other. He was soon looking better, the color returning to his cheeks. He emptied the bowl in record time and was soon looking wistfully over at the serving station.

"There's lots more," said Dean, taking his empty bowl. "Want another serving?"

"Oh, I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble...." says Cas half-heartedly.

"No trouble,"

"I don't want to interfere."

"You're not interfering. We've got lots," says Dean, walking over to spoon him up another bowlful, along with a big chunk of warm bread laced with butter, and a green salad, and both the fruit salad and the peach cobbler for dessert.

Cas was like a bottomless pit. He loved the stew, he loved the bread, he loved the salad, and when he got to the desserts he seemed nearly ecstatic about both the peach cobbler and the fruit salad. Dean took a particular pleasure in watching Cas close his eyes in apparent ecstasy as he carefully
chewed down one canned-peach after another, clearly relishing every bite.

Cas wasn't the only one still eating. Friday seminars were always accompanied by the soft background music of the clinking of forks against plates. But Dean was so entranced by watching Cas enjoy his food that he nearly missed his cue to introduce the Princeton guy.

The "Princeton guy" was a famed ecologist who'd been doing work in Greenland and was only briefly visiting Kupaluk. Everybody was interested to hear what was going on with the tundra in Greenland on the other side of the pole, and Castiel perked up noticeably at the mention of Greenland, setting his fork down quietly as the seminar started. "I've worked there," he whispered to Dean. Cas rearranged his chair and they were soon sitting side-by-side, cowboy style, both leaning on their chair seatbacks. Sam soon joined them, pulling up a third chair on Dean's other side; it turned out he wanted to be near the door so he could dart outside now and then to check on Ruby.

It was nice sitting with the two of them. Sam seemed to find the talk interesting. Dean found himself glancing over at Cas fairly often to check his reaction too — and Cas, it turned out, was doing the same, glancing over at Dean now and then, or leaning close to whisper a question or a comment.

At one point Dean looked over to find that Cas was frowning intently at the screen. One forearm was draped across his chair's seat-back now, cradling the elbow of his other arm, and his chin was propped up on one hand. Dean watched him for a long moment, and found his eyes drifting across Cas's profile.

He told himself he was checking Cas's state of health — what with Cas's wobbly look earlier, and Ruby's illness, Dean didn't want to take any risks — but Cas seemed to have bounced back from his spell of wobbliness earlier. Right now he looked every inch the thoughtful field scientist, what with that intense frown of concentration coupled with his windblown, disheveled, just-hiked-three-hours-to-get-here look.

He looked damn good.

Dean was so wrapped up in checking Cas's reactions that he forgot to pay much attention to the talk. He only tuned in again because of Cas's increasingly intense frown.

"So just to review what I think you all know," the Princeton guy was saying, "the tundra will be gone from the North Slope in about fifty years. The shrubbification is already well underway, as you all know. We're forecasting it'll turn completely to shrubs and then, eventually, taiga. The black spruce will take a little while to get over the Brooks — the advancing edge of boreal forest doesn't really move very fast — but even so, current models indicate that in about seventy years, all the tundra birds will have lost two-thirds to four-fifths of their global breeding range. They'll have to retreat to the high arctic Canadian Islands. Personally I'm hopeful they'll be able to hang on to northern Greenland for a few decades longer. But then there are the self-amplifying feedbacks, which I know you guys all know about, such that the two-hundred year forecasts show tundra disappearing entirely."

"From Alaska?" somebody asked.

The Princeton guy gave him a small smile. "From the planet," he clarified.

A quiet hush fell over the dining hall.

"Forecasts have been converging on that outcome for a good ten years now," clarified the Princeton scientist, "and at this point we're just dialing in the exact rate at which it'll happen. But we all know that, right? Not a surprise by now. Anyway, to sum up my other main points—"
Dean had heard this all before, in bits and pieces. A lot of the key work had been done right here at Kupaluk. It was a given, in Alaska, that global warming was real; nobody with boots on the ground, or boots on the melting permafrost and vanishing pack ice to put it more precisely, could have any doubt. Maybe the city folks down in the lower forty-eight and the doofuses in DC still had the luxury of arguing about it, but up here in the Arctic the question had been settled for years. But somehow Dean had never heard the big picture put so bluntly.

The tundra was going to **disappear**? Permanently? Forever? From Kupaluk? From all of Alaska? From the **planet**?

There were lots of questions when the talk finished. Dean glanced over at Cas again, who was still frowning deeply, staring down at his interlaced hands. He looked over at Dean, and they exchanged a rather solemn look.

"Damn, that was a dark ending," commented Sam. Dean turned to him to find that Sam was pecking away at his phone.

"Just was filling Ruby in on the talk," Sam explained. "She's better now, by the way. I'll run and check on her in a sec. Hell of a talk."

"I gotta ask," Dean said slowly. "Is AP on board yet with global warming? Or are they still denying it?"

Sam gave a faint laugh. "They were on board twenty years ago," he said.

"What? I thought the CEO denied it for ages. Isn't he still denying it, actually?"

"Publicly, they deny it. Still do. Privately, turns out they're counting on it." Sam finished sending his text and looked up at Dean. "Ruby says they've been planning for it for years. They're making a big money play: If the pack ice disappears it'll make drilling like a hundred times easier, so they're ramping all these plans for Arctic Ocean drilling. They want to get at the oil under the ice at the North Pole. So does Russia, I guess. Big scuffle over who owns the seafloor there. Also they're putting in big ports for commercial tanker traffic. But anyway, yeah, they totally know. They sent Ruby down just to get the update on how fast it's happening."

"Alaska Petroleum believes in global warming?" Dean said, still trying to take that in. It was totally contrary to their public statements. "But, wait, haven't they been funding those climate-denier-type politicians?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah, I don't quite get that either. Hey, where's Cas going?"

Dean turned and looked. Cas was gone.

"Dammit, it's not just the tundra that's disappearing," Dean said, jumping up and trotting outside, Sam by his side. "Hope he hasn't taken off. I was really hoping he'd hang out for a bit." Sam gave him a rather sharp look.

Two minutes' scouting turned up Cas out on the open-air deck. The deck had a spectacular view southward to the mountains, and Castiel was standing there quietly, gazing at the view. Sam headed
off to check on Ruby again, and Dean approached Cas.

"Some view, huh?" said Dean.

"They're all going to die out," says Castiel. Dean realized, then, that Cas wasn't looking at the mountains. He was looking at a little shrub about twenty feet away. On the top of the shrub was a tiny dark blob: a little bird, singing its heart out. It had its head flung back and its bill wide open, singing at the very top of its lungs. The bird moved a little and the sun caught it, and an iridescent bull's-eye of color on its chest seemed to spring into view, spectacular iridescent blue and chestnut. It was the same kind of little blue-breasted bird that Dean had spotted earlier.

"Is that a, um..." said Dean tentatively.

"Bluethroat," says Castiel. "I've been observing them for a long time. Them, and the Lapland longspurs, and the northern wheatears, and the yellow wagtails... They've all nested here for hundreds of thousands of years." He gestured over to the rocky slopes a mile away. "Since before humans were humans, northern wheatears have always nested over there, on that rocky hillside, see it?" Dean nodded, and Cas added, "And the longspurs have been nesting on this southern slope with all the cottongrass, right before us, for ten thousand years. And the ptarmigan, the eiders, the yellow-billed loons, the jaegers...." He paused. "Before then, they followed the edges of the glaciers southward. Hundreds of thousands of years..."

He paused a long moment before adding, "Dean, they have nowhere else to go. I knew things were changing. It's been obvious for some time. Things always change; nothing lasts forever. But it's been so stable, for the last ten thousand years, and I just... " He sighed. "I thought we had more time. But — what that fellow said... It's happening so much faster than I realized."

"Yeah," says Dean quietly. "Sucks, huh." He cast around mentally for something encouraging to say. "But, some change is natural, right?"

"Not this fast," says Cas, shaking his head. "It's not natural this fast. Species need time to adapt, and this isn't enough time. Dean, they'll be driven north, all these tundra birds. Not these specific individuals, but their children, and their great-grandchildren. They'll be driven all the way north to the Arctic coast as the shrubs move in, and then they'll run out of land. What are they going to do?" He gave a heavy sigh. "I almost wish I won't be here to witness it."

"Well, you won't, if that's any consolation," says Dean. "That's, like, two hundred years off. You and I won't be around."

Cas just bowed his head, a pained expression crossing his face.

"And maybe they'll adapt by then?" suggested Dean.

Cas gave him a skeptical look. "Two hundred years is the blink of an eye," he said quietly. "And I already know what happens when things change this fast. I've seen it before. What happens is, they can't adapt. What happens is, almost everything dies."

"At least the planet will recover, though," said Dean. He was grasping at straws, and he knew it, but he couldn't help wanting to cheer Cas up.

"Yes, in about twenty million years," said Castiel. "But it's not about whether or not the planet will recover. It's about the suffering that will happen before then."

"You make it sound like an apocalypse," commented Dean.
"Indeed," was all Cas said.

Dean fell silent.

There was really no way to put a positive spin on this topic. It was always the elephant in the room (or the mammoth on the tundra, rather), in any conversation at Kupaluk. In fact, Dean had been through many iterations of this conversation before, with the tundra scientists over the years. Fourteen years ago the conversations had tended to culminate in lots of excited discussion about what might happen and what could be done, but these days the climate-change conversations tended to end just like the way this conversation was going with Cas: everybody quiet, everybody looking at the tundra, and everybody depressed.

"Sorry it was such a bummer of a talk," said Dean, slumping down to lean against a nearby picnic table.

"Actually I very much appreciate hearing the update," said Cas, still looking at the tiny bird and its brilliant splash of iridescent blue. "It's making me plan a little differently."

They listened to the little bluethroat's exuberant, bubbling song.

Eventually Castiel said, "Death comes to us all, but that doesn't mean we just lie down and die. We fight for the longest and best life possible, don't we? The same is true of species — the fact that they'll go extinct someday doesn't mean we should just let them all go extinct today." He was silent a moment, gazing out over the snowy tundra, with its patches of greening tussocks, the air filled with song, life still surging to the fore despite everything. "Maybe there's still some things we could do?" he said. He almost seemed to be talking to himself. "If we could just slow down the rate of change... a soft landing, instead of a crash. If we could just hang on to northern Greenland, Dean, and those Canadian islands, then all these birds will have a chance. If we could just buy them even the littlest bit of time, a bit of space. One patch of tundra. Then they'd have a chance."

"It's always worth fighting for one more day," said Dean, finding, as he said it, that this was something he truly believed. "One more day is always worth a battle. And enjoying the day, too."

"Carpe diem, you mean?" Castiel said, with a little laugh. "You're quite right. The bluethroat's still singing, and so should we, I suppose." But with a long sigh he added, "I just thought we had more time."
Sam came walking back a few minutes later.

"How's Ruby?" Dean asked. "She feeling any better?"

"Yeah, she says she's fine," said Sam. "But she's thinking to head back up to Deadhorse tonight. Like, now."

"Straight back?" Dean said. He wasn't entirely surprised — Ruby's "illness" had given Dean a distinct impression that she just didn't want to be at Kupaluk any longer than she absolutely had to. But Sam and Ruby had been scheduled to stay overnight, and it was a long trip back up to Deadhorse so late in the evening. "Do you want to at least hit the sauna?" he offered tentatively.

Sam shook his head, with a wan smile. "Honestly I'd love to," he said. "But Ruby really wants to just take off."

Ruby did look pretty ill when Dean and Cas went over to the Mercedes to wish her farewell. She was hunkered against the passenger seat all wrapped up in her parka, scarf pulled up snugly over her mouth and her hat scrunched down over her forehead. She was barely even visible under all her gear. Cas had wanted to say hello, but she seemed asleep already and didn't even roll down her smoked-glass windows. Dean had to give Sam a rushed farewell at the side of the car and then stood, a little disconsolate, watching them drive away.

"Pity he didn't want to stay longer," mused Cas, standing next to him. "I was thinking to show him the wolf pups, and maybe have him meet the male."

Dean didn't answer; he was still standing with his arms crossed, watching the Mercedes bounce its way down the rutted road. "Something's off with Ruby," he said.

"Physical illness can be surprisingly debilitating," said Castiel, with an air of dispensing a rare piece of information, as if Dean might never have heard of physical illness before. "I don't know if you've ever been ill, but it can cause extraordinary fatigue. Really quite astonishing."

"I've been sick before, Cas," Dean said, shaking his head. "It's not that. It's something else."
"What, then?" said Cas, turning to Dean curiously.

Dean shrugged, "Don't know." He sighed. "Maybe I'm just pissed she didn't like camp. I really wanted Sam to hang out a bit more."

Cas watched Dean's face for a moment, and then turned and watched the departing Mercedes, just now disappearing over the farthest ridge of the Haul Road. "You know," he mused, "I do get the sensation that the two of you are supposed to be together. You and Sam."

"Could've fooled me," Dean said, a little sourly. "Don't suppose I could interest you in the sauna either?" he asked. But as he'd expected, Cas shook his head — though at least he looked regretful about it. Dean said, feeling a little hopeless now, "I really don't give a damn about your back thing. I won't even look. I'll look the other way. Hell, I'll wear a blindfold."

"Someone else might see," said Cas quietly. His hands were once again tight on his backpack straps, as if even the thought of going into the sauna made him feel exposed.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. You can't spend your whole life hiding, Cas."

"I can, and I have," said Cas, his voice now very quiet. "Since 1973."

Dean looked at him. 1973 must be when Cas was born, then. Forty-five years old, now? He looked a little younger than that, but it was a plausible age for him.

Had he been hiding his "deformity" his entire life?

A thought occurred to Dean. "Cas, is that why you stay in the Arctic? No cities, no people? Or not many people, anyway. To hide your... um..." Dean groped for a neutral word. "Your condition?"

"There's several reasons," Cas said. "But that's one, yes. Originally I wanted to investigate the long-term..." But he paused partway through this sentence, glancing away, and then he zipped up his sheepskin jacket with an air of decisiveness. "I should be going," he said. He looked back at Dean. "Thank you very much for inviting me. The seminar was fascinating. Though, of course, also terrifyingly depressing."

"Yeah, it kinda was," said Dean, with a rueful sigh. "Also kinda depressing that Sam didn't stay."

"Yes," said Cas equably. "That's almost as depressing as the imminent destruction of one of the largest biomes of the planet."

That, at least, made Dean laugh a little. "Way to put things into perspective, Cas," he said drily. "Point taken."

Cas blinked at him, as if he hadn't realized that his comment might come across as a little heartless. "Forgive me," he said, setting a gloved hand on Dean's parka-clad arm. "I didn't mean to belittle your personal issues. Not in the least." Cas looked at him a long moment, and Dean felt his hand squeeze lightly. "Thank you for inviting me, Dean," said Cas. "Despite the depressing nature of the talk, I'm glad I was able to hear it. And most of all, it was pleasant to come and visit."

"The free food ain't bad, huh," said Dean, clapping a hand on Cas's shoulder in return.

"The food was marvelous," said Cas. "But I wasn't talking about the food—"

"Sure thing," said Dean, cutting him off. "Come back any time." Cas's corduroy sheepskin coat was soft and textured under Dean's touch, his shoulder firm and muscled underneath. Dean almost
wanted to let his hand linger there. But he made himself remove his hand and give Cas a brisk nod.

Cas gave him a rather sad look. But then he nodded, donned his hat, and wound his scarf around his neck. He gave Dean one last smile, raised his hand in the inevitable farewell, and began walking away.

He hadn't gotten five strides when Dean realized how ridiculous it was to let Cas just walk all the way around the lake when Dean could drive him there in a tenth of the time.

"Cas, wait," Dean called, trotting up to him. Cas turned, and Dean said, "I'll drive you partway. C'mon." Cas eyed Dean uncertainly, but followed him willingly enough back to the old Chevy, where Dean swung up into the driver's seat and stuck the key in to fire it up. But two things happened at once: First, Castiel was already backing away, shaking his head.

Second, the Chevy wouldn't start.

Dean frowned down at the steering wheel. It was probably just frozen gas lines or something, but it was rare for the Chevy to misbehave. No matter, though; the more important point was the way Cas was backing slowly away. Dean had totally forgotten that the Chevy truck seat would be uncomfortable for Cas, with his pack and his "condition" and all.

"Dean," said Cas. "I'm afraid I can't—"

"I know, I forgot, sorry," said Dean rapidly. He thought fast. "Wait, wait, I got another idea," he said, hopping down out of the Chevy. Cas watched him curiously as Dean turned in place, doing a quick assessment of snow cover and snow fields.

The lake ice was still solid everywhere except the stream inflow zone. There was plenty of snow on the north-facing slopes, and even the south-facing slopes had enough strips of snow to be workable. *I can get him at least two-thirds of the way home, Dean decided. Farther than the Chevy can get him right now.* Cas was still looking him, a little puzzled, as Dean finished assessing the hills, turned to him and grinned, saying, "Ever been on a snow machine?"

Not fifteen minutes later Dean was steering his favorite "iron dog", an old-model snow machine, toward the increasingly-long plywood gangway, which now was spanning quite a good eight feet of open water at the lake's edge, while Cas watched with intent curiosity from a few feet away. Now that they were close to the lake, the air was ringing not only with the birdsong but with a musical tinkling, something like the sound of a hundred tiny wind chimes all around the lakeshore. This was the sound of the very outermost edge of the lake ice beginning to fall apart, fraying gradually into thousands of foot-long narrow blades that then floated around on the surface, constantly knocking into each other with endless cascades of delicate ringing notes.

Dean waded, in mud boots, across the shallow moat of open water to pull the plywood gangway into place. His boots stirred up the ice shards with every step, producing a minor chorus of the ice-music.

"That's one of my favorite sounds," remarked Castiel. "The music of the ice."

"Sound of spring," said Dean, nodding. "One of my favorites, too."

"That and the song of the bluethroat," said Cas, gesturing toward the little bird they'd seen singing
earlier. It was still at it, the same bird, now perched high up on the dining hall's lightning rod with its little mouth wide open, cascades of musical notes still pouring from its mouth. Cas then started naming other songs. "Lapland longspurs," he said, as one of the black-breasted sparrows sailed past overhead. "Golden plover," he added as another bird shot past. "The plovers always sound so proud of their nest, don't they? Savannah sparrow, that's the buzzy one. Yellow warbler. Hoary redpoll, overhead now, that's its flight call — it's calling to its friend. There's the friend, see, right behind. Horned lark over to your right, hear how the song climbs in pitch?"

He named a dozen birds in less than a minute, and Dean stood still by the plywood gangway for several moments, listening to all the songs Cas was pointing out. All of the songs were slightly familiar, but they'd always been just part of the tundra background noise to Dean. Birdsongs were never something he'd tried to pick apart or identify. But as Cas named the songs one by one, they seemed to come clear, each one distinct and unique.

A particularly distinctive melodious one came again. "Lapland longspur?" Dean guessed. Cas smiled, nodding. Then came the one that rose in pitch. "Horned lark?" said Dean. Cas nodded again, his smile broadening. It was amazing how much that smile changed the shape of his face, and his whole demeanour, and how it seemed to brighten his blue eyes, and Dean found himself grinning back. "Yellow wagtail," said Dean, more confident, hoping to get a flash of that smile again. And he did. "Hoary redpoll." Each time Cas's smile broadened.

Dean had to remind himself to get the snow machine going. He gestured to Cas to walk across the plywood bridge on his own, and Dean then steered the snow machine across, getting well onto the thickest part of the ice before he waved to Cas to come close.

"Now you just get on behind me," said Dean. "You can keep your pack on, see. No worries about how to lean back in a truck seat or anything."

"I do appreciate this, Dean," said Cas, his voice husky again.

"No sweat. Though I swear the truck'll be possible too, for you. I'll rig up some padding or something. But for right now, this'll work better. Now wrap your scarf on tight — make absolutely sure there's no loose ends that the wind could grab — and make sure your hat's on tight too, and hop on."

"Get on right behind you?"

"Right behind me and grab on around my waist," Dean instructed.

Too late, he realized that this might come across as pushy. But this was standard protocol, two people riding double on a snow machine like this. At Kupaluk it meant nothing much. Grad students might ride with PIs, staff with scientists; work colleagues might ride together. One might ride like this with friends, or distant acquaintances; it didn't mean anything. To Dean's relief, Cas didn't hesitate at all. He swung his leg over the seat and settled in place behind Dean.

A few things became clear at once. Cas was very warm, for one thing. Dean hadn't been aware of feeling cold, but the moment Cas was in place behind him, it was like having an electric heated blanket wrapped all across his back. Got my own heated seat, don't I, thought Dean, with a quiet grin to himself. So there, Ruby.

For another thing, Cas wasn't shy. He settled right into place behind Dean like they'd been doing this for years, and put both arms securely around Dean's waist. Not with that tentative half-hold that nervous first-timers tend to use, either, but wrapping both arms snugly all the way around. He even settled his chin comfortably on Dean's shoulder.
"Hold on," said Dean, finding he was really having to focus on the task of steering the snow machine. Cas gripped his waist even more tightly, and they set out across the lake.

It was late now, the sun hanging very low in the sky to the left, well into its night-time glide down to its midnight nadir. It was another beautiful sunny evening, the sky a deep cobalt blue now, with thin wisps of filmy cirrus drifting high overhead, tinged with the lemon and pink hues of the arctic evening. Dean went slowly at first, till he was sure Cas wasn't going to topple right off, and then he gave the snow machine a little more gas, opening up the throttle. It surged forward across the lake ice, its throaty roar drowning out any attempt at conversation.

The golden sun gleamed ahead. The evening wind had already gotten chillier, and as they picked up speed the wind in their faces grew bitingly cold. Cas only shifted closer; Dean felt him inch a little more firmly up behind, till his chest was resting firmly against Dean's back, his thighs against Dean's.

It could have been a turn-on. It was, in a way, even with the thick layers of outerwear and snow pants shielding them from each other. But it was something more as well, and Dean became aware of it only slowly, as they sped across the wide frozen lake. This was wonderful, being here with Cas, having him holding on like this, taking him over the lake. In the midst of all the doom and gloom of the evening, with the piercing knowledge that the eerily beautiful landscape around them would someday be gone forever, Dean suddenly felt happier than he had in years.

Fuck, Dean thought.

The pattern of his own behavior suddenly came clearer in his head.

He'd been half-aware of it all along, of course, but he'd been thinking of it in terms of just having to dampen down the kind of automatic flirting that he might do with any good-looking guy. But this was something more, wasn't it?

Couldn't take my frickin' eyes off him all evening. Been staying up late hoping he'll radio in. Can't wait to go up the north hill, just in case there's a frickin' note.

Fuck.

But all he could do was laugh at himself. And they continued across the lake. Dean added even more speed. The wind around them was lofting up skeins of ice crystals now, glittering sparks that caught the golden light and went swirling around them, some lofting up high in the air till the entire sky seemed to glitter, while other swirls of snow crystals went skirling low across the ice in great long loops. The whole surface of the vast lake seemed to slide and turn around them, like a loose sheet of satin that was flowing in huge shifting arcs. It was almost disorienting, like the whole lake was spinning underneath them. It seemed they were flying, soaring together through some kind of ice-crystal cloud. Dean indulged himself, then, and took the snow machine in a vast circle, so that the sun and the mountains seemed to spin around them. He felt Cas shifting a little behind him; Cas seemed to be almost automatically banking with the turns.

For a long exquisite moment, nothing else seemed to exist. Just the lake, the ice, the sun, the great swirling skeins of glittering ice, the wind; the roar of the motor, and, barely audible over the motor, the distant cries of the yellow-billed loons. Cas's arms were tight around Dean's waist, his chest warm against Dean's back, his chin propped snugly on Dean's shoulder, and Dean felt a glow of warmth and delight and joy so intense that he found it was actually hard to breathe. Surely it was just because of the wind.

But he knew it was something else.
When they reached the far shore Dean braked, quite regretfully, to a halt. They both sat still for a moment in the sudden silence, listening to the faint tinkling music of the shifting ice shards in the little strip of open water by shore.

The yodeling cry of the loons sounded once more, haunting and eerie.

Cas tightened his hands around Dean's waist, and he said, his voice almost choked, "That... was... exactly like flying."

"It is, isn't it?" Dean said, craning his head around, only to find that Cas was hastily wiping his eyes, with one gloved hand. Cas seemed to realize, then, that he was still clinging to Dean's waist with his other hand, and he let go quite suddenly and stepped off the snow machine, turning away for a moment to scrub at both his eyes. Maybe the wind had stung his eyes.

Dean waded a few yards through the musical ice-bits to shore and pulled the north shore's plywood-gangway into place. Castiel seemed to have gotten his eyes working again by then, and he helped position the other ends of the boards. They re-mounted the snow machine together. Over the plywood they went, more slowly now, and then they crossed the broad snowfield between the shore and the north hill. Cas began pointing to birds now and then, especially if one were singing. And Dean found that by now, he was able to name most of the songs confidently. "Yellow wagtail," he said of one. Cas nodded, pointing out another bird soaring overhead. "Golden plover," said Dean. One of the black-breasted sparrows came sailing down overhead, full of bubbling song, and Dean was sure: "Lapland longspur."

"You know the birds better than you said," remarked Cas.

"I got a good teacher," Dean replied.

They went up and over the north hill, and up and over the second hill. They passed the pingo-pool; they passed the mailbox. By now they had fallen into a companionable silence, and neither of them spoke. Cas was sitting relaxed now, hands almost loose around Dean's waist.

They went all the way to the far crest of the hill beyond the mailbox, the very spot where Dean had once waved a hello to a distant Castiel. Here on this high rocky ridge the snow ended, in a short expanse of lichen and heather. The snow machine could cross it, but not without damaging the fragile vegetation.

Dean looked ahead to Cas's little blue tent, scanning around for the best route down. The snow machine couldn't (or, shouldn't) cross snow-free tundra, but it would be very easy to steer around the bare lichen patch by going a little to the west, where there was a long strip of snow that went all the way down toward Topaz. But just as Dean was starting to guide the snow machine in a broad loop around the lichen, Cas tapped his shoulder.

"I'll walk from here," called Cas into his ear. "You don't have to come all the way to my camp."

"Oh, I don't mind."

"I'll walk from here," said Cas.

"Okay," said Dean, and he kept his voice calm and cheerful. He'd known this was coming. He braked to a smooth halt, and Cas dismounted. With Cas's body heat suddenly gone, a wave of cold air seemed to wash across Dean's back, and Dean shivered.

Once again Cas hadn't invited him to camp. And this time, as never before, it would have been exceptionally easy for Dean to visit. There seemed no other reason for this lack of invitation other
than that Cas was making a certain boundary very clear and consistent.

But it had been a marvelous ride nonetheless, hadn't it?

*He just wants a friend. I can be a friend.*

"Thank you so much, again, for the dinner, and the seminar," Cas said. "And the peaches. And the beer. And the stew."

"More where that all came from," said Dean, nodding equably. "You sure you're good from here?"

"It's an easy walk from here," Cas said. "I appreciate the offer, but I'll enjoy the walk. It's such a nice evening." For a long moment he lingered, his eyes on Dean's face, even drawing in a breath as if to say something to Dean. But he let the breath out without speaking, and then drew in another and said, with a soft smile, "You have a good evening."

"I will. You too," said Dean.

Dean sat there for a while watching him go, soaking in the image of Cas's outline against the snow. The dark hair, the tan coat, the black snowpants... the ever-present backpack. As Cas got farther away he began to look so small, so very fragile against that vast expanse of land and snow and sky, that Dean felt his hand twitching on the throttle, so strong was the impulse to race after him and pick him up and make sure he got all the way safely to his little tent.

Eventually it occurred to Dean that Cas must realize Dean was still watching, for the snow machine was idling audibly. Dean sighed and told himself in his best Bobby-voice, "Get out of here already, you goddam idjit." He revved the motor lightly and began bringing the vehicle around in a wide circle. Cas turned at once when he heard the engine change its pitch, and he waved one arm.

Dean waved back.

The drive back was strangely calming. Dean knew already that the moment on the lake would be engraved in his memory forever, like a shining and precious diamond of a moment, something he would always remember. But as he went up and over the hills, over the open snowfield, and back over the lake, he was also laughing at himself, as he thought, with equal parts of thrilled wonder and resigned despair:

*Fuck. Fuck. I've done the thing I swore I'd never do.*

*I've fallen for a straight guy.*

And try as he might, he could not regret it.
He just wants a friend, was the very first thought in Dean's mind when he woke up the next morning.

I can be a friend, he thought as he got dressed.

This was going to be painful. Dean could already see that coming. At nearly forty, he was no stranger to unrequited love and its particular brand of exquisite suffering. But it was a bit of a shock to feel how strongly it had taken hold of him.

Thought I was done with this sort of thing long ago, he thought, as he sat on the chair in the mud corner to pull his Tufs on. Thought it'd be just nice easy Haul Road drive-bys for the rest of my life. Happy Valley and Pump Station Three and the Sag River turnoff, and then back to work. No names, no pressure... no attachment.

And no pain.

Well, I'll take care of Cas, anyway, Dean resolved. He only had one boot on, but had slowed to a stop, gazing down sightlessly at the other boot in his hand, thinking. Clearly, making sure Cas was safe, and warm, and happy, was the priority here. In fact, the constant worry about Cas's whereabouts and his welfare had become almost a comfortable sensation at this point. It had only been a few weeks since they'd met, yet already it seemed to be second nature for Dean be thinking about Cas every day, wondering whether he was okay, making all those elaborate plans to ensure that Cas had enough food to eat.

I'll keep doing all that for sure, he thought. It wasn't even a decision that had to be made; it was just obvious. Even if he never wants anything more than that. I'll be happy just to take care of him. It's enough just to get to take care of him.

Then he had to roll his eyes at himself yet again, for there was a certain amount of noble, self-sacrificing drama wadded up in those little thoughts. And even an oddly seductive little thrill. The thrill, and the pain, of keeping a secret fire hidden in one's heart.

Goddamnit. I am really fucked, Dean thought.
Or not, rather. And then he had to laugh.

At that point Dean realized he was still sitting in the mud corner with one mud boot on and the other boot still dangling from his hand. He sighed, pulled the second boot on, and went out to start the day.

Last night's wind, the wind that had been blowing those ice crystals around on that memorable ride across the lake, turned out to have been the early harbinger of heavy weather from the west. Yesterday's blue sky had disappeared entirely; a thick bank of low dark clouds hung low over the tundra now, seemingly just a few feet overhead. As Dean stepped outside the clouds seemed almost to be pressing down, in a horizontal flat layer of low fog that was hovering so closely overhead that he almost had to fight a desire to duck. It was also starting to rain. Or sleet, rather, the wind blowing the icy little droplets into wicked diagonal streaks that began assaulting him like a pellet gun. As Dean trudged to breakfast, a million tiny sleet pellets seemed to knife right into his face. Matches my mood, he thought sourly.

He got into the dining hall, grabbed a cup of coffee and sat for a while at the long table by the windows, gazing out at the wall of dark gray sleet-fog that was now hiding the entire Brooks Range. Today was Saturday, and Dean had the whole weekend off. It was actually a rarity to have both days free. Normally Dean would have worked straight through this weekend, with at most a half-day free, till he rotated out for his break next week. But Ryan had offered to work an extra shift today so that Dean could take the weekend off. That had been back when Dean had still been thinking Sam would still be here all weekend. Back when he'd still been fantasizing about a fun brotherly-bonding weekend with Sam (well, and Cas too, had been the hope).

But they were both gone. Now what?

It was an awful day for any hikes or walks. (Hopefully Cas's tent was waterproof. Hopefully he was warm enough. Hopefully Cas had enough to eat....)

And, worse, this was Dean's last full weekend here for a while. Next Friday he'd be rotating out for a two-week break in Kansas.

Dean took a sip of coffee, thinking now about his two weeks away. He'd have to make sure Cas would be okay. Cas would have to get through two entire weeks with no Fig Newton deliveries, no more beer or peanut butter, and with nobody to check in on him.

Maybe I can have him check in with Shelly now and then? Dean thought. Shelly would be taking over from Dean for the next couple weeks. But that wouldn't fly; Cas wasn't an official camp resident, and regs were pretty clear about where a camp manager's duties stopped. Shelly might be willing to check on Cas once or twice, but certainly not every day; it would have to be done on her free time. She might be too busy. And if she happened to notice that Cas now had possession of some camp equipment... like, say, a certain radio, a certain satellite transmitter, a certain set of spare radio batteries... well, she'd be obliged to reclaim them. It wouldn't be fair to expect her to break regs on Dean's behalf.

Shelly was bound to notice the new wooden mailbox too, which hadn't, strictly speaking, been approved through normal channels. It was technically off of the Kupaluk research area (by all of ten meters) but it was probably on federal or state land — Dean hadn't really bothered to check.

Dean sighed, taking another sip of coffee. He was pretty sure Shelly would be willing to overlook the wooden box, but it just wouldn't work to also ask her to spend her rare free evenings doing food deliveries, or to keep a channel-six radio powered up and ready by her bed at all hours of the night.

Maybe I can get Cas a satellite phone? Dean thought. Then he could call straight to Kansas.
And I gotta make sure he at least has enough food.

Dean thought, again, of Cas wolfing down the stew last night, and his near-ecstasy at those delicious canned peaches that Ruby had been so dismissive of.

Then Dean had an idea.

Two ideas, actually. One was obvious: Dean had a whole week before he left, and he could spend much of that week shuttling more food to Cas, including plenty of canned food. (And another can opener, he reminded himself. Just to be on the safe side.) Canned fruit, canned beans, canned tuna — the sorts of things he'd been jotting down on his list the other day. Nonperishable stuff, dried stuff, weeks' worth of stuff. Then Cas would at least be okay, as far as food was concerned, for the two weeks until Dean got back to Kupaluk.

The other idea wasn't a long-term solution, but it involved the peaches. And the blueberries.

Dean had frozen most of Cas's wild blueberries, hoping for some bright ideas about something worthy to do with them. He rose, now, dumped his empty coffee mug in the dirty-dishes bin, and went to the kitchen, where he found Teddy Bear prepping several huge trays of rosemary-coated chicken breasts for dinner.

"Hey Ted," Dean said. "You got any recipes that use peaches and blueberries? I mean, together in the same thing?"

"Oh, hell yeah!" said Ted. He looked up from his chicken-prepping to say, "Those two are a match made in heaven!" He said this with such solemn intensity that Dean laughed, but Ted shook a mock-angry finger at him.

"I'm deadly serious," said Ted. "This is no laughing matter. I never joke about peaches and blueberries. It's a pie, Dean, and you of all people understand how important that is. And it's a hell of a pie."

"See, this is exactly why I got the university to keep you on," said Dean appreciatively. "Best pie baker on the North Slope."

"Best in Alaska," Ted corrected him sternly. "Not that I'm boasting, but it's just the plain facts, right?" As Dean laughed again, Ted added, "People get serious about their berries up here, y'know. One of the great wild foods of the north. One of the few you can just go collect yourself. There's some real work that goes into a berry pie."

"That's exactly it," said Dean. "So, here's the deal, this friend of mine gave me a big pile of wild blueberries that he picked. Like, several cups. I want to make something great with them. And I know he likes peaches too. So I thought, maybe the two together?"

"Make something tasty, give some of it back?" Ted said thoughtfully.

"That's the idea."

Ted shoved the chicken trays into a huge industrial oven, closed the oven door and stood up, wiping his hands thoughtfully with a dishtowel.

"This friend of yours ain't that hiker guy, is he?" he asked. "The bird dude? Gandalf who sent the white wolf?"

"Might be," said Dean.
"That's the guy who was sitting in back with you last night, right? He was right next to you?"

Dean hesitated.

Ted tended to watch the dining hall at night, to see who ate what and make sure nobody was going hungry. It was pretty common to see him leaning against the kitchen door, arms crossed over his flour-dusted apron, scanning the dining hall to see whether people seemed to be liking the food. In the process he tended to notice who was sitting with whom.

And sometimes Ted noticed other things, too.

He'd been the first to pick up on Shawn and Nicole. What else might he have seen?

"He might've been by me for a while, yeah," Dean admitted, as casually as he could.

Ted nodded, watching Dean's eyes for an unsettling moment. But all he said was, "Yeah, I get the picture. But I got a suggestion. Your friend's always out in the field, right? So, not a regular pie. Make mini-pies."

"Mini-pies?"

"In these," Ted said. He reached down to an open cupboard that had a wide array of baking tins and trays all stacked up vertically. Ted was a big guy, and he had to kneel down to rummage through the trays. Eventually he pulled out a tray from far in the back. Still on his knees, he showed it to Dean.

It was a muffin pan, sized for six large muffins, each about three inches across.

"This pan is for muffins, really," Ted explained, "Mega muffins. Big muffins. And large-sized-muffin pans happen to be perfect for making mini-pies." Dean took the pan, looking it over as Ted clambered back to his feet and dusted his knees off. "Super easy," added Ted, "You just wedge bits of pastry in the bottom, pop in the filling, bake, and hey presto, mini-pies. They travel great — they fit perfect in those round plastic lunch containers we've got. Easy for fieldwork. It's kind of like turnovers but the shape is better — more filling and less crust."

"Why have I never known about this?" asked Dean slowly, giving Ted a narrow look.

Ted gave him a wide grin. "Professional secret. They're a little too much hassle for making loads and loads for a big crowd, so I kind of never mention them as an option. But if you're just making a dozen or so, it's easy as, well, pie. It'll be a snap for you."

"For me?" Dean said.

"You'll be making 'em," said Ted. He nodded toward the oven. "I've got rosemary chicken to make. And about eight tons of rice pilaf, and butternut squash, and roasted portobellos for the veggie folks, and —"

"Yeah, so, I was hoping to bribe you into doing it," Dean confessed, shoulders falling a little. "I mean, dude, I just fix the trucks. I don't know how to bake. Like, at all."

"You do damn more than 'just fix the trucks'," Ted said, "and if you don't know how to bake by now, it's long past time you learned. How old are you anyway, fifty-five or something?"

"Thirty-nine," corrected Dean, with a scowl.

"So, yeah, fifty-five or something, just like I said," said Ted cheerily, countering Dean's glare with an
innocent grin. "Definitely time to learn. Don't panic, it's easy — you just follow the directions. If you can fix a truck, you can make a pie. Or a mini-pie." With that, Ted started pulling mixing bowls, wooden spoons and other tools out of the cabinets, and began piling them into Dean's hands. Ted went on, "Give a man a pie, he eats for a day. Teach a man to bake—"

"— he eats for a lifetime, got it," said Dean.

"More like, he burns through all your goddam butter, sugar and flour in two days, and bakes so much stuff the whole camp is on a sugar high for a week," said Ted with a laugh. "And then we gotta send a carrier pigeon to Fairbanks begging for more sugar and flour on the next truck up. I've had it happen. Worth it, though. With you, I'm willing to take the risk." With a thoughtful glance at Dean he added, "Besides, I kinda get the feeling you need to be making these pies yourself. For your bird guy."

"He's not my bird guy—" began Dean.

"Yeah, whatever," Ted said, with an unworried shrug. "Clear off that counter and grab a couple cans of peaches, would you? And where are your bird guy's berries, exactly?"

It all went pretty well. Ted talked Dean through the filling recipe and even managed to coach him through whipping up a home-made pastry, all from scratch. The rolling-out stage was the only part that got difficult; after a few times too many of dough sticking everywhere and not flattening correctly, Dean ended up shoving wads of pastry dough haphazardly into the muffin tin and pushing them roughly into shape with his fingers, rather than rolling them out. It seemed to work, though. (Ted, glancing over from his squash-chopping, muttered, "Well, that's a way to do it, I suppose.") Soon each muffin-shaped hole in the tin had its own mini-crust in place, empty and waiting. On Ted's advice, Dean added a speck of cornstarch in the bottom to soak up the blueberry juice, and then he spooned the peach-berry filling carefully into each muffin-shaped depression. Ted had cut up a lemon to squeeze a bit of lemon juice on the top of the filling, and he had Dean put a dot of butter on every little pie. Over the top went some more semi-flattened wads of pastry dough, dusted with cinnamon and sugar.

Dean made just two at first, not wanting to risk all of Cas's berries at once on an unproven experiment. Thirty minutes later, both test pies came out mouth-wateringly good, Dean downing one and Ted the other while they congratulated each other on the whole idea. Ted had been right, peaches and blueberries did indeed go together very, very well.

Dean used up all the filling making eight more mini-pies, hovering by the oven anxiously and checking them almost every minute to be sure they wouldn't burn.

It was when he found himself checking the oven for the sixth time in three minutes that he started to laugh at himself again.

"What're you moaning about?" asked Ted. Only then did Dean realize that his little moment of
amusement at himself had somehow metamorphosed into a deeply sad discouragement, and that he had let out a heavy, tired sigh. Which Ted, apparently, had heard.

Dean forced a somewhat wan half-smile onto his face, turning to Ted with the intent of cracking some kind of a joke. But he couldn't seem to come up with anything funny to stay, and meanwhile Teddy was still waiting, looking at him steadily.

At last Dean just said, waving a hand around at the dirtied mixing bowls and spoons, "I don't know why I'm doing all this, honestly. Maybe it's kind of pointless."

Ted just looked at him for a moment. "Never pointless to give a friend a pie," he finally said. "He's a friend, right?"

Dean could only nod, staring down now at the mixing bowls.

"Then pies are the perfect thing," said Ted. "Not to mention he gave you the berries."

"Berries don't mean a damn thing," murmured Dean under his breath.

"Berries are always significant," countered Ted. "Now, don't forget to clean up. I'm not your maid."

With that, Ted shoved an armful of the dirtied mixing bowls into Dean's arms, gave him a not-unfriendly shove toward the wash-up station, and turned away.

That evening the sleet finally lightened, and the eight mini-pies had cooled. On Ted's insistence, Dean reserved two for himself ("Always put your own oxygen mask on before assisting others, Dean"). The remaining six went into a set of six little round plastic containers, where, as Ted had predicted, they each fit perfectly. And off Dean went in the Chevy late that evening, trundling down the muddy perimeter road to the north hill.

To his annoyance, the Chevy had developed a few more little problems since last night. The wipers wouldn't work and the tape player seemed to have suddenly died. But at least the engine was starting again now, and Dean made a mental note to check out the truck thoroughly tomorrow.

It was cloudy and damp, still chilly, and the sky was still an oppressive layer of solid dark gray, but at least the rain had stopped. The sleet had dampened down the remaining snow, but had also sheeted everything with a thin coating of ice. This made the boardwalk so slick and slippery that Dean had to trudge up through the iced-over snow next to the boardwalk instead. His boots crashed through the thin ice layer awkwardly with every step. In one hand he held a plastic bag with the mini-pies, safe in their round plastic containers; the other hand had a six-pack of beer in another bag. His pack was laden and heavy with cans of soup, tuna fish, and spaghetti sauce, and some boxes and bags of pasta, rice and beans.

It was a workout, crashing his way step by step through ice-crusted snow while hauling the bags in either hand, but Dean finally got all the way to the wooden box. By this point in the day he wasn't even bothering any more to second-guess himself about it all — about how much time he was spending on Castiel, or why he'd spent all morning making mini-pies, and then hours more in the afternoon scavenging through the camp kitchen supplies for unneeded canned food, snapping up every leftover can that Ted said hadn't been used for this or that dinner recipe. Not to mention spending his evening carrying it all up to a lonely wooden box through ice and snow. Dean had ceased to worry about it all. This was simply what he did, these days, wasn't it? He helped Cas. That
was what he did.

Cas might not need help exactly, but it might make his life a little easier. Cas could use a little help, and so Dean would help.

The wooden box, once he got to it, held only one of Cas's used batteries today. Dean stuffed that into a side pocket of his pack, exchanging it for a fresh battery. Then he loaded in the six little plastic containers with their mini-pies, and finally as much of the canned food as would fit in the box. At the base of the box, he left another bundle of cans securely wrapped in a plastic bag, along with the six-pack of Alaskan Amber.

And once again he scanned the distant horizon with the binoculars. Just in case he might get a glimpse of Castiel.

Cas wasn't in sight from Dean's vantage point at the wooden box, so he hiked a little farther, to the gravel ridge where he'd dropped off Cas last night, and scanned again.

The snow machine's tracks were glaringly obvious here. Even Cas's tracks were still crispy visible, a line of perfect bootprints that were now sheathed in ice. But Cas was nowhere in sight. Dean took his time, standing by the farthest snow-machine tracks and investigating every inch of the distant horizon.

He found the little blue tent. He even spotted the white wolf, along with a dark one too, two skinny forms trotting along a very distant hill outlined against the gray clouds. Dean watched them till they went out of sight over the hill. It was cool to see them, and cool to see the male at last, but rather to Dean's surprise, the wolves weren't of absolute top importance. He was really much more interested in finding Castiel. But today Cas was nowhere to be seen.

There was a pang of disappointment, but Dean stuffed it down.

Before Dean left, he doublechecked to make sure the mini-pies were neatly bundled deep into the triple layer of bags, to keep the bears away. And he wrote another note.

*Hey Cas -*

*Don't mind saying I'm kind of proud of these little pies. These are your berries, by the way, plus some more of the peaches.*

*BTW, next week I leave for a couple weeks — just my usual early June break. It's routine, the university rotates camp managers in & out all summer so we don't go nuts. There'll be a different camp manager for a couple weeks. Her name's Shelly. She's nice but I think she'll probably be too busy to look after any non-camp people, so I brought some extra food to tide you over. I leave on Friday and I'll be back in two weeks exactly.*

* - DW

*PPS - You could drop by camp again for coffee or whatever. Like, before Friday, while I'm still here. If you wanted.*

He put the pink streamer back up on the box's wooden rod, and left. Halfway down the boardwalk he almost turned around to rewrite the note, but gave up and just kept walking on down toward the Chevy, muttering, "Coffee or whatever. Smooth, Mr. Winchester, real smooth."
The next morning there was an email from Sam:

Real sorry we had to leave so fast last weekend — Ruby was just feeling so crappy. Luckily though she really perked up after we left. I think she's fine now.

Also, it turns out Ruby can't come down to Kupaluk any more. I keep telling her to give it another shot but it's like she's got all these excuses now, all kinds of other commitments suddenly. I think maybe getting sick just gave her a bad impression of the place — nothing against camp, she swears she liked it [Dean had his doubts about that part] but she just seems kind of skittish about it. Oh and another thing, turns out she's booked up all the rest of my weekends for the summer, so it looks like I won't be able to come down either. Really sorry. I'm still trying to get some weekends off, but she & Crowley have got me totally booked all of a sudden, for the whole rest of the summer. Maybe you can come up to Deadhorse?

Sorry... S

Dean skyped him right away. It was mid-morning on a Sunday, usually a good time to call him.

Sam answered with a sleepy yawn. There were fabric and sheets pressed up oddly on one side of his face, and it took Dean a moment to realize that Sam was lying on his side in bed, his phone held close to his face. He seemed to be in a pretty plush bed, too, with a sparkling white, puffy down comforter wrapped over his shoulders.

"Mornin', Princess," said Dean.

"You called too early," Sam said. He was whispering. "Jerk."

"Bitch. You oughta be up by now anyway. What are you lying in, anyway, a pile of fluff?"

"AP's got pretty nice beds," Sam said, still in a whisper. "I'm sleeping in. So sue me. What's up? Anything wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, just got your email," Dean said. "Are you really serious about not being able to come down again?"

"Yeah, sorry," said Sam. He sat up finally, leaning against a wall by the bed, wedging his pillow under his shoulders and wiping the sleep from his eyes. "I just found out last night. Kind of a bummer, but they've got me booked." He gave a sigh. "So much for the community-outreach idea. I'm not sure what happened. I think they just got really busy all of a sudden."

"You really can't come back down for the entire rest of the summer?" Dean had to try to keep the frustration out of his voice. It was a little surprising, actually, how much this was buming him out — and it was going to be hard to convey this to Sam. He tried rephrasing it as, "They're seriously not giving you any weekends off?"

"Kinda got me booked up, yeah." Sam said. "Lot of legal briefings. There's some kind of Arctic Ocean drilling-rights battle heating up. Looks like the lowest-ice year ever, and all kinds of polar
"Cas was gonna show you the wolf pups," Dean said. "Not to mention I have the sauna and everything. I know it's a drag hanging out with your brother, but I had some hikes and stuff lined up that I thought you might like. Or we could go fish on the lake, once it's melted off. Or, we could... I dunno, take a little road trip or something. Go see Coldfoot."

It all sounded pretty lame even as Dean was saying it, and he could feel himself deflating at Sam's unenthusiastic reaction. "Yeah, I'd love to," said Sam, but his eyes weren't even looking at the screen now; his gaze kept sliding offscreen. "Just can't. Too busy. Sorry."

"I could come up and meet you," persisted Dean. "Take you down for just an overnight. Bring you down Friday night. Could have you back Saturday, even. I mean, Ruby doesn't have to drive you down."

"Thanks, but, I'm just... kinda busy," said Sam. "Another time, maybe?"

There was not going to be another time. This was likely going to be the only summer they'd ever be up in Alaska together. In fact, it was probably going to be the only remaining summer when they'd really have a chance to hang out as adults. Soon Sam would drift even farther away, to wherever his career took him, and wherever his life took him. Sam had seemed to love Kupaluk just four weeks ago, but already he seemed to be moving on.

Deal with the devil, Dean thought. It wasn't such a funny joke any more.

Let him go. You knew he was all grown up. You knew he'd be moving on.

But I thought we'd have just this one summer....

"Cas was gonna show you the wolf pups," Dean repeated helplessly. "Can't Ruby let you loose for one night? Wolf pups, and sauna; we could hit them both in one night. How about just one night?"

Sam hesitated then, and it was clear the thought was tempting. He started to say "Maybe I—" but then something interrupted him. The phone shook and Sam's gaze darted offscreen for a moment. A flicker of a smile ghosted over his face as he looked offscreen at whatever-it-was. When he looked back at Dean it was clear that the moment of wolf-pup temptation had passed. "Sorry, I really can't," said Sam.

"Hi, Ruby," said Dean.

There was a quick whispered consultation, a rustling of sheets and pillows, and a tousled Ruby soon appeared next to Sam, sleepy-eyed, dark hair tangled around her face. She had a sheet wrapped decorously over her chest.

"Hi, Dean," she said.

Be nice, Dean reminded himself.

"Sorry we can't get down there again," Ruby said. "Stuff... came up." Sam burst out laughing and a second later Ruby was giggling too. Dean listened to their whispered back-and-forth teasing: "Something came up? I can't believe you just—" "It just came out that way, I swear—" "—to my brother—" "Oh, he's a big boy, he can take it." They dissolved in giggles again.

By the time they both finally turned back to the screen again, Dean had managed to school his
expression into a cheerful, accepting grin.

"No sweat, Sam," Dean said. "I can see you got your hands busy. So to speak."

"So to speak," said Sam, and Ruby burst into giggles again, leaning her head on Sam's shoulder. Sam put an arm around her, and to Dean he said, "Maybe we can grab a beer next time you get up to Deadhorse."

"No beers for sale on the North Slope," Dean reminded him.

Ruby said, with a lazy smile, "AP has plenty of beer for the interns. Free."

"Of course you do," said Dean, and he forced himself to give them both a friendly farewell. The last thing he saw before the screen went blank was Ruby rolling toward Sam for a kiss.

Dean set his iPad down on his sleeping bag with a sigh, looking around the dark bedroom. The rest of Sunday stretched ahead bleakly. Even the idea of running more canned food up to the mailbox today for Cas didn't hold its usual appeal, for the contrast between that image of Ruby rolling towards Sam, and Dean's own quiet little empty bedroom (and the memory of Castiel walking away across the snow) was getting a little hard to bear.

He managed to haul himself out of bed, padded across the non-muddy section of the room in his stockinged feet, and hitched up the windowshade to peer out. Sunday morning. Once again the tundra's changeable weather had turned on its head; yesterday's cloud bank had thinned out overnight. Most of the sky was a bright bowl of blue. A few isolated thick billows of clouds were dragging little trails of gray underneath them, looking almost like gigantic gray women dragging their filmy gray skirts slowly across the landscape. Those "gray skirts" were rain showers; it was going to be one of those days when sporadic rain kept blowing past. Not an appealing morning for mailbox deliveries, then. And maybe not a good day for any kind of all-day hike; when showers kept coming, it was best to keep a vehicle nearby. Dean wasn't really in the mood for hiking anyway.

*Great day for shooting, though,* he thought. Target practice, out on the tundra.

Usually he went south for target practice, down toward Atigun Pass. Today, though, as he studied the direction of those sporadic drifting rainclouds, it occurred to him that the rain might be lighter up north.

Well.... actually the rain probably wouldn't be lighter up north at all. But why not go north anyway? North was a perfectly fine direction.

It was just pure coincidence that north would also take him near Cas's turnoff on the Haul Road.
Dean usually took the guns out for target practice once a month or so. He was supposed to do this regularly, and so was Shelly and, as of this year, Ryan. This was pretty routine. Everybody in Alaska knew how to shoot. Dean had met kids up here who by the age of eight could not only shoot, but could also pilot snow machines, small boats, and in one case a small Cessna. Shooting skills, and outdoor skills in general, were not rare. But it was part of official bear-safety protocol that there be a few Kupaluk staffers formally trained to shoot and who would regularly keep their target skills up.

Bear firearms were a little different anyway; the ammo had to be heavier gauge for grizzlies, the guns pretty substantial. Even Dean's ivory-handled Colt was barely sufficient caliber for a grizzly's thick skull. The Colt was a .45, plenty hefty if used on small wildlife, but it took quite a lot to put a dent in a grizzly bear. This was the main reason that Dean kept it loaded, when out in the field, with the last of Dad's old armor-piercing bullets. But the pistol was really just backup, a small firearm that could always be on his pack. The real bear guns were the rifle and the shotgun. Every time Dean went out for target practice he brought the pistol and at least one of the long guns, leaving the other one at camp in case of a bear.

Maddeningly, it turned out the Chevy now had a flat tire — the right front tire had, mysteriously, gone totally flat overnight while the truck had been sitting absolutely still. At least the ignition was now working fine, as were the tape player and the wipers. A little bothered by the recent string of problems, Dean spent a few minutes checking the Chevy over. But everything looked good; no loose wires anywhere, spark plugs all working, good tension on all the belts, battery reading fine — everything suddenly seemed fine. He even tested all the fuses, thinking there might be an erratic short somewhere, but the fuses were all good. Just to be on the safe side, he changed all the fuses anyway, and put a few spare fuses in the glove compartment. Then he changed the flat and loaded another full-size spare tire into the back. Couldn't be too safe, up here on the Slope.

Usually he washed the Chevy on Sundays (to the considerable amusement of the rest of the camp staff, since the truck only ever stayed clean for half a day at most). But all the fuse-checking and tire-changing had sucked up a lot of time, so Dean decided to skip the washing for this week. He packed up a lunch and brought his two selected guns over to the Chevy — the shotgun and the ivory-handled Colt .45 pistol. (The Winchester Alaskan rifle would stay at camp, just on the off-chance that a bear might come through while Dean was away.)
The Chevy felt fine as Dean drove out of camp.

And it felt especially fine as he turned it to the north on the Haul Road.

North toward Cas's turnoff, that is.

He headed a few miles up the road, keeping an eye out for the three boulders on the left side that would mark Cas's turnoff. After only about fifteen minutes he spotted them. Dean had driven past these three boulders many times before, of course, but had never pulled off at this particular spot before. There was only a very tiny pulloff here. Originally, before the three boulders had been plunked into place, this had been the start of the rutted stretch of gravel that, decades ago, had once been the small access road to the north side of Kupaluk Lake.

The pulloff was tiny — just barely big enough to get the Chevy fully off the Haul Road itself. Dean had been rather hoping that he'd find an easy way to get the truck around the boulders, but they were placed far too close together, and he hesitated about driving around them. Getting around the full line of boulders would require driving a wide loop over semi-frozen tundra tussocks. This would not only damage the tundra but could be brutal on a truck, even a sturdy old one like the Chevy.

So Dean just maneuvered the Chevy around so that he could back it as close to the boulders as possible. Parking it there, he got out and swung open the back, intending to pull out all his gear. But then he found himself sitting on the rear bumper for a while, gazing at the tundra ahead of him, and the ancient and worn little access road, half overgrown now with tiny willows.

He was still feeling a little down about Sam, he realized.

And, well, maybe a little bit about Cas too.

About this new self-discovery that Dean was apparently headed down a one-way road to near-certain heartbreak.

Stop being so frickin' melodramatic, Dean finally ordered himself, standing up and grabbing for the shotgun case. Just get to work.

It wasn't really ideal to be shooting while in a bad mood. As cathartic as it could be to bring out a gun while in a bad mood, it also tended to lead to safety lapses. So Dean forced himself to pause for several moments and run through his target-practice checklist. He had an actual paper checklist for this purpose, on a clipboard stuffed behind the driver's seat, and he pulled it out now and read methodically through it.

IDs and current hunting permits in his pack, check; he was off Kupaluk's designated research area, check; AP and BLM had both been notified this year of regular target practice, check; camp staff knew, check; Phil and Ryan were both on call in case a bear randomly came through camp in the next couple hours, and both knew how to unlock the rifle cabinet, check; no scientists working north of camp today, check; no tour buses had logged a stop here either, check; Dean was still a solid mile away from known human habitation (namely, Cas's tent), check; Dean was going to be well aware of potential overshoot, and would plan his shooting so that any stray bullets hit tundra, check; and he'd signed out on the whiteboard, check.

Dean took a long, slow breath, picked up his guns and his pack and closed the truck. He strode past the boulders down the old access road, looking for a good, steeply sloping hill that could be a safe backdrop for his target shooting.

The little access road clearly hadn't been used for decades. Anywhere else on the planet it would
probably have long since been overgrown to the point of invisibility, but tundra recovered very, very slowly. Miniature little willows, tiny cottongrass tussocks and some sparse clumps of arctic sedge-grasses had clearly been doing their best to grow back, but even after some forty years' growth the little willows were only two feet high and the vegetation had only crept a few feet onto the old road from either side. There was still a wide, easily walkable path down the middle. Melt-off creeks had cut across the little road here and there, carving deep channels over the years down through the road surface, but Dean easily hopped over these.

In just five minutes' walking he came to a steeply sloping hill to the north of the road that looked ideal. It was just steep enough, and high enough, that any stray bullets would hit the tundra harmlessly (instead of sailing on for miles to hit some unlucky distant trucker or tourist — or a distant scientist, like, just for example, Cas). Dean would be facing away from the Haul Road, too, and the AP pipeline was over a mile away, on the far side of the Haul Road. Dean looked around carefully to be sure that Cas, and no other random hikers or scientists, were anywhere in sight, and he even hiked up the entire hill and looked over the other side. No Cas, no road, no trucks, no random tourists wandering around, no caribou, no nothing, just two birds wheeling around overhead. Golden plovers, Dean knew now; he even smiled up at them. Even the birds were safely high, well out of range.

Dean returned to the road and paced out targets at fifty, a hundred, and two hundred feet, doublechecking for additional possible safety issues as he went, and finally he set up some aluminum cans at each of his chosen distances.

He returned to the little access road, and checked over his guns.

The shotgun was first. Dean only tested this gun at fairly short range, at fifty and a hundred feet. The cans nearly disintegrated.

The ivory-handled pistol was next. He first reloaded the pistol with regular ammo, carefully saving Dad's silver-colored armor-piercing bullets. Those bullets of Dad's not only had some sentimental value but also were rather rare, so Dean never used them for target practice. In fact no gun shop he'd shown them to had even really been certain what brand they were exactly, and Dean had never been able to find exact replacements. Once he'd tested a single one of the armor-piercing bullets on a boulder at fifty feet, and the bullet had actually shattered the boulder, cracking it right down the middle. They'd certainly do for a bear. Dean had decided then to save all the rest for actual bears; he didn't waste them on target practice any more.

Once the pistol was loaded with ordinary ammo, Dean took his time with it, sighting carefully on each can. The pistol, of course, wouldn't put out a spray of buckshot like a shotgun would, but only a single bullet at a time, and it was never as easy to aim as a precision rifle. So it took a little concentration at the farther distances. Dean always liked to save the pistol for last, in fact, because he actually found it rather relaxing doing this sort of target shooting. Despite the noise of each gunshot and the considerable jolt of the recoil, there was almost a serenity in the pure concentration required to focus on one's aim, bringing all one's attention to bear on just that distant target. And there was usually a real satisfaction in seeing a line of cans flip backwards into the half-melted snowdrifts, one by one.

Usually. Today Dean was having a little trouble getting into that calm state of focus. As he tried to concentrate on the first can, the Skype conversation with Sam kept popping back into his head.

*Be happy for him*, Dean instructed himself, lowering the pistol briefly while he tried to clear his head. *You just got off on the wrong foot with Ruby. So she didn't like Kupaluk. It's allowed. It's a rough place. So she didn't like the shower trailer — that's okay.*
He raised the pistol and sighted on the first can.

BLAM. The can flipped backwards neatly.

Be nice. Be happy for him.

BLAM. The second can flipped away.

Goddamit, though, the way she sneered at Baby!

The way she kept draping all over Sam....

The way Sam just frickin' put up with her bullshit.

BLAM. BLAM. BLAM. He missed the third and fourth cans and only hit the fifth; he'd let himself get distracted. Dean lowered the pistol for a moment, forcing himself to re-focus.

"It's okay if he leaves," muttered Dean out loud. "It's a good thing. Long past time." This was true, of course, but...

She's supposed to be his supervisor! Is she totally manipulating him?

Dean sighed and lowered the pistol without shooting, trying once more to put the Sam-worries out of his head. At last he sighted on the more distant targets, the two-hundred-foot cans. Usually for this distance he liked to imagine a threat at camp: a wolf or a bear, charging in and attacking some hapless grad student. Maybe that kind of approach would help him focus?

He tried to picture a wolf running into camp, and tried to imagine shooting at it.

But the white wolf at the sauna had merely walked right past him, hadn't it?

If Dean had been holding his pistol during that evening on the pier with Sam, would he have shot the white wolf?

The wolf hadn't done a single thing wrong.

Dean was still sighting on the first two-hundred-foot can, but had not yet pulled the trigger, for he was thinking now about the white and the dark wolf walking together across the distant horizon. This was, in fact, their land. Humans were interlopers here. Why was he in the habit of imagining wild animals when he did his target practice? The wolves belonged here. This was their home.

Which wasn't stopping humans from wiping out the entire ecosystem, was it?

What was going to happen to the tundra wolves? To their pups, and the grand-pups, and the great-grandpups?

The pistol had drooped down. Dean was just staring at the ground now.

With a sigh, he brought the pistol up again. Do your frickin' target practice, he ordered himself.

Bear. Imagine a bear.

Dean sighted again, closing one eye and bracing the pistol with both hands. He imagined a bear storming into camp. It had actually happened a couple of times, grizzlies wandering into camp and taking everybody by surprise. He pictured the great hulking head, the huge claws, the distinctive humped blond back of a grizzly. An aggressive bear, a nervous bear, coming into camp.... some
hapless kid like Ryan not far away....

*But the only time bears did come through camp, nothing happened,* Dean remembered, lowering his pistol yet again. On one of those two bear-occasions, the grizzly had just walked right on through with barely a pause — as if Kupaluk, and all its trucks, people and trailers, were only a mildly distracting roadside sight on the way to somewhere else. The other bear had been more worrisome, sniffing around for a while and clearly curious, but some warning shots had driven it away, and it had never come back.

*I'd try pepper spray first,* Dean reminded himself. *And then warning shots. Bears are smart, and they know there's a bear hunting season; they all know what that sound means. Warning shots will scare most of them away. I'd only shoot if there were a direct threat to life.*

Dean realized he'd been holding the pistol down for quite a few minutes now. Without shooting.

Cas's voice floated into his head: *You're just looking for the right thing to hunt.*

Dean paused a long moment. Now he could think only of Cas. Cas's throaty voice, crackling through the static from the summit of Topaz Mountain. *You're just looking for the right thing to hunt.*

Cas in Dean's room at the dorm trailer, holding the mammoth tooth, sitting straddled in his chair, one of his knees brushing Dean's....

Looking up at Dean. Those stunning blue eyes, serious and solemn, looking at Dean like they were staring down into his soul.

Arms wrapped around Dean from behind, on the snow machine. The ice crystals swirling. The wind, the light, the sensation of flying....

Cas turning away afterwards, brushing tears from his eyes.

Dean's chest was aching.

*Goddammit,* Dean thought to himself, shaking his head. *Get to work.*

*Imagine a more dangerous bear, then.* Maybe that would get his mind back on the (required) target practice.

*Imagine if Sam were cornered by a bear.*

So Dean pictured Sam, threatened by a grizzly bear. But then, unplanned, he pictured Ruby instead, and that bizarre flash of darkness that had gone through her eyes on Friday in the dining hall.

BLAM. BLAM. BLAM. With the image in his mind of Ruby's strangely dark eyes, this time he hit all three cans — and these were the most distant targets, too. A startled bird even shot up from near the cans, but Dean barely noticed.

Dean had emptied the pistol's magazine, and hit every single can. He stood, breathing hard, pistol still raised. Sure it was nice that he still had his eye, still had his reliable aim, but he was a little horrified at himself. Had he actually been thinking about *Ruby* as a potential target? A *human being*? What was wrong with him?

He lowered his pistol slowly, baffled.

"Have the cans harmed you?" said a low, rough voice.
Dean flinched and spun, badly startled; Castiel was standing only a few feet behind him.

"Jeez, Cas!" Dean said. "I had no idea you were there! Don't sneak up on somebody who's shooting!"

"I waited till you were done shooting," Cas pointed out. "I was curious, have the cans harmed you? Or disappointed you in some way?"

Dean was too rattled to even laugh. "No, no. Just target practice." He flicked the pistol's safety back on, and gestured at the shotgun, which was resting on the ground by his feet. "Target shooting," he explained. "I'm supposed to tune myself up now and then, for camp safety. Long guns and handguns, both."

"Ah," said Castiel, nodding. "To defend your camp from... um... cans?"

"Well, no," said Dean. "Just, you know, animals."

"The bear that you fear may attack again," said Castiel.

That'd been the idea. Until the Ruby image had come floating up out of nowhere.

But all Dean said was, "Yeah, like bears, that's, uh, that's the idea."

Cas narrowed his eyes, watching Dean for a silent moment. "You look troubled," he said at last.

Dean shrugged. He re-holstered the pistol, clipped the holster back on his pack, and busied himself packing the shotgun back into its rainproof case.

It would be silly to say he was worried about Sam. This Ruby thing was fine. Just fine.

"Something wrong?" asked Cas.

"No, no, no," Dean said. "Just... I don't know." But there was tension all across his shoulderblades, and a tight knot in his stomach. Dean ignored it, donning the pack, and slinging the shotgun case over his shoulder, adjusting the strap so that it stretched diagonally across his chest, the shotgun resting comfortably against the backpack. But even after all the adjusting of the guns and the pack, Castiel was still watching him silently, head tipped slightly to the side. Finally Dean said, "By the way, Sam won't be coming down any more. He can't come visit Kupaluk, I mean." He added, "Ruby won't let him. Or his AP bosses won't, I guess."

Cas studied him for a moment longer. His head tipped more; he was frowning a little.

"Come with me," Castiel said. Oddly, he held out his hand; even more oddly, Dean took it.

Cas turned and began to lead him up the hill.

They walked up to the fifty-foot target, where Dean retrieved the battered cans and put them in his pack. Cas then held out his hand again, and Dean took it again; Cas led him on to the hundred-foot target, where they repeated the whole routine, and finally Cas led him on toward the two-hundred foot target, which was halfway up the hill.

They walked hand-in-hand nearly the entire time, which seemed strangely, almost magically comfortable, marvelously comfortable, and yet also totally confusing. Cas seemed so nonchalant that it was utterly impossible to tell whether he might actually mean something by the hand-holding, or whether he was merely trying to lead Dean along a certain path through the tussocks... or whether he
simply had no sense of personal space at all. Maybe if he'd really grown up in that hypothetical isolated bush town, he might just not have absorbed the usual social norms? Whatever the reason, he seemed to want to lead Dean at every step, almost tugging Dean along behind him as they clambered over the bumpy tussocks. Dean eventually ceased to try to interpret it, and just began to enjoy the warmth of Cas's hand, and the way Cas was guiding him along.

They came to the rocky patch where Dean had set his farthest cans. The two golden plovers were wheeling overhead again, calling in high, fluting voices.

"Stop here," Cas said, releasing Dean's hand at last. He pointed overhead to the birds. "See," he said. Dean nodded and said, "Golden plovers, right? Classy-looking. I like the gold and black combo."

Cas gave him a sharp look for a long moment. Finally he said, "Yes, their back feathers are, um, gold-tipped. You noticed that?"

"Saw it in the bird id guide," said Dean.

"Ah, of course," said Cas. "Well... yes, I'm rather fond of those colors too." He looked away from Dean with a rather confused air, gazing around him at the ground.

There were eight cans here, all scattered now. Dean grabbed the nearest one and started to walk ahead of Cas, intending to pick up the farther cans. But Cas lunged at Dean's elbow and yanked him to a halt, barking out, "Stop!" There was such unexpected urgency in his voice that Dean halted at once, looking back at Cas.

"Don't move your feet," Cas said. "At all." He was scanning the ground near Dean's feet very intently. "There," he said a moment later, pointing at a seemingly empty patch of lichen a few feet away from Dean's right boot. It was just an ordinary stretch of lichen, in the usual speckled lichen colors of black, white and green.

"I don't see anything—" Dean started to say, but then, as if emerging mysteriously from the background, there they were: four speckled eggs, perfectly camouflaged, arranged in a precise star shape with their pointed ends all facing neatly inward. They were all blotched with irregular patterns of black, white, and green, such that they were barely visible, even though they were sitting right there in the open on the rocky ground. There didn't even seem to be any kind of a nest, just a tiny little hollow in the lichen.

Dean realized now why Cas had been leading him by the hand, and why he'd grabbed at Dean's elbow so suddenly. "I could've stepped on them," Dean said, disconsolate.

"But you didn't," said Castiel.

Dean turned to look around; yes, there were the two-hundred-meter cans, not far away at all, and slowly Dean realized that this little flat patch of rocky ground was only a few yards beyond the cans. And now he remembered the startled bird that had flown away when he'd hit the three distant cans. "I could've hit them," Dean said, a little horrified. "I mean, I almost shot the mom! I saw them flying, before — I should've thought! She must've snuck back to the nest when I was loading the guns. Damn, I could have hit her!"

"But you didn't do that either," Cas pointed out. "The eggs are fine." He added, "But I'd advise that you keep your eyes on them, pick up your cans rapidly and then back up to where I am, before you lose track of where exactly the eggs are. If you take your eyes off them, it's surprisingly easy to get turned around and take one step in the wrong direction." Dean took his advice, scooping up the last
cans and then stepping backwards cautiously, keeping his eyes fixed on the four speckled eggs until he reached Cas's side.

"Many bad things could happen," Cas remarked. "We do the best we can. That's all we can do. Don't dwell on it; just learn how to do better in the future. Did you see the parents circling overhead when you put the cans here?"

Dean nearly groaned. The plovers. This just kept getting worse. "This is the plovers' nest? Yeah, I did." He added morosely, "I guess I wasn't paying attention."

"No, I'm sure you were paying attention," Cas corrected. "It's more that you simply didn't know what it meant. You didn't know that it means something if a bird is flying in a circle. Don't feel too bad; few humans would know. And now you've learned. Now you know how plovers act when they're worried: they circle around you and call. Next time you'll notice, right? And next time you'll think, the plovers are trying to tell me something, and you'll look around."

Dean took a slow breath.

"We each do the best we can," Cas added gently. "Don't blame yourself for for things you didn't know. And besides, you didn't even hurt them."

Cas was right, of course. Dean hadn't shot the plovers, or their eggs. He hadn't shot Ruby, either, and of course he never would; that had been just some weird glitch in his brain, some half-spooked part of his subconscious worrying about Sam. He hadn't shot the little eggs, and he hadn't stepped on them. Things could have gone worse.

Cas was watching the plovers now, which were still circling overhead, piping and calling in melodic, fluting voices. Dean followed his gaze, and now he could see that, indeed, the two plovers weren't flying randomly; they were flying in tight circles right around Cas and Dean.

"I knew there was a nest somewhere around here, from the way the parents have been acting during the last week," said Castiel, "but I hadn't known its exact location, since I usually don't work this close to the road. The road is excluded from my study. I was a little west of here. But I heard the shots—" (and Dean knew then, quite suddenly, exactly why it was that he'd driven north to this hill for target practice today. He'd been hoping all along that Cas would hear, and would come investigate.) Cas went on, "I came over to see what was happening, and saw it was you, and saw the birds circling around you, and I knew you must have gotten close. So your shooting has helped me to find the nest. And in the end, that may help me protect this nest a little bit. Birds that nest so near to humans do face some additional risks; I try to help them when I can." Cas watched the plovers for a moment longer; then he turned, checked the sun, paced off ten long steps from the nest downhill while Dean stood watching. There Cas stood for a long moment, gazing back and forth between the nest, and the nearest boulders, and occasionally glancing at an especially prominent willow-shrub.

Dean realized he was probably assessing the nest's proximity to the few available landmarks.

"You gonna GPS it?" Dean asked. "And flag it?" He knew that the Cornell team always noted down the GPS location of every nest that they found, and every squirrel den and practically every shrub. They were perpetually tying pink streamers on everything they found. It was difficult to keep track of exact tundra locations any other way, out here. All the endless thousands of seemingly identical cottongrass tussocks, stretching infinitely in all directions, made it almost impossible to re-find any small object again without the help of pink flagging tape and GPS.

But Cas just gave him a squinty-eyed look. "GPS?"
"Y'know, GPS..." Dean started to say. But from the look in Cas's eyes he guessed immediately this was one of those modern developments that somehow had passed Cas by entirely. "Global Positioning System," Dean explained. "You can get a really precise latitude and longitude just by triangulating with some stationary satellites overhead."

Cas's eyes widened, and he looked up at the sky. "Oh," he said. "I've seen those. I used to fly past them."

Dean had to laugh at that. "Not likely, unless you were in the international space station. They're way high, practically in outer space." (Cas opened his mouth as if to say something, but then just closed it again, setting his hands tightly on his backpack straps.) Dean explained, "There's these little handheld things that talk to those satellites, that you can get lat/long from. Latitude and longitude. Cell phones can do it too, but up here it's easier to use a dedicated GPS hand-held. That way you can figure out where the nest is exactly."

Cas just frowned at him. "But I know where it is. It's right here." He pointed to the four eggs.

Dean chuckled. "Yeah, but how are you gonna find it again?"

Cas gave him a baffled look, and gestured to the completely featureless expanse of rolling brown tundra around them. "It's halfway upslope from the road," Cas began, "between these two rocks, near the squirrel den, south-southeast of that willow by fourteen paces, and due east of that other willow twenty paces. Though..." He hesitated, glancing doubtfully at the willows and the rocks — which, it seemed to Dean, were exactly like several dozen other willows and rocks that were scattered nearby. Cas finally said, "I'll admit my sense of navigation seems to have weakened recently." A note of irritation came into his voice as he added, "Along with just about every other ability I used to have. I did in fact lose track of a longspur nest the other day. It was most frustrating." He gave Dean a considering look. "Tell me, how does one GPS a nest? And what did you mean about flagging it?"

And this is how I give away my personal GPS, Dean knew immediately. Along with every roll of flagging tape in my pack. Again, he could only laugh at himself, as he swung the pack off his back and pulled it open.

Cas was afire to start GPS'ing and flagging his nests immediately. Amazingly, it turned out that until now, Cas had been doing all of his navigation solely by eye and by memory, somehow making his way unerringly from nest to nest, over mile after mile of tundra — apparently without ever getting lost, even in fog and snow. He even seemed to have been memorizing all of his data, rather than writing any of it down. His memory was astonishing; it soon became clear that he was able to reel off full detailed histories of every nest that he was monitoring, complete with the numbers of eggs, the exact date each egg had been laid, the date each egg was expected to hatch, and even the personal histories of the parents.

But he was instantly eager to start using the tools Dean had offered. He was delighted with the pink flagging tape ("I've noticed, this color is so effective for the human eye. The one you've put on the wooden box — it's so bright! I can spot it from at least half a mile away!") Cas began by tying a series of especially long pink streamers at hundred-yard intervals on the willow bushes along the worn gravel road, to help use as a main landmark system. Entering digital waypoints into the handheld GPS was a little beyond him at first, though, so Dean decided to work with him for a
while. Purely to assist, of course; purely to help put the lat/long waypoints into the GPS.

The sun shone, the birds sang, the wind drifted lightly over the tundra, as Castiel and Dean walked from nest to nest together with the GPS. Passing rain showers blew by to the north and south, but by luck no rain hit them directly (and Dean wouldn't have cared if it had).

And Cas began to show him things. Little things.

First Cas paused when a little bird went creeping past on the ground about twenty yards away with a puffy white feather clutched in her bill. She was trying to hide, but the feather gave her away, a big poofy spot of white gliding very visibly across the tussocks. "Lapland longspur," said Cas. "They just can't resist those ptarmigan feathers, can they?" Cas watched the little bird patiently (while Dean watched Cas, just as patiently) and they soon tracked the little bird to her nest. The nest seemed a tiny miracle, a cup of perfectly woven grass strands wedged almost invisibly into the side of a tussock. It was lined very neatly with white feathers.

"She's been working on it for the last three days," explained Cas. "She's lining it with ptarmigan feathers now. Which are not abundant, you may notice. She walks a mile or more of tundra to find a single feather, collecting these rare feathers one at a time and bringing them back here. And look, look carefully—" Cas bent to the nest and gently brushed back some overlying willow-twigs.

The nest contained a tiny, perfect egg.

"Her first egg," Cas said, gently letting the willow-twig fall back into place. "Ah, could you maybe assist me with the, uh, with the way-... the way-thing..."

"Waypoint," said Dean, grinning at him. "Sure. Watch how I do it." Dean marked down the exact GPS location ("waypoint", in GPS parlance), intensely aware that Cas was watching closely over his shoulder. Then Cas flagged a nearby shrub with a little streamer of pink, and they backed away carefully.

A few minutes later Dean practically stumbled across another Lapland longspur nest all on his own, and felt inordinately proud seeing Cas's delight about finding another nest. At each nest after that, Cas managed to enter the GPS location on his own, while Dean tied a little pink steamer to whatever nearby bit of shrubbery seemed most convenient. White-crowned sparrow nest, hoary redpoll nest, northern pintail nest, willow ptarmigan nest; as nest after nest was flagged, Dean was astonished to look back and see how many they had marked. The tundra turned out to be peppered with secret, cryptic little nests, each one like a hidden jewel carefully camouflaged from prying eyes. Cas was even positioning his little pink streamers slightly away from each nest, just in case a fox or a raven might figure out his flagging system.

Meanwhile Castiel pointed out every bird to Dean, and as time passed they saw more and more. An owl came flying past, right at mid-day, wings flapping in great moth-like beats; "Short-eared owl," said Cas. A falcon shot past across a distant hill; "Peregrine falcon," said Cas. A pair of gigantic white birds went honking by overhead; "Tundra swans," said Cas. "Easily confused with the trumpeter swan, but there's more yellow in their bill." And all around the little songbirds sang, with songs that Dean was truly starting to know: Golden plover, yellow wagtail, Lapland longspur, bluethroat, Smith's longspur, northern wheatear, savannah sparrow, horned lark, white-crowned sparrow.... hundreds of birds, dozens of species, everywhere around. How had the tundra ever seemed empty? The quiet rolling hills around them turned out to be bustling with life, alive with activity and song, packed full of hidden bird nests.

And around the nests, the first flowers had started blooming. The first to catch Dean's attention were several fuzzy clumps of bright yellow blooms that he'd noticed in previous years.
"Hey, the yellow fuzzies are out!" said Dean, pointing, when they came to the first bright clump of yellow. "Sign of spring, the yellow fuzzies. Or... well, I always call them yellow fuzzies, anyway." For he was suddenly aware that this was just an amateur's nickname.

Cas laughed. "I rather like that. Yellow fuzzies. They're technically 'glacier avens,' but you're quite correct, they're yellow and they're fuzzy."

They sat soon for lunch, Dean sharing a thermos of coffee and some other snacks, while Cas shared a peanut butter sandwich in return. Castiel began pointing out other flowers as they ate. They were sitting near a patch of tiny six-inch-tall spikes of dark-purple flowers that Cas explained were "arctic lupines." (Dean was a little embarrassed to admit that he'd always called them "purple spikies"). There were bright puffs of pink "alpine bistort" too, like tiny pink pipe cleaners poking up from the heather. The infinitesimal flowers of the arctic azalea were starting to open, specks of color tinier than a peppercorn. Atop all the tussocks, buds were starting to grow too, and Cas explained that these would eventually open into the cheery white puff balls from which cottongrass took its name.

The more Dean looked, the more he saw, and everything he saw, Cas seemed to know intimately. Rock jasmine by the lichens, saxifrage starting to grow by a little snow-melt pond, indigo blooms of beach pea, yellow nodding blossoms of the milk vetch; Cas knew every flower, and every tiny shrub, and every mammal and bird. And even every spider and bug; he pointed out woolly caterpillars, and big arctic bumblebees. They finished lunch and kept walking, Dean pointing out everything he could find and Cas naming every one unerringly.

Dean looked around and realized they'd gone up and over one hill, and up and over another, without Dean even noticing, for time had seemed to fly by. They'd been going almost directly north, he realized. Which wasn't the direction to Cas's camp. But that was okay. It really was okay. It was enough just to be here, on this sunny afternoon, seeing the tundra anew, with Castiel at his side.

Cas never said anything about last night's seminar. Dean didn't bring it up either. All the tundra, he now knew, would disappear someday soon, and all these marvelous specialized species would disappear with it. I'll just pray for the Canadian Arctic islands to hang on, thought Dean.

And enjoy it for today. For the birds kept singing, didn't they?

They came over the top of a low, broad hill to find themselves at a dirt bank near a little snowmelt stream. Dean began investigating a clump of something that was apparently called "whitlow grass" when Cas said, "There they are. Look." Dean raised his head and looked where Cas was pointing.

Not fifty yards away, by the dirt bank, sat the white wolf, and the dark one, side by side. They were watching Cas and Dean.

"Oh my god," Dean murmured, slowly straightening up.

"I mean the bank, Dean," Cas insisted, still pointing. "Look at the dirt bank. See?" Only then did Dean realize there was a dark hole in the dirt bank behind the two wolves. And there, at the mouth of the hole, was a fuzzy little face looking out curiously at him.

A wolf pup.

Cas had brought Dean to the wolf den.

This hadn't been a random walk at all. He'd been bringing Dean deliberately in this direction, all along.

"Let's sit," Cas whispered, and they sat. Dean was barely breathing, fascinated by the little pup's
fuzzy face. He looked now and then at the lean parents. They were only about thirty yards away. He should have been worried; he should have gotten his pistol out, or the pepper spray, or the shotgun. But he remembered the white wolf's actions at the pier, and he left the guns and the pepper spray holstered.

He did wish, though, for his ruined phone and its camera. "Wish I could take photos," he murmured to Cas.


So Dean did. He drank it all in; the sun and the sky, the distant tall clouds dragging their gray skirts of rain showers in the distance. The flowers and birds — golden plover, glacier avens; Lapland longspur, purple lupine; yellow wagtail, arctic heather; endlessly colorful life, in all directions. Green shoots of spring poking through patches of snow and ice, tussock and lichen determinedly coming to life again. Birdsong in the air from all directions. And the white wolf, and the black one; and their little fuzzy-faced pup in the den by the bubbling brook.

And Castiel by his side.

Dean memorized it all.

Cas leaned closer and said, in a quiet whisper, "Usually I just sit here. I don't approach. If they choose to approach, they can."

Long minutes passed; the birds sang. The two parents were watching Cas and Dean with close attention, but they didn't seem excessively anxious, just alert. Eventually the little pup grew bolder and it came out of the den, bumbling out into full view, nearly tripping over its own feet. Another fuzzy pup came behind, and a third and a fourth.

The four pups soon relaxed and began to play with each other, tumbling over in the sand by the stream. They chased a big fuzzy bumblebee that came droning past, and bit playfully at their parents' ears and tails.

Eventually the first pup, which seemed to be the boldest, came tottering closer. At first it seemed very confident (or very clueless) and walked quite briskly to a point just ten yards away from Dean's boots, a little ball of gray fuzz coming closer and closer, seemingly happy as could be. But then it suffered a sudden attack of nerves and scampered at top speed back to its parents. It sat there for a minute between the white wolf's front paws, and finally got its courage up again and came closer again — to within eight yards, and then backed up. Then it inched closer, and closer still.

Cas sat very calmly. Dean was nearly holding his breath.

The little gray pup stretched out its stubby nose absolutely as far as it could, stretching out its fuzzy neck, and sniffed the very end of Dean's boot.

That seemed to be the limit of its courage; it then galloped clumsily all the back to it mother and flopped down between her front paws, as if exhausted by its adventure. Dean let out a slow breath.

Eventually the darker parent — the male, apparently — gave a low huffing noise. The pups disappeared into the den, and the dark wolf after them. The white wolf stood, watching Cas and Dean.

Cas said, aloud, to the white wolf, "Thank you, once again. I won't forget this." He nudged Dean's elbow, whispering, "It's time to go."
They stood and walked away.

They walked in silence back over the crest of the hill.

"Holy shit, Cas," Dean burst out, sneaking a look back over his shoulder. "Did you see that? Did you see? It sniffed my boot! A wolf pup sniffed my boot!"

"I saw," said Cas, a quiet smile on his face. "So nice of the parents to bring them up for us. They've really been such hospitable neighbors." He paused, looking around thoughtfully at the rolling tundra around them. "I do hope the wolves can hang on here. Even if the tundra changes to taiga, maybe they can stay anyway. Their descendents, I mean. Even if my birds leave..." He paused a moment, hands going to his backpack straps once again. (It was a move Dean was starting to recognize. Cas did it so often; and, it seemed, he tended to do it almost defensively, when he felt unsettled or vulnerable.)

"If just any of them could survive, it'll all be worth it," Cas said, almost in a whisper. His hands tightened on the pack straps.

They walked in silence back over the hills to the access road.

"No matter what happens here," said Cas, as they followed the new line of fluttering pink flags back toward the Chevy, "today was a lovely day. Wasn't it?"

"It really was," said Dean, grinning at him. And it was true. All the worries about Sam and Ruby had somehow receded into the distance. Not gone, exactly, but tabled. Even the "two-hundred-year forecast" — the apparently inevitable demise of the tundra — couldn't quite dampen the joy of just working through the land with Castiel, learning the plants and the birds with him, and, of course, meeting the wolves. Even just showing Cas the GPS had been fun, for it always felt good to be able to give him some useful tools that might make his life a little easier.

"This was a great day," agreed Dean. He looked back up toward the golden plover nest that they'd first flagged. "They keep trying, don't they?" he said, thoughtfully. "The plovers, and that little bird with the feather, all of them; they're still working so hard. All those hours and hours building their nests and finding those white feathers and laying their eggs."

"Birds always keep trying," said Castiel, nodding. "Always. A wild bird never gives up. Same with the wolves. They never give up. I've never yet seen a wild bird, or a wolf, that felt sorry for itself. Till the end, they just keep trying."

Dean let out a little laugh. "Maybe I could learn something from that."

Cas looked at him thoughtfully. "Maybe we both could."

Cas accompanied Dean all the way to the Chevy. While Dean was loading the shotgun back into the back of the truck, securing it into the little armory area that he'd rigged up by the spare tires, Dean asked, "Hey, by the way, been by the wooden box since last night?"

"No, I haven't had the chance," said Cas. "I was going to drop by tonight. Have you brought more batteries? My — well, your — radio died again."
"Couple batteries up there, yup," Dean said, swinging the pack off his back and setting it inside. "Also some canned food."

"Canned food?" Cas asked.

"I'll be gone a couple weeks," said Dean, reluctantly. He turned to face Cas. "Wanted to be sure you were all set."

Cas blinked at him. "You're leaving?" He added, rather hastily, "But you'll be back?"

Dean nodded. "It's just two weeks."

"I suppose I can survive two weeks," Cas mused, relaxing a little. "I'll admit, your food deliveries have been unexpectedly useful."

"Well, then, there's another little surprise in the box that you might like."

"What?"

"If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise, now, would it?" Dean said, grinning. The guns and pack were loaded into the truck; he couldn't come up with much more reason to linger. But he wanted to linger, he really did, and Cas seemed to be lingering too. Dean cast about for some reason to chat a little longer, and his eyes lit on the thermos that was still jammed in a corner pocket of his pack. He settled for, "Hey, you want some more coffee before you take off? It should still be hot. I'll just end up dumping it otherwise; can't finish it myself."

"Oh, well, in that case...." said Cas.

Dean poured him a cupful, loaning him the cup that served as the top of the thermos. Dean had a bit more himself, using an old camping mug from the front seat. It was a pleasure to see how Cas relished the coffee. Cas closed his eyes for each sip, as if focusing intently on the taste.

"More where that came from," Dean remarked. "And a lot fresher. We always have a fresh pot going at camp."

"It's so much better than the coffee at Pump Station Three," said Cas, lowering his little cup with a sigh of pleasure.

"Pump Station Three's main attraction has never been its coffee, yeah," said Dean, with a snort.

Cas looked at him curiously, handing the empty thermos cup back to him. "What's its main attraction, then?"

Dean felt himself color a little. "Well, you know. Um, really it's not the pump station itself, more like, the pull-offs up at Happy Valley. There's... well... guys. Not your thing, I guess."

Cas looked at him a long moment, frowning, and then he turned and peered toward the northeast (where Happy Valley lay, some thirty miles distant), as if he could see the "guys" from here.

_Hell with it_, thought Dean. _He already said he was fine with people being gay. I don't have to hide this._ "Gay guys," Dean explained. "It's kind of a cruising spot."

"Cruising...." Cas echoed.

Dean added, "Yep. So if gay isn't your thing, I'd recommend you give it a pass."
"I see," says Cas thoughtfully, and he looked again towards the northeast. But he said nothing more. And Dean, for once, managed not to push.

The coffee was gone; it seemed time to leave, so Dean walked up to the driver's door, Castiel trailing along behind him. Dean hoisted himself into the Chevy's driver side seat, grabbed the keys off the dash and started the engine. Cas raised one hand in farewell as Dean closed the door, but Dean rolled down the window to say a few last words.

"Thanks for the wolf pups, dude," said Dean. "That was..." He shook his head. "That was unforgettable. I just wish Sam could've seen them."

"If he does return, I can still take him there," said Cas, taking a step closer. "The pups will be there for a couple months yet." He took another step forward, set one hand on the edge of Dean's window and said, "And, Dean... even if your brother can't visit any more, he does care for you. You know that, right?"

Dean almost couldn't answer for a moment. "You've only met him, like, twice," he finally said.

"I can see it," said Cas. "It's obvious." He added again, quite seriously, "There's still time for him."

And now Dean could not trust himself to speak. He nodded; Cas nodded back, with just one slow, silent nod that seemed, somehow, intensely meaningful.

Cas backed away then, and Dean rolled his window up. But Dean's eyes caught Cas's through the mud-smeared window, and there was another of those oddly long stares. These moments were always magnetic.

Cas smiled at him now. It warmed Dean's chest in a way that almost hurt.

*I am totally f*cked*, thought Dean.

Yet the day had been perfect as it was.

He gave Cas a grin and a brisk nod, threw the truck into gear, and pulled out onto the Haul Road to head back to Kupaluk. Just as on the first day they'd met, he kept glancing in the rearview mirror until Cas was out of sight. And just as on the first day they'd met, Cas watched Dean too. For as long as Dean could keep him in view, Cas stood there by the Haul Road, alone under an endless sky, watching Dean drive away.

The next day Dean visited the wooden box again with another load of canned food. The pink flag was down. Dean opened the mailbox to find all the original food gone, and three of the little round containers were now refilled with new contents. Two were full of blueberries again, and the third had cranberries. The note read:

*Dean, those little pies were... I have no words.*

*Had I known blueberries had such potential in your hands, I'd have shifted my summer camp here*
years ago. I wonder what you might do with cranberries?

By the way, I will be gone for a couple days. For research. I will return.

C.
The next day Dean left a new batch of mini-pies at the box (a cranberry-blueberry experiment, this time), and he put up the pink streamer.

But the pink streamer was still up the next day.

And it was still up the next day after that. Upon which Dean reluctantly retrieved the cranberry-blueberry mini-pies, ate two himself and shared the others with Phil, Nicole, Shawn and Ryan. And after that, he immediately went off into the kitchen to make a fresh batch for Cas. It wouldn't do for Cas to get stale mini-pies, after all.

The new batch came out very well — this time Ed had a brainwave to add some coarser flakes of cinnamon and fresh grated lemon peel, and the flavor, in Dean's opinion at least, really took off. (Dean was already beginning to consider himself a connoisseur of miniature pastries.) Dean delivered the new batch after dinner, hiking up the boardwalk on a chilly, overcast evening, past hills shrouded with fog.

Disappointingly, the fog was thick enough that Dean couldn't even see toward Cas's tent. Just to be sure, he diverted fifteen minutes to hike toward the look-out spot from which Cas's little tent was usually visible, but the tundra tonight was just a sea of gray fog, the low night-time sun just a small white disk gleaming through a silver haze. Visibility was only about a half mile. Topaz Mountain, and Cas's tent too, were lost in the mist.

Returning to the wooden box with a sigh, Dean packed some snow around the outer bag to keep the new batch of little mini-pies well-preserved until Cas could pick them up. And then he lingered a few minutes longer, until the chill began to creep into his bones. It had seemed possible that Cas might show up, if he just waited long enough. But finally, when Dean began to shiver, at last he left, a twinge of disappointment gnawing at him. Cas had said, of course, that he'd be gone "for a few days." It shouldn't be surprising. But it was more frustrating than Dean had expected to not know exactly when Cas would be coming back.

The next afternoon, Dean kept wondering if Cas had finally gotten back from his research expedition (wherever that had taken him) and whether he had found the new batch of mini-pies. Frustratingly,
though, the entire day slipped by without a chance for Dean to go check the wooden box. This was 
because today was Friday, Dean's last full day at Kupaluk. The week had flown by, and as 
unbelievable as it seemed, his two-week break started tomorrow.

He worked all day, and through lunch. Even at dinnertime Dean was still at work, checking through 
all the camp logbooks in the manager's office. Everything had to be brought up to date before he left: 
the water and food delivery schedules, the maintenance logs for the vehicles and Big Mama, the 
dorm bed reservations. Every little detail had to be ship-shape before he handed the reins over to 
Shelly tomorrow. The whole day had been totally jammed full with camp logistics and paperwork. 
And with this one last hectic day of long hours of work, his first month at Kupaluk would be over. 
Tonight he'd pack up his stuff, and early tomorrow he'd have to hit the road to drive up to 
Deadhorse. It'd be two weeks at a minimum before he got back up to the north hills, and to the 
wooden box, and to that overlook with the view of Topaz Mountain and the little blue tent.

Dean sat at his battered wooden desk in the camp manager's office, staring down at a clipboard as he 
tried to focus on Big Mama's oil change schedule. But it had been a very long day, and he was 
having a little trouble concentrating. At last he set the clipboard down and gazed out the window at 
the mountains.

Today's fog had finally lifted into a bank of high, sailing clouds, punctuated here and there by 
patches of bright blue sky. The Brooks Range were emerging through the thinning fog like sentinels 
across the southern horizon. Their jagged snow-capped peaks were serene and majestic, striped now 
with bands of sun and shadow. A few distant bird songs were audible through Dean's half-opened 
office window: White-crowned sparrow. Lapland longspur. Bluethroat. And even, Dean realized, a 
little trill or "chip" now and then from the little lost dark-eyed junco. Dean had been tossing it 
handfuls of birdseed out on the dining hall deck every couple days now, and it seemed to have 
signed up as a permanent Kupaluk resident.

He listened to the birds for a few moments longer, and glanced over at the channel-six radio. It had 
been silent for days.

*I really wanted to cross paths with Cas just one more time,* he realized.

For one thing, he wanted to be sure Cas was all right, after whatever research trek Cas had been 
doing. It wasn't unusual for tundra scientists to do this sort of multi-day excursion, of course — a few 
days' of camping on some distant hiking circuit around remote study sites. Sure, it was a little old-
school to do it on foot (these days, scientists usually preferred to be dropped off by helicopter) but 
everything Cas did was old-school. But it was more than a little frustrating to not even hear from him 
for days. Yes, he was an old hand at the Arctic; yes, he'd left that note, and he'd clearly stated that he 
had a few days of research stuff to do. Yes, he now had that yellow satellite transmitter, and the radio 
too.

But still. There were bears to run into. There was ice to fall through. There was still cold weather at 
night. It had been days. What if Cas had gotten into trouble?

And even assuming Cas really was fine, it would've been nice just to see if he liked the new mini-
pies.

*All right...* Dean thought to himself. *Fess up. It would've been nice, too, just to get to hang out a bit 
more.*

Emphasis on *would've*. Dean checked his wristwatch, sighed, and picked up the clipboard to finish 
his notes for Shelly. He was plain out of time.
The plan for tomorrow was pretty well set. Dean would pack tonight so that he could head out early tomorrow morning to Deadhorse, aiming to get there around noon. Then he’d grab a beer and a lunch with Sam — the beer brought by Dean, of course, since there were no bars anywhere on the North Slope (and for some reason, Dean hated the thought of having any of AP's beers). From there he’d head to the airport, where he’d meet Shelly on the inbound flight from Fairbanks. Dean would then hand over the Chevy keys. He always hated to relinquish possession of the beloved old truck, but Shelly was one of the very few people he trusted with it. He’d check his pistol with the airline (the rifle and shotgun would stay at Kupaluk, but Dean never traveled without the ivory-handled pistol). Then he'd board trusty Flight 143 once again, which undoubtedly would be the very same plane he'd flown in on, and he'd fly out, on just the first of several long flights that would deposit him back in Kansas some eighteen hours later. Deadhorse to Barrow, Barrow to Fairbanks, Fairbanks to Seattle, Seattle to Kansas City, and there’d be Bobby, meeting him with a smile and, undoubtedly, an acid joke or too about how filthy and tired Dean usually looked, post-Kupaluk. Then one more drive to Lawrence and at last he could sleep.

Dean usually spent his Kupaluk shift breaks in Lawrence, helping Bobby with the garage for a couple weeks. A few days sleeping and then a week or so helping Bobby was the usual routine. He’d also been planning, this year, to take a trip up to tiny Lebanon to check out the freshly surveyed property markers on that old farm that Dad had inexplicably purchased before his death. It would’ve been nice to have Sam along, of course, since Sam was a co-owner, the two brothers having jointly inherited all of Dad's property. They were planning to sell, if they could even find a buyer in that quiet stretch of north Kansas, but Dean hadn't had a chance yet to figure out what the old farm might actually be worth. There'd originally been a vague plan that maybe Sam could come down for a quick look around, but Ruby had nixed that idea a couple weeks ago. So it seemed it would be a solo trip for Dean up to little Lebanon.

This itinerary had been set, and the tickets purchased, months ago. A trip back to Kansas had been Dean's usual routine for years. Though he always missed Kupaluk a bit, it was always great to see Bobby too, and it was good to feel like he was helping a bit with the garage. Not to mention it was always downright luxurious to get a taste of a Kansas summer once more. After weeks on the tundra, the warmth and softness of those Kansas nights always felt practically exotic. The crickets droning in the evenings, the extravagantly green leafiness of the trees, the gardens of flowers and shrubs — it all made the world seem so lush it almost felt like cheating.

Not to mention the amazing sight of the sun actually setting. After a month on the tundra, the limitless darkness of a true night could feel like a drug. Dean even had a little ritual about it: his first night on break, he'd sit out on the porch of the Lawrence house with Bobby, beers in both their hands, just watching night settle over the land.

He’d always looked forward to it.

But, somehow, not this time.

This time I don't want to leave, he thought.

It was partly because of worrying about Sam. Sam and that damn Ruby.

But mostly, of course, it was Cas. How would Cas survive? What if something went wrong? And, not to be too selfish about it or anything, but what if Dean just missed more chances to hang out with him?

Dean had even considered staying at Kupaluk for the entire two weeks of his break. But every additional person at camp cost the university a whopping hundred-fifty dollars in food delivery, water delivery, gray-water haul-out, trash and recycling haul-out, room maintenance, permits,
staffing, and all the rest. And while he was on break, no way was the university going to pay his daily bill. Staying an extra week or two at Kupaluk on his own dime would take a huge bite out of Dean's savings, and those were dollars that were already earmarked for Sam's very last tuition bill.

Maybe it would be good to stop hanging out with Cas quite so often?

Maybe it'd be a good chance of pace to give the late-night Topaz Mountain radio calls a rest.

Dean found himself letting out another heavy sigh as he gazed out his office window at the mountains. He knew perfectly well that this whole "relationship", such as it was, wasn't going to go anywhere. And he also knew, from painful experience, that it really was a bad idea to get hung up like this on a straight guy. *Broken hearts are just wasted time,* he'd always thought. *Best to not get attached.*

That was the theory, anyway. There was theory, and there was reality. Dean knew it was ridiculous how hung up he'd gotten on Cas in just a scant handful of weeks, but somehow it had happened, and now the whole thing seemed to have a momentum all its own. And despite knowing perfectly well that it "wouldn't go anywhere," just to get one more day walking over the tundra with Cas... one more time seeing the wolf pups with him... one more time under that limitless tundra sky, walking with Cas over the heather and lichen, hearing his tales of the wild animals and the birds.... even just one more day would be worth it. Even if all they did was check bird nests or stick pink flags in the ground.

A rap on the door snapped Dean's attention back to the present. He glanced up; Teddy Bear was there, a dinner plate heaped with food in his hand.

Teddy marched over and plunked the plate in front of Dean. "Eat," he said.

"I'm not done with the logbooks," Dean explained. "Gotta get my work done."

"Then eat while you work," commanded Teddy. "I'm taking down the dinner buffet. You gotta get some — it's your favorite." He slapped down a fork, knife and napkin next to the plate, and began to turn away.

"Some of us never get some," muttered Dean quietly, picking up the fork. "Not our favorite, anyway...."

"What's that?" said Teddy, looking back.

"Nothing," said Dean, more loudly. "Thanks, Ted. Appreciate it." He obediently swallowed a couple mouthfuls, and added, "Delicious." Teddy gave him a bit of a skeptical look, one eyebrow raised, but at last he left.

The food was indeed delicious, but Dean found he wasn't very hungry. The thought of leaving Kupaluk for a few weeks seemed to have driven his appetite away.

It was long past dinner when at last he got the logbooks completed. He was stacking up all the clipboards and the three-ring binders in a neat row for Shelly when his computer pinged. An email had just arrived.
Dean spun his chair to the monitor for a look. It was from Sam:

*Hey Dean - Really sorry, but looks like the beer and lunch tomorrow may not happen. Ruby managed to get me booked on a free chopper tour out over the pack ice tomorrow morning. I guess she couldn't book it any other day — chopper's unexpectedly free all Saturday and it's the last weather window for a while. I guess there's a weather system coming through or something that's gonna sock in Prudhoe Bay on Sunday. You should get out fine on that Alaska Air flight on Saturday, but, afraid I gotta take a rain check for lunch. Maybe we can meet up in two weeks, on your way back through?*

*Sorry. I was looking forward to catching up.*

*Say hi to Bobby for me, okay?*

*Sam*

At this point it seemed inevitable. Of course Ruby had arranged her chopper tour for the one and only day in the entire summer that Sam had been scheduled to meet up with Dean. Of course.

*Let him go*, Dean reminded himself.

*Let him go. He's gotta go live his life on his own.*

He made himself shoot back a quick, neutral, "No prob bro, see you some other time," fired it off, and shut down the computer.

Looked like he'd just go straight to the airport tomorrow, then.

Dean was striding out of the office, trying to fend off a wave of mixed frustration and melancholy, when he thought to check his watch. It was only nine p.m. It was definitely going to be a bummer to miss seeing Sam, but at least it meant Dean wouldn't have to leave quite so early tomorrow morning. In fact it would free up two whole hours.

Which meant he could put off his packing till tomorrow morning.

Which meant he suddenly had a few hours free tonight. Right now.

Which meant he had time for just one more drive around the perimeter road, up to the north hills, to the wooden box by the pingo-pond.

Thirty minutes later Dean was walking up the long boardwalk carrying a plastic bag with another little bundle of cans and jars for Cas. More nonperishable food; it was the best excuse he'd been able to come up with for why he was letting himself march up here one more time. More peanut butter, tuna, a couple boxes of crackers, a big brick of cheddar cheese, and several cans of soup.
Up and over the first hill he went, down and across the snowmelt creek, and up the second hill. As he walked, he reminded himself not to feel too worried (or too rejected, really) by Cas's mysterious several-day absence.

But it's been five days, he thought.

Cas had stuff to do. He had his research, he had his own work; he had those “transects” to do, and nests to GPS and flag, he had bird behavior to watch and data to collect. He had a ten-mile-diameter study area to cover. He had a long-term research project. Clearly he couldn't come trudging over toward Kupaluk every single day, just to check on Dean's dumb little wooden box and its possible beers and mini-pies.

But it's been five days....

Cas had to be fine. He knew this country. This was the guy who'd walked over Atigun Pass in March, who'd been working in the Arctic for years. The guy who could tame wolves, and charm caribou, and who practically could talk to birds, and who apparently had a wild pomarine jaeger almost eating out of his hand. He must be fine. The weather had even been pretty good the past few days; midnight lows hadn't even gone below freezing for three days now. Cas must be fine. Though, the evening NWS forecast had in fact mentioned the possibility of a system moving in, probably the same system Sam had mentioned, the one that was going to "sock in" Prudhoe Bay by Sunday. Dean would be safely in Kansas by then, but what about Cas?

He checked the sky as he walked up the second hill. The "weather system" should still be at least thirty-six hours away, but it seemed the local weather was already windier than usual. Rough gusts had started blowing out of the west, now and then shoving hard at Dean's side, almost unbalancing him a few times. It was still sunny, but the huge puffy clouds that had been hanging overhead all day were now sailing past like giant aerial schooners. Each big, broad cloud seemed like a whole planet of white and gray, and each brought a broad patch of chilly shadow below it. As Dean walked, he watched one of these shadow patches sweep toward him from a mile or more to the west. The broad dark shadow rolled rapidly toward him like a wall of darkness, the great cloud suddenly blotting out the sun, as shade settled all over the entire hill like a blanket of cold.

Just as quickly, the huge cloud blew on past and the golden evening sun slanted though once again, the long rays of the evening bathing him once again, and the air temperature bouncing back up by at least ten degrees.

The huge speeding clouds were actually rather beautiful, but the waves of cold and shadow were starting to seem a little worrisome. Even the longspurs and savannah sparrows that had been singing all around seemed to go silent with each wave of shadow. It definitely felt a little less like spring, and a little more like winter. Just how bad was this "system" going to get?

Maybe I'll write Cas a note, thought Dean. Just to warn him about the weather. It was as good an excuse as any to linger by the wooden box a little longer.

Dean spent a good five minutes planning the note he was going to write, as he plodded steadily up the second hill. But when he came to the end of the boardwalk, there was Cas.

Cas was standing by the open box about fifty yards away, just beyond the pingo-pond. He already
had an open Tupperware container in one hand, and a half-eaten mini-pie in the other.

It was ridiculous how Dean's heart leapt at the sight. It was ridiculous how he could feel a huge smile spreading over his face already, and how powerless he was to even try to tone down the smile. But when Cas spun to see him approaching, right away a wide smile was on Cas's face too.

Cas swallowed his bite of mini-pie hastily, still smiling, and lowered the rest of the pie as if about to say something.

"Finish it, finish it!" Dean said. "Finish the pie!" He jumped off the boardwalk and strode toward Cas over the tussocks, following what had become a rather well-trodden path over the lichen and heather. When he came to a stretch of flowered tundra by the icewater pool, Dean began hopping from tussock to tussock, so as to dodge the fragile flowers as he went. Lupine, glacier avens, bistort, he jumped past them all, fairly bouncing his way up to Castiel. He felt almost giddy with energy. Cas was already holding the half-eaten mini-pie out toward Dean, and Dean waved it off, saying, "The pies are for you! Eat!"

Cas shook his head, still smiling, and pushed the remaining half-pie into Dean's hand, "You take the last bite. I insist," he said. "You just walked all the way up here." He swung his vintage leather water-skin from the side of his pack and took a long swallow of water. "Ah, Dean, these little pies..." Cas said, surfacing from his water-skin with a heavy sigh. "I was thinking about them, the past couple days. I was so looking forward to checking the box as soon as I got back tonight. These little pies!"

"This batch has these bits of cinnamon, from actual cinnamon sticks," Dean informed him, beaming at him. "And lemon zest."

"They're wonderful. You must have some yourself — eat, eat, finish that one. You know, it's quite amazing just how satisfying, how purely pleasurable, it can be to...." Cas hesitated before concluding, "Well, to satisfy a physical hunger."

Dean nodded. "Hunger's like that," he agreed. At last he took a modest bite of the remaining half-mini-pie, but then handed it back to Cas. "Tragic that you had to go four days without any pies. I had to make another whole batch, actually."

"I had a research trip, remember," said Cas. He took one more bite from the shrinking pie, once again handing the remainder to Dean.

"Yeah, I know," says Dean, nodding. "But still, pie-less for four days. That's gotta hurt." He took a very tiny bite this time, eating only half of the diminishing pie, and handed a tiny bit of the remaining pie-top, a fragment a half-inch square, back to Cas. "Tag, you're it," said Dean; Cas grinned at him and finally popped the last little crumbs in his mouth, and then they traded the water-skin back and forth.

There was such a shining, pure enjoyment in this casual act, just in how freely Cas was trading the pie and his water back and forth with Dean. Why was everything with Cas just so damn enjoyable? With every passing moment, Dean was dreading his own imminent departure even more.

"How'd the transects go?" asked Dean, pausing before taking one last swig of water. "You get a lot of data?"

"In a way," Cas said, with a slow nod. "In a roundabout way, I suppose. I did find a few nests, but quite by accident, en route. My real destination was Happy Valley."
Dean choked on his last swallow of water. Cas even had to thump him on the back a few times.

"Um," said Dean, when he got his breath back. "Why were you at Happy Valley?"

"Research," Cas reminded him. "I walked there a few days ago, observed for a day, and started the walk back yesterday. Just got back, actually."

Dean paused. He lowered the waterskin and looked at Cas.

Happy Valley was thirty miles away. And tundra was very rough terrain.

"You walked? Dean asked. (Cas nodded.) "Over tundra? Round trip?"

"It only took five days," said Cas. "I set out Monday. Two days going there, a day of observation, two days back."

Dean let out an astonished laugh. "Dude, seriously?" Cas was just blinking at him, as if a little confused by Dean's reaction. "Goddamn, Cas, I could've driven you there in, like, forty minutes."

Castiel just shrugged. "I didn't want to bother you."

"Damn, dude, we really need to arrange that wolvesled with the wolves," Dean said. "Or get you one of the retired trucks. An ATV. A mountain bike. Something. We gotta get you some kind of vehicle."

"I like walking," Cas said mildly, with another shrug. "Thirty miles is fairly easy at this time of year. The ground's still frozen enough, underneath; the tussocks still don't turn underfoot, and one can make quite good time if one follows the ridgelines. I wanted to do a bird-count transect anyway. I was taking data on spring arrivals."

"Well, um... okay, I guess," said Dean, still a little flummoxed that Cas would have gone so far on foot. "Um... how'd it go? You get some good data on the birds, at least?"

"Oh, yes, indeed," said Cas. "I passed a Smith's longspur breeding area. The Smith's females have all just arrived, so of course there's much excitement. They live for this week, you know. Also, and this is rather interesting, golden-crowned sparrows have crossed over the Brooks too. They tell me they've never—" Cas hesitated the briefest moment. "My data indicate," he amended, "that golden-crowned sparrows have never nested this side of the mountains before. They've peeked over the pass, of course; and now and then one or two of the bolder ones have flown over for a quick look, but they've never found it hospitable enough to stay. Until now. This year, things are changing. Quite a few have decided to stay, and some are building nests. Also—"

Dean knew he was missing some of the details of this tale of the golden-crowned sparrows and how they'd finally gotten over the mountains. He was, as it happened, more than a little distracted by just how good it was to see Cas again. It was a great relief just to know he was okay, of course. But also it was just plain good to see him. It literally felt good just to look at him, just to take in the sight of Castiel standing here on the open tundra.

It was partly the setting; those dramatic clouds sweeping past, the darkening indigo of the late-evening sky, the low glowing sun sinking toward its midnight nadir. It was partly the spring colors on the tundra, covered now with sprays of tiny green shoots showing at the top of every tussock, mounds of color-speckled soft heather spreading away beyond Cas's feet, and dramatic dots of bright color here and there — spires of vivid-purple lupine and bright pink bistort, and clumps of fuzzy yellow glacier avens. The tundra was fairly a carpet of flowers now. Topaz Mountain loomed in the background, still streaked with snow. It was a stunning setting.
But Dean's gaze was really on Cas's face. As the clouds blew by overhead and bands of light and shadow kept passing over them both, stray ends of Cas's dark hair kept whipping around in the wind. His habitual five o'clock shadow had matured into a rough-looking scruff while he'd been away.

The scruffy look... was good. The way his hair was blowing around looked... really good. He looked good in that open air setting, with the flowers spread around at his feet....

He just looked good. There was no other way to put it. He looked so good.

*It's a crime to look so hot if you're just gonna spend your life alone on the tundra,* Dean thought. *If you're not interested in guys, then you oughta at least go find some girls. 'Cause hiding this away from the world just isn't right.*

Dean was so engrossed in his study of Castiel that it took him a few moments to realize that Cas had concluded his story about the golden-crowned sparrows and had just pulled something out of his pocket. He was looking down at it in his hand, keeping a tight grip as it fluttered in the wind at one end. Dean took a step closer.

It was another black feather.

"Oh, is that also from that jaeger?" Dean asked, gesturing to the feather.

"Yes," said Cas, a little quietly. "It shed yesterday. While I was doing observations at Happy Valley."

Dean blinked, a little puzzled; the pomarine jaeger had been at Happy Valley?

"Would you like this one too?" said Cas. He added, "It's the mate to the one you've already got. Off the other wing."

"You saw the same jaeger thirty miles from here?" Dean asked. "What, is it, like... following you?"

"In a way," Castiel said, with a shrug. "Or at least, I have the feather. Um... would you like it?" After a slight hesitation he added, "It's traditional, if a... um... jaeger is molting, to have both matching feathers. The left and the right. You could keep them both. If you wanted."

"They are pretty cool," Dean agreed. "Sure." He took the feather and turned it in the light.

It was magnificently dark at first, glossy and gleaming, so lovely that it actually managed to hold Dean's attention (for once, he wasn't looking at Cas). But as Dean turned it around in the golden light of the evening sun, for the briefest moment the feather flashed gold too.

"Look! Did you see that?" said Dean, holding it up. "It did the gold flash! Did you see it? Did you see the gold?" Dean turned it around some more, holding it closer to Cas so that he could get a good look too.

For a long moment nothing happened, but then the feather flashed gold again. "There!" Dean said. "Did you see?"

"I saw," said Cas quietly.

"You're the only one besides me who's seen it do that," said Dean. "Whenever I hand these feathers to anybody else, they won't go gold."

"Imagine that," said Cas.
"Yeah, it's the coolest thing," Dean said. "I think it's bioluminescence. Sometimes the other one glows at night."

"Yes, it would," said Cas. "I've been seeing those gold flashes for some weeks now." Though, in fact, he wasn't even looking at the feather at all anymore. Instead he was watching Dean's face. He added, "Dean, you're leaving quite soon, correct?"

Dean nodded, finally looking up from the feather. "It's kind of a twenty-four/seven job, so they force us to take time off now and then. And they can't afford to keep feeding us up here, so they kind of kick us out for a couple weeks. Most folks just park in Fairbanks, or take a vacation trip somewhere, but I usually head back home. Check in on this friend of ours; old friend of our dad's. He runs this garage, and I help him with it. Actually..." He paused as the reality set in again. "I gotta leave tomorrow."

"I know," said Cas softly. He was watching Dean's face. "You mentioned it last time. That's actually why I returned today. It was something of a long hike, but I did hope to meet you here today."

"I'll be back," said Dean. "It's just two weeks. I should be back in mid June. Fifteenth or so. You'll still be around, right? You're up here through the summer, you said?"

But Castiel shook his head.

"I'm afraid not," Cas said, and he looked down at the ground. "I received some news two days ago. My...uh... my superiors are rather... displeased, I suppose you could say, with my... course of action here. Certain... developments..." (He flicked a glance up at Dean.) "... have come to their attention, unfortunately. I'm to be..." He hesitated a long moment before finally saying. "Well, there's a procedure I will need. It's sort of a... surgical procedure."

Dean was struggling to take this in. Cas wasn't going to be here at all when Dean got back? Cas was going away? For how long?

"Wait... what for?" Dean said. "What procedure?" On a guess he added, "Does it have to do with your back? Your, um, back problem?"

Cas nodded, but now he wouldn't meet Dean's eyes. He turned away, and gazed at Topaz Mountain.

"Will it fix it?" Dean asked. "The scoliosis or whatever?"

But Cas shook his head. "It'll make it less noticeable," he said. He added, his voice now oddly gruff, "Smaller."

Dean took a step closer, frowning. "Jeez, man, you gonna be okay?" he asked. The initial shock of hearing that Cas might be leaving was temporarily tabled by the realization that Cas did not look remotely happy about this "procedure." Was this something Cas actually wanted? Was it dangerous?

Dean watched him for a moment. Cas turned back slowly from Topaz, and looked at the black feather that was now securely in Dean's hand. He still wasn't meeting Dean's eyes.

Dean tucked the feather carefully in his pocket. Cas looked up at him then, and Dean said, "Cas, is this a good thing or a bad thing?"

Cas hesitated. "My family thinks it's a good thing," he said at last.

"But what do you think?"
"It doesn't matter what I think," said Castiel.

Dean frowned. "What the hell do you mean?" he asked.

Cas darted a brief glance at him and looked away, over to Topaz Mountain again.

Dean repeated, "What do you mean it doesn't matter what you think? Of course it matters! It's your life. It's your body. You don't have to do anything that you don't want to do."

Cas gave him a faint smile. "I'm afraid that's not strictly true," he said.

"Dude, they can't **force** you—" Dean started.

"They can, actually," said Cas, cutting Dean off firmly, and there was a steely look in his eyes now.

Dean went silent for a moment.

"Cas—" he tried again.

"It was my choice originally," Cas said, glancing yet again at Topaz Mountain. "They could have taken quite a different course with me. They could have done something worse. I chose to have this procedure instead. But I knew it wouldn't be permanent. It has to be renewed now and then."

Dean was truly worried now, as well as frustrated that Cas wouldn't just tell him what the "deformity" actually was. Whatever it was, it had long been clear that it was something Castiel felt ashamed about. It had even become pretty clear the guy had practically exiled himself from humanity because of it. Even up here on the Slope he kept himself apart, and that was saying something.

Dean took a step closer, drawing a breath to speak, but Cas's next words literally stopped Dean in his tracks.

"I fear we won't see each other again after today," Castiel said.

Dean stared at him.

"After the procedure, I'm to be reassigned immediately," said Cas. His voice had gone oddly even and steady, almost mechanical, as if he were trying to pretend none of this mattered. "They've asked me to shift to one of my other arctic camps. As far away from here as possible. Likely Iceland, maybe Siberia. I'm to close up the camp here permanently. In ten days."

Dean just stared at him for another long moment.

"You can't leave," Dean blurted out.

"I don't want to, believe me," Cas said, a touch of emotion finally coming back into his voice. "But I don't have any choice."

"But you — you can't — but your research," Dean said. It wasn't at all what was most bothering him, but it was the most persuasive argument that jumped to mind. "You've got to keep your research going! You've been studying these birds for years, haven't you? This is a long-term study!"

"I know," Cas said, and now there was some real bitterness in his voice. "I do truly want to keep monitoring them... I'd so very much like to stay. For other reasons too. But, I'm to be reassigned."

"Can't you just... get another job?"

Cas gave him a wry smile. "It's not that easy," he said.
But, Cas—"

Castiel interrupted him. "Actually," he said, and now something in his voice had changed. He turned to face Dean, and he said, "Actually, I was wondering if you might be interested in one more activity today."

"One more... activity?" Dean said. He felt in shock, still trying to process that this might the last time he would see Castiel. Surely not the last time? Not the last time ever? Surely they could keep in touch? They could email or Skype or something. Maybe they could even visit each other. Iceland wasn't an impossible place to visit. Even Siberia wasn't impossible. It wouldn't be the end.

Yet Dean felt so dismayed that he almost felt nauseous. Which was a crazy reaction. Dean knew perfectly well that it shouldn't be getting to him so much. People came and went, up here. Everybody on the Slope was a nomad. And it wasn't like he'd even known Cas all that long. Just a few weeks....

Never fall for a straight guy. Never fall for a straight guy.

But that bridge had long since been crossed, hadn't it? Hell, it had been burned to ash.

"What activity," said Dean, trying to focus on whatever Cas wanted to do for their last day together. (Last day together! It couldn't be. It was impossible.) "Um, like what, the sauna?"

Cas gave a little laugh. "No, not the sauna." He paused a long moment, and his eyes locked on Dean's.

There it was again. That look. That lingering moment of silence. That stare.

The moment lengthened. The stare continued. The blue of Cas's eyes seemed almost to be gleaming, alight with... what? What was that expression on his face? Why did he look so intense? What was he feeling?

Curiosity?

Hunger?

I've asked him before, Dean had to remind himself. I asked him straight out if he was gay, and he said no. Several times. He said he couldn't really understand how anybody could be gay. Doesn't get much clearer than that. And if he'd been bi, he'd have said. I swore I wouldn't push. I don't want to be the kind of guy who pushes when the other dude's not —

Castiel said, his tone almost casually conversational, "Did you know that gay means homosexual?"

Dean could only look at him. Cas had to be joking, right?

But by now Dean had learned that whenever he thought Cas was joking, Cas was almost certainly not joking. Castiel tended to mean exactly what he said.

A prickling shiver ran across Dean's skin.

"You don't say," Dean finally managed. "And here I thought it just meant young at heart."

"No, the word means homosexual now," Castiel informed him. He was giving Dean a searching glance. "And I believe you knew that."

"I... might have heard that usage of the word," Dean said, who still couldn't help thinking that Cas had got to be pulling his leg. Sure, Cas had grown up in an isolated bush town or something, but
even the bush towns had satellite TV these days, and they had their own little radio stations and they
got the news just like everyone, and everybody was online these days. There was no possible way
Castiel couldn't have known what "gay" meant.

Though, if Cas actually hadn't known what "gay" meant, then maybe—

Dean said, cautiously, "Kids these days and their crazy slang, you know? It's so hard to keep up."

"It is," Cas agreed, and he heaved a sigh, as if this were a very tiresome point. "Colloquialisms are
the very bane of my existence sometimes. However, indeed the word now means homosexual. I
discovered this at Happy Valley. I made quite some interesting observations there. Dean, I recall you
asking me about gay-ness earlier, and so, I now realize I might have misunderstood, and now that I
know I'm to be reassigned elsewhere, I was wondering ..." A small, uncertain smile crossed his face,
something almost shy. But then he gave a sudden shrug, turning both hands palms-up as if he were
throwing caution to the winds. He said, "It occurred to me that I might at least clarify if by any
chance, when you asked, earlier, if I were gay, if maybe you weren't asking if I were happy and
carefree. Might you by any chance have meant ...." He paused, looking over at Dean.

Never before had Dean felt so paralyzed.

*There it is again,* Dean thought, feeling almost hypnotized, for it was that long steady stare again.
The clouds were scudding over the sun, patches of sun and shadow blowing over them both. It was
late evening now and the sun was getting very low; its long golden beams were catching Cas's eyes
from the side, and the blue of his eyes seemed almost to glow, like some kind of radiant internal blue
light were spilling out of him. His profile was picked out perfectly; half his face in light, half in
shadow; the scruffy two-day beard looking *insanely good*, the wind ruffling his dark hair around his
forehead....

The wind was sharper now, the midnight air distinctly colder, but all Dean felt was heat.

Cas took a step closer.

"Do you ever...." asked Cas, his head tipped slightly, an inquiring frown on his face. But again he
didn't finish his sentence. "I was just wondering, do you ever...."

He inched closer still. He was only two feet away now. Dean found himself taking a deep, slow
breath, discovering he was even leaning twoard Cas a little.

"Do I ever what?" Dean finally managed to croak, in almost a whisper.

"Do you ever engage in homosexual activity?" Cas said. "I was just wondering."

"Um," said Dean weakly. "Why do you wanna know?"

Castiel took a half step closer.

"I was thinking it might be an interesting activity to try," said Castiel.

There was a distinct sensation of heat at Dean's groin now. He thought, *This can't be happening. Is
this happening? Is this for real?* He managed to say, mouth dry, "What, um, like, here? Now?" He
couldn't tear his eyes off of Cas's.

"Here," Cas confirmed, with a slow nod. "Now. If you'd like."

"DTF after all, huh?" said Dean. He raised one hand, still in disbelief, and set it on Cas's shoulder. It
was a trial move; it was, really, a question. Castiel didn't pull back. He was still staring into Dean's eyes — and, now and then, glancing down at Dean's lips.

"That expression I still don't understand," Cas said, his gaze still flickering up and down Dean's face. "DTF."

"Down to fuck," Dean said. "And the word 'down' means 'ready and willing'. Just to clarify the colloquialism."

"Ah," says Castiel, his expression clearing. "Thank you for explaining." A perfectly marvelous smile spread over his face; uncertain, tentative, but a smile. Impossibly, Castiel said, "Yes. Yes. I'm very much down to fuck. I rather wish you had clarified that expression sooner." Dean closed the distance between them, and then his mouth was on Cas's.

There was a rough and unpracticed feel to it. Cas didn't tilt his head quite the usual way, and he even jumped a little in surprise when Dean added a bit of tongue. But the hesitation seemed to pass in a flash, and within two seconds he was responding in kind. Even so, a lacing of worry and disbelief was still running through Dean's mind, a lingering concern that he'd gotten it wrong, but Cas's last words had been a crystal clear "Yes." And every action was now backing that up: the way he had both hands on the sides of Dean's face now; the way he soon shifted one hand to Dean's back, pulling him closer; the eagerness of his kissing, which was getting bolder by the second. Dean was flooded with sensations — the marvelous roughness of Cas's stubbly cheeks, that solid muscularity of his shoulders. Even the soft nubbiness of his sheepskin jacket seemed entrancing. And his scent, and the way he tasted! How miraculous it was that Castiel was somehow free of that classic North Slope working-man's fragrance — the inevitable mixture of sunblock, mosquito repellent, mud, dust, and sweat that everybody else up here seemed to have. Cas had quite another smell entirely, and as Dean kissed him, and nibbled at his lips, and tasted his tongue, and twisted down to nibble at his neck, it seemed imperative to memorize that scent and that taste, to take in as much of it as possible. It was like the wild arctic heather, the lake ice, and the wolves, all rolled into one. Cedar-smoke and storm clouds... wild frozen rivers, and wind off the pack ice... ice and rain and wildflowers. And under it all, an indescribable slight musk, something subtle but feral, an addictively wild scent. Something like a wild bird, maybe.

Something like feathers.

For a long moment Dean was absolutely lost in that scent, and the feel of Cas's mouth on his, and the taste of his mouth.

Dean found himself pressing shamelessly against Cas as they kissed, even shifting his feet to lean more firmly against him. *Christ, I'm already hard,* he realized, breathless. It had been barely thirty seconds. He was almost embarrassed to realize he was pushing hard against Cas's thighs, and even as he noticed that he was doing this, he couldn't help adding a little shove with his hips, a small but unmistakable hip thrust. He hadn't even planned it; he'd just done it. Even through the snowpants Cas must have felt it (and must have felt a certain lump, as well), for a jolt of surprise seemed to flash through Cas's whole body.

Cas inhaled sharply, breaking the kiss for a moment and pulling back to stare at Dean in something like shock.
There was only another second's hesitation before Cas dove in again, eagerly pressing back, pushing back so hard against Dean's own thigh that Dean had to do a hasty repositioning of one foot just to brace himself.

There was a pattern emerging here, of waves of shock and confusion and delight that seemed to keep hitting Cas, like successive bursts of surprise. And then Dean realized, *He's new at this.*

Dean made himself slow down. He wanted to grab Cas's crotch right then and there, stick a hand right down his snowpants and grab his cock, throw him right down to the heather and strip him bare in the icy wind. But Dean took a slow breath and made himself break off the new round of hungry kissing and groping just long enough to say:

"Hey, just wondering, have you done this kind of thing much before?"

Cas shook his head, a little out of breath. "Never," he said, his voice so gruff and low now that it came out almost in a growl. "I've only ever observed. I'm not supposed to..." He hesitated, hands tightening slightly on Dean. One was on Dean's shoulder now, the other right on Dean's ass. Dean slid both hands down to Cas's ass in return, and squeezed lightly.

"... not... supposed to... participate," Cas managed to say, in almost a groan, his eyes sliding shut.

Dean almost wanted to groan too. Had Cas's family really squashed the poor guy's true leanings that thoroughly? Religious family, sure enough.

Dean said, trying to make a joke out of it, "No interference, huh?"

A pained expression crossed Cas's face. "Exactly. No interference."

"Well, I'm gonna interfere with you now, okay? And you had fucking better interfere with me right back, and I'm serious about that."

Cas's eyes went a little wide, and he nodded.

So Dean got to work.

The first problem was the snow pants. Tundra outerwear could be challenging. There tended to be multiple layers, and all sorts of velcro and ties and snaps. Fortunately Dean had plenty of experience — and also plenty of motivation right now, as it happened. In fact, whole rivers of pure motivation seemed to be pouring through him. In record time he had figured out Cas's belt and its positively ancient-looking brass clasp, and it only took a few moments longer to solve the complicated set of old-school lacing on Cas's snowpants and figure out the access points in his long johns. This all only took a few moments, Cas's breaths hitching unevenly as he watched, and finally Dean slid one hand right down Cas's snowpants.

Cas's eyes went wide.

Ah, there, yes, a nice stiff rod of hot flesh. Beautifully stiff. Getting stiffer by the second.

That first moment of skin-to-skin contact was electric. It was one thing to kiss, it was one thing to grope and feel around a little, but that first moment of getting a hand on the goods — that was when it truly became clear if it was all actually going to happen.

Cas actually staggered when Dean took hold. He let out a hiss and spread his legs a little, hands tightening so hard on Dean's shoulders that it seemed he was searching for support. Dean lingered there a moment, feeling his way around Cas's dick, stroking the soft skin. He tested a soft grip, and
Castiel gasped, leaning his forehead against Dean's shoulder.

Oh yes. This was going to happen. Oh yes.

"Gotta get these damn packs off," Dean murmured. For Dean had a plan now, and the plan involved them both naked from the waist down, both their jackets spread out on the heather. Heather always made the best surface for tundra adventures. It could be a little prickly, but it provided a good barrier from the icy permafrost and the damp tussocks and the patches of snow. The wind would still be chilly, but it'd work.

With a quick glance around to assess the terrain, Dean withdrew his hand from Cas's pants, grabbed his hand, and led Cas a few steps over to the edge of the snowmelt pond, where there was a broad soft pad of arctic heather and azalea some eight feet across, carpeted with tiny flowers. Cas had followed him mutely and was staring at Dean now as if in a trance, one hand drifting uncertainly to his own snowpants as if unsure if it was all over. "Custom tundra bed," Dean said to him, nodding to the heather with a grin. Dean shucked off his own backpack and then took two steps closer, right up to Cas, relishing the ravenous look in Cas's huge dark eyes as understanding dawned, and then Dean slid his hand right back down into Cas's snowpants again. Cas's resulting gasp and shudder made Dean want to memorize this moment forever, live it over and over again, this glorious moment of sliding his hand onto Cas's dick and seeing Cas so eager and shaken. Dean began biting lightly at Cas's neck, one hand tugging very gently on his dick, and Cas started trembling.

Dean felt almost drunk with power. The next goal, of course, would be to get Cas flat on his back on the heather. This would require removing the ever-present backpack, and in the heat and thrill of the moment Dean entirely forgot that this might be an issue. Still drifting one hand lightly over Cas's dick, reaching deeper to fondle his balls lightly, exploring around his whole groin now (with Cas's breathing accelerating), Dean slid his free hand under one of Castiel's backpack straps, planning to slide the backpack off and set it aside.

But Cas flinched. He grabbed Dean's wrist hard with one hand and yanked it off the backpack strap. He'd gone from pliant willingness to iron resistance in a single second. He was braced now, staring at Dean, gripping Dean's wrist surprisingly hard with one hand. His other hand was flat on Dean's chest, almost pushing him back. Dean was so startled that he drew his hand out of Cas's pants. Had he gotten it all wrong? For a moment they were both frozen in mutual confusion.

"Sorry, I, uh..." Dean stammered.

But the look in Cas's eyes was still pure hunger, the blue of his eyes almost cobalt-dark, pupils wide. He was breathing deeply, as if he'd been running. He actually ran his tongue around his lips as he stared at Dean. Then he lunged forward again at Dean (yet still gripping Dean's wrist with one hand), and he shifted the hand that had been on Dean's chest around to the back of Dean's neck, yanked him closer roughly, and they were kissing again.

Again, thoughtlessly, Dean tried to get his backpack off, sliding his other hand to Cas's other strap. It was a move he'd done so many times at Happy Valley with other guys that it felt almost automatic: get the inevitable snow pants off, then get the inevitable pack off — it was all part of the process. But again Cas wrestled Dean away, using both hands this time to fend him off. Another dark stare; Cas now had both of Dean's wrists in his hands. His eyes flicked behind Dean, a faint smile crossed his face, and then he shoved Dean on the chest, shockingly hard. Dean fell flat backwards onto his back into the springy mound of heather. Cas had aimed the shove well.

Like a starving animal, Cas fairly flung himself down after Dean, first dropping to his knees between Dean's legs and then scrambling his way closer, till he was half crouching over Dean and half lying
on him, one hand planted in the heather by Dean's shoulder to support his weight. Cas seemed to come to himself for a moment then, balanced on knees and one hand, a scant inch of space between their groins. In that tantalizing position, so very close and yet barely in contact, Castiel paused for a moment, just gazing down at Dean.

Dean stared up, speechless.

Cas touched Dean's chin with his free hand. He stroked one finger over Dean's lower lip; he slid his fingers slowly around to the back of Dean's neck. After that brutal shove down to the heather, his touch now was astonishingly delicate, almost reverent. He stroked the small hairs at the back of Dean's neck, slowly, for several long moments, gazing down all the while with a darkly intense look. His touch sent actual shivers down Dean's spine, and Dean let out a gasp, and then a groan.

Then Cas bent closer in another hungry kiss. Dean let out another groan, and now he had to close the gap between them; he ground his hips against Cas's as they kissed.

A third time Dean tried to get his backpack off. It had become a quiet game now, and this time Dean did it knowingly, grinning up at Cas as he tugged at the backpack straps. Cas even grinned back; but unexpectedly Dean almost succeeded. This time he hadn't even been intending to get the pack off (he'd finally remembered about the "deformity") — he'd really only been intending to tug at the straps playfully. But there came a weird moment where it seemed like the backpack couldn't come off, that it couldn't even shift from side to side, as if it were stuck somehow, anchored to Cas's back. It was only a fleeting impression, but it seemed to break the playful mood. Again Cas abruptly grabbed both Dean's wrists in his hands, this time pressing Dean's hands up over Dean's head. All his body weight was fully on Dean now, heavy and solid, almost crushing Dean down to the heather like a wall of muscle. Again that wild scent came to Dean's nose. There was a powerful impression, then, of Castiel as one of the lean wild muscled creatures of the tundra. Like the wolves, or the foxes, or the falcons that went soaring by. Something alien and strong, and very, very wild, was crouched over Dean, willingly, eagerly; between Dean's legs, grinding now against Dean's crotch, leaning heavily against Dean's torso (and now, nibbling at the side of Dean's neck). This time Cas wouldn't let go of Dean's wrists, and he had Dean pinned. Dean was a little amazed at his strength. He tried twice to pull his hands free of Cas's grasp — though, to be fair, both efforts were quite half-hearted, for it was turning out to be astonishingly exciting to feel so manhandled, so easily tossed around. And oddly, Cas was turning out to be rather skilled at the wrestling part of this. The kissing still seemed to be new for him, but the wrestling, the mock-fight they'd stumbled into, the way he seemed able to twist and turn and get Dean's arms pinned without even the slightest effort — he had some real skill there.

But the rest still had that eager clumsy feel. Which, somehow, was making it even more hot. Cas began dry-humping against Dean's crotch as if he didn't even know there was any other alternative, anything else to do, and Dean just lay back and drank in the sight of how lost Cas got in that simple dry-humping motion. Cas's eyes even began drifting closed as he rutted slowly on top of Dean, still holding Dean's hands pinned.

Dean finally had to grunt out, "You had goddam better get both of our pants off soon. 'Cause I can't do it myself if you're gonna hold my hands pinned like this."

"Oh!" said Cas. "You want — what? You — Oh... ah... wait a sec." (It was as if he hadn't even realized that getting the snowpants off was an option.) He started fumbling ineffectively, with one hand, at Dean's snowpants — which, Dean happened to know, had a particularly annoying set of velcro and snaps. Soon Cas released Dean's hands, rolling slightly off him and scrambling down to waist level just in order to study Dean's snowpants with greater attention. He was downright glaring at the snowpants now.
Dean had to laugh. "That's the problem with winter gear!" he gasped. "Mine have this loop thing on the velcro, a loop around that button there — wait, just let me—" Dean undid the right buttons, and the loop, and the zippers, and wriggled the snowpants down to his hips. And Cas took it from there, with shocking speed. He yanked one of Dean's mud boots clean off and then the other, and then he stood, took hold of both legs of Dean's snowpants and gave a tremendous pull. In a flash Dean was disrobed down to his long johns. It was so startling that Dean let out a yelp.

"That all right?" Cas asked then, a flicker of worry coming onto his face.

"Yes. That would be a yes," said Dean. There were two more layers, of course, Dean's black long johns and underwear, and Dean was already wriggling out of those. Cas joined in to help with those as well, again whisking them off with startling abruptness.

Then for a long moment he stood absolutely still.

Dean was sprawled on his back on the heather, naked now from the waist down. Cas, though, was still fully dressed. And he stood staring down at Dean — and at Dean's now-extremely-erect cock — as if in a trance. He stared for so long that Dean started to get a little embarrassed. And then worried. "We don't have to—" Dean began, starting to prop himself up on his elbows. "We don't have to do anything." He reached for his snowpants.

"Don't you dare cover up," said Cas, hastily kicking the snowpants away. Dean glanced up at him; Cas was actually licking his lips, face flushed. He knelt between Dean's legs, and set his hand right on Dean's dick.

Slowly he wrapped his fingers around the very base of Dean's dick. Dean couldn't help letting out a slow, soft groan.

And there Castiel hesitated. He looked up at Dean.

"May I perform some fellatio?" said Castiel, with excruciating politeness.

"Holy fuck yes," gasped out Dean. "Are you fucking kidding me? If you don't do something—"

Castiel bent down and swallowed down Dean's dick.

YES — he's really — I'm really — YES —

Dean could only flop back and gasp.

Again there was that slight clumsiness on Cas's part, and the little jolts and shifts of position, as if the waves of surprise and delight were still hitting Castiel every few seconds with every new sensation. More signs of inexperience. But even so it felt good. It felt very good, and Dean was squirming almost at once. "Get closer, get down here," muttered Dean, tugging at Cas's shoulders a little, and Cas settled down, wriggling closer, till he was sprawled across Dean's legs, swallowing his cock down with exaggerated care. Both of Dean's hands were soon groping at Cas's hair (so soft! It had always looked so soft! It WAS soft!) and Dean had to remind himself, repeatedly, not to shove Cas's head down any farther, not to yank at him, not to throw too much too soon at him. He tried to slow his breathing, reminding himself to let Cas adjust. There probably should be some kind of conversation here; was this indeed Cas's very first time? Or just, first time with a guy? Or first time in a while, or what? — there probably should be some sort of heartfelt honest talk, maybe about health history and all that, and — about — mutual expectations— there probably should be — some — sort of — talking —
But Dean could only moan.

Cas wrapped his lips right around the head of Dean's cock, and began sliding his tongue around the cockhead, rather at random. It was clumsy, sure; it was tentative, yes; and it was wet and hot as hell and it felt fantastic. Dean let out another groan. Cas just kept at it, yet only playing with Dean's cockhead, and never going any deeper. Soon Dean was nearly whimpering with the need for more.

"Would you MOVE," Dean finally begged. "Like, up and down? Please." Cas began bobbing his head up and down, but with excruciating slowness, as if he wanted to examine every millimeter of Dean's shaft with his tongue. At one point he pulled all the way off and licked Dean's cock all over, exactly as if it were an ice cream cone, pausing at one point to whisper, "You taste good."

"Okay," Dean gasped, a little incoherently.

"I mean that. I genuinely like the taste."

"Yeah, okay," groaned Dean. He was getting close now, and could no longer hold back from doing little pulsing motions of his hips. Which then became little thrusts. Which became bigger and bigger thrusts. He could feel it building, his cock stiffening, he was getting close —

But wait.

"Wait, stop," gasped Dean. "I'm close, but wait, not yet, not yet—" Cas paused, lifting his mouth of Dean's dick and as he looked up at Dean quizzically, the reality of it hit Dean hard. He and Castiel were actually finally fucking. Bi or gay, whatever he was, Cas wasn't straight.

"Goddammit," burst out Dean, "We could've been doing this all along!"

"It does seem like a pity, doesn't it?" remarked Cas, his voice husky. "It was occurring to me that—"

"Shut up and get your dick out," Dean said, sitting up and grabbing at Cas's snowpants.

Cas's pants were still partly undone, and it only took Dean a moment to get them yanked down just past his hips, while Cas stared down at what Dean was doing. Dean didn't bother to try to get Cas's pants all the way off, or his boots — that would have taken a maddening amount of rearranging and standing up and logistics, an entire minute at least, and there was clearly no time for that. Cas's dick was out now, and that was good enough. Dean flopped onto his back again on the heather, bare legs spread, and he wrapped both heels around Cas's bare ass and hauled him closer.

Skin to skin, both their dicks pressed together deliciously. Castiel soon seemed to become nearly lost in it, eyes half-closing, lying heavily on Dean now. He'd started to let out little moans.

"Just one more thing—" gasped Dean, looking around. "Where the hell's my pack?" He saw it off to the side, managed to grab one stray strap and hauled it closer. Rummaging down into the very bottom of the pack with one hand, he managed to locate the little tube of lube that he always kept way at the bottom. It was difficult to get it out, for Castiel seemed to have totally lost track of what Dean was doing and was now just humping him almost mindlessly, nibbling at the side of Dean's neck with his eyes closed.

"Back up," Dean ordered, shoving a hand on his chest. Cas moved back unwillingly, with a soft groan of dismay, and Dean managed to get a palmful of lube on both their dicks, wrapping his hand around both their dicks at once. Cas's eyes flew open at the coldness, but then he thrust again, his dick sliding against Dean's.

"OH," Cas cried out, his face twisting at the sensation. "AH. That's... so good! Ah— AH—" and he
was off again, thrusting in rapid little pulses against Dean's hand. Very soon he was losing control, his thrusts getting fast and uncoordinated. He pulled back too far; his cock slipped out of Dean's hand. Cas grunted in frustration, stabbing now almost randomly at Dean's ballsack and ass. And then it was suddenly crystal clear what the next move had to be.

Dean worked a lube-slicked hand down around his own side, found Cas's dick and steered it to where he wanted.

"Here," croaked Dean. Cas's dick was hot and heavy; Dean felt it throb slightly. He pressed Cas's cockhead to his own asshole. "Here. Right here."

"Are you—" Cas gasped, in a whisper. "Are you sure?"

"I'm so damn fucking sure," Dean hissed back. He adjusted Cas's aim minutely, wriggled a little to reposition himself, and pulled his knees up a little, shoving his pack under one knee as a brace. The whole thing was a little awkward, but it would work. "There, right there, push— slow, Cas, slow—"

But Cas had started gasping deeply now, in heaving breaths. Dean, still with one hand on Cas's cock, could feel his cock stiffen, and he realized Cas was damn close. Cas gasped, "Dean, I'm— I'm— something's... happening, I—"

"Just push," Dean told him, and Cas pushed.

Dean felt the hot blunt round warmth shoving against him. He made himself relax. There came the moment when Cas's cockhead snapped in, almost popping into place, Dean's sphincter closing around it. Cas's eyes went wide. "AH," he yelled. His feet scrambled in the snow; he pushed harder, groaning loudly, "AH, AH, AH—" Dean grabbed his ass to yank him closer, and Cas gave one last hard thrust, shoving in balls-deep. Cas's cock slid even deeper and he let out a helpless throaty yell, "nGGGGAAAHHHH! AH, AH, AH, AH", his dick twitching as he started to come.

For a long blinding moment all Dean could feel was that thick hot rod starting to twitch inside him, and all he could see was Castiel's face screwed up, his mouth stretching almost in a grimace as he screamed. Dean was perilously close to coming himself; he yanked Cas's ass even closer, held him in place and wrapped both legs tightly around him. Cas's whole upper body was spasming; he folded down onto Dean, his forehead leaning on one of Dean's knees, shuddering and bucking, moaning with every twitch.

Cas seemed to come to the end of it and at last he lifted his head. But his eyes were glazed, and he was still panting hard. He started thrusting again, and he moaned, "Dean... it's not done..."

He sounded almost confused. Christ, he's still hard, Dean realized. Rock-hard, in fact. The slickness inside was unbelievable now, as Cas started doing long, deep thrusts, almost trying to grind himself into Dean. Maddeningly silky electric shocks were flooding through Dean now, with every thrust that Cas made. "Oh, yes, oh, YEAH," Dean blurted out, one hand finally going to his own dick. He began jerking himself, hard — Cas's eyes flew down to watch, and he set both his hands down in the heather to prop himself up a little. Heavy-lidded, he watched Dean stroking his own dick as Cas added his own heavy, hot, long thrusts into Dean's asshole. Cas hit somewhere perfect, somewhere electric, and Dean felt that shooting spiral. "Ah, ah, ah, ah, THERE, THERE—" Dean groaned. They were tilting a bit now, starting to topple sideways, but it didn't matter, nothing mattered except keeping this going. Dean had one bare foot thrashing in the prickly heather, the other clamped hard around Cas's ass. One more long thrust from Cas and Dean's dick twitched hard. "Ah, yeah, YEAH," Dean groaned, and the first thick string of semen flew out. Semen spurted hard, shot after shot, some landing on Dean's hand, some on his stomach, and one shot landed on Cas's hand. Dean's asshole was pulsing down hard on Cas's dick with every spurt; Cas let out a hoarse cry. Dean felt
Cas's dick pulsing yet again; Cas was coming a second time. He moaned with every pulse, buckling forward against Dean. They spasmed together for what seemed like minutes.

Cas was still hard. "Holy fucking shit," Dean moaned. "How long has it been for you?" Cas just gave him a heavy-lidded look, and started thrusting again. Slowly, gently, this time, his eyes tracking up and down Dean's half-clothed body. Bracing himself on Dean's pack with one elbow, he wrapped his other hand around Dean's cock, stroking in time with his own slow thrusts. Dean let his head flop back on the heather, sure he wouldn't come himself this time.

Cas thrust gently into Dean for long, exquisite minutes. He was watching Dean's face now. Sparks of pleasure were still running through Dean, and, amazed, he realized he was climbing toward a second orgasm himself. It was a slow climb this time, almost lazy, with Cas doing all the work as Dean just let the heat roll through him. It built, and built, and built, and the whole time, Dean gazed up at Castiel outlined against the sky. The tremendous clouds were still blowing by overhead, beams of golden sunlight catching Cas's profile from the side. His face shone with sweat; he was flushed, and panting, his chapped lips parted, his blue eyes gazing down raptly, sometimes looking at Dean's face, sometimes at Dean's cock. And sure enough Dean's cock was stiffening again under Cas's hot hand.

"Jesus fuck," Dean moaned. "I'm gonna come again..."

Cas said nothing. He didn't change his pace. Slow, deep, thrust after slow, deep, thrust, on and on he went. His hand slid heavily down Dean's dick in time with each thrust. Dean was gasping now; he could feel beads of pre-come welling from his dick. "Yeah, I'm, I'm, close again," he managed to grunt out to Cas. Cas seemed near collapse himself, and at last he pulled Dean over sideways in the heather.

They rutted there in the heather like animals, Cas still shoving steadily into Dean, Dean's legs still locked around him. They'd ended up halfway into a patch of soggy snow. Icy cold began filtering through Dean's jacket and bit at his skin, but that didn't matter. Cas seemed to have discovered that he now had both hands free, for he switched to his other hand on Dean's dick now, and slid the other up under Dean's shirt and jacket. He found one nipple; he pinched, and he squeezed. Dean cried out, wrapping his heels even more tightly around Cas's bare ass. Cas just kept thrusting, slowly, steadily.

"Yeah, I'm-- I'm... oh," Dean blurted. "yeah, like that, yeah, yeah, don't stop, Cas, don't stop, don't...stop..." It built, it built, and Cas gave one especially sharp deep thrust and pinched Dean's nipple hard, watching him through heavy-lidded eyes. "YES--' yelped Dean, bucking against the heather. He flailed for purchase with one hand and found only snow; maddened, he grabbed at Cas's ass again, with the handful of snow, and Cas hissed, his hand jerking tightly on Dean's dick. Then Dean was coming again, his dick pulsing, his asshole clamping down on Cas's cock. "UNGH," Cas grunted, loudly, and his careful slow movements crumbled in a flash; suddenly helpless, he launched into a fast rabbity series of desperate and uneven thrusts, even while Dean was still coming. Cas bottomed out, stiffening, boots shoving roughly at the snow, hands like iron on Dean's hips now. His face twisted, and Dean felt him pulsing inside, yet again.

This time, at last, Dean felt him slip out, and at last Cas stopped moving. He collapsed against Dean, and they lay there, quiet, both still panting.

Thoughtlessly, Dean tried to embrace him. Over the pack.

This time Cas let him.

He leaned his head on Dean's chest, as Dean wrapped both arms around both Cas and the backpack, and held on tight. There was some kind of lumpy form inside there, something a little larger than
Dean had been expecting, but it didn't matter. It didn't matter right now.

Eventually Cas raised his head. He set one hand on Dean's chin, and stroked Dean's cheek with his thumb, and then slid his head around to the back of Dean's neck and stroked the soft hairs there, as he had at the beginning.

He said nothing. Dean could only gaze at him.

The icy wind blew, and Dean didn't feel it; a willow ptarmigan walked right past not six feet away, and Dean barely noticed; chilly shadows swept over the hill, but all Dean saw was Castiel lying there, tiny flowers of the heather and azalea all around. The touch of Cas's hands was, again, causing delicious tendrils of shivery chills to run down Dean's spine, and Dean closed his eyes.

He was actually almost asleep when a damp touch on his ass made him flinch. Dean looked over to see that Cas now had some tundra moss in his hand. While Dean watched, Cas dampened the moss with icy meltwater from the snow and wiped Dean three times over, using new clean bits of moss each time, while Dean shuddered from the cold. Yet it felt good.

Cas then stood, got his own snowpants back on and looked around for Dean's underwear, which had somehow ended up on a willow-shrub almost ten feet away. Cas fetched the underwear; Dean, by now, was getting to his own feet, dizzy and stunned and somewhat breathless. Wordlessly Dean put on his underwear, and Cas helped him back into the snow pants and boots. (The long johns now seemed unnecessary, for Dean felt completely overheated). Dressing was a slow process, interrupted by occasional wordless kisses, and caresses, and a few more wistful touches.

It wasn't until Dean was fully dressed and had picked up his own pack — and the bag of canned food — that he remembered that Castiel was leaving. For good.

He held out the bag to Cas.

Neither had spoken a word in some time, but as Castiel slowly took the bag, at last Dean spoke.

"You can't leave," Dean told him. "You just can't."

"Believe me, it is literally the very last thing on this earth that I want to do," said Cas. "But I have no choice."

"There's got to be a choice," said Dean. But Cas turned away, and began to walk back to the wooden box.

It was simply unbearable to realize how fast they'd gotten back on their feet, how fast they'd reverted to their usual separated lives, how soon they were going to walk away from each other. Dean couldn't stand it, and he lunged a step closer and grabbed Cas's shoulders, swinging him around.

Cas turned to him eagerly. There was a hungry kiss then. And from the way Cas pressed against him....

"This cannot be the only time we do this," said Dean, breaking the kiss abruptly. He felt almost angry now. "It just can't."

"But what can we do?" said Cas softly.

Dean, both hands on Cas's shoulders, looked at him. "I'll cut my trip short," he said, after a few moments' thought. "I'll change my plane ticket. I'll spend just a couple days at home, fix up some details, check in with Bobby—" And somehow figure out a way to cover the hundred-fifty Kupaluk...
daily fee, he thought — "and then I'll come back here. Less than a week and I'll be back. That'll give us some time to plan. And I'll talk to your family when they get here. Just let me talk to them. When are they coming exactly?"

"They said they'd be here in a little over a week," said Cas, frustration crossing his face. "Nine days from today. But I can't let you talk to them. It's far too dangerous. Dean, I greatly fear I may have put you in danger as it is. This was...selfish...." He gestured to the bed of heather. "This was selfish of me. I realize now I may have put you at risk."

"I don't care," said Dean, and he truly didn't. "Under a week, and I'll be back. Five days, tops." A hundred fifty dollars a night was nothing if it meant another week with Cas.

Gently, Dean moved one hand farther back to set it on Cas's backpack. Again, this time Cas let Dean's hand stay. Dean said, "And I want you out of this damn pack next time, dude." Cas looked at him from under lowered lids as Dean said, "I don't care about any deformity, and I really mean that." Finally Dean thought to check his wristwatch. Just past midnight. It was time to go; he still had to get up early to pack for the drive to Deadhorse. And he'd be doing the drive solo; regulations required he get some sleep before driving. "Goddammit," Dean muttered.

"Indeed," Cas said, a little smile crossing his face.

"I gotta go," Dean said. "But I'll be back, okay? Five days." Cas nodded, and Dean leaned close. They kissed one last time; slowly now, savoring it as if it were the last time.

They stepped apart.

Castiel reached out one hand and cradled the side of Dean's jaw, stroking Dean's cheek with his thumb, and Dean caught hold of his hand and kissed his palm. Cas smiled, lowered his hand, and he turned and walked away.

Dean stood and watched him go.

Then Dean headed back down the boardwalk and to the Chevy.

Once he reached the truck, Dean sat in the driver's seat for a long time without starting the engine, watching the huge dark clouds blow over the lake. They sailed by in a parade of endless sun and shadow that was almost hypnotic. Thoughts seemed very slow to come. For a while Dean felt as if he were in a trance, floating through some sort of magical world, a fantasyland where Castiel had actually, somehow, turned out to be gay (or bi or whatever he was), an unlikely dream world where Cas actually wanted Dean, every bit as much as Dean wanted him. It was impossible; it was miraculous. And nothing else seemed to matter at all other than counting down the days till the next time.

I am not going to let him go, thought Dean. And I'm not gonna let his batshit crazy family steal him away, I'm just not. I'm not gonna let that happen.

He finally remembered to turn the key, and start the engine.

Away he drove at last, trying to concentrate on logistics: how soon he could change his plane ticket, how much cash he had in the bank, and how many days he could afford at Kupaluk.

But all he could see, really, as he drove, was Castiel outlined against the sky.
Dean had considerable trouble getting to sleep that night. He was in such a fizzy mix of giddy excitement, worry about Cas's coming confrontation with his crazy family, and frustration about having to leave, that he kept switching his plans almost every ten minutes. Go to Kansas as planned? Go but shorten the trip, even more than he'd told Cas, shorten it to just a couple days? Stay at Kupaluk and not go to Kansas at all? Get online again and see if he could change his flight right now? Beg the university to put him back on duty? Buy out Shelly and convince her to go back to Fairbanks and let Dean take her work shift?

He tossed and turned, sheets tangling around his feet and the sleeping bag sliding off the bed at least three times. He was totally unable to drift off.

For one thing, he was actually a little sore. It'd been a while since he'd taken that kind of a pounding. Even up at Happy Valley, Dean almost always went for top. Not that he never turned things around, but there'd always been some sense of wanting to be in control, some reluctance about handing over the reins. Cas, though, had just grabbed the reins, hadn't he?

It had been a little startling to discover just how amazing it had felt to have Cas tossing him around like that, pinning him down. And then...

Well, everything afterwards had been pretty awesome too.

As Dean gazed up in the darkness to his dim dorm-room ceiling, again all he could seem to see (and all he could think about) was that unbelievable image once again: Castiel outlined against the sky, face twisted in a grimace, thrusting hard into Dean.

"That was fucking insane," Dean muttered to himself now. Goddam, Cas had come three fucking times in a row. (Not to mention Dean had come twice himself — and even though that had been just a few hours ago, just the memory of it was making his dick twitch a little, making him want to jerk off again.) As deprived as Dean had started to feel over the past several weeks, clearly Cas had been dealing with years of pent-up frustration.

Could that really have been Cas's first time? Like... ever? (There was a flicker of guilt now that Dean hadn't paused for long enough to really talk to him about it. And couldn't stay to talk to him any more
It was almost painful to realize that they'd wasted so much potential time. Just because Cas hadn't
known standard modern slang! Well, just because Dean had been so clueless, really. Dean should've
known; he should've noticed that Cas wasn't picking up on quite a lot of other modern slang as well.
They could've been pounding each other for weeks now!

Clearly, it just wouldn't be right to leave the poor guy alone now. It wasn't even ethical, when Cas
was obviously so starved for sex. Not to mention he might need a little emotional support if he was
really so brand-new at all this. Emotional support and, well, of course he'd need practice too. Lots of
practice, lots and lots, which Dean could help him with. They'd only really done just a couple
positions, up there on the heather. There were about a hundred other positions and permutations that
Cas really needed to experience, ideally as soon as possible. (Dean would therefore have to
experience it all too, which was a definite added bonus.) Had the poor guy ever even had a blow
job? What Cas clearly needed first was about a hundred blow jobs immediately, and then he needed
to feel what it felt like to pounded like that on the receiving end. (Oh and, he probably needed
assistance with that crazy-religious-family issue as well, and the looming surgery on his back, and his
freedom and everything. But blow jobs and pounding also seemed rather important.)

It finally occurred to Dean, then, that maybe he could just stay at Cas's camp. He could skip the
Kansas trip entirely and just move in with Cas! I don't have to pay that insane Kupaluk day-use fee, I
can just camp with Cas! he thought, and he even scrambled to his feet then, suddenly convinced that
it was an excellent plan to start grabbing clothes to pack up to go to Cas's camp right away.

But sanity soon returned. Calm down, Dean thought. He still hasn't even invited me to his camp.
Don't just invade — he's new at all this and I don't know what he really wants. He probably doesn't
know what he wants either. Just chill. It really wasn't that awesome of an idea to barge in on the poor
guy's private camp after sleeping with him all of one single time.

Besides, I don't have any real camping gear of my own, Dean thought, sitting now on the foot of his
bed in the dark. That little blue tent of his won't really work for two — it looks like just a pup tent.
Also I'd need real winter camping gear. Which I don't have, not here in Alaska.

Dean adjusted his sitting position (he actually was distinctly sore), and laced his hands together as he
considered the problem. Not to mention food, he then realized. If I'm not formally staying at Kupaluk
I can't eat at the dining hall. I don't have any food. And Cas sure as hell doesn't have enough food
for two, not even with the canned stuff he's got now. I can't be a burden on him. The priority here is
to be sure he's okay—

A flashing glint of gold from the bookshelf made the whole room flicker, and Dean glanced over at
the bookshelf. He'd forgotten to cover up the two black feathers with his t-shirt, and they were doing
their weird color-change trick again. He reached over to the bookshelf and picked them up; two
near-identical little black feathers, each four inches long and slightly curved, mirror images of each
other. Dean twirled the two feathers slowly in the dim room, one in each hand.

Again they flashed gold, so brightly this time that it made Dean squint.

Cas had seemed to think this gold-flashing thing was totally routine.

But it was clearly unusual. Whatever sort of bioluminescence this was, it had got to be rare. Dean
had never even heard of anything bioluminescent in the entire tundra ecosystem. (It was the northern
lights that were the big-ticket light show up here, once the sun finally got around to setting in fall.
The animals and plants of the tundra had always remained stolidly non-luminescent). It had to be
rare, and it was very, very cool. Yet Cas had simply given him these two awesomely bioluminescent
feathers, feathers that clearly must be part of his research collection.

Another comment of Cas's floated to mind: "It's traditional to have both." He'd said that about the jaeger-feathers. Did jaeger-feathers have some special folklore wherever he'd grown up? Maybe the feathers of arctic birds were part of whatever weird back-to-the-earth bush-town religion he'd apparently grown up with. Maybe some kind of special totem, like eagle feathers were for the plains tribes down south?

And Cas had just plain given both feathers to Dean.

Dean turned the little feathers around once more, and again they both did the gold-flash trick, first one, then the other. The gold flash was always brief, and both faded within moments to their normal glossy black, but Dean sat staring at them in the darkness for a while longer. The two feathers were warm in his hands, and somehow they almost seemed to calm him, as if they were exuding an aura of peace that seemed to spread over Dean's skin, first up his arms and then pouring softly over his whole body. (Even the soreness began to fade.) He took a long breath, and then another, and finally he seemed able to think a little more clearly.

A workable plan began to form up. The important thing here was to be sure Cas was okay and didn't feel pressured — not by his family and also not by Dean. Which meant Dean wasn't going to harass Cas by moving instantly right into his little blue pup tent with no notice at all. Not right away, at least. He'd try to take it slow. He'd stick to the plan — a bit. A modified plan. He'd fly back to Kansas for a couple days, just long enough to check in with Bobby, maybe beg a loan of some cash till his first Kupaluk paycheck came through. And he'd pick up all his camping gear — the tent he used on his so-called "hunting trips" in fall (during which he'd never actually shot a single animal), his winter sleeping bag, his trusty camping cookstove, the Thermarest sleeping pad, and all the rest. He'd grab some more cold-weather bedding as well. Then, winter camping gear bundled up, he'd fly right back to Fairbanks. If he had to pay for first class to pull this off, so be it. He'd get back to Fairbanks in just two or three days, and in Fairbanks he could load up on enough canned and dried food to get through the rest of the two weeks, plus enough to cover his remaining summer breaks as well, both for him and Cas. *Then* he'd fly to Deadhorse and pay Shelly for a private pick-up.

And then he'd camp near Cas. Maybe spring for a single day at Kupaluk now and then for sauna use, or a hot meal. If Cas did want to hang out, they could. But if he didn't, if he needed a little time or whatever, Dean would adjust.

It'd cost, Dean calculated rapidly, a cool sixteen hundred or so, for the bag fees for the camping gear, the flight-change fees, a few more pieces of winter gear he needed to buy, and occasional day-use fees at Kupaluk. But it meant he could be back in just a couple days. And if Cas was still freaking out about his "deformity" or whatever it was and still didn't want Dean too close by, Dean would just have his own camp a little ways away to give him some space.

Dean had always enjoyed camping anyway. Maybe he could even stay near the wolves, and buddy up with the pups a bit more.

He finally set the two feathers aside, stood, and flicked on the overhead light to start packing. One way or another, this room had to be free for Shelly tomorrow, and if he couldn't sleep, he might as well pack. And he had a plan now, and finally he knew what to pack.

Over the next twenty minutes, Dean bundled his boots, outerwear, clothes and his few possessions into two sets: one very small set to take to Kansas, and second that would stay here at Kupaluk in storage till he got back. He'd travel light to Kansas, only bringing a single change of jeans, a few pairs of underwear and socks, and hardly any of his outerwear. That way he'd have room to bring more camping gear back from Kansas.
Packing at last done, Dean flicked off the light and lay down again. Though now that he wasn't holding the feathers any more, the lovely aura of calm had faded somewhat, and now a nagging worry had emerged about the fact that Cas had once again failed to invite Dean to his own camp.

Even after that stupendous, unbelievable episode on the heather, Cas had just walked away in the end.

Was it really just that he was shy about his back-deformity thing? Or could it be something else?

Could this just have been a one-time fling for Cas?

Had he just wanted that one roll-in-the-hay? (Well, roll-in-the-heather.) Maybe he'd only be wanted to get his rocks off just once before saying goodbye.

Maybe he'd even deliberately timed the whole thing so that it would occur exactly when Dean left.

Dean did finally manage to drift off, but he never did sleep very well that night.

He woke to find Ryan hammering on his door.

"Hey, it's nine already," called Ryan through the door. "I know you're not working, but you said to wake you if you didn't show at breakfast. Don't you leave in a couple hours? Teddy Bear's holding breakfast for you."

"Shit," muttered Dean, grabbing for his watch. He'd set the alarm wrong — he was still without his phone (which, he suddenly remembered, must still be in the bag of rice somewhere in the dining hall). "Thanks, man," he called out to Ryan. "Be out soon."

Fifteen minutes later Dean was dressed and hurrying outside. He dropped his travel pack off in the Chevy on the way, locked his long guns up and carried the locked cases to the dining hall. They'd be stored safely in the manager's office till he could return in a couple days to retrieve them. The bulk of his gear, including the heaviest outerwear, the Sorel snow boots, and the Tuf mud boots, were neatly packed in the Rubbermaid back in the dorm room, along with the dwindling supply of beer, and would stay in storage in a corner of the room — now Shelly's room — until he returned. Even the claw and the tooth were packed in storage. (The feathers, though, he had in his pocket.)

Last-minute travel plans took most of Dean's attention for the next hour: packing the guns away, returning his radio, some last paperwork. He finally remembered to grab his ruined phone and dump out all the rice. He was a little surprised to find that the phone powered on this time; apparently another week in rice had done the trick. He took a moment, then, to doublecheck the flight times in his phone's calendar — and to look at the photos. There was one photo on the phone that he'd completely forgotten about: the black wings at Cas's icewater pond.

It turned out it was a very confusing photo, overexposed and totally washed out because of the midnight sun that'd been blazing in the background. The photo was mostly a blur of bright golden light with dark shadowy silhouettes hovering in front of it. There were three shadowy blobs on the right side, all three of which bore antler-shadows too; the caribou, obviously. Then there were two longish narrow blobs in the middle — the jaeger's wings. And right under the wings was a hunched shape that Dean realized must be Castiel. He could just make out Cas's profile in the roundish blob of shadow that must have been his head.
Cas was positioned all wrong, though. He was facing away from the jaeger. The blurry wing-shapes, as difficult as they were to make out, seemed to be behind him, not in front of him. It was almost as if the jaeger had been on Cas's back somehow.

Maybe it had just been in the middle of getting loose from Cas's grasp? Maybe that's how it had gotten away.

Dean puzzled over the photo for a long moment.

Where was the rest of the jaeger?

All Dean could see was the wings, and Cas's torso, and Cas's head.

Where was the rest of the jaeger?

Maybe Cas had the jaeger's body tucked under one arm? And, granted, the entire Cas-and-jaeger shadow was fuzzy-edged, more an impressionistic blur than a precise silhouette. The jaeger could be there, just hidden in the shadow of Cas's torso, and flapping its wings in a really weird way.

Wings that seemed far too big for a jaeger.

There had always been something a little odd about the whole jaeger business...

More than a little odd. Very odd.

"You seen the weather update, Dean?"

Dean looked up. It was Phil who'd spoken. Phil, Ryan, Shawn and Nicole had all finished their breakfasts, but it seemed none of them had headed out to their various jobs yet. They were all lingering at the breakfast table over second and third cups of coffee, passing around a white sheet of paper.

Dean shoved the phone in his pocket, planning to study the strange photo later once he was on the plane. "What are you lazy asses up to?" Dean asked, heading to the coffee machine to get his own cup of coffee. "You all taking the day off?"

Phil held up the piece of paper. "Forecast. Take a look. Big, red and bold."

Dean frowned. Even from clear on the other side of the dining hall, he could already see what Phil meant: the first line of the forecast was visible even from here, a blur of some kind of big, red, bold font. The National Weather Service never used that font unless they were serious. Ryan stood, grabbed the piece of paper from Phil, and walked over to stick it in Dean's hands.

"You might wanna check with the airline," Ryan said.

The first line read, in that characteristic huge font:

SPECIAL WEATHER ADVISORY

NORTH SLOPE OF ALASKA AND ARCTIC OCEAN COAST

BLIZZARD WARNING - WINTER STORM WARNING - SMALL CRAFT ADVISORY

It turned out a low-pressure system from the west was blowing in with unusual force. It was that "weather system" that Sam had mentioned; it had strengthened quite a bit overnight, and had sped, and it turned out it was arriving today, not tomorrow. A couple feet of snow were now expected,
which was a lot for the usually-dry Arctic.

Dean read the details with a critical eye, studying the wind speed and direction as he walked over to the dining table to join the others, all of whom were piping up now with opinions and predictions. Nobody was worried, exactly — spring blizzards were pretty routine — but it did mean that all the work plans had to be adjusted.

"Ought to start at noon," said Phil, as Dean sat down slowly, still reading the forecast. "We've been having a little debate about when the snow will hit here. I'm betting for flurries starting at eleven a.m. It'll be light at first but I'm having my whole crew stay in."

"Moving northeast after that," said David, the other ecologist. "Slowing over the coastal plain. We're guessing at least three hours for it to reach Deadhorse. And then it's gonna sock us in for three days, we think."

"So if you leave within half an hour," concluded Phil, "You'll be fine. You'll outrun the storm and get up to Deadhorse and if you get on the one o'clock plane out, you're good. The plane's already there, 'cause it flew in last night— " (Everybody nodded, for of course everybody knew Flight 143's schedule by heart, and even knew the exact individual plane involved.) Phil added, stating the obvious facts that all the old hands already knew, "What they'll do as the storm approaches is re-route it back to Barrow and then around the storm's southwest edge to Fairbanks. It'll still get out, you just gotta get to Deadhorse by a little after noon."

Shawn put in, "I called the airline already and they're still thinking the one p.m. flight's gonna be fine. We all decided that's feasible if you leave by ten."

Ryan said, "Shelly'll get stuck in Deadhorse overnight though, but I already booked her a room at the hotel."

Everybody nodded. They'd clearly been discussing this. The storm wouldn't reach Deadhorse for another few hours, which meant Dean would get out fine, but Shelly would be stuck up there overnight.

Dean nodded too, thinking. He actually did want to make that flight, for he wanted to get his camping gear from Kansas. He was all packed, too, his stuff already loaded; he'd make it to Deadhorse comfortably. And if not, well, he'd be fine in the truck — it always had food, water, and sleeping bags.

And if he got snowed in and had to stay at Kupaluk (and near Cas), that wouldn't be too bad, would it?

The only problem was that now he was, inevitably, worried about Cas. How would that little blue tent stand up to a two-foot snowfall? And Cas kept saying how he'd been feeling cold recently....

"Business as usual, right?" asked Ryan, breaking into Dean's thoughts. "Doesn't this happen a few times a year? I remember that one last June, last summer."

Dean nodded. "There's always a couple blizzards."

"More these days than there used to be," put in Phil. "Warm air holds more moisture, so, ironically, with climate change we're getting more spring blizzards instead of less."

Inevitably this led into a string of blizzard stories. "Remember that one in 2011 that hit on the summer solstice?" said Phil, leaning back in his chair. "No, wait, that was 2010. 2011 had the three blizzards in a row in the first week of June. I remember because the lake ice was—"
But Teddy, walking over from the kitchen, was shaking his head. "No, you're thinking of 2005," Teddy corrected. "That two-day sleetstorm that hit right after the solstice. That was when the Japanese tour bus skidded off the Haul Road, remember? And they all ended up here. I remember because we actually ran out of food. What happened was—"

They chattered on. Blizzards stories could keep a Kupaluk conversation going for hours, almost as reliably as bear stories. Dean, though, was thinking about little blue pup tents, as he gazed out the windows at the glowering bank of dark clouds, which even now were starting to blot out the mountains.

Ryan nuded Dean's elbow, saying, "I'll probably be camp manager for a day, huh? Till Shelly gets here."

Dean snapped to attention. Ryan would indeed be interim camp manager. "Yeah. You'll be fine, though. Just go to spring blizzard protocol."

"Yeah, gotcha," said Ryan. He picked up a nearby three-ring binder — the spring blizzard protocol, which apparently he'd already been studying — and he flipped to the first page. "Tie down choppers, still gotta do that," he said, starting to go down the page, "mountain bikes back in the shed, doublecheck the spare tires in all the trucks, check airline arrivals up at Deadhorse, book hotels for incoming passengers if necessary — I already did that — and by the way, Shelly already emailed to say you can sleep on her hotel floor if you get stuck there too, and that she'll try not to accidentally step on you too often."

"How thoughtful of her," said Dean, only half-listening as he checked his watch. He'd have to leave within a half hour to get out of here safely.

"— alert anybody driving up from Fairbanks — already did that, some more ecology peeps on their way but they're gonna hang in Coldfoot. Alert kitchen staff about food deliveries, did that. Check truck schedules for everything else, did that. Check sauna firewood, water in the shower tanks, check outhouses — I still have to do all that. Check that all our trucks still got emergency winter shelter stuff, food and all that. Advise all scientists... I've got all but Cornell covered. I think that's it?"

"Yep," said Dean, eyeing the thick cloud cover again. "Then just start the poker game."

It was a routine storm, really. The blizzard protocol checklist was really kind of overkill. Snowstorms happened every year, all the time, in every month. It was the Arctic, after all. No big deal. Just a couple feet of snow like usual.

Except that Cas didn't know it was coming. The dude didn't even have a weather radio. What if he was out doing one of those long transects?

And if Dean went out to warn him, well, Kupaluk had a safety policy that strangers could stay at camp if there were blizzard conditions. It just might be that Dean would have to bring him back.

"The only thing I wanted to ask you about," said Ryan, "is that the Cornell team is still out." That caught Dean's attention, and he swiveled in his chair to look over his shoulder at the whiteboard in the outer lobby. Sure enough, there was a line still scrawled there.

Dean stood and strode closer to read it, Ryan trotting along behind him.

The entire Cornell team had gone south, toward Atigun Pass, and they still hadn't signed back in.

Ryan explained, "They went out super early, before six, before the forecast came in, and the last forecast before that wasn't anywhere near as bad. I tried hailing them already over the radio, but they
must be way out of radio range. I thought they'd come in for breakfast and we could fill 'em in then, but now Ed says he thinks they took breakfast out with them, 'cause the hard-boiled eggs are all gone. They must see how it's shaping up by now, but... I should drive down and get 'em, shouldn't I? But I also gotta deal with the other stuff."

Dean thought a moment, and then he chucked his coffee mug, only half-drunk, in the kitchen dish bin nearby. "I'll get Cornell," he said, grabbing his jacket. "I gotta head out anyway. I'll go make sure the Cornell team gets the word, and then I'll head on to Deadhorse from there. You've still got camp prep to do."

"But they're south. You're going north—"

"Their main site is just five miles south. It'll take me ten minutes. You finish checking everything else and make sure the choppers are back and tied down. I'll go get Cornell and then I'll be on my way from there." There was time to go fetch the Cornell team and still time after that to run north to check on Cas.

With any luck, the day might even end with Castiel and Dean both officially snowed in at Kupaluk for the night.

Maybe Cas would even have to bunk with Dean. That would be a pity.

Dean wrote carefully on the whiteboard, in block letters:

**Who:** Dean W

**Where:** Haul Road south, rendezvous w Cornell, then Deadhorse

**How:** Baby (truck)

**Time out:** 10am

**Time expected back:** n/a, destination Deadhorse

**Overdue:** n/a - Dean W. flying out; truck at Deadhorse airport till Shelly T. can drive back down.

In just a few minutes Dean was out on the Haul Road, heading south toward Atigun Pass to give the heads-up to the Cornell team. Oddly, the Chevy had developed yet another problem — today its right headlight seemed to be on the fritz. Of course, headlights weren't too important under twenty-four sun, so Dean didn't worry too much about it. It was certainly a little odd that the truck had suddenly developed so many problems, but long as the motor ran okay and the tape player worked, Dean would get to Deadhorse just fine. A ten-minute jaunt south to alert the Cornell crew, then a quick stop near Cas's camp to try to raise him on the truck's CB (just to be sure he knew about the storm). Then Deadhorse, and Kansas, and the camping gear. And soon he'd be back up here, ready to see what Castiel might (or might not...) want to do next.

The thought of seeing Cas again in just a few days was awfully cheering, and Dean found himself singing along with an old Doobie Brothers tape as he drove along. The drive down this way was
beautiful, the Haul Road twisting and turning on its way south into a wide-open canyon between two foothills of the imposing Brooks. Miles-wide slopes of scruffy tundra rolled away on each side, the slopes now fuzzed with new green growth and dotted here and there with bright clumps of the lupines and the yellow fuzzies (glacier avens, Dean reminded himself). But within five minutes, steeper hills appeared, drawing close on either side to form rocky foothills. The peaks of the snow-covered Brooks loomed closer now, hulking ahead like huge white walls.

Their highest peaks were already hidden by a low, dark wall of dark grey cloud. And to the west, a looming wall of even darker dark cloud was already blotting out a few of the westward mountains. That wall of dark cloud seemed to have a dark, obscure darkness hanging underneath, a ghostly shadow, like a veil that was blotting out the land and hiding the hills. That veil, of course, was the falling snow.

Dean was still glancing now and then at the snow-clouds when he realized he'd been driving ten minutes already, not the expected five; he'd gone far past the Cornell team's usual spot. Where was their truck? It should have been easily visible. Dean slowed, peering closely at every pull-out that he passed in case the Cornell truck was tucked down into some willows. Dean went about five minutes farther, and finally he pulled over, frowning.

Snow was already starting to fall. If he was going to make his flight, he needed to turn around now. Actually, he should have turned around fifteen minutes ago.

Actually, it was looking sort of iffy whether he'd get to Deadhorse at all.

Dean maneuvered the Chevy into a briskly executed three-point-turn and headed back north.

"Kupaluk Base, Kupaluk Base, this is Baby," Dean called over the CB, as soon as he was back in range of camp.

"This is Kupaluk Base," came Ryan's voice a few moments later, through a hiss of static. He was barely audible. "Go ahead, Baby."

"Road check's done, but I don't see any of our trucks out. I can't find Cornell's truck. Been all the way down to the stream culvert and back and I can't find them anywhere. Over."

"Damn idiots came back already and forgot to log themselves in," said Ryan. "They were over in their lab the whole time we were at breakfast. I tried radio'ing you a few times but we're getting a lot of static."

Dean swore, glancing at the glowering storm. The falling snow was still sparse, but already the road was beginning to acquire a thin dusting of white. "Well, I just burned half an hour looking for them," he said.

"Chewed 'em out already," said Ryan. Static was starting to interrupt his words: "The PI —" (Static.) "— new grad students. She said she ripped them a new one already. They each thought the other one had —" (Static again.) "— you still going to Deadhorse? It's already snowing here. Where are you?"

"Still south near Atigun," Dean said. He was thinking hard. If he got snowed in at Kupaluk, maybe the university would spring for his whole two weeks? Or, more likely, they'd only let him stay just long enough for the weather to clear and then would boot him out to Deadhorse anyway.

Could he borrow camping gear from some of the researchers?

Or maybe Castiel might even just let Dean stay with him after all. Dean hadn't even tried asking yet.
A gust of wind hit the truck so hard that it shook. Dean shook his head; the decision had been made for him. He pressed down his CB button and told Ryan, "I'm gonna bail on that flight. I'm coming back into camp. But I got one more thing to do: I'm gonna run north and check on Cas. I mean, the bird guy. Over."

"What was that? You're breaking up. I think the snow's messing with—" Another burst of static. The radios always tended to lose a lot of range in thick snow conditions. This was another bad sign; it meant the snowfall was already getting heavier, somewhere between Kupaluk and where Dean was.

Dean repeated, "I'm gonna run north just real quick and then I'll head in. If I get stuck, don't worry. I got my gear in the truck. Baby out."

There was no reply, and Ryan didn't respond to Dean's next two hails, other than with a few inaudible bursts of static. But Dean wasn't worried. The Chevy had, as always, the sleeping bags in the back, and the emergency stash of food and water. Not to mention that Dean had his pack... though, actually, it didn't have all his usual extra layers right now, packed as it was for the flight, with just two light changes of clothes and a bathroom kit.

But as long as he stayed with the truck, he'd be fine.

Conditions were deteriorating fast. It took nearly forty-five minutes just for Dean to work his way back north past the Kupaluk turn-off again and then get to Cas's pull-out. In fact it was getting somewhat inadvisable even to go up to Cas's pull-out at all. But was Cas going to be okay in this kind of storm? The shifting layers of worry and planning about the Kansas flight, and what sort of relationship Cas might or might not want, had now narrowed down into a quite precise worry about whether or not Cas was even going to get through this blizzard. This was was shaping up to be the worst spring blizzard in a few years, and Kupaluk always tended to get more snow than other arctic sites did. Like, for example, Cas's other study sites elsewhere. Was Cas prepared for really heavy snowfall?

There was an inch of snow on the Haul Road already, snowflakes increasingly thick in the air. Dean soon had to turn the wipers on, and he could feel the truck's tires starting to tug sluggishly at the snow. Tiny half-second skids began to interrupt his progress, the truck doing periodic small wobbly skids of a foot this direction, a foot that direction, before one of its tires finally bit and got traction. This was not too worrisome; Dean could easily handle minor skids. But as he cautiously slowed for Cas's turnoff, he was aware that he was pushing it. It was only going to get worse.

But if he had to camp overnight in the truck, he'd be fine. All he was going to do was try to radio Cas from the truck, just to make sure he was set up well enough for the storm.

The Chevy's wipers were at top speed by the time he parked, new layers of snow forming up constantly on the windshield almost as fast as the wipers could whisk them away. Dean pulled the CB out and set it to channel six.

"Blackbird, Blackbird, this is Hunter One," he said.

He waited. The wind was really starting to buffet the truck, the whole vehicle rocking on its shocks now and then when a heavy gust hit it. Dean sat for a long thirty seconds, hoping to hear Cas's reply, but the rhythmic *zzh-zzh* of the wipers, the steady blowing of the truck's heater, and the occasional moan of the wind were the only sounds. Outside it was actually getting rather dim — a rarity in spring in the Arctic. The three boulders blocking the road were already coated with two inches of
snow, and snow was piling onto the truck's windshield almost faster than the wipers could blow it away. Dean flicked the truck's headlights on. One solitary headlight came on (the other was still dead), illuminating a wide cone of white snowflakes that were whirling down in front of the truck. Ahead, past the boulders, the old gravel road meandered away, a thin line of even white. The first flag from Cas's string of pink flags was the only spot of color visible, just a tiny fleck of brightness in the grey gloom of the storm.

"Blackbird, Blackbird, this is Hunter One," Dean said again. "Come in." He added, just in case Cas might hear, "Cas, you want to come into Kupaluk for the night? I'm at that pull-out by the Haul road. I can take you in. We're supposed to get at least a foot of snow, maybe two."

There was still no reply. Dean gritted his teeth, scanning the broad tundra hills ahead. The more distant hills were vanishing now into white haze as the snow thickened and the visibility dropped. He could just make out part of the hill where he'd been doing his target practice; the far part of the hill was already lost to view, but he was pretty sure he could see the area where he'd propped some of the cans.

"Blackbird, Blackbird—" Dean began, and he stopped. There was motion on the hill. Up by the nest of the golden plovers. He squinted through the windshield; snow was piling up so quickly on it now that he could get only a brief flash of fuzzy visibility in between each move of the wipers.

It was a person. Well, it seemed to be a person, anyway, just a dark shadow in the storm. But it had to be Cas. He must have been out doing nest checks, and presumably he'd just checked the plover nest. As Dean squinted, the Cas-like shadow seemed to peer toward the truck. For a moment Dean felt sure that Cas had seen him — the truck's headlight must be pretty obvious — but Cas turned away, walking back toward Topaz Mountain, moving parallel to the little access road. He was moving fast, too, as if trying to get back toward Topaz as quick as he could.

His backpack looked a little odd.

"Blackbird, is that you?" Dean called into the radio. There was still no reply (maybe Cas didn't have his radio with him?) Dean honked the Chevy's horn, and flashed the single working headlight, hoping to catch Cas's attention. Oddly, Cas merely sped up, almost running now.

As Dean peered through the windshield, he saw Cas's distant shape stagger. Cas had gotten to a thick patch of snow near a snowmelt stream, and in his hurry he'd gone right through an especially thick patch of snow, one of his legs plunging unexpectedly deep. This sort of thing happened all the time and was no big deal, just a brief loss of balance, but something very odd happened to Cas's black backpack as he lost his balance: it shot out sideways, to both sides at once.

It was as if it had some kind of extensions that had flipped out to both sides automatically when Cas had nearly fallen.

Wait. Did Cas even have a backpack on? Something looked different. Dean called into the CB, "Blackbird, hold up. Something's up with your pack—"

Cas regained his footing only to sprint at top speed over the hill, actually running now, just as Dean realized what was going on: That jaeger. Cas had gotten hold of the black jaeger again.

And the jaeger was... perched on Cas's back? Or something. Could it be attacking him? Maybe he'd gotten too close to its nest? Was it pecking at Cas's head? Maybe that's why he was running?

Whatever was going on, Cas was at least headed the right direction: toward his camp. But now Dean was increasingly worried. Cas's behavior seemed very weird, and he wasn't really that close to his
tent. What was he even doing out in the blizzard? Not to mention he seemed to be under attack by a rabid pomarine jaeger.

Something seemed off. Dean popped the door open. A biting wind whipped into the truck, bringing with it a flurry of snowflakes. He hopped half out of the truck, honking his horn again with one hand and waving a hand overhead. Cupping one hand around his mouth, he hollered, "CASTIEL! HEY! THREE-DAY STORM! Come in to camp! You can stay at Kupaluk!"

But Cas just continued to run away.

Into the storm.

"What the hell..." Dean muttered, staring into the thickening snowflakes again. "CAS! COME TO CAMP! IT'S A THREE DAY— fuck." If Cas hadn't heard Dean before, he certainly wouldn't now; he was already getting pretty far away, heading into the swirling snow toward his hopelessly flimsy little pup tent, probably thinking it was going to be just the usual two-inch kind of arctic storm.

Dean hesitated only a moment. Cas was only a few hundred yards away. If Dean ran, he could catch up to him.

"Stay put, Baby," said Dean. He grabbed his leather jacket with one hand and his pack with the other, flung the pack over one shoulder, slammed the door to keep the snow out of the truck, and bolted after Cas.

Cas was almost out of view. "CAS!" Dean hollered again, breaking into a run now. He bolted down the old access road, pack bouncing on his back, yelling, "CAS! WAIT UP! IT'S ME!"

Yet Cas seemed to accelerate too. He cut up and over the ridgeline of the little hill he was on, and soon he'd vanished entirely, into the swirling snow.

Dean stopped, baffled. He swore, looking around. Conditions were simply too bad. Cas had disappeared completely, and the snow was so thick now that Dean could barely even see the next pink flag; he was getting much less confident that he'd even be able to find Cas's tent. At least the truck was still clearly visible, its single headlight glowing serenely. Dean would be fine; he could just camp in the truck if he needed to.

But what about Castiel?

And why had he run?

Disheartened and worried, Dean walked back to the Chevy, clutching his leather jacket closed against the wind with one hand. He was really concerned about Castiel now, and as he plodded back to the truck, he began going mentally through possible plans for how to get to Cas. Probably the best thing would be to switch over to a snow machine. Dean could head back to camp, check in with Ryan and the others, make sure Kupaluk was all buttoned down tight for the storm, and then he'd get his favorite snow machine out, and he'd switch to the polar parka and good snowpants and the felt-lined Sorel boots and the big arctic mittens. (The leather jacket he had on now was crap for a real snowstorm; he was wearing only his Kansas clothes). Also, he'd grab a radio and a GPS and a spare battery. And the other satellite beacon, and some thermoses of hot chocolate and some food. Then he'd take the snow machine over the hills, probably with one other person on a second snow
machine for safety, Ryan or maybe Phil, and they'd find Cas and get him back to Kupaluk safely and

Still focused on all the details of this plan, Dean automatically went to open the Chevy's driver-side
door. It didn't open. He yanked at it, and yanked again.

The door was locked. The key was inside the truck.
The engine was still running smoothly, the single headlight still on, but the door was locked. Blinking in surprise, Dean tried the door yet again, and a third time. The door was definitely locked.

For a long moment, he could only stare at it stupidly. Truck doors were never locked. It was camp protocol: truck doors were never locked, and keys always stayed in the vehicle. In case a bear or something came along.

A bear... or something. Something like, for example, a blizzard.

*I must've leaned on the lock button,* Dean thought. But it was no big deal, of course, just startling. He'd just use one of the other doors. All the doors were always left unlocked. So he tried the left rear door.

It was locked too.

Dean stood still a long moment. He took a long breath, settling himself, and walked around to the other side of the truck.

Both those doors were locked, too. And the cargo door in the back as well.

"God fucking dammit," muttered Dean.

Biting his lip, he thought a moment. It didn't make any sense that the doors could somehow have gotten locked all at once. This old 1967 Chevy Suburban long pre-dated the modern "lock all" buttons. Locking its doors required going around the truck to every door, and pushing down each and every lock knob individually. In fact it was so clearly impossible to get locked out of this particular vehicle that he'd almost forgotten that the doors were even capable of locking at all. None of Chevy's doors had been locked in at least thirteen years.

Some moron in camp must've locked the other doors for some idiotic reason. Some newbie grad student like that clueless Cornell kid who hadn't signed their team back in. And maybe, just maybe, Dean might have leaned on the driver's door button accidentally, in his rush to jump out and go racing after Cas.
It was a little freaky, though, considering all the other things that had gone wrong with the Chevy over the last several days, ever since Sam's and Ruby's visit. Could the locks somehow have malfunctioned all at once?

But it wasn't a problem, because there was a backup: there was always a spare key duct-taped under the rear bumper. Dean had insisted years ago that the camp staff set up all the Kupaluk trucks like this. He checked all the duct-taped keys at the beginning of every season to be sure they were all still there, refreshed their duct tape as needed, and checked again monthly after that. He'd doublechecked the Chevy's spare key just a week ago. Sighing, Dean got to his knees in the snow and began feeling around for the key.

It was gone. All he found was a strip of torn duct tape hanging loosely from the inside of the bumper. Duct tape didn't usually tear like that, especially not when tucked safely inside a bumper the way Dean always set it up, but somehow the spare key had fallen off — for the first time in thirteen years.

"God fucking dammit!" Dean burst out again, this time in a shout, slamming his hand hard into the bumper. Then he caught himself, and took a breath. He felt around the bumper a few more times to be absolutely sure the key was gone, and then he stood, calmly, and dusted off his knees. It wouldn't help to lose his temper.

*Just slow down and think,* he thought. Yes, getting locked out of one's vehicle with a blizzard blowing in was not ideal. Especially given that he didn't have any of his winter gear. But he had his pack, and he was only six miles from Kupaluk, and probably a mile at most from Cas's tent. Those were easily hikeable distances. This was a solvable problem.

He walked around the truck trying all the doors again, multiple times.

"So did you get cursed all of a sudden?" muttered Dean to the truck, laying one gloved hand on its snowy windshield. He wiped the snow away. A little to his surprise, he found Ruby's doodle still there on the windshield. Its crust of mud was still stuck firmly to the windshield under the snow, and in fact it seemed to have been etched right through the mud, directly into the glass of the windshield itself. Dean stared at it, biting his lip. It was trivial, of course — the doodle had nothing to do with his present predicament — but it was frustrating to find the poor old truck had been damaged. Did Ruby have diamond-tipped nails or something?

He set the doodle out of his mind; it was irrelevant right now. There was, of course, another solution, another reason he was inspecting the windows. It was just that Dean hated to have to do it. All he had to do, of course, was break a window. Dean scanned around the side of the road, looking for a rock.

Everything was coated with snow. There was no rock.

Dean scuffed the snow off the edge of the road with his boot, looking for a decent-sized stone. He moved gradually at first, and then, heart sinking, kicked more and more of the snow away. There had to be a rock somewhere. Why wasn't there a rock?

But he knew why; there was plenty of stony ground over at Topaz, but he wasn't at Topaz. This part of the tundra was all mud and tussock. The only rocks here were the three huge boulders, each of them a dozen tons or more. The most he could find was a fistful of gravel from the Haul Road, and after a few futile moments of hopelessly pitching gravel at the Chevy's passenger window, he let his hand drop to his side.

He went through his pockets next, searching for anything hard enough to break a window. There was nothing useful. A single bullet from the pistol would have done the job, of course, but the pistol
was already locked carefully in its flight case for the Deadhorse flight... and the case was sitting on the front seat of the Chevy. ready for airport check-in.

Dean even would've been willing to try using his laptop as a battering ram, but the laptop, too, was in his little carry-on shoulder bag inside.

There was nothing hard enough in his pockets, either; all he had was a tiny plastic compass. There was nothing hard in the pack — it only held a change of clothes, a paperback book, and a little toiletries case that was currently carrying only a toothbrush, a plastic comb and a plastic razor. Dean had packed very light for his trip, and he'd even deliberately avoided carrying any items that might set off the airport's metal detector. Even his belt just had a plastic buckle. He had nothing at all that could break a window.

Dean bowed his head, taking a slow breath.

All it takes is one thing going wrong, he'd told the students so many times. One mistake; one minor equipment failure, one sprained ankle. Or in this case, one locked truck. All it took up here in the Arctic was just one thing going wrong, on the wrong day, in the wrong weather. And one of the worst mistakes was simply not having good cold-weather gear. Dean had brought all that, of course — but, infuriatingly, it was all in the truck. All the cold-weather gear in the world, all the sleeping bags and food and water and pepper spray and guns and parkas in all of Kupaluk, wouldn't help at all if it was inaccessible. And all of his gear (most critically of all his parka) was locked in the truck.

Dean took a more careful inventory of the backpack. He'd packed very lightly for Kansas but he did have some clothes. Nothing really useful for a blizzard, though; just a clean pair of jeans, two flannel shirts and two t-shirts, and some underwear and two pairs of socks folded up in a Ziploc bag. Along with the clothes were the paperback book, the small bathroom kit, and a second Ziploc bag containing some snacks for the flight — some trail mix, a turkey sandwich and a pack of Fig Newtons. At the top of the pack were his hat and scarf, and a light pair of gloves.

Calmly, he rearranged his clothing, setting the pack on the Chevy's snowy hood just long enough to don both flannel shirts and then get the leather jacket back on over both of them. Calmly, he did up the zipper on the leather jacket. Calmly — or at least, with a reasonable semblance of calm — he replaced his hiking boots, and pulled his jean cuffs down to cover the tops of the boots, so that snow wouldn't get inside. He donned his scarf, winding the ends around and tucking them inside. He turned the leather jacket's collar up, even snapping closed its single collar-snap that he'd never used before. He donned his hat, a plain wool cap; then he put his thin Kansas gloves on, and, after a moment's thought, pulled out a pair of the spare socks too, to use as makeshift mittens.

He took a minute to go through his pockets again, again taking a careful inventory. All he had were the two little black feathers (which he now tucked safely in the breast pocket of the innermost flannel shirt); a fistful of pink flagging tape (he'd taken to carrying this around in case he might find a bird nest that Cas might want to see); a pack of Kleenex; the inevitable Sharpie; and, wedged in a front pocket of his jeans, his little manual compass.

He put the baggie of food in his jacket pocket, closed up the pack again and set it on his back, pulling the shoulder strips snugly, and then, after considering a moment, he began tightening up every other possible strap too. The pack was another layer, after all, and it might help keep him a tiny bit warmer. He clipped the rarely-used waist strap into place, tightening it up as snugly as it would go, and secured the chest strap and pulled it taut too. As he did all this, he thought, very carefully.

The Kupaluk camp staff, he realized with a sinking heart, wouldn't even know to go look for him. Dean hadn't put an "Overdue" time on the whiteboard, and his last attempt at radio transmission to Ryan had almost certainly not been heard. As far as the camp staff knew, Dean was still headed up
to Deadhorse and had outrun the storm. They wouldn't know that he'd never made it to Deadhorse. They wouldn't know that for about another six hours, which was probably the earliest that Shelly might contact them. Even if Ryan began to suspect before then that Dean was in trouble, he'd probably head south to Atigun, where he'd last heard from Dean.

_Gotta get out of this myself_, Dean thought, doing a final adjustment to get the cuffs of the flannel shirt tucked neatly into the gloves. Then he pulled the socks on over his gloves, and stuck his hands in the leather jacket's pockets for extra insulation. He was already shivering. The snow was blowing very thickly now, and as he looked around he could barely see more than thirty feet in any direction. It was like being in a snow globe.

There were two choices: hike back six miles to Kupaluk on the Haul Road, which usually would take an hour and a half even in good conditions. It was unlikely he'd be able to hitch a ride. The Haul Road wouldn't have any truck traffic now; no trucker in their right mind would be continuing in this weather. Or he could go to Cas's camp, a shorter distance but over rough tundra. Probably this would take only thirty minutes.

Cas's camp, then. (Which had a certain appeal anyway.)

After one last lingering look at the Chevy, Dean set out to the west. He walked past the three boulders and set foot on the little access road, heading toward Topaz Mountain, which was starting to vanish in the swirling snow.

The first fifteen minutes went relatively well, and Dean was soon thinking he'd gotten unnecessarily worried. The snow was still falling heavily, the wind strong, but the snow accumulation was still only about three inches and Dean made good time on the old gravel road. The hiking boots really weren't the perfect footwear, and even with the two flannel shirts and the jacket he was definitely feeling chilly, but he'd be fine. Dean even picked up his speed to a slow trot, knowing this would keep him warmer without too much risk of injury. His main concern was the potential of getting disoriented in the thick snow, but right now there were some good landmarks: the little road was still clearly visible, and Cas's pink flags, stretching ahead in a line of fluttering pink flecks, were excellent markers. An additional landmark behind was the Chevy, though it seemed uncomfortably far away when Dean glanced behind; already its single headlight seemed just a faint glowing dot in the storm. Ahead, the dark hulking shape of Topaz Mountain was only a slightly darker area of storm, but even so it was still a helpful landmark. Dean knew he was headed the right way.

But it was cold. And getting colder. Dean knew very well that he was underdressed for the conditions. If only he'd thought to grab his parka before he'd dashed out after Cas! He'd had all sorts of extra layers in the truck. Slowing from his jog for a few moments, he made himself swallow down the food that had been in the pack. All the safety videos said that digestion created some heat, and that cold people should eat. Apparently it helped delay the onset of hypothermia. So he chewed down the turkey sandwich as he walked, and the Fig Newtons, and the trail mix.

Forcing himself into a jog again, he tried to pick up the speed, but soon he'd reached the end of the little gravel road. Here the tundra got so uneven and bumpy that he knew he couldn't risk running. A sprained ankle would only make everything worse. Topaz, too, had totally disappeared now, the whole world narrowing to a swirling patch of thick snowflakes just a hundred yards wide or so. But there was a pink flag behind, and a pink flag ahead, and at each pink flag Dean took a read on his precious compass, and he kept going westward.
As the visibility got worse, a new worry dawned on Dean: what if he couldn't even spot the blue tent? At this rate the tent would soon be totally covered up with snow, if it wasn’t already. Cas had said he’d planned to set out pink flags in a line going all the way to his tent, but had he really ended up doing that? What if Dean got to the last pink flag and there was nothing there?

_Don't worry over nothing_, Dean commanded himself. _If there's no tent, you can back up to the Haul Road and walk to Kupaluk after all. You'll be cold, but you'll survive._

He picked up the pace as much as he could on the rough terrain, clambering steadily over what had become a very bumpy white snowfield. Twice he paused at a pink flag to take another read on the compass. At the second of these flags, as he stood peering at the little compass, he felt a shiver run over his shoulders. A strong shiver. A shudder, really. And then the shivering settled in steadily. His heart sank: shivering meant he was losing heat. He was getting chilled. The only things keeping him at all warm were the little bit of food and the fact that he'd been scrambling so fast over the tussocks. This wouldn't last. For one thing, he had no more food. And the more chilled he got, the more slowly he'd go, until the exercise would be unable to warm him up at all.

A mental clock started ticking in his mind. There was a time limit here. And the clock didn't have all that much time.

And then Dean couldn't find the next pink flag.

Visibility had gotten so bad now that he could barely see twenty paces in front of him. Had he gone past the flag? Had it ripped loose, or fallen over? Or had he not gotten to it yet? He was shivering more, now, as he checked his compass, and peered into the driving flakes, and moved in a broad circle, trying to spot the next flag. He turned to check the previous flag, and realized he'd gotten slightly far away from it; it was just out of view. He moved back.

Where was the previous flag? He'd felt sure it was on a certain willow bush, and headed to that bush, and felt a distant, almost calm, sense of horror settle over him when he realized it was the wrong bush. The flag wasn't there. Which meant he'd gotten disoriented. No, wait, there was another willow-bush — was it that one? No, the flag wasn't on that bush either—

_Calm the fuck down_, Dean ordered himself, trying to ignore the steady shivering that was rattling his whole body now. _Walk east, and if you can't find a flag, just keep going east. You can walk straight east back to the Haul Road. You've got a compass. You know where east is. The Haul Road has to be to the east._

He was angry at himself now. This had been a ludicrous string of errors. Granted, the truck doors being locked was mystifying, and Cas running away like that had been mystifying too, but Dean should never have left the vehicle. Certainly not without all his winter gear — a real parka, real snowpants, real snow boots, and all the rest. Instead here he was without his gun, without enough food, with no parka, in frickin' Kansas-summer clothing.

_This was insane. You wanted to save Cas, but you can't even save yourself. Get back to the Haul Road._

He checked the compass and began plodding east.

_At least somebody'll find your body_, he thought, with grim humor. He was shivering more now, and the mental clock was ticking down faster now. Reluctantly he allowed a certain quiet thought to surface to consciousness: _This is exactly how people die, up here. This is how it happens._

He kept walking, shivering hard now. There came the first stumble, and the second stumble, and the
third. *That's the next sign of hypothermia,* he knew. It was in all the safety videos. First came the shivering, and next came the stumbling.

*Third is the confusion. The stupid decisions.*

He crossed his arms over his chest to try to slow the rate of heat loss, and tried to hurry up to add some more exercise-heat to the equation. But as the minutes dragged on and the wind bit and the snow stung his cheeks, his toes began aching ferociously with cold, and then his fingers. His nose had gone numb long ago. He kept going, but his legs seemed to have gotten heavier, and slower. Soon he forgot to keep his arms crossed, and found himself swinging his arms widely instead, in an effort to correct his increasingly unsteady balance. The tundra was so *very* bumpy, and so *very* difficult to walk on, and it was so *very* hard to keep his balance when he was shivering so hard, and over there to the right a little bit was a much flatter patch of snow. A completely flat patch in fact, that looked like it would be very much easier to walk on. So Dean veered there, not noticing the tiny willow twigs that were sticking out of the snow.

He was shuffling across the flat patch, feeling rather proud of himself for having found an easier place to walk, when he fell through the ice.

Only into about three feet of water. Only waist deep or so. It was just one of those little innumerable snow-melt ponds that dotted the entire tundra, covered over with a crust of ice and full of half-melted slush. It wasn't like he'd fallen into the lake. But even so, even with just a hip-deep dunking, the shock was brutal, a searing cold so vicious that it felt like his whole body had suddenly caught fire. *Pond, I'm on a pond, I walked onto one of those fucking little ponds,* Dean realized, scrambling desperately to dry land, crashing his way hastily through ice and slush. He was drenched from the waist down now, his hiking boots full of water, and he was shuddering violently.

*Think. Think. Get the damn water out of your boots.* He found a squat willow-bush nearby, shook the snow off its branches and sat right down in the bush itself, knowing it would offer a slightly drier emergency seat than the snowy tundra around him. He didn't even have to think about what to do next, for this was an exercise he'd coached the students through dozens of times in the safety lectures: what would you do if you got wet while out on the tundra? Get the wet clothes off instantly no matter what, he'd told them, over and over. So he did that now, almost on autopilot. There was an oddly removed sensation now, as if he were watching himself from some very distant vantage point. He watched himself drop the backpack, and yank off one boot, then the other; he watched himself pull off the drenched socks and the wet jeans and drop them in the snow; he watched himself stick both bare feet right into the backpack in a desperate attempt to save them from frostbite, and then he watched himself trying to extract the other pair of jeans from his pack, fumbling with very clumsy hands. He even watched himself muttering instructions aloud, through chattering teeth: "J-Jeans out. D-dry jeans out. Dry j-jeans. Shake them out. One f-foot in. Get the foot in. Other f-foot. Now stand. Now f-fasten th-the jeans. C-could be worse. I actually have spare j-jeans. C-could be worse."

*Could be worse, could be worse,* became the mantra running dully through his mind, as, slowly, with numbed fingers, he managed to put his feet somewhat dry with a few of the Kleenexes. His feet were ice-white, and Dean knew this was bad, but he ignored it, clumsily pulling on first one pair of spare socks and then the other. Even the potential loss of his feet had ceased to be an important issue. Survival was all that mattered.

Soon each foot had two layers of thin cotton socks for Kansas — clearly inadequate for the conditions, but at least it was something. Dean's fingers were moving very, very slowly now, and he had to pause a long moment to consider the next step. His boots, which were sitting nearby accumulating their own layer of snow, were still soaked — in fact they were starting to freeze solid. After a period of staring dully at the drenched boots, with stockinged feet (totally numb now)
propped on his pack, it occurred to Dean that he still had the paperback book.

With numb hands he fumbled it out of his pack and stared at it.

*On The Road.* By Jack Kerouac.

It'd been a gift from Sam, actually.

Dean slowly tore a page out of the book, and another, and another. It was becoming quite challenging to get his fingers to cooperate at all, and he ended up tearing the pages out with his teeth. After crumpling up the loose pages (mostly with the palms of his hands, since his fingers wouldn't move at all anymore), he wedged the loose papers into the two ziploc bags to try to provide a little extra insulative layer. Then he pulled the plastic bags over his feet and shoved each foot, one at a time, into the frozen boots. Dean tried it out, getting to his feet and taking a few experimental steps. His legs barely worked; it felt as if he were walking on stilts, and he nearly pitched over into the snow right away. His feet were completely numb, his lower legs nearly so, and now his thighs were burning with the cold. But at least he was still shivering (this was good, because it meant that he was still alive, a point that he had begun to doubt). Maybe with the papers as a bit of foot insulation, he could at least get back to the Haul Road, from which he could stumble slowly back to Kupaluk. Maybe Ryan would come along or something.

*This'll be a warning story for the newbies,* Dean told himself, slowly donning his pack again and shuffling forward with an experimental step. *Great story once I get back to camp. I'll make it part of my opening spiel for newbies: Lemme tell you all about the time I made a couple dumb decisions and ended up walking on the tundra through a storm, fell into a pond and that could've been it, but I kept my wits, I used my socks as mittens and I tore up a book for insulation and I used these two ziploc bags and I still had my compass --*

Except that he didn't have the compass. The compass wasn't in his pocket. Dean groped at his jeans, finally realized he had different jeans on now, and managed to retrace his (few) steps to the bush where he'd dropped the drenched jeans. But the compass wasn't in any of the pockets, of either of the jeans, nor was it in the pack, nor the jacket pockets. It must've fallen out of his pocket when he'd been floundering in the water. He checked all his pockets twice over, but all he found were the two black feathers.

There was a moment of calm realization.

*I won't find the truck,* Dean thought, slowly. He tucked both hands in his jacket pockets, keeping a feather in each hand now, mostly just to have something to hold on to. It was tempting to try to just stagger onward to see if he find the Haul Road, but in a moment of awful clarity, Dean realized he had no idea anymore where east was. He'd totally lost track of all directions when he'd fallen into the little snowmelt pond.

It was interesting how fast the future disappeared.

All those dim distant plans he'd had for years... making sure Sam got set up with a better job after his internship, paying off that last tuition bill, finding that damn yellow-eyed Denali bear; it all disappeared. The vague thoughts he'd had about his own future disappeared. He'd still had the faint dream that something more might happen with his life, that the adventures weren't all over, but all that was irrelevant now, wasn't it? The years ahead were disappearing, devoured all at once; and the months ahead vanished, and all the rest of the summer. He'd been planning to go check out Dad's Lebanon property, maybe talk with Bobby about buying the garage someday. None of that was going to happen. He was not going to be on the Deadhorse flight, he was not going to get his camping gear. And that stupid dream he'd had of camping near Cas, of helping Cas confront his
family... oh, so many things he'd wanted to do with Cas!

It all vanished. Even tomorrow vanished, and then today was all there was. And the hours were vanishing too, the remaining hours of this one last day, until there was only one precious remaining hour left, with each minute ticking by relentlessly, the seconds flitting past like precious diamonds. The whole vast world disappeared, and all that was left was the next thirty minutes, for that was all the time he had left.

Dean stood still a moment, wavering on his feet as the howling wind buffeted him.

*I didn't get to say goodbye to Sam*, Dean thought. He took a moment then for one last task; he extracted the Sharpie from his back pocket and rolled up one sleeve just long enough to scrawl, nearly illegibly, "SORRY" across his forearm.

He rolled his sleeve back down, put the cap back on the Sharpie (this task took him nearly thirty seconds, for his fingers wouldn't move at all now), shoved his hands back in his pockets and limped on slowly. He'd been holding the black feathers earlier. Were they still in his pocket? Were they even still there? He couldn't feel them anymore; both hands had gone numb. He drew one hand out of his pocket to discover it was festooned with the stray bits of pink flagging tape.

Dean stopped, briefly, to tie a strip of pink flagging tape around a willow. At least it might help them find the body.

And now he was thinking about Cas.

*I only just found him*, Dean thought, trudging on slowly in a direction that might, or might not, be eastward.

*All these years up here, and I only just found him.*

*It's not fair.*

"Keep movin'," Dean muttered to himself. "Keep movin'. Lef'. Right. Lef. Righ'." His voice was slurring more and more, but he kept mumbling to himself. "FUCK. Thought it wasn't... supposed to hurt. Hypothermia's not suppos' to hurt. Tha's wha' the... video says. Stupid saf'ty vid. This FUCKIN' HURTS." It did, too, a searing agony that was throbbing erratically along his arms and legs, each throb creating a pounding flood of pain.

"Goddammit, Sammy, I'm sorry..." he muttered, now under the impression that Sam was somewhere nearby. "I'll be th' new camp story, huh?" he said. He laughed; his steps were slowing. "An' then he fell through th' ice, it's how all th' jokes go, Sammy, right? Lost my compass like a fucking grad studen'... lock m'self outta my truck....then I fell through th' ice..." Abruptly he was crying, mumbling, "Dammit, Cas, we shoulda had more time, we shoulda had more time....I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

The goal was still clear enough in Dean's mind: Keep moving at all costs, keep the wind at his back, and keep tying flagging tape to bushes, in the rare moments when his hands would obey him. But he was having to command each leg, one at a time, to take the next step. Whole body parts seemed to be lofting off of him and drifting away; he could no longer feel either foot, and even his legs seemed to be only partly present. Had his legs fallen off? A moment came when Dean had to step over a
tussock and his right leg would not lift up as he'd commanded it to. He tripped and fell face first into the snow.

It turned out to be exceptionally difficult to get up when his legs didn't belong to him anymore. He eventually managed to get to all fours, buffeted by wind, snowflakes driving at him, and he blinked at the snow below him. There was something dark there; a feather. Two feathers, actually; he must have been holding them after all, and now he'd dropped them. He picked them both up. This took a long time of sitting in the snow, hands fumbling slowly; since his fingers wouldn't move anymore he had to scoop the feathers into the palms of his hands.

_Cas_, he remembered. _These are from Cas._

Both the feathers flashed gold.

_Cas, I need your help._

With great effort, he managed to put the feathers into his pockets again, and he somehow got up. This began a sequence of endless falls. He walked; he fell; he got up. He walked; he fell; he got up. He walked; he fell; he got up. He could no longer tie the pink flagging tape, for his fingers would no longer move, but he draped a few pieces here and there. He walked; he fell; he got up.

At some later point, he walked, he fell, and he couldn't get up.

He struggled to stand and only managed to sit cross-legged. He'd lost a boot somehow, and one glove, and he stared without much interest at his bare foot (the socks were gone) and then at his hand, both of which seemed to be totally white. They didn't really belong to him anyway, so it didn't matter.

_I'll just catch my breath_, he thought. _I'll just rest a little bit..._

A shape emerged from the swirling white in front of him. A hulking vertical shape; a bear; no, a man, or, no, it seemed to be an eagle of some sort, for there were wings. Dean slowly realized that he was seeing all this from an odd perspective, and this turned out to be because Dean was lying on his side now, half covered in snow. The apparition came closer, and closer still; a figure in sort of strange cape, the wing-shapes stretching out. Dark hair... blue eyes.

"Cas?" he murmured.

The world around was hallucinatory now, Castiel's face sliding in and out of focus. Dean's skin seemed, paradoxically, burning hot, and Dean tried to take off his jacket and hat, but Cas was fighting him for some reason, shoving Dean's arms back in the sleeves and jabbing the hat back on his head. Dean tried to explain, "No, no, it's _hot_, Cas. _Too hot._"

Cas's voice cut like a buzzsaw through Dean's fuzzy thoughts. "DEAN! WAKE UP!" Cas yelled, right into Dean's ear. For a brief moment the world seemed to snap into focus again, and it was a very unpleasant world of unbelievably bitter wind and howling storm and stinging snow, whipping at them both. "You've got to stand," pleaded Cas. "I've put out a call for help but I don't know if they'll come. You have to stand. You have to stand and walk. Come on, try! I put my socks on your feet. I found your boot. Please, Dean. Please."

He seemed unnecessarily upset. It really wasn't such a big deal. He also didn't seem to realize that what he was asking was impossible.

"I don't have any feet," muttered Dean. "I lost my legs. They fell off."
"You have legs," Cas snapped. "They're right there. Come on, stand." Somehow Cas hauled him up; somehow they were moving, Dean leaning on Cas. Time stuttered and slipped; Cas seemed to have several arms around him somehow, his usual arms and then some kind of other arms as well, ones that were wrapped in a heated feather cloak. Time slipped again, the world tilted, and Dean was floating now, rolling onto something blue.

A noisy snuffling came at Dean's ear and then Dean was sliding over the snow, blinking up at a million white snowflakes that drifted down from above. His leather jacket was pulling very strangely, and there was huffing noise at his ear and a wall of white fur, some creature beside him with its snout by Dean's shoulder. A pale shaggy tail waved over Dean's face. Cas was trotting alongside, speaking in a language that Dean didn't know. Once again Castiel was outlined against the sky, and though it was a very different sky and a very different moment, Dean was suffused with an intense gratitude, and even a sense of peace.

At least we got some time together, Dean thought. The hiker on the road, that first evening at the snowmelt pond, the little pies, the trip over the lake, the wolf pups, the golden plover and the glacier avens. And that astonishing, incredible, unbelievable, evening on the heather... At least they'd had that.

It hadn't been such a bad life after all, in the end.

"Take care of Sam," Dean tried to say, but all that came out was a mumble. It was impossible to keep his eyes open any longer. Castiel was beside him, in the snow; that was enough. Dean closed his eyes.

Slowly the world reassembled.

For a time Dean was only aware that he was violently shivering, as searing pins-and-needles sensations went sweeping like a fire down his arms and legs. His feet were exploding with pain. Then there came an intensely uncomfortable sensation of gigantic swelling, as if both feet had become the size of boats. He couldn't get his teeth to stop chattering for long enough to even try to say anything. The wet clothes had been stripped away — everything had been stripped away — and somebody was moving rapidly around Dean, coaxing him to drink something very hot, and bundling him into an incredibly soft bed or sleeping bag of some sort. But Dean couldn't stop shivering.

Something silky wrapped over one foot, and then the other. The searing sensation eased immediately. Dean almost groaned with relief. The strange effect was repeated on both his hands, and then on his face, something dark and feathery and soft draping over him for a long moment.

A warm body moved into place behind him, long and solid and strong. Dean wanted to say "Get closer," but he had no strength to say anything; all he seemed able to do was shiver. The person, whoever it was, pressed closer. One arm snaked under Dean's head, another wrapped tightly around his body, and a great silken blanket rolled around him from all sides. The silken blanket blazed with heat.

The shivering began to fade.
"Drink," urged Cas, some time later. He was no longer curled behind Dean but instead was crouched over him. The wind outside was still howling, but here inside Cas's pup tent, all was still and calm. *This pup tent is enormous,* thought Dean, trying to raise his head to look around. But the pup tent was also unexpectedly dark, and Dean's vision was swimming. He couldn't even see Cas properly, for Cas seemed to have great dark banners arcing around him on both sides, banners that somehow followed him around as he moved.

Cas crouched lower by Dean's side to help Dean hold his head up, and tried to ladle a few spoonfuls of hot broth into his mouth. Dean choked at first, coughing on the broth. But it was wonderfully good, and he clumsily groped at the little bowl that Cas was holding.

He managed to take a few more swallows before it occurred to him to wonder how exactly Cas was helping to hold Dean's head up when Cas already had both hands busy with the soup. One of Cas's hands was holding the bowl, one hand was holding the spoon, and a third hand was holding Dean's head up.

Dean peered up at him. Cas was shirtless. (Well, actually, Cas was totally naked.) Those dark banners were still following him around, though. One was half-raised behind Cas's back. The other was arced around behind Dean, and this seemed to be the arm that was supporting Dean's shoulder and head.

Dean couldn't understand this at all. "You have three arms," he said fuzzily to Cas.

"Four, actually," said Cas. "Limbs, not arms. Drink more."

"Okay," muttered Dean. He finished the broth and slumped back exhausted. Cas's mysterious arm-banners were still following him around, though. One was half-raised behind Cas's back. The other was arced around behind Dean, and this seemed to be the arm that was supporting Dean's shoulder and head.

"What were you doing out there?" Cas asked, touching his forehead gently as if checking for fever.

"Came to rescue you," muttered Dean.

That made Cas chuckle. "Thank you for the rescue."

"Anytime," said Dean, aware he was mumbling a little, but unable to speak more clearly.

"I shouldn't have run," said Cas, his smile fading. "This was all my fault, Dean. I'd only gone out to try to protect the plovers' nest from the storm; I'd built them a little wicker shelter. And then I saw you. I shouldn't have run. If I hadn't fled, you wouldn't have tried to follow. I'm so sorry, Dean. I was...." He took a slow breath. "I was afraid to let you see."

Dean couldn't make sense of that. "See what?" he said.

"I didn't have my pack on," said Cas.

He moved out of sight, walking around to the other side of the bed. There was some shuffling and then Cas was sliding into bed next to Dean. "Sit up a little," Cas ordered, and Dean managed to do so, and when he slumped back down he again found that he was enveloped in that great feather blanket that Castiel seemed to own.

A feather blanket that seemed remarkably mobile and muscular. In fact it seemed to move under Dean — yes, it was moving under him, rolling him around a little, letting him settle more perfectly
against Castiel, with skin to skin contact all the way down. Cas settled closer, incredibly close, a long lean sinuous band of heat that seemed wrapped all around Dean from all angles. Outside the wind whistled, and the snow hissed endlessly against the strangely huge tent's dark walls.

There was something peculiar about the sleeping bag they were nestled into, as if Dean were floating in an enormous pool of warm feathers.

Sleep dragged heavily at Dean's mind but it came to him that Cas had just said something quite meaningful — *I didn't have my pack on*. It came to him, too, that there was a very important piece of information hovering right nearby. Dean fought to stay awake.

"I just didn't expect you to follow," Cas whispered, almost to himself. "It didn't occur to me that you might put yourself at risk."

"Was worried," Dean confessed. "Bout you. Three-day storm. Knew you just had this... um... " (Where the hell were they?) " — this, uh, pup tent. Didn't know you had... all these... feather blankets and stuff. Thought you'd... need help. Was gonna... bring you to camp. Was thinking I'd put you in my room."

The feather blanket tightened.

"That was very thoughtful," said Cas softly. "But you shouldn't have put yourself at risk just for me. I don't matter."

"No, no, you do..." Dean began. It was terrifically hard to think straight. He stirred a little, trying to wake up enough to shape the confused set of images in his head into an actual thought. Images were coming into his memory now.

Castiel, always wearing that beat-up backpack.

Castiel, reluctant to come into the dining hall to take off his pack and sit down.

The jaeger. *That jaeger's always on me.*

The photo on his phone, with the wings at Cas's back.

The dark banners.

Dark feathered banners.

Four limbs.

Dean managed to close one shaking hand on the edge of the feather blanket that was wrapped around them both, and he realized that he was gripping something solid and warm. It must have been Cas's arm; it seemed to be folded up in the feather blanket and extending across Dean's shoulders and chest.

No, wait. Cas's arm was lower down, around Dean's waist. Dean could feel it there, Cas's hand flattened snugly against Dean's belly. And Cas's other arm was under Dean's neck.

Then what did Dean have hold of? The third arm, clearly. Dean squeezed it experimentally: Bone and muscle. Wrapped in feathers.

Feathers meant a wing.

A gigantic black wing. And a second wing underneath.
"What—" whispered Dean, suddenly wide awake. "What are you?"

"I'm your friend," said Castiel softly. "Now rest." The impossible wing did something then, a small, precise movement, and a particular little dark feather at the curve of the wing brushed Dean's cheek. Dean plummeted into a bottomless sleep.
Some time later, Dean woke.

He was lying on his back, in darkness, on an incredibly soft bed. Fuzzy blankets of some sort were heaped over his legs, while his upper body was covered with a bedspread that was quite warm yet seemed to weigh very little. It had a silky, yet somewhat stiff, feel to it, arcing over Dean's chest without quite draping down to follow every curve of his skin. The air was a little chilly on his face, but between the blankets and the oddly stiff, silky bedspread, he felt quite comfortable, aside from the odd tingling in his feet. A pleasantly strange scent was all around, a faint musk mixed with outdoorsy tinges of cedar and heather.

It took several minutes to come to full wakefulness. Dean felt exhausted, his thoughts slow; all his muscles were sore, and his feet were tingling slightly. For a long time he simply lay there, half-awake, soaking in the warmth of the bedspread and breathing in the delicate scent, only dimly noticing that some other heavy warm things were also draped over his waist and pressing on his shoulder. But slowly he came to himself, enough to start to wonder where he was.

He was in some kind of room, obviously. It was a very dim room. All he could see clearly were several small blobs of red glowing quietly in the darkness, about fifteen feet to the left of the bed. Coals, maybe, in some kind of fireplace, surrounded by a faintly visible ring of dark stones.

Wait; this couldn't be a normal room. For one thing, the fireplace seemed to be right in the middle of the floor, surrounded by nothing but the ring of stones. For another, the space seemed far too large for an ordinary room, and was strangely dark, too. As far as Dean could tell there were no windows at all, and the dark walls, barely visible, were some distance away. A single dim vertical glimmer of light some thirty feet away was the only sign of a door.

Dean craned his head around to try to get a better look at the shadowy space, but could get only a vague sense of large and airy dimensions. As he shifted to look around, he realized — for the first time — that there was a person lying against his right side.

The person was very close, dozing, their head against Dean's right shoulder. Dean was further
startled to realize that the person even had an arm flung across Dean's waist under the silky bedspread. One bare arm. Against Dean's bare waist.

Dean turned his head. Soft hair brushed his cheek, and there was another whiff, then, of that tantalizing wild scent.

_Cas._

In a rush it all came back.

The blizzard.

Dean went still, head half-lifted. He let his head sag back onto the bedding as he realized what had happened: Cas had found him.

Cas had rescued Dean somehow, from out there in the blizzard, snatching him up from what would certainly have been a very icy death.

The memories of the blizzard had a disconnected, dreamlike feel, and at first Dean struggled to piece together what had happened. He took a long, slow, somewhat shaky breath as the fragmented memories started to fall into place. The truck... something about the Chevy. Oh, right — he'd locked himself out of the truck without his gear! That's what had started it all. The most stupid, classic mistake possible: getting stuck outside one's vehicle, with lifesaving gear mere feet away. Then he'd gone stumbling through the snow in totally inadequate clothing trying to find Cas's pup tent, and finally he'd fallen into that damn slush pool. A _slush pool_. He hadn't even fallen into a proper lake like a real Alaskan, which would at least have qualified as a suitably dramatic arctic death. Instead he'd nearly died because of a waist-deep slush puddle. It was sobering, and a little embarrassing.

After that... Well. Even now, lying here bathed in warmth, a shudder ran right down Dean's spine as he remembered those awful final moments: the breath-taking cold, the relentless wind, the desperate effort to keep walking, and most of all that crushing, pathetic, helpless knowledge of certain doom. It had been a textbook decline. He wouldn't have survived much longer. That illusion of overheating he'd felt at the end — that was supposed to be the very last stage of hypothermia, wasn't it? Hell, his feet had already frozen.

_My feet_, Dean remembered, then, with a sudden jolt of panic. Could he have actually lost his feet? But no, he could still feel both feet perfectly well — in fact they'd been tingling persistently since he awoke. He wiggled his toes, and to his relief they all seemed to move on command. He could even feel them brushing against the fuzzy blankets. He rolled one foot around a little bit, and then the other. Everything seemed fine.

Yet his feet had been bone-white and totally numb. His hands, too. How was it possible that he'd avoided serious frostbite? He wiggled his fingers carefully, testing them out too, and pulled both arms out from under the crisp edge of the stiff silken bedspread to take a look at them. As he did so, the entire "bedspread" shifted across his chest. By itself.

Only then did Dean abruptly remember the strange dark banners that had been suspended behind Cas's shoulders during the blizzard. He'd seen them when Cas had first run away through the falling snow, and also when Cas had miraculously reappeared later to save Dean. And he'd seen them again in the dimness, later still, when Cas had been helping Dean eat. Great dark banners, arced out on either side.

_Can't be_, Dean thought now. _Can't have been._
I must be remembering it wrong. I must have been dreaming. It can't be...

But it could be, clearly.

He ran his fingertips along the edge of the "bedspread" and came immediately to two silky little tufts that lay right on his chest. He ran his finger over one carefully, craning his neck to peer down at it. Thin, flexible, cool; about four inches long; a narrow central shaft that bent when he touched it, and sprang back into position when he let it go; and a perfect smooth sheet like a strip of satin on either side. This odd flat silky structure looked a lot like...

Well, a feather. It looked a lot like a feather.

It looked like a feather, and it felt like a feather. It looked a hell of a lot like that "jaeger feather," as a matter of fact, except that this one had a little crescent of gold at its tip, and also it was attached to the... to the "bedspread." As was its smaller twin next to it. Reaching farther down, Dean encountered an array of the same structures, just much larger. Huge feathers, gigantic feathers, all in a neat parallel array.

They were feathers, and this was no bedspread. It was a wing. There was an enormous wing stretched over him.

Cas had a wing.

A faint golden glow began to illuminate the bed, emanating from the large feather that Dean happened to have his fingers on at the moment. It seemed that even these gigantic feathers had a touch of that same golden bioluminescence as the little black "jaeger feathers" that Cas had given him earlier. On these much bigger feathers, the gold was fainter, barely discernable, just a subtle glow that seemed almost to ripple along the feathers like water, a ghostly trail of soft gold chasing after his fingers.

As if it weren't already weird enough that Castiel had a wing, it wasn't even just a plain wing, it was a frickin' glowing wing. Specifically, a wing that glowed whenever Dean touched it.

The little "jaeger feathers" had been Cas's feathers too, hadn't they? Those had been feathers from Cas's own wing. They had to be. The little feather that Dean had just been examining must be a newly grown replacement.

There followed a full minute or so of Dean scrambling mentally for some kind of logical explanation. I've gone crazy, he thought, still stroking the wing lightly, watching in a sort of mesmerized, stunned fascination as the waves of soft golden glow flowed like liquid down the feather-shafts.

Or I'm dying. Maybe I was brain-damaged by the hypothermia and I'm lying out on the tundra right now dying, and I'm hallucinating all this. I'm going crazy, or I'm dying. Either of these options, or maybe both, seemed much more likely than Castiel having actual wings.

Yet it all seemed so real, and so full of crisp detail. The weight of Cas's arm around his waist seemed very real, as did the feel of Cas's hair brushing Dean's shoulder, and the slight bite of the chilly air on Dean's face, and the scent of cedar-smoke in the air. It seemed an awful lot of detail for a hallucination.

But if it wasn't a hallucination, what could explain the wing?

Maybe it's some kind of research project? Dean thought, still in disbelief as he gently stroked the first few inches of one particularly huge feather. Maybe Cas glued feathers to his back deliberately? Or
maybe it's like a wearable harness, like a costume, for... for... well, maybe in order to.... look like a giant bird? Just to see how the wild birds react, or something? Some bird-behavior experiment? (This didn't really seem too likely.) Or maybe he's a cosplayer, or a costume artist or something... who for some reason only does his art stuff alone on the arctic tundra? (Even less likely.)

Even as Dean was trying to think his way through this, inventing and discarding one outrageous explanation after another, he knew in his gut that this was no costume. The upper edge of the wing, which was lying right across Dean's chest, had some kind of solid, warm, rounded structure underneath, and this deeper structure was clearly not cardboard, and not wire, but warm living bone. And the detail was far too extravagant. Each of the long feathers had such a precise architecture. Each lay fanned out so neatly against its long neighbors, the bases of the biggest feathers covered over with rows and rows of small silky feathers, overlapping each other in elaborately precise layers. And when Dean peered again at the small feather in the dimness, at the little feathers right at the bend of the wing that he'd been examining earlier, it seemed to be perfect down to microscopic detail. And it was attached at its base not with glue, but with a feather-shaft that went down through a fine layer of downy fluff, through skin and into bone.

This was no sham of glue and cardboard and foam. This was a wing, warm, alive, and real.

As Dean kept poking at the little feather, in bafflement and confusion and wonder, the wing moved again.

It moved very deliberately this time. It began to fold. Dean had his hand on the main joint of the wing right now, the joint where the little feather attached, and he almost jumped when he felt tendons shifting underneath. The wing was folding up, flattening itself, pulling away to slide behind Cas's back. Dean found he didn't want to let go, so he kept his hand on the joint that he'd been holding, fascinated by the way it was folding up. He was so reluctant to release it that he ended up rolling to follow the wing as it moved, and found himself face-to-face with Castiel, who turned out to be wide awake.

Cas was looking at him from only about six inches away. His face was barely visible in the dim glow from the fireplace embers, but he seemed alert, his attention focused acutely on Dean. (Had he been watching the whole time that Dean had been inspecting the wing?) There was something wary, and worried, and quite uncertain, in his eyes.

Dean's arm had ended up stretched around Cas's shoulder, his hand still on the wing, which was now neatly folded behind Cas's back. There was something else shifting around behind Cas's back, too: a second wing. It had presumably been folded up there all along, tucked behind Cas's back, and it was shuffling a little now as the two wings settled together more neatly. Dean drew in another shaky breath as the reality of it began to settle in: Wings. He has wings. Two of them.

Cas just watched him silently.

Even now, Dean couldn't resist one last round of inspection to try to determine how the impossible wings were attached to Castiel. Could they conceivably be held on by some kind of harness? Gently, he traced the edge of the upper wing farther behind Cas's back, following the contours of its underlying bone. Cas still said nothing; he just watched Dean's face, as Dean slid his fingertips along the wing's big folded joint, and then inward and down, following the wing to what turned out to be an unexpected second joint, some sort of broad elbow-like hinge point that was more than halfway down Cas's spine, resting against the small of his back. This led to another whole inner-wing-segment, a stout bone at least a foot long that led Dean's hand upwards again, through increasingly softer and fluffier feathers, and to a point between Cas's shoulder blades where the wing attached to his skin.
There was no harness.

There were no lines or rigging, no wood or wire or straps. The wing simply attached to Cas's back, the wing muscles rooting in deeply right to his shoulder blade. And the feathers, as Dean traced his way across the junction point, grew finer and fluffier and smaller, and finer and smaller still, until they disappeared entirely, and then Dean was tracing his hand over the smooth skin of Cas's upper back.

Cas still hadn't said a word. But his eyes were locked on Dean's, his jaw set. Apparently he was willing to allow all this wing-handling, yet he also seemed to be braced for something unpleasant. Braced, perhaps, for Dean's reaction?

Yet Dean couldn't even say anything. There were still some last-ditch explanations rattling around in his head. The wings could be a crazy mutation. An insanely elaborate birth defect. A science experiment gone awry, some crazy futuristic biology technology, like that gene-editing stuff that he'd heard the scientists talk about. Or a deliberate transplant from a... from a real bird, but it'd have to have been a very big bird, so... well, it'd have to have been one of the largest birds in the world, wouldn't it? An Andean condor, or a wandering albatross. Maybe Castiel had gotten a wing transplant from an Andean condor. *Yeah, that's totally likely,* Dean thought, almost starting to laugh. For Dean knew, as he ran his hand once again along the entire folded length of the wing, as he marveled at the silky softness of the feathers, the perfect structure of the long, strong bones and the neat arrays of flight feathers, that this wasn't a mutation, and it wasn't a transplant, and it wasn't any kind of experiment.

Because it wasn't just the wings, was it?

It was a thousand other things about Castiel, too.

The glowing really should have been a giveaway. "Bioluminescence" — Dean almost laughed at the thought. It had never been remotely like bioluminescence. And besides, the "jaeger feathers" hadn't just glowed. The first one had gone full-on invisible once. That had been no sleep-deprived fantasy; it had been real. One of those feathers had flat-out disappeared, right in Dean's hand.

Not to mention the way the wild animals reacted to Cas. The fascinated awe of the caribou, way back at the beginning. The wolf showing up right on cue, right after Cas had actually said that he'd go talk to the wolves about arranging a visit. The way he referred so casually to what the wild birds were conversing about... and the birds, in turn, all seeming to understand exactly what Cas had told them. That dark-eyed junco, for example, showing up on the dining hall deck mere hours after Cas had said he'd "recommend" to the little lost bird that it should seek out Dean.

A faint memory surfaced, too, of a plumy white tail in the blizzard. Had the wolves helped Cas to rescue Dean? Had there been a wolfsled after all in the end? Had Cas somehow arranged that too?

Then there were Cas's erratic descriptions of the passage of time. The confusing way he kept alternating between talking about ten years ago, and fifty years ago, and a thousand years ago, as if those times seemed almost equally recent in his mind. There'd been that evening when Cas had held Dean's fossil mammoth tooth in his hands, eyes closed, recounting the last desperate days of a creature who had died over eight millennia ago.

His odd slips-of-the-tongue. *I miss the mammoths... I mean, it's a pity we missed seeing them, isn't it?*

He'd fixed a light bulb by merely holding it in his hand. (And he’d looked rather weak afterwards, as
if the effort had drained him.)

His confusion about modern English idioms. His unfamiliarity with everything modern, from trucks to GPS to radio protocol. He'd known exactly when the word "coffee" first entered the English language, yet he'd never heard common modern slang like "gay".

His hyper-controlling "religious family."

Religious, indeed.

*You grew up flying, by any chance?*

*Not any more. I haven't flown in years. Now I just walk.*

The silence now was perfect and limitless. Cas's eyes seemed unreadably dark, the glow from the fireplace picking out only the faintest hint of deepest indigo in their depths. He was still watching Dean's face quietly, unmoving and silent, but his jaw was still set, his shoulder braced, both wings folded up tightly now.

Dean wanted to say, *You're an angel, aren't you? An actual angel. You're an angel.* But it was impossible to say the words. It was too crazy; it was too outlandish. This must all be an insane dream —

Cas let out a very small sigh and drew his arm off of Dean's waist. He looked away, glancing over his shoulder at his own wings, and now there was something resigned in his expression.

Then Dean wanted to say, *It's okay. It's cool that you have wings. It's fine. In fact it's pretty awesome. In fact it's literally the most awesome thing I've ever seen.* But speech had fled, and all he seemed able to do was begin stroking the wing again, patting its feathers over and over, running his hand repeatedly along the little feathers at the bend of the wing, and down the first few inches of the immense flight feathers. Cas still had not spoken, but he turned back to look at Dean again, and Dean stroked his wing again, and again. Finally Cas let out another sigh, this time sounding a little more relaxed. Gradually Cas's shoulder dropped, and the wing loosened a little bit from its tightly folded position.

Emboldened, Dean braved a longer stroke, intending this time to run his hand all the way down to the tips of the feathers. But as Dean's hand went farther and farther down the wing, Cas flinched, the wing tensed, and then Cas closed his eyes, turning his face down to the bedding. Dean frowned as he watched Cas's expression change, and then his hand reached the end of the wing. It was much shorter than Dean had imagined; it wasn't ending the way he'd expected. He'd been picturing that each feather would have a smoothly rounded feather-tip, the contours soft to the touch, like larger versions of the little black feathers he'd had in his room. Instead what his hand came to, at about the level of Cas's hips, was an abrupt sawn-off end.

All the feathers on either side stopped at exactly the same place. They'd been cut. They'd all been cut short, in a straight line that ran right across the wing.

The wing had been mutilated.

Cas, eyes still closed, seemed to stop breathing as Dean's hand lingered on the strange cut area.

"What happened?" said Dean quietly, at last breaking the silence.

Cas pulled away.
In one smooth move he was out of the bed and on his feet, moving so briskly that Dean, left behind on the bed, just stared after him in confusion. It turned out Cas was completely nude (as was Dean), but Cas seemed unconcerned about this; in fact he had jumped out of the bed in such a way that he kept his front toward Dean, everything in full view. It was a pleasant view, of course. It was a very nice view, just like at the pingo-pond all those weeks ago, but it suddenly came clear to Dean that Cas had been trying then, and was still trying now, to keep his wings out of view. The full-frontal was merely a bonus; the point, all along, had been to hide the wings.

Sure enough, Cas's next move was to sidle to the foot of the bed, still keeping his wings carefully angled away from Dean, until he reached down and scooped up a tawny-colored thing off the foot of the bed. It was, it turned out, a soft and supple fur — for the "blankets" over Dean's legs, and the soft bedding underneath, were all furs.

Cas spun his selected fur around his shoulders so that it settled over both his wings like a cape, and he fastened it around his shoulders with a loop of leather that fitted around a little ivory-colored toggle. Wings safely hidden, only then did he finally relax a little and glance at Dean again briefly. And only then did he seem to notice Dean's nakedness, or his own. The furs had pulled off of Dean's hips when Cas had jumped out of bed, and Cas's eyes drifted to Dean's crotch for a moment. He glanced down at himself, and back up at Dean, now with a faint smile.

Only a day or so ago, they'd done almost everything with each other that it was possible to do; yet today, in this mysterious dark shelter, confronted with the impossible wings and with Cas apparently being an actual... angel, was the word, wasn't it, "angel," "angel" — confronted with this realization, Dean now found a wave of shyness flooding through him. Angel, angel, he's an angel, Dean thought, and then he couldn't hold Cas's eyes. Confused and embarrassed, he grabbed the nearest fur and pulled it over his waist. He then tried to turn the move into a more normal throwing-on-a-robe, as if he were just casually getting out of bed in the morning, and ended up sitting up on the edge of the "bed" (which, he was slowly realizing, was simply a huge pile of heaped furs) as he awkwardly pulled a soft spotted fur around his waist.

Cas finally spoke, only to say, a little sadly, "I suppose I should cover up too? That's... normal? Or, I guess—" He sighed, glancing over his shoulder at his now-shielded wings. "Cover up more."

Without waiting for an answer he turned and walked several paces away across the large dim room, past the hearth to a line of coat-hooks on the wall — or rather, caribou antlers, it turned out. There were several polished antlers hung against some sort of dark shaggy wall-hanging. All the tines of the antlers seemed to be serving as coat-hooks, draped with various items of clothing that included not only more furs but also Cas's regular working clothes. Dean watched mutely, still clutching the spotted fur around his waist, as Castiel pulled on a pair of black long johns. The long johns were familiar from the episode on the heather, and, like many of Cas's clothes, they had a certain vintage 1970's look. They were followed by Cas's black snow pants, and then, not a t-shirt but a short fur tunic. The tunic was slit down the back and went on something like a furry hospital gown, covering Cas's front from neck to waist and overlapping below his wings at his back. Cas tied it in place with a narrow strip of thin leather. It was cut to fit the wings. This must be why Cas wasn't wearing a normal t-shirt; maybe he couldn't put one on over the wings.

And this, Dean realized, was also why he had never managed to get Cas's clothes off, the other day on the heather. Cas had been carefully keeping certain things hidden. The wings, obviously, must have been the most critical to conceal. But Cas had also probably been trying to hide this odd tunic, which was clearly convenient for wings but also looked like something out of the Stone Age.

Cas seemed a little uncomfortable under Dean's gaze. As if fumbling for something to say, he asked, "Um, are you hungry? Or thirsty?" He reached out to another antler and picked up his vintage leather
waterskin — one of a set of three, it turned out, that were hanging in a row on three successive antler-tines. "There's still a bit of water," he said, hefting the waterskin in his hands and even uncapping it and peering into it. He was glancing at one thing after another — the clothes, the waterskin, the antlers — yet never meeting Dean's eyes, and there was a nervousness in his movements that seemed unlike him.

Without waiting for Dean to reply, Cas then recapped the waterskin and said, a little rapidly, "I was thinking earlier, I should get some more water soon. Today, actually. Soon. In case you're thirsty. Oh, and..." He hesitated, a look of uncertainty crossing his face. "I now have a small latrine as well, for use in foul-weather conditions," he said, gesturing toward another wall-hanging. "There's an alcove behind there. I've just set it up. There's a... well, a bucket, and some washing supplies. Everything should stay frozen in the bucket, don't worry — it's got an ice charm, and it's completely warded against odors." He then added, as if having a latrine required some explanation, "I used to have enough power to clean my vessel by other means. As I did for you on the tundra the other day." (Dean could only blink at him.) "But my power's quite erratic these days, and it was drained down entirely last night — you know, from, well, from restoring your feet to health— so I thought a latrine might be useful. Since it's still so snowy out."

"Okay," said Dean weakly. Castiel had built Dean a magically charmed and odor-warded latrine for indoor use in blizzards. Of course he had. And this was because he'd used up all his angel powers while magically healing Dean's feet. It all made perfect sense. It was all completely insane.

"There's a different alcove to keep food chilled, as well," said Cas. "On the other side. Over there." He gestured to the far side of the room. "Are you hungry? Wait, I'll get some of the stew." With that, he hurried all the way across the gigantic room, tugging a little at his furry wing-cape as he went, as if to be certain that it was in place. He then disappeared behind another wall-hanging into yet another alcove.

At that point Dean finally realized that they weren't in a room at all. And they certainly weren't in the little blue pup-tent, either. They were in a cave, some kind of rounded-out space that seemed to have been hollowed right into the rocks. It was impressively large, at least forty feet across.

Cas reappeared a moment later with a small iron pot, which he carried over to the hearth and set at the edge of the coals. "It'll just take a moment to warm," he said. He added, turning toward Dean with an air of almost formal apology, "I regret that I can't heat it instantly." He seemed to be a little embarrassed by this, and he added, "I'm low on power, as I mentioned. I'm afraid it'll take a few minutes to heat it by standard physical heat conduction."

"Right, yeah... that's no problem," said Dean. "Heat conduction's, um, just fine. Um, where are we, anyway?"

"Just inside the east face of Topaz Mountain," Cas said. He was now walking over to a set of hand-hewn wooden shelving under the antlers. The shelves held quite an assortment of items, and Cas selected a wooden stirring spoon, returned to the hearth, and knelt by the fire to take the lid off the pot and give the stew a few stirs. "I built this cave long ago," he added.

He had "built" the cave. He'd built a cave. Long ago.

"I thought you had a tent?" admitted Dean. "That blue tent?"

Cas gave a soft laugh as he set the pot-lid back in place. (He seemed to have relaxed a little, now that he had the stew to focus on.) "The tent's rather a decoy, to be honest. It just has some extra supplies. It's just for if people ask where I'm camping. I don't, um..." He sat back on his heels and looked around at the cave. "I don't usually let anybody else see this cave," he confessed. "We're deep into
the bedrock here. In fact, you're actually the only other person who's ever been here." Watching Dean peer around, he said, "Oh. Allow me." He picked up a stick of wood from a nearby stack of kindling and rapped the coals lightly. A little shower of fine gray ash fell off them, and they flared with much brighter light. Cas tossed the stick of wood on top. It caught with a bright yellow flame and a distinct scent of cedar, and finally the cave was illuminated.

Dean looked around, amazed. This was an elaborate space. The fur bed he was sitting on was quite wide, almost the size of a king-size bed. It was composed of dozens and dozens of furs all heaped up, the furs corralled together in a round shape by a latticework of roughly hewn wood. The whole bed was placed off to the side of the cave; the little fireplace was dead center, the cedar smoke now twining its way up to some sort of chimney-hole in the high rock ceiling overhead. And the "shaggy wall hangings" that Dean had glimpsed earlier turned out to be even more furs. All of the rocky walls were lined with thick overlapping furs, hung like tapestries; Dean could only guess that they were for insulation. Some were striped and some were spotted, as if from some mysterious kind of great cats. The wall with the antler coat-hooks was covered by a single huge black hide from some particularly enormous creature. Furs also lined the floor like carpets, and more furs shielded the entrances to the latrine-alcove and the food-alcove. Far to Dean's right were multiple sets of hanging furs that were letting in the faint vertical glimmer of light that he'd noticed earlier; presumably this was the cave's entrance.

Many of the furs had artistic little diagrams in their corners, drawn in some kind of dark pigment. The more Dean looked, the more of the diagrams he saw; there seemed to be diagrams on every single fur, in fact. There were even some etched in charcoal on the bare rock walls high overhead, and some small ones drawn on the little stones around the hearth.

"Glyphs," Cas said. He was still crouching by the fire, watching Dean take all this in.

Dean looked at him blankly, too overwhelmed to even know what questions to begin to ask.

Cas gestured with one hand down at the diagrams on the little hearth-stones. "A type of runes," he said. "They're... well, they're a form of magic, essentially. They're for protection." He tapped one stone that had a design of flame symbols in a circle. "For example, this one keeps the fire from spreading beyond the hearth-stones. It keeps the furs safe from sparks. This other one here—" (he tapped another stone) "— is part of a set that dissuades insects from entering the cave from the smoke-hole above; there are others like that at the door, wards to dissuade pests. The ones on the furs bestow longevity. Some of these hides are millennia old, and I wanted them to last. And the glyphs keep them clean, as well. I also have a few glyphs for strength, so they don't wear thin, and for luck...." He paused, glancing toward the door-furs, which seemed to have a particularly elaborate set of the little circular designs, as well as several glyphs on the rock floor and ceiling around the door. "And several wards to keep out possible enemies," Cas said. He added, flicking a cautious glance toward Dean, "Though, of course, I couldn't add anti-angelic wards."

"Oh...right," was all Dean could manage. Weakly, he managed to ask, "Are the glyphs, um, are they like... made with... Sharpie?"

"Dried blood," said Cas. "Similar, really."

"Oh," said Dean again, even more rattled. "Yeah. Just like a Sharpie, yeah. They look, uh..." He looked around at all the little glyphs and runes, groping for something intelligent to say, and finally added, "... thorough."

"This cave was an important place to me," said Cas quietly. "I set it up long ago. I wanted to keep it safe for as long as possible."
All Dean could think to do was keep looking around at the cave. (This was mostly an attempt to keep from staring too obviously at Castiel, and at the impossible wing-shapes that were still apparent under his fur cape.) He finally craned all the way around to look directly behind him, at which point he nearly jumped off the bed. Right behind him in the corner of the cave sat a tremendous tusked skull, at least four feet high and five feet long. The tips of its gigantic tusks actually wrapped around the sides of the broad bed.

"One of the last mammoths," Castiel said, following Dean's gaze. "The last big male who lived in this area. He died a few years before that female, that one whose tooth you found."

Dean looked at the mammoth skull for a long moment, and slowly turned back and looked at Cas.

Cas gestured toward the other furs on the walls and the floor. "The last of the three-toed horses as well. The last of the short-faced bears, the last of the tundra lions, and—" (he nodded toward the huge, shaggy fur on the opposite wall) "—that hide, too, is from the same mammoth as the skull." Dean was utterly unable to look away from Castiel now, as Cas took a long breath and added, "I was honored that many of the last animals bequeathed their hides to me. I set the wards on the furs to help preserve them, to keep them clean and intact and keep insects away. That's the original reason I built the cave, just to store these few rare items from the past. A place of memoriam, I suppose. And a place for reflection and meditation. It eventually became a place of rest for me." He finally glanced at Dean, and for once he didn't seem to mind that Dean's eyes were on him again. "But I never knew at the time that I'd need this place someday for my own survival," he added. He gazed around at all the furs once again, and glanced down at his bare feet; he was crouched on a spotted fur at the edge of the hearth, and Dean watched as Cas moved his toes slightly, as if to work his feet ever-so-gently into the deep part of the fur. Cas then reached down and patted the fur for a moment.

"I've been very grateful to these animals," Castiel said. "I hope they wouldn't mind that I've been sleeping here, among their own hides and tusks. Using their own hides for warmth, in fact. That mammoth was such a wise old friend...." Cas was quiet a long moment. Finally he added, "I think, or at least I hope, that they wouldn't mind that I'm staying here."

Dean said, or tried to say, "But wait, if you knew the last mammoths, that would make you at least eight thousand years old." All that came out, though, was a hoarse croak of a "But" — and then a series of rough coughs. The cedar-smoke seemed to be tickling his throat. Cas frowned, looking sharply at Dean.

"Don't exert yourself," said Cas. He rose rapidly and took a few long strides back over toward Dean, apparently having lost all of his shyness the moment Dean started coughing. Leaning over and peering into Dean's eyes, he set two fingers at the pulse point just under Dean's jaw. After another moment he placed his other hand flat over Dean's heart, frowning in concentration.

Dean submitted to this scrutiny quietly. Cas's hand was warm on Dean's bare chest, and the physical contact was oddly reassuring. Whatever sort of alien creature Cas might turn out to be, he certainly had a human side as well. His hand still felt like a hand; his skin was warm; he felt human.

Yet an edge of black feather was sticking out from the edge of Cas's fur cape. A burst of amazement hit Dean all over again: Wings. He has wings.

But Castiel was still Castiel. "Show me your hands," Cas said next, and it was still the same low, gravelly voice; it was Castiel's voice; it was Castiel.

Dean quietly held out both hands. Cas took hold of one of Dean's hands in his own, and crouched on his heels before Dean to study that hand carefully, turning it over, looking closely at the palm and the back. He studied every fingertip with intense focus, and then did the same with Dean's other hand.
And with Dean's left foot, and then with the right.

Throughout, he had the same steady, thoughtful gaze as always, the same alert and kind intelligence in his eyes. This was still Castiel.

Wings, yes... but still Castiel.

In fact, he hadn't even changed. He was the same Castiel he had always been. Dean just had a clearer view of him now.

"You had serious frostbite of your hands and feet," Cas said finally, releasing Dean's foot at last and standing up. "Particularly the feet." He rearranged the spotted bed-fur more snugly around Dean's waist (a flicker of a smile ghosted over Cas's face as he did this, as if what was under the spotted fur wasn't entirely without interest, just not the priority at the moment). "Fortunately," Cas added, lifting another, larger, fur from the bed to drape it over Dean's shoulders for extra warmth, "I do still have a few small abilities. Not quite enough to bring you back to perfect health right away, and as I said I drained the last of my power quite down to nothing, but I was able to heal your hands and feet. And the tip of your nose too while I was at it." (Dean touched his own nose, realizing only then that it was tingling too.) "There might be some residual tingling," Cas went on, now folding an edge of the large fur around Dean's feet. "And you may have a bit of coughing, from some minor frost burn of the respiratory linings. But it should pass. In the meantime, you should stay warm. For the next few weeks, when you go outside, be sure your hands and feet stay warm, and keep a scarf over your nose."

Dean nodded. Cas studied Dean a moment more and nodded back. Then he went back to the fire, where he checked the iron pot. Collecting a few more utensils from a nearby wooden tray, he levered off the pot's lid with what seemed to be a sort of bear-hide oven mitt. Then, using a completely modern-looking white plastic ladle, he scooped some hot steaming liquid into an ancient, misshapen wooden bowl. He stood to bring the bowl closer.

"Eat this," said Cas, holding out the bowl along with a stainless-steel spoon. "You had a little yesterday, but you need more. To recover your strength."

"Is it... like... mammoth stew or something?" said Dean slowly.

"Campbell's beef barley, I believe," said Castiel, glancing down into the bowl. "From one of the cans that you brought to me. I did add some herbs, and a few cranberries. I must thank you for all the extra food, by the way; these cans of soup have been wonderful. I was getting very low on stores. I hadn't even realized how hungry I'd been." Dean slowly took hold of the bowl, and spoon, staring at both. The bowl looked it had been hand-hewn and hand-polished from some ancient hardwood, and the spoon had some etching. Dean peered at the etching, rather expecting to find some mystical runes from the Pleistocene, but it merely read, "PEPE'S NORTH-OF-THE-BORDER - Farthest north Mexican restaurant in the world!"

"I found that eight years ago, on a side road near the town of Barrow," said Castiel. "Eat. Please. You need the nourishment."

Dean ate. He found himself suddenly ravenous, and downed spoonful after spoonful. When he reached the bottom he upended the bowl and downed every drop.

Cas nodded. "I'll go get you some more water, too," he said. "You should probably drink more." He stood and moved back to the antler-hooks to get his outdoor clothing on. This process turned out to involve a lot of maneuvering to keep his wings almost completely out of Dean's view. First, turning his back to the wall (and therefore facing Dean), he un-fastened the ivory clasp of his little wing-
cape, swung the cape off and hung it on a nearby antler-tine. Wings now exposed, he hurriedly pulled his familiar sheepskin jacket off another antler-tine. This jacket turned out to have slits up the back, along with a series of strategically placed buttons that fitted the lower edge of the coat neatly around the bases of the wings. It took Cas a few minutes to get it all arranged, and he did the entire process facing Dean, keeping his back — and wings — in shadow. But as Cas settled the jacket edges in place, he seemed to need to shake out his wings, which he did as quickly as he could, flaring them both out briefly with two quick flaps.

Dean only got a quick glimpse, but the cut ends of the wings seemed terribly obvious now. They were much too short. They were clearly meant to be longer.

As Cas shook out his wings he darted a very brief glance at Dean's face, and at once his wings tucked up tightly, folding behind his back in a flash — and going completely out of view again.

Eyes now fixed upon the floor, Cas pulled some wool socks on. Clad now in a fairly complete outfit of fur tunic, sheepskin jacket, black long johns, black snowpants, and wool socks, he then grabbed his backpack, which was also hanging nearby. It, too, turned out to have a strategic hole cut into its underside, and with a practiced move Cas shrugged it on, his wings apparently tucking inside a long central slit that ran right up the middle of the pack. Once the pack was in place, lopsided and a little lumpy at first, Cas tightened up a few straps. It seemed to require several adjustments before the pack settled into its more familiar shape. Cas grimaced as he tightened the straps, and Dean wondered, then, if the straps hurt him. Maybe Cas's wings had always felt cramped inside the pack.

No wonder Castiel had wanted to have just one moment, out in that snowstorm, when he could finally take off that pack at last. One moment on a stormy day with poor visibility, when surely he must have thought that nobody would see him. Just one moment when he could have his wings out in the open, and stretch them wide, and feel the snow falling on them, and feel the wind in his feathers.

Until a nosy camp manager from Kupaluk had come blundering along, right in the middle of the blizzard.

The blue scarf went on next. Dean was a little startled by how familiar Cas's outfit looked now, and how much it seemed to de-mystify him. Tan coat, dark pants, the blue around his neck, and a perfectly mundane backpack on his back... suddenly it was just Castiel again.

Castiel the bird guy, who camped somewhere beyond the north hills, somewhere over by Topaz, in a little blue pup tent. Castiel the bird guy, who was doing some kind of long-term research project.

Castiel the bird guy, who had his very own wings.

And who even now was re-tightening his backpack straps, and checking the buttons on sheepskin jacket, making sure everything was well-hidden.

"You don't need to hide them, you know," said Dean quietly.

Cas gave a little grimace, but he nodded. "I'm aware it's a little pointless; I know you've seen my wings already. But I guess I've gotten used to keeping them hidden."

"Sorry I came poking around in the blizzard," Dean said. "It's probably good to get that pack off sometimes, huh?"

Cas gave him a faint smile. "I'll admit it's a little uncomfortable at times. But, Dean, don't apologize for coming out here. I know you were trying to help me."
"Something went wrong with my truck," said Dean, shaking his head. This part of the blizzard story still didn't make sense. "The doors got locked, somehow. They're never locked. I still don't get it."

"Accidents can happen very easily, up here," said Castiel. He walked back over to Dean, and, at last, Cas slowly sat on the edge of the bed next to Dean, only a couple feet away. It was the closest he'd gotten since they'd first awoken. He had to heap up a few furs to make a little seat for himself (maybe to make sure the bottom end of his pack — and the wings— wouldn't bump into the bed). But he took the trouble to do so, rolling up a couple of furs rapidly to make a little perch for himself.

Sitting down just a couple feet away from Dean, he said, quite seriously, "I consider this whole disaster my fault. You were very kind to come looking for me. And you never would have tried to follow if I hadn't fled. I'm so sorry."

One of his hands made a half-movement toward Dean, almost reaching out toward Dean's hands, but then Cas seemed to check himself, and he folded both hands in his lap. Dean, in turn, nearly reached out to pat Cas's knee, but hesitated too.

_How do I reassure an angel?_ Dean wondered.

Cas took a breath and said, "I'm so glad you reached out to me later, in the end. I was getting worried anyway — I'd come all the way back here and was in the cave by then. I'd assumed that you'd merely return to your vehicle and head back to your own camp. But then I realized I hadn't verified that you'd in fact done so, and I started to get worried. I was about to come out and doublecheck that you'd gone back to your vehicle successfully, and exactly at that moment, you reached out. And I realized how badly off you were."

He took a long breath, and again one of his hands reached out toward Dean, more slowly and cautiously this time; more deliberately. And this time Dean met him halfway, taking hold of his hand.

"I ran, then," Cas said, glancing at Dean out of the corner of his eye as his fingers closed around Dean's. Cas's hand was very warm. "I'd just been about to put this backpack on, here in the cave. I had it in my hands. But as you've seen, it's a bit of a process to get it on. So I dropped the pack, and I ran. Calling to the wolves as I went. The female heard me, thank goodness."

"Wait," said Dean slowly. The mention of the wolves was intriguing enough, but Cas had just said something else that was rather interesting. "What do you mean I 'reached out' to you?"

"You were holding my feathers," Cas told him.

Dean was silent for a long moment.

Dean said, slowly, "You can hear me... when I... hold the... jaeger-feathers?"

"Sort of." Cas paused, tipping his head sideways, a contemplative gesture somewhere between a shrug and a nod. "I get... I get glimpses. Not words, but glimpses. Thoughts; moods. And there's sort of a directional pull. I knew you were in trouble, and so I ran, toward where you seemed to be. The pink flags helped, by the way. Your footprints were already snowed over, but some of the pink was still visible in the bushes." He let out a long, slow breath. "You were very, very chilled," he said, and he met Dean's eyes again. "I would have taken you back to your own camp, but there was no time, for you probably wouldn't have lasted the journey. I realized I had to bring you here. I'm just so glad that I got you here, and still had enough power to heal you." He added, quietly, "You have to understand, I don't usually have much power anymore. Just small bursts that come and go. I'm really just a regular human now."

"Just a regular human," repeated Dean.
"Pretty much."

Dean took a slow breath. "Just a regular human with wings."

Cas's hand went still on Dean's.

Dean shifted a little to face Castiel directly.

"So, can I just clarify one thing," Dean said. "Um, you seem to be saying that you're a, um..."

It was still remarkably hard to say the word. Dean had never been religious; he'd never been that sort of a believer. Wings, halos, trumpets; devils, demons, gods; it had never been his thing.

But now Dean forced himself to say it. "Don't laugh me right out of the cave here, but...you're an... angel?" He almost choked on the last word.

"Was," Cas said quietly, his fingers tightening slightly on Dean's. "Not anymore."

Dean swallowed.

An angel. An angel. An angel.

Dean managed to say, "Well, um.... pardon me for pointing this out, but you seem to still have... wings. So it kind of looks to me like you're ... still an angel?"

"Not really," Cas said. Dean could almost see an aura of careful calm settle on him, a deliberate effort at dispassionate reserve, as Cas stated, in a very even tone, "I don't have functional wings. Not anymore."

Dean decided, then, to risk asking the same question he'd asked earlier. It seemed a rather critical question, and it was the question that had made Cas jump out of bed entirely and walk away. But maybe now the question could be asked.

"What happened?" Dean asked.

Cas broke eye contact, glancing away toward the fire.

"I mean," Dean persisted, as gently as he could, "What happened to your wings?"

Cas gazed at the fire embers for a long moment. Then he pulled his hand out of Dean's grasp. He said, almost mechanically, "My wings were clipped. I won't fly again." He raised his head and with a brittle crispness he added, "I'm going out to get some water. You stay here and rest." He patted Dean's knee briskly, stood with surprising abruptness and strode to the sliver of gray light at the entryway. His boots were there by the door, along with a basket containing some mittens and hats. Cas shoved his feet into the boots, grabbed a pair of mittens and a hat, and without even pausing to lace up the boots, he darted through the overlapping door-furs. There was a swirling of snow, a blast of howling wind and bitter cold, a flash of grey light, and then the furs fell back into place and Dean was alone.
Dean jumped to his feet and ran after Cas, thinking he'd call him back and try to talk to him a little more.

Or rather, he tried to jump to his feet and run after Cas, still clutching the spotted fur around his waist and the bigger one around his shoulders. What actually happened was that his still-slightly-numb feet didn't move as quickly as he'd planned, and he pitched right over, falling right onto his face on the floor. He wasn't hurt — he'd landed on a particularly plush tiger-striped floor-fur, with his two other furs still tucked around him — but he was forced to give up the attempt to chase down Cas.

_Old habits die hard, apparently_, he thought, tottering back to the bed, where he sat for a moment to catch his breath.

_Went running after Cas in the snow and I'm still running after him now_. Maybe it was time to sit still for a moment.

After a few more minutes, though, the warm stew began to work its way through Dean's insides, and soon he felt ready for another foray. He tucked the spotted fur around his waist more securely, draped the other fur across his shoulders and stood again, more cautiously. This time he felt sure he could walk around as long as he took it easy. After successfully managing to get over to the hearth and put another log on the fire for additional light (this felt like a minor triumph), he decided to examine his surroundings more closely while waiting for Castiel to return. Maybe he could at least find his clothes; the spotted-fur loincloth was making him feel a bit like a Flintstones extra.

He started with the tremendous mammoth skull, tottering over to gaze at it for a few moments and tentatively running a hand over its long, polished tusks. He studied its huge shaggy hide, too, with some awe (it seemed absolutely immense, covering an entire wall of the cave), and tried to remember what the other furs were from. Three-toed horse? Arctic lion? What was the spotted one around his waist from, then, some kind of lost arctic leopard?

Dean could only shake his head, trying to take it all in. He began moving around the cave, circumnavigating its perimeter slowly and investigating the little side alcoves. The latrine worked well; it was about time to try it out, in fact. (Its magical bucket turned out to be completely odor-free,
The food-storage nook on the other side of the cave turned out to be not magical at all; it simply used the natural permafrost. It was positioned near the front of the cave where a pocket of permafrost-tundra nosed its way close to the granite of Topaz Mountain, and it had a small dug-out area that extended down into the permafrost soil, like a natural chest freezer. There were a dozen of glass jars here filled with frozen blueberries and cranberries, along with a few strings of whole frozen fish and a small collection of dried meats, while some dried potatoes hung from leather strips overhead. But it wasn't really that much food. Cas had indeed been very low on stores. Near the entrance of this little alcove was a neat stack of canned goods — all of it cans that Dean had donated — and after a rapid inventory, Dean concluded that his recent contributions had nearly tripled Castiel's available food.

Next he investigated the shelving. There were a number of hand-hewn shelves placed at the sides of the room, most composed of hand-sanded wooden boards that were still edged with bark. Some were attached to each other with wooden pegs to form little bookshelves, though one set of boards was propped up with modern bricks that Dean felt sure were from Kupaluk's construction-leftovers pile. A few boards were simply placed on the fur rugs like trays, like the one by the hearth that was now holding Cas's ladle, his bear-skin oven mitts and Dean's (or, rather, Cas's) soup bowl and spoon. (Dean then took the liberty of ladling out a second helping of the stew, and began swallowing it down spoonful by spoonful as he walked around.)

Every collection of items seemed to have the same odd mix of modern and ancient. A vintage 1950s camping coffee pot sat next to a small collection of three mugs consisting of a birchbark container, a hand-polished wooden mug, and a bright white ceramic coffee mug that said, in cheery letters on the side, "Visit the ARCTIC CIRCLE at the COLDFOOT DINER!". Beside the Coldfoot mug was a small assortment of cutlery: a few stainless-steel forks, several carved wooden spoons, and two flint blades that were actually cutlery with thongs to antler handles (these blades looked positively prehistoric), along with a single, wicked-looking silver knife that glinted brightly in the firelight. Yet another shelf had a small collection of dog-eared paperback books along with some rolled-up scrolls of birch bark and even, it seemed, papyrus scrolls. Dean didn't dare touch the ancient-looking scrolls, and tiptoed past with his soup bowl.

He went past a set of things-hanging-from-antlers that seemed to be sort of a closet area — there were two huge chamois-cloths that seemed to be something like large towels, the waterskins, and
several more fur capes. Dean was starting to feel uncomfortably like he was snooping when at last he came across his own clothes. They had all been draped around one last set of shelving, this one a tall set that was entirely hand-made with wooden pegs. The jeans were draped from a peg on the left side of the shelving, the two flannel shirts were hanging from pegs on the right side, and the woeful pairs of thin Kansas socks and the t-shirt were draped across a lower shelf. His hiking boots were on the lowest shelf, lying on their sides with the openings angled toward the fire. Even his underwear had been neatly laid out on a clean fur next to the boots. His leather jacket was hanging from another antler nearby, and his battered backpack was propped behind the shelf. The whole set of shelves had been shifted a little bit toward the fire, and everything was warm and dry.

Also on the shelving, on the top shelf between all of Dean's clothes, were several huge black feathers nested together in a little stack.

Dean set down his empty bowl and spoon, and went over to the feathers for a closer look. There were six broad feathers, each several feet long and all stacked up neatly. They were gigantic. Had Cas been losing his big feathers too, and not just the little ones?

Something smaller still caught Dean's eye. Sitting right in front of the stack of big feathers were two miniature black feathers. Their shape and size were instantly familiar. These were the "jaeger feathers" that Cas had given to Dean weeks ago.

There was no doubt in his mind that these were the same two feathers, and it was crystal-clear now that these two four-inch-long feathers were indeed Castiel's own feathers. They had never belonged to a pomarine jaeger. In hindsight, Castiel's whole pomarine-jaeger story began to seem somewhat ludicrous. Of course these were Castiel's feathers. They were exactly the same shade of black as the big ones just below.

In fact, Dean felt sure that he even knew now where on the wings those little feathers had come from. They were the feathers from the bend of the wing. The feather Dean had examined when he'd first woken up had been precisely the same size and shape; it must have grown to replace one of these fallen ones.

Dean couldn't resist touching the two little feathers again, and they rewarded him with the familiar flicker of golden light. Once again, that oddly calming sensation that seemed to wash over him, and at last this made a sort of sense. These weren't normal feathers; they were angel feathers. Of course they'd feel different. Of course they'd feel soothing.

But his attention was soon drawn back to the big feathers, for now that he could see them laid out before him, it was especially clear that they'd all been cut short. It looked like the majority of each big feather's length had been removed. Maybe three-quarters of the big feathers had been cut away, at right angles to the feather-shaft. To Dean's eye it looked appalling, as if a beautiful work of art had been defaced.

Clipped wings, Dean thought. Why clip an angel's wings?

It hadn't even been done all that neatly, either; the severed ends were a little uneven, and the feather-shafts had ended up rather jagged. In fact it looked like Cas had tried to plug the open end of each feather-shaft with something like candle-wax, maybe to keep the jagged ends from scraping his back or cutting up his backpack.

But why are these feathers sitting on a bookshelf, anyway? Dean finally thought to wonder. Did these fall off on their own, or did he take them off? Is he molting or something? Dean drew a fingertip across one huge feather, and jumped back, when, inevitably, a flicker of golden light ran down the feather-shaft.
Time to stop snooping, he thought, and time to get dressed. Yet he found that now that he was reluctant to discard the furs that Castiel had so carefully wrapped around him. After a little thought he retrieved his single fresh pair of underwear from his pack and changed into his jeans and t-shirt, but kept the large fur on as a cape for additional warmth.

Cas had cautioned him to keep his feet warm, so Dean picked up his freshly-dried socks too, and went back to sit at the edge of the bed (or, at the edge of the round-pile-of-furs, at least) to pull them on. There was another wicker basket here by the head of the bed, just under the tip of one great curling mammoth-tusk. Dean glanced down at it as he pulled his socks on, realizing he hadn't fully looked at it before. Like the other baskets, it was formed from bent and woven branches of arctic willows, expertly shaped. This one was a large basket that turned out to hold a bed of dried lupines, and nestled in the flowers was a little pile of modern equipment: the radio that Dean had loaned to Castiel so many weeks ago, the yellow emergency transmitter, the GPS, and the most recent set of spare batteries. There was also a battered and torn paperback book by the radio, a book that seemed to have dozens of loose pages sticking out at the edges. Dean craned his head to read the title: *On The Road*, by Jack Kerouac.

Dean picked it up slowly. It was his own copy. The pages had apparently been rescued from his boots and had been dried and set carefully back in place, rather crumpled but all in order. A little more inspection revealed that the loose pages of Chapters 1 and 2 had been set aside separately, in a neat stack right at the side of the bed, along with half of Chapter 3. Had Castiel been reading through the book, crumpled page by crumpled page, while Dean slept?

Dean was about to put *On The Road* back in the basket when he spotted a faint gleam of gold below the dried flowers. Gold and black. Half-buried in the dried lupines was another book. Dean moved the GPS and the other equipment out of the way, set *On The Road* aside by its stack of loose pages, and brushed the lupines aside.

There was a large hardcover book just below, bound in worn black leather. Faded gold embossing on the cover read:

*The Physiology of Angels*  
*With Notes on Behavior*  
*and*  
*Additional Observations*  
*by*  
*Knut Schmidt-Nielsen*

The book was clearly well-handled, the page edges worn, the corners of the cover rounded with use. When Dean picked it up and opened it, the book fell open to a section that had a heavy piece of parchment folded carefully into thirds. It looked designed to be folded out. *Like a Playboy centerfold?* Dean thought. Whatever it was, Castiel had clearly looked at it many times, or the book wouldn't have fallen open so naturally to this place. A smile was tugging at a corner of Dean's mouth as he opened it up, but his smile faded as he opened the fold-out page to its full length. It was a detailed picture of a fully spread wing.
It was the old-fashioned scientific style of illustration, hand-drawn, with tiny hand-lettering delineating every type of feather. Dean studied the little labels. "Primaries", "secondaries", and "tertials" were all carefully labeled, with every feather individually numbered. Rows of little feathers called "greater coverts" and "lesser coverts" were labeled as well. And there, marked with tiny arrows, were the little feathers at the bend of the wing, the "alula quills," with an arrow pointing to "Alula #1".

The wing was drawn as if attached to a human body, the person facing away. The human part was only sketched in lightly, the head and torso and legs just a ghostly gray; the focus of the illustration was clearly the wings. The right wing was fully outstretched, the left wing folded. All the longest flight feathers were jet black, while the little overlying covert-feathers were illustrated reflecting the light in shades that looked almost blue.

Below was a figure legend:

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Figure 23. Fully-spread wing of a seraph, Seraphim majesticus, one of the most powerful species of angel. Note the twelve primaries, a greater number than in the cherubim, these extra primaries providing exceptional velocity and agility in flight. Note, also, the doubled number of alulas (cf. alulae), unique to seraphs. The longest feather of alula 1 has special significance (see text). Wing shown in scale to a typical human vessel. Illustrated with permission of the seraph Castiel.

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The illustration was Castiel's wing.

Castiel's wing, before it had been clipped.

Dean gazed at the illustration for a few more long moments, fingertips tracing lightly over the gloriously long feathers, before it sank in: Castiel had kept this book by his bedside, and had clearly flipped it open to this particular page many times. Castiel had kept looking, over and over, at an illustration of his own wings as they'd once been. Before they'd been clipped. He'd curled up in his bed of ancient furs in this lonely cave in the dark, his clipped wings tucked at his back, looking at the illustration by firelight, just to see his wings as they had once been.

Though apparently he hadn't looked at it in a while. The book had been well-buried in the dried flowers, and from the dusty look of the flowers and the way Dean's radio equipment had been heaped on top, it had probably been a while since Cas had uncovered the book. Yet he'd kept it here still, by his bedside.

See text, the figure legend said. Dean ran his fingers across the rough edges of the book's pages, about to flip to the "text," but he hesitated. It felt a little bit private. Yet it was only a book. A scientific book, at that. It wasn't like he was reading Cas's journal, or anything truly personal; it was clearly some sort of a textbook.

And if Dean was really going to be in this to the end, if he was truly going to have an actual angel as
a friend (or even, unbelievably, as a lover) — and if he was ever going to be able to help said angel friend with whatever problems might be involved with having clipped wings — then Dean needed to know more about angels. (Starting with fact #1, "angels are real," which right there was still taking some adjusting to.)

Dean thought for a long moment, the book still in his lap.

Drive-bys on the Haul Road were one thing. Trysts with nearby scientists were another. But Castiel was something else. Did Dean really have any kind of a chance with a millennia-old angel? And did Cas even really want Dean involved in his life? He'd been keeping Dean at a careful distance the entire time they'd known each other, and he'd even been seeming a little standoffish here in the cave. Well, maybe "standoffish" wasn't quite the right word for someone who'd been wrapped naked around Dean just a half hour ago — arms, legs and wings alike had been all over Dean in the fur bed — but maybe that had been just to warm Dean up. There'd definitely been something cautious and wary in Cas's manner once they'd both been fully awake.

A depressing thought surfaced, and not for the first time: maybe the entire heather episode had just a brief fling for Cas. Just to satisfy his curiosity, maybe; just to experience a bit more of the mortal world. Slumming with the mortals for a day, and then back to his angelic business.

*What does he really want?* thought Dean.

Not twenty minutes ago, they'd sat side-by-side on the edge of the bed. It had still been a bit uncertain and awkward, true, but it had seemed like Cas had almost reached out a few times. And when Dean had finally reached out a hand to him, Cas had met him halfway, and had grabbed on tight. Hadn't that been the pattern all along? Once Dean finally reached out at all, Castiel jumped to close the remaining distance.

The question reframed in Dean's mind: *What does he need?*

Well, first off, Cas needed a friend. That much, at least, had always been clear. He needed a friend.

And so, it seemed, did Dean.

Dean put another log on the fire for a little more light, and he sat down by the fireside and opened the book.

There were chapters on "possession" and "vessels", chapters on "ether" and the "true form", chapters on "dimensions" and "grace." There were elaborate charts of power flow, and pages of complex equations about "wing-loading" and the "material-etheric transition." It was far too much to take in all at once, and Dean began flipping rather randomly through the book, somewhat overwhelmed. There was still an air of unreality to all this — people had known all along that angels were real? Whole books had been written on them? Dean had to look up now and then and glance around the cave, just to convince himself that he really was here, here in an angel's ancient lair with all the angel’s ancient artefacts (with backpacks and ceramic souvenir coffee mugs mixed in), reading about "angel physiology" from a weird old textbook that looked at least a century old.

But a few things did become clear from the book.

Angels could inhabit human bodies, it turned out, taking over control of a living human being
though apparently only if consent was given.

Angels could, indeed, fly. Literally.

They had other powers, too — there were ominous mentions of "smiting," and "telekinesis" and even "time-bending."

There seemed to be several different species of angels — and seraphs, it seemed, Castiel's species, were one of the most powerful.

Dean slowed his page-flipping when he came to Chapter 6, "Wings, Feathers, and Flight." With a quick glance over at the feathers at the bookshelf, he hunkered over Chapter 6 and tried to really focus.

The wings, it seemed, were actually how angels took in their power. "Heavenly" power streamed into the wings through certain of the feathers, which channeled the power to the "grace" (whatever that was). This power was what fueled an angel's unique abilities, and also, it seemed, it was what allowed angels to fly even when in a decidedly non-aerodynamic vessel like a human body. The wings could also pull the angel to some sort of other dimension, the "etheric plane", where apparently flight was a little easier and power more abundant. And wings, of course, orchestrated the complexities of flight. There was a series of paragraphs about velocity, acceleration, turning radius, side-slips, thrust and lift. Somewhat to Dean's surprise, he found he could follow this part of the text easily, for it reminded him of the vehicles that he serviced every day. Velocity and acceleration, steering and braking; it was all about movement. Wings, in a way, were a machine built for movement — a machine built for flight. A particularly beautiful machine.

Which made the next section of the chapter seem all the more heinous.

Loss of Flight: Pinioning and Clipping

The wings are easily the most famous feature of the angelic form, and the one most often illustrated in ancient texts. This is not a coincidence; in physiology, anatomy, behavior, instincts, habits and traditions, indeed in every aspect of their beings, angels are creatures of flight, and thus their wings are the most profoundly important portions of their angelic bodies. Indeed, the wings are the only anatomical region of the angelic true form that retains a distinct shape even when in the etheric dimension. As discussed in earlier chapters, the rest of the angelic form can reportedly collapse to a transcendental wavelength, yet even this "wavelength" retains lateral extensions, i.e. wings.

Similarly, the wings are the only part of the angelic anatomy that sometimes manifests in physical form even when the angel is housed in an otherwise non-angelic vessel.

Wings are critical for angelic physiology and behavior in numerous ways. Most importantly they provide the means by which angels gather power, via etheric flow through the tertial-feathers. Wings are even how angels express their moods; the attitude and spread of the wings, and even the degree of fluffing of the feathers, telegraph an angel's state of mind quite vividly to anyone with the least interest in reading the cues. And above all, wings imbue angels with the power of flight. The ability to fly is of deepest importance to an angel, and the loss of flight is reportedly one of the most searing experiences that a living angel can suffer. For though the angelic wing is not as fragile as the avian wing, even so the angelic wing can indeed be damaged.

Some such damage is accidental. Fractures and lacerations can sometimes occur in accidents or in battle, particularly from the blades of other angels or from certain spells, and such damage can remove flight capability until the wing heals. Additionally, significant physical damage to the flight-feathers can remove the ability to fly without necessarily destroying the muscle or bone of the wing.
itself. For example, an angel who is expelled from Heaven and falls directly to Earth can have its flight-feathers seared to ash by the meteoric passage through the Earth’s outer atmosphere. Any damage to the feathers cannot heal immediately, but must await the next molt — a wait that may last years, for the angelic molt-cycle can be unpredictable.

Perhaps the most tragic cases of loss of flight, however, occur when an angel is deliberately de-flighted by its enemies, by pinioning or wing-clipping.

**Pinioning** is defined as permanent amputation of a part or the whole of the wing. We can contrast angelic pinioning with that which is sometimes inflicted by man upon captive birds. Pinioning of birds normally removes only the outer half of the wing, i.e. the entire manus is removed (along with the alula and all primaries), severing the wing at the main joint (the anatomical wrist), but the inner half of the wing is usually left intact. Though this operation is still quite appalling, at least the unfortunate bird is left with a partial wing, enough to break a fall should it forget itself and jump from a perch, thinking that it can still fly.

Angels pinioned by enemies, however, typically suffer a more extreme form of pinioning in which the entire wing is removed at the shoulder-joint. This is reportedly done so as to ensure that the tertial-feathers (the innermost of the flight feathers) are fully removed, for, as already mentioned, angels gather power primarily through their tertial-feathers. This horrific procedure not only denies the angel any source of etheric power, but leaves the angel with no wings at all. It is reportedly excruciating. Power bleeds out fully from the grace through the severed shoulder-joint, leaving the angel mortal and powerless to the end of its days. Those days may, in fact, be few in number, for many angels do not survive the pinioning procedure by more than a few weeks. Some die by hemorrhage or infection; others choose to take their own lives. And others die from no obvious cause. Loss of the wings seems to harm the angelic essence in some way. Perhaps the terrific shock, pain and grief of the pinioning, combined with the sudden transition to mortal-dom, are simply too great a burden to bear. Many such angels seem to forget to eat or drink, withering away and dying within weeks.

**Clipping**, in contrast, is physically milder, though in some ways no less psychologically devastating. Clipping is the severing of the outer halves of the flight feathers only, and does not involve amputation of flesh or bone. It fully removes the ability to fly, and, since the tertial-feathers are typically clipped as well, clipping also demolishes an angel’s ability to acquire and store etheric power. The grace is intact, but power, once used, cannot be easily stored up again. A clipped angel therefore experiences a gradual decline in power, eventually arriving at a fully-mortal state. Some clipped angels reportedly can still perform exceedingly minor acts of power now and again — very minor miracles, in other words — due to erratic power flow through the small remaining portions of the feathers. But as the power cannot be effectively stored up in the grace, such minor miracles are minor indeed (on the scale of reviving a wilted flower, or sensing the nearby presence of a close companion). A clipped angel is for all intents and purposes “just a human.”

Clipping presents an additional problem in that the wings, once powerless, can no longer be shifted to the etheric dimension, but instead remain manifest on the vessel’s shoulders in physical form, a considerable impediment to daily life.

Clipping, further, carries with it a promise of potential healing, but this is usually a false promise. In theory, a clipped angel could one day molt its feathers, growing full-length ones in their stead and hence regaining both power and flight. But the process of molt itself requires power, and it is exceedingly rare that a clipped angel can gather sufficient power to molt even one feather, let alone a full set (though see Section 6.5, Molt-Companions, for a theoretical exception). Thus, though there is the perpetual hope of a future molt, such a molt will in all likelihood never occur.
Pinioned angels die nearly immediately. Clipped angels can live for years. Yet among the angels, the common opinion is that clipping may in fact be a worse fate than pinioning. Wing-clipped angels must bear their useless wings in physical form, always a reminder of what they have lost. As well, they must cope with the tantalizing hope of future flight, the hope of an exceedingly unlikely molt that almost certainly will never occur, and this false hope must be itself a sort of burden. It is no wonder that angels view such a fate with dread. For no angel can ever be truly happy with his feet forever fixed to the ground. His eyes will ever be on the sky, and in his dreams, always he will long to stretch his wings once again, to sail across the boundless Earth and the immortal skies of Heaven. To have such hopes repeatedly and endlessly dashed, year after year without end, must be a uniquely angelic form of torture.

But Cas was molting.

Cas had regrown the little alula-feathers, and apparently some of the big ones had fallen too. Had the big ones regrown?

It was at this point that Dean, glancing up from the big black book, finally realized that Cas was taking quite a while to return.

How much time had actually elapsed, exactly? Had Cas just been gone fifteen minutes or so, or could it have been as longer? Dean tried to concentrate on the book (he really wanted to read Section 6.5 now, the one on "Molt-Companions") but soon he was looking anxiously toward the furs at the cave-entrance, and their faint glimmer of daylight.

After a few more minutes he made a decision. He carefully set the book back into its bed of dried lupines, stood again and went over toward the far wall of the cave where his clothes were. This time he headed for the outerwear. His old black North Face jacket was hanging nearby, the one he'd loaned to Cas weeks ago. This jacket had acquired some slices up the back, and Dean remembered, now, Cas's peculiar question about whether he could "modify" the North Face jacket. For wing-slits, obviously. Dean fingered the neat cuts in the black fabric, and some little thongs and toggles that Cas seemed to have added below. Dean tried to visualize how Cas would put it on, and how his wings would fit through. Wings... actual angel wings, sticking out through Dean's mundane fleece jacket...

He shook his head and donned the jacket himself. Even with wing-slits, it would make an excellent extra layer. The leather jacket went on over the fleece one, and then Dean grabbed his thin Kansas gloves and his hiking boots and looked over at the water-skins, thinking.

Cas had gone out for water, which probably meant he'd been headed for the nearest stream, most likely the one that came down off the east slope of Topaz. This stream, Dean knew, drained the central bowl of Topaz's high mesa, flowing down through a narrow gully to reach the bottom of Topaz. Topaz was named, in fact, for the bluish ice tunnel that tended to form over this particular stream when it came down the narrow gully.

Dean had seen the stream on hiking trips in previous years, but he wasn't at all sure he could find his way to it right now, from whatever part of Topaz Mountain this cave was in. The memory of last night's hypothermia was still very fresh in his head.

As were Cas's instructions about Dean staying warm.

Of course, now Dean had more layers. And though he'd lost his compass yesterday, he now had another option: the GPS.
Dean went back over to the basket by the bed and fetched the GPS from the little pile of equipment. Its battery turned out to still have some life; its screen flickered on as soon as Dean shook off a few more dried flowers and pressed its little power button. Helpfully, it also displayed the date and time, and it turned out it had only been one day since he'd gotten lost in the storm. The storm had been forecasted to last three days, through Sunday. So... the snow wouldn't stop coming down for some time yet.

But now Dean had navigational equipment — a critical item he'd been missing last night — as well as better clothing. Even so, though, he was aware that it was a little ridiculous to go running right back out into the ongoing blizzard that had nearly just killed him. But if Cas wasn't back....

At least Dean could poke his head outside and look, right?

He selected two more furs from the bed, planning to use one as an extra hand-muffler and the second as an additional wrap-around cape. Bundling up the furs in his arms with his mittens and boots, he also grabbed the GPS and, for good measure, the yellow emergency satellite beacon. With the pile of gear in his arms, he padded in stockinged feet to the cave-entrance.

He peered out cautiously. The cave-entrance turned out to be a short tunnel, with not one but two sets of hanging furs that were separated from each other by a little antechamber. The inner "door" that Dean was looking through now was a set of four large furs — these all seemed to be striped, as if from some sort of Pleistocene arctic tiger — with their hanging sides arranged to overlap so as to keep most of the fire's heat in the cave. Following these furs was the antechamber, a narrow cleft in the rocks about five feet long and three feet wide, with a few more furs hanging down at the far end, these ones weighed down with stones at their lower ends. Dean padded carefully into this antechamber and set down his supplies.

It was much brighter here, with enough daylight seeping in from outside that Dean found himself squinting as he bent to pull on his boots. Despite the stones, the outer furs were shifting a little in the wind, a bitterly cold breeze sneaking through each time. A much brighter light was streaming periodically through a thin gap in the middle of the furs, and some snow had sneaked in through this gap as well, piling up in a long breeze-driven line that extended several feet into the antechamber. The snow had been shaped by the wind into something like a narrow, miniature, pure-white sand dune, marred by a single fresh bootprint — Cas must have stepped on it on his way out.

Dean's boots weren't even laced properly yet, but, just to see what conditions were like, he shuffled over to the outer furs and pulled one aside a few inches to peek out.

It was almost a complete white-out. A few rocky outcroppings nearby shielded the cave entrance from the worst of the wind, and a puffy willow bush just in front of the cave entrance provided some further cover, the bush capped now with a thick mound of snow. Beyond the willow-bush and the rocks there seemed to be nothing but whiteness. No horizon was visible at all, no ground, not even any hint of the contour of the land, just a dense wall of small white snowflakes flying thickly through the air in a flat gray twilight.

It was bitterly cold, and an almost reflexive shudder ran through Dean's whole body as he stood peering through the outer furs. He pulled his bed-fur more tightly around his shoulders, trying to figure out what to do. How could he find Cas? Where had Cas gone?

Oddly, Dean found himself wondering, too, what was happening to all of Castiel's birds. Arctic birds were tough, he knew that much, but what exactly did they do in conditions like this? Did they fly back over the mountains, or did they just hunker down under a willow and try to wait it out? And what about their nests? Were Cas's plovers okay?
He wondered, too, whether anybody at Kupaluk would have thought to give that lost little junco a bit of birdseed. Dean had thrown a few extra handfuls of seed out on the deck before he'd left, but would that be enough?

Dean let the outer furs drop back into place. He was shivering steadily now, his hands and feet tingling again as the chill crept into them. Backing up a little, he tried to rearrange his layers a little more, making sure every button was done up, and tucking the shirt-ends firmly into his jeans. This all was bringing back a grim memory of that moment yesterday by the Chevy, that awful moment when he'd realized that his gear — and all his emergency storm clothing — were locked and inaccessible inside the truck.

_Well, I've got the GPS this time_, he reminded himself, as he started wrapping the furs around himself, trying to find a way to secure them so that they wouldn't blow completely open.

_What I need is one of those ivory-and-leather clasp things_, he was thinking, still wrestling with how to arrange it all, when the outer furs pushed aside to let in a blinding blast of cold, snow, light and wind. There was Cas, shouldering past the furs into the antechamber. He looked almost like a snowman; his black hat, along with his pack and jacket, were completely covered with a coating of white. He was carrying two wooden pails (while wearing only a pair of very thin mittens), both pails sloshing full of half-frozen water, with bits of ice and melting snow bobbing at the surface. Cas stopped short when he encountered Dean, and he stared at Dean in surprise from just a couple of feet away.

"What in heaven's name are you doing?" said Cas. "I thought I told you to keep warm!" He set down his pails hastily, grabbed Dean by the arm and hustled him back through the inner doors.

The cave felt blissfully warm and dark in comparison, its little orange fire still glowing cheerily. Cas stopped just inside the inner furs. Still with one hand firmly on Dean's upper arm, he batted the snow off his own shoulders, stamped the snow off his boots, and then leaned down (still holding Dean's arm) to yank at his bootlaces. Standing back up, he efficiently levered off the boots by stepping on his own boot-heels, one foot at a time. Through this whole process he had not let go of Dean's arm.

"I thought I told you to rest!" said Cas, as he kicked his second boot off, still gripping Dean's arm. "And to stay warm!" He sounded almost angry — or, maybe, worried. "Do I have to remind you that you nearly died doing exactly this sort of thing? Just yesterday?"

"I had extra furs this time," pointed out Dean. "And I've got the black jacket too." He gestured at his double jacket layer, and pulled the GPS and the yellow satellite beacon out of the pockets of the leather jacket. "And these. Found these in your basket."

Cas relaxed very slightly, but he still gave Dean a rather exasperated look. "But what were you trying to do?"

"Trying to figure out how to order up another wolf-sled, I guess," said Dean, with a shrug. "I got worried about you. You were gone a while."

Cas just glared at him. "I was fine," he said.

"You're not the only one who gets to worry about people being out in blizzards," said Dean. He gestured outside. "It's white-out conditions out there, dude. I never got a chance to tell you, this is supposed to be a three-day storm. Didn't know if you were okay."

Cas shook his head. "You don't need to worry about me," he said. With a sigh he pushed his way back through the first set of furs to pick up the two water buckets. Dean held the furs open for him as
he carried the buckets back through and set them down carefully just inside the entrance.

"There's a stream quite near here that comes down off the east face," said Cas. "That's where I went for this water. It's not very far. I was fine."

In reply Dean reached out, took hold of one of Cas's hands and drew the mitten off. As he'd suspected, the mitten was damp from the water, and Cas's hand was icy.

"Your own hands are near-freezing, see?" Dean said. "You left too fast; you didn't really take the time to dress for the conditions. Your hat's too thin, your scarf's not wrapped around right, and these mittens are way too thin for this kind of a blizzard. Yeah, I got into real trouble yesterday, absolutely. But that sure doesn't mean I'm gonna just sit here and let you make the exact same mistakes. I know you're an old arctic hand, but you've said yourself, you get cold more often these days. And didn't you just tell me that you used up a lot of energy... um..." Here Dean began to falter, suddenly uncertain about what Cas's "power level" really was, and whether or not his "tertal-feathers" had been clipped along with all his other feathers.

"You're low on power," Dean finally said. "You said so yourself."

Cas's shoulders dropped a little as Dean pointed this out, and at last he gave a grudging nod. He looked at his own hands, and touched his cheeks, as if trying to judge how cold he'd gotten. "Well," he said, lowering his hand slowly, still gazing at his fingers. "You may have a point."

"Also, um..." Dean gestured to Cas's backpack, which was shaking noticeably. "Forgive me for pointing this out, but your wings are shivering."

Cas blinked, and glanced over his shoulder at the pack. He gave a quiet little laugh. "All right. All right." He considered a moment and nodded. "What happened to you could indeed happen to me. You're quite correct. I keep having to remind myself that I'm more vulnerable now. And it only takes a few mistakes."

"Or just one," said Dean, thinking of his own misadventure yesterday. "Or just some bad luck."

"But you're still not well enough to go out."

"Well, then don't be dumb enough to charge out half-dressed," countered Dean. "Let me at least get a look at your mittens next time. And let me wrap your scarf all the way around your neck if you can't do it yourself. Or else I swear I'll hike right up Topaz just to radio the camp office for help—" Dean paused, a thought dawning on him. "Oh, hell," he muttered, looking out toward the antechamber. "They don't know where I am, do they? They'll worry."

Somehow Dean had entirely forgotten about Kupaluk, and about Shelly, Ryan, and everybody at camp. Cas's hidden cave, his incredible wings, and even the mysterious book, were all such a revelation that Dean had pretty much forgotten about the entire rest of the world. But there was, in fact, a world out there. By now Shelly would've realized that Dean hadn't turned up, and she'd have called camp from Deadhorse. At first they'd probably assume Dean had pulled off the road to wait out the storm in the Chevy, but as soon as they found the empty truck, they'd really start to worry.

"I gotta let camp know I'm okay," Dean said. "Sam'll be worried—" (Or would Sam even care, what with all the Ruby distractions?) "Well, Kupaluk'll be worried, at least," Dean finished uncertainly.

Cas nodded. "I'm aware," he said. "I was planning to take the radio up Topaz as soon as the snow lightens, to call your people to let them know you're here. Would they receive my transmission, do you think?"
"Not right now," said Dean, thinking about the thickness of the snowfall. "But you know what, this little dude might be able to raise one of the satellites." He held up the bright-yellow satellite beacon, showing it to Cas. "I should try sending them a satellite text. Else they might go nuts and send out a search party. Then later once the weather clears a bit we can follow up with a radio call. I could try from just outside the cave."

After another brief argument about whether Dean might manage to survive thirty seconds outside even if fully bundled up, Castiel at last let himself be convinced to let Dean walk exactly one pace outside, as far as the snowy willow-shrub. Clearly unhappy about this, Cas nonetheless held the outer furs open for Dean and followed close behind him as Dean took his prescribed one step out into the snow. Dean then turned on the satellite beacon, and they both watched its little screen as it attempted to make contact with any of the satellites that might be within range.

It was very hard to even read the transmitter's faint little screen — fresh snow kept landing on it — but the transmitter's screen soon read "SATELLITE LOCK."

"Is that good?" asked Cas. His curiosity seemed to have overcome his worry, for he was now hunkered close beside Dean, chin almost on Dean's shoulder as he peered at the screen.

Dean nodded. "I think so. Hard to see the screen, though."

"Wait a second," said Cas. There was a shuffling sound, and something large and dark extended overhead. Dean almost jumped; Cas had taken off his backpack and there was now a large dark wing arced over Dean's head and shoulders, shielding him — and the transmitter — from the snow. A moment later Cas extended his second wing out, too, curving this one forward a little to shield them both from the wind.

For a long moment Dean could only stare blankly at the wings that were arched around him.

And he realized, rather slowly, that Cas was, for once, letting him get a clear look at the wing.

And at the cut-off ends of the great feathers.

_This is all going to take some getting used to_, thought Dean, realizing that he had been just gaping up at the wings for several moments. The cut-off feather-ends that Cas seemed so worried about were the least of it. It was just the fact that Cas had wings that was still so confusing.

"Does that help?" said Cas. There was a distinct tension in his voice.

"Um, yeah," said Dean, yanking his gaze back down to the transmitter — which was, indeed, now screened from the falling snow. "Sorry, I'm just... ah, you know, a little new to this whole, um, wing thing. But yeah, it helps. Don't want your, um, your wings getting cold though, so, um, let's get this done."

Cas seemed to relax a little, and soon he was watching curiously as Dean typed out a short text that would, hopefully, be sent directly to the base receiver in the Kupaluk camp office.

_Got snowed in on the road_, Dean wrote, painstakingly pecking out one letter at a time on the transmitter's rather clumsy little button keyboard. _Parked north by Topaz. Met Castiel, got shelter/food/heat. All good. Will check in by radio soon - DW_

He pressed the green SEND button, and they both waited a few minutes, watching the little screen. Castiel had crowded even closer to Dean, his chin now actually resting on Dean's shoulder as they both peered at the satellite transmitter's screen.
Eventually it lit up with "MESSAGE TRANSMITTED."

"Let's wait one more minute to see if anybody replies," said Dean. So they stood there together, Cas's wings arched around them both.

After a few more moments, Cas put his arms around Dean's waist.

"You should stay warm," Cas commented.

"Thanks," Dean murmured back. The truth was, though, that now he didn't feel cold at all. Not with Cas standing right behind him like this, arms wrapped around Dean now, and the wings curved around them both to block the wind.

The white world outside was still visible between the wings. Dean closed one hand over Cas's, and for a long, exquisite moment they stood there together. Cas's black wings were outlined against the white world beyond. A few snowflakes swirled inside the wings from time to time, the white dots vivid against the black.

"Clipped feathers or not," Dean murmured to Cas, "those are some freakin' gorgeous wings."

"Oh," said Cas. "Um... wait. What?" He sounded confused.

"I said, your wings are gorgeous, dude," said Dean, with a chuckle. He found himself leaning back against Cas then, without even having planned to. Cas leaned forward a little in return, and Dean was fascinated to see that both wings lifted up a few inches, the little feathers on the top edges of the wings fluffing up slightly as well. Was it just a sign that Cas was cold?

What had the book said? The "attitude and spread" of the wings, the fluffing of the feathers, could "telegraph an angel's state of mind." To anyone with the least interest in reading the cues.

Dean, of course, had more than the "least" interest. He was soon studying the degree of fluffing of Cas's feathers with such close attention that he jumped when the satellite transmitter's screen lit up with a little ping. He'd almost forgotten about the transmitter. He lifted it up so Cas could read its little screen too. A new message read:

*Whew, was just about to send out the dogs. Shelly was freaking. She's still up at Deadhorse btw. All good here tho. I'll tell your bro you're good, he's been freaking too. Take care, talk soon - Ryan*

"Your brother does care, you see," said Cas.

Dean gave a slow nod as he powered the transmitter off. The thought of Sam "freaking" was unexpectedly heartwarming.

Cas folded back his wings, took hold of the transmitter, held the furs open with one hand, and Dean found that he was being steered firmly back into the antechamber. By one of Cas's wings, that is. The wing pressed firmly across Dean's shoulders, ushering him back into the antechamber relentlessly.

Cas shook off both wings as they got back into the cave. A little shower of snow fell from them, but he still seemed bothered by something, craning his head around to peer at one wing and then the
other. They both had some thick clots of half-melted snow melting damply into the feathers.

"Let me help," said Dean. Cas hesitated a moment, but he nodded and, slowly, extended both wings. Dean brushed off as much snow as he could. The whole concept of the wings was starting to seem more normal now, but it was still startling to be touching those glossy feathers.

"Stand back a little," said Cas. "I can shake the rest off." Dean stepped back and Cas extended both wings and beat them in the air a few times. A small spray of melted-snow droplets flew around the front part of the cave, and all the wall-furs stirred in the breeze. The strength in those wingbeats was impressive — and it was startling all over again to see the wings in action.

Dean just said, trying not to sound too over-awed, "You got some power there, dude."

Cas replied, a little unhappily, "They're not really good for much."

"Worked well enough to keep the snow off, didn't they?" Dean pointed out. "Um... you got a towel or something? Snow's gone but they're still wet. And you're still shivering."

Cas pointed to a little stack of fabric in one of the nearby wicker baskets. The stack turned out to be several old hand-towels, worn but clean. "My wing-towels," Cas explained, almost shyly. "I use them whenever my wings get wet. But I can't really reach the middle of the wings very well. I often just sit by the fire for a while."

"Well, you can still sit by the fire, but maybe I can speed things up," said Dean, grabbing a few towels.

Cas just looked at him doubtfully.

"Look, dude," said Dean. "I've seen your wings. I know you're an angel. I know I'm kinda out of my element here, but let me at least help a little."

"You're not out of any element," said Cas, frowning. "It's just...well, my wings are... um... clipped. As I said. I know you've already seen that, but... well..." His wings were tucking tightly behind his back even as he said this, and he finished with, "They're really not... they're not as they should be. They've been damaged."

"Yeah, I saw," said Dean. "Several times. Close up. Doesn't matter. Let me help dry them off."

He led Cas over to the fire, where he finally managed to coax Castiel to stretch both wings out again. Dean wiped the last of the damp snow from both wings and started to pat them dry. Cas held both wings out stiffly at first. The little feathers were no longer as fluffed; it seemed Cas was feeling more uncertain, now that Dean was actually handling the wings. And Dean, too, felt a little intimidated. Angel wings. Angel wings. It was one thing to read about them in a book, but quite another to have them in your hands.

But as Dean started drying one wing, running a little towel around the top section of the left wing and then down one long feather, and then another, Cas slowly began to relax. And so did Dean.

The wings were still impressive. They always would be. Dean kept experiencing moments of surprise and wonder all over again, as he took in the sight of the wings from all angles now, walking around Cas and seeing them from both sides, feeling the feathers under his fingers. They were huge, they were dramatic, they were gorgeous... but they were starting to seem familiar. And as Dean wiped the towel along each feather in succession, he even found himself starting to feel a little possessive about them. After all, it was Dean's job now to get the wings dry and make sure they were all right.
He soon developed a routine with each feather, first giving the feather a quick wipe along its full length, then working a second, dryer, hand-towel down into the area of the feather-root to get the downy layer dry, and finally drawing both towels carefully along both sides of the feather simultaneously, front and back, to press it dry. Whenever the two towels got too damp, he exchanged them for fresh ones. Feather by feather, he worked his way first along one wing, and then the other.

Eventually, Castiel took off his sheepskin jacket, and then the fur tunic underneath, so that Dean could get to the base of both wings. Cas hadn’t spoken in a while, but the little feathers were starting to fluff up a little bit again, though this time the wings were sagging down loosely instead of raising up. In fact his wings seemed to be relaxing more and more under Dean's touch. Cas's head was soon drooping, too, his eyes drifting closed; he was still holding his jacket and the fur tunic bundled up near his chest, but he seemed almost asleep on his feet. Dean was careful not to disturb the mood. Especially, Dean made no more comments about how the feathers had been "clipped". Whenever he reached the cut-off end of a feather, he merely made sure it was dry, and then moved on to the next feather.

Hopefully the story of that wing-clipping tragedy — for it had clearly been a tragedy — would follow later. For now it could wait.

Dean also refrained, for now, from asking about the possible molt and about why some feathers seemed to have fallen off. He was fascinated to see, as well, that a couple of the longer feathers looked different than the others. Three feathers in the middle of the left wing, and a mirror-image three in the middle of the left, were much shorter than any of their clipped brethren, and their feather-tips seemed to be intact, soft and rounded. These feathers all had gold tips while the others were solid black. Could these shorter feathers possibly be newly growing ones? New replacements for the fallen feathers on the bookshelf, maybe?

Dean didn't ask. He worked in silence, enjoying the feel of the silky feathers, and checking Cas's face now and then to be sure Cas still seemed okay with all this.

For the last bit of wing-drying, Dean happened to be working on the inner side of Cas's right wing. Dean glanced up to find Cas's blue eyes looking thoughtfully into Dean's.

"Yesterday I had decided to leave my wings out," Cas said at last. "I'm not supposed to."

Dean paused, looking at him.

"I'd decided leave my pack off, while it was snowing," explained Castiel. "Dean, it's... " He let out a short sigh, gazing into the fire. Dean began slowly drying more feathers, and both wings extended slightly as Cas finally said, "It's so good to stretch them out sometimes. So good to feel the wind in my feathers. Yet I'm not supposed to do so where any... well, where any regular humans might see. I only stretch my wings out when I'm certain there's nobody around for at least twenty miles, or if it's foul weather, when visibility is poor. So when it began snowing, and visibility began to deteriorate, I thought, maybe I can just spread my wings out a little bit today. Feel the wind in my feathers again." He glanced back over at Dean and went on, "And then I thought I would go out to put the little wicker cover over the plovers' nest. It's just one of my baskets, but I thought it might keep the snow off the eggs, and I made a little hole in the side so that the plovers could walk in and out. Anyway, I was just putting the wicker basket in position, assuring the plovers that it was safe, when I saw you, by the road. I did hear you calling to me. But..." He paused a long moment, and he said very quietly, his wings suddenly drooping a few inches, "I fled."

"Understandable," said Dean quietly. He'd reached the end of the wing, but he started re-drying some already-dry feathers, just in the hope that Cas would keep talking.
"I was afraid you would see my wings," said Castiel, "It was a poor decision." He shook his head. "Cas, it wasn't your fault," said Dean, carefully wiping down an already-fully-dry feather.

Cas shook his head. "I feel it was. And also, you were quite correct that I did need checking on. What you said just now was true; I'm not at all invulnerable to cold anymore, no more than you are. I do get chilled, these days. I was getting chilled in the blizzard yesterday, even when you saw me, as a matter of fact. You were right all along; I did need some assistance, and I'd underestimated how bad this storm was going to be. In fact, later, I didn't even have enough strength to get you back to this cave by myself. If the white wolf hadn't answered my call for help, I don't know what I would have done. I'm sorry, Dean."

Dean finally paused in his feather-wiping to look over at Cas and say, "You saved my life, dude. I don't know why you're apologizing."

"You wouldn't have gotten into such trouble if I hadn't fled from you, and if you hadn't tried to follow. You were trying to help me, and I led you astray."

"I made my own mistakes," said Dean, shaking his head. "Should've had my parka on before I got out of the truck. Should've checked the spare key before I left camp. Bunch of mistakes. Also, the truck's been acting up. I knew that; I should've taken a different truck, honestly."

Cas considered that, and finally he nodded. "Maybe there were contributing factors. But still, I feel responsible." He added, brightening a little, "Though, you would merely have gone to Heaven, you know. Death is by no means the end. But — I suppose this is rather selfish, but I would much rather you stayed here, on Earth, a while longer. I know that was quite selfish of me."

"Let me just interrupt to say that I am glad you were feeling selfish," put in Dean. "Cause, purely selfishly, I kinda want to stay here a little longer too."

Cas gave him a smile. "Mortal life may have its struggles, and its pains, but also..."

He hesitated, still gazing at Dean.

"Also its pleasures," Cas said at last.

The look held.

Once again, there was that steady stare. Cas's face was in shadow now, with the firelight behind him, but even so Dean could see a glint in his eyes, and that intent, focused look of attention.

"Yeah," Dean said, softly, almost to himself. "There it is."

"There what is?" asked Cas.

"The answer," said Dean, moving in front of him. "At least, I hope it's the answer."

"What? The answer to what?"

"The answer to a question I've had," said Dean.

"What question?" said Cas, eyes narrowing.

_The question was, what does Cas want?_ thought Dean, but he didn't answer. He moved in front of Cas, slowly. Cas was still holding his little fur tunic and his sheepskin jacket, clutching them to his waist. Quietly, Dean reached out to Cas's hands, took both items of clothing, and set them on the
Straightening back up, he took a long look at Cas, who was bare now from the waist up, wearing only his snow pants and the long johns.

"Y'know, what with this fire being right here," said Dean, "I'm thinking that the best way for us both to warm up is to get more of these layers off." He drew off his own leather jacket and the North Face jacket and set both on the ground too, and then he started unbuttoning his flannel shirts. One shirt came off, and then the other, as Cas watched.

By the time the second shirt came off, Cas was literally licking his lips. Dean grinned at him, adding, "Or if the fire's not warm enough, what if we both just go back to the bed to warm up even more?"

Cas swallowed. "I suppose... um... I rather think that's probably a smart idea. Quite a good idea, purely in terms of, um, thermoregulatory potential. But, Dean, I know this is all quite new for you. I know my... my angelic nature must be a shock. And I'm aware you're sort of stuck here with me — I mean, stuck in this cave —"

"Yeah, we're kind of snowed in, huh?" said Dean, dropping both flannel shirts to the fur rug. He shucked off his t-shirt next, grabbing it by the collar and yanking it over his head in one fast move. Bare-chested now, he was rewarded by seeing Castiel's eyes drift hungrily down Dean's body. Dean said, "And yeah, being snowed in with an angel and getting to dry off his gorgeous wings is kind of new territory for me. So what should we do now? I guess we could read a book?"

"We... could," said Cas, rather unwillingly. "I do have some books... but... I've read them all.... well, most of them...."

"Or, I've got another idea," Dean said, taking a step closer. He lifted both hands and set them, not on Cas's shoulders, but on his wings. "We could do something else," said Dean.

Tentatively, unsure if this was even allowed, Dean tugged Castiel a little bit toward him. By the wings.

Immediately Cas stepped right up to him, and both wings flipped out and wrapped around Dean. It was an astonishing sensation, both of those great dark banners flashing out around Dean's shoulders and embracing him, the silky feathers spreading down Dean's back. Cas actually let out a little sigh when his wings made contact with Dean's skin, his eyes blinking shut for a moment. On an impulse, Dean shifted his hands, one sliding to the nape of Cas's neck, and the other reaching up under Cas's arm, sliding up the small of his back, till Dean came to the slightly-damp feathers between the wings. Dean burrowed his fingers in there, stroking the little feathers gently, simultaneously stroking the short hairs at the nape of Cas's neck with his other hand. Cas let out a soft gasp, and he simply leaned against Dean, his forehead leaning against Dean's. The longest of the wing-feathers slid slightly against Dean's back. It wasn't a sexual touch exactly, but it was a delicious feeling. All the feathers of both wings were still ever-so-slightly damp, and they felt cool and sleek as they stroked slowly across Dean's skin.

"Wait," Cas murmured a moment later. The wings pulled away slightly as Cas said, almost in a whisper, his eyes still half-closed, "I don't want to pressure you. You have nowhere else to go."

"You are not pressuring me," Dean said, with a laugh. Cas cracked one eye open, and then the other, watching Dean doubtfully. Dean paused then, hesitating. "Wait. Am I pressuring you, though?"

It occurred to Dean, then, that if he was stuck here with Cas, then Cas, too, was stuck here with Dean. Cas had had to take Dean in. Cas had nowhere else to go either. And until now he'd been
carefully keeping some distance from Dean.

Was Dean pushing too much? Pressure could go both ways.

"Um," Dean said, withdrawing his hands from Cas's feathers. "Is this a bad idea?"

Cas's eyelids flew all the way open then. The wings suddenly wrapped tightly around Dean again, and now there was a hand involved too, a hand that was grabbing Dean's elbow. Cas yanked firmly at Dean's elbow and somehow managed to slide Dean's hand right back up onto the feathered area between the wings. "I'd just decided it was a very good idea, actually," said Cas, right into Dean's ear. "You were quite convincing."

"You know what," said Dean, speaking into Cas's ear in return, "We could stand here all day trying to reassure each other that we're not pressuring each other, or we could just have sex—"

"Let's just have sex," suggested Cas.

"All right, that's a plan," said Dean, almost laughing now. "Lemme just... um... massage your wings a bit more first?"

"Okay," said Cas, and he dropped his head down onto Dean's shoulder again. Dean didn't even have to look to know that Cas's eyes had closed again.

Dean wasn't actually sure what to do with the wings. He was starting to feel comfortable with handling them, but how they might play into sex remained to be seen. It didn't seem like they were erogenous zones exactly, but maybe having one's wings stroked felt something more like a massage? In any case, Cas sure seemed to be liking the feather-stroking, and it seemed to be helping him to relax, and that all seemed like a good thing. So Dean stood there a few minutes longer, running his fingers up into the feathers-between-the-wings area again. He was soon working his hands gently onto the wings themselves, and at last he stepped back a little, got his arms free and reached over the top of the wings this time to get at them from above. This way he could start stroking both wings along their top edge, where the big flight feathers seemed to be rooted. Cas let out a shaky sigh, and Dean felt both wings droop and loosen.

The feathers actually still felt a little cold, as if bits of the chilly outside air were still trapped between them. Dean gently worked a few fingers between the feather-roots near the main joint of both wings, trying to work his fingers as gently as he could, into the downy layer and to the skin. Cas drew in a hiss of air, but then let out a slow sigh.

"This okay?" Dean asked. "I don't really have a lot of experience with angel wings."

"It's... fine," Cas said. He almost seemed to be slurring his words. "Your fingers are... very warm," he murmured.

"Told you you'd gotten chilled out there," Dean said to him. "Snow on your wings and everything. Gotta warm you up." Again and again he ran his fingers through the feathers of both wings, enjoying their silky feel, but mostly enjoying how the wings began to droop and spread.

And then the feathers began to glitter with gold light.

The light seemed to chase after Dean's fingers, appearing and disappearing in waves along both wings.

"Why do they do that?" Dean asked.
"Wh-what?" said Cas, a little sleepily.

"Why do the feathers glow?"

Cas craned his head over one shoulder, trying to catch a glimpse of the light. He seemed unsurprised.

"Yeah..." Cas said, eyes drifting shut again as Dean ran his fingers through the feathers once again. "They've been doing that."

"But why?"

"It's a... kind of..." murmured Cas. He now seemed to be having a little trouble putting a full sentence together. "Power echo... from the ether..." he murmured. Dean's hands had now reached the outermost feather roots, and Dean massaged the bases of those feathers, simultaneously, on both wings. Cas's next words were lost in a soft groan, and he actually waved on his feet. "Unh," was all he said for a moment. Then: "That's good. That's really... good. Unnh."

"Power bleed?" said Dean.

"Yeah..." murmured Cas. "Doesn't always happen though. Kinda... rare. It only happens if..." Then Cas's eyes flickered open, and he pulled back a little to look at Dean, his expression focusing.

"If what?" prodded Dean, and he slid both hands off the wings. He'd been planning to start the wing-massage all over again, but Cas didn't give him a chance.

"If there's a bond," said Castiel, setting one hand around the back of Dean's neck. He pulled Dean firmly close, and began kissing him. Simultaneously both wings came forward and wrapped around Dean's shoulders again, pulling him closer still. Cas's other hand went right down the front of Dean's pants, where Cas took hold of Dean's cock.

There was a scramble then to get their snowpants off, and the long johns, and every other stray scrap of clothing — underwear, socks, every piece of fabric was soon gone. The second they were both nude, Cas simply grabbed Dean, again with that dizzying multi-limbed embrace of both wings and arms. Cas pulled him very close, this time even pressing their hips together. He was already grinding against Dean.

"Let's, ah, let's lie down," suggested Dean, for Cas wouldn't let him go.

"Oh, yes, right," said Cas. He simply backed up a few steps, the wings pulling Dean along, until they reached the pile of bed-furs. There Cas just let himself fall over backwards onto the furs, hauling Dean down with him. Dean landed on him a little heavily, laughing.

"Forgive me," gasped out Castiel, "but, and I have to be honest, I've been wanting to get my wings on you."

"Oh yeah?" said Dean, sprawled across him now. "Personally I've been wanting to get something else on you." Dean began grinding slowly, pressing his cock very firmly against Cas's stomach, relishing the sensation of Cas's stiffening cock pressing right against Dean's own stomach.

"Oh... yes...." Cas murmured, in between kisses. "Me too. I've been waiting... so long."
"How long?" asked Dean, curious now.

"Weeks," said Cas, almost in a groan now. The wings slid along Dean's back again, as if Cas couldn't get enough of pressing his wings to Dean's skin. "It's been... I don't know, Dean, at least four weeks."

"Torture, huh?" said Dean, pressing against him.

"Unbearable," whispered Cas.

"Did you do anything about it?" asked Dean, truly curious. (Did angels jerk off? Dean had never considered this before.)

"Um. We're not really supposed to," said Cas. Dean gave another slow grinding thrust and Cas let out a hiss, wings grabbing at Dean's shoulders again, while Cas's hands grabbed at Dean's hips.

"But did you?"

"Ah. Maybe," Cas confessed. "Once or twice. In the last few weeks."

"Me too," said Dean. Cas's eyes opened and he looked up at Dean, startled.

"Really?"

"Couldn't fuckin' stop thinking about you," Dean said. He then said, slowly, deliberately, "Or rather... couldn't stop thinking about fucking you." Cas stared up at him, breath coming rapidly now. Dean bent and kissed him. He broke the kiss just long enough to whisper, huskily, face just inches from Cas's, "Couldn't stop thinking about being fucked by you, if you really want to know the truth. Couldn't stop thinking about blowing you...."

"Blowing?" Cas asked, and this time there was a note of confusion in his voice. Dean pulled back a little and looked at him.

"A blow job," said Dean. Cas just blinked. "Fellatio?" Dean suggested. Cas at least did recognize the more formal word, though there was still a hint of uncertainty on his face.

"Don't tell me you've never been blown?" Dean asked, appalled at the thought. Cas's eyes actually widened at the question, and that told Dean all he needed to know. Dean said, "Open your wings. Let me move down."

Cas stared at him for a long moment, but his wings tightened. "You're supposed to be recuperating," he said, a little weakly. "You shouldn't exert yourself too much—"

"This is my very favorite form of recuperation, I promise," said Dean. "Seriously. Cas. If one step out in the snow didn't kill me, then this won't either." He added a winning smile. "In fact it'll warm me up. It'll warm us both up, and we both need to warm up, right?"

"We do... both need... to warm up," agreed Cas, almost panting. The wings relaxed enough to let Dean move (Cas seemed to have to concentrate to make them let go of Dean), and Dean slid down Cas's body to kneel at the edge of the pile of bed-furs, right between Cas's legs.

And there was Cas's cock, right at eye-level, swollen and turgid now, pointing almost straight up.

Dean allowed himself one breathless moment to take in the entire scene — Cas completely nude, his gorgeous cock sticking straight up, and that look on Cas's face as he stared down at Dean. Hungry,
disbelieving, lips parted... he was actually panting in anticipation. And those impossible, glorious, dark wings, half-spread at Cas's sides, the feathers actually trembling.

All the uncertainty of the previous few hours, all of Cas's shyness, all of Dean's bewilderment (well, most of it) seemed to have been washed away. At last it seemed very clear, crystal clear, what Castiel, the angel, wanted. And what Dean, the human, very much wanted too.

Dean wrapped an hand around the base of Cas's cock, leaned closer, and swallowed it down.

"AH!" Cas yelped, almost bucking. "Oh, Dean...how does... it...feel so... AH, yes, ah, AH! That's so good!" Within a few more seconds he seemed almost unable to talk, grabbing at Dean's head with both hands, both wings fluttering against the furs.

Dean took his time, bobbing up and down slowly, stopping now and then to swirl his tongue around slowly. He felt Cas's cock pulse repeatedly in his mouth, and soon he was tasting pre-come. Cas was already very close; understandable, if this was his first blow-job, and especially if the episode on the heather had been his first sex of any sort. But Dean was suddenly perversely determined to make it last a while. He rearranged his grip, getting his fingers even more firmly around the base of Cas's cock. Slowly, he bobbed his head up and down again. "AH!" yelped Cas, already thrusting up into Dean's mouth. There was another slow pulse of saltiness and Cas moaned as the pre-come oozed out onto Dean's tongue. Cas's hips were thrusting faster now, and faster; he wouldn't last long at all. His breathing turned to fast grunts, his thrusts speeding, but Dean tightened his grip around the base of Cas's cock, gently but firmly. Cas yelped, feet and wings both thrashing in frustration, as Dean held back Cas's orgasm.

"AH," Cas blurted out. "Why — what are you doing — please—"

"Ever heard of a cock-ring?" said Dean. "I want to make you last a little. Sorry."

"Fuck that," Cas spat out, and he sat up and lunged for Dean. "I want my wings on you, NOW, and I want YOUR cock, NOW—" He was almost too desperate to make any sense, and too uncoordinated. But it did give Dean an idea, and Dean swung around into a sixty-nine.

Cas seemed to grasp the concept instantly. As soon as Dean was halfway around, both Cas's hands were already onto Dean's hips, yanking him the rest of the way around. A second later both wings wrapped tightly around Dean. The sensation was overwhelming, like great silken bands tightening down all over Dean's ass and lower back, and then Cas's mouth was hot on Dean's dick, his tongue swirling.

"Jesus fucking christ," Dean blurted, thrusting into Cas's mouth. In this position Cas's wings had him bound up tight, with Dean's hips practically strapped right to Cas's mouth. Rather to Dean's shock it was an unbelievable turn-on, for the wings would not let him go. Cas had hold of him, Cas had him exactly where he wanted, and Cas was not going to let him go. Dean squirmed there almost helplessly, while Cas's mouth worked his dick hard, Dean almost came right then himself, and only with some desperate counting-backwards-from-ten did he manage to fight it back. Somehow he'd almost forgotten about Cas's cock, despite the fact that it was nearly stabbing him in the eye now. Dean got a hand back on it; it was hot, and throbbing, and swollen dark red now, and dripping precum steadily at the tip. Cas groaned at Dean's touch; he was on a hair trigger. A few more licks would take him there, a few more changes of friction. So Dean didn't move his hand at all. He watched Cas's cock from about six inches away, trying to make it last, nearly at the edge himself from the sensations coming from his own cock, and the feel of those impossible wings.

Finally Dean managed to get his wits together to think about the next step. It was time. He leaned in and licked Cas's cockhead, using a slow, broad, heavy stroke of his tongue that went right up the
side of the shaft, and swirled firmly over the head.

The wings flinched and tightened against Dean's ass and lower back; simultaneously Cas twitched all over and let out a deep, muffled groan, Dean's own dick still deep in Cas's mouth. And Cas's dick, in turn, twitched hard in Dean's hand. A big, round bead of pre-cum welled from the tip.

"Oh holy hell," Dean groaned. He managed to restrain himself to one precise lick, this time aiming exactly at that salty drop, at the hole at the tip of Cas's cock. Dean narrowed his tongue to press down there, flattening out the drop of pre-cum, finishing with a swirl right around the head. Another helpless groan from Castiel, another twitch from the wings, and for the first time Cas's mouth faltered on Dean's dick, and he pulled off as if he needed some air. Dean felt him bury his face against Dean's thigh; Cas was too far gone to focus on Dean's dick. One more heavy tongue-stroke up Cas's shaft and Cas mewled. "Ah," he gasped. "Dean — I — AH—" Abruptly he went into a series of fast hip-thrusts, hips shoving forward repeatedly in rapid, instinctive jerks. Now, thought Dean, and he swallowed Cas's rock-hard cock all the way down to the root and just let Cas piston in and out, while Dean swirled his tongue around Cas's swollen cockhead.

"AH YES YES AH YES, mnnNGGGAAAAA!!" Cas screamed. With one last gigantic thrust he shoved hard into Dean's mouth, wings tightening down almost brutally, holding Dean pinned in place against Cas's cock. Cas froze there, back arched, and then his cock was twitching and jumping, Dean's mouth filling with salty fluid. With every pulse of semen Cas's wings twitched hard and his whole body jerked, stomach muscles spasming, bucking hard against Dean.

Cas's orgasm had barely begun to fade when Cas grabbed hard at Dean's ass with both hands, and swallowed Dean's dick down in return. Simultaneously there was a wet finger working its way up Dean's asscrack. Suddenly desperate, Dean spread his legs. The wings loosened just enough for Dean to hook one leg up over Cas's head, and then Cas was stroking the rim of Dean's asshole. Dean was lost at once, pistoning into Cas's mouth helplessly. He pulled his mouth off of Cas's softened cock, gasping for air, turning his face up, moaning. He felt the finger slip inside and the feeling was electric. It grew, it expanded, and Dean was thrusting wildly now, heedless of anything else. Cas's cock was against Dean's cheek now, and it was still twitching slightly, leaking little streaks of come on Dean's cheek. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, like that," Dean grunted. "Yeah, yeah, yes, don't stop, yeah," The wings had loosened slightly as Cas recovered from his own orgasm, and Dean moaned, 'No, no, tighter, tighten your wings—' Cas must have heard, for the wings abruptly went iron hard, yanking Dean balls-deep into Cas's mouth. The finger probed, Cas swirled his tongue, the wings had him pinned; Dean felt his balls draw up, and felt his cock throb. He heard himself grunting loudly, shamelessly, and didn't care. The sounds ripped out of his throat: "NG! NG! NG! NG! ahhhhhyeah yeah yeahAHHHHH!" And then he was coming, thick spurts of semen squirting out rapidly into Cas's mouth.

Cas nursed him through every pulse. He kept Dean's cock in his mouth to the very end, swallowing every drop.

For long moments they lay there gasping. Cas's wings gradually relaxed, flopping out loosely. One wing was pinned under Dean's hips now; the other was stretched out limply above them both.

Eventually Cas stirred. He pushed at Dean slightly, and Dean could feel him trying to pull his lower wing free. "Oh, uh, sorry," said Dean, rolling away till Cas could get loose.

"Quite... quite all right," murmured Cas back. He still seemed to be having some trouble talking, as if he didn't have his breath back yet. But as soon as he got both wings free, he rose and tottered all the way across the cave to the doorway. Dean craned his head to watch him, briefly worried that Cas was fleeing for some reason, but Cas returned a moment later bearing one of the buckets of water.
He had another of the little towels in his other hand.

"I meant to warm up one of these buckets," he said, dipping the rag in the water. "I was going to leave it by the fire. I had a plan."

"Did you now," said Dean.

"I forgot the plan," said Cas. "But it all worked out."

He began wiping Dean down, all over; he cleaned Dean's dick completely, and every inch of Dean's crotch, switching to a new hand towel now and then. The ice water was actually deliciously cold, shocking and yet delightful too. Dean had intended to help with the cleanup but found himself sliding into a comfortable drowse. Cas switched to a yet another damp towel and wiped himself down too. He balled up the used towels and tossed them unerringly into an empty basket by the wall, joined Dean on the bed and pulled a clean fur over them.

"I'll clean up the furs," Dean murmured.

"They're already charmed for cleanliness," Cas said. "They'll be fine."

"Do you think the animals would mind?" Dean asked. "That we're doing this on their furs? The... lions and stuff?"

Cas gave a low, throaty laugh. "This particular fur is from a sabertooth. And, trust me, knowing this particular sabertooth, she would most definitely approve."

After a long pause Cas said, very quietly, "You liked my wings on you?"

"I did," said Dean. "Quite a bit."

"Even as they are?" Cas asked. "Even... um... clipped, I mean. Short."

"Honestly, all I noticed was that they felt fantastic."

After a pause, there was a shuffling in the furs. Dean knew what was coming; he lifted the fur up a little to make room, and something long and silken and dark stretched over him. Cas shuffled closer, and Dean wrapped an arm around his waist and curled closer.

"I swore to myself I wouldn't pressure you," murmured Castiel. "As soon as you awoke I was going to get out of bed and leave you alone. That was my other plan."

"Yeah, I think you forgot something else there, in that plan too," said Dean.

"What?"

"I didn't want to be left alone," said Dean. "If you're going to snatch me from the doors of death like that, then I am going to want to live every second to the max. Especially with you turning out to have frickin' wings and all."

He set one hand on Cas's wing, stroking the two little feathers that were right at the bend of the wing. The feathers flickered gold, and the gold didn't stay just on the feathers that he had touched; this time the moving band of gold seemed to pass through the whole wing, swiftly spreading across the entire wing like a ripple of light moving through water. It spread all the way down to the long flight-feathers, dissipating quietly at their cut-off tips; and it spread the other way, too, up the wing, a
faintly sparkling band of gold that went all the way to Cas's shoulder. Cas's eyes had been closed as this happened, but he let out a sigh as the faint ripple of gold reached his back and sank into his skin.

Dean watched him for a long moment. There were still questions. There were many questions, an infinity of questions. And the future, too, was still completely unclear. (What did it even mean for an angel to take a human as his lover? What sort of future could they have?) But for now it was enough to just to be here. To be here with Castiel.

Dean closed his eyes too, and they slept.

Later Dean dreamed. It was a dream he'd had before, of the enormous multi-colored creature, the one that seemed made of a million polygonal shards of light, the dragon-sized beast with the glittering sapphire eyes. They seemed to be moving across a pristine snowfield under a quiet starry night. Around and above them was a dazzling show of colored light; bands of blue and green and red, flickering through the sky. The northern lights. In the dream, Dean thought to wonder if this great beast could possibly be some form of mammoth, or the saber-tooth cat, or the three-toed horse, or even some kind of enormous wolf. But then the creature shifted its wings and Dean realized they were flying. They'd been flying all along, soaring so smoothly that Dean hadn't even realized they were aloft. He was astride its shoulders, and vast dark wings were arcing out on other side, and they were flying.

*It's just me*, murmured the immense creature. It had not made a sound, yet somehow seeming to speak directly into Dean's thoughts. It had been angling its plumed ears back toward Dean, and now it turned its head too, till one shining sapphire eye could look directly back at Dean. As the northern lights rippled all around its dazzling head, the creature said, in utter silence, *It's just me. Could you do that thing again?*

"What thing?" said Dean.

*That thing where you stroke my feathers.*

Dean did so, burrowing his hands down into the silken plumes of the dream-creature's neck. Bands of golden light flowed through all the feathers then, running across the creature in glittering waves, from the tip of its nose to, Dean knew somehow, the very end of its long plumed tail.

The creature let out a sigh, and stretched its wings out even farther.

On they flew, bathed in their own golden light. They flew through the glittering arctic sky, across the boundless Earth, and the immortal skies of Heaven.
When Dean woke, Castiel was kneeling by the fire, clad just in his long johns, his wings folded and relaxed at his back. He was poking at two little objects on some warm stones by the fire. Now and then he peered into his old camping coffee-pot, which was sitting in the hot ashes at the very edge of the fire. Dean sat up for a closer look, and Cas glanced over at him and smiled.

That smile....

_Holy fuck, I've got it bad_, Dean thought. He almost laughed at himself — "holy fuck" indeed — and just let himself grin back at Cas.

"Your latest batch of pastries," Cas said, gesturing down at the little things on the rock, which, Dean now saw, were two of the round mini-pies. "I had put a few of them in cold storage for later. And I've prepared some of your coffee, as well." He poked experimentally at one of the pies again, tilting it up with a polished wooden fork to peer at its lower crust. "One more minute should do it, I think," he said, letting the pie settle back down on the hot stone. "They're already very good when they're cold, by the way, but I've recently discovered that they're extremely good if I heat them."

"Sign me up," said Dean. He rubbed a hand over his face, glancing over at the glimmer of light at the doorway — which looked exactly the same as it always had, faint and gray. It was impossible to assess the time. "How long did I sleep, anyway? What day is it?"

"It's Sunday morning," said Cas, peering at the coffee again. "The third day of the storm. The snow's lightening now, though. I think I could make it up Topaz later today, or certainly by tomorrow, if you wish me to radio to your camp."

"You mean we," corrected Dean. "We could make it up Topaz."

"But you shouldn't be out in the cold—"

"Neither should you," pointed out Dean. "At least if we freeze, we freeze together." More seriously, he added, "We can watch out for each other."

Cas looked at Dean, gave him a slow smile, and nodded. He stood then, laced his fingers together
and stretched his arms high overhead. Simultaneously both his wings extended out wide to either side. In full view.

*Full Monty, wing version,* Dean thought, grinning to himself. It seemed a privilege to get such a glorious view of both the wings fully spread. A privilege, and, clearly, a sign of increasing trust as well. Even a day ago, Cas wouldn't have been stretching his wings out quite so freely in front of Dean.

The thought made Dean's heart a little warmer.

There was still, though, it had to be admitted, an occasional sharp flash of doubt about whether this might all be some sort of hallucinatory dream. Maybe Dean was really just dying in the snow, dreaming of angels while in his last delirious moments of hypothermia?

Dean tightened his hand on the saber-tooth fur that lay across his knees, running a finger across the uneven edge of the skin, and looked down at the detail of the patterns in the fur. He glanced again at the piles of boots and clothing around the cave, at Cas's tawny tunic by the bed with its antler-toggle clasp; at the GPS and the two-way radio and the satellite beacon, all in their wicker basket with the dried flowers. The neat stacks of canned food piled up on the bookshelves, the carefully dried book pages, the runes and glyphs and sigils... All of this detail was not only quite elaborate, but it had also remained consistent. There'd been a mammoth skull in the corner before, and there was still a mammoth skull in the corner now. Dean's boots had been dry, and then he'd put them on and they'd gotten snowy again, and then he'd taken them off by the door; there they still were, by the door exactly where he remembered leaving them, looking a bit damp again.

Everything held together. Everything was consistent.

It was real.

Maybe he ought to have been more doubtful, but he was getting used to the wings remarkably fast.

He thought, then, of that odd dream of black wings in a barn. He'd had that dream a full ten years ago, yet it had haunted him ever since.

Had it been some kind of premonition? Or just a coincidence?

Cas was still in mid-stretch, yawning and rolling his head a little. As he brought his arms down, both wings shook out lightly, sending puffs of air around the cave. He then left both wings outstretched and looked at each of them in turn, examining each one with a critical eye. It seemed it might be an invitation for Dean to look more closely as well. And, possibly, an invitation for discussion.

"So... 'spinal deformity', huh?" Dean said at last.

Cas gave him another wry smile.

"Technically a scapular deformity, really," Cas finally said.

"Technically wings," said Dean.

Cas laughed again, and nodded. But then he added, "They're not functional, though. See?" He stretched one wing out a little farther, gesturing to its shortened feathers. "Clipped," he said, a little brusquely.

Clipped they were, indeed. (But still magnificent.) Yet now that Cas was holding them still and stretched out, it was clearer than ever that a few of the feathers in the center of each wing didn't really
look clipped. These central feathers were mostly shorter than their neighbors, but they had softly rounded feather-tips, instead of the roughly-cut shape of their neighbors. They were also definitely glossier; in the light of the fire they took on a distinct gleaming shine.

There was another difference as well. The feather-tips on these glossier feathers were also a different color. They were all edged in gold.

One of them, too, seemed slightly longer than it had yesterday out in the falling snow. Its golden end was projecting a few inches beyond the sharply cut-off line of the other feathers. Dean frowned. Hadn't all of the glossy feathers been shorter than their neighbors just yesterday?

Cas gave the wings a sharp shake, almost experimentally, as if he were testing something. One shake, a second shake, and then something fell free of the left wing. Something large. A feather. It drifted down from the middle of the wing, from right next to the group of central glossy feathers. But the feather that had fallen was not a glossy one; its color was duller, a matte-black. It was one of the clipped feathers, roughly hacked short, with a partial vane that was only about a foot and a half long.

It fluttered down to Cas's feet, and he looked down at it without apparent surprise.

"You're losing feathers?" Dean said.

"Molt," said Cas briefly. He said this as if it were routine.

But according to the book, this was significant. Highly significant. Possibly life-changing.

Dean ventured, "I noticed some seemed to be growing."

Cas nodded. Yet, inexplicably, he didn't seem very excited at the prospect of growing new feathers. He was merely looking at the other wing now, giving it a few more sharp flaps. The coals in the fire glowed with each flap, the furs on the wall stirring in the breeze, and eventually another old, worn, clipped-short feather fell free, this one from the other wing.

"The alulas fell nearly a month ago," Castiel said, glancing down at the second feather. "And the central feathers next. I've had new feathers growing in for some weeks." Holding both wings still and outstretched again, he pointed to each wing in turn, the left and then the right.

"Molt always starts in the center of the wing, see?" said Castiel. "Alula very first of all, then innermost primary, and the outermost secondary. Those are all side-by-side in the center of the wing." Dean nodded as if this were familiar territory, though he was trying to remember the book diagram. (Primaries were on the outer half of the wing, secondaries on the inner half, right? Tertials innermost of all.)

Cas went on, "So my alulas dropped first. That was right when... ah..." He cleared his throat, almost self-consciously. "One fell right around the time that I met you, actually. Quite a, um... to be honest it was rather a surprise. Though in another way, not a surprise at all...." His eyes drifted over to Dean for a moment. Then he cleared his throat and went on, "Anyway, the next morning the other alula fell, and then a few days later the innermost primary dropped from each wing, and then more feathers started dropping on either side, moving outward from that spot." He pointed to the gaps. "So each of my wings has two waves of molt now, one going outward through the primaries toward my wing-tip, and one going inward through the secondaries toward my back. And as each feather drops in succession, a new feather starts growing in its place. Those new ones have been growing for a few weeks now—" He was twisting his wing a little bit now, and craning his head, as if trying to get a clearer view of the outline of this wing. "— and they're... Huh. They've put on a fair bit of length in the past few days, haven't they? I hadn't realized."
"Does it hurt?" asked Dean.

Cas shook his head. "The feather-roots itch sometimes," he said. "That's actually why I was at that icewater pool up on the pingo, that day when you met me there, when I was conversing with the caribou. Though I only realized later why they'd been itching. But it doesn't hurt. It's been noticeably tiring, though. I think because my power's so low. I seem to need to eat more, and I sleep much more, and, I, um... I've been dreaming... I've been having dreams of flying again, which is not... That hasn't happened in a long time."

"The new ones have gold tips," Dean pointed out.

"Yes," said Cas quietly. "Even the alulas."

"Did all your feathers used to have gold tips originally?" asked Dean. "I mean, before they were, um... shortened?"

Cas shook his head. "No," he said. There was a faint smile on his face as he added, "It's a new feather-color for me."

He didn't explain further, but just folded his wings. Both wings settled with a light shuffling motion against his back, and he crouched to pick up the two newly fallen feathers, looking them both over briefly. Then he walked over to the wicker bookshelf that had the other large feathers that Dean had noticed earlier. He picked those up as well — only the large ones. He left the little four-inch ones exactly where they were, the two that he'd given to Dean.

Cas walked back to the fire and tossed all the large feathers into the flames.

Dean couldn't restrain a gasp, and he jumped to his feet, clutching a fur around his waist automatically. The feathers caught with a flare of bright silvery-blue light, and Cas crouched by the side of the hearth and watched them burn.

"You're burning them!" Dean said, unnecessarily. It seemed wrong, to burn angel feathers. But Cas glanced up at him with a steady look.

"I've been planning to burn them," he said. "There's no reason to keep clipped feathers. They have no power. And if certain... if certain colleagues found them, they might put them to ill use, and I have reason to believe I may be seeing those colleagues soon. Also..." He paused. "It's not a good memory for me anyway. I mean, seeing these clipped feathers just reminds me of.... well, of the incident when they were clipped."

Dean sank quietly down on the edge of the bed. Cas was burning just the clipped feathers. Of course. This made a little more sense.

As if this were all no big deal, Cas then returned his attention to the little mini-pies. This time he seemed satisfied with how much they'd been heated, and he pushed them one at a time off the hot rocks that they'd been warming on, and onto a couple of small wooden plates. He had to move them with quick little nudges, blowing on his fingers afterward to cool them down. Then he peered into the coffeepot, picked it up with his bear-skin oven mitt, and poured some steaming black coffee into the white ceramic mug and one of the wooden mugs. He brought the pies and both coffee mugs over to Dean.

"This is my best mug," he said, nodding to the white ceramic mug, which he then handed to Dean. Taking the wooden mug himself, he sat by Dean's side at the edge of the bed, and so they breakfasted together.
It seemed a such a comfortable, ordinary breakfast routine that Dean had to remind himself that he was having his morning coffee while sitting next to an actual angel— who was, incongruously, just having his own coffee instead of doing momentous angelic things. Dean obediently ate his pie, and drank his coffee, but kept sneaking continual glances over at Castiel while doing so. (Cas, in turn, seemed to be glancing fairly frequently over at Dean.)

Dean found himself ravenous again, though, and he downed the pie rapidly. Then he sat licking the berry juice from his fingers and watching Castiel eat. Cas was sitting, once again, on a little mounded-up heap of furs to give his wings some maneuvering room, and the wing that was nearest to Dean was slouching down a little bit, so that its big joint was brushing Dean's shoulder. There was that little feather, the newly growing alula — the replacement for one of the ones Dean had been keeping in his pockets. Dean touched it tentatively. A smile quirked Cas's mouth when Dean touched it, and he glanced over, watching Dean stroke the little feather.

It glittered a little bit with a flash of gold light. This seemed downright ordinary now.

"This is one of the new ones, right?" asked Dean, glancing at Cas.

"Yes. It's been growing a couple weeks," said Cas. He swallowed down his last bite of pie, took a swig of coffee and added, "Actually, it's the replacement for the first feather you found."

"The one that went missing? Or the one you gave me later when you came to my room?" Dean said.

Cas let out a soft laugh. "I have a confession. Those are the same feather. The one I gave you in your room is the one that went missing, and it went missing because I went into your room the day before to retrieve it. To... uh, steal it, to be perfectly frank." He gave Dean a slightly embarrassed look. "I'm sorry about that."

Dean had been suspecting this, but it was a little startling to have Castiel say it flat out.

"You stole your own feather back?" Dean asked. "I would've given it back if you'd asked, you know. You could've just said you needed it for your research or something."

"I know," said Cas, looking a little abashed now. He glanced down at the furs on the floor, as if ashamed to meet Dean's eyes. "I'm sorry. I may have panicked a little bit. The alula-feathers have some significance. I hadn't realized yet that I was beginning to molt, though in retrospect I realized that it's why I had even thought of bathing in that pool. My wings had been... restless. They'd felt hot, and a little itchy, as I've said, and I just... I really wanted a bath, a real bath. And I remembered how you and your brother had bathed in the lake — I, um," Cas hesitated again, coloring a little. "I may have observed that, too, actually."

Dean shot him a surprised look, and Cas confessed, now looking even more embarrassed, "I was in the bushes farther along the shore. I was just there to make sure the wolf found the right people — she was quite willing to come by and meet you, but she was uncertain she'd be able to pick you out, even though I'd described how distinctive you are. I wanted to be sure you and Sam both got a good look at the wolf. So I had accompanied her to camp and then hid in the bushes so that I wouldn't... well, I had the feeling that if you were aware I could communicate with the wolves, it might draw attention. So I hid, and I asked some nearby birds to fly so as to convey to the wolf that she'd found the right two people. But, anyway, I saw how you seemed to enjoy the swimming, how refreshing it looked, and you looked, um... " He darted a shy glance at Dean. "Quite nice...."

Dean couldn't help letting out a laugh. "And what about Sam? You must've got an eyeful of Sam too!"
Cas blinked, twice, as if he'd never even thought of that. "Huh. I forgot about that. I guess I didn't notice Sam. I, um, I was sort of just... well, my eyes were sort of, um... drawn to you specifically, for some reason. Um. Sorry. I realized later I shouldn't have hidden like that. I just had wanted for you both to meet the wolf. She's been such a good neighbor."

"It's okay, Cas," said Dean, letting out another laugh. "It was awesome meeting the wolf. Terrifying, but awesome."

"Well, anyway, later the next day my wings were just feeling so itchy, and I thought maybe I would try to bathe too." Cas let out a small sigh and added, "But I couldn't use your lake because you, or your people, would have seen me. Then it occurred to me that the pond on top of that pingo was quite sheltered." With a small smile he concluded, "But you found me anyway."

Dean had to laugh. "I guess we both got an eyeful in the end. Sorry."

"I'm not sorry at all," said Cas, his smile widening as he looked over at Dean. "But, later, I realized that I had lost an alula-feather. The longer one from the right wing. And then I realized that you had found it. I could feel, that night, that you had hold of it. Alula-feathers are... significant, as I said."

"Alula-feathers," Dean murmured, and once again he touched the little gold-tipped feather on Cas's wing. To his surprise the little feather he'd been touching moved. It moved on its own, as if independently controlled, raising up slightly from the leading edge of the wing.

"They're actually digits — the thumb and forefinger of the wing," said Cas. "Two feathered digits on each wing. One longer, one shorter." Curiously, Dean stuck one finger closer, positioning his fingertip about an inch away from the longer of the little feathers. Both the feathers lifted up again, and the longer one brushed the end of his finger.

"They're winglets, really," Cas explained. "They're called alulas, or alulae in the older languages. There are legends of angels having six wings, you know, but it's really referring just to these winglets. One main wing and two alulae, on each side. So, six flight surfaces in total, technically. It's just that four of them are very small."

Cas let the alulas settle back down on his wing.

"And you... needed those feathers back?" asked Dean.

"The longer alula-feather has significance," Cas explained.

Dean looked up at him. Cas said, "We angels had wings before we were given any other element of physical form. We were first really... well, wavelengths, you could say. With a very changeable form. We could will ourselves into almost any shape. But always we had wings, and always we had the alulas, and they serve as our hands whenever we are not in a form that naturally has hands. This body..." He gestured down at his human form. "This is not always how I have looked. It's not actually my true form. Though it's become familiar to me." With a little pause he went on, "Anyway, there was a time when these little digits of the wing were largely how we handled objects. They're rooted right into the joint of the wing, right into the grace, and they tend to... reflect our essence, as it were." He bit his lip and was silent a long moment. Finally he looked over at Dean. "I already knew you were unique. That was apparent immediately. A unique human. But even so, it was unsettling to know that a human had found one of my alula-feathers. So..." The embarrassed look was creeping onto his face again. "I stole it back, that very evening, while you were sleeping. But, almost immediately I realized the feather was saddened to be separated from you."

"The feather was saddened?" repeated Dean. Cas nodded. Dean asked, a little blankly, "Feathers
have feelings?" Anything seemed possible at this point.

Cas laughed. "Not really. I'm not explaining it well. They're not sentient. But in a way, they're still part of me. What I mean is, I can feel, very slightly, what's happening to them. Especially alula-feathers. And they can respond, in a way, to certain people. The golden flashing that you've noticed means that feather chose you, in a way; it was pleased by your touch. As are all my feathers, apparently. They're all pleased by your touch. Which really means that, uh.... that I am pleased by your touch. As you may have noticed." He glanced at Dean, a little more uncertainly.

Dean couldn't help smiling at him, and an endearingly sweet smile spread over Cas's face too.

Dean said, "I could have sworn it went invisible once. That first feather."

Cas frowned, tipping his head in thought. "Interesting. When angels are fully powered, we're able to shift our wings to the adjacent dimension. We can put the wings away, as it were, and only bring them out when needed. And when we fly, we move our entire body to the adjacent dimension and fly there." He set his coffee-cup down slowly between his feet. "Of course, I haven't been able to do any of that in some time. I don't have the power to put my wings away. That's exactly why I have to wear the backpack; they're stuck in physical form, in this dimension, and I can't put them away. It's been most problematic, actually." He gave Dean a very thoughtful look. "It's quite interesting that an alula-feather of mine would have gone invisible in response to your touch. Did it happen often?"

Dean shook his head. "Just once." Experimentally, he touched the little feather at the bend of Cas's wing one more time, this time giving it a firmer stroke, wondering if it might go invisible again. Cas seemed just as interested; they both watched intently as Dean petted the little feather several times.

It flashed gold. But it didn't disappear. Dean stroked it a few more times, and lifted it up a bit, and pressed it down. The golden glittering happened a few more times, but it still didn't disappear.

"No luck on the invisibility," Dean said.

"Hm," Cas said.

"Do you feel anything when it does the gold thing?"

Cas tipped his head, considering the question. "There's a warmth. Maybe a... maybe a little increase in power? I'm not sure. It feels nice, though." He hesitated a moment, watching the feather as Dean touched it again. And then, slowly, Cas added, "There has long been a theory that certain... companions, certain bonds, you might say, might be able to feed power to the wings. Which I suppose might enhance the wing's own ability to pull power from the etheric plane. I wonder if your touch enabled the feather to re-power itself briefly. Maybe that little alula-feather gained enough power to move briefly to the etheric plane."

"It only lasted a second," said Dean.

Cas nodded. "Etheric plane movements require a lot of power," he said. "And it would make sense that once it did that once, its power would drain down much more fully, and then it might not be able to do it again. Especially given that it had fallen from the wing. I don't have as much power now as I did that week, so maybe that's why it won't happen now. Still, though... " His eyes were on Dean's face now. "That it happened even once is rather interesting."

"Do you think," Dean asked slowly, "once your new feathers are all grown in... could I help... re-power you, or something? Is that possible?"

Yet again Castiel seemed almost nonchalant about his newly growing feathers, as if it didn't much
matter. He only shrugged, and he said, looking back at the fire, "I'm afraid it's rather a moot point."

Dean frowned at him, and Cas gave a short sigh, both his wings drawing up and tightening behind his shoulders.

When Castiel finally spoke again, his voice had changed. In a lower, very even tone, he said, "My brethren are aware that I've been dropping feathers."

Dean looked at him.

Cas kept staring at the fire as he added quietly, "That's why they're coming next week. I notified them of my molt, as I am supposed to. I agreed at the beginning that if I ever were to go into molt, I would let them know. I never thought it would actually happen; it's been decades since I was exiled, and there's been no sign of molt until this year. They inspect my wings every year anyway; that's why my brothers visit now and then. So they'd have found out no matter what. Anyway, I told them, and... that's why they're coming." After a little pause he added, "Perhaps I should have chosen otherwise at the beginning."

"What do you mean? Chosen what?" asked Dean.

Cas was silent for another long moment. He laced his hands in his lap, his dark gaze settling on the fire. Dean waited; but Cas had gone silent again.

Finally Dean said, "Blackbird, Blackbird, this is Hunter One. Come in."

Cas laughed, and he nodded, slowly. "All right, Hunter One," he said, with a faint smile, as he looked over at Dean. The smile faded from his face as he said, "This is what happened," and at last he told his story.

"Long ago, we used to come down to Earth quite often," Castiel began. "It was routine then to do visits to the material-plane, as we referred to this place. This was maybe twelve millennia ago, when it was all starting. We'd been around before then, up in Heaven, but..." He hesitated. "It's almost stasis, up there. Like being in a trance. A million years might go by, but it feels like an instant. There's just song, and light, and flight..."

He was quiet a long moment, staring into the fire, as Dean watched his face.

*Twelve millennia,* he'd said, so casually.

Finally Cas said, "I still dream of it sometimes. We were in our original forms, then. Quite a different form than this one." It wasn't the first time he'd mentioned his other form, and this time Dean remembered, faintly, that strange dream he'd had last night. The dream of the gigantic winged beast made of those dizzying planes of multi-colored light. That tremendous beast with gleaming sapphire eyes... and the vast wings.

"From time to time, though," Cas went on, "we were advised — commanded, really — to leave Heaven and come to Earth, to the material plane, to guide along a certain species in its journey. To assist. To advise. To carry messages from God, I think? To be honest, our instructions were always somewhat vague, but God seemed to have been watching certain species, nudging them a little, seeing if they would make that leap to consciousness. It rarely happened, and even when the spark of
intelligence appeared, it didn't always form up into the sort of complex society that I suspect God was looking for." He took a breath. "We didn't ever know quite what God was planning. But we always knew one thing. We knew someday there would be an Apocalypse."

The word seemed to echo through the cave.

Dean echoed, "Apocalypse?"

Cas nodded.

"Seriously? Like... end of the world?"

Another nod. "We always knew that someday the Beast would rise," said Cas. "That someday everything would come to an end, that life on this planet would be destroyed. And we were supposed to be preparing the most gifted species for that great battle. Yet God never really had any specific messages. He... um... well, to be frank, God has been silent for a long time. And we... rather... I think we began making it up as we went along." Cas paused a moment longer. Then he said, "But ten millennia ago we realized that one of the species was making that great leap. This was the time of the Garden of Eden."

A chill went down Dean's back, and he sat very still, trying to take in what Cas was saying. Once again, Castiel was talking so casually about such unfathomable stretches of time. The mammoth skull had been a pretty big clue, of course, but it still seemed unbelievable that Castiel had actually witnessed the dawn of human civilization.

Castiel went on. "When humans first acquired knowledge, it wasn't just in the Garden, you know; it happened all over the planet, all at once. Knowledge of good and evil was just part of it. There was knowledge of tools, and language. Knowledge of how to shape the environment, domestication of the dog and the horse.... the taming of wild plants, the development of crops. How to build shelters, and from shelters to buildings, and from buildings to towns. The mastery of fire. How to survive anywhere from the savannah to the ice. Dean, it was so very fascinating to watch all this happen. There'd been many species we'd been keeping an eye on, you know. The elephants, the whales, the parrots, the raccoons—"

"Raccoons?" Dean had to break in, with a laugh. "Parrots? Are you serious?"

Cas said, quite seriously. "Do not underestimate raccoons. Nor parrots, for that matter. Anyway, the apes clearly were among the frontrunners. It was fascinating, like watching a race, to see if any of these species would make that jump, and I had my hopes about the apes. But the bipedal apes had begun to die out. The ones that stood on two feet. There used to be dozens, you know. Soon all but one type had gone extinct and to be honest most of the angels had rather given up on the group of them, the last survivors, which were you little Homo sapiens. You were down to just a few tens of thousands at one point, did you know that? One little population, in one little valley in East Africa. But, if I've learned one thing, just because a species is in decline doesn't mean it has no future, and doesn't mean it's valueless. I wasn't working in that region, you understand. I had been assigned to monitor the mammoths and certain of the cetaceans, and other creatures...." He was looking around the cave, at the furs and the antlers. He turned, then, to gaze at the mammoth-skull for a long moment.

"But," he said, turning back, "I used to still visit those last little hominids in East Africa from time to time. They'd always been so fascinating, and so clever and... It's hard to explain. In your kind, there was, and is, a... flexibility of the soul, I'll put it. A boundless capacity, one that can stretch in almost any direction. You humans can be violent and cruel, or you can be so kind and sympathetic. You can fall almost completely into hedonism — and just by the way, may I just mention there is no other
"One of our strong points," Dean put in, giving him a tentative grin.

And Cas grinned back. "Indeed. But, most of all, you were so clever! Such clever little hands, and such clever minds, just full of ingenious solutions. So, even when you still seemed to be just the last few members of a doomed branch of life, I still felt there was something special there, in that last little valley in East Africa. So I used to go and visit. Some of your band figured out how to chip flint knives, and you'd invented little tunics — clothes — and you were starting to colonize environments that you weren't really that well suited for. Those nimble hands of yours, those clever minds — well, it just seemed a pity to let you all just die out. So I helped a few of your bands migrate to other places, across the Middle East to Asia and Europe."

He picked up his mug and took another sip of coffee, as Dean sat by his side watching him.

Cas had helped humanity spread across the planet? Cas had done that?

"That was just sort of my hobby," Cas went on, "But it wasn't actually my assignment. So then I was sent back to my own selected species to monitor. And I was up here with the mammoths and then, one day, my mammoth friend spotted a little band of bipeds making their way from west to east across the coastal plain. You'd somehow gotten yourselves across the coastal islands. And right over the Bering Strait you came, whole bands of you, with furs and spears, and little boats that you'd made out of wood frames and sealskins, and more of those clever little tools, spear-throwers and oil lamps and bone needles to make your clothing, axes and moccasins and birchbark baskets. So many ingenious creations. I remember being astounded to see that this tropical ape had not only survived, but had actually figured out how to cross the Arctic, when you're not really suited for the Arctic at all. After that you spread all at once. Like a wildfire, almost. Like a tidal wave, that spread all around the planet." He was gazing at Dean now with something like reverence, as if Dean were the personal embodiment of the ingenious species that Castiel had been observing, and helping, for so long.

"It was clear, at long last, that you were going to be the ones," Castiel said. He set down his mug again, slowly, and said, "The ones who would develop art, and music; who would dream of space travel, and codes of ethics — not that they were always the soundest codes of ethics, mind you, but at least you were attempting to think about it. You were the ones who would split the atom. The ones who would search for God, and who would actively seek out Heaven. You were the ones whose souls, of all the wild souls on Earth, have the most power of all." Castiel paused a long moment, his eyes on Dean now, as Dean gazed back stunned.

Cas said, "And you were the ones who would bring the inevitable Apocalypse. Yet, too, you would also be the only ones who could stop it, once it was underway. This had all been foretold long ago."

Dean sat quietly, just trying to take this all in.

Cas stood, now, and put another log of cedar on the fire.

He returned to the bed-furs with the coffee-pot, refilled both their mugs, and sat down by Dean's side again. He adjusted his wings slightly before he spoke. "I believed in our mission," he said at last, wrapping both hands around his mug, gazing into the fire. He was silent a long moment.

Eventually he continued. "Once humanity really started to accelerate, I was re-assigned to a garrison in Heaven. Mostly I stayed in my true form. I'd never taken a permanent Earth vessel anyway, as some of the archangels had. Rafael, Michael, they all selected the most impressive possible vessels, and they used to... well, they'd parade around down here, you could say. But I was mostly back up
Heaven. Singing hosannahs. Endless flights around the Holy Throne. Waiting, and watching, for the Apocalypse. It was relatively peaceful, though. As I said, time is different there, and centuries can float by while one is singing a single hosannah. Meanwhile, there were occasional skirmishes down here on earth, but nothing too worrying. Occasionally a demon would escape from Hell and we'd chase it down." (Dean blinked at the mention of demons. Demons were real, too? Hell was real? But of course — where there were angels, there'd be demons too.) Cas went on, "Occasionally... well, bad things did happen. But the Apocalypse seemed like it was a long way off. Everything was mostly as usual. But then something changed."

A cedar log popped in the fire, and Castiel took a long breath, as if steadying himself.

"About forty or forty-five years ago," he went on, "we started hearing rumors. I and my garrison, up in Heaven, started hearing rumors from occasional demons that we captured. The demons themselves seemed to be more numerous — there was a year in the early 1970s or so when we caught quite a few of them, and we realized there were at least two dozen demons loose on the surface of the Earth. There were some ripples in time, as well. Some of those telltale twists that occur if somebody has been doing time-travel, you know?"

"I really don't know, actually," Dean said quietly.

"There's a stutter," Cas explained. "As the present moment passes through a moment in time where somebody has started or ended a time-journey, there will often be a little stutter. Like a little flicker of memory from the other time-stream. A moment of prescience."

"Deja vu?" Dean said.

Cas nodded. "Exactly. It only lasts briefly. It's most noticeable if you yourself would have had something different happen in your life in the other timestream. Anyway, there was a whole collection of such moments that affected me quite strongly — one little clump in about 1973, another clump a few years later. I told no one, but rumors began flying about certain... demon deals. But nothing happened for a long while after that, so I wrote it off as an anomaly. But I always did wonder, after that, if there was some other time-stream, some other universe, where something different had happened. And then, much later, about fourteen years ago, we confirmed that there was a Prince of Hell maneuvering on the surface of the Earth. Not Lucifer himself, but one of his captains. We thought then that surely the great battle was about to start, that Lucifer was preparing to rise, and so we prepared. We drilled, we readied our blades, we practiced our aerial maneuvers and our combat skills and our smiting tactics."

He paused and took another sip of coffee.

"And?" said Dean. He set his own coffee mug down, by the basket, finding he had no interest in food or drink anymore. This whole elaborate tale, of demons and Princes of Hell and Lucifer, was insane, of course. It was utterly insane. Yet everything Cas was saying had the ring of truth. And, oddly, Dean found himself not terrified by it, as he should have been, but almost exhilarated.

It was as if this were strange tale were something he had been waiting for.

"And then what?" Dean prodded.

Cas was frowning down into his coffee now. He shrugged. "And then... nothing," he said.

"What do you mean, nothing?" said Dean.

"Nothing happened," said Cas. He looked over at Dean. "It was the oddest thing, really, to have
nothing happen. There'd been such a powerful sensation of something building, not only the deja-vu
time-twist sensations, but also a whole set of hints and prophesies. Everybody was certain that
something was about to happen. Yet nothing happened." He gazed down into his coffee mug; he,
too, seemed to have lost his appetite. "Except that I realized I was being watched."

"By... demons?" Dean said.

"By my superiors," Cas said softly. He flicked another quiet glance at Dean. "In retrospect, I now
realize that they had ceased to trust me. They were worried I would betray them. And I'd no idea
why." He paused a long moment, staring down into his coffee again, and when he began speaking
again, his voice had saddened. With quite a low and rough tone, he said, "I was loyal, Dean. I
believed in our mission. I was devoted to the cause of helping humanity. I would never have
betrayed Heaven, never..."

The pain in his voice was clear. There was a slight movement at Dean's side and a brushing of
feathers down Dean's arm; Cas's wings had started drooping down. The mug in his hands began to
tip, as if he'd forgotten all about it.

Dean reached over and slid Cas's mug out of his grasp, gently, and set it over by the basket with the
other one. Cas let him do so, staring again at the fire.

Cas was quiet for another long moment, now just gazing at the flames. Finally he continued. "I
couldn't figure out what I had done wrong. But my movements were restricted by my superiors. I
was assigned menial duties, tasks just inside of Heaven. Hosannah-training for the fledglings, carving
and honing of new blades, assisting a few of the cherubim in molt... They have the messiest molt, by
the way, you've no idea — all this fluffy pink down just getting everywhere, and they get so weepy
and hysterical when they see their feathers floating away." He sounded a little exasperated just at the
memory. "But I was happy to assist however I could, and of course I wanted to prove my loyalty, so
I performed the duties that I'd been assigned. But it was such a different set of duties than I'd been
doing before. I'd been a battle commander, Dean." There was frustration in his voice now. "I was
trained in aerial combat; I'd been practicing blade-dueling and demon-smiting for decades. They'd
even been training me up for some sort of mission to Hell — my whole squadron had been drilling
hellbolt-evasion maneuvers for over a year. And suddenly there I was teaching second-year
cherubim how to keep their feathers straight. I finally realized that I'd been quietly confined to
quarters."

"House arrest," said Dean.

"Essentially, yes," said Castiel. "House arrest in Heaven. It began to get disturbing. I had this... this...
this sense," One of his fists was knotting up on his knee now, as he went on, "I just had this
absolutely maddening sensation that I was supposed to be doing something else. I don't know what,
but something else. And the conviction just got stronger and stronger. So, after about two years of
chasing bits of pink cherub-down all over Heaven, I finally decided to slip down here and try to
figure what was going on. Try to figure out what was wrong, I mean. What was happening... why
I'd been confined to quarters... and why they didn't trust me. This was strictly against protocol, you
understand. Absolutely against orders. But—" Both his hands had tightened into his fists now, and
he even clenched his teeth for a moment; both wings had drawn up and were now clamped tightly
behind his back. "Something was wrong," he said. "Something was not as it should be. I just felt
certain about that. And certain that I wasn't doing what I was meant to be doing. So I decided to go
down, on my own, to Earth. This was ten years ago. I found a really nice vessel—" He glanced
down at his human form, placing one hand on his chest. "The vessel was willing." He glanced over
at Dean. "This was not my own body originally, you understand. It belonged to a human. A devout
man, and a brave one. And he was willing to give everything. I explained that I was acting on my
own, but even so, he was willing. So I slipped into this vessel, with his approval, and I began to investigate." He gave a long sigh. "But the whole thing was futile. I was only down there three days in total when they found me."

"They... the demons?" asked Dean softly.

"The archangels," said Castiel, and a silence fell over the cave.

Archangels are real too? thought Dean.

But again, it all had that eerily familiar ring of truth.

Of course angels were real; of course demons were real too. And of course archangels were real as well. Of course.

Cas was silent a long moment, now staring into the fire again. "I thought my crime to be relatively minor — all I'd done was go down to Illinois for three days, and I'd seen nothing at all of interest, absolutely nothing — but Raphael and Michael were in a state of fury such as I have never seen. I thought they would kill me straight away, and they nearly did. They blasted my poor vessel to blood and dust, and spun me loose in my true form... oh, Dean, such shame I've felt, such sorrow, for I'd promised my vessel that he'd be okay. I'd promised he'd be released unharmed; and I'd promised that if anything happened, I would see to his family. But they blasted his soul clean away to Heaven in just an instant, disintegrated the physical vessel completely, and spun me loose in my true form and then they pinned me down by holy-fire. I couldn't even move...." He looked truly distressed at the memory, hunching over now, both hands clasped between his knees.

Dean automatically reached out to pat him on the shoulder, and found himself patting a wing instead. But that seemed to work too; Cas glanced over with a grateful smile, and he relaxed a little.

"What happened then?" Dean prodded.

"Well, then," Cas said, "Michael and Raphael got into the oddest argument. They were not quite out of earshot; I heard most of it. I remember Raphael saying, 'It's like everything we do makes it worse.' He also said, 'It keeps converging to match the other one.' I'd no idea what he meant. There was quite a long argument. They also said something about, if they killed me I'd just be resurrected. I couldn't make any sense of it at all. At last they came to me, and they told me that for my crime, for my useless three days in Illinois with my poor, willing vessel, I would be exiled."

He stopped short.

"Meaning what?" asked Dean quietly.

"Exiled to Earth," said Castiel shortly. "Stripped of my powers. Stripped of my... wings. Well, of my power of flight, more precisely. Turned mortal, and sentenced to live in isolation. I wasn't supposed to interact with humans at all, ever again. I gather there was some disagreement, with one faction of the angels — I believe this was Raphael's side — determined to execute me. But, rather to my surprise, some of my other brethren came to my defense, including the youngest of the archangels, Gabriel. Gabriel argued that I had committed only a minor transgression. It was... long and quite confusing. In the end they put me in confinement while they argued it over. And when they finally brought me back out, I learned that my human vessel was to be reassembled, but empty now, its original owner gone. Apparently they wanted me anchored down into a physical vessel — this always reduces power somewhat, you know — and as they didn't want me interacting with any additional humans, they'd decided to reassemble the vessel that they'd destroyed. So they put the vessel back together, its original owner gone, and then I was stuffed back inside."
Cas took a long breath. "I didn’t mind that part. I actually like this vessel, quite a bit. But I was then offered a choice about my wings. They needed to strip my wings so as to remove my ability to gather power, you see, for, as I've sure you know, etheric power is gathered via the tertial-feathers."

"Right," said Dean (who'd learned about this only yesterday). He still had one hand on Cas's closer wing, right on the big joint, and Dean stroked the feathers lightly. One of the silky little alula-feathers grabbed onto his hand.

"The choice was," Cas went on, "I could have my wings pinioned completely and then I could go anywhere I wished and live as a human, or I could have my flight feathers clipped." He spat this out very rapidly, rather as if by skating past the words "pinioned" and "clipped" as fast as possible, he could keep some distance from it. He went on, still talking a little quickly, "In the latter case, of clipping, I'd keep my wings, but they'd be useless, for almost all the angel's power drains from the feathers when the feathers are clipped. And, too, then they'd be visible, and physical, and I'd be unable to shift them to the etheric plane. I would have to live isolated from humanity, so that no one would ever see my wings. So that was the choice. Lose my wings forever, or live in isolation in the Arctic with useless wings." He finally stopped his somewhat breathless rush of words, and looked over at Dean, who was staring back at him, appalled.

"I couldn't bear to lose my wings," Cas said simply. "I just couldn't bear it. I don't know if it was the wrong decision. But I couldn't bear it."

Dean ran his hand down Cas's wing lightly. This time the soft ripple of golden light moved through them, and Cas let out a little sigh.

He seemed to gain courage from the touch, and he took a deep breath and went on. "So they clipped my feathers, and most of my power drained out right away, and I was sent to the Arctic. That was because it was the place that had the fewest humans. It was just lucky chance that I also happened to know the terrain up here a bit from my previous assignments. They also pushed me back in time — I think they were hoping I would go back millennia, actually, but for some reason I snagged in 1973. That was right where there'd been one of those time ripples, you know. The time ripple caused me to drop out there. And there I was in the woods near Whitehorse, in the Yukon, in 1973, gazing up at the northern lights. I think Raphael and Michael just gave up at that point. They seemed to think that at least I was far enough away from the present so that I wouldn't get back into... well, whatever trouble they thought I might get into in Illinois in my little trip there, in September of 2008. It's still totally unclear to me what they even thought I would do."

The story was overwhelming, a complex tale of demons and vessels and archangels that seemed beyond belief. Yet throughout the whole tale the hair had been rising on Dean's neck, goosebumps running down his arms, for the entire thing seemed eerily familiar, like something he'd heard in a dream.

Dean finally drew a long breath and tried to focus on one fact that seemed fairly simple to understand: "You've been here since 1973?"

"In the Arctic, yes," said Castiel, nodding. "Not always this particular patch of tundra, though. I've been traveling around. I decided I might as well do that long-term follow-up study that I've described, and as I had some old sites up here anyway, I started circulating back to them, doing bird observations at each one. Siberia, Greenland, Scandinavia... I could go anywhere in the Arctic where I wished, really, as long as I still had the bare minimum of power necessary to survive the cold. The conditions of my exile were primarily I not interfere with humanity, that I stay in the Arctic, and that nobody could ever see my wings. But within those bounds, I was relatively free to move around." He paused a long moment, looking around at the cave.
"Many times I've wondered if I'd made the wrong choice, that I should have had my wings cut off entirely. But somehow, I couldn't bear the thought. And I still was bothered by what had happened. I still had the sensation that something was changing upon the Earth, some great change in the fortunes of humanity." With a shrug he said, "But all I could do was study the tundra as best I could, so that's what I did."

Cas lifted one hand to his own left wing, resting his fingers gently on the big joint. "I still had some of my powers, for a while — powers don't fade instantly when feathers are cut. They bleed out over time. But, over the last decade, my power has faded more and more, and over the last two years I've been nearly down to zero. This year most of all. I tire now, and need sleep; I'm not as immune to the cold, so my travels have been more restricted. Overall, this is my fourth circuit around the pole since my wings were clipped. My research, such as you could call it, has really just been observing the changes in the wildlife for the last forty-six years, with comparisons to several millennia ago."

He gave a long sigh and added, "I suppose I'd been thinking, all along, that if I just do enough observations on Earth, that someday I'll figure out what was happening, why I was exiled. But I have spent the full forty-five years up here and have learned nothing." He added, in a very discouraged tone, "I'm still no closer to figuring out what it was all about. Why I was exiled here, what I did wrong... what the Prince of Hell was planning... why my vessel had to die... what the point of it all was... why I was forbidden from ever traveling to Kansas...."

"Kansas?" said Dean, sitting up a little more. "Wait, Kansas? You only mentioned Illinois."

Cas glanced at him. "Illinois was the site of my one foray down to Earth in 2008. September of 2008. But for some reason, Raphael also forbade me specifically from any travel to Kansas. That was one of the odder conditions of my exile. If I ever go to Kansas, he'd pinion me completely. He said he'd do it personally. I've no idea why. I've never even been to Kansas."

"Sam and me are from Kansas," said Dean.

They looked at each other.

"Well, that is... rather a coincidence," said Castiel slowly. He thought a moment. "Dean, by any chance did anything of significance happen in Kansas in 1973?"

Dean chuckled. "Not much happens in Kansas. Well, not unless you count my mom and dad meeting."

Cas's gaze sharpened. "Your parents met in 1973?"

"Yeah, they met in kind of a weird way, actually." Dean's voice faltered as he said this, and he became aware, then, there were some odd coincidences stacking up here. He racked his brain to try to remember what Dad had said, about how he'd met Mom.

The details were pretty vague. After Mom had gotten sick, Dad had never really talked that much about their past together. What had he said about how they met?

*Some people died. Kind of a weird deal. But you don't need to worry about that.*

"There was something strange about how they met," Dean said slowly. "But I don't know the story. Our mom got pretty sick when I was just a kid, and she died when I was in high school. Dad never talked much about their past."

"What form of disease did she have?" Cas asked, his eyes narrowed.
"Um... she was in a... a mental institution, actually," said Dean. He added, "Schizophrenia is what they said. She had these... um...delusions, I guess? Hallucinations.... There was this phase when she kept talking about..." And then Dean's mouth went dry. "Demons," he finished, barely able to say the word. "She kept talking about demons."

Dean suddenly felt sick.

Again they looked at each other.

"Well, that's... interesting," said Cas slowly. "Very interesting. Disturbing, in fact. I wonder if the fact that they met in 1973 is related somehow to those time twists that I felt. Though... probably not. Couples meet all the time. They didn't ever do any time-travel, did they?"

Dean had to laugh at that. "No, um, as a family we never really got into the time-travel thing, actually. Just kind of let time do its usual thing."

"Do you have any connection to Illinois?" asked Cas next, still frowning.

Dean shook his head. "Never even been there."

"Well, at any rate," Cas went on, "I'm sorry about your mother."

"Could she have seen a real demon?" Dean managed to ask, almost in a whisper. "We thought she was crazy, but... could it have been real?"

Cas pressed his lips together, inclining his head in a half-nod. "There were indeed demons on the Earth at that point. It's possible she might have crossed paths with one." He looked at Dean, his full attention on Dean now, and reached out to squeeze his knee. "I'm sorry, Dean."

Dean had to clear his throat to speak again. He forced himself to shrug; it was probably all just coincidence anyway. "It was a long time ago," he finally managed to say.

And then he remembered something else Mom used to say:

*Angels are watching over you.*

She'd said that to Dean several times, near the end, before she'd taken her life.

Could there possibly be some connection, between what had happened to Mom, and what had happened to Castiel?

"So you never did go to Kansas?" Dean asked. But Cas shook his head.

"No, never," he said. "I never went to Kansas, and I never went back to Illinois either. Staying in the Arctic was one of the conditions of my exile. One of many. If I violated any of the conditions, I knew I'd be pinioned. And they inspect me every year. They query me about where I've been, they put me through this...well, this truth-testing protocol. And they examine my wings annually, to check for any potential molt." A shudder ran through his body as he said this. "I hate the feather-inspections," he added, teeth almost gritted now. "Gabriel and Balthazar always try to be gentle, but Naomi is so rough. And, you know, it just always feels so strange, to have someone handling your wings when you don't really want them to. When it's not somebody you've chosen."

"Yeah, I really only let certain people handle my wings," said Dean.

"Yes, exactly—" said Cas, and he stopped short, with a little laugh, looking over at Dean. Again
their eyes met.

"I will say," said Castiel, "that your wing-handling is exceptionally gentle. It's most... soothing, in fact. You have a fine touch with wings."

Dean gave him an uncertain smile back, patting his wing again. He was still thinking about his mother, and trying to remember all those crazy things she'd been babbling about demons. There'd been something about a demon deal. Something about Sammy, something about fire and being pinned to the ceiling.... Just one of her crazy hallucinations, they'd always thought.

Cas reached up and took hold of Dean's hand. Folding both hands around Dean's, he said, "Dean, it's concerning to me that you have a connection to Kansas. I've been greatly worried, all along, that I may have placed you in danger, simply by meeting you at all. If there's some other connection too, then I'm even more concerned. Right from the beginning, when I met you and your brother on the road, I've been worried. That's why I've been trying so hard not to let you see my wings; that's why I never invited you here, to my cave. I wanted to invite you here — I very much wanted to, to be honest — but I wanted to keep you safe. The archangels can be...." He hesitated. "I really shouldn't criticize, but, they're not my favorites of my brethren."

"Not your favorites how?"

But now Cas seemed reluctant to criticize them. "They are archangels," he said slowly, as if trying to remind himself of this fact. "All their acts are divinely inspired, they say. They're close to God—"

"What are they like?" said Dean. "These Raphael and Michael dudes? I mean, how would you describe them?"

"Cruel," said Castiel immediately. "Arrogant. Controlling. Manipulative. Power-hungry." Dean raised an eyebrow, and Cas said hastily, "But, you see, they are archangels, and so those are not the right words, because archangels by definition cannot do wrong." He hesitated. "Or so they've always said."

"I think I'm getting the picture," said Dean drily.

"Gabriel's better," said Castiel. "He's different. But the point is, they are very powerful, and I don't want you in their path. At all. I want you a thousand miles away." His hands tightened on Dean's. "I want you three thousand miles away. Back in Kansas, maybe. Maybe that's the safest place? I want you to forget about all this. I shouldn't even have told you any of this. I should never have let you see my wings, and I should never have brought you to this cave of mine. But when I found you in the snow...." His hands tightened on Dean's. "I had to save you," he said, his voice intense. "I had to bring you here, and I had to warm you up, and the best way was to wrap my wings around you. But... " Cas faltered, looking at Dean. "I don't want you in danger. I don't want you involved. You have to leave."

"That's my choice, isn't it?"

"No, you have to leave—" began Cas.

"Cas, they're gonna clip your feathers again, aren't they?" interrupted Dean. "That's why you're not excited about the molting. You're just gonna get clipped again, aren't you?"

Cas fell silent. After a long moment he nodded. "It was a condition of my relative freedom that I never get my powers back," he said quietly. "So, yes, they'll clip the new feathers short, just as they did with the old ones. It's part of my punishment."
"Sounds to me more like they're scared of you getting your powers back," said Dean. "Like... it's not that it's a punishment of what you did, so much as it is that they're just plain scared of what you might do."

Cas considered that, frowning. "Well, whatever their reasoning, the result is the same: they won't let my wings regrow," he finally said. "As soon as they see the feathers are growing, I expected they'll take me into custody, keep me there till molt is done, and then... well. Clip the new feathers."

"Can't you run? Run and not let the archangels find you? Run and hide until your feathers re-grow?"

Cas looked at Dean. "I gave them my word," he said. "Or, I gave Gabriel my word, at least. I agreed not to run. Anytime they're scheduled to meet me, I have to be here."

"But, just hypothetically, are there ways you could hide from them?" asked Dean.

Cas thought a moment. "Possibly," he admitted at last. "There are some... charms, you could call them. Sigils." He frowned in thought, staring at the fire, his hands squeezing Dean's again, and he said, "I'll admit, I've wondered if a tattoo might work. There's a way to block their ability to locate an individual. And, you know, I've rather wondered if Gabriel might not even... He might be a little flexible. But, until now, there didn't actually seem a reason to run. It's not so bad up here. I didn't mind avoiding humans; I didn't mind always being on the move. But this year..."

He looked at Dean, and the air seemed to grow warmer.

"Things are different now," said Castiel.

Dean said firmly, "Here's what's gonna happen. We're gonna run. And you're gonna get that tattoo or whatever."

"Dean, you don't understand," said Cas, shaking his head. "They're incredibly powerful. We can't beat them. We simply can't. They'll track you down."

"Then I'll get one of the tattoos too. We both get tattoos and we run," said Dean stubbornly. "Besides, they don't even know I'm involved anyway. They've never even seen me. All they'll know is that you're gone. And meanwhile, you and I, we head south. And I mean, we do this within the next few days. We head right down to the lower forty-eight and find somewhere for you to hide out. I don't know, Montana or something, the Grand Canyon, whatever, but we set you up somewhere where they won't even think to look. You could be all squirreled away in a safe house with your new tattoo in just a couple weeks from now. Then I come back to Kupaluk right on schedule when my break ends like nothing even happened. And I just finish out the season here, just a lowly human doing his lowly job, and nobody's the wiser. Then I come join you."

"I don't like the idea of you staying at Kupaluk without me," said Cas, frowning. "It's too close to this cave. They'll inspect my dwelling, and they'll notice Kupaluk and they'll notice you. Dean, I don't like this plan—"

"And I don't like you getting your wings clipped again when it's clearly not what you want and when you never even did anything wrong!" said Dean, his voice getting heated. "You've gotta make a stand, Cas. What they're doing to you is not right, and you know it. If you think they'll figure out that I'm involved, fine, then, I don't even have to come back to Kupaluk. I'll stay with you." Dean was astonished to hear himself say this.

Leave Kupaluk? His research station? The place he'd spent thirteen years, fourteen now, whipping into shape?
But maybe it was time. Maybe fourteen years was long enough.

Dean went on, thinking out loud now. "And maybe I come back next year if things have blown over, or maybe not. We play it by ear. But Cas, you are not getting your wings clipped again, not if I can do a single damn thing about it, I swear. So here's the plan." (He actually had no plan, but he started talking anyway, hoping a plan would emerge on the spot.) "My last paycheck should pay off Sam's tuition, and there's enough left over to buy the old Chevy. The university's been trying to get rid of it for ages — it's too old now, some liability issue, no air bags or whatever, and I'm the only one who's been arguing to keep it here. I'll just buy it off them, I can do that in a day, I know the guy in the Fairbanks office and I know he'll jump at the chance. So, let's see, as soon as... as soon as this storm's over, I head to Kupaluk and put in my resignation for the season. I'll tell them it's a family emergency and that I've got to beg off for the rest of the season. And I'll get Ryan all set up to take over. I'll need a couple days to tie up loose ends, maybe, um...." Dean thought a moment. "Two days. Then I come pick you up, and you and me, we just frickin' head south. This Wednesday at the latest. The road'll be clear by then. We head south to Fairbanks, get new plates on the truck, and we get our tattoos there — I know just the place, actually — and then we drive east like a bat outta Hell." Cas frowned at this phrase, and Dean amended, "Okay, like an angel outta Hell. Angel out of Heaven. Whatever. We'll get you through Canada somehow—"

"I have a passport, actually," said Castiel quietly. "Gabriel provided me with one some time ago. It seems to be quite convincing; I've crossed Canada multiple times."

"Perfect. We get you down to the lower forty-eight. I can get us to Seattle in four and a half days by road. I've done it before. And then we pick a place to hide out, and we just... hide out."

Cas looked at him a long moment. "You would do all that when we've only known each other a few weeks?"

Dean was a little startled to be reminded of this. It seemed they'd known each other a decade already. It was hard to explain, either to Cas or to himself, why he felt so willing to abandon his whole career here at Kupaluk and drive clear out of Alaska, across Canada and across half the lower forty-eight, just to help somebody he'd only met a month ago.

"Well, yeah, dude," Dean said at last, and all he could do was squeeze Cas's hand. Cas squeezed back. Dean added, "And it's not just because you're fun to sleep with. Which you totally are. But also... I don't know. This feels... big, you know. It feels important."

"It feels like what I'm supposed to be doing," Dean thought.

Looking at Cas, he added,"And also, you just feel like family."

Cas smiled, tightening his hand. "I feel the same," he said softly. But then a shadow crossed his face. "What about your brother?" Cas asked quietly.

Dean winced. This was the problem with the plan; it left Sam here alone.

"I'd like to bring him too," Dean confessed. "We were even just talking about doing a road trip together. But... he's met this Ruby chick, he's got this job possibility... I guess I should just leave him alone? Let him find his own path." He shook his head. "Damn, though, I wish I could figure out some way to get him to come along."

It didn't feel right, somehow, taking off on a long road trip without Sam.

"He'll find his own path," Cas said, with a surety that Dean didn't seem to be feeling himself. "I have
a feeling you'll see him again." He took a long breath, though, as if thinking. "But you're probably right that it's safest for him to not get involved. If the angels overlook him entirely, that's the best outcome. Maybe later we can figure out a way to meet up with him." He added, almost casually, "Assuming we survive more than a few days, that is, which is rather unlikely."

"One thing I really dig about you is that optimistic outlook you got," said Dean drily, squeezing his hand again.

Cas's mouth quirked in a half-smile. "I'm just trying to be realistic. If you're going to insist on getting involved, you need to understand that this is a very dangerous game."

"I know," Dean said. It was already very clear what kind of game this was; the biggest game of all, and likely the deadliest. "I know," he repeated. "But I want in anyway."

Cas regarded Dean a moment longer, his hand warm on Dean's. Then he stood, went to his little wicker bookshelves, and picked up the silver knife. Returning to Dean, he held it out, haft-first.

"Take this," he said.

"A knife?" Dean said, looking at it uncertainly. "What is it, a hunting knife?"

"It's my garrison combat blade," said Cas. "Carved from my own... well, never mind. It's made of keratinized ether, and the important thing is, it works against some powerful adversaries. It can kill demons, and angels as well." He added, still holding the haft out toward Dean, "I'd feel better if you had some protection."

"I've got my guns," said Dean. But he took the blade, a little uncertainly. "Knife-fighting's not really my thing. Good ol' bullets are really more what I know."

"Normal ammunition won't affect either angels or demons," said Cas, sitting back down beside him. "You may need this blade. I'll teach you some grappling techniques." As Dean turned the silver blade over in his hand, admiring its shining surface, Cas remarked, rather slowly, "It looks familiar in your hands." He shifted to face Dean more directly, and added, "Nonetheless, I need to make clear again that I don't think it's wise for you to get involved. You shouldn't be put at risk. I know we've shared intimacies, but that doesn't entail any obligation at all on your part."

Dean nodded, calmly. "I'll admit this'll be the first time I've split from a job and gone on the run with someone I've only slept with two times."

"My point exactly. I just—"

"So I was thinking we could go for three," said Dean.

Cas's eyes widened and he stopped in mid-sentence. He looked at Dean for a long moment.

Dean held his eyes.

And that was when Dean discovered that he could make the feathers fluff up on Castiel's wings just by looking at him in a certain way.

"Three?" Castiel said. "Like... now?"

"Maybe four," said Dean. "And that's just for tonight."
They got to six before the snowstorm cleared.
Three days later they walked together down the old rutted access road.

It was a bright and beautiful day, the sun beaming in a perfectly cloudless blue sky, a light breeze wafting over the hills. Cas and Dean walked side by side, Cas once again with his backpack concealing his wings, and Dean wearing his original storm outfit — jeans and leather jacket. The weather was so nice now that this outfit actually felt comfortable, so much so that he didn't even need the second flannel shirt. Cas had insisted, though, that Dean bring the second shirt along, and the North Face jacket, as well as Cas's snowpants and an extra pair of his socks. Despite the perfect weather, all of these additional layers were now wadded up in Dean's pack, along with some food and one of Cas's waterskins.

"I know I'm prepared now for another blizzard to come up out of nowhere," Dean said, glancing around, "but actually I can't believe how fast the melt-off is going. It's so warm. It feels like... what, seventy degrees at least?"

Cas nodded. "The twenty-four-hour sun does wonders, once the sky finally clears."

Once the storm had passed, the arctic spring had reasserted itself with its usual impressive speed. New snow-melt streams were flowing busily past their feet at the side of the little access road, and what had been thick, impassable snow drifts on the hills just yesterday were now just rapidly shrinking patches of white, with patches of green already showing through.

Squinting at the Haul Road ahead, Dean said, "I bet the road'll be driveable by tomorrow." He patted the two-way radio, which was now clipped to one of his backpack straps. "That plow operator, the one who said he could come pick me up, he said they were trying to get the road driveable by tomorrow night, remember. But at this rate of melt-off, I bet we could drive by noon tomorrow."

"And we've still got four days until my family's due to arrive," said Cas. "Maybe luck is on our side. The birds are already singing again, hear them?" He pointed with one mittened hand toward the source of some distant burbling song. "The Lapland longspurs are at it again. And the white-crowns, and redpolls, there, hear them too? It's always so nice to know they came through a storm okay." He added, "Maybe you're right — maybe we can leave tomorrow." He added, thoughtfully, "You
know, I think I don't even need my mittens." He stripped off one of his bear-fur mittens off as he said this, looking at his bare hand.

"Oh, I don't know," said Dean, removing one of his own gloves and taking Cas's hand. "I better check on that. What if your fingers get cold?"

"What if yours do?" countered Cas, with an almost shy smile back. (Jokey flirting still seemed a new concept for him, but he seemed to be getting used to it.) His fingers wrapped warmly around Dean's, and they walked on together, hand in hand.

"You sure you don't want to come with me to Kupaluk tonight?" Dean asked.

"I definitely do want to come with you," Cas said, "but if we're truly going to try to do this drive south before my brethren arrive, I do need to pack up some of my belongings. And, as you know, I'd like to seal the cave. I'm not sure I explained how much time that can take. I'm so low on power now that I can't do it with my own power, but instead, I'll need to add different glyphs and do a few spells. They're not difficult, but the process takes some hours." He glanced at Dean. "And you need time to pack up your own possessions as well, correct?"

Dean nodded. "Won't take too long, but I need about a half a day to reorganize my stuff. Make sure we got everything we need for the drive. Mostly though, I gotta get the Chevy checked over. Dig out the spare keys from the office, come back here and jump the battery and gas it up, and take it back to camp and give it the once-over." He thought a moment and corrected himself. "The twice-over. The four-times-over, actually. I'm going go over that truck with a fine-tooth comb before we take off."

Cas eyed him for a long moment as they walked on, boots splashing through snowmelt puddles. "You really don't need to come with me," he said at last, quietly. "I know we've discussed this, but I must emphasize again—"

"—that it's dangerous and you don't want me involved," finished Dean. "Yeah, yeah, I got that the first fifty times you said it. No dice, Cas, I'm coming with you. Besides, you need a truck. You'll never get far enough away on foot. I am not letting those bastards clip your wings again."

"But—"

"I am not letting them clip your wings, and that's final," said Dean, hand tightening firmly on Cas's. "We're sticking to the plan." Before Cas could object again, he plowed on with a review of the plan. "Which means, right now you're coming as far as your plover nest so you can check it, then I'm hitching a ride to Kupaluk and getting the damn spare truck key and getting the truck, and I'll get the truck all organized for the drive. And meanwhile you're gonna seal up your cave. And tomorrow morning we're meeting up at the pingo. Then we're taking off in the truck as soon as we can — noon tomorrow if Atigun Pass is clear, and if it's not clear yet, we'll hang at Kupaluk until the plows do another run over the pass. Tomorrow night, midnight, whenever it is, the very first second Atigun's clear enough for the Chevy, we move." He took a slow breath, still thinking through some of the details. "And we'll figure out a safe house for you once we hit Fairbanks. Once we get back in range of some internet and some cell towers, where we can do a little research, and I can make a few calls. Like we talked about." With a laugh he added, "Like we talked about a thousand times already. So don't you go and get cold feet on me."

Cas looked at him a long moment, hand still warm on Dean's as they walked. At last he nodded. "I do appreciate your help," he said, softly. "You've no idea. But I worry about you."

Dean shrugged. "We're in this together," was all he said. His voice dropped, though, as he couldn't help adding one more thing: "I just still wish Sam could come."
Cas gave him a sympathetic look, and Dean said, "I know we talked about him a thousand times too, but—"

"It bothers me too," Cas said quietly.

"I know it's a dumb idea," said Dean, "but I just still feel like Hunter One and Hunter Two should be working this case together." He gave a little laugh. "Right along with Blackbird. All three of us."

"Case?" Cas said, turning to Dean with a puzzled squint. "What do you mean by 'working a case'?"

Dean paused, actually stopping in mid-stride. What did he mean by 'case'? Why had that word popped into his head? "Working a case?" Sam and he didn't work "cases" together, and never had. Besides, their lives were on separate paths anyway; that had been true for a very long time. Ever since Mom had had that last, and worst, psychotic break, about that "bright eyed" demon burning her alive.

He could only shrug at Cas. "Dunno. Been watching too much CSI, I guess." They started walking again, though Castiel was still frowning at Dean, a little puzzled. Dean just shook his head, saying, "I only meant, it still seems like, if we're doing a road trip, Sam oughta come along. Don't know why I feel that way. I just do."

"I've been having the same feeling," said Cas, still watching Dean's face. "It's odd, really, because I don't know your brother very well at all, but it's quite a ... compelling vision, really, this thought of all three of us traveling together, isn't it? Such an attractive possibility." Cas returned his attention to the path ahead — the little access road they were walking on was still only half-visible through melting humps of snow, the snowed-in Chevy a distant lump farther ahead. Cas added, "But I can't seem to come up with any rationale for involving him that would justify the added risk. He's safer if he's not involved."

"I know," said Dean, with a sigh. "I know. We both want him along, and we both know that's a dumb idea. Sam's on a whole different path now, and the last thing I want is to mess that up. His internship, his whole career...." He hesitated, a certain dark-eyed woman coming to mind. Black-eyed, really.

"And Ruby?" suggested Cas. "You're still worried about Ruby, aren't you? I still wish I had gotten to meet her."

Dean could only shrug. Ruby still gave him the creeps, but that wasn't any of his business. "Maybe Ruby'll work out for Sam, maybe she won't," said Dean, "I dunno about that. But what I do know is, the last thing Sam needs is to be dragged into a cross-continental chase with us, dodging actual frickin' archangels. He should stay out of it. It just still bugs me to leave him, is all."

"Maybe we can open lines of communication with him at a later stage," Cas suggested. "I mean, if we survive."

"Like I told you before," Dean said, with a laugh, "I really love your optimism."

They came, at last, to a certain hill, quite close now to the snow-covered Chevy. Dean pulled out the GPS out of his pack, and then, with Dean calling out directions to Cas from the GPS, they made their way up the slope. They went fairly rapidly at first, hiking up through swiftly melting snowdrifts...
and across wet patches of cottongrass, Dean peering at the GPS screen while Cas scanned the
ground ahead.

At last Cas pointed ahead. "There!" he said. Ahead was a fluttering dot of pink. Cas made his way
toward the little pink flag, slowing down as he got closer, both of them breathing heavily now from
the uphill hike. "Gotta be just up ahead," Dean called, consulting the GPS's little screen once more.
"Within the next six meters."

Cas began moving very slowly, one step at a time, lifting each boot and studying the patch of snow
ahead very closely before he put his foot down. Dean inched along behind, following Cas's tracks
exactly.

A whistled cry overhead made them both look up; one of the golden plovers was circling overhead.

"I'm just here to check on the nest," Cas said to it. This didn't seem to reassure the bird at all, for it
just kept circling around them, letting out a long series of endless cries. Cas crept forward, scanning
the ground.

"Pink, there," Dean said, pointing. There was another dot of pink flagging tape ahead, this one tied
low to the ground, its end sticking out from a patch of snow. Cas nodded and took another careful
step closer, and Dean jumped as a second bird came bursting out of a round lump of snow by the
low pink flag. It limped away dramatically, dragging a wing and letting out a pathetic series of calls.

"Oh shit, it's hurt!" Dean said.

Cas laughed, shaking his head. "It's fine. It's just a broken-wing display. She's trying to get us to
follow her. Which is to say, she's trying to get us away from their nest."

"Jeez," said Dean, eyes still on the plover. The black-and-gold bird, about pigeon-sized, looked as if
it were on death's door. It was thrashing pitifully in the snow now, one wing still dragging as it let
out pained cries. "Are you sure it's all right?"

"She's fine," said Castiel. He leaned down to the spot the bird had emerged from, which seemed to
be a tiny snow-covered igloo. Cas brushed away a bit of snow, revealing an overturned wicker
basket with a hole cut in the side. Carefully, he picked it up.

Within were four perfect speckled eggs, pointed sides in, in a low flat nest of moss and lichen. Cas
touched them delicately. "Warm," he reported. "They survived. Oh, I'm so pleased. See, here, Dean,
touch an egg. Gently, now, don't crush it, but it's safe to touch it if you're careful."

Dean crouched down and gently laid one finger on an egg, a little worried he might crush the thing
just with a fingertip. The egg's smooth surface was radiating heat.

"Wow," Dean said. "Toasty warm."

Cas nodded. "Given a bit of assistance, the parents do an excellent job." As Dean stood and backed
a step away, still a little worried he might step on the nest, Cas added, "I can't protect every nest,
obviously, but I always worry about birds that have happened to place their nest near the road;
people come by, there's... um... disturbance...." (Dean winced, remembering his target practice.)
"...and nests can get trodden on, and, I don't know, I just like to give them a bit of help when I can."
He tucked the basket under one arm. "Now, let's back up. I've tried to explain to the plovers what
this basket was for, but they're still nervous; large creatures near their nest always make them
worried, even if the large creatures are friendly. Let's follow the mother. She'll love it if we fall for
her distraction display."
Together, Castiel and Dean took a few careful paces away from the nest, and then they both turned toward the bird with the broken wing. She struggled along before them, flailing in the snow. Now she was actually dragging herself along the ground with her one good wing, looking up at them with desperately worried eyes as she gave a pitiful string of frightened peeps.

"Are you sure she's okay?" said Dean, getting worried again.

"She's just making sure we get far enough away from the nest," said Cas. "About three more steps should do it."

The wounded bird struggled ahead of them for three more steps. Then she bounced to her feet and shot into the air, both wings perfectly fine.

"Oh," said Dean. "Okay. Never mind."

Cas laughed. "They're excellent actors. Really quite clever birds." He called to the birds, "Very best of luck to you. I hope you have four healthy chicks."

They walked back down the hill. Dean glanced over at Cas; he seemed a little quiet now, a slightly sad expression on his face.

"Hard to leave your birds?" Dean asked.

Cas nodded. "It's funny, because originally I was stranded up here very much against my will. But after all these years, I seem to have grown fond of the tundra. And its animals."

He was looking around now, a wistful look on his face, and he paused for a moment in his downhill hike to gaze ahead at the distant mountains. The upper reaches of the Brooks to the south were a perfect, seamless white today, freshly coated in snow, outlined against a crystalline blue sky. Around them on the lower tundra hills, the snowmelt streams burbled and the birds sang, the two plovers still circling overhead, as miniature tundra flowers emerged slowly from the melting snow all around.

"I hope I'll be able to be back someday," said Castiel softly. "But I don't know."

"One step at a time," said Dean. He moved closer and reached out to pat Castiel's backpack. As Cas turned toward him with a somewhat wan smile, Dean slid his hand to the back of Castiel's neck, working his fingers under the blue scarf to give Castiel's neck a soft stroke. He knew, by now, that this was something that always seemed to reassure Castiel. Some angel thing, apparently. (Cas had finally confessed that it had to do with something about not being able to "preen" the back of one's own neck).

It worked; meaning, Cas turned to him with a smile, and kissed him.

"Damn, wish we had more time," Dean murmured, a long moment later. "Cause I just thought of something else I'd love to try. Right here, right now, under the sun—"

"We'd get completely soaked in ice water," Cas pointed out.

"Worth it," said Dean.

"I agree," said Cas. "Shall we?"

But the distant sound of a rumbling engine broke the spell. Dean turned to peer toward the Haul Road. Far beyond the white lump of the snowed-in Chevy, a heavy-duty snowplow on caterpillar tires was trundling into view over a distant hill.
Dean sighed. "I think that's my ride," he said.

"Until tomorrow, then," said Castiel. "We'll see each other shortly. Tomorrow at noon we meet at the pingo, correct?"

Dean nodded. "You better be there. I hate that you won't have the radio anymore." He patted his jacket pocket, where the two-way radio was still nestled.

Cas shrugged. "Battery's dying. It won't last till evening anyway. Best you hold onto it yourself until you get back to your own camp — and the GPS too. I want to be absolutely sure you get back successfully to your own camp. I'm going to wait here and watch until I'm sure you've gotten into the snowplow successfully. Besides, I've got the yellow guy."

"You've got the yellow guy," Dean agreed. "I guess that's something. Okay. Bye for now, then."

But he had to take Cas in a tight embrace. Cas grabbed him back.

It was hard to let go. Dean even found himself turning his nose to Cas's neck, almost trying to burrow his nose down into Cas's shoulder in an attempt to inhale that feathery scent one more time.

"Jesus," muttered Dean, his words a little muffled by Cas's scarf. He had to laugh at himself, adding with a chuckle, "I was only in your cave five days, but it feels like the end of the world to leave."

Cas was clinging back just as hard. He said, his voice a little husky, "I will confess that was the best five days I've had since at least 1973. Well, before that, too, actually. Not to mention the most... um... vigorous five days in quite some time."

"More where that came from," said Dean, with another little laugh.

"I certainly hope so. But next time let's skip the first part where you nearly die of hypothermia, okay?"

"Deal," said Dean. The engine sound was drawing closer. Reluctantly, he released his hold and stepped back, one hand sliding down Cas's sleeve to end up holding his hand.

They looked at each other for a long moment. Cas's eyes were limpid blue, matching the boundless sky all around them. The mountains behind, the sunlight on his face, the sound of birdsong....

It was very hard to let go of his hand. But Dean managed to let go at last, and turned to walk toward the Haul Road.

When he climbed into the rumbling snowplow fifteen minutes later, greeted by a jovial snowplow driver who seemed delighted with the company, he turned to scan the distant hills. There was Cas, just a distant speck once again, raising one hand in farewell. Dean rolled down the cab window to raise one hand too.

"Friend of yours?" asked the snowplow guy.

"Yep," was all Dean said.

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Brazil, Dean thought the next morning, now back in his Kupaluk dorm room packing up his clothes.
He'd been doing some research online, as he'd promised Cas, and had some new ideas about where he and Cas could hole up. *We could head to Brazil.*

Or Canada, possibly. Far eastern Canada had some good possibilities; Nova Scotia maybe, or way out at Prince Edward Island.

Or maybe they could hole up someplace in the Alaskan bush. Maybe they didn't need to go all the way to the lower forty-eight; maybe he could set Cas up in some little cabin, somewhere in the nearly infinite stretch of boreal forest south of Coldfoot.

But no, even the vastness of southern Alaska seemed uncomfortably close to Cas's camp at Topaz Mountain, where the mysterious "archangels" would surely come. Best to get out of the state entirely.

Dean was packing up his papers now, including his original Kansas flight itinerary. That flight was long gone, of course, but Dean's hands slowed as he read the destination on the folded piece of paper: Kansas City. A new idea occurred to him. It seemed almost too simplistic: What about Kansas?

Sure, Kansas seemed to be on the no-fly list (literally) as far as Cas's orders were concerned, but clearly those orders were going to be abandoned once and for all. And what had Dean had just realized was, he might actually have a safe house in Kansas. A literal safe house. Not in Kansas City, of course and not in Lawrence, either — in Lebanon. Cas could hide out on that worthless old farm! That farm that Dad had bought a few years back, the place up in tiny Lebanon, Kansas, a minuscule speck of a town in the middle of nowhere by the Nebraska border. Nobody knew about that old farm! In fact, nobody besides Bobby even knew that Dean and Sam owned any property at all, let alone where it was. They'd all kept mum about it. Dad had done the deal through such a weird series of shell companies and off-the-books cash deals that it had taken Sam and Dean years just to trace the path of ownership, even long after they had technically inherited it. It was as if Dad had actually been trying to hide the details of who exactly owned that property now, for some reason. Even the survey boundaries hadn't been all that clear; Dean had finally had to get the county surveyor to re-survey the lines just this past winter, just to clarify the borders of what they actually owned.

Nobody knew about that farm. Bobby hadn't told anybody — Dean had asked him to keep it quiet, since none of them even knew yet what they'd inherited. Dean hadn't mentioned it to anybody either (the whole thing had been kind of a painful reminder of Dad's strange decline into his own peculiar obsessions, in those achingly sad years after Mom had died.) And Sam hadn't told anyone. (Well, assuming Sam hadn't told Ruby.... But he'd have had no reason to.)

Lebanon. It'd be a long drive. But once they got there, it'd be perfect.

Kansas, then.

Dean moved on with re-packing his duffel, now adding a few additional clothes for a potentially longer trip. In several ways this was a trickier packing job than his earlier departure had been. It'd be a long overland drive, not a flight. And, though the camp staff thought he'd be back in a week, in reality he might be leaving for good. More clothes, then. More underwear, more socks. More warm layers, in case they had to camp in northern Canada along the road.

*On The Road* went into the duffel as well, loose pages stuffed carefully into it — Cas had said to bring it along, for he wasn't done reading it. Even if they were going to be on the run, there was room in the duffel for a few small personal possessions. In fact...

Dean reached out to pluck the mammoth tooth and the bear claw up from his small array of
possessions. The bear claw went deep into his duffel. The mammoth tooth, though... Dean gazed
down at it, hefting it in his hand. Then he looked out his dorm-room window at the mountains,
which were gleaming white today against a bright blue sky, as he recalled the day by the Kupaluk
stream, with the Kupaluk scientists, when he'd first found the tooth.

Just as Cas had been struggling to leave his birds, it turned out it was surprisingly hard for Dean to
leave Kupaluk in mid-season like this.

The thing was, this was Dean's camp, and these were Dean's people. His place to protect. It had
been that way for nearly fourteen years. And as determined as Dean was to help Cas get away from
those sadistic archangel overlords, it also felt very odd, and even a little wrong, to be leaving Ryan
and Shelly and all the others. It was "just a job," sure, but still, he felt responsible for the place. He'd
helped make it what it was today. Dean was even still a little hopeful that he could come back to
Kupaluk for short shifts now and then once Cas was settled in, but it was starting to feel like this
might be a long-term deal.

Of course Kupaluk would be fine. The camp had operated for years before Dean had ever been here,
and it would go right on after he left. They'd been fine without Dean during the storm, in fact. Ryan
had carefully followed the storm protocol and everything had gone well. (He'd even fed the junco.)
And Shelly was here now, too; she'd finally gotten down from Deadhorse just yesterday, as soon as
the road from the north had opened. She was an experienced camp manager, and she'd be solid.
Ryan could take Dean's shift when Shelly rotated out. Ryan had actually been doing well this year
— minor mistakes aside, he had a season under his belt now, and most of his errors this season had
downgraded to the less important stuff like the wooden-board-length snafu. He'd be okay. Maybe
Dean could call in now and then (from some suitably untrackable burner phone) to see if things were
going okay and see if he could give any advice.

Still, though, leaving Kupaluk just felt a little wrong. But the decision was still firm in Dean's mind.
Cas had to leave, and Dean had to help him.

*It's a sin to clip an angel's wings,* Dean thought. The thought had a ringing clarity to it. *It's a sin to
clip an angel's wings. I don't care if it's an archangel that did it. It's a sin.*

He'd never been one to think much in terms of "sins", but he knew, he knew somehow, that what
had happened to Castiel was deeply, horribly wrong. And Dean had to help him.

*I've only known him a few weeks,* Dean tried to remind himself. Yet it still seemed, somehow, that
they'd known each other years. And try as he might to remind himself to stay cool, to stay skeptical,
not get in over his head, to not fall head over heels for someone that he'd only been sleeping with for
a week, Dean knew it was all a done deal by now — at least in his own heart, anyway. He could tell
himself *Don't drink the Kool-Aid* as much as he wanted, but the fact of the matter was that he was
head over heels for Cas. And it wasn't even just the sex. The sex was awesome, more than awesome,
but it was far more than that.

It was that Cas was the good guy.

Cas cared. He cared about the people at Kupaluk, he'd cared about Sam and the state of Sam's soul,
he cared about every little bird and every little bird nest. He'd gone running out in a blizzard to try to
put a little shelter over a bunch of little speckled eggs, for chrissake. He'd been giving advice to a lost
junco, a single lost little bird out of all the millions of lost birds that must die up here every year. And
despite the fact that many juncos must have died before, and many would die again, Cas cared about
the one that he'd met, and he'd tried to help it. He cared; he cared about the humans, he cared about
the animals, he cared about Sam and he cared about Dean. He cared about the whole planet.
Cas was good. He was good right down to his angelic-wavelength bones.

And all he'd done wrong was to pop on down to Illinois for a little look around, ten years ago, and take one particular "vessel" instead of another one. What could harm could that possibly have caused? And for that tiny, infinitesimal transgression, he'd been exiled to the frickin' Arctic for forty-plus years! They'd stuck him about as far away from humanity as they could possibly get him... and it was abundantly clear that Castiel was an angel who enjoyed human company. Dean had been thinking about Cas's story for days now, and he still winced to think how lonely Cas must have been. He'd survived up here, sure; he'd been resourceful and clever. But it was very clear (to Dean, anyway) that he'd also been lonely. Achingly, desperately, lonely. Exiled from his own kind, barred from humanity too. And all those years he'd had his sadly crippled wings dragging at his back, reminding him at every step what he'd once been, and what he could never be again. Reminding him of everything he'd lost.

But was it all really lost?

If Dean could only get him away from the archangels... what if his wings never got clipped again? What if all his feathers regrew?

What if Cas could get his powers back?

And it wasn't even just about Cas. It wasn't just a little family squabble. This was big. This was bigger than all of human history. That word Castiel had been slinging around so casually, "Apocalypse"....

This might really matter.

Dean turned away from the window, wrapping the mammoth tooth in a cotton bandanna and tucking it his pocket. He zipped his duffel closed, mentally going over the last items on the to-do list. Last to-do's before fleeing from the archangels, he thought to himself ruefully. In half an hour the great journey would start; the great escape. Was he ready? He looked down at his packed gear, hands propped on his hips, reviewing the details.

Dean had already checked the Chevy over a dozen times this morning, haunted by worries about its recent string of breakdowns, but everything seemed to be working fine. Its only flaw now appeared to be a scratched-up windshield (Ruby's damn doodle turned out to have etched down right through the mud into the glass, somehow). And the camp manager's office had had not one but four spare keys. Two were in Dean's pocket now (Cas would get one, Dean would keep the other), and the other two were already newly taped in secure locations under the front and rear bumpers.

Everything was packed. He checked his watch; it was ten a.m. Cas was closing up his cave this morning, packing up his few possessions and storing the rest, and he was probably already hiking to the pingo-hill. Dean would meet him there at noon. Then they'd take one last look around, at that vast lake, at Topaz Mountain and the yellow-billed loons, at the tundra flowers and all of Cas's little birds singing their songs.

Then they'd walk down the long boardwalk, down the first hill and over the second, to where the Chevy would be waiting. Dean already had a stack of blankets propped up on the truck seat, to elevate Cas's seating position a little and make room for his wings so he could sit comfortably. The shotgun and pistol would be coming with them, while the rifle would stay at Kupaluk for bear safety until Shelly could arrange a replacement. The rest of the gear was already in the Chevy, including two sleeping bags (the kind they could zip together to make an extra-large bag, big enough for two). There were several gallons of water, and an extra carboy of fuel, and two full-size spare tires. There were plenty of warm clothes, and boxes of provisions — canned soup, beef jerky, Fig Newtons, trail
mix, instant oatmeal and granola bars. Dean had ransacked the dining hall just an hour ago, after breakfast, grabbing some additional piles of snacks. (Ted had spotted him, but he'd said nothing. In fact he'd disappeared into the kitchen and had come out a moment later with one last pie, a big one, which he'd boxed up silently and had put in Dean's hands.)

There was even a pair of battered old binoculars, in case Castiel might want to look at some birds en route.

They'd get in the truck. Then Dean would drive to the junction with the Haul Road, where they'd take that great turn to the south, toward the Brooks.

They'd drive south over Atigun Pass (which had just an hour ago been reported clear), and through the hours and hours of endless black-spruce forest.

They'd cross the Arctic Circle, and when midnight came, the sun would sink below the horizon behind them at last. They'd drive on through the wee hours in the eerie arctic twilight. Maybe they'd even get to see the northern lights.

They'd reach Fairbanks in the early hours, and would catch some sleep in the truck. Then a quick set of errands: Dean had arranged to buy the truck from the Fairbanks office and get a new set of plates, and Cas had a drawing for some sort of glyph-type tattoos that they were both supposed get right away at one of Fairbanks' tattoo joints.

After that Dean would pull the last of the cash out of his bank account. It wasn't a whole lot, but it'd be enough for what they needed. Enough for gas to get the Chevy all the way down through the Yukon and B.C., and to anywhere in the lower forty-eight. Enough for food. And enough for some ammo, and a replacement rifle as well.

They'd head east to Canada, driving straight on through the twilit night, and onto the infamous "Alcan," the great Alaska-Canada Highway. It would take them all the way to Seattle.

If they drove sixteen hours a day with no breaks, they'd reach Kansas in a week.

The archangels were perhaps a small flaw in the plan. Over the last few days, Cas had tried to explain to Dean what archangels were capable of, but it had all been a little confusing. (Partly because Cas's explanations had kept getting interrupted by more, and longer, episodes in the fur bed. And episodes on the hearth by the fire, and even out in the snow at the cave entrance.) Whatever the details about the archangels, Dean was keenly aware that he and Cas were going to be woefully underpowered. But at least they had an initial advantage of stealth and surprise. With any luck they could simply sneak away.

Dean surveyed his little room. Everything was ready. He glanced down at his snowpants-and-Tufs outfit, which should be suitable for hiking up to meet Cas at the pingo in the current soggy melt-off conditions. And he patted his pocket, where he'd bundled up the mammoth tooth in its soft cotton bandanna. The bear claw was already packed away in his duffel, but he was planning to make a gift of the mammoth tooth to Castiel. Cas might have to leave his own mammoth relics behind, that tremendous skull with the great curved tusks, and the huge shaggy fur. But maybe he could at least keep Dean's little tooth fragment, as one last memento of his mammoth friends.

Dean donned his pack, hefted his duffel in one hand, checked the pistol holster, slung the shotgun case over his shoulder, and strode out to the Chevy.

He paused a long moment, gazing up at the Alaska state flag that was whipping in the wind on the dining hall's flagpole. It was one of the loveliest of the U.S. state flags, certainly the simplest in its
design, just the Northern Star and the Big Dipper in a plain array of golden stars against a midnight-blue sky.

How many times had Cas watched those stars wheeling overhead, during his long dark winters alone up here?

But something else had drawn Dean's attention to the flag: the wind was picking up. A stronger wind than had been forecast.

"You takin' your guns camping?" called a familiar voice, interrupting Dean's thoughts. Dean turned; it was Ryan.

Ryan's expression was cheerful. None of the camp staff knew how catastrophic Dean's storm adventure had nearly been, and none knew where he was headed now. All they knew was that Dean had gotten his truck stuck in the snow, had ended up "hanging out with the bird guy" for a few days, and that the university had approved his staying in his original dorm room for a few more days until the road cleared. Now that the Haul Road was clear, he'd just told them he was going camping to enjoy his remaining week of break, and that he'd be back shortly to help Shelly manage the big influx of June and July summer-season scientists.

Of course, they'd soon hear that Dean had a family emergency and wouldn't be able to return after all. (It was going to be a tale about Bobby suddenly developing a heart condition).

"Yep," said Dean. "I'll be gone a few days. I've still got a week of leave, but now that the snow's melting off the road, the university's gonna start charging me day fees, so I gotta scoot. Want the shotgun just for bear safety, y'know."

Ryan nodded. It was routine for Alaska campers to bring along some bear guns. "Where you going? Denali?"

"Haven't decided yet," said Dean. "Up north to the Sag, at first, I think. The snow's just about all melted off already, have you noticed? Spring's really sprung again. And the mosquitos aren't out yet. That golden week, y'know?" (Ryan chuckled; everybody cherished this time of the year, when the flowers were out, but not the mosquitoes.) Dean added, "Might head up to Deadhorse to hang with my brother. I might've missed my Kansas flight but I still get to have some fun, right?"

It didn't feel good at all to be lying to Ryan, but Dean had acquired a creeping sense of paranoia about what the archangels might do. And the less Ryan knew, the better.

Ryan nodded, grinning. "You go have fun with your bro. Bet he'll be glad to see you — he was pretty worried during the storm. See ya in a few days, right?"

Dean nodded, stifling a sudden urge to give a big, way-too-obvious, farewell hug to his junior assistant.

Ryan started to turn away, but then turned back in midstride and glared at Dean, shaking a finger at him in mock-sternness. "Now, don't you forget to sign out on the whiteboard where you actually went, Mr. Winchester."

Dean laughed. "Whatever made you think of that?"

"Somebody trained me pretty well," said Ryan. "Also, some moron made me pretty damn worried the other day by writing they were going south in a blizzard when they'd really gone north. Some moron named Dean."
"Mea culpa," said Dean, spreading his hands. "I did go south first, you know."

"Tell it to the judge," Ryan said, but he was grinning now. "Seriously, don't worry me like that again. You take care of yourself."

"I will," said Dean. He watched Ryan walk away.

It was a little disconcerting to have Ryan be the one to be lecturing Dean about safety.

The kid would make a good camp manager someday. Someday quite soon, if all went as planned.

With a sigh, Dean went to his camp manager’s office, where the sight of the row of little radios in their charging stations brought another unexpected surge of nostalgia. He shook his head at himself. No point in getting sentimental; it was time to get going. He powered on the computer just long enough to write one last message.

It ended up taking nearly fifteen minutes just to write the first part:

---

**Hey Sam. I'm heading south for a bit. On leave from Kupaluk. You might not hear from me for a bit. Don't worry, you know I always take care of myself. Just gonna go out and see the sights. Thought I might take up bird-watching.**

**Paid off your tuition by the way. With any luck you'll never figure out a way to pay me back.**

**Hey, do you remember that year when Mom was going on about all that bible stuff? That time when she was sure demons were hunting her? I've been looking into it a little. Never been a Bible reader much, you know that, but I'm starting to think there's some freaky stuff out there. I wish I'd listened more to what she was saying.**

**Anyway, you hang on to your soul.**

**Take it easy. Watch out for that Ruby. I know you're into her, but there's something about her. Just stay on your toes, okay?**

---

Dean paused there, re-reading it for the twentieth time. it had taken several attempts before he'd felt satisfied with the phrasing for the one small clue that he might be with Castiel, and the hints about demons. And even now he couldn't seem to figure how to finish it. He sat there with his hands on the keyboard, fighting off a fatalistic sense that this was a final good-bye. And if this was goodbye... dammit, there was so much more to say. So much they'd never gotten to talk about.

Dean suddenly wanted to tell him everything. All the huge secrets. The wings. Cas being an angel. The Prince of Hell loose upon the earth, the crazy time-travel story, the Pleistocene animals. Cas's awful tale of his little lonely three-day trip to goddamn Illinois, of all places, and the forty-year hell it had landed him in, wandering the Arctic in exile with his destroyed wings. The desperate journey he and Cas were about to attempt.
Sam would never believe it. It had been hard enough for Dean to believe it, even with Cas's actual physical wings right there in front of him, and Cas doing all his magical animal-communication and lightbulb-fixing. Yet it was real; those wings were real. And whatever the archangels and demons were, whatever they could do, they were real too.

But Sam would never believe it, and it would put him in jeopardy if he knew.

There was more, too, that Dean wanted to tell him. So much more. About Cas, about the nature of his and Cas's relationship, and the secrets of Dean's past Haul Road life that he'd never come clean about.

And all sorts of big-brother advice as well. Even just mundane stuff, about jobs, and careers, and Sam's new life, and where it might all take him. How fourteen years could zip by in the blink of an eye. How you could make all the plans in the world, and have the biggest dreams, and then just end up fixing trucks day in and day out while the years flowed by like water.

How, when at last you found the thing you truly wanted, you had to go for it. No matter what.

Be safe, find love, live your life, Dean wanted to tell him. Oh, and, you might wanna get this one tattoo.

But in the end Dean just signed off with:

I wouldn't mind doing another road trip with you someday. I'll be in touch.

If you don't hear from me, you take care of Bobby.

And you take care of yourself too.

D

He pressed Send on the email, and then found he had to wipe his eyes.

Then he shut the computer down and looked around the room one last time. He frowned a little at the windspeed indicator mounted on the wall, which seemed to be picking up even more. The NWS six a.m. forecast hadn't had anything about strong winds. This gave Dean a moment of worry, and he rechecked the NWS forecast online, but there was absolutely nothing about any approaching storm. At least this time Dean had much more foul-weather gear, multiple extra truck keys taped to various strategic places, and he had his outdoor gear on his actual body this time (not idiotically placed inside the truck). There was no way he'd be taking even a single step out of the truck without his pack and his guns.

Better get a move on before the weather picks up, thought Dean. Don't want a repeat of last week.

He stepped outside the manager's office and picked up a dry-erase pen.

On the big blackboard, he wrote:
Who: Dean

Where: Sauna, then Deadhorse (camping en route at Sag River for a few days)

How: Baby

Time out: Noon

Time expected back: Next Wed.

Overdue: Next Thurs.

Dean looked at his handwriting moment, chewing his lip. The "Where" column was a complete lie, as were the "Time expected back" and the "Overdue".

He sighed, checking his watch. Plenty of time still. Actually, maybe he could grab one last shower, and one last shave, and —

There was a sudden sharp beeping from behind him from the camp manager's office. It was so loud it made Dean jump; it was unfamiliar, too, a harsh and grating beep. Was it the fire alarm? Puzzled, he took a step back into the manager's office.

It wasn't the fire alarm. It was coming from the bank of equipment on the long table. There were so many pieces of equipment stacked up there, the GPSs and all the two-ways and multitudes of other devices, that it took Dean a minute to figure out which thing was actually beeping. It was the base receiver of the bright yellow satellite beacon - the emergency transmitter. Somebody must have pressed the red emergency button on their hand-held, the button that automatically transmitted lat/long to this base receiver. Dean had never actually heard it go off before. They'd occasionally used the yellow transmitters for (expensive) texts, as Dean had done a few days ago, but nobody in camp had ever had to use the red emergency lat/long button.

After a startled moment of staring blankly at the receiver, Dean lunged for it. There were several people in camp who had these yellow transmitters. Ryan had one, Shelly had one, Phil had one, and the Cornell team had one. And Cas, of course, had one. He'd watched Dean use the transmitter just days ago, using it to send that one pricey text to Ryan. Dean hadn't pressed the red lat/long emergency button that day, but Cas certainly knew where that button was, and what it did.

Dean snatched up the base unit and peered at its tiny gray monitor.

EMERGENCY SATELLITE TRANSMISSION

BEGIN

Dean, they've come early. I'm surrounded. Cant meet you. So sorry. Leave now go far away. Couldn't last no regrets so glad we met c

LAT/LONG: 68° 44' 02.9112" N / -149° 48' 33.2994" W

END
Dean stared at the message. For a long moment he could only read Cas's message over and over, but at last his eyes went to the Lat/Long numbers at the end.

Lat/Long meant Latitude/Longitude, and the numbers that followed were the exact degrees, minutes and seconds of Castiel's location when he'd pressed the red button. Latitude 68° 44' 02.9112" north. Longitude -149° 48' 33.2994" west. The first parts of those numbers, the degrees and minutes, were always the same around Kupaluk; it was the third number that was important. And Dean knew that "02.9", and he knew the "33.2." He'd seen those numbers before, several times. He'd seen them just yesterday when he'd been guiding Cas back to the snow-covered plover nest.

He grabbed a GPS unit from the charging bank and typed in the lat/long numbers, heart pounding.

A green map leapt onto the GPS's little screen, with a neat black pin dead center on Cas's location. Dean zoomed out on the map.

Cas had pressed the red button from the summit of Topaz Mountain.

They'd surrounded Castiel at Topaz Mountain. Somehow he'd gotten out of his cave, and then he'd probably done the only thing he could do; he'd gone up. Up to the summit. He hadn't had the radio anymore, but he'd managed to bring the yellow satellite transmitter, and he'd remembered how to use it. He'd even had time to type a few lines. Though it seemed like he'd been hurrying at the end.

Dean spun toward the door. He almost pelted straight past the whiteboard, but something made him stop, a sharp memory of Ryans’ worried face. Dean snatched up an eraser, wiped away everything he'd just written, and scribbled one last thing:

**Who:** Dean

**Where:** TOPAZ-DONT FOLLOW

**How:**

**Time out:**

**Time expected back:**

**Overdue:**

The pen fell to the floor with a clatter as Dean bolted out the door to the Chevy.
Dean was halfway to the Chevy before he realized how strong the wind had gotten. A sharp gust actually shoved him off-balance halfway through the Kupaluk parking lot and he had to pause in mid-stride just to catch his balance. He looked up, then, across the lake — toward Topaz.

A huge thunderhead cloud seemed to have boiled up out of nowhere, swirling right around Topaz Mountain. The rest of the sky was still a perfect, cobalt blue, but over Topaz, clouds seemed to be somehow assembling out of nothing, as if condensing directly out of the blue sky. They were forming a towering series of bulbous, puffy dark clouds that piled up in a unified clump right around the little mountain. A few peripheral clouds were breaking loose of the main cluster and spreading out in a broad swirl around the mountain's base, sailing over the tundra in oddly random directions. One of these stray clouds was soaring over toward Kupaluk, and it seemed to be bringing the sudden gusts of heavy wind with it. Yet somehow the majority of the dark, boiling clouds seemed to be staying anchored in the sky right above Topaz, as if pinned over the little mountain by some freakish local surge of gravity.

A cold prickle ran down Dean's spine as he took in the sight. This couldn't be natural.

Dean tore his gaze away from the strange pile of dark clouds, and he broke into a sprint again, headed for the Chevy, backpack and shotgun case thumping against his back. He had to get to Topaz. He had to.

Despite the flood of near-panic about Cas, despite the dread at seeing those eerie black clouds, Dean also found himself assessing the situation ahead of him almost coolly, even as he ran. In a strange way, it almost felt like familiar second nature to be charging toward actual supernatural forces, instead of running away like any rational person would clearly do. He even found himself trying to strategize. Options, he found himself thinking, as he dashed across mud puddles toward the truck. Consider all the options.

Backup, he thought next. I need backup. "Backup" for a battle was not a concept that had ever entered his thoughts before, but it popped instantly to mind now, almost as if he'd been spending the last fourteen years as some kind of warrior, rather than as camp manager of a peaceful research station.
And, oddly, Sam jumped to mind instantly as well. Sam would be excellent backup. Sam should be by Dean's side. Sam would be perfect.

Wait, no. What on earth was Dean thinking? First off, Sam was hundreds of miles away. They'd never even worked together as adults. Besides, why had he thought about his kid brother Sam, his nerdy Stanford-lawyer brother of all people, in terms of "backup" for a potentially life-and-death battle? Sam had never done anything like this in his life! (And neither had Dean.)

Anyway, Sam was too far away. Ryan and the other camp staff were a no-go; they were too naive, too ignorant of the stakes, too innocent. No, Dean had to do this alone.

Dean splashed up to the truck, but as he reached for the door another very strange thought shot through his head: *Good thing I got the Impala. Fastest car on the road.* He even found himself reaching far too low for the door-handle, as if he'd been expecting a small car rather than the tall truck.

He hesitated, one hand actually brushing the mud of the truck's dark side. Even the mud seemed surprising; Dean had somehow been expecting the polished mirror surface of a well-loved classic car.

But obviously the Chevy wasn't an Impala. It was just an old Suburban. Just an old muddy camp truck.

What the hell was he thinking? Was he going nuts?

Dean stood there a long moment in the mud, confused, one hand still on the old truck's door. For a long, incomparably eerie moment there was the utterly baffling sensation of a second Dean somewhere close by, almost like some other Dean had briefly hijacked his thoughts somehow... somebody else, from some other universe, somebody who was even now asleep and dreaming of the Arctic.

He had to physically shake his head to get himself moving again, fumbling the door open and jumping into the old truck. As he flung his pack and shotgun case beside him he reminded himself, *It's a goddamn Suburban.*

*Not an Impala. Get your fucking head screwed on straight.*

And it was a damn good thing it was a Suburban, because he wouldn't have had a prayer with an Impala anyway. It simply wouldn't have had sufficient clearance and traction on the muddy and half-frozen Haul Road. A Suburban was actually better, up here. Even so, it'd be difficult to get to Topaz in less than an hour. Dean knew he'd have to abandon the old truck at the turnoff by the three boulders. He'd have to run all the rest of the way to Topaz on foot.

Well, so be it. With one last glance at the swirling dark clouds over Topaz, Dean jammed the key into the ignition and fired up the engine, and the sturdy old truck roared to life. Dean cranked the wheel hard and gunned the gas, whipping the truck around Kupaluk's muddy parking lot in a dizzyingly tight turn, a big rooster-tail of brown water soaring up behind him.

And somewhere an infinite distance away, yet somehow right nearby, it seemed that the other, sleeping, Dean smiled. Again there was that odd sense of deja vu, of a doubled self; and a thought floated through his mind that whatever the universe, there was nothing like that rush of acceleration, nothing like that sensation of flying into action, of racing off, of knowing he was on his way to help Castiel or Sam.
Dean tightened his hands on the wheel, shaking his head to make himself focus. Past the double-decker outhouse they went, Dean and the old black truck (and, maybe, the illusionary sleeping-Dean as well). Past the Alaska state flag with the North Star whipping high in the wind, past the Kupaluk flag with its little Lapland longspur winging over the Arctic Circle, and past the stars-and-stripes. The Chevy kicked up another huge wake of muddy water as it roared past them all. Past the door to the dining hall — where Ryan was even now coming out of the entryway doors, looking a little shocked at Dean's speed. Past the shower trailer and the Winter Lab and the Weatherports and Big Mama the generator, and past the two little helicopters, which were both quivering visibly in the wind, their tie-downs barely holding, the chopper crew dashing around securing them with more lines. Then past the long stretch of tundra to the Haul Road, past all the arctic ground squirrels sitting up alertly on their burrow-hills barking as the truck roared past, and all the little birds hunkering down before the wild wind.

The surreal "second-Dean" feeling finally faded as Dean took the turn onto the Haul Road; this stretch of driving would require ferocious concentration and Dean could focus on nothing else. He swung the Chevy hard to the north, barely even slowing for the turn. Right away the truck slewed into a thick patch of icy mud and sailed into a lazy skid, and Dean only straightened it out with an effort. The road wasn’t in good shape. Passable, yes, but not in shape for fast driving. Most of the snow from the storm had already melted and had been churned into mud, but the slushy mud had been carved by passing semis into deep sticky furrows that kept catching the truck’s tires, yanking it in unexpected directions every few seconds. Dean gritted his teeth, floored the gas and took the Chevy north as fast as he dared.

It was a rough ride. The Chevy went careening through the mud ruts at teeth-jolting speed, lurching hard whenever a tire caught a rut at an angle. Dean held the wheel firmly, riding out the jolting lurches and reminding himself to go with the skids, not to fight them. During a brief moment of calm he managed to glance over at his pack, which lay on the passenger seat beside him. Again that eerie sense of cool experience came over him, as if this sort of crazy desperate drive was something that happened regularly in some other life, and this time he found himself taking a weirdly calm mental inventory of the weapons that he had on hand. Dad’s ivory-handled pistol was in the holster on the pack; the shotgun was in the rainproof case and would just take a moment to pull out. The rifle was still back at the camp manager’s office, but at least Dean had Castiel's silver knife with him, whatever that might be good for. Cas had fashioned a rough leather sheath for it two days ago, which Dean had put on his belt, and the haft of the silver blade was even now bumping against Dean's ribs.

It was definitely a little strange how calm he felt, how eerily second-nature it seemed to be dashing toward the danger. Not to mention how odd it was for Dean to be calmly reviewing his weapons as if he were channeling some kind of ghostly U.S. Navy Seal. The truth was that he was absolutely terrified. Something horrifying was clearly unfolding today, scant miles away at Topaz. Something larger than life, something unimaginable, and his best friend Cas was trapped right in the middle of it. (Best friend. Best friend. Not just a fling, and not just a crush. Cas was Dean’s best friend. It felt undeniable.) Archangels were up there, actual archangels, and poor Cas in the middle of it. What could Dean even do, even if he could get up there in time?

It seemed the game was over before they’d even gotten started. Yet Dean couldn’t help feeling that if he gave it his absolute all, if he took all his weapons and took his fastest vehicle and threw caution to the winds and dove, recklessly, head-on into the battle, that somehow they might have a chance.

I can't just let them take him, Dean thought. With one hand, he reached into his jacket and brushed the haft of Cas’s silver blade with his fingertips. I gotta fight.

Even if this is the last thing I do, I gotta try.
The truck shuddered again. It was hitting stretches of icy slush now, half-frozen puddles mixed with mud. At times it flew into a sort of a floating skid, only a tire or two in firm contact with the road, and there were moments when the steering wheel seemed to pull in the wrong direction. Just the mud ruts yanking at the tires, of course. *I know this road*, Dean tried to reassure himself. *I know these sorts of conditions; I can handle this.*

"Sorry, Baby," he muttered aloud. "I know you've had a hard time lately. Just get me there."

The truck seemed to ride a little better if he centered it in the middle of the road rather than staying over in his lane. Well, lanes up here were kind of hypothetical anyway — it's not like there were even any lane markers on the rough gravel surface. As long as nobody else was coming the other way, riding the center was sometimes necessary. And what were the chances of somebody coming the other way exactly now, at exactly this spot on the Haul Road?

He was barreling up the crest of the last hill before Cas's turnoff, concentrating on keeping the truck straight, when the Chevy's CB radio crackled to life. "Southbound coming over the hill by Topaz, southbound by Topaz," said a tired-sounding voice. A semi was coming the other way, and by common Haul Road convention, the trucker was announcing to any other vehicles that he was about to crest the hill and come down the other side. Only at this point did Dean realize that he was on a famously blind stretch of the Haul Road — it was dead straight here, rising to a little hilltop just ahead where it was impossible to see over the other side. And Dean had forgotten to announce his own presence.

Dean grabbed the CB mic, jammed down the button and called out, a little too late, "Northbound here, northbound vehicle coming up!" Simultaneously he tried to slow the Chevy while also coaxing it over to the right, back into his lane.

But the CB wasn't working. There was no crackle of static, no answering "Roger that," from the trucker.

And, worse, the Chevy wouldn't respond to Dean's tugs on the steering wheel.

The steering wheel was stuck. The Chevy wouldn't move out of the center of the road.

And it wouldn't brake.

Dean pulled at the steering wheel, and pulled again, baffled, jamming his foot hard on the brake. The steering wheel wouldn't budge; the brake pedal seemed frozen. He dropped the CB mic and yanked hard on the steering wheel with both hands, yet the old Chevy surged up the road dead-straight, rocketing toward the crest of the little hill. it was as if the truck had gotten glued into the ruts and could only go perfectly straight. And it wouldn't slow down.

Frantic now, Dean nearly stood on the brake pedal, hauling with all his might on the steering wheel. "FUCK this," he said aloud. "FUCK this shit! FUCK IT!" *I don't believe it,* he thought, as he gave the steering wheel a series of powerful yanks, throwing all his weight against it. *Things've been going wrong with Baby every damn day!*

In a flash it finally came to him, then, that just as the strange clouds over Topaz were not normal, just as the odd thoughts from the other-Dean floating into his head were not normal, this recent string of endless problems with the Chevy was also not normal.

Things had been going wrong with the truck ever since Sam's visit.

Or rather, ever since *Ruby's* visit.
Ruby. She'd drawn that little doodle in the mud on the windshield. Dean's eyes shot to the doodle. It was still there, over on the passenger side of the windshield. Dean had tried a couple times to wipe it away, but it had stubbornly refused to wash off, as if the mud around the doodle had gotten glued to the windshield.

Dean yanked on the steering wheel again. The crest of the hill was approaching. He glanced at the doodle yet again, and now it seemed ridiculously obvious that it was an awful lot like those rune things that Castiel had had all over his cave. It was a circle motif with little curlicues and lines inside it. *Glyphs,* and *sigils,* Cas had called them.

*They have some magical properties,* Cas had also said.

What Ruby had drawn wasn't just a doodle, was it?

*For luck,* Ruby had said, as she'd etched it into the muddy windshield.

For luck. Good luck, or bad?

These thoughts all shot through Dean's head in a split second. He was almost at the crest of the hill, still eyeing the doodle, and the Chevy still wouldn't slow, and still wouldn't move over. One of those odd other-Dean thoughts pierced into his head again: *You gotta cut through the sides of the sigil. Break the lines.*

Dean yanked Cas's silver blade out from its sheath. It was the only hard-edged tool within easy reach.

The next few moments unfolded in terrible slow motion. An immense tractor-trailer burst over the hilltop, already horrifyingly close. It seemed to fill the entire road. Dean was headed directly at it. The semi driver was trying to pull over, horn blaring, but only a hundred feet separated them — a second's time, at most — and semi's couldn't turn that fast without tipping right over. Dean did the only thing he could think of: he leaned over and plunged Cas's silver blade, hard, into Ruby's little doodle.

The windshield shattered, the silver blade skewering the "doodle" right in the center. An eerie flash of red sparks showered out from the whole windshield, and at once the steering wheel snapped loose from its strangely stuck position, and the brakes finally engaged, hard. The Chevy veered wildly to the side. With a spray of gravel and mud and another deafening blare of the semi's horn, the two vehicles whipped past each other at what seemed like one inch of distance. The side mirror of the Chevy exploded as it clipped the semi's front bumper, but by some miracle the two vehicles didn't collide. The Chevy veered wildly and went into a frightening diagonal skid along on the very edge on the road, its right tires sinking down into the slushy snow on the shoulder. For a sickening moment Dean was sure the poor truck was going topple right over into the snow-spotted tundra, which lay a dozen feet below the road's high gravel surface.

For a surreal moment, Dean even glimpsed a little pond below him, in which a pair of white swans was sailing like a vision from a dream. He thought at random, *Cas would know what kind of swans those are,* I gotta tell him I saw some swans, as the truck teetered, and skidded.... and straightened out.

"Fucking hell," Dean gasped, heart hammering, as the old Chevy somehow came under control again. The windshield was spiderwebbed with a thousand cracks, but it was still somehow holding together, Cas's silver blade actually stuck halfway through the glass. Dean stole a quick glance in the rearview mirror and saw that the semi, too, had survived — it was straightening out from a near-disastrous veering skid of its own, but it hadn't tipped over.
The CB exploded in swearing. It was the semi driver, of course, who sounded both terrified and furious. The CB mic was dangling by the floor mats now, and Dean at last managed to fish it up by its coiled cord to say, "Sorry dude, my bad, my steering went out or something." The CB seemed to be working now too, for more furious swearing came back at him. But they'd both survived. At last Dean tossed the mic onto the passenger seat and just tried to concentrate on driving.

Ruby. Ruby. The truck really had had quite an extreme run of bad luck since Ruby'd made that damn doodle. The tape player had gone out, then the wipers, the flat tire, the headlight, then that total catastrophe with the door locks in the blizzard — a near-fatal catastrophe, in fact. One thing after another. Then this thing with the steering and the brakes. All in a row. In fact, something different had been going wrong literally every time he'd driven the truck.

Ruby had cursed the truck.

A week ago this would have seemed like complete insanity. But a week ago, Dean hadn't even known that angels were real.

Was Ruby an angel, too?

An archangel? Dean remembered, now, that hallucinatory moment when her eyes had seemed to turn black. Did archangels have black eyes?

Or... did demons?

Ruby was with Sam now....

What the hell had Sam gotten mixed up in?

There was no time to think it through. Cas's turnoff was already just up ahead, and Dean had to focus on slowing for the turn.

Driving with exceptional caution now, Dean pulled the old Chevy off the road and drew it to a sedate halt by the three boulders. He had to take a couple of rather uneven breaths to settle himself after the near-collision, before he could regroup and focus on his next task: getting up Topaz Mountain.

The Chevy had got him four-fifths of the way there, but the remaining fifth might take a while. Topaz lay directly ahead of him to the west, hulking on the horizon maybe two miles off. It was framed by a dramatic sky that was nearly black with billowing storm clouds; during the few minutes that Dean had been driving north, the dark clouds had multiplied, nearly filling the whole sky now. Above Topaz the clouds were blackest of all, with flashes of lightning and forbidding rumbles of thunder now adding to the mix.

Beyond the three boulders was the crooked old road, with Cas's series of nest flags stretching out in a neat, helpful line, little dots of fluttering pink that were whipping hard in the wind. And beyond that was a mile of open tundra. The snow from the storm was already melted off already, the greening tundra peeking through melting patches of white all around. Dean had walked that stretch with Cas just yesterday; what with the mud, tussocks and snowdrifts, it had taken an hour.

But Dean sat a long moment staring ahead. Now all he could seem to see was the featureless expanse of white of several days ago, when everything had been shrouded in blowing snow, Topaz invisible then in the snowstorm. Dean was parked now exactly where he'd parked during the blizzard, and indeed he was about to walk almost the same path, once again trying to help Cas. This time Cas really was in desperate trouble; this time he really did need help. But last time hadn't gone too well,
had it? Dean had screwed up, and had nearly died himself. And the enemy then had only been the snow, a mindless foe that Dean had been dealing with capably for years. Today he was going to fight archangels.

The camp manager of Kupaluk Research Station was hiking off to fight archangels, armed with an angel's blade (that he didn't even know how to use), a couple of guns and a pair of Xtra-Tuf mud boots.

It seemed laughable.

*I don't know how to do this,* he thought, suddenly transfixed with the realization that he was very far out of his element. *I'm not a fighter. I'm not even really any kind of hunter. I'm just a guy who fixes trucks. I'm out of my league here. Punching way out of my weight class.*

But again an almost disembodied thought appeared in his mind. *You're a Winchester,* said the disembodied thought. It felt dreamlike, a fuzzy, almost formless idea that seemed to bubble up sideways from the depths of some kind of deep pool of quietness.

*You're a Winchester. It's what we do. Saving people, hunting things.*

Dean looked again at Ruby's weird doodle, now shattered by the windshield cracks and pinned by the blade. Slowly, he reached out and took hold of the silver blade. It slid out from the windshield reluctantly.

Even if the doodle had actually been some kind of curse, Dean had managed to disable it.

Which might mean that even if magic and demons and angels existed in the world, even if there were mysterious sources of incomprehensible power out there, there might be ways that even a regular guy like Dean could still have an impact.

*Saving people,* Dean thought, looking at the blade in his hand. He glanced over at the gun case. *Hunting things.*

*Saving people, hunting things. It's what we do.* It had the ring of truth.

*Saving people and angels,* he amended mentally. Well, Cas probably counted as "people" now anyway, after what the archangels had done to him.

Dean drew a breath and looked at Topaz again, tucking the silver blade in its leather sheath again, and now it seemed he could see his goal more clearly. Now he could start to plan. Might it be possible to get around the boulders, to get the Chevy a little farther onto that old access road? Peering at the road beyond the boulders, Dean now noticed something he should have seen right away; there were some tire tracks in the mud ahead, running parallel to Cas's line of pink flags. Somebody had driven along the old access road. Recently. Since the storm. In fact... As Dean looked around further, checking the tundra right outside his driver-side window, he realized there were fresh ruts in the mud right here by the boulders, right where the Chevy was now parked. Dean frowned, rolling his window down to take a closer look. The ruts looked brand-new, the ridges of the tireprints still crisp and sharp.

Somebody had driven around these boulders *today.* Just an hour or two ago.

It looked like only one clean set of prints. A single vehicle had driven in, and hadn't driven out yet. A big 4x4, to judge from the spread of the tracks.

Did archangels drive 4x4's?
A slow roll of thunder rumbled in the distance

"Okay, then," Dean muttered to himself. "Showtime." He set the old Chevy's gearshift into Drive, and pulled the wheel sharply to the side. The old truck responded promptly this time, the steering and brakes now working impeccably. Around the boulders the old truck went, and onto the tundra.

After a few wobbly bumps and lurches over a short stretch of tussocks, Dean managed to get the Chevy around the three boulders and onto Cas's old access road. The road, though, turned out to be a "road" in name only. A good forty years had passed since its last use. Deep stream washouts cut sharply across it every few dozen yards, and huge potholes had formed, too, over the years, narrowing the road in places to just a lumpy stretch of holes. At points the road seemed to have vanished almost entirely, replaced by little colonies of puffy willow bushes that were approaching the size of small trees.

But it was driveable, more or less, so Dean drove. The truck lumbered slowly across the washout ruts, it trundled around the little willows, it shuddered its way through the potholes, but it kept going. The truck was responding perfectly to the steering wheel and the brake pedal now, but it was just plain rough going. And every time Dean had to brake, for a washout or a willow or a tussock, he found himself bracing for ambush, half-expecting a herd of archangels to spring out of the bushes (or a "flock" of archangels, or a "gang" or whatever they should be called), maybe with a blare of trumpets and bolts of divine lightning. Yet the abandoned road, as decrepit as it was, seemed oddly peaceful. The willow-shrubs quivered steadily in the wind, Cas's pink flags fluttered fast, and brief spurts of rain were now hitting the shattered windshield sporadically, but nothing else happened.

Biting his lip, hands clenched hard on the steering wheel, Dean drove on. He passed the place where he'd done his target practice. He passed the hill where the golden plovers were nesting — and, in fact, he spotted the two golden plovers themselves, two dark dots in the sky that were wheeling around Dean's truck.

He passed a certain little pond, an icy pond of slush that, he knew, had a hole in its ice, and a lost compass somewhere at the bottom of the pond.

Dean drove on.

The old road petered out after a half-mile, as Dean had known it would, but the fresh ruts kept on going. Whatever vehicle he was following (he was thinking of it now as "the archangels' 4x4") hadn't stopped when the road had stopped, but had just kept right on going, over what looked like a solid mile of cottongrass tussocks that stretched out ahead to Topaz. Driving on tundra was absolutely forbidden for Kupaluk staff, for tundra was very slow to heal, but Dean didn't hesitate, and he guided the Chevy onto the tundra as fast as the old truck could go.

Which wasn't very fast at all. Driving over tundra wasn't like driving through a field. It was more like driving through a field of bowling balls, for each tussock wasn't just a lump of grass but had a solid core of permafrost-ice. The tussocks here were a foot high, and perfectly spaced to trap a truck tire in the spaces in between. Taking it too fast would only guarantee a broken axle or a bogged-down truck, so Dean did the best he could, avoiding the biggest tussocks and trying to coax the Chevy to vault the others.

The Chevy struggled valiantly onward, shocks and springs creaking as it lumbered up and over one
big cottongrass tussock after another. The front end was soon lurching so heavily that Dean was nearly flung right into the windshield a few times. "C'mon, baby," he muttered, when a front tire lodged at a particularly big ice-core, the engine whining. "C'mon. C'mon, baby, you can do it."

The tire spun for a moment, the other three tires gripped and dug in, and the Chevy jumped heavily over the tussock. Lurch by lurch it kept going, vaulting one tussock at a time, sometimes with all four tires seeming to each fight their own personal battles. Dean felt a spark of pride for the old truck. Maybe she wasn't exactly a muscle car; maybe she wasn't as flashy as the classic Impala Dean had always dreamed of, the mythical Impala that seemed to be haunting his subconscious even now. But an Impala couldn't have made it over this kind of ground. Today, a sturdy old black Suburban was the right vehicle for the job, and soon Dean was drawing close to the the foot of Topaz at last.

The little mountain only had a few thousand feet of elevation gain, but it seemed to rear up before Dean now like a great wall of rock and grass and snow, blocking out half the sky. The archangels' ruts weren't headed toward the side of Topaz where Cas's cave was, though. Instead they seemed headed for the easiest trail up to the top, the gentle mossy hiking trail that Cas (and Dean, in previous years) had walked up many times. Just as Dean was trying to pick out the starting point of the trail, a bright gleam ahead caught his eye, something in the midst of a big thicket of wind-tossed willow bushes. As the Chevy staggered closer over tussock after tussock, the gleam resolved into a shining, sparkling clean, new-model Mercedes-Benz GLS. Dean drew the Chevy to a halt nearby, staring.

The Mercedes was flame-red, and it had an Alaska Petroleum logo on the side.

It looked an awful lot like Ruby's truck.

It was Ruby's truck. Dean recognized the license plate. Not that long ago, he'd had to write that plate number down in the Kupaluk visitor's log.

Ruby. Ruby was here.

And she'd left the Mercedes in a strange place. It was skewed sideways, tipped down into a mudhole between two frozen tussocks. Dean paused, the Chevy idling, as he peered at the Mercedes' smoked-glass windows.

He took a moment to assess what he had on hand. Unlike his ill-fated hike in the blizzard, this time, Dean had his black snow pants on, and a decent fleece vest and a gray raincoat. This time, he had his pack with him, with all its extra layers, and rain gear, and pepper spray, and spare food and water.

And the pistol.

And the shotgun.

And even Cas's silver blade.

And this time, he was taking the Chevy key. Even with Ruby's windshield-doodle-thing destroyed, no way was he risking letting locked out again. He even took a quick moment to back the Chevy up into the thickest spot in the clump of willows, hoping to keep it slightly out of view — it might give him a chance at the element of surprise if nobody spotted that there was a second truck by the first one. Then he cut the engine and tucked the key carefully in an inner pocket. The pistol was in its holster; the pack went on his back, the shotgun with its shoulder-strap slung across the pack, unloaded, its double barrels angled carefully to point to the ground behind Dean's feet. He was ready.

A thin, erratic rain was whipping past in gusts as Dean set out. Steady slow rumbles of thunder rolled
overhead, great throaty grumbles that seemed to come spilling down from Topaz's crown of black clouds as if the sky itself were speaking at last. Through the spitting drifts of rain, Dean walked cautiously over to the Mercedes (accompanied by one of the golden plovers, which was still circling overhead — for some reason it had followed the truck quite a long way from its nest site).

It was indeed Ruby's luxury truck. Dean walked a little circuit around it, the golden plover flying three circles around it to Dean's one, as if trying to help him inspect the surroundings. The Mercedes' right front wheel was badly canted; looked like it had broken an axle in its rough tussock journey. Whoever had been in it had been forced to continue on foot.

"Score one for old Chevys," muttered Dean.

Dean turned to look up at Topaz Mountain. The start of the hiking trail was maybe a quarter-mile ahead. It was just the thinnest of paths through the moss and grasses and half-melted snowdrifts, a thin brown line that zigzagged up the side of the mountain through greening tundra and patches of snow. And... was there something moving, there, far up on the trail? Several somethings?

Dean grabbed his binoculars from the back seat of the Chevy and brought them to his eyes, tracing the line of the trail as it zigzagged upwards. Soon he spotted what he was looking for: a distant line of people making their way slowly higher. Four people, all plodding methodically up the long mossy trail. They were only halfway up; it would take them a while yet to get to the top.

They were all wearing new-looking Alaska Petroleum rain jackets, expensive-looking GoreTex in deep red, with the classic AP logo on the back.

One of the four figures was quite tall.

Dean almost stopped breathing. He tried to focus the binoculars a little better, working the focus knob back and forth. The lenses were damp with rain and the view was blurred and fuzzy, but even so, Dean was sure the tall figure was Sam. It had to be Sam, just from the way he was walking, from that long gangly stride, and from the way his head was tilted. It was Sam.

Baffled and worried, Dean watched Sam moving slowly along. Sam and three others. A shorter, dark-haired female figure was a few paces in front of Sam; Ruby, surely. Ahead of her were two men that Dean couldn't identify at all from this distance. Big Oil bosses, maybe? Maybe Alaska Petroleum was doing some kind of totally coincidental survey of the local tundra? (It wasn't out of the question; the entire strip of land on other side of the Haul Road was controlled by AP, and Topaz could conceivably give them a good view of the area.) But why? Why would they be here instead of just using their fleet of helicopters? Surely Sam must have told them they were doing this survey in the most inefficient possible way — and indeed, Sam was trailing a little behind the other three, pausing now and then to look around, as if he was unsure of the route.

Or unsure if he should be hiking at all.

Sam paused again; he looked around.

He was looking toward Kupaluk.

I'm here, Sam, thought Dean. I'm not at Kupaluk. I'm down below you.

As if Sam had heard Dean's thoughts, he turned slightly and looked back down the trail. Down the mountain, toward the Mercedes GLS truck. And Dean's black Chevy.

Deliberately, Dean stepped away from the hidden Chevy, out of the cover of the clump of willows. He stepped up on the tallest tussock around, in plain view. And he saw Sam go very still. Sam had
Dean knew he must have been a tiny figure to Sam from this distance, just a little dot in the distance. But Sam had spotted him; Dean was sure. And Sam knew it was Dean; Dean was sure of that too. Sam could even probably tell that Dean had binoculars up (Dean knew from experience that those dark lenses of the binoculars, and the typical posture of a person holding binoculars to their eyes, were recognizable from a long way off). So Dean held the binoculars in place for several long moments, willing Sam to realize that Dean was actually watching him. Then Dean lifted one arm slowly, waving it back and forth in the traditional one-arm hail.

Sam looked toward Dean for a long moment.

His expression was unreadable from this distance; Dean couldn't even make out his face in the shadow of his rain hood. Sam didn't return the one-arm hail. He didn't do the two-armed "I need help" wave either. Instead he stayed still, just staring in Dean's direction. At last Sam did an exaggerated head shake, and he made one clear gesture: he held one hand out toward Dean, palm outward, fingers spread, arm stiff.

No. Stop.

Don't follow me, was what Sam meant.

Sam held his hand there a moment, and then dropped his arm. Just in time, for Ruby paused in her walking, turning back toward Sam. She was probably asking Sam why he'd stopped. Dean ducked down behind the willows, hoping desperately that both he and the Chevy were hidden well enough. Peering cautiously with the binoculars through the screen of willow-branches, he saw Ruby turn to start looking toward the Mercedes (and toward Dean). But Sam grabbed her, and kissed her.

Soon they were walking on.

Still hidden in the willows, Dean lowered his binoculars, mystified.

It wasn't just Ruby. There were three AP employees involved in this weird angel business. Plus Sam Winchester, the AP legal intern.

Was Alaska Petroleum somehow mixed up in Castiel's whole wing-clipping thing? With the angels? With the archangels? Was Alaska Petroleum run by archangels?

It just didn't seem like an angel-ish sort of company.

Whatever was going on, it was clear that Dean had to get up the mountain. The problem was, they'd see him immediately if he headed up the hiking trail right behind them. Sam was only going to be able to distract Ruby with kisses for just so long, and anybody walking up that exposed trail in this open country was going to be very, very visible. It had been a huge stroke of luck that the Chevy hadn't attracted notice so far, but that luck couldn't possibly hold for a hike all the way up. Especially not with Ruby turning back now and then to check on Sam.

Dean looked to the left of the trailhead, and the right. Maybe he could take some other route up? He decided to try to scuttle a little farther around Topaz, keeping to the willows for cover till he got around the shoulder of the mountain. Hopefully there'd be another hikeable route that went up one of Topaz's many gullies.

It proved to be heavy going, but soon Dean was working his way around the base of the mountain, staying in a thick string of willows until he got out of view around a bend of the mountain. He soon discovered that the willows were lining the banks of a surging snow-melt creek a few feet across,
probably the very same creek Cas had gotten his water from during the storm. It must be the stream that came down off of Topaz's high central mesa.

Gray veils of rain were trailing down now like filmy skirts from the undersides of the darkest clouds, thicker rain than the scattered drops before. One of these rain showers began to blow past, zeroing in on the hiking trail as if on purpose, and Sam and his little band of Alaska Petroleum people were soon shrouded within a thick curtain of gray. Even with their fancy AP raingear, they must have been getting totally drenched. This would surely slow them down; maybe if Dean picked up the pace, he could actually beat them to the top? Dean took a quick moment to inspect them in the binoculars again, and he saw the distant, tall Sam-figure glance surreptitiously toward the Mercedes truck a few times, apparently trying to spot Dean again. Even from this distance it was clear how Sam's shoulders were slumping.

Sam had been trying to keep Dean from following. But just the same, he seemed discouraged now that Dean had apparently disappeared.

"I'm on my way, Sammy," Dean muttered aloud. "I haven't abandoned you."

*Not you, and not Cas.*

Dean scampered onward, pushing through the willows as quick as he could, and finally he rounded a curve of the mountain and got out of view of the AP team. Breathing a sigh of relief, he abandoned the willows at last and started striding, fast, straight up the hill. A gully lay above him, a gully filled with scree — a loose, steep field of gravel. Not ideal, but at least it was headed upward.

*Got no frickin' clue where I'm going,* Dean realized. He was just striking out at random up an unknown face of Topaz Mountain, hoping it would turn out to be hikeable. Scree was very slow to hike through; it constantly gave way underfoot and could sometimes slither a person down farther than he'd hiked up. But there was nothing to be done than just try.

He'd taken a few long steps toward the scree-slope, when there came a ringing cry overhead, a melodic wailing whistle. A faint smile came to Dean's face, for he knew that sound by now. "Golden plover," he muttered to himself, not pausing in his scramble up toward the scree. The bird must have followed him all the way here, maybe still trying to chase Dean away from its precious nest.

*Damn fool bird doesn't know any better,* he thought.

*Birds never give up,* he remembered Cas saying. *They always keep trying. We could learn something from them.*

He kept hiking up.

The plover's melodic cry came again, louder this time.

"Go home and check on your nest," Dean said aloud. He put the bird out of his mind; he had to focus on his climb, which was already seeming rather difficult. He was on the scree now and the footing was indeed very bad, patches of icy gravel already crumbling badly under his feet. Dean was soon gasping with effort, but he kept staggering upwards.

Something patted the top of Dean's head.

He jerked and spun, looking all around. There was nobody there.

Hail, maybe? Heavy rain?
He peered at the bare gray scree-slope around him suspiciously, but nobody was in sight. Even Sam, Ruby and their mysterious two companions were out of view now around the corner of the mountain. A little puzzled, Dean finally moved on.

A few seconds later came another ringing cry, very close and loud now, and another tap on the head, sharper than before. Dean spun in a half-circle, looking up, and there was the golden plover. It was flying in a tight circle around him, eyeing him with liquid dark eyes.

The bird banked and flew directly at Dean's head. It let out another startlingly loud cry, putting out both feet. It was only about the size of a pigeon, with no talons at all and just a harmless-looking little stubby bill, but it suddenly turned out that even smallish birds could seem rather formidable when they were flying at top speed straight at one's face. Dean couldn't help flinching as the golden plover swooped down and gave him, once again, a tiny whack right on the top of the head, slapping him with both its little feet at once. This time it seemed to realize that at last it had succeeded in getting Dean's full attention, for it braked sharply and landed on a tussock just a few paces away.

The plover looked up at Dean. Dean looked down at the plover, utterly confused.

It was just a plover. A type of shorebird, Cas had explained. An elegant shorebird, to be fair; this one seemed to be holding itself with almost military bearing. It had long legs, a crisp black belly, and a clean white stripe above its dark eyes. It had lovely chocolate-brown feathers on its back and shoulders, and every one of these chocolate-brown feathers was frosted with gold. ("Golden" plover, indeed.)

It cocked its head, blinked its big dark Disney eyes at Dean and fluttered one wing. Just one wing.

Was this normal bird behavior?

_Probably not, since nothing's normal today_, Dean thought.

The plover fluttered one wing again, its left wing, and then, quite slowly, it stretched that wing out to the side and quivered it slightly. The movement seemed quite deliberate. Then it began to walk away with an exaggerated shuffling limp, the left wing almost dragging in the snow at its feet.

It was the broken-wing display again.

Dean racked his brain now to remember the details. Cas had said plovers did the fake-broken-wing thing to lure predators away from the nest, didn't they? But this plover's nest was a mile away. It had followed the truck all the way from the nest by the Haul Road.

Wait. The broken-wing thing meant that they wanted the "predator" to follow them.

_Clever birds_, Cas had said.

Hesitantly, Dean took a step toward the golden plover.

The plover immediately tucked its wing up to a completely normal folded position and scuttled farther away. It was headed laterally along the mountainside, as if aiming toward the next gully over. It paused after a few rapid steps and looked back at Dean with those liquid dark eyes.

Dean stared at it a moment, and then glanced back up the foggy route through the scree that he'd been about to blunder his way up into. The moment his eyes left the bird, the plover let out a dismayed piping call, and when Dean looked back at it, it was dragging one wing again.

Once again it tried to lead him, dragging the wing dramatically — and again it was doing its "limp"
toward the next gully over.

"All right, Lassie," Dean said to it. "You say Timmy fell down the well again? Well, take me to him."

Dean followed the bird deliberately this time, walking toward it with steady strides. The plover soon seemed to realize that Dean was really following it now. Again the limp disappeared, the wing tucked back up, and the plover settled into a surprisingly rapid, businesslike scurry, running in brisk bursts along the ground like a little feathered wind-up toy. Now and then it paused and looked back, as if to check that Dean was still following. Occasionally it forgot itself and took to the air, opening both wings and flying ahead far faster than Dean could follow on foot. But each time it seemed to realize it had flown too fast, and it circled back, landed near Dean again and continued to scurry ahead of him.

"I'm following a frickin' bird," Dean muttered aloud. "I'm following a bird. This is insane."

Of course, it was also insane that three staff members of Alaska Petroleum would drive one of their luxury 4x4's straight over uncharted tundra (breaking a dozen environmental laws in the process), snap the truck axle, abandon it, and then hike directly up Topaz Mountain in a thunderstorm. It was insane that they were dragging along a lowly legal intern like Sam. It was insane that the black clouds above Topaz were staying put when there seemed to be gale-force winds blowing by at some fifty miles an hour in every other part of the sky.

It was insane that Castiel had wings growing out of his back. It was insane that his feathers glowed gold when Dean touched them; it was insane that he'd been here ten thousand years ago.

It was insane that archangels had clipped Cas's wings once before, and were planning to do so again.

Dean followed the bird.
The plover led Dean at a surprisingly fast pace to a nearby gully that proved to have a stream tumbling down it — the very same stream, Dean realized, that he'd been following earlier, the one that Castiel had presumably gotten their water from. The stream turned out to come splashing down Topaz from a narrow gully that was completely choked over with snow and ice, the snow piled at least a dozen feet thick. This immediately looked like a horrible route up, much worse than Dean's original scree slope, yet the plover led Dean directly to the apparently impassable wall of snow and ice. It seemed hopeless; the stream disappeared right into the ice. Dean gazed up at the snow-choked gully in dismay. There was no way he'd be able to flounder upwards through those thick snowdrifts.

This whole following-the-bird thing had been a delusional mistake. This was just some other plover, a different plover that had a nest nearby, and it had only been leading Dean away from the nest.

"That's not gonna work for me, sorry," he told the plover. The bird was standing on a rock where the stream disappeared into the snow. It cocked its head at him expectantly. "Thanks anyway," Dean told it, and with a sigh he turned back. He began to retrace his steps rapidly, cursing himself for wasting so much time following a bird. Sam was probably more than halfway to the top already, and who only knew what would happen when the mysterious AP people got all the way up. And who knew what might already have happened to Castiel.

But Dean had only taken a few steps when he felt a familiar tap on the top of the head. The plover landed a few feet in front of him, dragging both wings as dramatically as it could, tail flared high, letting out a series of excited little peeps. It was trying to turn him around.

"I can't get up that gully," Dean told it. "Can't get through a wall of ice, sorry." He tried to move around it, but the plover let out an urgent "EEEP, eep eep eep eep eep!" and dashed in front of him again, so fast that he nearly fell over just trying not to step on it. Dean was starting to get frustrated when a bright loud "CHIP CHIP CHIP" also caught his ear and yet another bird joined the fray, this one a tiny little sparrow-ish thing with dove-gray plumage and white outer tail feathers. Dean blinked.

This bird he knew.
This was a junco. And Cas had told him that there was only one junco in the entire region right now, in this whole stretch of the North Slope. This had to be the lost "dark-eyed junco," the one that Dean had been feeding at camp. It was chirping in excitement, hopping around next to the plover and making excited dashes at Dean's boots. Now there were two birds trying to turn him around.

So apparently I'm a Disney princess now, thought Dean. I'll just go with it. He slowly turned around. The tiny junco and the much bigger plover immediately flew ahead of him, both birds landing side-by-side on the same rock that the plover had been standing on earlier, the rock right where the stream disappeared into the wall of snow. Frowning, Dean stepped closer.

"What the hell are you guys trying to tell me?" he asked them, but both birds just looked at him. The plover shifted its feet a little, half-dropping one wing again as if it still wanted to lead Dean somewhere. The junco's style was different; it was bouncing frenetically, jumping from one rock to another like a restless rubber ball, and suddenly the junco seemed to jump right into the wall of snow, and it disappeared.

Dean walked up to the rock where the plover was. And there, hidden until now by his angle of approach, he found there was a narrow cleft in the snow right where the stream came bubbling down, with walls of ice on either side. This cleft headed uphill. It was just about wide enough for a person. Up ahead, the tops of the two ice walls leaned closer, and met, forming a ceiling of ice.

There's a stream near here that comes down an ice tunnel in spring, Cas had said.

An ice tunnel.

Of course. The Topaz ice tunnel. The snowmelt streams around here could form all kinds of odd ice formations. And when ice and packed snow crusted over the top of a flowing stream, it could freeze over into a sort of roof. Meltwater carved out a tunnel in the snow underneath, and when the meltoff slowed and the stream shrank, the tunnel became passable. Hikeable, sometimes. Dean had even heard before that there was an ice tunnel somewhere around Topaz, though he hadn't been to this part of the mountain for years.

Hiking up ice tunnels was hazardous, though. They could collapse without warning.

And if a flash flood came along, disaster was certain.

It was a very dumb idea, trying to climb up an ice tunnel to get up Topaz when it was starting to rain. It was reckless, and stupid. (Almost as stupid as charging out of his truck in a blizzard and letting all the doors lock behind him.) But it was what the two crazy birds seem to want him to do, and maybe the birds knew something, and maybe they had somehow talked to Cas. Or maybe they hadn't and Dean was completely losing his mind.

Either way, this was probably the only way to get up Topaz that would keep him totally out of view of whoever was at the top.

Dean waded into the stream, newly grateful that he'd happened to have done this whole hike in his trusty Xtra-Tuf mud boots. Even so, the icy water was nearly up to the top of the calf-high Tufs, and he had to advance slowly, bracing each boot carefully against the slippery rocks at the bottom before taking the next step. But the plover stayed behind, watching Dean start working his way up the little stream through the cleft in the steep ice walls. Dean realized it was not coming along, and he looked back toward the plover.

"You gotta get back to your nest or something?" Dean said. The plover just fidgeted a little bit, shifting its feet and shuffling its wings restlessly. "Go, go," Dean told it, waving a hand at it. "Take
care of your kids. Your eggs. Me and the junco can take it from here."

And sure enough, the plover spread both wings and lofted away into the wind.

Indeed the tiny gray junco seemed to be taking the next shift as trail leader, for it was already fluttering from rock to rock ahead of Dean, leading him farther up the stream into the cleft of ice. Dean splashed along cautiously in his mud boots, grabbing at exposed willow branches here and there to keep his balance or to pull himself up a particularly steep stretch. Snow and ice banks rose a good twelve feet on either side as the stream bed steepened, and at last the two banks closed overhead, and Dean was in the tunnel. He paused a moment, peering doubtfully at the ice roof overhead, and stepped into the dim world of ice.

Inside, it was almost magically silent. The rain stopped; the wind stopped; the sporadic booming of the thunder overhead faded to a distant, dull roar. The only sound now was the bubbling of the little stream cascading around Dean's feet. It stretched up in front of him in a long series of little ponds and steep cascading stretches linked by tiny waterfalls, like an endless staircase rising ahead out of sight. Dean started climbing, splashing his way up through one little pond after another.

The ice forming the walls and ceiling of the "staircase" formed almost dizzying shapes. During heavier water flow — as must have occurred in the last couple days of melt-off after the blizzard — the water must have carved away at the ice walls, producing an endless series of curves and bends and slopes. It felt something like climbing through a modern art sculpture. Dean passed through rounded caverns, climbed around sinuous serpentine passageways, and squeezed past narrow ice clefts. Some of the ice looked semi-permanent, years old, with the distinctive blue and green tinge that multi-year ice took on with the passage of time. The whole tunnel glowed dimly with color, aqua and jade and even purple. Though it was exquisitely beautiful, it was also very dizzying, and quite narrow and increasingly claustrophobic. Dean was more and more grateful for the guidance of the little junco, which seemed a welcome spark of life in this eerie multi-colored world of rock, water and sculpted ice. The little gray bird kept hopping ahead, fluttering from rock to rock. It seemed unable to keep quiet and kept letting out a nonstop commentary of excited little chip, chip, chip call notes as it kept hopping along, leading Dean ever upwards. And Dean climbed after it, as rapidly as he could.

It would have been a magical hike if he'd been here for fun, and if he'd had proper climbing gear. It would have been marvelous to come here with Cas or Sam. But instead Dean was rushing along, panting heavily as he climbed, pack weighing him down, the side of the shotgun barrel thumping awkwardly against his elbow now and then, heart pounding from the effort, and the entire time he felt wretched with anxiety. He pushed himself to the very limit of his speed, until his heart was beating so loudly he could hear it in his ears, his lungs searing with pain. Was he climbing too slowly? Was he too late? Had the archangels already done... whatever they were going to do, to Cas? Why was Sam here? What was happening up there?

Was Dean just hiking up to his death?

Were all three of them doomed — Castiel, Sam, and Dean too?

Well, if there was ever a hill to die on, this is it, thought Dean. The thought almost made him laugh (for he was, of course, literally on a hill), but by now he was too out of breath even for laughter. He soon had to stop and yank off his jacket, afraid he might be overheating to the point of heat stroke. He had to scoop some icy water over his head and even stuff a bit of ice-slush right down his neck to cool himself off. He jammed the jacket into his pack, unbuttoned his flannel shirt, re-arranged the shotgun over his shoulders, checked the pistol and the blade, slurped down a few handfuls of ice-cold water, and went on.
It began to seem that he had been in the ice tunnel forever, that the junco's constant ringing chip, chip, chip was the only sound he'd ever heard. *Hang on, Castiel,* Dean thought. *Hang on, Sam.* He barely realized that at some point this ordeal had changed from a hike to a climb, for he was moving more vertically than horizontally now, grasping for handholds, hauling himself up over one boulder after another, hands and knees both drenched in ice water. After each boulder he had had to stop and pant for air, his heart thumping so hard and fast now that he could feel his ribcage vibrating.

There were occasionally places where the ice-ceiling had broken overhead and a thin beam of gray light streamed through. In these places Dean got a glimpse of the wild weather outside. It wasn't a blizzard like last week; it was clearly shaping into a thunderstorm. Through the cracks in the ceiling rain came dripping down, and thunder boomed through the tunnel. Lightning seemed to be flickering overhead too, until the whole tunnel seemed to flash white with every lightning bolt. Dean faltered the first few times the thunder and lightning rolled over the ice tunnel, a little stunned by the realization that he was hiking toward supernatural forces of such unthinkable power that they could actually *call up a thunderstorm.* But Dean tried not to get distracted. The stream was steeper and steeper; he was almost climbing up a waterfall at this point. Here and there a few clumps of cottongrass had managed to grow on the banks, and Dean started using these for hand-holds, grabbing onto large fistfuls of half-frozen grass to help haul himself up.

He came to a dicey place where he had to clamber straight up over a dripping boulder. Sprawling belly-down across it, he braced one booted foot on a little rock on the bank, gripped a large cottongrass tussock overhead with cold-numbed fingers, and his lifted his other foot to an outcropping on the side of the boulder. But when he put his weight on the outcropping, horrifyingly, the entire boulder sank, rocked once, and then simply fell away from under him. It went crashing down below in a thudding of ice and rock and gravel, and suddenly Dean was hanging from a single tussock of cottongrass over a drop of at least fifteen feet.

Dean flailed both feet, desperate. Miraculously, the cottongrass held, the grassy roots frozen solid into permafrost-ice, but for a long moment Dean simply couldn't find a foothold anywhere. The junco seemed to notice Dean's predicament and came flitting back to stand by Dean's hands, flicking its little gray wings in anxiety, its calling accelerating to a louder, worried-sounding "CHIP! CHIP! CHIP!" At last Dean managed to find a precarious foothold, one of his mud boots wedged against a totally untrustworthy bit of ice. He didn't dare move; he couldn't pull harder on the tussock-grass either, for he could feel bits of grass starting to rip. He needed a better handhold, but couldn't see over the edge of the rocks above him.

He felt a tiny pricking on one of his fingers. The junco's beak. Was it *pecking* him?

"Not helpful!" Dean gasped.

No, it was trying to move Dean's finger. Trying to tug Dean's finger, rather. Trying to tug it in a certain direction.

It took a great effort of will to let go of the clump of grass and reach out in the direction the junco seemed to want. For a terrifying moment Dean groped his hand through nothing but air, and felt his foot begin to slip; but then his hand closed on a sturdy willow-root.

"CHIP!" said the junco.

Dean hauled on the root with all his might. Up and over he went at last, and he found himself sprawled in mud and snow by the edge of the stream. The junco was bouncing in place nearby, wings shivering so fast with excitement that its little wing-tips were just a blur of gray.

"Chip!" it said again.
"Thanks," Dean gasped out to it.

"Chip! Chip."

Shaking with fatigue, Dean scrambled forwards on his hands and knees until he was safely clear of the edge. The junco bounced along next to him in what seemed like anxious relief, now accompanying him so closely that it actually hopped onto his hand a couple times.

"I'm okay," Dean whispered to it. "I'm okay." He got to his feet, and only then realized that he'd reached the end of the climb.

The ground leveled out here. Dean was now in a domed ice cave about twenty feet across and maybe ten feet high. The cave was bathed in serene turquoise light, the little stream running right down the middle of the gravelled ground. It was very dim; Dean could only make his way by the occasional flashes of lightning overhead, each of which made the whole cave glow an almost neon blue.

The little junco had gone uncharacteristically silent and it finally flew up to Dean's shoulder, perching there in perfect quiet. Its silence seemed ominous, and Dean walked forward cautiously, the tiny gray bird hunkered on his shoulder.

About twelve feet ahead the stream broadened into a pool of quiet water, and a few willow-shrubs were visible just beyond, where the ice walls widened out. The wind was getting louder. A sudden deafening crack of thunder made both Dean and the junco flinch; the storm must have been right overhead. There was a faintly familiar scent in the stormy air, and then Dean found himself huffing the air a little, nostrils almost twitching. With a jolt, he realized what the scent was.

Wings.

Angel wings.

And not just any angel's wings. Dean was aware that he still didn't have that much experience with angels, but he knew that particular scent, knew it deeply and intimately. He'd inhaled that specific intoxicating scent many times by now — in snow and in blizzards, on the flowered tundra and under the midnight sun, on heather and under furs and warmed by fire. It was the scent of Castiel's wings.

Castiel was ahead, and Castiel had his wings spread.

Dean pulled the shotgun off his shoulder and loaded it, hands still trembling with fatigue. He checked the pistol, and the silver blade, and then he inched ahead.

The ice cave's roof opened out above him as he inched forward, and soon the cave was no longer a cave, flaring out into two icy walls that framed a view of a black and stormy sky over a wide mesa of boulder-strewn tundra. Dean recognized the depression; this was Topaz's little summit-snowfield, once home to its own little glacier. Though the glacier had disappeared in the last few decades with the warming of the Arctic, the bowl-shaped mesa still collected snow every winter, most of which was now melting off and feeding the very stream that Dean had just climbed up.

Dean had made it. He was at the top of Topaz Mountain.

Dean hunched over a little, trying to stay low behind a thick clump of willows at the stream entrance. Oddly, though he could hear the wind, he still didn't feel it. The air seemed perfectly still. Nor did he feel any rain. Glancing around cautiously from behind the willows, he saw boiling black cloud in all directions, with occasional spears of lightning. Sheets of rain were falling not far away, but somehow
none of the rain was falling here. The entire summit of Topaz, this entire acre-wide bowl of tundra and its craggy rock walls, seemed to be in a bubble of quiet air.

It made the hair stand up on the back of Dean's neck. It seemed wrong. It seemed unnatural, it seemed impossible. It seemed...

It seemed miraculous.

Dean inched a few feet farther forward, till he could peer carefully around the edge of one of the piles of snow, and there was Castiel.

He'd been stripped to the waist. His head was bowed. But he still had his wings.

His hands were bound in front of him by some sort of peculiar handcuffs that seemed to be glittering with blueish-white light. Actually, the more Dean looked, the more it seemed that the handcuffs were made of blueish-white light. Cas's wings were drooping; it seemed a discouraged sort of wing-posture that Dean had never seen before, his shortened wings almost sagging to the ground. But Dean had a clear view of the side of Cas's right wing, and to Dean's vast relief it seemed the feathers hadn't been clipped yet. The tips of the longest and glossiest of the new flight feathers were still visible, reaching just past Cas's hips.

Cas's wings might have been intact, but he wasn't looking entirely comfortable. He seemed to be shivering — his wings were vibrating — and it looked like he'd been rained on at some point, for he was drenched, hair dripping, and there was a steady trickle of water dripping off the tips of both folded wings. He looked cold and miserable, but he was alive.

It was such an immense relief to find Castiel not only still alive, but with his wings still intact, that all at once Dean felt exhaustion crash over him like a tidal wave. It was as if he'd been holding all his fatigue at bay until now by sheer force of will. He even had to bend over and put a hand on his knee (the junco scuttled back on his shoulder to avoid falling off), just to catch his breath and collect himself as he realized, for the first time, that he wasn't too late after all. That the desperate drive along the Haul Road, the scramble over the tundra and the long, exhausting climb up the ice tunnel might actually have been worth it.

Catching his breath at last, Dean raised his head, thinking only, I've got to get him out of this. I've got to. I've got to. I've got to.

I've got to calm down and study the situation. He thought, again, of that sensation of the other Dean. What would that other Dean do?

Strategize. Assess the options.

It took several moments just to comprehend the rest of the scene. Castiel was with three other people, but Dean slowly realized that none of them were wearing the AP jackets, and that Sam and Ruby were nowhere to be seen. This wasn't the AP team. The AP team wasn't even here yet; it seemed Dean had beaten them up the mountain. Instead there were three totally different people up here, and they seemed to be guarding Castiel.

The three other people, unlike Cas, were completely dry, as if they'd somehow teleported here without having to walk through the circle of rain showers that now seemed to ring Topaz completely. These have to be the archangels, Dean decided — though, confusingly, they didn't seem to have wings. Maybe they'd just hidden them away? Cas had mentioned something about how it wasn't just feathers that could disappear — that whole wings could disappear too.
Two of the three possible-angels were standing to either side of Cas, not touching him directly but clearly guarding him. One of these two was shorter, with a sardonic half-smile on his face; he had a glinting golden dagger in one hand. The other was a taller, lanky guy with tousled hair, and this man held a silver blade just like the one now sheathed at Dean's belt. Incongruously, they were both wearing three-piece suits. Dean frowned; both of them also looked slightly familiar, but he couldn't place where he might have seen them before.

Cas and these two guards were lined up along a row of Topaz's blueish-black slate rocks, standing on a lumpy damp patch of snowy tundra. They were facing the third person, who was standing some distance away, in the middle of the tundra-meadow gazing up at the lightning. This third person had his back to the others; Dean could only just see his profile. He was tall, with dark skin, and was dressed in a dramatic white robe with elaborate silver embroidery. It had enormous white fur-lined sleeves that nearly dragged on the muddy ground (yet miraculously seemed to have stayed perfectly clean). The overall effect was rather like some sort of medieval king. He seemed not to be paying any attention at all to Castiel or to the two guards; he was just looking up at the sky, as if enjoying the lightning show overhead.

For a long while, nothing at all happened. Everybody seemed to be waiting. Cas stood silently, with such a stoic air that it seemed he could have been standing there wet and shivering for days already. His expression was completely neutral, but the tension in his jaw, and the sad droop to his wings, still gave away his real mood. *I'm here, Cas*, Dean thought, wishing he could convey some hope to Castiel.

Not that there was anything Dean could do. He fidgeted a little, fingers restlessly shifting on the shotgun, but it seemed the wrong time to try anything. The guards with the blades were far too close to Cas. Dean knew very well that he only had one card to play, the element of surprise, and that single advantage would last only a few seconds. But he could, at least, be ready for an opportunity, if he could just stay alert enough to take advantage of some moment of confusion or chaos.

Now and then the two guards murmured something to each other right across Castiel — apparently some series of sarcastic jokes, for the response from the other guard was usually either a snort or an eye-roll. The taller guard took an exaggerated glance at Cas's wing-tips and whispered something to Cas; Cas didn't respond, and both guards burst out laughing. The shorter guard then raised his voice a little, and Dean heard what he said next.

"Castiel," said the shorter guard, "of all the angels who I never dreamed would manage to find a molt-companion while stranded in the middle of the arctic tundra, you have got to be the top of the list. Tippy top. Tippy top with a cherry on top. Actually, of all the angels I thought would never find a molt-companion at all—"

The taller guard snorted, breaking in with, "Your perspective may be a little skewed, Gabe. Every time I hear anything about you it's, oh, did you hear, Gabriel's molting again, and I'm all, again? Didn't he just molt last month? What happened to the last molt-companion? And the story is always, well, somehow he found a new molt-companion already — or two or three —"

"What can I say?" said the shorter one (Gabriel, apparently). With a winning smile he added, "Molt-companions just... flock to me, heh! I suppose it's just my scintillating personality."

"As hard as that is to believe," put in the taller guard, "I suppose it might actually be true, because you certainly don't have much else to offer."

"Oh, stop, Balthazar, you're making me blush," said Gabriel, with a mock-coy hand wave. He looked at Cas then and asked, "But, Cas, tell us, which of those charming young scientists could it have been? One of the ornithologists from that science camp? How'd you introduce yourself — did
you flare your wings out and discuss avian anatomy?"

At that the third man, the one dressed in the kingly robes who'd been watching the lightning show, finally spoke. "Gabriel," he growled over his shoulder, without turning around. "Show some decorum."

In a completely innocent tone, Gabriel replied, "I'm just curious how he got the initial conversation started, that's all. Because, you know, Castiel here has really never been one for small talk. Have you, Cas?"

Cas only darted a quick scowl at Gabriel, but rapidly composed himself once again, staring quietly at the snowy ground.

The taller guard — "Balthazar" — pointed out, "Could've been one of the villages, you know. Cas has been up here years. I'm sure he gets around."

"Hm," says Gabriel, tapping his chin with one finger. "Interesting idea." He glanced at Cas. "You going native on us, Cas?"

Balthazar laughed. "Well, of course he's gone native, seeing as how it can't possibly have been someone of, you know..." Balthazar leaned close to Cas's ear. "— of your own species."

"Tsk, no need to be racist," says Gabriel easily. "The fact that we're vastly superior to every human on the planet in every way needn't keep us from enjoying human company now and then. Now and then a devilish little, ah, human witch or something can be just the ticket. All that... overwhelmingly physical femininity can have a certain appeal. Assuming you don't mind slumming a little. That right, Cas?" Gabriel was peering closely at Cas as he said this, and there was a moment (just after the word "femininity") when Cas's wings flicked a little. Just once, and just a very small flick, but by now Dean knew that particular wing-gesture; it meant uncertainty, or slight surprise.

A moment later Cas's wings were perfectly still again.

Gabriel's smile had faded a little; he was studying Cas's face a little more closely. "Or... wait...." murmured Gabriel, as if a new possibility had just occurred to him.

The man in the regal robes spoke up again, and this time he sounded very annoyed. "By the grace of all that is HOLY," he snapped, in a basso growl, "Would you two hold your tongues! You're giving me a headache. I need to prepare mentally for our.. colleagues."

"Sorry, bro," said Gabriel, sounding completely unrepentant.

"Excuse me?" spat the regal man, this time finally turning around to glare at Gabriel.

"I offer my most humble and heartfelt apologies," Gabriel said smoothly, "to my dearest and most exalted sibling, Raphael." He executed a bow that had only the faintest trace of deliberate sarcastic exaggeration, and straightened up with a picture-perfect, completely unobjectionable, blank smile on his face.

Raphael glared at him a long moment longer, and then turned back to stare up at the lightning. The second his back was turned, Gabriel leaned forward to catch Balthazar's eye across Castiel, and mouthed exaggeratedly, "HE LOVES HIS LIGHTNING." Balthazar stifled a snort. Castiel, in between them, just closed his eyes, letting out a tired sigh.

A few minutes of silence dragged by, broken only by the erratic thunderclaps and the bright flashes.
Dean was thinking. *Colleagues.* The man in the regal robes — Raphael — had mentioned "colleagues." That had to be the Alaska Petroleum group — including Sam. Whatever was going to happen, was probably going to happen soon; the AP group would arrive any minute now, and then... something would happen. Should he make a move right away, before the AP group arrived?

He ran through his weapons mentally; shotgun, loaded with two shells, and there were more shells in the backpack's hip-belt pocket. Pistol, holding the last six of Dad's armor-piercing bullets. The silver blade wasn't going to be much use yet — Dean was too far away for close combat — but who knew how things might develop. Tracing his fingers farther across his backpack straps, Dean then came across the canister of pepper spray, which he'd totally forgotten about, but pepper spray seemed unlikely to be of any use against supernatural beings. The wind was blowing the wrong way anyway.

While Dean was trying to figure out how best to attack not one but three enemy angels, the regal man squared his shoulders and tipped his head, as if he'd caught a scent on the wind. Gabriel and Balthazar, and even Cas, all sniffed the air at the same moment, all four turning their heads to the far end of the little Topaz Mountain plateau — looking upwind, away from Dean.

"I'd know that stink anywhere," commented Balthazar.

Dean couldn't smell a thing. Apparently angels had good senses of smell. (It occurred to Dean then that the plover and junco — the junco that was still perched on his shoulder even now — had not only managed to guide him to a spot that was hidden with a good view, but a spot that was also downwind, where Dean himself wouldn't be sniffed out.)

"Stinky indeed," agreed Gabriel, with a nod and another sniff. "Three of them, I think." He sniffed the air again. "And... a human? Huh."

"Quiet," growled Raphael.

And sure enough, through the howling wind and sheets of rain that circled the summit, came four forms trudging up the hiking trail at the far side of the summit meadow, all wearing the red Alaska Petroleum jackets. First to come into view were two men Dean didn't recognize. Both had that self-satisfied look to them, that Big Oil look of rich businessmen who were very much accustomed to getting their way, exactly as they wanted, at all times. The first of these two came sauntering onto the tundra plateau almost casually, a lean, tall, gaunt man with a weathered face. The moment he took in the scene in the meadow, a wide grin slithered onto his face, as if he found the whole eerie setting a bit amusing.

Dean, crouching behind the willow-bush, found himself physically shuddering with a sensation that was very near to nausea. His blood was instantly crawling at the sight of this first man, though he couldn't fathom why. He had to struggle to swallow down the taste of bile.

Just behind came the second figure, a man with a tidy black beard, who seemed somewhat out of breath. As soon as this bearded man reached the gaunt man's side, he looked down at his shoes with distaste, and attempted, futilely, to wipe the mud off of one of them with a little red handkerchief.

Last of all came Sam and Ruby.

Ruby had a firm hold on Sam's arm by this point, and an annoyed look in her eyes. She seemed to be almost dragging Sam along, as if she'd had to convince him to do the last part of the hike mostly by physically pulling him. Sam bore a somewhat hunted look; he was following Ruby's arm-tugs willingly enough, but everything about his expression and posture seemed to shout that he would rather be almost anywhere else in the world. But Dean was very relieved to see that at least he
seemed okay — though Sam, like Cas, looked unhappy, and cold, and wet.

Until now Raphael had been standing with his back to the others. He now turned slowly, his silver cloak sparkling as it swirled dramatically around him. As he turned, lightning crackled overhead, and thunder boomed. (Dean caught an eye-roll from Gabriel, and a slight smirk on Balthazar's face. Castiel remained expressionless.)

"Azazel," said Raphael to the first man, who only tipped his head very slightly in return, gazing around coolly.

Dean recognized this name. Everyone in Alaska knew that name. Mr. Azazel was the famed CEO of Alaska Petroleum. The man who had single-handedly built a billion-dollar empire. (At some expense to the environment.)

"So delightful to see you again," drawled Azazel. He turned out to have an almost sing-song nasal voice that made Dean shudder once again.

"Crowley," said Raphael next, apparently greeting the bearded man. Ah; this must be Ruby's Alaska Petroleum boss. Mr. Crowley greeted Raphael with a wide, smirking grin.

Raphael gave Ruby only a curt nod, which she responded to with a rather half-hearted hand-wave. Raphael didn't greet Sam at all; in fact his gaze slid right over Sam without the least notice, as if Sam had been nothing more than Ruby's pet dog.

"Good of you to come," added Raphael to all of them, in a completely neutral voice. But he made no move any closer, he didn't bow, and he didn't smile. They clearly all knew each other, but just as clearly, they weren't exactly friends. "Won't you come closer? I'd like to be sure you have a good view of the... proceedings."

The four Alaska Petroleum arrivals — Azazel, Crowley, Ruby, and poor Sam — walked a little bit closer and grouped up in a ragged line together, about ten yards from Gabriel, Castiel and Balthazar. Sam was the laggard, still trailing along slowly, and being hustled a little by Ruby, who was still tugging on one of his arms and looking increasingly impatient. But Sam came to a confused halt as he began to take in the whole scene. His attention until now had clearly been caught by the bizarre sight of Raphael in his medieval robes. Now he glanced, very briefly, at Castiel and the other two, did a double-take, and stared at Cas again.

Cas gave him a carefully neutral look back, without the least sign of recognition, but Sam couldn't seem to stop staring.

Of course; the wings. Sam had never seen Cas's wings before, and now it seemed he could look at nothing else. And with Cas naked from the waist up, it was clearer than ever his wings were not attached by any sort of harness or wires.

Sam blinked, jaw going slack in shock, eyes going round.

Crowley laughed at Sam's expression. He said breezily, "They're called 'angels,' kid. Get used to it." Sam gave him a completely dumbfounded look. Then Crowley turned on his heel and bellowed at Raphael, switching into a full-volume roar on a dime, "Why the hell did you call this stupid meeting on the top of a bloody MOUNTAIN in the middle of a bloody THUNDERSTORM? Could you possibly have picked a MORE INCONVENIENT SPOT?"

Raphael said, in a perfectly even tone, "Azazel, keep your dogs in line.”

"Now, now, Crowley," said Azazel mildly, wagging one finger at Crowley, "This is a diplomatic
"I'm not a DOG—" Crowley began, but Ruby reached over and whacked him on the arm. Crowley looked over at her, startled.

"Oh, wake up, Crowley," snapped Ruby. "It's just a power display, isn't it obvious?" She wiped her damp hair off of her face. "Heavenly storm. Complete with Heavenly hail and Heavenly fucking rain. And, totally coincidentally, drenching us cold, as well as blocking our ability to use any kind of our own magic to zip ourselves up here. It's not an accident that we actually had to slog up here on foot like fucking mortals." (Sam only gaped at her.)

"Ah, were you not able to fly above the rainclouds?" said Raphael, eyes widening in mock surprise. "I kept a clear path for you up above." He pointed, high overhead, where indeed there was an odd little speck of clear blue sky directly overhead, as if there were a tiny cylinder of storm-free air cutting right through the storm from above.

"Yeah, no," said Crowley brightly. "This storm is going practically out to the orbit of the Moon. Up to the troposphere anyway. Just a bit farther than demons can go. But you knew that." Crowley still looked like he was about to lose his temper; Ruby just looked exasperated; and Azazel, multi-billionaire and CEO of one of the world's biggest petrochemical corporations, was now idly examining his fingernails.

"We're so sorry," apologized Gabriel smoothly. "We knew your powers were a bit restricted but I admit I, for one, had totally forgotten you guys are so... limited that you can't even get over the troposphere. Apologies, I just clean forgot you don't have wings. Next time I'll arrange a golf cart, how about that?"

"If the subordinates are done strutting," said Azazel smoothly, "Let us get to business, Raphael."

"Let us indeed," says Raphael, and there was an even more deafening blast of thunder. And then, impossibly, all three of the "men" who had been standing with Castiel — Raphael, Gabriel and Balthazar — all spread their wings, which, all of a sudden, were present, physical, visible, and jutting dramatically from their backs. (The wings were somehow extending magically through the clothes).

They were, indeed, angels. Gabriel, Balthazar, and Raphael too. All three of them were angels.

Raphael spread both his wings to their fullest extent and arced them slightly upwards, while Gabriel and Raphael kept theirs demurely half-spread. Lightning flickered as Raphael raised his wings higher, thunder crashed, and for once the gale-force winds whipped through the little clearing (it was suddenly very clear that Raphael had been personally controlling every gust of wind, not to mention every flash of lighting and every crash of thunder, all along). His wings seemed almost to glow, as if they were being illuminated by an unearthly light from another dimension entirely. They were purest shining white, as were Gabriel's and Balthazar's. Only Castiel's wings were black.

They were angels. Dean had known this was probably the case — he'd even half-recognized Raphael's and Gabriel's names from some long-forgotten Bible lesson that Mom had tried to drum into him ages ago. But even so it was still a heart-stopping shock to see all the wings for real. For one thing, these angels' wings were absolutely enormous, much bigger than Cas's. Each flight feather alone looked some four or five feet long. Raphael's fully outstretched wings looked at least twenty feet wide, wingtip to wingtip. Only now did it come clear just how brutally Cas's feathers had been cut back — and just how young his new feathers were, and how much length they still needed to put on. The wings of these other angels, even half spread, were at least twice the length of Cas's.

Dean had known for a week now that angels were real, but even so it was unsettling — no, it was
downright terrifying — to see these other angels at full power. Perfect unclipped wings were impressive enough, but Raphael's complete control over thunder and lightning had truly horrible implications. Raphael crooked one finger, and lightning flashed yet again, and thunder rolled, and the very wind was obeying his wishes. Dean found his mouth had gone dry, his breathing accelerating.

*You've met scary things before,* he reminded himself. *You've met wolves, you've met bears. And you survived those.* He made himself take a slow series of long, careful breaths, till he managed to settle himself a little. He shot a quick glance at Sam, and found that Sam, too, was white-faced, gaping at the angels, terrified and bewildered.

The thunder rolled into silence. Into the sudden quiet, Sam whispered audibly to Ruby, "*Angels? Like... for real? Like... do they fly?*"

"*Like I said,*" said Ruby drily. "*Power play. They just love to show off those wings. Especially when they're about to cripple one of their own.*" She nodded, then, toward Cas, and Sam blinked, mouth actually gaping open.

"*I thought that must be a... a... costume?*" said Sam, almost unable to get the words out.

"*Nope, real.*"

Dean could almost see Sam struggling not to say Cas's name. Cas, meanwhile, was giving Sam a hard stare, and he even shook his head sharply. To the others, it would come across meaning, *No, my wings aren't a costume;* but Dean knew the real message was, *Don't say my name. Don't let them know that you know me.*

Sam stared hard at Cas for a long moment, shut his mouth with obvious effort, and swallowed.

Azazel spoke up, turning for the first time to look directly at Sam. "That's not the half of it, little Winchester," he drawled, his gaze passing lazily from Sam's head to his feet and back up again. "You might've been wondering why we dragged you up here. You might've been wondering why we kind of dropped all those hints that... *bad things,* shall we say, would happen to that brother of yours if you didn't come all the way up with us. In fact you might've been wondering why we selected you for this internship at all."

"*Yup,*" said Ruby cheerfully, still hanging possessively on Sam's elbow. He looked blankly down at her as she said, "*We chose you specifically. We wanted YOU, Sam. Because we want you to join us!*" Her eyes flickered then, changing to a seamless, bottomless black, whites and irises both gone. Dean, still shielded well back in the willows, could see the change in eye color even from where he was heading. Even from here it was unsettling, and poor Sam's shock was palpable. He tried to take a reflexive, horrified step away from Ruby, but she hung onto his arm, grinning up at him like a ghoul. Sam looked helplessly at the others. Crowley's eyes went black too, and then Mr. Azazel, CEO of Alaska Petroleum, let out a lazy laugh, his own eyes flickering to a horrifying amber-yellow.

Azazel said, "*You see, we really need a good lawyer, for the contract we're about to draw up for your brother. Kind of like that contract of your own that you signed today, remember?*"

"*You do remember that thing I had you sign, Sam, on the drive down?*" added Crowley cheerfully. "*When we were kind of implying that things weren't gonna go too well for your bro if you didn't sign? That contract about how you'd get all that sweet, sweet, Alaska Petroleum salary money, how you could take care of your brother? You do know to read every word of a demon contract, don't you?"

"*Demon...contract...*" murmured Sam, who seemed so stunned he was almost beyond speech. He
took an uneven breath and managed to ask, looking around at his three black-eyed Alaska Petroleum colleagues, "You're... demons?" He then looked, bewildered, over at Cas, and added, "And you're... an... angel?"

Crowley commented to Azazel, "Not too quick on the uptake, is he?"

Azazel just grinned at Sam, murmuring back to Crowley, "Give him time. He's got potential." He added to Sam directly, "Why, yes, my dear young protege. They're angels, we're demons, and together we're going to destroy the world. And you, as well as your miserable sword-of-Michael brother, are both going to help us. It's in your contract."

Crowley said to Sam, "Didn't you read the fine print?" As Sam stared at him, he began to laugh outright, and added, "You ought to know that by now in your trade. Always read the fine print!"
"Small print?" echoed Sam. "What... what small print?"

Crowley laughed again, apparently delighted with Sam's confusion. "I do love these baby little legal interns," he commented to Ruby. "You'd think they'd have been taught about contracts in year one. But then again, this one was a bit of a lost cause anyway." Crowley glanced again, still chuckling, at Sam. "I mean, let's be real here, my dear clueless Alaskan moose, you're thirty-five and you're only now getting around to getting a real job? What've you been doing with your life, exactly? If I can just give you a wee bit of advice now that we're on the same team, you and your brother just better—"

"Remember your position, crossroads demon," interrupted Azazel, his eerie amber eyes flashing. His lazy drawl had sharpened into a much less pleasant tone,

Again Azazel's voice made Dean's skin crawl. It felt almost like snakes slithering right into his ears, like the voice of some terrible forgotten nightmare. Azazel went on to Crowley, "I only bothered to bring you along to do the paperwork. The younger Winchester is mine, all mine, and don't you forget it."

"The younger Winchester?" echoed Sam blankly. "What... what do I have to do with anything?"

"Hopefully nothing," replied Azazel. "And let's keep it that way, in our little universe at least. But just as insurance, I figured a simple little deal with Crowley here might help you see the light about what path to take. Now, to proceed to the matter at hand...." He paused, gaze settling now on Raphael, who had been watching the entire scene with a slightly disgusted look, arms folded over his glossy silver robe and his huge white wings now folded up neatly behind his back. Azazel said, "To summarize. Your side swore you'd completely deactivate this potential timebomb of a rogue angel here." He gestured toward Castiel with a sweep of his hand. "And in return, we'd help deactivate the other two potential timebombs of the Winchesters. Both of whom, I remind you, I retain a claim on."

"Time bomb?" said Cas, sounding truly confused. "Wait... Raphael, you've been working with Azazel?"

"The two Winchesters?" put in Sam. "Me and... my brother? Dean? What do any of us have to do with any of this?"
"Oh, nothing, hopefully," said Azazel breezily. "And I'm only keeping you, anyway, and just as a memento. As soon as I have a chance to visit your brother's adorably primitive little science station and root him out from wherever you've hidden him, that'll be the end of that threat." As Sam stared at him blankly, Azazel turned again to Raphael. "But I'll confess, angel," Azazel said, somehow managing to imbue the word with scorn and disgust, "I'm not feeling entirely at ease. Imagine my surprise when your invitation to view Castiel's final fate was to meet you here on Topaz Mountain, right here in northern Alaska, so startlingly close to not just one but both the Winchesters. This made me just the slightest bit..." He paused, and drawled slowly, almost hissing each syllable of each word, "...displeased. Restless. Disturbed, even. I thought the whole point of our last meeting regarding this rebel angel of yours, when we talked about this ten years ago, was to get him entirely out of the way of humans. Zero interference with humans, and half a planet away from the Winchesters, was the deal, as I recall. And here you've stuck Castiel right next to the Winchesters. Sam, I knew about — I recruited him personally, specifically for this meeting, as you know. But the other brother, that Dean? Ruby tells me Dean's been working on the North Slope too? For years. And Castiel, who should have been over in Greenland or Siberia or whatever, is also here on the North Slope?" His lips bared in a lazy smile. "Play with fire much, do you? These were not the terms of our deal."

"What deal?" Cas burst out, taking a step toward Raphael. Gabriel and Balthazar each grabbed one of his wings, and Cas flinched, eyes closing. He stepped back into place reluctantly, and they let go of his feathers. "What deal?" Cas demanded again, opening his eyes and glaring at Raphael in near-disbelief. "Raphael, you've truly been working with the demons? Have all of you?" He shot an appalled look at Gabriel too, and at Balthazar. They both avoided his gaze, Balthazar with a distinctly uncomfortable look, while Gabriel began a cartoonishly nonchalant whistling.

Cas stared at Gabriel hard. Gabriel finally stopped his whistling and said, "Oh, maybe we've been consorting with demons just the tiniest little bit?"

Cas spun to look again at Raphael. "What is going on?" Cas demanded.

Raphael regarded him coolly. "You'll forgive me if I don't share all of my plans with rebellious junior seraphs." He emphasized the word "rebellious" with distaste, the corners of his mouth curling.

"I'm not rebellious!" objected Cas. "I did commit... one transgression, agreed, one, that ONE trip, but since then I've always completely obeyed the stated conditions!" As Cas's wings clamped tightly behind his back, he took a step toward Raphael, his hands turning palm-up within their blue-light handcuffs as if he were trying to plead his case. "I've let you clip my wings, Raphael. I've been here for all the annual feather-checks. I agreed to all the conditions, I've gone where you said. I let you fling me back in time! I've spent forty-five years in the Arctic. Alone! I did exactly as you commanded! I have not rebelled—"

Raphael broke in smoothly, "Maybe not yet. Not in this world."

Castiel fell silent, blinking at him.

Raphael added, "But let's be clear here, you did commit that one initial transgression."

"Three days in Illinois," said Cas bitterly. "During which nothing happened!"

"It was the pattern that was disturbing," replied Raphael. He and Azazel exchanged a quiet glance, and then Raphael looked again at Castiel. "It was a pattern that we'd seen... in another place. It could not be allowed to continue. And may I point out, in the course of your trial afterwards, you did indeed verbally express dissatisfaction with certain of our policies—"
"That's because they seemed counter to our express purpose here," interrupted Castiel, wingtips now flicking in irritation. "The course of action you'd settled on clearly wasn't beneficial to humanity. Letting demons roam around unchecked?" He gestured with both cuffed hands toward Azazel. "Letting them take control of major human business enterprises? We're supposed to stop the Apocalypse. We're supposed to fight the demons, not ally with them! Our purpose—"

"YOU DO NOT DETERMINE OUR PURPOSE," roared Raphael, suddenly at a skull-rattling volume. Dean cringed, as did Sam across the clearing, both brothers clapping hands to their ears. (The little junco let out the tiniest "chip" Dean had heard from it yet, and tried to burrow under the collar of Dean's jacket.) Lightning flashed, and thunder crashed, all at such deafening volume that the entire mountain actually vibrated under Dean's feet. Raphael's eyes flashed an eerie blue; his wings had half-spread again. "DO YOU DARE TO SPEAK AGAINST THE ARCHANGELS?" he roared to Castiel. "Let me remind you, WE, THE ARCHANGELS, AND ONLY WE, RECEIVE THE WORD OF GOD."

Gabriel's wings flicked slightly.

Raphael spun to him, glaring. "WOULD YOU LIKE TO SAY SOMETHING, LITTLE BROTHER?" shouted Raphael, lightning crackling overhead again. "WILL YOU DARE CONTRADICT YOUR ELDERS?"

Gabriel shook his head cheerily. "Oh, no, no, no, thanks but no. Sorry, just had a wing-cramp there." He shook out one wing, rolling his head as if to work out a problem with his shoulder. He added, "You're doing just great, Raff. Keep on at it."

While Raphael glared at Gabriel, Cas put in mulishly, "I never contradicted the word of God. I only ever asked what the point was in ceasing to battle the demons, and letting them roam freely upon the Earth. You always told us we were supposed to save humanity, and help save their home—"

At this point Azazel started laughing. It was a joyful laugh, loud and long. Crowley had started grinning too. Cas paused, looking over at both of them with his eyes narrowed.

"You naive little duckling," said Azazel, still laughing. "Your superiors aren't trying to save humanity at all! And definitely not their home. Hasn't that sunk in yet?"

Castiel stared at him a long moment, and then looked back at Raphael.

Raphael let out a sigh. "I suppose now is as good a time as ever to clarify. The course is well set now; nobody can stop it at this point." He took a step closer to Castiel. "We were always trying to bring about the Apocalypse, Castiel. Where did you ever get the idea that we were trying to prevent it?"

Cas just stared at him. (As did Gabriel and Balthazar.)

Raphael went on. "The Apocalypse means the end of mortal life, and the beginning of the true reign of God. Why would we want to stop that? The sooner the better, as far as we're concerned."

"But... you... we... we're supposed to help humanity," said Castiel, almost stuttering. "You — you went to all that effort to track the demons... When they first started appearing. There was all that worry about... about... that demon-deal somewhere." He glanced over at Azazel and Crowley. "I never was told where it was, but—"

"Kansas, wasn't it?" put in Balthazar. Cas spun to him, a look of shock on his face.

Gabriel nodded. "Yeah, it was Kansas. 1973, 1974, whereabouts, wasn't it? All that excitement about
stopping a demon-deal that was about to go down somewhere in Kansas. And all that weird stuff about ‘oh by the way don't tell Castiel.’ 'Whatever you do, don't tell Castiel, yadda-yadda, in fact, let's just put him on cherubim-molt duty.' And then all of a sudden it just ceased to be an issue and we were all sent home again." Gabriel was looking directly at Azazel. "Oddest thing, how fast it all fizzled out, after all that drama. It was like the demons suddenly gave up."

Cas looked back and forth between Azazel and Raphael, clearly bewildered. "What's going on?" he asked, almost helplessly.

"We found a better way, Castiel," said Raphael, almost gently. "We found a better Apocalypse. A simpler one." Raphael began to walk closer to Cas, step by step. He went on, "You see, we've done some research. There are... alternate universes, let's call them. Other realities, other Earths, where this same story has also been playing out. The demons trying to bring about an Apocalypse; the angels making half-hearted efforts to stop it. But not really trying to stop it, because, as you now know, the Apocalypse must occur. We want it to occur." Step by slow step, he drew closer to Castiel. "The only question, really, is actually how best to get it to begin. It's surprisingly difficult to destroy a planet, did you know that? There have been many attempts at Apocalypses, on those other Earths. Many excellent attempts." Another slow step. And another. "And do you want to know what happens?" His last step took him right up to Cas, who flinched visibly when Raphael leaned in at him. Raphael's expression had changed now, his lip curling up in almost a sneer. Cas held his position now, meeting Raphael's eyes, his wings tightening.

"YOU happen," said Raphael, leaning so close he was almost spitting on Castiel. "YOU. You, and this WINCHESTER here." He shot an irritated glance over at Sam. "And another one too, apparently, that other Winchester brother--"

"Dean," breathed Sam.

"YES," spat Raphael. "Dean Winchester, Sam Winchester, and the angel Castiel. The three of you, just two puny little damned humans and a lowly nobody of a seraph, just you three, somehow the three of you blow our Apocalypse plan to shreds!" spat Raphael. He seemed to be working himself up into such a fury now that Cas automatically backed up a step, Gabriel and Balthazar even backing up with him. Raphael spat out, "It happens in almost every universe we've looked at! The only exception we've found is one where the Winchesters were never born and YOU apparently ended up brain-damaged somehow, and quite a sorry sight that was, but even so, THEN GUESS WHAT HAPPENED? Even that universe was invaded by a Castiel and a pair of Winchesters from yet another universe!"

"I... don't understand," said Cas, backing up another slow step. "I've never even met these, um... these Winchesters...." (Sam flicked him a cautious glance.)

"It was only a matter of time!" spat Raphael. "Your little jaunt to Illinois, you have no idea how close you were getting. That vessel you picked! Good lord, it literally made my feathers shiver—"

Gabriel said cheerily, to Cas, "You should've been up there that day. About gave them a heart attack, Michael and Raphael, when they realized the vessel you took." Gabriel waved a hand at Cas's body, and Cas glanced down at his own human body, bewildered. Gabriel explained, "Apparently it's the same vessel you took in the other universes. The ones where you, um, y'know... rebelled. And, um, killed the other Raphaels and Michaels, I guess."

Cas stared down at his own body as if totally confused. Looking back up at Raphael, he said, his voice slightly shaky, "It was just... it was just the strongest vessel. It was the logical choice. It was strong, and he was willing—"
"Irrelevant," snapped Raphael. "We had to stop you. And we did. And we sent you away, and crippled your wings. I wanted to kill you outright; I should have, really, but Gabriel here somehow got it into his head that we could just exile you up here." He glanced over at Azazel. "Yet even in exile to the blasted Arctic, both the hell-begotten Winchesters somehow made it up here anyway!" He shook his head. "It's impressive, actually. We gave you the entire Arctic, trying to keep you away from all of humanity, and yet somehow both the Winchesters ended up right in your exact patch of godforsaken tundra— drawn to you like a pair of doomed magnets, I suppose, or maybe there's some echo from the other universes, I really don't know—"

At this point Dean, still hiding behind his willows trying to make sense of all this, realized why Gabriel looked so familiar. And Balthazar as well.

He'd seen them both before.

Fourteen years ago.

Back in Lawrence, Kansas.

There'd been a job fair at the university, and Dean had drifted by — rather hopelessly, for not only was he not a university student, he'd barely scraped by with his GED after all the awful stuff with Mom. Yet a flyer had somehow turned up at his door about the job fair (and how had that happened?). And then a second flyer had shown up a couple days later. So he'd gone to the job fair, and there'd been a guy at a little booth in the corner. A tiny little booth, way off in a forgotten corner, with a sign that read "University of Alaska - Fairbanks."

Dean wouldn't even have spotted the little booth if he hadn't run into another job-seeker who'd pointed it out to him. UAF was recruiting for Arctic field workers, said the other job-seeker. UAF's pay was decent, said the other job-seeker; seasonal work, only part of the year. UAF was looking for someone who could fix trucks. Someone tough, someone good with his hands.

Balthazar had been the other job-seeker. Gabriel had been sitting at the booth.

Dean had applied for the job. There'd been a bit of confusion later at the University of Alaska, he remembered now. They didn't seem to even remember that they'd had a booth at that little Kansas job fair. But somehow Dean's application had been sent in, and he'd gotten the job.

Had Gabriel and Balthazar been countering Raphael's plans all along?

Gabriel was the archangel who had fought to spare Cas's life. Had he planned all along, too, to coax Dean up to the Arctic? To the one place in the world where one of Castiel's lonely camps was close to a human outpost? Had they hoped that someday Castiel would circle back to his camp at Topaz Mountain, and would encounter Dean there? And had it been just coincidence that Sam had landed the AP internship this same year, too?

It had taken fourteen years. But at last it had happened: Dean and Castiel had, improbably, met at last, and Sam, too, had ended up here in the very same year.

Dean's eyes went to Castiel.

Well, maybe the exact way it had played out in the end hadn't been foreseen by any of the angels, nor the demons.

Castiel spoke again, interrupting Dean's thoughts. "But if the Apocalypse hasn't even happened, what's the point? What do you care if I meet the Winchesters if there's not even an Apocalypse going on, if Lucifer isn't even going to rise? It seems you're not even trying to bring about an Apocalypse at
Azazel and Raphael exchanged a look again.

"Azazel and I decided," said Raphael to Cas, "that what our other selves had apparently tried in the other universes wasn't working. Freeing Lucifer, breeding up flocks of demon babies, a knock-down drag-out battle between Michael and Lucifer..." Raphael sighed, spreading his hand. "It was appealing, mind you, but it just wasn't going to work. All the other universes tried it that way. All of them failed. So I realized that if the Apocalypse were ever to occur, I would have to do something quite different. I admit I miss the sense of drama that such a battle would have provided..." He let out a regretful sigh. "We've all been looking forward to a Lucifer-Michael showdown, haven't we? But it clearly just wasn't working, in the other universes. So in THIS universe, you see, we decided we'd take quite a different tack. Very hands-off. No visible miracles."

"No obvious demon possessions," said Azazel. With a small sigh, he added, "No demon babies." He flicked a dry glance at Sam. "Rather to my regret. But I could see the wisdom of the plan. Sometimes one's enemy can discover something... mutually beneficial."

"And then, you see," said Raphael, a slow smile spreading over his face, "we'd also noticed something. Something rather unexpected. The angels were reporting some feather-irritation from the upper atmosphere. Feathers tingling a little. Nobody thought anything of it, but I looked into it."

"Carbon dioxide," said Azazel, laughing a little. "The demons had picked up on it too. Just a tiny change, but we felt it whenever we apparated."

"Oh," said Ruby and Crowley, simultaneously. They looked at each other.

"I noticed that—" said Ruby. "Kept stinging whenever I changed vessels."

Crowley added, nodding. "CO2. Never thought it might be that. Huh."

Raphael nodded. "And we saw that if we were just patient enough, and just nudged things along just enough, the Apocalypse would happen all on its own. The CO2, you see. It's changing the atmosphere. We called a temporary truce, Azazel and I, and we peered into the future a little bit. It turns out the atmosphere's changing quite a bit."

"Are you talking about global warming?" blurted out Sam, in a tone of pure disbelief.

"Why, yes," said Raphael, a broad smile spreading over his face.

"You're... you're causing global warming? Are you kidding me?"

"No, we're not causing it, you ninny," drawled Azazel. "YOU are! That's what's so perfect!"

Raphael was smiling now. "We weren't causing it at all. You humans were causing it! All on their own! So we looked even farther into the future and we saw exactly what we needed to do. Leave humans unchecked! Just appeal to their natural greed and shortsightedness a little bit, just enough to keep them plowing on with their oil and their airplanes, and the humans would cause the Apocalypse all on their own."

"It was so simple!" said Azazel, his yellow eyes brightening, a gleeful smile spreading across his face. "All I had to do was nudge things the tiniest little bit. Take over a few oil companies, feed a few millions of dollars to a few politicians."

Crowley added in, "Well, and a few well-placed crossroads deals here and there. Let's not
entirely overlook dear old Crowley's contributions, shall we—"

"Yes, yes, you helped, certainly," said Azazel, waving a hand dismissively. "You played your little part with the elections and all that, sure. But the point is, it's beyond stopping now. Now all we have to do is sit back and enjoy the show. Which is what we're doing now."

"Total apocalypse," said Raphael, beaming. "And one of their own making."

At this point Sam spoke up, with an uncertain, "But wait a second here. If you're talking about global warming, the hundred-year forecasts aren't THAT bad. I mean, sure, the tundra's gonna disappear, I saw that seminar, but it's not the literal end of the world—"

"Yeah, did the seminar cover the three-hundred-year forecast, Sam?" said Ruby, speaking up for the first time. "Five hundred? A thousand?"

Sam just looked at her.

"The planet will survive," said Raphael smoothly. "The planet always survives. But humanity's crops and seaside cities will all be gone, and humanity with them. There is almost nothing that can be done to stop it now. Not even you—" (He looked with faint scorn at Castiel) "— and not even your odd pair of humans can stop it, no matter what you three managed to do in the other universes. It's past stopping now." He looked back and forth between Sam and Castiel, arms crossed, fingertips of one hand drumming restlessly on his other arm. "Which really means, I suppose, that there's really not much point in worrying about you three anymore."

"Meaning... you'll let us go?" said Sam hopefully.

"Oh, no," said Raphael, laughing. "Meaning, no need to keep you in reserve anymore. You three were wild cards, you know. For a while we didn't know quite what to do with you. But at this point I believe it's safe to take the final steps."

With a flourish he drew out a dagger from one of his elaborate sleeves. Lightning flashed yet again, and the dagger caught the light. It was shaped rather like the one Gabriel was holding, with a twisted golden blade.

Cas tensed at the sight, flinching with a quick step back.

Raphael admired his own reflection in the gleaming golden blade for a moment, and then he turned to Gabriel and Balthazar. "Hold him," he said. "Grab his wings. Turn him around. Get him down on that rock. I want this to be just a couple of quick cuts." To Castiel he added, almost kindly, "It'll be over quite soon. You'll hardly suffer at all. This is a kindler, gentler Apocalypse, after all."
"Well, what are you waiting for?" snapped Raphael to Castiel's two guards. "Get him over to the rock!"

Cas shot an alarmed look at Gabriel, who in turn was staring at Raphael.

Gabriel said, "Wait, wasn't the plan to just trim his feathers again?"

"More than feathers this time," said Raphael. "Could just stab him in the heart actually — that'd be fastest — but —" He shrugged. "Then his wings would burn to ash, you know how it always goes. Naomi requested we keep his wings intact. Cut them off clean. I thought it was a good idea." A sly grin spread over his face as he looked at Castiel. "For research, you see. I'm sure you can understand the scientific impulse. You do the same to your little mortal birds, right?"

"I don't clip their wings!" Cas said, his voice now a ferocious growl. "And I don't cut their wings off, either! I don't kill them, and I'd never—"

"You see, nobody's ever seen what happens to angel wings that are mortal for so many years," interrupted Raphael. "Mortal wings that then start to molt. There's been some curiosity about how it was that you started to molt after all this time." To Gabriel he added, "We'll kill him after, but if we remove the wings first, then the wings won't burn, see?"

Dean, hearing all this with a sense of dawning horror, hurriedly pulled out his pistol, slinging the shotgun back across his shoulders. The problem was that both Cas and Sam were mere inches away from their captors. A shotgun blast to Azazel or Raphael would surely also hit Sam or Cas with some of the shot. He'd always been a better shot with the pistol anyway.

It had to be the pistol, and he'd only get one shot before all the angels, and all the demons too, would turn on Dean as well. Three enemy angels; three demons; against Cas, and Sam, and Dean. Six against three. Six super-powered beings against three un-powered ones.

This is a suicide mission, Dean knew.

So be it.
But, frustratingly, once he had the pistol out, and once he'd agonized over who to use his one surprise-attack-moment on (Raphael was the best choice; Cas seemed in more imminent danger than Sam was, at least at the moment), Dean still couldn't get a clear shot. He was just a little too far away. Raphael, maddeningly, was hovering far too close to Cas's head, while inspecting Cas's wings greedily. Dean bit his lip, trying to edge around the willow-bush for a slightly different angle. But if he came out too far from the willow they'd spot him at once. A quick glance over to the demons revealed Ruby and Azazel both standing closely around Sam — no clear shot there either. This was maddening.

As Dean gritted his teeth, still trying to get a clear line of fire to either Raphael or Azazel, Raphael said, almost casually, "Okay, now that I've cleared all that up, get him down on that rock." He gestured to a flat-topped boulder a few yards away.

Gabriel and Balthazar didn't move.

Raphael glared at both of them. "Do I have to repeat myself? Get him down on this rock." There was another short pause; this time Gabriel and Balthazar glanced at each other.

"NOW!" barked Raphael. There was an earsplitting crack of thunder overhead.

Slowly, Gabriel and Balthazar started to take hold of Cas's arms, but Raphael gave an impatient sigh, made a quick gesture of one hand, and Cas's strange blue-light handcuffs seemed to yank him forward. He stumbled helplessly a few steps toward the boulder. Another gesture from Raphael, and Cas's two handcuffs split apart, the two rings of blue light yanking his arms straight out to the side and pulling him face-down onto the rocky surface. He fell heavily, and Dean couldn't help flinching as Cas's face smacked into hard rock. Cas's gasp of pain, and his helplessness and obvious fear, twisted at Dean's heart like a knife. A cold fury was stirring in Dean's gut now, a real rage.

*You gotta save Cas,* said a voice in the back of his head, a voice somewhere else an infinity away. The sleeping Dean. The one who had an Impala. The one who apparently charged into battle so often that it was merely daily routine. A string of crystal-clear thoughts seemed to be floating up now, as if the other Dean had become focused intently on this scene, this whole strange setting on Topaz Mountain that must have seemed to him to be a dream. *You gotta save Cas,* said the voice, with an emphatic certainty. *And you gotta save Sam too. You gotta save them both. Do whatever it takes. And make the bastards pay. Azazel and Raphael. We killed them in our world. You gotta kill them in yours or they'll never quit.*

Dean blinked, and staggered behind his willow bush, unsteady for a moment. The voice was gone.

And this time he remembered what Azazel and Raphael had just been talking about.

Could this "other Dean" sensation actually be something real?

A Dean from one of those other universes, maybe? The ones that Azazel and Raphael had been spying on? Had their repeated glimpses into one of those other worlds opened up some kind of faint tendril of communication?

The strange exchange left an aura of dizziness, and even some nausea. Dean swallowed, and he had to shake his head even just to get his eyes to focus again. When his eyes finally cleared, Cas was pinned face-down on the rock with his arms outstretched, his wings now folded very tightly to his bare back, with Raphael standing just beyond (still far too close to Cas to risk a pistol-shot). Balthazar and Gabriel moved slowly up to positions on either side of Castiel — a little reluctantly, it seemed, now and then trading a quiet and unreadable glance with each other. Raphael scowled at them both, and he growled, now in a distinctly angry tone, "I said, *grab his wings.* Spread them out
and hold him still."

Gabriel and Balthazar exchanged another quiet glance, but they didn't hesitate this time. Gabriel took hold of Cas's left wing, and Balthazar the right. They both held their respective wing in an odd grip, one of their hands on the bend of the wing and the other taking firm hold of the big joint that was farther down Cas's back. It seemed Cas couldn't resist this sort of hold at all; he let out a rough gasp as Gabriel and Balthazar extended both wings. Cas's feather-tips were trembling visibly now. Both the other angels had expressions of distaste on their faces, but nonetheless they stretched his wings out wide.

"No, wait!" Castiel cried out. He twisted his head around to look at Gabriel. "Please, don't do this, Gabriel—"

"Sorry, little brother," Gabriel muttered, almost under his breath. "You know I don't have a choice. Orders are orders."

Dean still had the pistol raised, heart pounding, trying desperately to keep his hands from trembling as he forced himself to wait for the perfect moment for a clear shot. But the "perfect moment" seemed to be taking its sweet time arriving. Inevitably Raphael seemed to be just in front of Cas, or just behind Cas, or leaning closely over Cas.

And now Raphael was actually crouching over Castiel, practically kneeling, his nose almost to Cas's feathers as he inspected Cas's wings.

"Move, you fucker, move," Dean hissed, trying to will Raphael to step away from Cas. "I've only got one good shot, you bastard!"

But Raphael didn't budge. Instead he glanced over at Azazel and said, "Let's be clear on the terms. You've got the younger Winchester under contract, correct?"

"Correct," said Azazel, nodding toward Crowley, who drew out a parchment scroll from his vest pocket and held it up, flicking it open with a flourish. The lower end dropped down to Crowley's feet and unrolled several feet across a patch of ice. The scroll looked at least eight feet long and was dense with tiny hand-written paragraphs from top to bottom.

"Total control," said Crowley. "Our dear ol' Alaskan Moose here—" (he nodded at Sam, who scowled back at him) "— sat in the back reading it on the way down. Signed the thing in blood before we left the road. Got him under total control."

"Well, not total control—" objected Sam. Ruby still had hold of one of his arms. She must have tightened her grip, for Sam winced, looking down at her with open distaste now. Once again he tried to yank his arm out of her grasp, but she only tightened her grip even more, until Sam gasped with pain. Petite as she seemed, she must have had some sort of unnatural strength, for Sam seemed unable to pull away from her while she was holding on to his arm.

"Sorry, Sam," she said. "It's been mildly fun, but I think our little tryst is over. You're Azazel's now."

She dragged him effortlessly closer to Azazel, who simply raised one finger, not even looking at Sam. Sam jerked in place, letting out another gasp. Ruby finally let go of his arm but now Sam seemed unable to move at all. Azazel had him pinned in place somehow.

Raphael said mildly, "I still think you should kill him, by the way."

"Too valuable a vessel," replied Azazel. "Got plans for this one. But we'll keep him well controlled."

"You're not going to keep me well controlled—" spat Sam, but Azazel quirked his finger and Sam
fell abruptly silent, with a tiny choking noise.

"Oh, I rather think Azazel will," said Crowley, busily rolling up his scroll. "And not just because he's waving a finger at you. You'd be amazed the deals people will strike when we've got the life of their older brother in our hands. Isn't that right, Azazel?"

Azazel smiled at Sam, almost sweetly. Turning back to Raphael he said, "Samuel... is... mine." The liquid drawl in his voice made the hair raise on the back of Dean's neck. "And as we agreed, I'll pick up the other Winchester shortly." Azazel looked down at his own body. "Thought I might use one of my older vessels when I go get him, actually. Take this one off for a sec and step into an old favorite. One that he'll recognize, I believe. Stashed it near here just for the occasion. Anyway, I'll pick him up in an hour or so, and I'll core him — get the soul out, I mean — and I get to eat the soul and you get the husk for a vessel, as we agreed. And I'll deliver the husk to you. I'll be sure and keep the heart beating, never fear."

"Don't you dare hurt him!" Castiel yelled, now jerking desperately at his handcuffs. "Either of them! Don't you dare!"

"We will do exactly what we want with them," said Raphael evenly, eyes flicking to Cas's face. "Just as we will do exactly as we want with you." To Gabriel and Balthazar he added, "Hold him still." Cas started really struggling now, yanking hard on the blue-light handcuffs. Gabriel and Balthazar tightened their grip on his wings as Cas thrashed, wings twisting against their grip, feet scrabbling against the tussocks and heather. "Don't hurt them—" gasped out Castiel. "Don't hurt Dean, please!" In desperation he turned to one of his own guards. "Gabriel — please — Gabriel, please, we've served together eons. You must see that what they're doing is wrong!" But Gabriel said nothing; he only held tight to Cas's left wing, and Balthazar held tight to the right, and the most Castiel could do was struggle in place, pinned helplessly.

Dean was still trying to aim, pleading under his breath at Cas, "Stay still, dammit, stop thrashing — I gotta aim, Cas, please stay still—" Cas was still thrashing, but Raphael, maddeningly, was leaning even closer to Cas now.

Raphael once again withdrew his golden blade from his belt, and held it up before his nose, admiring it.

Dean clicked off the safety, even though Castiel was still dangerously close to Dean's line of fire; it was clear it was now or never. The tiny click noise was too faint for the others to hear, but it startled the junco, which gave a little hop on Dean's shoulder. He'd almost forgotten it was there.

And Dean had an idea.

There was no way it would work. Cas might be able to communicate with birds, but Dean sure couldn't. But he glanced at the junco on his shoulder, and found it looking right back at him from just a few inches away, its bead-bright eyes staring alertly into his own.

Worth a try, Dean thought, and he pointed at Raphael and made a little flapping motion with his hand.

The junco crouched slightly, still staring at him. "The one with the white robe," Dean whispered, making a gesture as if outlining the shape of a robe. The junco glanced at Raphael, and back at Dean, as if waiting for a go-ahead.

Raphael had been taking a moment to study Cas's wings. He reached out and touched one of the gleaming new feathers on Cas's left alula; Castiel actually hissed in revulsion at his touch, his wing
frowning. A puzzled frown flickered over Raphael's face as he traced one finger over the feather-tip. "Gold?" he mumbled.

Gabriel shrugged. "Some girl," he said. "It happens. Whatever you're going to do, do it now."

Gabriel then glanced directly at Dean's willow-bush, repeating, "Do it now."

With a chill, Dean knew then that Gabriel wasn't speaking to Raphael at all.

Dean tore his eyes away from Gabriel, nodded at the junco and whispered, "Now." The junco flew.

It flew fast as a dart, zipping right through the willow bush and out over the open ground. Without hesitation it charged directly at Raphael's eyes. There was nothing the little junco could do against such a formidable enemy, of course, except throw Raphael off balance from the surprise, but the tiny bird accomplished exactly that: Raphael flinched back, lost his balance on the uneven tundra and actually fell over backwards, his silver robe splashing into the mud. He growled in anger, leapt to his feet and turned to glare at the junco, which was now desperately winging away to the far side of the tundra-meadow, beating its little wings as fast as it could. Raphael flung out one hand toward the junco, a disdainful sneer on his face. The little junco's tiny gray wings went limp, its little gray feathered body dropping like a stone to the tundra. But while Raphael was crowing in delight, he took one step farther away from Cas. Cas was out of the line of fire at last. Dean squeezed the trigger.

The pistol boomed through the little clearing, the report seeming as loud as a bomb, freezing everyone in place from surprise just an armor-piercing bullet caught Raphael in the shoulder just above one wing. It had a very strange effect: a flash of vivid brilliant silver light poured from the wound. He staggered, spun half around by the impact. For a moment there seemed to be light welling up at Raphael's throat as well, as if he were exploding, or choking on light somehow. But with a roar of fury he fought it down. Apparently he was wounded only, and not killed. He lurched unevenly, found his balance and turned toward Dean, roaring in pain and rage.

Dean, still crouching behind the willow, pivoted fast to take aim at Azazel. But they'd all clearly seen where he was, and Azazel had shoved Sam in front of him. Dean hesitated. He might hit Azazel successfully. Or he might hit Sam. He hesitated a critical moment too long, and a moment later a terrific blow struck him, some kind of magical sonic-boom wave from Raphael's outstretched hand. Game's over, thought Dean, and there was a gut-wrenching, dizzying moment of flying through air, past the willows to the wall of the ice cave behind him. The impact was horrifically hard, but his backpack absorbed some of the blow. Then the entire wall of the turquoise ice cavern exploded around him, shards of ice collapsing down all around.

Dean lay on the ground stunned and helpless for a long moment, ears ringing, the breath knocked completely out of him. Sounds of shouting and bellows of anger reached his ears. Distantly he heard Gabriel say, "Oh, whoopsie, totally lost hold of his wing there," and Balthazar replying, "Me too, rats." Then Cas was yelling, and Sam too, and even Ruby, and there were thumps and thuds and more blasts of air and blazes of blue-white light that seemed to be going in all directions. It seemed everybody was fighting, and yet Dean couldn't even seem to make himself move; he couldn't even draw a breath of air. Get up, get up! came the distant voice; Grab the pistol and get up! It seemed to take ages before Dean could even suck in a breath of air, let alone make his arm move. Weakly he fumbled his hand across the ice. The pistol seemed lost, but the shotgun was still slung over Dean's shoulder, and he staggered to his feet to find a furious battle raging.

Lightning was spearing everywhere in the sky now, thunder booming continuously, the deafening racket making it hard to think. Dean stumbled forward through huge fractured pieces of ice, and finally he spotted Cas, who was some thirty yards away in a desperate scrambling roll on the ground.
Cas was trying to evade a furious Raphael, who was actually crawling after him on all fours stabbing almost randomly with the golden blade and still roaring in fury. White light was still streaming brightly from Raphael's shoulder wound. Cas's blue-light handcuffs seemed to be causing him some difficulty - they kept pinning him to the ground briefly — and Gabriel was limping after them both, one of his wings dragging and red with blood. Gabriel was snapping his fingers oddly, frowning in concentration as he did so. With each snap of Gabriel's fingers, Gabriel seemed to weaken, but Cas's blue handcuffs seemed to grow thinner, wisps of blue evaporating off of them. Finally, as Gabriel went to his knees with another finger-snap, one of Cas's handcuffs evaporated. Then one last finger-snap and the other handcuff was gone too. Gabriel seemed to be totally incapable of even walking now, slumped in the snow with his legs folded under him. But he managed to yank a golden dagger from his sleeve and he hurled it, spinning, through the air toward Raphael — who deflected it with a wild parry of his own golden blade. Cas snatched up Gabriel's blade and rolled at Raphael. Shining gold caught the light as Cas made a broad slashing slice. He managed to graze one of Raphael's huge white wings. Gabriel was crawling closer and there was a rough scuffle next, all three angels on the tundra wrestling messily, tumbling through snow and mud with their wings flailing. Meanwhile Dean, limping frantically closer, his head still ringing, raised the shotgun with no idea what to shoot at. He could only make out a few quick glimpses of what was going on: one of Cas's black wings punching Raphael right in the jaw, a flash of a golden blade grazing a yelping Gabriel, two blades whirling —

"Enough of this," growled Raphael, and he staggered to his feet and backed away. He was leaking silver light from at least four places.

"You're wounded," Castiel said, on his knees on the tundra, gasping. He shot a desperately worried look over his shoulder at Dean and lurched to his feet. He must have been near collapse from fatigue, but both his wings lifted up in a high posture that Dean had never seen him use before, arced out dramatically, raised above his shoulders. Dean realized a moment later that Cas was trying to shield Dean from Raphael's view — and from a potential throw of that lethal golden blade.

"You're badly wounded," said Cas to Raphael. "You can't win. Give up, Raphael."

"Surrender to a depowered seraph? To a fallen angel? Please," said Raphael, a disdainful scowl on his face. "A change of vessel is all I need." He was clearly quite weakened, he managed to summon up enough energy for one last sneer at Castiel. "I never liked these human vessels anyway. Never could understand what you see in them. Filthy, flimsy little apes." With that, he opened his jaw wide and a blazing stream of light poured from his mouth.

Dean watched in shock as the streamer of silver light shot up into the sky, leaving behind only a thin dark-skinned man in a ludicrous silver robe who was pouring blood, not light but blood, from four terrible wounds — the bullet-wound in his shoulder as well as at least three other stab wounds from Castiel and Gabriel.

Cas and Dean both hurried toward the dark-skinned man, but the man glanced down at his wounds and murmured, softly, a faint smile on his face, "Finally." He fell to the ground.

Cas knelt to feel at his neck, and turned to Dean with a sorrowful shake of the head.

The man — Raphael's "vessel", apparently — was dead.

"DEAN!" came a desperate shout. Sam's voice. Cas and Dean both spun around to find that there was an entirely different battle raging behind them, a few dozen yards beyond the rubble-field of shattered ice. Balthazar, Sam, and the demons were well embroiled in their own frantic fight.

Dean sprinted over — or tried to, but the rubble-field of ice took some scrambling over. Cas was
beside him, Gabriel limping along behind, as Dean took in the scene ahead: Balthazar had a silver blade in his hand and seemed to be facing off against Azazel himself, who turned out to have his own nasty-looking serrated dagger.

"Does everybody have a weird knife?" Dean gasped to Cas.

"Pretty much," Cas muttered back. "Oh, no, Balthazar—"

Balthazar had taken at least one wound already, leaking the now-familiar silver light from a gash in his chest. And off in a corner near the start of the trail, Sam was struggling with Ruby. Crowley had taken a few steps back and was regarding the whole scene with his arms calmly folded, with something of the air of a spectator who only wished he had some popcorn.

Ruby was screaming in fury, yelling at Sam, "YOU SIGNED! YOU SIGNED! YOU HAVE TO OBEY!"

"I INVALIDATED THE CODICILS!" bellowed Sam back. This mystifying statement made everyone in earshot — Crowley, Ruby, Azazel and even the wounded Balthazar — all freeze at once.

Even Castiel paused in his headlong run, grabbing hold of Dean's arm as he did so and pulling Dean to a stop. "This matters," hissed Cas quietly.

As one, everybody turned to stare at Sam. Sam let out a ragged gasp, backing up a few steps, looking at them each in turn.

"I'm not a complete idiot," said Sam. He caught Dean's eye and added, "That contract was insane. I invalidated all the codicils before I signed. I overwrote them with my own codicils — crossed out the old ones, put the new ones in the margins — and initialed and dated each one." To Crowley he added, "What did you think I was doing, all that time in the back seat?"

Crowley hesitated a long moment and finally ventured, "I thought you were a... slow reader?"

Sam let out a short laugh. "I did manage to learn to read, during my measly thirty-five years, you know. If you didn't re-read the contract after I signed, and just added your own signature without paying attention to all my changes, that's on you."

There was a breathless pause. Dean shot a baffled glance at Cas to find that a slow smile was now spreading over Castiel's face.

"Crowley?" growled Azazel, turning to Crowley slowly. "Does this mean he's not under our control at all?"

Crowley was now unrolling the contract in his hands, an eyebrow raised as he rapidly reread a few sections. He turned to the others and said brightly, "Really now, how many people even know about codicils? I'm sure we can put together a revised contract in a jiffy—"

"Shut the hell up, you imbecile," snapped Azazel at Crowley, and he spun back to Balthazar. Azazel had recovered from Sam's surprising revelation first, Balthazar a split second later. But Balthazar was too slow; Azazel had used the distraction deliberately and was now smoothly lunging at Balthazar with his deadly-looking serrated dagger. Dean, Cas and even Gabriel all tried to run then, but already Azazel was burying the serrated dagger deeply in Balthazar's chest. Balthazar dropped to his knees and crumpled to the tundra.

Azazel stood triumphant, gazing down at Balthazar with a wide grin. Though the serrated
dagger didn't seem to have actually killed Balthazar yet; his wings were still moving, weakly. It was dawning on Dean that there were types of daggers, and that this serrated demon-blade was maybe not quite enough to kill an angel with a single blow. But it had certainly done damage, for poor Balthazar seemed absolutely helpless now, lying flat on his back in the tundra with his wings flapping weakly, gasping by Azazel's feet. Azazel bent to yank the blade out, and raised it for a second blow. Dean heard a choked "No!" from Castiel behind him. At which Dean raised the shotgun barrel, carefully aiming so the shot would clear Balthazar, and pulled the trigger.

It was only buckshot. Which, Dean was pretty sure by now, wasn't going to be much use against a demon. But it took Azazel full in the chest and flung him straight back against the rock wall that bordered the whole summit-meadow. His legs crumpled and he slid down to a patch of ice and snow, his serrated blade falling several feet away. Dean advanced, yanking Cas's silver blade from its new custom-made sheath, readying it for a throw. Azazel's eyes tracked the silver blade, and he murmured, "Oh, for fuck's sake."

Dean raised his arm for the throw; but before the silver blade could strike home, a streamer of red smoke poured out of Azazel's mouth, and Azazel's body went limp.

"Be careful," murmured Balthazar, and Dean turned to find Balthazar gazing up at him, eyelids flickering. The now-familiar silver light poured from his awful chest wound. "Be careful," whispered Balthazar again. "Crowley..."

"Hey, Ruby, ol' pal, what say we get out of here?" said Crowley conversationally. "And bring that boy with you. I'm sure we'll find some use for him."

The final showdown now became clear; Crowley and Ruby, standing together with Sam near the start of the trail, facing Cas, Gabriel and Dean, all panting and all wounded. Ruby still had one hand latched like iron again onto Sam's upper arm, and it had been clear for some time now that the power of that grip was itself supernatural, and was something he could not break free of. At Crowley's words, Ruby turned away from Sam, looking at Crowley. Sam shot a desperate glance at Dean. At which point Dean realized that he still had an arm raised, and still had Cas's silver blade in his hand, and still was ready to throw.

He didn't trust himself to be able to hit Ruby with the blade at this distance, but he didn't have to. Instead he caught Sam's eye and tossed the blade in a low underhand throw right over to him. Crowley saw the blade sailing through the air, and his eyes widened. Too late, Ruby turned too, but Sam had already grabbed the blade, somehow snatching it from mid-air unerringly by the haft. Even as Ruby turned toward him he flipped it around to a striking position, and the move looked as natural as if he'd been doing it all his life.

The blade sunk deep into her belly.

Ruby crumpled against Sam, eyes wide with shock. "Damned intern," she said.

Her eyes flamed with a blazing silver light.

She collapsed.

Sam let her body drop to the ground and backed away slowly, Cas's silver blade still in his hand, a numb look on his face.

Ruby's eyes had been completely burned out. Only blackened sockets remained.

"Well, this is a complete shitshow," said Crowley brightly. "Don't mind if I do take that one blade,
thanks—" He scuttled over to where the serrated blade had fallen when Azazel had lost hold of it. Snatching it up nimbly, he waggled it at Dean, saying, "Demon blade should stay in demon hands, don't you think? Well, I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again. My my, things can suddenly get interesting when you least expect it, can't they? And just think, nobody's on the throne of Hell at the moment. Not to mention, Alaska Petroleum's going to need a new CEO. Hm..." With a puff of red smoke, he was gone.

Cas and Gabriel came stumbling over. Both looked quite a bit the worse for wear, especially Gabriel, who was dragging one wing and was wobbling so badly that Castiel soon grabbed his arm to try to help support him. Gabriel's mouth quirked as if he wanted to make some dry sarcastic comment, but he seemed unable to get a word out and soon gave up the attempt, face going almost slack as he slumped heavily onto Castiel's shoulder. Silver light was leaking from two nasty-looking wounds, one at the base of Gabriel's dragging wing and the other in his abdomen. Dean and Cas exchanged a long look as the two angels staggered closer, and then Cas nodded toward Sam.

Dean turned then to Sam, who was still holding the silver blade, staring down at Ruby's body blankly.

Dean walked closer. Sam flinched when Dean touched his shoulder.

"She was a... demon," Sam said, still staring down at Ruby's body.

"I know," said Dean, resting one hand gently on Sam's shoulder. He could feel Sam fairly vibrating, his shoulder muscles actually twitching with adrenaline and shock.

"She was a demon," Sam repeated. He looked over at Gabriel and Cas, who were both kneeling over Balthazar now (who seemed to still be alive, though clearly in need of assistance). Sam let out a long, slow breath at the sight of their wings — Cas's half-length black wings, which still were arced out broadly in what seemed to be a high-adrenaline aggressive posture, and Gabriel's much longer white wings, one folded up tightly and the other leaking both blood and silver light as it dragged in the snow. Both of Balthazar's wings were on full display too, white wings splayed out helplessly in the snow, the snow steaming around his feathers as the two other angels tried to do something about the silver light streaming from Balthazar's awful chest wound.

"They're angels," said Sam numbly. "Angels are... real. Dean. Angels are real."

"I know," said Dean.

"Dean, Cas is an angel." Sam drew a ragged breath. "Look. He's got wings."

"I know."

Sam turned to him slowly, seeming to hear something in Dean's voice. "Wait... you... already knew?" he asked. "About all of this?"

"Only about Cas," Dean said. He realized then that though he'd intended to be bracing Sam, for surely Sam was in shock and would need some bracing, instead he was actually leaning on Sam's shoulder for support, head still throbbing from the throw to the ice wall. He forced himself to stand up a little more and said, "'The demon thing was new to me." He added, "And I didn't really know about Ruby. Thought I saw something weird in her eyes once or twice, but I figured I'd imagined it."


After a moment he added, "Oh and, she cursed my truck."

"What?"

"She cursed my truck. That's why I got stuck in the storm. Nearly killed me, actually — Cas found me just in time. I broke the curse though."

Sam just blinked at him. "Ruby was a demon... and she cursed your truck."

"Yeah."

"And Cas saved your life."

"Yeah," Dean said. He added, knowing it was totally useless, "I'm sorry, Sam."

Sam was still trying to take it all in. "Global warming is the frickin' Apocalypse," he said next.

Cas looked over at them both and said, "That element was new to me as well. Come on, you two. We have to get out of here. It's not over." He whispered something to Gabriel, who nodded. Gabriel took tight hold of one of Balthazar's shoulders, Cas gripped the other, and Gabriel murmured something. The flow of light from Balthazar's wounds seemed to dim a little, but the effort seemed to weaken both Gabriel (who crumpled to his knees, white-faced now), and Cas, who was also now weaving slightly on his feet. "Go," Cas murmured to Balthazar. "You've done enough. Go hide. And heal." Balthazar gave a quiet nod. The two others helped him to his feet, and then, oddly, they dropped their hands, backing away and leaving Balthazar unsupported. Balthazar was wobbling a little on his feet, but he stayed upright. His wings stretched out unevenly, and he met Dean's eyes.

"Glad you took that job," he said to Dean. "Told you you'd be a good fit for it, didn't I?"

With that Balthazar simply vanished, an eerie fluttering noise ripping through the air after him.

Sam and Dean both jumped in shock.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" said Dean.

"What," said Sam, almost blankly. He stared around. "What was that — where'd he go— where'd he go?"

"That's how we fly," said Castiel, now helping Gabriel up, who again leaned heavily on Cas as soon as he got to his feet. "We move into the etheric plane and fly there." Cas sounded, and looked, exhausted, one of his dark wings folding up at his back now, the other wrapping around Gabriel as if to give him some support. Slowly the two angels made their way closer to the two brothers, glancing around at the three remaining bodies — Raphael, Azazel and Ruby. "This isn't over," said Cas as they drew closer.

"What do you mean it's not over?" said Sam, now sounding somewhere between hysteria and anger. "How much more of it is there? When is it going to be over?"

Gabriel finally spoke, his face tight with pain, "That would be a 'never', I think. But as for now — the immediate problem is, Azazel and Raphael will be back."

Dean and Sam both turned to look at the bodies — Raphael's dark-skinned vessel lying limp in the tundra, Azazel slumped against the rock wall, and Ruby crumpled in a patch of snow. But Cas and Gabriel just exchanged a knowing glance with each other.
"Only Ruby died," explained Gabriel, through gasps for breath. "Raphael and Azazel... got away. Those... streamers of light. The bodies were just... their vessels. They've just... gone to get... new vessels. And—" He gritted his teeth, trying to get his sentences out. "I know Azazel had... another vessel ready, one of his... favorites. And Raphael can... resurrect one in a flash... he just needs... some source material. We've gotta get out of here."

Cas nodded, glancing up at the towering storm overhead and then turning to scan around the mountain-top meadow. "As soon as they're both envesseled they'll come looking for us. For all of us. Gabriel, can you fly? I'm afraid I don't have much more power left to try to heal your wounds."

Gabriel straightened up a little and took a shaky step away from Cas. He lifted his unhurt wing first, and then, more slowly, the wounded one. Though he winced, his wounded wing spread out slowly. "I think so," he gasped, teeth gritted. "But I couldn't carry anybody."

"Get out of here, then," said Cas. "Get somewhere safe. Go find Balthazar. And... thank you. You and Balthazar were the only ones who ever helped me at all, all these years." Castiel added, his voice low, "I won't forget it. Now, go. Take care of yourself."

Gabriel gave him a quiet look, and he nodded. Gritting his teeth, he extended both wings a little farther.

His wings vanished first (Dean and Sam both jumped). For a moment Gabriel looked like a man, an ordinary man, with no wings at all. He winked at Sam; there was the strange fluttering sound again, barely audible above the storm, and he was gone.

Dean and Sam looked around. Gabriel, too, had disappeared.

Dean finally said, "Cas, just so you know, I'm not going to get used to that."

Cas gave him a faint smile. "Do you remember how my feather disappeared?"

"But it... came back," objected Dean. "It just went invisible. It didn't leave."

"Step one is putting the wings in the etheric plane," said Castiel. "Step two is flying. You were accomplishing step one with that feather all on your own." He saw their confused looks, and shook his head, saying, "Never mind. More to the point, Balthazar and Gabriel can barely even get their own vessels into the ether; they can't carry along anybody else. And my feathers are only half-grown and I'm very drained right now." He gave a frustrated sigh. "It's too risky to try to carry either of you. My range would be very short, my steering poor and landings unreliable. So I'm afraid we'll have to hike back down, and we should do that right now. But—" His eyes narrowed; he was looking at Dean's pack. Or, more precisely, at the empty pistol holster. "Where's your other weapon?"

Dean felt at the holster. "Damn. I dropped it when Raphael did that... flinging me into the air thing."

"Go find it," Cas said. "We may need that gun — for some reason it had quite an effect on Raphael."

Dean nodded and trotted (or, rather, wobbled) over to the willow-bushes, Sam following along behind. It only took them a moment; the pistol turned out to be lying only a few feet from the shattered ice wall, glinting brightly in the flashes of lightning overhead. Dean scooped it up, flicked the safety on, and they hurried back to Cas, who was standing out in the middle of the tundra-meadow looking at something on the tundra. Dean walked up to find him cradling the fallen junco in both hands.

There was an amazingly strong pang of grief at the sight of that sad little clump of feathers, but when Dean drew closer, he discovered that the junco was still alive. It looked like it had been stunned,
lying on its side in the palm of Cas's hand, but it soon struggled feebly to its feet, wobbling a little and sticking out both wings for balance. It let out a faint, breathy-sounding "chip". Cas nodded, turning to look for a safe place to set it down.

"He'll be okay," said Cas. "But it's past time we left—"

"CHIP!" said the junco. Dean frowned; all the junco’s head feathers were suddenly sticking up completely straight, as if it had been electrified. It was looking right at them.

No. At something behind them.

"Too late," said Sam softly. He pointed; Cas and Dean both turned, and there, just a few paces away, was the biggest grizzly bear that Dean had ever seen.

It had yellow eyes.

*The bear. The bear,* Dean thought numbly. He glanced at its paws. Five great curved claws on the left paw. Only four on the right.

It was missing a claw.

Dean could only stare at it for a long, hopeless moment. A huge grizzly bear, one paw missing a claw. With yellow eyes.

It looked at them, and it smiled.

It was frickin' smiling. Bears were not supposed to do that.

*Bears don't usually do that,* the rangers had said, all those years ago.

*Biggest bear we've ever seen,* the rangers had said. *Yellow eyes, too. Strangest thing. Never seen yellow eyes on a grizzly before.*

"Arm around my back," Cas murmured, lips barely moving. Dean met Sam's eyes; Sam had heard. They each snaked an arm around Cas's back; Cas was holding his wings slightly away from his back so that Dean's and Sam's hands could meet below his wings. Dean felt Sam's hand grope for his, and Dean grabbed on tight. Cas was still holding the junco in one hand and he shoved it at Dean, stuffing the bewildered junco into the pocket of Dean's flannel shirt. Cas wrapped both arms around Sam's and Dean's waists.

"Hold on very tightly," Cas muttered under his breath.

The bear made a bizarre growling, grumbling noise. With a sense of thrilled horror, Dean realized it was speaking.

"You... can't... fly..." the bear growled, the words barely recognizable. "Half... grown... wings. Crippled. You... can't... fly." And then it laughed, a positively nauseating sound.

"Give up, Azazel," said Castiel.

"I'll... kill... you... ALLLL," growled the gigantic yellow-eyed bear, and it was still bellowing the last word as it charged.

It was blindingly fast. It was on them in a moment, so large it seemed to blot out the world, jaws wide, enormous teeth reaching, a paw the the size of truck tire swiping at them from the side. The last thing Dean saw was the gleaming yellow eyes.
The yellow eyes faded. The light seemed to warp; all of Topaz warped. There was a beating of wings again, that eerie fluttering sound that Dean had heard twice already now, but this time the sound continued, like a flag whipping in the wind. The world dropped away, and they were soaring high in the clouds.

There was an odd stuttering feeling to their passage, as if the world had suddenly switched to low-resolution, low-frame-rate video. *Are we in the ether?* Dean wondered. He could still see, somehow; he could see Cas’s face close to his, gray and misty, and Sam just beyond, his face shocked and pale.

And Dean sensed Castiel struggling. How Dean was sensing this, he didn't know, but the fluttering sound had faltered, and now it was as if he could feel Cas struggling to swim forward as if through heavy surf, as though his half-grown feathers didn't have quite enough length to propel them all forward. This had to be the first time Cas had flown in over forty years, right? And he was carrying two passengers.

*Hang on, Cas,* Dean thought, reaching out to him in some way that he couldn't even have described. He felt Cas soaking up whatever it was that Dean was somehow offering, and the world swung beneath them.

Then Dean was falling. Through the air. Through actual air. With the tundra tilting below him. There was a horrific moment of uncertainty about how far the drop would be — was the green tundra a mile below him, or just a few feet? But almost immediately he smashed into a huge drift of soft half-melted snow. He heard Sam yell too, from not far away.

It took a moment even to figure out which way was up, but soon Dean managed to extract himself from the snow, the junco scrambling out from his shirt pocket with a chitter of panic. He checked the holster; he still had the pistol, and the shotgun's strap was still somehow around his neck as well. There was ice water trickling down his neck; he batted at it, shaking snow out of his hair, looking around.

Sam was lying on his back nearby, just starting to sit up. Dean floundered over to him through mounds of sopping wet snow, and gave him a hand up. Cas was standing a few feet away on a patch of heather, gasping for breath, bending over with his hands on his knees. His wings were drooping down to the snow, quivering with exhaustion. The junco tottered across the tundra a few feet away, first with uneven hops and then making a short wobbly flight of its own, to a small willow-shrub where it perched uncertainly. As soon as Sam was on his feet, muttering to Dean "Fine, I'm fine," Dean dashed over to Cas.

"You okay, Cas?" Dean said, bracing both his shoulders.

"That went better than I expected," Cas said. He was breathing heavily. He glanced up with a harried look, hands still on his knees, and added, "I tried to throw you both toward the snow pile."

"Well, at least that part worked," said Dean. "But what just..." He turned in a half-circle, still keeping one hand firmly on Cas's arm as he looked all around him. The sky was still stormy overhead, the
clouds crackling with lightning. Dean spotted Topaz Mountain, which now seemed to be on the horizon a couple miles away. And then he spotted a wooden box not far away, and finally realized, with a sense of inevitability, that it was the very wooden box that Dean himself had built. They were at Cas's pingo-pool, and Cas was standing on a certain memorable patch of heather.

Dean said, "Okay, so, what just happened?"

"We flew," Cas said, still in a half-bent-over crouch. He still seemed very pale, and he looked up at Dean with wide, startled eyes. "Dean, I... I flew. I flew. I flew. I can't believe it. I flew. Did you see?"

"I saw," Dean said, a grin coming over his face at Cas's obvious shock.

"Where are we?" asked Sam, shaking the snow off his Alaska Petroleum jacket as he looked around him.

"Near Kupaluk," said Cas. He looked around at the heather and glanced up at Dean again, with a faint smile. "It's easier to target an area that has some, uh, emotional resonance. My apologies, my steering's not what it once was, and my power's quite low. Dean, I wonder if you were feeding some power to me. You see, that started out as what we call an under-powered flight, but you—" He stood up as he was saying this, but he didn't finish his sentence. As soon as he'd stood all the way up, his eyelids sagged shut and his knees folded. Dean grabbed him, wings and all, as Castiel crumpled to the heather.
"This wasn't on the forecast AT ALL," Ryan muttered to himself as he sprinted through some surprisingly powerful winds to the dining hall. He was hoping to round up some grad students to help him with the Weatherports, Kupaluk's huge domed eight-bed platform tents. Weatherports weren't as sturdy as trailers, consisting simply of big aluminum frames covered with canvas, but they helped provide extra housing for the influx of summer scientists. Kupaluk had a whole row of them. However, it turned out they didn't fare especially well in high wind — particularly when they were still only half-built, with the canvas halfway on, as Ryan had just discovered.

As he dashed to the dining hall through a passing shower of brief hail, Ryan darted a look at the towering thunderheads above Topaz Mountain. The height of those great storm clouds was astonishing. This whole weird storm had only started a couple hours ago, and Ryan was sure he hadn't seen anything like this on the National Weather Service's morning forecast. Dark, boiling clouds were stacked up now above Topaz in a slowly moving vortex that seemed to stretch miles high, the tops of the clouds wisping away to dizzying heights that seemed to stretch all the way up to outer space. Flashes of lightning sparked inside the clouds now and then, each flash lighting up the whole towering pillar of clouds.

All the camp staff had started watching the storm as it formed. Shelly had even gone back to her office computer to doublecheck that they had even printed out the correct forecast this morning. At first it had seemed that the freak storm would blow past, just another passing tundra thunderstorm, but instead it had somehow (very weirdly) remained parked directly over Topaz. Then, equally weirdly, its fringe of outer clouds had started spreading out over camp, and the wind had started picking up. Really picking up.

Fifteen minutes ago Shelly had sent out a radio call on channel four to the camp staff, officially putting the camp into storm protocol. Staffers were now fanning out all over camp to tie down essential gear, and Ryan knew that the Weatherport that he'd been struggling with all morning counted as "essential gear." And he was awfully worried that it might just blow away.

Ryan pelted into the dining hall to find a clutch of three grad students chattering excitedly in the
mudroom, pulling on their rain gear. "Weatherports, right?" one of them asked him. "Shelly told us you'd need help. So what do we do?"

Ryan hesitated only briefly. It was still a little strange to find people his own age looking to him for direction, but he tried to summon his inner Dean and said, in as authoritative a voice as he could manage, "Should be pretty straightforward. The ones that are already fully up should be fine, but the one that's half-up doesn't have its guy lines yet — I nearly got it together this morning but not quite. We gotta just take down the canvas that it has already. It just takes some extra people to hold the corners while we get the canvas off, and then we just roll it up. Hold on a sec, we're in storm protocol now and I'm supposed to check the board—"

He read over the entries on the sign-out board rapidly. Four bird people from the Cornell team were, inevitably, a mile to the south with their truck, as they nearly always were (hopefully this time they hadn't forgotten to keep the board updated). Phil, David and their grad student Jeannette had signed out two of the tiny open skiffs for the lake work; they'd need to be told to come in. Shawn had gone out earlier in an old Ford pickup to track radio-tagged lemmings on the eastern tundra hill, but hopefully he'd have the common sense to come back in on his own. And Dean Winchester, who was technically on leave, only still on the North Slope at all due to last week's blizzard, had taken off with that old Chevy a few hours ago. Ryan winced to see that Dean had written "Topaz" as his destination.

Along with a quite mysterious "DON'T FOLLOW."

"Shelly, Dean's at Topaz—" Ryan called out as Shelly went running past him into the manager's office.

"I saw," she called. She emerged from her office a second later holding the handset of the main camp radio, which, Ryan knew, relayed its signal through a powerful signal-boosting antenna on the roof of the dining hall. She peered at the board, bringing the radio up to her mouth.

"Dean's at Topaz," Ryan repeated urgently, "That bird guy Castiel's probably there too, the one who helped him in the snowstorm. Dean says Castiel camps somewhere near there, so I bet Dean went to see if Castiel was all right. We gotta go get them."

"They're right in the thick of the storm," Shelly said, pointing outside. Her eyes widened. "Oh, holy shit." Lightning bolts were crackling now around the entire base of Topaz, and they all watched in awe as nearly six lightning bolts hit the ground at once, scattered all across the tundra from Topaz to Kupaluk Lake, some of them reaching nearly over to the Haul Road. There was a tiny moment of breathless quiet afterwards and then an earsplitting crack of thunder split the air, in several rapid percussive waves of sound that made them all flinch.

After a brief moment of stunned awe, one of the students muttered, "Goddamn."

"Shelly...." said Ryan quietly. "Dean's out there."

Shelly took a ragged breath. "Dean's got that truck of his. He got through the whole blizzard in that truck; he knows what to do in lightning. The truck's got rubber tires, and he knows that, and if he's in it he'll be fine, and if he's not, he knows to lay low, literally. And that bird guy should know the land too — Dean says he's an old arctic hand." Though she then added tightly, "But I really hope they've taken shelter. This is very bad terrain for getting caught out in the open in lightning."

The radio was crackling with excited messages back and forth between a few truckers, and Shelly had to wait till they'd stopped talking. "Break, break, break," she then said crisply, announcing an emergency break-in to communication, and she followed it with a very clear "Securité, securité,
securité." (Ryan felt a little thrill of excitement; he'd never actually heard "securité" used in real life. It was an old French term, still used in radio protocol to signify a serious safety announcement.) Shelly continued, "This is Kupaluk base. Be advised there is a serious lightning storm at Topaz Mountain and it is moving toward Kupaluk and the Haul Road. We have gale-force winds at Kupaluk Lake."

"Hurricane-force," said Ryan, pointing to the wind speed indicator that was mounted on the wall. It was connected to an official weather station that was mounted a hundred yards away in an open patch of tundra. The numbers had just ticked up to hurricane level.

"Correction, we have hurricane-force winds," said Shelly into her radio, "and multiple lightning strikes by the Haul Road. Advise all Kupaluk teams to return to camp immediately. Advise all truck traffic to halt or seek shelter. Truckers, please relay north and south to other traffic. Repeat — Sécurité, sécurité, sécurité, we have a serious lighting storm at Topaz Mountain...."

She repeated the whole message carefully. When she'd finished, the radio came alive with staticky replies. Shawn turned out to already be running from his lemming site toward the perimeter road, where he'd left his little pickup parked. The Cornell team piped up too, already on their way back from their southern site near Atigun — the change in the weather must have been obvious from miles away. A couple of truckers acknowledged as well, with professional-sounding "Copy that's," and "Wilco's" crackling over the radio.

Then a "Base, base, this is Titanic," caught Ryan's ear; that was the call sign of the U Penn stream ecology team, the ones who were still out on the lake in their two tiny skiffs. "Titanic" was Phil's pet name for the older of the two skiffs.

"Titanic, this is Kupaluk Base, go ahead," said Shelly crisply.

"We're heading in," said Phil. "We've got sea state four out here on the lake, it's unbelievable. Whitecaps and spray and everything."

"Copy that, Titanic," said Shelly. "You guys okay?"

"We're making headway. I'm just hoping we don't live up to our call sign. Can you send someone to toss us a line from the dock? We'll be okay if we can get in to the dock pretty quick. Over."

"Copy that, I'll send Nicole. You guys stay safe, and call if you need more help. Over and out." Nicole herself then piped up next — she'd heard the whole exchange from her own radio in the EMT trailer — and not twenty seconds later Nicole went dashing straight past the dining hall, still pulling her rain gear on as she pelted toward the lakeside dock.

Shelly lowered her radio, breathing tightly, and she shot a wide-eyed glance toward Ryan. "Jesus," she muttered.

"You sound super professional," Ryan assured her.

"It's all an act," she confessed. "This is the worst windstorm we've ever had." She peered again at the windspeed indicator. "We just smashed our all-time record. Fuck."

Ryan looked again out the little windows in the dining room doors, the three grad students bunched up next to him. Shelly lowered her radio and took a step closer to peer outside too, and for a long moment everybody just looked outside.

Pieces of plywood and bits of lost laundry were whipping past. An empty five-gallon bucket went rolling by, bouncing across the gravel at a good thirty miles an hour at least. Rain spray was hitting...
"You really think Dean's gonna be okay?" Ryan said to Shelly.

Shelly put one hand on her forehead, her eyes closing for a moment. "We can't help him," she said. "We can't send any kind of rescue mission through this kind of wind."

"But Dean—"

Ryan fell silent as Shelly's eyes opened. She regarded Dean's last sign-out line on the whiteboard with an expression of misery. "He's always left standing orders," she said softly. "Standing orders that if he's out on the tundra and there's a crisis, we gotta get everyone else before we get him. Damn, the poor guy just went through that blizzard, too." For a moment she looked very tired. Another two people went dashing past outside, their raincoats flapping wildly; they were the air crew, running to get more line to hold down the choppers. The chopper dispatcher came running out from her trailer too to meet them, holding three coils of extra line, and they all rushed back to the little helicopters together.

Shelly watched them run past, and seemed to come to a decision. She turned to Ryan, and when she spoke her voice was calm again. "Ryan, go see if the air crew needs help tying down the choppers," she said. "I'll take the students to anchor the Weatherport, else that thing's gonna blow completely apart in the next sixty seconds. Come meet me as soon as you can. Keep your radio with you and the volume up. You keep watching the road for Shawn and the Cornell folks, and I'm gonna keep my eye on skiffs on the lake and report on the radio as soon as anybody arrives back in camp. Remember Dean's rule - people are number one, and everything else is lower priority."

Ryan nodded, and as Shelly turned to the three students to give them some instructions, he ran out into the storm.

Strangely, there was relatively little rain. The problem was the wind. The storm was still centered on Topaz Mountain, a wild, dark vortex of towering cloud that was lit sporadically by internal flashes of lighting. It seemed now to be actually swirling counterclockwise around the mountain, as if a miniature tropical hurricane had somehow popped into existence here on the North Slope with its eye centered exactly on the mountain. The storm clouds had spread out to cover half the sky. A few anomalous patches of blue sky were still showing to the south over the Brooks, but to the northwest near Topaz, the sky was nearly black.

Even as Ryan made his way to the choppers, the winds seemed to strengthen. He had to hunker over even to make headway against the wind. He heard a ripping sound behind him and turned to see that the three flags above the dining hall were whipping in the wind so violently that their ends were starting shred; the stars and stripes had lost the outer halves of all the stripes. The second flag and the third flag were still mostly intact, though probably not for long, and Ryan's eyes were drawn to their fluttering logos: the tiny longspur in flight over the Arctic Circle, and the Alaskan state flag with its golden stars against the midnight blue background. Beside the three flags was the dining hall's lightning rod.

Ryan made himself move on, but the reminder that the trailers were all equipped with lightning rods was a definite reassurance. He looked around as he ran, now noticing the lightning rods that stuck up from every single structure in camp. Big Mama, the dorms, the lab trailers, the sauna, even the outhouses — every structure had its own lightning rod, and Ryan remembered, now, how Dean had told him that lightning could be a serious threat on the tundra. Here in this treeless land, an upright human figure, or even a little outhouse, could be the tallest thing around for miles.

Ryan got to the choppers and helped one of the pilots tie down one bird, while the dispatcher helped
with the other one. They'd soon waved him back to the Weatherports, where Shelly and the cluster of half-excited, half-scared grad students were trying to wrestle the huge canvas tent covering back down from its aluminum frame. The howling wind was making it almost impossible for them to hear each other.

"There was nothing about this on the NWS forecast!" yelled Ryan to Shelly. "I swear I checked!"

"I know you did!" screamed Shelly back. "It's the Arctic, shit happens! God damn, this canvas is hopeless. Oh, shit—" Her radio was crackling, and Ryan's was too, and they both froze still as they heard the distinctive word "Mayday."

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, this is Titanic," said Phil, in an almost spookily calm voice. "We have sea state six now. We are taking on water." Shelly spun to face the lake and Ryan dropped his corner of the heavy canvas, dashing next to her to see what was happening.

The two little skiffs, far out on the ice-free third of the lake, were battling freakishly high white-water waves. *Sea state six,* Phil had said — Ryan couldn't remember the sea state scale, but he knew six was high. Six was something that only ever happened on the open ocean. A small lake like Kupaluk never had waves like this, and the tiny skiffs weren't designed for such heavy seas. Even from here Ryan could see the two skiffs were nearly swamped, bucking hopelessly against waves that were nearly three times the height of the little boats, with huge splashes of ice water pounding repeatedly over the gunnels onto the shivering, hunched people. The boats had almost reached the dock, where a frantic Nicole was trying to throw the end of a line of rope to them, but both boats were now being driven rapidly away by the incredible wind and waves.

It was a little lake, but even a little lake could be very hard to swim across, and the water was thirty-four degrees Fahrenheit and sheathed on three sides with ice. The skiff crew were all weighed down with boots and parkas. Anybody who fell into that icy water would be gone in less than a minute. Especially if they were blown under the remaining ice.

"Nicole, get to the sauna pier!" Shelly was shouting into her radio. "Phil, you won't make it to the main dock, but you'll be blown past the sauna pier, we'll throw you a line! Be ready to catch!"

Ryan and Shelly both saw in an instant that Nicole wouldn't be able to get to the sauna pier in time; she was too far downshore. "Ryan, get the students in!" Shelly yelled, "And watch for the others on the road! Get everyone inside!" She was already in a sprint toward the sauna, her rain jacket flapping as she ran, radio still clutched in one hand. A tall figure went thundering past Ryan after her — Teddy Bear the cook, still in his shirtsleeves, clutching his own radio, apron straps flapping. He must've heard the commotion over the radio while in the kitchen.

Ryan looked around, almost overwhelmed. The entire chopper crew was fighting now with the second chopper, which was tipping precariously up on its left skid. Ed and Shelly were in mid-dash headed to the sauna. *Watch the road,* Ryan remembered, and he turned to see the Cornell truck (a big new Suburban that seemed just a speck at this distance) making the turn off the Haul Road and onto the long rutted Kupaluk driveway. Two lumbering semis were cresting the Haul Road hill in the distance, and Ryan was horrified to see one of them actually tip up as a tremendous gust of wind hit it, all the wheels on one side lifting entirely off the ground. It teetered there for a terrifying moment, then righted itself, thumping down heavily in a great spray of mud. But it seemed to be intact, and made its cautious way down the long hill.

Black clouds had covered the entire sky now, the last specks of blue long gone. Thick black clouds everywhere, wind howling like a freight train, lightning and thunder piercing the heavens now and then. Sheets of rain began to lash past, sporadically, the raindrops flying with such force at Ryan's face that he was sure at first that it was hail. The Brooks mountains had disappeared behind a wall of
heavy cloud. It was so dim that it almost seemed as if a true night, at long last, had come to the
summer tundra.

There was a tap on his shoulder. "Ryan?" one of the new students screamed, shouting against the
wind. Ryan turned mutely to find that the entire bunch of students, the three grad students along with
a handful of nervous young undergrads, were all clumped up just behind him, watching him with
wide eyes. They were waiting for him to do something.

For a long moment he just stared back at them.

"What do we do with the Weatherport?" one of them asked, and only then did Ryan realize that
several were still holding edges of the half-rolled Weatherport canvas in their arms. The canvas was
still partly attached to the upper sides of the framing; it'd be nearly impossible to get it all loose and
folded up.

Dean was gone. Shelly was gone.

*People first, everything else second,* Dean used to say.

"Drop the canvas," Ryan ordered. He pointed to the dining hall, which was several hundred yards
away across the parking lot. "Get to shelter," he yelled through the wind. "Dining hall. It's the
strongest building. Stay in the center room and stay away from the windows." The students all
dropped the canvas at once (which immediately began to unroll like a huge wobbling sail, the wind
dragging it across the ground) and they all ran. The undergrads all sprinted to the dining hall pell-
mell. But the grad students didn't head the same direction. "Gotta grab my laptop!" shouted one.
"And the field books!" said another, adding, "We'll meet you in the dining hall!" Off they went,
headed not for the dining hall but for the lab trailers — all of which were smaller, less well-secured
structures, and all of which, Ryan now saw, were trembling visibly in the wind.

"FORGET THE DAMN DATA!" Ryan bellowed after them. He knew it was hopeless. *Data's like
diamonds to them,* Dean had said once. They were too far away to hear him by now anyway, half a
dozen people scurrying frantically all over camp, trying to rescue the information that they'd spent
years of their lives collecting.

Ryan groaned, looking toward the Weatherport (where the great spool of canvas was now ripping
free of the frame) and then toward the lake. The skiffs were making some progress now, and it
looked like Ted and Shelly, who were standing at the end of the pier, had managed to toss lines to
the two tiny boats as they'd hurtled past in the bucking waves. The two boats were now straining
against their lines, the boat crews hauling the lines hand over hand to reel themselves in to the sauna's
little pier. In the opposite direction toward the Haul Road, a small line of vehicles were now making
their way along the rutted driveway as fast as they could. First was Shawn's battered old Ford
pickup, wipers beating hard against the brief squalls of rain. Not far behind it was the Cornell team's
big Chevy Suburban, hopefully with the entire Cornell crew inside, and on the Haul Road not just
one but both of the big rigs were slowing to take the turn to Kupaluk, both apparently seeking
emergency shelter.

*Get to the dining hall, update Shelly on the radio, and close the shutters on the dining hall windows,*
thought Ryan, and he turned to pelt back to the dining hall.

He was nearly there, halfway across the parking lot and just thirty yards from the front door, when
goosebumps flared along his arms; he felt the hair standing up on the back of her neck. "GET
DOWN!" he yelled to the scattering of grad students who were just now re-emerging from their
various dorm trailers and labs, clutching backpacks, laptops wrapped in plastic bags, and fistfuls of
bright yellow Rite-in-the-Rain books. None of them could have heard him but they all must have felt
that same deadly hair-on-end feeling, for half the students flung themselves down to the ground and the remaining half cringed back into their lab trailers. Ryan flattened down into a patch of snowy gravel as the entire sky erupted with lightning.

More than a thousand lightning bolts speared down simultaneously, all over camp, all over the tundra, from Topaz Mountain halfway to the Brooks Range, with a nightmarishly sustained thunderclap so loud that Ryan felt his entire ribcage vibrating with the noise. He was certain he’d gone deaf; it seemed the sky had completely split apart. It was as if God himself, or all the angels of Heaven, had gone mad with fury. And it wasn't over; the thousand lightning bolts were still there, flickering in place, shaking and trembling like living things for several horrible long seconds. Ryan even had time to lift his head from the frigid mud and look around, mouth agape, head ringing. Every single lightning rod in camp, on every trailer from Big Mama to the outhouses, had its own personal mile-high jagged lightning bolt pinning it to the sky, the lightning still live and flickering. Even the tiny sauna, which had its own little lightning rod, had drawn its own personal lightning bolt. (Hopefully it had drawn lightning away from the nearby wooden pier — Ryan could make out the precious little group of people huddled on the very end of the pier, but the sauna's lightning rod seemed to have saved them.) Both the huge semi-trucks had been speared by lightning bolts as well.

The lightning bolts stayed. And stayed. And stayed. Ryan felt himself shaking.

And in the parking lot to his right were two whole sets of lightning bolts that seemed to have glued themselves together. Two sets of lightning bolts coalescing into fearsome glowing twin pyres of electric fire, one a blood-red and swirling with dark smoke, and the other a shining blue.

All he could do was duck his head down again and hold his breath.

Slowly, all the lightning faded.

There was a breathless silence. All Ryan could hear now was an eerie whining hum in his ears. He wondered if he had gone deaf, but then heard the thumping of his own heart. He felt himself shaking.

He looked around slowly, still on his belly in the mud. Big Mama’s endless drone had stopped; the massive generator must have fried out. The three flags atop the dining hall were on fire. The thunder had stopped as well; the only sound was the wind in the tundra grasses. The two little skiffs were bobbing loose in the waves now, the little bunch of figures on the pier scampering back to shore and past the sauna as quick as they could. Winter Lab was on fire. The second helicopter had taken a direct hit and had burst into flame; two of the dorm trailers were smoking ominously, and the loose Weatherport canvas was not only aflame but was now lofting up into the air and spinning slowly around camp, almost gracefully, like a forty-foot-high burning canvas ghost.

Toward the Haul Road, Shawn’s tiny Ford and the Tahoe were halted in the mud. The semi behind them had flames licking up from its smoking trailer bed, and it veered slowly off the road and tipped, almost in slow motion, into a snowmelt-runoff ditch. Doors popped open on all the other vehicles and little figures emerged, all dashing to the stricken semi to try to help the driver.

Ryan took all this in slowly. He could still hear crackling from the clouds overhead, and his hair was still standing on end, so he stayed low. He wriggled around to look over his shoulder at the parking lot, where the pillars of lightning bolts had coalesced.

Sparks were still crackling through the air, horizontal lightning flickering high overhead, and the blue lightning pyre was still there, but Ryan barely noticed, for there before him, exactly where the red pyre had been, was the biggest bear he had ever seen in his entire Alaskan lifetime.

The bear was enormous, far larger than a normal tundra bear. Kodiak bear? thought Ryan, gaping at
One of the world-record Kodiak grizzlies from down south must have somehow been teleported up here to the tundra, for this was no normal grizzly. It was impossibly huge, even for a grizzly. It didn't even have the right kind of shoulder hump, and its shaggy fur was oddly dark for a grizzly, almost black. And its head—that heavy square head seemed downright dinosaur size, its skull nearly three feet long.

Massive slavering jaws opened (the thing was actually drooling), lethal foot-long teeth bared. It shook its heavy head from side to side and raked one paw against the ground. Its claws looked nearly a foot long (one claw was missing) and it ripped yard-long gashes in the frozen ground with apparently no effort at all.

Behind the bear, the Ford pickup and the Suburban suddenly came into view, crammed with people, both vehicles jouncing along the road in a hurried dash for the parking lot. Both the trucks slewed to an awkward stop; they must have just seen the bear as well as the mysterious spiral of blue lightning. The chopper crew, which was now running toward the dining hall as well, froze in their tracks as they came around the corner of the Tahoe. Grad students in all directions were pinned in place like paralyzed statues, all still clutching backpacks and laptop bags and fistfuls of yellow field books, all of them frozen still, staring at the bear.

Dean had made Ryan watch that damn bear safety video three times over now, and Ryan remembered what the video had said: A bear that swung its head back and forth, and scraped the ground with its claws, was an angry bear. A bear that stood up on its hind legs was a very angry bear.

The great bear swung its heavy head, in turn, to the Suburban, the Ford pickup, the little trail from the sauna (where Shelly, Ed, and the drenched and shaken lake ecology team were now standing stunned on the trail, staring at the massive beast). The bear turned farther; it saw all the grad students cringing in their tracks.

It swung its massive head.

It lifted one paw and raked the ground with foot-long claws.

At least it hasn't stood up and roared, Ryan thought. Dean had always said that was the worst sign.

The bear turned more, and it focused directly on Ryan. Ryan caught an eerie flash of light from its gleaming yellow eyes, and the bear stood up on its great hind feet, towering up a good twelve feet tall, and it roared.

This would have been bad enough. But then the blue lightning bolts, still spinning in a tight spiral, coalesced into a shaking pillar of blue fire nearly twenty feet high. Great arcs of blue-hued lightning arced away to the ground, looking like nothing less than two gigantic wings of electricity. The blue pillar of light shook and hummed. Ryan heard glass shattering, as every window within range began to explode, one at a time, shards of glass flying. The bear looked over at the glowing pillar of fire and the twinned lightning-wings. Horribly, the bear seemed to smile, the corners of its great mouth drawing up, and Ryan could have sworn its yellow eyes were literally glowing, shining like yellow fire. The huge dark bear turned back toward Ryan and let out a growl, and it almost seemed that the growl had a meaning, a shape, consonants and vowels. It sounded something like a deep, groaning sentence:

"Where... is... Dean... Winches... ter..." growled the gigantic bear, one syllable at a time.

Ryan just gaped at it, certain now that he'd gone mad.
The bear growled in displeasure. It turned its huge head toward the pillar of blue lightning and 
growled, "Ra-pha-el. Help...me... search."

There was a tremendous thunderclap, and there between the arcs of lightning was a mammoth.

A woolly mammoth, straight out of the Pleistocene. Just like the skulls that had been eroding out of 
the banks of the Sag River. Just like those grand old tusks on display at the Gates Of The Arctic 
visitor center. Just like in the old painted dioramas in the museum down in Fairbanks. A woolly 
mammoth... but alive.

Shaggy and huge, standing on four immense furred pillarlike legs, twenty feet tall if it was an inch, 
with a great domed head towering higher than the burning flags atop the dining hall, it was a woolly 
mammoth. With a pair of massive spreading tusks wider than the entire Big Mama trailer.

A subsonic rumble shook the air, a soundless vibration that made Ryan's head buzz and his chest 
hurt. It seemed to come from the mammoth. The bear roared once more, and the mammoth curled up 
a trunk as thick as a tree, raised its immense head and let out an earsplitting trumpet.

The lightning storm and the hurricane had been bad enough. The bear had been bad enough. But 
with the mammoth the shock was so extreme that Ryan's trembling actually stopped. A calm settled 
over him, for this had become a dream, some sort of wild, crazed nightmare. He closed his eyes; he 
opened them; the bear and mammoth were still there.

In his head Ryan heard Dean's voice, saying quietly, If everything goes to complete hell, defend the 
people. Camp doesn't matter; people do.

Ryan looked around and he saw no less than two dozen people who were all too close to the 
impossible animals. So he took a breath, stood, turned his back to both great beasts, and walked into 
the dining hall to get Dean's bear rifle.
As Castiel crumpled down, Dean grabbed him right around the half-folded wings and went to his knees with him. He then had a brief flash of panic about whether he might hurt Cas's half-grown feathers, and managed to roll Cas on to a drier patch of heather and away from the dampest of the moss. Cas ended up more or less on his side, both wings flopped out behind his back. Sam came running over too, though he stopped short a few feet away and stood gaping down at the wings, clearly still a little in shock.

"Wings...." Sam muttered under his breath.

"Yeah," said Dean, a little abruptly. "You get used to it." He couldn't spare a moment to explain any more; he was too worried about Castiel. He crouched by Cas's side and felt at his neck. To his relief, he soon felt a steady pulse. But what was wrong? Cas was still out cold. Had he been stabbed, maybe, like the other angels? But there were no visible wounds (and Cas was still bare from the waist up; any major wounds should have been easily visible). Dean checked Cas's wings next, lifting them gently to peer at both sides as Sam looked on uncertainly, but the new feathers still looked straight and undamaged.

"He's waking up," said Sam, and Dean jumped from the wings to check Cas's face. Sure enough Cas's eyes were already flickering open. He'd only been out about twenty seconds.

"I flew," murmured Castiel, blinking up at Dean.

"You sure did. You flew," agreed Dean, giving him a quick smile, "and you also passed out right after. Don't scare me like that, all right?"

"I'm fine," muttered Cas, already shifting around and pushing one hand under him as if to sit up. "It was just an underpowered flight. But I flew—"

"Dude, stay down," said Dean, setting one hand on his shoulder. "Seriously. Stay down a minute." But Cas gave him a reassuringly alert look back, and reached up to pat Dean's hand — and to shove it slightly out of the way.

"I'm really okay, Dean," said Cas. "It happens sometimes at very low power. I'm okay. Let me up."
Reluctantly Dean let him rise to a half-sitting position. Cas first rolled carefully to all fours, on his hands and knees, clearly taking some care to get his gold-edged wingtips safely clear of the ground. He crouched there a few moments getting his breath, still muttering "I flew," under his breath to himself a couple more times. But then he fell silent and frowned up at the sky.

"You sure you're all right?" Dean said, still worried. Cas didn't answer immediately. He was still staring at the clouds.

"It's extremely windy," Castiel said. Sam and Dean glanced up, only then realizing that Cas was right: the wind was shockingly strong. A particularly violent and sudden gust came just then, almost knocking Dean right off his feet. It blew a spray of twigs, leaves, and bits of loose snow at them in such a strong burst that both brothers hunkered down next to Cas, all three of them closing their eyes until they were no longer being peppered with leaves and twigs.

The gust lightened. Sam, Dean and Castiel looked at each other, faces somber. After a moment Sam reached out, tentatively, and plucked a willow twig from Cas's left wing.

"Thank you, Sam," said Cas. But he frowned again at the sky, adding, "I'm worried about this wind." He got to his feet, Dean supporting him cautiously by one elbow, and Castiel looked back over at Topaz Mountain. "The wind was partly why we had such a rough landing," he said. "Normally, wind wouldn't affect me, but with my feathers still so short, and my power so unpredictable, it was a quite terrible attempt at steering."

"Hey, you got us here," said Dean. "Not complaining."

"Not complaining at all," added Sam.

Cas gave a reluctant nod, and said, "This does pose problems, though. I'm not sure I can fly you any farther." He glanced over his shoulder as he spoke, inspecting one wing and then the other, and even running his fingers through a few of the feathers (Sam even helped pluck out another willow-leaf). "I think we should—"

But Cas was interrupted by a tremendous blast of thunder echoing through the sky, and another viciously strong gust of wind hurtling at them, this one bringing a spray of rain. They all had to steady themselves against the wind, clinging to each other arms as raindrops peppered their faces. Cas had to turn to face the wind and tuck his wings very tightly, just to keep his balance. A startled "chip!" caught Dean's ear, and he turned to see that the little junco nearby was being buffeted nearly right out of its little willow. It finally let go of its perch, lofted up into the air and shot away over the hill toward Kupaluk. They all watched it go; the wind carried it at such velocity that it seemed like a little gray bullet, gone in a flash.

"This is turning into a real storm!" said Dean, looking around at the willow bushes thrashing violently in the wind. "We gotta get under cover."

Cas nodded. "Yes. Caused by Raphael, no doubt. Maybe to try to hamper my flying. We should be moving," he added, with another doubtful glance at Topaz. "We're nowhere near far enough away. They'll be looking for us, and we're very exposed here."

"What about the... um... bear?" Dean said. The thought of those yellow eyes made him shudder.

"Azazel," said Castiel. "The bear is his new vessel. Or, rather, an old one that he's switched back to when his human one got too damaged. He must have had it stashed nearby. It sounds like he's been using it off and on — probably for a while now. He's a Prince of Hell, you know; he can handle strong vessels."
"Right, right," said Dean. "Prince of Hell.... Okay." He took a breath. "So, thing is, that was the bear that killed Dad, and—"

"What?" said Sam. He'd been carefully pulling a few more willow leaves from Cas's right wing, but now he froze and looked at Dean.

Dean gave him a somber look back, and nodded. "Huge. Dark fur. Yellow eyes. Missing a claw. It's the same bear. Rangers said it was the biggest grizz they ever saw."

"It's a cave bear, actually," said Castiel. "The oldest of the demons and angels always seem to still be rather fond of their original Pleistocene vessels. Those older vessels are very powerful."

Dean and Sam both looked at him for a moment.

"A... cave bear... killed.... Dad?" said Sam.

"Which means..." Dean said slowly, as the pieces slowly came together. "... a Prince of Hell killed Dad. A demon." He had to repeat it to let it sink in: "A demon killed Dad." Then he added, in amazement, "Mom was right all along."

Dean and Sam looked at each other for a long moment.

"She wasn't crazy at all...." murmured Sam.

It was a lot to take in. Dean felt terrifically shell-shocked, and he knew it must be even worse for Sam, of course. A mere hour ago Sam had known nothing about any of this.

Not to mention that Sam had just had to kill his girlfriend. Who had turned out to be a demon.

After a long pause, Sam just reached out and pulled another willow twig from Cas's wing.

Wordlessly, Cas extended his wing out a little farther, toward Sam. It seemed to be a gesture of support, almost some sort of wing-greeting. Short as Cas's half-grown wing was, it barely reached to Sam. Sam pulled out one last willow-leaf, and then, hesitating, he ran his fingertips along the leading edge of the wing. When he reached the two little alulas at the joint of the wing, he paused. The little feathers closed over his fingertips.

Sam regarded the wing for a long moment in silence, the alulas still lightly folded over his fingers. Slowly he looked over at Cas, who met his eyes quietly.

Sam asked, "We're on the run from that bear, aren't we, Cas? We're on the run from... a demon?"

Dean turned to Cas. "Is he right? Will Azazel be looking for us, you think?"

"Yes, and Raphael too, very shortly—" said Cas. There was a distant rumble of thunder and he stopped abruptly, eyes narrowed, staring first toward Kupaluk and then toward Topaz.

The air seemed to thicken.

"You're puffing up," said Sam, still feeling at Cas's wing with his fingertips. Cas didn't reply; he was staring intently toward Topaz Mountain. Dean looked at Cas's wings and saw what Sam meant: the little feathers along the leading edge of both wings were standing up straight. Then Dean felt a prickle along the nape of his own neck, and his scalp; his hair was standing on end too.
He exchanged a startled look with Sam, who had just raised a hand to his own unruly mop of hair, as if his hair, too, were feeling odd.

Castiel yelled, "DOWN!"

Dean and Sam were too slow to react, both just staring blankly at Cas. In a flash both wings were around the brother's shoulders, as Cas grabbed roughly at the heather-bush beneath him and hauled hard with both hands, pulling himself facedown in the heather and using his wings to yank a befuddled Dean and Sam down too on either side of him. It took Dean off balance and he found himself slammed face-down in the prickly heather, gasping, Cas's right wing locked rigidly across Dean's shoulders, the side of the shotgun knocking hard into the side of Dean's skull. Sam had been pushed down too by the left wing. There was just time for Dean and Sam to exchange a baffled look above Cas's head when the world erupted in lightning.

The entire world went white, with such a stunning volley of sound that the whole hill shook. It took Dean's breath completely away. His hair was still standing on end; the air seemed to be buzzing with static. There was a sharp smell of ozone, and of burning. Blinding white flashed, and flashed again, and as Dean's eyes slowly adjusted he realized a jagged lightning bolt was piercing the sky right on top of them, landing scant yards away.

And it wasn't the only one. He managed to twist his head slightly to the side to glance around, and all around, for miles in every direction, hundreds of lightning bolts were shattering the sky. They seemed clustered even more thickly over by Kupaluk, where there even seemed to be lightning bolts coming together in trembling pillars of fire. A few seconds later a deafening shockwave came rolling their way from Kupaluk's direction.

"Shit, shit, shit," Dean thought. "We're on top of a HILL, in a THUNDERSTORM, on the TUNDRA — this is the worst place we could possibly be — I should have thought — there's no lightning rod— there's no trees—we're the tallest things —

But Cas had managed to pull them down. Just in time.

The lightning bolts all around them flickered and finally faded. Dean found himself struggling to breathe, as if his lungs had frozen, or as if the air had become too heavy to move. His ears were ringing, eyes still dazzled, a jagged black afterimage of the nearby lightning bolt dancing so sharply in his vision that he feared his retinas had been seared.

"Holy fuck," he heard Sam say, distantly. Everything sounded underwater. "We're alive?"

Slowly the afterimage faded, and sounds began to come through again.

"I think your box saved us, Dean," said Castiel, his wings still tight around both brothers' shoulders. Dean followed his gaze and realized that there was a pillar of fire nearby. Of course; the wooden box that he'd built for Cas. They were by Cas's pingo-pool, and the wooden box was now the tallest thing on the hill. It had drawn the lightning directly to it, sparing Dean and Cas and Sam.

"What the fuck was all that?" gasped Sam.

"I believe that was a resurrection," Castiel said. His wings finally relaxed a little, and all three of them cautiously lifted their heads, looking around. Cas looked very grim; he was looking over toward camp. "That sort of pillar of lightning isn't a normal storm," he said. "I think Raphael just resurrected an old vessel. A very old vessel."

A breathless, distant "chip chip chip!" caught their ears then, and they all watched as a tiny,
bedraggled spot of gray came flying toward them, skimming low over the tundra, wings beating rapidly. It was the junco. It landed a few feet away. It was actually panting, its little bill gaping open.

"Chip," it finally managed to say. It was looking at Cas. "Chip chip chip chip chip."

Cas's mouth thinned. He turned to Dean and said, "Two great beasts are attacking your camp. Azazel and Raphael, I assume."

"Another cave bear?" Dean said. "Is Raphael a bear too now?" Then he processed the rest of Cas's statement. "Wait, they're at my camp? At Kupaluk?"

"They probably thought I'd taken you there," said Cas, rising very cautiously to his knees again. "They probably detected my direction of flight, but didn't realize I didn't get you all the way there. They're looking for you, Dean. And you as well, Sam." With a sigh he added, "And me." With a narrowed glance toward Kupaluk he added, "The most intelligent thing for us to do is to leave. I could probably take you both to the east — perhaps to your truck, Dean, or maybe I could hopscotch you both across the tundra and get over the mountains. I think I could do a series of short flights. It's probably our best chance of survival."

Dean stared at him. Cas gave him a very steady look back. There was a question in his eyes.

_Camp_, thought Dean.

Ryan. Shelly.

Nicole. Shawn. Phil the ecologist. Teddy Bear the cook. All the scientists. All the grad students. All their eager little undergrad helpers.

Dean's camp.

Dean's people.

_Saving people. Hunting things._

"I gotta go help them," said Dean.

"Just to be clear," Cas said, "We will all probably die if we go to your camp."

"I gotta try," said Dean, but then he hesitated as what Cas had just said sank in. Dean said, slowly, "You guys don't have to come. But I gotta. I gotta try. I gotta go help them. But you two don't." He exchanged a long look with Cas, and then another with Sam. "You two get out of here, Cas, take Sam and fly him somewhere safe. I gotta go to camp. I'll run on foot, I'll, I'll, let's see, I can get there pretty fast if I run—"

"But, Dean—" Sam started to say.

Dean cut him off. "It's not about me. I can't just let those two tear everybody apart."

"No, I mean— " Sam started again, but Dean was already scrambling to his feet. Sam and Cas jumped to their feet too, and Dean grabbed Sam in a quick hug, and then, once he'd let Sam go, he had to grab Cas too. _This is frickin' goodbye, isn't it?_ He thought, once he had his arms around Cas's wings. It was hard to comprehend how fast events had moved, how disastrously everything had turned out. But at least Cas and Sam had a chance.

Dean clung to Cas for maybe a moment too long, burying his face over Cas's shoulder into the
corner of Cas's wing. He allowed himself one long breath to take in that feathery scent, while Cas grabbed him very tightly back, snaking one arm around Dean's waist.

Then, a little oddly, Cas seemed to readjust Dean's hold a little, maneuvering slightly till Dean was positioned more on Cas's side. Dean lifted his head, looking at him. Oddly, Cas wasn't even looking at Dean at all; instead he was exchanging a look with Sam, and holding out his other hand toward him. Sam nodded at Cas and stepped closer.

Too late, Dean realized what Cas and Sam had decided. Dean tried to let go of Cas then, but Castiel now had one arm wrapped like iron around Dean's waist, the other around Sam's waist, and Sam had grabbed hold of Dean's hand behind Cas's back. They were in flying position again.

Both wings stretched out.

Dean struggled to get loose. "No, you don't get it," he said, "You two can't come, it's dangerous—" But it was too late. The world swirled, the tundra went gray, and they were flying again, this time soaring through the wispy ether.

This flight was shorter. The world quickly swung back into vivid focus, and they all crashed to a firm, carpeted floor. Dean landed so hard on the floor the breath was nearly knocked out of him. He gasped helplessly for breath for several long seconds, but finally he managed to suck in a shaky breath, sat up, and realized he was undamaged.

Dean looked around, a little disoriented. Cas was sprawled nearby, on his stomach stretched across the corner of a narrow bed, wings waving slightly as he blinked dizzily down at the floor. Sam was scrambling up from a muddy pile of rubber boots in the little room's corner.

"I... flew again," muttered Cas to himself, through gasps for breath. He hadn't even managed to get to his feet, but he managed to crane his head around to spot Sam, and then caught Dean's eye. "Are you both all right?" he said, still sounding very much out of breath.

Sam nodded, putting out a hand to steady himself against the wall.

"Think so," said Dean, lurching to his feet.

"I flew again," announced Cas once more to them both, as if they might not have noticed the flight. "Dean, I flew. I flew twice."

"Awesome job, angel," said Dean, reaching over to help Cas up. Cas looked up at him with a wide-eyed amazement, a stunned smile now tugging at the corner of his mouth. These are his first flights in forty-five years, Dean realized. And despite all the chaos and the confusion, despite the battle at Topaz and the lightning storm, Cas's smile at his new-found ability to fly — however erratically — was contagious. Dean found himself giving him a wide grin back, as he helped Cas up.

"You flew, Blackbird," Dean agreed, and he couldn't resist giving Cas a rough, quick, hug, and patting his wings. "To...." He looked around. Where were they? A little room, with boots in the corner and a little bed—

"—to my dorm room?" finished Dean, staring around. "You flew us to my dorm room?"

"Emotionally charged location," Castiel explained. He followed this statement with an uncertain glance at Sam.

Sam gave Castiel a blank look back.
Then something flickered across Sam's face, a mixture of doubt and surprise. He stared at Cas a moment longer, and then looked sharply at Dean, a question dawning in his eyes.

Dean could only shrug. It didn't even seem like it needed to be kept secret anymore. "Fill you in later," was all he said to Sam. While Castiel frowned back and forth between both of them, obviously confused, Dean tried to refocus on the crisis at hand, saying, "Look, you two need to get away—"

But he was interrupted by a tremendous trumpeting roar from outside.

Cas was still visibly wavering, pale and shaky again from the power drain of even this brief flight. But his expression sharpened at the sound of the terrific bugling roar, a look of grim alarm passing over his face. "This is not good," he said, and he pulled away from Dean and stumbled to the door.

"Cas, wait—" called Dean, but Cas had already yanked the door open and was tottering out into the dorm trailer's muddy hallway. He looked very unsteady, and Dean winced to see Cas's left wing thump heavily into the doorframe. The two brothers hurried through the door into the hallway after Cas, both still fighting their own waves of dizziness from the flight.

There was another great animal roar from outside — this time, not the bugling trumpet sound, but a throaty growling roar. A sort of roar they'd heard before — the bear. Then came the unmistakable sound of rifle shots. Cas, who'd been weaving unsteadily down the hallway ahead of them with one hand braced on the wall, looked back at Dean with his eyes narrowed.

"Is that one of your guns, Dean?" he said. "It doesn't sound like that long gun of yours—"

"It's the rifle," Dean said, hurrying past Cas to the outer door, counting the shots as he ran: six, seven, eight. Somebody had grabbed Dean's Winchester Alaskan rifle, probably Ryan or Shelly. There was another maddened trumpeting sound, then a deafening roar, and then a horrific crash. Dean burst out of the dorm trailer, Cas and Sam right behind him (Sam actually shoved Cas's wings closed from behind to make sure Cas got through the narrow doorway without problems). They all trailed to a halt, all three gaping at the scene ahead.

"That's a... mammoth," said Sam slowly.

There was, indeed, a woolly mammoth striding through the Kupaluk parking lot.

Full size. Living and breathing. Shaggy and huge and with massive spreading tusks, and a tremendous long trunk. Even as they watched, it picked up a full-size snowmobile with casual ease, hoisting the snowmobile up on its tusks. It trumpeted one more time.

And at the far side of the parking lot, a good hundred feet away, the great cave bear was casually shredding its way through the side of the EMT trailer. It stuck its great head right through a gaping hole in the trailer wall, growled unhappily, backed out and headed directly for the next trailer to shred that one too.

The cave bear, the bear that had haunted Dean's dreams for so many years, was bad enough. But the sight of the woolly mammoth absolutely took Dean's breath away.

"That's a mammoth," agreed Dean. "And... a cave bear. Okay. A mammoth and a cave bear. Right."
One hand drifted to the pistol holster on his pack; the other stroked the shoulder-strap of the shotgun. Both weapons were pointless, weren't they? What could he even do?

"Raphael and Azazel," said Cas. His voice was tight and low; he added, in a low mutter, "How dare Raphael select that vessel. How dare he. He knows that was my friend!"

"What?" Dean said, glancing at him.

Cas said rapidly, "The mammoth — I'm sure he resurrected it from the skull and the hide in my cave. I know he did. He's seen my cave; he's seen the skull. That mammoth was a friend of mine. And Raphael knows that, damn him. Raphael knows the mammoth would probably trust an angel, Raphael flew it here and resurrected it — that's what caused all the lightning, that explosion —" Castiel was almost spitting out the words, clearly furious. "The mammoth would have said yes, because that mammoth trusted me— no reason to think angels weren't trustworthy — of all the nerve—"

"Okay now, focus, dude," Dean said, setting one hand on the bend of his wing. He could feel Cas almost vibrating with rage, and he squeezed Cas's wing slightly and said, "Chill. We gotta think. They've got a mammoth and a cave bear. What do we do?"

Cas took an uneven breath, obviously trying to regroup.

Sam suggested, "How about we get out of sight? Just for starters?" He pointed to a big snow drift just ahead, a five-foot-tall pile by the edge of the parking lot. Cas nodded, and all three of them scuttled behind the drift, ducking their heads down to keep out of view.

"Azazel's looking for Dean," said Cas, eyes narrowed as he peered over the top of the snow drift. "That's why he — the bear, I mean — is going from trailer to trailer. But Raphael is just...causing chaos, I think. I've no doubt Raphael is enjoying this. He always did love a show of power." Sam and Dean poked their heads up too for a glimpse, and they all watched in horrified awe as the mammoth hoisted its snowmobile high in the air and hurled it, seemingly effortlessly.

The half-ton snow machine sailed through the air for at least fifty feet and landed with a tremendous crash in the Winter Lab.

There was a squeal of screams from within, a door burst open, and two grad students came pelting out in terror, both bolting for the dining hall. They shot past a thin figure stationed at the dining room door who turned out to be none other than Ryan, bearing the Winchester Alaskan rifle. "Get inside!" yelled Ryan to the students as they scrambled past him.

Unbelievably, Ryan was the one standing his ground against the two great beasts. It was Ryan who had been shooting. Even now he raised the rifle again and shot one more time, this time aiming for Azazel's great cave bear vessel, which was now shredding its way directly through the shop trailer a little farther away. Both the great animals eyed Ryan with utter disdain, and the mammoth casually picked up another snowmobile and hurled it directly at him. Ryan managed to dodge, but he had to finally retreat inside the dining hall when the mammoth followed up with a barrage of mountain bicycles. Thankfully, the mammoth seemed to get a little bored then and strolled a little farther away, picking up every item within reach and hurling it high overhead, as if it were all just a game. The bear, meanwhile, had gone directly through the shop trailer, had clawed its way right out of the far end and was now attacking the hapless shower trailer. (Shelly, Ted, and Phil's team, meanwhile, were retreating quietly toward the pier, trying not to draw bear-Azazel's attention.) Apparently the plan was simply to shred the entire camp to pieces, one trailer at a time, until they found Dean. And sooner or later they would get to the dining hall, where most of the people were holed up.
Dean found he had pulled his shotgun off his shoulder, and had even already pulled more shells from the side pocket of his pack. He began loading the shotgun, but Cas looked over at him and shook his head. "It won't help," Cas said. "It won't hurt either of them."

"Might slow ’em down," replied Dean. "Might distract ’em. We need every advantage we can get."

Cas narrowed his eyes, thinking. Then his gaze went to Dean's pistol. "Your smaller gun," said Cas, "It hurt Raphael before. What was it loaded with?"

"Dad's old bullets," said Dean.

"Do you have more of the same ammunition?"

Dean nodded, and Castiel said, "Try that as well." Then he murmured. "And maybe this—" He reached out and plucked the canister of pepper spray from the side of Dean's pack.

"Somehow," said Sam, "I just feel like pepper spray isn't going to do all that much, you know? It's just water and hot pepper."

Cas nodded, looking a little sadly at the pepper spray. "You're right. I'm grasping at straws. With a frustrated sigh he said, "If only I had that mammoth tooth..."

"What, this?" Dean said, pulling the bandanna out of his pocket. He unwrapped it, and there, nestled in the bright red cotton, was the fragmented mammoth tooth.

Cas's expression of amazement was almost comical. He gaped at Dean for a long moment and then snatched it out of Dean's hand saying, "Why on earth do you actually have this in your pocket? No, never mind, it doesn't matter, what's important is that we have it. But—" He wings sagged a little as a new thought struck him. "I don't have enough power. I'm just one seraph anyway—"

A new voice spoke up. A sardonic, sharp voice, from just behind. "Two seraphs," said Gabriel. "And one archangel, just a little worse for wear."

He'd materialized behind Cas, with none other than Balthazar with him. Balthazar was still clearly hurting — he was half-draped across Gabriel's shoulder, an arm slung over Gabriel's neck, and Gabriel's good wing was wrapped tightly around him — but at least his eyes were open now.

Gabriel said nonchalantly, "One underpowered seraph wouldn't do it, true. You'd just all die. But two underpowered seraphs, one wounded and the other with half-grown wings, and an underpowered archangel with a bad wing, and— " He gave another shrug. "Well, we'll still all die, actually." He added, with a winning smile, "But at least you'll have company, right?"

"I would've died anyway," said Balthazar. His voice came out in a wheezing gasp. "Already survived— an hour longer than— I thought I would."

"You both came back?" said Cas, clearly startled. "You could have fled. You did flee."

Gabriel shrugged again, explaining, "Went off to tape up Balthazar a bit more, you know, slap a band-aid or two on him, and we got to chatting, had a cup of tea, a little heart-to-heart, and we've been thinking. You know what we realized? It'll really suck pretty bad for us if Raphael wins this battle."

Balthazar added a quiet nod, which seemed almost all he was able to do.

The sardonic tone left Gabriel's voice as he admitted, "Raphael would just come after us next."
"So, you see..." gasped out Balthazar, still slumped heavily onto Gabriel's shoulder, "It's purely selfish."

"Yep," said Gabriel, "We're each just looking out for number one."

Cas stared at them for a moment. Finally he said, "I don't believe that for a moment. You two have been helping me for years. I've no idea why, but you have."

Gabriel glanced over his shoulder at Balthazar, who returned his gaze evenly.

"We both kind of got... fond of the Earth," said Balthazar. "We kind of like it the way it is."

"Round," added Gabriel. "Oxygenated. And, y'know, not cooked to a cinder. Hospitable to life. Kind of got fond of the humans a bit, too. At least they're entertaining. Anyway, what's the plan?"

With a rather grim look, Castiel held up the tooth.

Gabriel and Balthazar both stared.

"That's it?" said Balthazar.

"What, a resurrection?" added Gabriel. "From that? A tooth?"

Balthazar added, "It's not even... a complete tooth. It's a half a tooth."

"It's a quarter of a tooth," said Gabriel.

Castiel said, "Actually, it's an eighth of a tooth. But it should have the full genome, and enough connection to the soul to call it back. I hope. With the three of us together we just may be able to pull the rest of it together."

Mammoth-Raphael was now all the way up at the helicopter pad, inspecting the two tiny research choppers with great attention. They watched as it knelt to lever its great tusks under a chopper's body — the one that had been struck by lightning earlier. It then straightened its forelegs, standing up with a tremendous lunge. All the helicopter's tie-downs snapped at once, and the mammoth lifted its head high and swung slowly back toward camp, the body of the little scorched helicopter wobbling on its tusks, rotors swinging slowly around the mammoth's head. Then mammoth-Raphael began to walk majestically back to the dining hall, the smoking helicopter balanced on its massive spreading tusks, lightning crackling and thunder rolling overhead. It strode toward the dining hall, step by slow step, clearly enjoying the aura of dread and terror that was spreading in front of it, as frightened faces peered out from the shattered dining hall windows. Ryan still stood at the dining hall door, rifle now aimed directly at the mammoth.

Ryan fired, and fired again.

"It's going to throw it into the dining hall!" Dean said, suddenly frantic. "Where everybody is!"

"Now or never," Gabriel said to Cas and Balthazar. They nodded.

"You two," said Cas, looking sharply at Dean and Sam. "Back up and get to the ground. Twenty feet away at least." Sam and Dean backed up as instructed, Dean still looking in agony over toward
the mammoth, which was letting out a deafening trumpeting call now, pacing ever closer to the
dining hall, where, he knew, most of the camp staff and scientists must be making their last stand.

Cas held out the tooth in one hand. Balthazar struggled to his feet and took a few steps away from
Gabriel, so that they were spaced out in a rough triangle. This was the first time Balthazar had tried
to stand on his own, and he immediately gasped in pain, hunched over and clutching a hand to the
wound on his chest (which was now leaking silver light past his bandages). But he managed to stay
on his feet.

There they stood, three damaged angels; Balthazar wounded and pale; Gabriel with one wing still
bloody and dragging, and Castiel, with his shortened clipped wings, still looking rather wobbly from
his "underpowered flights." But the three angels each stretched out one wing, angling so that each
wing brushed directly onto the tooth, the ends of the three wings overlapping. One short black wing
and two long white ones touched the mammoth tooth.

Gabriel spoke a single word: "Rise," he said.

"Rise," echoed Castiel.

"Rise," said Balthazar.

There was another deafening clap of thunder, a blinding flash of light and another pillar of lightning
— not blue lightning this time, and not red, but pure shining white.

When the thunder faded all the angels were flat on their backs in the mud and snow, all three of them
apparently knocked out. And a new mammoth was standing right over them.
It was like staring up at a shaggy two-story house that had somehow grown legs. The other mammoth had already looked enormous, but from close up the bulk and breadth of this second beast was overwhelming.

For a moment Dean and Sam stood nearly paralyzed. Dean was still clutching the ivory-handled pistol in one hand, and the loaded shotgun was hiked over one shoulder. But neither weapon would be much use against this beast, of course.

Great tusks arced out high overhead as the new mammoth looked around, its huge head swinging slowly. The mammoth's brown eyes were wide, its trunk curled high in surprise as it took in the sight of the tundra, the snow, the willows... and the trailers and buildings and trucks, which, of course, must have been entirely novel sights. At first the mammoth seemed not even to notice the humans and angels scattered at its feet, so fascinated was it by the buildings and vehicles.

Another Pleistocene beast, resurrected from the dead. At this point it almost seemed routine.

Cas, still shirtless, had ended up flung right back into the snowdrift, where he seemed to be passed out again, his half-molted black wings spread wide in the snow. Gabriel and Balthazar didn't seem in much better shape. Balthazar was completely passed out, flopped face-up on the icy gravel with his limp white wings spread wide, while Gabriel was now sitting slowly upright, blinking and shaking snow off of his own blood-stained wings, groping vaguely at the can of pepper spray that Castiel seemed to have dropped.

"Get clear," Dean hissed to Sam. "Get out of here. Take this." He pushed the shotgun into Sam's hands. "Do you know how to handle this?"

"Um," said Sam.

"Aim it at the bad guys and pull the trigger," Dean said. "And make sure no good guys are in the crossfire. Now get going — get to the, um, go down to the lake and get to the sauna and just stay there till this is all over, okay?" He turned to try to dart over to Cas and, hopefully, drag him out from under the tusks of the new mammoth.
Annoyingly, Sam totally ignored Dean's directions about how to get to safety. Instead he followed right at Dean's heels, even angling the shotgun defensively up at the mammoth.

"Sauna," Dean hissed over his shoulder at Sam. "Get out of here!"

"No fucking way," hissed Sam back. "I'm your backup."

Dean glared at him. And yet, somehow it seemed right. Of course Sam would be backup; of course he'd stay at Dean's side; of course. Even the shotgun looked strangely natural in Sam's hands. And Sam, too, seemed strangely comfortable with it.

Dean shook his head and turned to scuttle over to Cas, Sam hurrying along behind him.

Dean had been hoping not to draw the mammoth's attention, but that turned out to be a little hopeless, for the mammoth seemed to be eyeing Castiel carefully, even taking a few steps closer. Dean finally had to scuttle directly under the ends of the mammoth's tusks to reach Cas, while Sam crouched on his heels nearby with the shotgun ready. Dean couldn't help cringing as he inched forward, creeping as slowly as he could. The hair on his head prickled with the knowledge of those terrible tusks right overhead. But he didn't dare leave poor Cas there helpless. He glanced over at the mammoth's feet — barely ten feet away — and realized that the new mammoth was shifting nervously from foot to foot. And, Dean realized, it was trembling too. Maybe with fear, or rage, or excitement; Dean didn't know.

He finally reached Cas and crouched in the snow next to him. Cas's eyes were starting to blink open.

"Shh, stay still," Dean whispered.

But Cas's wings shifted, with a soft rustle of feathers. At once the new mammoth's gaze seemed to fix on Cas. Its head lowered slightly, and Dean saw its eyes refocus on Castiel. It took a step closer, and another, and it stretched out its trunk.

Reflexively Dean groped for his pistol again. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sam aim the shotgun, apparently feeling a similar impulse. But Cas put his hand on Dean's arm, and he whispered, hissing over to Sam as well, "No. Don't shoot her. Don't. Dean, help me up."

Dean gave him a doubtful look, and glanced back up at the towering mammoth. To his alarm, a long muscular trunk was now stretching out toward them, stout as a small tree. Dean cringed back against Cas, trying to shield him.

Instead Cas pushed Dean firmly (but gently) aside, and clambered to his feet. Dean, reluctantly, got up too, still trying to shield him, but Cas seemed determined to approach the gigantic beast. Cas took a step closer and held out one hand, palm upward.

With unexpected delicacy the mammoth touched the tip of her trunk right to Cas's open palm. There was a snuffling noise, as if she was sniffing his hand. Then her trunk lifted to one of Cas's wings.

Cas held very still, as the mammoth felt delicately at Cas's wings, her trunk huffing breaths of warm air over Cas's feathers.

The trunk lifted to Dean's face.

Dean held absolutely still; he felt Cas take firm hold of one of his hands. "She's just greeting you," said Castiel softly, squeezing Dean's hand. Dean squeezed back, closing his eyes, as the immense animal towered over him, its trunk right at Dean's face.
A hot puff of mammoth-breath wafted over him too. It smelled of grass.

Dean opened his eyes slowly. The trunk had moved; it was sniffing at Sam's face now. Dean exchanged an alarmed glance with his brother, thinking, *Sam, don't move, don't move*. Sam stayed still, clutching the shotgun tightly — but not firing it — and eventually the mammoth lowered her trunk.

From several yards away, Gabriel spoke. "So who takes it as a vessel?" he asked. "Me, you, or Balthazar?"

"I rather suspect none of us do," said Castiel back, speaking in a very quiet tone.

Gabriel lurched to his feet. "What? Did she say no?"

"I didn't ask that question," replied Castiel. "I'm hoping she'll help us in a different way. But it can't be forced. Either she'll choose to help or she won't."

To Dean's alarm, Cas let go of Dean's hand and stepped closer, right between the tusks, to set a hand on the side of the mammoth's trunk. The mammoth shifted its weight from foot to foot, and let out a low rumble. One eye rolled toward Cas.

"I'm sorry to disturb your rest," Cas said softly. "But we need your help. A demon and a mad angel are trying to destroy the world. One other of your tribe is also here, and I believe he needs your help as well—" Cas gestured over his shoulder. The mammoth stiffened, then. Dean spared a glance back too, over the snowdrift, and nearly yelled.

The other mammoth, Raphael's mammoth, was right there on the other side of the snowdrift. It must have spotted the new mammoth and had walked closer, somehow gliding almost silently on those pillarlike legs. It was now a mere twenty feet away, just on the other side of the snow.

And it still had an *entire helicopter* balanced on its great tusks.

Its eyes were shining an eerie blue. Dean couldn't even meet that unearthly gaze. That was Raphael, surely. Raphael was still in there.

Cas turned back to the new mammoth and whispered, desperately, "Will you help us?"

But now Cas's mammoth seemed to barely be listening to him. Her posture had stiffened as soon as she had spotted mammoth-Raphael (which, Dean slowly realized, must be a male; Cas had always referred to the skull in his cave as a "he"). Her shaggy little triangular ears spread wide; her stout tail lifted high. She curled her trunk very high up, as if to trumpet. Nothing audible happened, but a curious pulsing vibration seemed to quiver at Dean's chest and stomach, as if some infrasonic wave, far too low for human ears, was rolling right through his body.

*She died alone*, Dean remembered. *The last of the mammoths.*

And now she could not seem to tear her eyes from the other mammoth — Raphael's vessel. She was riveted, ears spread wide, tail high, head held high and her trunk curled up, all her attention fixed on mammoth-Raphael.

Raphael's mammoth eyes were still blazing that eerie blue. He was still holding the helicopter (which, though small for a helicopter, was at least the size of a pickup truck). His immense trunk wrapped firmly around the helicopter's tail and he hoisted the huge thing up off his tusks. The cabin of the chopper crumpled, rotors slewing, skids clipping at the side of a nearby trailer. The mammoth only lifted it higher. It was clearly about to throw the chopper at all of them.
"Out of the way!" Dean hissed to everybody around. "Take cover!" He glanced around. Gabriel was now trying to drag a wounded Balthazar further out of the way. But Castiel, Dean and Sam were right in between the two mammoths, penned in by the snowdrift with no obvious place to run. Sam swung the shotgun toward Raphael, but Cas only whispered. "Don't. It'll just make him angrier."

Mammoth-Raphael swung the great helicopter toward them and they all cringed. Yet somehow Raphael didn't quite throw the chopper cleanly. His trunk failed to fully let go of the chopper in time, and the chopper swung back toward him and simply crashed to the ground at his shaggy feet. One long rotor slammed into mammoth-Raphael's own shoulder in the process, and the great beast let out a groan.

"Did it just drop that?" whispered Sam. "Like, not on purpose?" But Castiel made an urgent gesture for silence.

Another wave of shuddering seemed to pass through the air.

"What is that?" Dean whispered to Cas.

"Infrasound," murmured Cas back. "Our new mammoth is speaking to the other one."

For a moment, the eerie blue shine of mammoth-Raphael's eyes flickered, and faded.

For a moment there seemed to be just another mammoth looking back, with wide and desperate eyes. Eyes that were only a simple brown, with none of the eerie blue glow.

Raphael's mammoth let out a low, long, mournful-sounding rumble.

But with a crash of thunder overhead, the blue shine leapt back into mammoth-Raphael's eyes, and with a trumpeting roar it hoisted the crumpled helicopter again, high overhead, in a chilling display of power. How much of this power was the mammoth's own muscles and how much was Raphael was impossible to tell, but one thing was clear: if it wanted, it could crush them all in an instant, with no more effort than swatting a fly.

If it wanted.

Yet apparently that wasn't what it wanted, for once again it seemed to hang onto the chopper just a little too long. The blue shine left the mammoth's eyes; for a moment the dark brown was back, and with a great lunge and a high fling of its massive tusked head, the mammoth flung the helicopter clear of all of them.

The battered little red helicopter soared high over their heads, clear over the top of the dorm trailer, and crumpled harmlessly into a patch of willows on the open tundra about fifty yards away.

"I don't believe it," murmured Cas. "I wouldn't have thought it possible." He tugged at Dean's arm, and at Sam's. "Get back. Raphael will get control back in a second." Together they scrambled away, clambering over a side of the snowdrift to join Gabriel, who had managed to get Balthazar as far as the entry steps of the dorm trailer. Balthazar was slumped on the first step, both wings muddied and splayed out to either side, still clutching his chest wound, but he was awake enough now to be staring at mammoth-Raphael with fascination. But they seemed to have a moment of respite, for mammoth-Raphael seemed to have momentarily forgotten their existence and was instead pacing angrily in circles around the parking lot. Even Azazel the cave bear, who had been at the far side of camp casually shredding his way through the series of doomed Weatherports, had paused in his task to sit back on his haunches and watch mammoth-Raphael's increasingly frantic antics.

At first, mammoth-Raphael seemed to be looking for more missiles to hurl at the new mammoth, for
it started yanking up every large object in sight, a steady discontented rumbling shaking the air the entire time. One more snow machine hurled through the air, then two ATVs, an upturned skiff, then a small pile of Shawn's lemming traps that flew apart in mid-air, a cluster of shattered aluminum paneling, then part of a greenhouse, and then an entire stack of PVC piping. One thing after another, mammoth-Raphael picked up an object and threw it — but, oddly, it seemed to just be throwing everything harmlessly out onto the tundra. Always it seemed *almost* about to hurl the object at the new mammoth, or sometimes, it seemed, at Dean and his little bunch of companions. Yet always, at the last second, the mammoth ended up flinging the object to the side instead, sending it sailing out to the cottongrass.

Something strange was happening to its eyes, too. They were flashing alternately between colors, Raphael's eerie blue radiance alternating with the much more normal-looking animal brown.

And, once, a strange white light began to glow at the tip of the mammoth's trunk. It only lasted a moment.

Cas's female mammoth was inching forward now, kicking her way through the five-foot-high snowdrift with casual ease and letting out another of those vibrating, pulsing waves of inaudible infrasound. Mammoth-Raphael gave her one pleading glance of its large brown eyes and then began spinning in a wild circle, and another, and another. It seemed to go into a confused frenzy. Like a gigantic top the great beast swung around, as if being yanked this way and that by conflicting desires.

Or, maybe, by conflicting wills.

"It's resisting," whispered Cas to the others. Gabriel and Balthazar nodded, but Dean and Sam just gave him a baffled glance.

"What?" said Sam. "What do you mean?"

"The vessel's resisting," whispered Cas.

"Cryptic much?" Dean hissed back.

"The mammoth," expanded Gabriel. "Try to keep up. The mammoth — the first one — is resisting Raphael. It's trying to kick him out."

Sam asked, frowning, "Can...um... 'vessels' do that?"

Castiel nodded. "Hard to kick out an archangel, but, if a vessel's really motivated... Look out!" he added, pushing Dean and Sam down a little with both wings, and they all cringed as another snowmobile came flying past overhead. (Gabriel, oddly, paid this no attention at all — he was now inspecting the label on the can of pepper spray, as if a woolly mammoth flinging snowmobiles over his head was only of passing interest.)

"We have to put an end to this," said Cas grimly. "Raphael will kill us all if he gets away clean. He'll just get another vessel and come right back again. The cave lion, the tundra cats — He'll find a vessel that can't resist, and we won't have a chance. We have to end this now."

"But how?" said Dean.

"We fight," said Cas. "Or rather, I fight. And you stay safe." With that he leaned over and kissed Dean. On the mouth.

And while Gabriel was muttering, "I knew it," and while Sam was muttering back to Gabriel "It's not
even the fifth weirdest thing today," Cas slid his silver blade neatly out of the sheath on the Dean's belt.

"No, wait —" Dean whispered, as Cas pulled back. With one last look at Dean, Cas turned and ran to the mammoth — and only then did Dean see he had the silver blade held firmly in one hand.

"CAS!" Dean yelled, sprinting after him. But Castiel was several strides ahead of him, racing right past the female mammoth (who rumbled urgently at him as he passed), directly to mammoth-Raphael, who was standing now with legs spraddled wide, eyes and mouth and trunk-tip all blazing bright with white light. But Raphael seemed to gain control again right at the worst moment, eyes flickering blue as he lowered his huge mammoth head and advanced on Cas. He swiped at Castiel almost casually with one lazy stretch of his great trunk, and poor Cas was flung nearly twenty yards through the air, slamming hard to the ground, the blade knocked right of his hands. Raphael spun to him, lowering his heavy head. He was going to crush Cas right into the gravel.

Dean ran, then, ran fast, sprinting absolutely as fast as he could. All fear of the mammoth was gone; he absolutely had to get the mammoth's attention. He ran at top speed, waving his arms to catch Raphael's attention, and leaped between Cas and the mammoth, yelling, "LEAVE HIM ALONE, RAPHAEL, YOU F**KING ARCHANGEL SON OF A BITCH!"

The mammoth spun to face Dean then, and Dean faltered to a stop. Too late, he realized that he had no plan at all.

But he did have a pistol.

Dean lifted the pistol, and fired.

The precious armor-piercing bullet only ricocheted right off one of the great ivory tusks, splintering the end. Ivory shards sprayed through the air, one stinging Dean’s hand, and he nearly dropped the gun. Then a second tremendous gunshot noise at Dean's side made him jump with shock. The sound was so close that for a moment he thought he'd accidentally fired the pistol a second time. But no, it was Sam, right at Dean's side, shotgun braced to his shoulder, aiming at Raphael. Sam fired again. The buckshot turned out not to damage Raphael (a brief peppering of tiny blood spots appeared on the mammoth's face, but then healed immediately). But at least it distracted him. Dean fired once more to keep Raphael distracted, trying to aim very carefully, for his hand was slick with blood and he knew he was nearly out of ammo. This time he was rewarded by seeing a spark of silver light — a wound, in one of the mammoth's legs. The massive trunk lunged out at him, a ropy wall of muscle whipping right at him — but Cas, behind Dean now, yanked Dean back bodily by his belt. Dean fell over backwards and lost hold of his pistol entirely; it flew right out of his bloody hand. He scrambled to his feet, looking around wildly for his weapon. But Sam had dashed around to the side, yelling at Raphael and brandishing the shotgun dramatically; he'd somehow got the shotgun loaded again and he let out another blast of buckshot, making Raphael spin to face him.

"Here," said Cas, tossing Dean his pistol, and Dean caught it smoothly.

It was all terrifying, and overwhelming, and nightmarish. Yet... it also felt right. Sam and Cas and Dean together, all three of them fighting as a team — it wasn't going smooth as silk exactly, and it wasn't getting any less terrifying, but there was a well-worn familiarity to it. There was such a certainty that both Sam and Cas would stand their ground and fight with Dean; such a crystal-clear knowledge that neither of them would break and run, that both would be with Dean to the bitter end. They seemed even to be anticipating each other's motions; even now Sam was kicking the silver blade to Dean, who scooped it up to toss to Cas, who already had a hand outstretched to grab it. And then, without having to coordinate it, the three of them spread wide apart from each other — baffling Raphael, who didn't seem able to decide now which one of them to focus on.
It was as if the three of them had battled together for years.

Raphael seemed increasingly maddened, spinning in place to stare first at Sam, then at Dean, and finally at Cas. He bellowed, and he trumpeted, eyes blazing blue again. There was one last snowmobile nearby and Raphael snatched it up and hurled it right at Castiel, who leaped out of the way, landing hard on his stomach on the gravel, black wings waving.

But right behind Castiel had been the female mammoth, who'd been creeping slowly closer, as if so mesmerized by the sight of the other mammoth that she'd totally failed to notice the battle with the little humans.

The snowmobile didn't hit Cas, but it hit her. She'd been taking another fascinated step forward, rumbling softly, staring at mammoth-Raphael with her shaggy ears spread, when the flying snowmobile caught her right in the face.

She staggered back and fell to one knee, blood streaming from a vicious gash on her trunk.

At that, mammoth-Raphael froze still, curled his trunk high. He let out a tremendous trumpeting bellow of rage. A glow of white light began to shine again at the nostrils at the tip of the mammoth's trunk, and at its eyes, and this time the glow of white brightened, and bulged, and brightened more.

"Shouldn't have hit the girl, Raffie," called out Dean. "Bad move." For this time Dean knew the signs: Raphael was leaving the vessel. Or rather, he was getting kicked out, apparently.

Which meant Raphael was going to get away again.

A brilliant stream of white light poured from the mammoth's trunk — Raphael himself, Dean knew now, Raphael's essence, in some inexplicable way. But Cas, beside Dean, threw his silver blade.

Castiel flung it high, with unerring aim, high overhead, the blade whipping through the air in a flash of silver, and the blade skewered the dead center of the streamer of light.

The streamer of white light froze there, hovering in place, as if somehow pinned to the very air by the silver blade. It rippled like a long silver banner, like its own strange form of lightning.

For a moment two trembling wing-shapes seemed visible on either side, faint and glittering.

"COVER YOUR EYES!" Cas yelled. Dean and Sam, on either side of him, were both gaping up at the silver streamer of light when Cas spun to them both and whipped his dark wings up right in front of their faces. There was a crashing explosion, and a blinding spray of light that seemed as bright as a supernova. The lightning bolts had been nothing; this was like a nuclear bomb, like a piece of the very sun itself had been unleashed on the face of the earth.

Dean and Sam cowered behind Cas's wings, hands over their heads, covering their eyes.

A stillness fell. Dean raised his head slowly, pushing Cas's wing aside.

Raphael's streamer of light was gone.

And there before them was the male mammoth, trembling, shaggy legs spread wide, head drooping. It had spun away from the glowing light just in time, shielding its closer eye with a coil of its own trunk. Blood was dripping steadily now from the wounds on its leg and side, from the shotgun blasts and the helicopter blade. It lowered its trunk slowly, and its eyes were a liquid, warm brown.
Gabriel walked up behind them. "I'm starting to see why Raphael was trying to keep the three of you apart," he commented. "That was actually rather impressive." His eyes narrowed, then, looking at something beyond them. "Heads up, though, we're not done yet. Sammy, my boy, if you're out of ammo you might want this—" Gabriel tossed something to Sam with a lazy underhand throw. Sam caught it with one hand and then stared down at it blankly.

It was just the can of pepper spray.

"Sorry, I can't seem to smite at the moment," said Gabriel with an apologetic shrug. "Resurrecting Pleistocene megafauna can really take it out of a guy, y'know? But maybe that'll be useful." He turned, next, to the snowdrift. "Hold on, Balthazar and me were just talking about making some snowballs. Worth a try, I'd say."

Sure enough he started grabbing fistfuls of snow and packing them into fist-size lumps.

Snowballs. An archangel was making snowballs. Dean blinked at the sight.

"Don't panic," murmured Castiel. "But... look at the mammoths."

Dean followed Cas's gaze to discover that both mammoths were backing away from something, eyes fixed on something on the far side of camp.

A hulking shape moved between two Weatherports.

A throaty, low growl rumbled through the air.

Oh. The great cave bear. Azazel.

"Shit," murmured Dean. "Aren't we done yet?"

"I hate to say this," said Castiel, "but I think Gabriel was right, earlier. I'm starting to get the feeling that we'll never be done."

"But just one to go, for now at least, right?" said Sam, raising the shotgun again.

Cas said tightly, "Yes. But don't underestimate him. This is a Prince of Hell."

Azazel seemed to have decided it was time to take action. He burst into view at the far side of the lot, where he paused to pose dramatically between two trailers, great furry paws braced wide, and he let out a thunderous growl. Then he strode right past the dining hall (where Ryan, Shelly and a shocked clump of students were now crouched in the doorway, transfixed by the battle). Ryan, to his credit, fired the rifle several times at the bear, but it didn't even pause. Its eyes seemed riveted now on Castiel. The bear let out a rumbling growl. It broke into a steady trot toward them.

"Get behind me," said Cas, and he shoved his way in front of the two brothers, wings spread and trembling.

"You don't have your blade!" Dean objected. "Where's your blade— you don't have your blade— "

"Where's your gun?" Cas asked in turn. "Dammit, I can't smite." He called to the bear, "Azazel, stop, let's discuss this—"

The tremendous bear just roared at them. Now it went into a gallop, and it seemed to be coming at
them with the speed of a jet plane. Somewhere behind Dean both mammoths began to trumpet, a
defeathering stereo harmony. In the end it was Sam who ignored all the noise and stepped in front of
both Dean and Cas. And Sam had only the pathetic can of pepper spray that Gabriel had given to
him.

"Sam, NO!" was all Dean could say. "Use the shotgun!"

"Out of ammo," Sam said, almost quietly. "But at least the wind's at my back, right? Gabriel says it's
worth a try." The bear was almost on him. The pepper spray wouldn't do a thing, but Sam pulled the
orange tab from its top, and he fired.

A completely trivial spray of fine orange mist flew out of the little can right into the bear's face.

The great cave bear plowed to a stop with a squeal of pain. Sizzles of smoke rose from its face from
a hundred different points where the pepper spray had struck it. It roared in rage, swiping at its face
hurriedly with a great furry paw. Sam sprayed again, and the bear actually backed up a step. There
was definitely smoke wafting up from its face.

"What the—" Dean muttered. A third shot of pepper spray, and Azazel was squealing in agony,
backing up fast now and wiping at his eyes repeatedly with one smoking paw.

"Ha, it works!" called Gabriel in delight from behind them.

"What works?" said Castiel.

"Holy pepper spray," said Gabriel. "I read the label. Turns out pepper spray's mostly water! So I
blessed it. Might not be able to smite at the moment, but I've still got some archangel tricks up my
sleeve. Here's another." Raising his voice, Gabriel called out, "HEY, AZAZEL, check this out—"

He raised an arm and hurled a snowball hard at the bear. It struck dead center in the bear's forehead,
with another sizzle of smoke and another howl of pain.

"Ooo, nice," said Gabriel. "Wasn't sure if that would work." With a wink at Sam he added, "Holy
snowball, of course. I added an extra little something to bind him into the vessel. He can't vacate
now."

"Of course..." replied Cas, as if all this insanity made sense to him. "Clever, Gabriel. Very clever."

Balthazar, limping closer, was cradling a whole pile of snowballs in his arms. "I've been making
snowballs, and Gabe's been blessing them," he said. At the brothers' confused expressions, he added,
"Snowballs are just solid water. Takes a little more effort, but same principle. Handy having an
archangel around sometimes, you know?"

Cas lunged for the snowballs first, and Dean and Sam a moment later. They peppered the great bear
with holy snowballs, and soon they had the Prince of Hell, Azazel, backing up slowly across camp,
growling in agony, his great shaggy back and his huge head soon singed with black burn spots. Even
Ryan and Shelly realized what was happening. It wasn't clear whether they understood the "holy"
part of the holy snowballs, but they came running over from the dining hall and grabbed more
snowballs. Soon Balthazar and Gabriel had headed to a small drift by the dining hall to make some
more snowballs, Balthazar shaping them up, Gabriel blessing them as fast as he could, and Shelly
handing them out to the students. (Gabriel and Balthazar both seemed to have managed to "put their
wings away", while Sam had flung his Alaska Petroleum jacket hastily over Cas's wings.) Soon
Ryan and all the grad students were grabbing holy snowballs as quick as they could and flinging
them at the bear, some with more enthusiasm than aim. Enough of the snowballs connected with
their target to keep the great bear backing up, till it turned tail awkwardly and lumbered hastily beyond the farthest Weatherports toward the lake.

"They're genetically engineered snowballs," Gabriel explained cheerily to the Kupaluk students. "Designed to explode on impact. Newest thing. We've got a paper in review."

Dean murmured to Cas, "That doesn't even make any sense."

"None of them are thinking too clearly at the moment," said Cas. "I don't think they've even noticed my wings. The woolly mammoths are a helpful distraction."

There was a gleeful sense of triumph to the whole endeavor, all the campers united to drive the great bear away. Even the mammoths seemed to have gotten involved, trumpeting and raising their trunks again, striding toward the lake as the bear backed farther away. But, as Dean watched Azazel backing restlessly to the lake edge, he realized this was only a temporary reprieve.

Azazel was still alive.

And he was going to get away alive.

This might be hurting him, but it clearly wasn't going to kill him. It would only drive him away from camp.

Dean looked down at the ivory-handled pistol.

This pistol had taken a claw off that great bear once, years ago. It had wounded even the archangel Raphael, and in both of his vessels, the human one and the mammoth. Dean was aware that he didn't know much about angels, but it was clear already that very few things could hurt an angel. But this pistol had somehow done so.

Dean checked the chamber. One bullet left.

Of course. Of course there was one bullet left. Because nothing could be simple, nothing could be easy, and everything had to be an endless neverending struggle from crisis to crisis. Of course there was just one bullet.

He tipped the precious bullet out of the chamber, checking to make sure no mud had gotten into the chamber or the barrel. Everything looked fine, but just to be on the safe side Dean gave the single bullet a quick wipe with his flannel shirt, and he slid it back into the clean chamber. It caught the light as he did so, reflecting a perfect silver sheen, and it occurred to him then that this last bullet of Dad's was exactly the same shade of silver as Castiel's angel-blade.

Had the bullets somehow been made from an angel-blade?

Was that even possible?

If anybody could have figured out a way to do such a thing, it would have been Dad.

"Dean?" said Cas, at his side. Dean met his eyes silently. Cas's eyes flicked to the pistol, and he saw the silver shine of the bullet. Understanding dawned in Cas's eyes.

"C'mon," said Dean, and he turned and broke into an exhausted run toward the lake.

There was a such a chaos of running and shouting that it was hard to keep track of what was happening — two mammoths pacing toward the lake trumpeting at the great bear, all the grad
students running alongside the mammoths while pelting bear-Azazel with a nonstop barrage of snowballs. Between the furious mammoths and the snowballs, the growling bear was forced backwards, step by step. At last bear-Azazel reached the lake edge. With one more angry growl he turned, leapt across the little moat of open water to the ice, and turned to snarl at everyone on shore. The mammoths paused at the lakeshore, still trumpeting in fury; they seemed unsure whether the ice would bear their weight, and went no farther. The grad students, as well as Ryan, Shelly, and all the rest of the camp staff, were now lined up at the lakeshore as well, but hurling snowball after snowball at the great bear. (Behind them, barely noticed by anyone, a pale-faced Gabriel was blessing snowballs as fast as he could, while Balthazar limped around handing them out to people.)

Snarling, the bear was driven slowly back, step by step, farther out onto the great sheet of lake ice. *You're looking for the right thing to hunt,* Dean heard in his mind.

Dean strode to the edge of the shore, Cas and Sam walking silently at his side. (Cas still had Sam's Alaska Petroleum jacket slung across his shoulders, covering both wings.) The bear had gotten far enough away now that the people (and the two mammoths) had stopped throwing snowballs, the people chattering uneasily, the mammoths rumbling near-constantly with their trunks curled up.

"Never seen a grizz like this," Dean heard Ryan say. "And why does it hate snowballs so much?"

"Dean, you all right?" That was Shelly's voice. Dean barely recognized the sound, so fixated was he on the bear. Shelly had to grab Dean's sleeve to get his attention. "Actual mammoths! Woolly mammoths, Dean, can you believe it? What an unbelievable day—"

"There must have been a relict population—" That was Phil, the ecologist. "In an ecological refugium, somewhere in the Brooks. Some hidden valley, probably, with one last little population. Not impossible, you know; dwarf mammoths lasted on a few of the Canadian Arctic islands till just a few centuries ago. The North Slope's never been properly surveyed—"

"But I swear I saw wings," a hapless undergrad was saying. "Didn't you see the wings? I swear I saw wings. Where is that guy, anyway?"

"Thought that was a cape," said another.

"No, it was his pack, that dude has a black backpack, I've seen it a million times, it must've gotten torn up by the mammoth—"

"Look, look, the mammoths are holding snowballs! In the tips of their trunks! Look!"

"They were *throwing* snowballs, too, dude, weren't you watching?"

Dean strode past them all, as fast as he could manage, trying to ignore the dull throb of true exhaustion that was dogging his heels. He worked his way farther down the shore, to a spot where the lake ice stretched quite close to shore. There he paused.

"You guys should both stay here," he said to Cas and Sam, knowing, even as he said it, that there was no way they would stay.

Once again Castiel and Sam exchanged a look of their own, as they had already done several times
today. As if they, too, had found an immediate camaraderie, brothers-in-arms so comfortable with each other that it seemed they'd known each other years.

And once again they seemed to come to a silent decision.

"Normally you seem rather intelligent," said Castiel, turning to Dean. "So I really can't understand why you would conceivably think I would stay behind."

"That goes double," said Sam. "We're coming with you."

Dean merely nodded.

Together, Dean, Sam and Castiel waded into the icy water of Kupaluk Lake. A hundred yards away, the great wounded bear on the ice sheet turned to face them, fur smoking, yellow eyes blazing bright with hatred and fury.
It's one damn thing after another, Dean thought, as he waded out through the shallow stretch of lake water, flanked by Castiel and Sam on either side. Cas reached the ice first, scrambling up onto a knobbly edge of eroded ice that instantly began to crumble under his duck boots, but with only a minor scrambling of wings he made it to more solid footing. (To the onlookers on shore, it must have looked like Cas's Alaska Petroleum coat was simply waving wildly in the wind). As soon as Cas reached the firmer ice he turned back to give Dean a hand up, and then Sam.

"Dean!" came a voice from shore. "Get back here! Don't risk it! Just let it go! The bear's leaving!" It was Shelly. She was joined by Ryan calling "Dean, it's not safe!" and then a chorus of other staff and students, and even a worried trumpet-call or two from the mammoths, but Dean kept on walking, Cas and Sam still beside him.

"They don't realize we've got to kill him," muttered Dean to Cas and Sam. "They don't realize it's not just a bear."

Cas nodded. "Just as with Raphael, if he gets away we'll just be fighting this battle over again some other day. He'll heal up and return later, possibly with disastrous results. At least now he's a little weak. I think you're right — this is our best chance."

One damn thing after another, thought Dean again, fighting back shivers of cold — or maybe of adrenaline — as he walked onward. The cave bear — Azazel — had been facing them until now, head lowered, still glaring at them, its face and paws still smoking with singe-marks from the pepper spray and holy snowballs. As they advanced, the bear actually began to look a little alarmed at their progress. Azazel soon turned away, glancing back over his furry shoulder at them a few times. Soon he broke into a shambling gallop, headed straight out across the lake ice, trailing a line of smoke (and a scent of singed fur).

At that point they all realized that if the bear simply ran a mile straight ahead, right across the lake ice, it would get away.

Sam actually broke into a run right after it, pulling ahead of both Cas and Dean, who both looked over at him in some astonishment. Sam looked absolutely determined, loping along fast with the
shotgun slung over his shoulders once more, the can of pepper spray raised in one hand.

"Sam!" Castiel called. "Wait!"

"That fucker got Dad," Sam called over his shoulder. "And he's getting away." He kept running.

Dean and Cas glanced at each other and broke into a run too.

The storm had stopped completely since Raphael's demise. The lightning and thunder had stopped at once, and now the clouds were blowing apart in the wind, with small patches of sky starting to peek through the great dark bands of storm-cloud. The sun broke through at last, several wide streamers of light slanting down, until the vast surface of the lake ice was bathed in great diagonal bands of light and shadow. Ahead, the bear was a shambling dark form against a shimmering field of silver-and-gray ice. Dean kept on running, jogging as best he could in his mud boots, clutching the ivory-handled pistol tightly in one bloody hand. *We're chasing down a frickin' cave bear,* he thought in disbelief.

_One damn thing after another._

He'd thought originally that there'd just be one big fight, up at Topaz. One big battle and then it'd be over. But this just seemed to keep going on, and on, and on. One big battle only led to the next, which led to the next, and the next, each fight more perilous than the last. One frightening enemy, one tremendous beast, was surpassed by another, and then another, and then another. Wouldn't it ever end?

_Not likely,* said a very distant voice.

It was almost familiar by now, that sleepy-sounding voice, something like a memory, or maybe from a dream.

*It's always like that,* murmured the voice, from an impossible distance, across an impossible chasm. _One damn thing after another, every damn week. But that's why we stick together._

And indeed, Dean realized he wasn't alone. Cas and Sam were still with him, flanking him on either side. Sam was reloading the shotgun, somehow accomplishing this act in mid-run as if he'd done it a thousand times before. Castiel was armed with four of the holy snowballs cradled in his left arm, as well as the silver blade clutched in his right hand. The red Alaska Petroleum coat, the one that Cas had flung over his wings in camp, fell off as he ran, and his dark wings spread wide on either side. He cast a glance at Dean. "Doesn't matter anymore," Cas called. Onward the three ran, toward Azazel the cave bear.

Azazel was still sneaking looks back over his shaggy shoulder. He was limping a little, his paws still smoking, but he was making good time. But suddenly Azazel stopped, and Sam, Cas and Dean all stopped too, all three breathing hard. Azazel looked even more exhausted. But, exhausted or not, he was truly formidable. He turned, bracing himself on widespread paws, his shaggy ribcage heaving steadily with pants, and he lowered his head with a vicious growl and roared.

"Why'd he stop?" wondered Sam aloud. "He was getting away."

Together, Castiel, Dean and Sam walked a few paces farther forward. The clouds, thinning further overhead, let another broad beam of sunshine spread through, and a horizontal shimmer of light sparked to life just beyond Azazel.

"That's not ice," said Dean. "That's water."
Azazel was at the edge of a vast patch of open water. Beyond was the shimmering surface of the open lake, glittering now with light and shadow.

"Cave bears never did swim very well," said Castiel, in a quiet voice. "Heavy bones."

Azazel was cornered.

Never fight a cornered bear, the bear safety videos had all said. Never fight a cornered bear.

The distant voice spoke up again.

Just stick with Cas and Sam and you'll be okay, said the voice. Might want to bring Bobby in on all this too, actually, once this battle's done. You all gotta stick together. There was an almost wry sense of laughter as the distant voice added, Gotta confess though, I never thought of sticking with Cas in exactly the way you've done. Never really went there, y'know? But... maybe you're on to something....

The other voice began to fade, and Dean staggered. For a moment he had a sharp, almost hallucinatory sense of the other world, of the inside of a vehicle somewhere, the other version of himself waking from an awkward, exhausted sleep in the front seat. Beyond that windshield, in the other world, was a black shining hood, with a leaping silver emblem at the front; not a Suburban at all, but an Impala. Another version of Sam, he knew somehow, was asleep in the back; another Castiel was sitting quietly in the passenger seat, an unfamiliar blue tie in place of the blue scarf, a strange tan trenchcoat instead of a tan sheepskin jacket, black suit-pants instead of black snow-pants. Some details were different, but it was still Castiel, even now turning to meet the other-Dean's sleepy gaze with a speculative eye.

Those blue eyes; that quiet steady gaze.

The gaze held.

Cas was the same in any world, wasn't he?

Maybe you're on to something, about Cas.... said the voice again. Those were the very last words; the voice faded away, the tenuous sense of connection fraying and unraveling. Somewhere, that other Dean had at last fully woken up, and with Raphael's death, it seemed the faint strand connecting the two universes was at last fraying.

"Dean!" Cas said, and in a dizzying rush Dean was back on the ice, on the lake, in broad daylight. He found himself leaning over, both hands braced on his thighs, Sam and Cas both hovering over him in worry. A quick glance ahead revealed Azazel still panting with fatigue at the water's edge. The bear started to pace along the ice rim, nosing at the water as if looking for a swimmable crossing place. They had a brief moment to talk.

"You all right?" said Cas. He was gripping Dean's upper arm firmly, one wing stretched over Dean as well. "You nearly passed out."

Dean could only shrug. "Kind of losing my mind, I think," he said.

"It might be just a side effect of battling a woolly mammoth and a cave bear," pointed out Castiel. "But...." He paused a moment, with a quick glance at Topaz Mountain. "I suspect that Raphael and Azazel have been peering into one of the adjacent universes rather more than they described. There seems to be a thin spot between the two. I have been getting a ... a faint sense of connection, let's call it. It's a little disorienting. Though with Raphael's death it seems to be getting weaker."
Sam put in, "Got some of that going on myself, I think."

"We were all in a car," murmured Dean, finally standing up. "An Impala, I think...."

"They were in a car," Castiel corrected. "We're here on a frozen lake facing a Prince of Hell. And if our other selves managed to stop an Apocalypse in those other worlds, let's see if we can do the same here. Focus, Dean. Take a breath."

"Okay, right," said Dean, trying to settle himself. He looked ahead at the hulking bear, still only a hundred feet or so away, outlined on the edge of the ice. "I just need to get close enough for a clear shot," he said. "You two, let's see, maybe distract him a little if it seems like that might help me get close? Cas, if you see an opportunity to use your blade again, take it."

Sam said, "I know the shotgun won't do much, but I've got it loaded and ready. And I have about a quarter-can left of the holy pepper spray, I think. Cas, you can't make more holy snowballs, can you?"

Cas shook his head. "That's an archangel specialty," he said.

Dean glanced back. Gabriel, it turned out, was scrambling onto the ice, trying to follow them. He was moving slowly, though, exhausted, his wounded wings flickering erratically into view, and even as he took his first few steps, one leg gave way under him and he sank down to his knees.

"Gabriel's quite weakened," said Castiel. "His wing was injured right at the start; he's been losing power this entire time."

"If we can just stall the bear for a minute—" Dean began.

"Too late," said Castiel sharply. "Heads up!" Dean turned back to find that Azazel seemed to have settled on a course of action. It was pretty much the same course of action he'd used all along: the great cave bear took a heavy breath, growled, and launched toward them at a thundering gallop.

Dean braced himself and took aim with the ivory-handled pistol. Cas sprang one way, flinging his blade with unerring accuracy; Sam sprinted the other direction, letting out a blast of buckshot from the shotgun. But this time Azazel was ready. He batted away Cas's blade with a great paw. The blade sheared off two more claws in the process, but Azazel was otherwise unhurt and galloped on with barely a break in his stride, while the blade went spinning away across the ice. Cas followed this up with the holy-snowballs, and Sam flung the shotgun down and switched to pepper spray, running perilously close to fire the last of the holy-pepper-spray can. But Azazel ignored Cas, and he ignored Sam; he ignored the holy-snowballs, each of which left a searing, smoking wound; he ignored the blaze of holy-pepper-spray from Sam, which wreathed his entire shaggy head in smoke. His gleaming yellow eyes were fixed on Dean alone, and he came rocketing forward, burned black fur smoking, jaw gaping wide, huge fangs bared, the yellow eyes bright with insanity.

One bullet, thought Dean. One chance. He braced himself; he sighted.

"This one's for Mom and Dad," he murmured. The bear's jaws gaped wide, filling the whole world. Dean aimed directly between the gleaming yellow eyes, and squeezed the trigger.
The ivory-handled pistol always had a hell of a kick, and a hell of a sound, and Dean lost his footing on the slippery ice. The bear crashed into him. It was like being hit by a freight train; together Dean and the bear slid over the ice, great paws on either side of Dean's head, the horrid toothy jaw embracing his torso. For a horrified moment Dean thought the bullet had failed, and indeed he felt one slight spasm of the jaws, the foot-long teeth pressing almost calmly at Dean's ribs.

But it wasn't biting. It was dying.

Dean's bullet had taken Azazel dead center in the forehead, and there was a bizarre sizzling sound something like a high-voltage line shorting out. Orange sparks seemed to fill the bear's whole body. Dean writhed and shoved, frantic, trying to get out from under it, but he could barely even breathe, pinned as he was to the ice. The cave bear must have weighed nearly a thousand pounds. The sizzling orange sparks seemed to fly all around, melting into the ice with a series of cracking sounds. For a terrifically eerie moment the beast's skeleton was actually visible, outlined in a flame-bright orange through a pelt and body that were now, impossibly, translucent. Dean cringed in horror to see the gigantic flame-orange skull lying right on his chest, every tooth bright and blazing.

Then the flame-bright skull faded from view. There was only dark shaggy fur then, and crushing weight, and the iron tang of blood in the air. Azazel was dead; and the cave bear's own soul, it seemed, was long gone.

With a shattering sound the ice split. Dean and the cave bear fell into the lake.

The cold was beyond shocking, a physical blow that seemed to crush Dean from all sides. He could feel his heart skip a beat from the wild blast of the cold, and there was no air, no way up. The bear's yellow eyes had faded; it was, indeed, dead, but its heavy paws were still wrapped around Dean, and they sank down together for several horrible long moments before at last Dean managed to slither free.

And then he fell through the ice and died, Dean thought. The old joke. It wasn't a joke. And this time it wasn't a waist-deep puddle that he'd fallen into. This time there was no hope of shaking out the water from his boots and going on, of buying a bit more time in a blizzard, of trying to hang on a little longer. This time he didn't even have the luxury of thinking what to do with his remaining fifteen minutes. He didn't have fifteen minutes. He had only seconds.

And he couldn't seem to swim upwards. Try as he might, he was still sinking. His boots seemed to weigh a hundred pounds; his jacket, too. Pressure pounded at his ears. The silver glow of daylight overhead began to fade, a luminescent pearly ceiling gliding into view on one side. The mild current from the inflow stream was sweeping him under the ice. Dean managed to kick off his trusty Xtra-Tuf boots, and they plummeted heavily below into the dark depths. The jacket followed, and then Dean struggled to swim upwards, the cold raking at him viciously, biting deeply into him, worse than any wild animal. Far above, too far, was the shining pearly surface: the ice of the lake. Where was the open water? He looked around desperately, trying to figure out where he'd fallen in, and where he could get through the ice. Yet overhead was nothing but a dazzling white ceiling. Bands of sunlight shone through, slanting down in aqua and cobalt bands down to the dark depths below.
Desperately, Dean swam upwards, but his sodden clothes still seeming to weigh a thousand pounds. His lungs were burning; black spots swam before his eyes. *Swim, swim, swim,* he commanded himself. *Up, up, up*— but there wasn't enough time.

A dark shadow appeared, high and to the side. Twin slender dark shapes were at its sides, oars of some kind, beating hard in the water. No; *wings.*

The winged shape came rocketing down to him; a hand stretched out; Dean glimpsed dark hair floating, piercing blue eyes. Castiel. Castiel had jumped into the water and plunged after Dean, using his wings to beat his way through the water faster than he could possibly have swum otherwise. Dean reached out with the last of his strength, black spots swirling before his eyes, and Cas grasped his hand, pulled him into a tight hold and turned to swim back up.

Again, somehow, just as during the flight, Dean felt Cas's exhaustion. He felt it as it were his own.

And again, somehow, Dean knew what to do.

He managed to wrap his arms around Cas's neck, each of his hands brushing a part of Cas's wings, and he knew by now that there was some connection there, some kind of bond, something extending from him to Cas — and to Cas's wings as well. Something that carried energy. *Swim, damn you,* Dean thought. *Save yourself. You've got to get out of here. You can't die here. You can't. I won't let you.* He closed his eyes, and sent every ounce of his heart over to Castiel. Every memory, every image, every surge of emotion — he sent it all over.

The way he had felt traveling with Cas over the lake, pressed together, the snow machine flying them along...

The great multicolored beast soaring through the aurora...

Lying with Cas in the dark, in the furs, stroking one hand across his feathers....

Walking with him in the sun, birdsong all around....

All of it. Everything they had shared; everything they ever would share. With the last of Dean's strength, he sent it all to Cas.

Cas's wings flashed bright gold, energy pouring through those majestic dark feathers as a surge of power seemed to tear right through them both. From the ether maybe, or maybe from that far distant
world. Whatever it was, however it happened, Dean saw the gold pour through the feathers, saw them beat — once, twice, three times — and felt a tremendous surge of acceleration, the icy water whipping past them both at blinding speed.

And then he was gasping at the shore of the lake in Castiel's arms, helpless and retching. Cas, too, was panting and choking, and both were shivering so hard that they couldn't even stand. It took an agony of long minutes before Dean could even manage to crawl, on all fours, Castiel tugging weakly at Dean's sodden shirt to help him along. Slowly they crept to shore and collapsed in a soft pad of cottongrass. Whereupon Dean realized first, and Castiel only later, that Cas's shining dark feathers were full-length now. The last of the old ones must have fallen out in the water, and somehow almost all the new feathers were fully grown now, and every glossy feather was tipped with gold.

"There!" said Ryan. "It's Dean! And the bird guy! They made it out! On the far shore, see?"

"I don't believe it," said Phil. "Thought for sure they were goners. Well, it's only sea state two now, so let's go get 'em. You got some blankets?" Shelly was already running up with several fleece blankets and a first aid kit.

It took precious seconds before they could haul in one of the storm-blown skiffs, Shelly hopping with impatience on the pier the entire time. At last Ryan and Phil headed out, blankets and first aid kits and life jackets ready, Shelly still shouting out instructions over her shoulder, even as she ran back toward camp to make sure the impossible mammoths weren't causing even more havoc. Phil rowed the entire way by hand, for the outboard motor had been flooded out by the storm.

Ryan and Phil were both very surprised, and tremendously relieved, to find Dean and his bird guy friend in surprisingly good shape, both still wet but somehow spared of serious hypothermia. And the bird guy, it was clear now, was just a regular guy. Ryan had been sure there was something weird about him (he wasn't going to confess this to anybody else, but he was sure he'd seen wings earlier, during the mammoth fight). Now Castiel looked every inch the normal human, shirtless and damp and shivering by the water's edge, his pants sodden, his duck boots lost to the lake. No wings at all. Just a shivering, very cold, scientist, clinging to Dean with both hands.

Soon Phil was rowing them the other way, back toward camp, Cas and Dean both wrapped up in blankets and looking more than a little stunned. Back at the dock, they were met there by a small greeting party of excited staff — just some of them, for the rest of the staff and all the students were now grouped in a hushed semicircle around the two great mammoths, who were now standing exhausted together, leaning on each other with their heads low and their trunks entwined.

But Teddy Bear, Shelly, Phil and a few others came over to make sure Dean and Cas were okay, and to congratulate them on surviving the cave bear. Teddy had gone over to help Sam cross the little moat of open water (Sam had had to stumble back across the ice on foot). Soon everybody was reunited at the dock, where all of the staffers made a point of shaking Cas's hand, and Sam's, and everybody thumped Dean on the back, congratulating them about surviving the bear attack. Ryan waited his moment, till Dean was on his own for a second, still wrapped up in a heavy wool blanket.

Ryan stepped closer.

"You did good, kid," Dean said. "I mean that."
"Thanks," said Ryan. And it mattered, to hear Dean say that; it really did. But right now Ryan had something else on his mind as well. "But, um, hey, your bird guy...."

Dean narrowed his eyes. "My who?"

"Your bird guy," Ryan repeated, nodding toward Castiel. "Could've sworn for a sec there that he had, um...." Ryan hesitated. "Appendages, maybe?"

A blank look came over Dean's face.

"Appendages?" Dean said, completely expressionless.

"Like... feathered... appendages?" Ryan heard the hesitancy in his voice and almost laughed at himself. "Okay, so.... wings, is what I mean. I thought I saw wings."

"Wings?" Dean replied with a snort. "What, two woolly mammoths and a Pleistocene cave bear aren't enough for you?"

"Could've sworn I saw wings," said Ryan stubbornly.

"Does he look like he has wings?" said Dean, with a laugh. They both looked over at Castiel, who was shaking his damp blanket out at the moment. He was still shirtless and had his back to them. And he clearly had just an ordinary human back. Though at that very moment Cas looked over his own shoulder with a look of surprise, as if he'd been expecting to see something that was no longer there. Cas caught Dean's eye just as Dean added to Ryan, "There's no way he has wings. I mean, not unless he can make them invisible, right?"

And Ryan was certain, certain, that Dean winked at Castiel then. Which Cas answered with a slow, warm smile.

What that comment might mean, about "making them invisible," was anybody's guess. But as for that wink... And that smile. Ryan cleared his throat, and turned away to give them a little privacy.
Dean's phone beeped as he made his way along the forested trail.

He fumbled it out of his pocket with some difficulty, a process that involved some juggling of a rolled-up blanket, a flashlight, a whiskey bottle and two paper cups that were all cradled in his other arm. This far into Montana there wasn't always cell service — tonight they'd picked a campsite well away from the highway, on a little-traveled U.S. Forest Service road in the backcountry west of Great Falls. There shouldn't have been cell service here. But Castiel was enchanted with his new phone and seemed to somehow find cell service no matter where he was. (Dean suspected him of boosting the local signal strength somehow. Maybe something to do with the wings?)

Just five minutes ago, a text reading "Join me at sunset on creekside trail" had finally convinced Dean to quit wrestling with Cas's little blue pup tent, leave Sam to his peaceful reading by the campfire, and join Castiel on the little creekside lookout. Supposedly it had a great view of the majestic Front Range of the Rockies. They'd only be in Montana for one night, after all, just another quick stopover on their long drive south to Kansas, and it wasn't every day that Dean got to see the sun set over the Front Range.

Let alone see it with his angel by his side.

It had already become something of a tradition, starting the very day they'd crossed the Arctic Circle and the sun had begun actually setting at night. They hadn't missed a sunset yet, for the whole drive through Canada. Sam, for his part, had taken to just rolling his eyes whenever they went on their "sunset walk." He invariably settled down by the fire with a book. (And with the shotgun at his side, just in case. Along with a few strategically placed runes, drawn by Castiel on the nearby trees.) Sam knew very well what they tended to get up to, or get down to, on these sunset walks.

Dean's phone vibrated again just as he finally got it out of his pocket.

*Sunset imminent*, Cas had texted. He'd even added a little sun emoji. A moment later an additional
text arrived: *I have three things to show you.*

Well, that was intriguing.

*What three things?* Dean texted back.

*Get here fast and I can show you while the sun's still up.*

Dean grinned and picked up the pace. Only half a minute's more walking brought him to a peaceful creekside clearing by a little stream, and there was Castiel, sitting cross-legged in the grasses on the stream bank.

Cottonwood trees swayed gently overhead; aspen trees across the stream raised their graceful white branches to a pink-hued sunset sky; and beyond the aspens was a phenomenal view of the Rockies. Castiel was just sitting there admiring the view — and, it seemed, gazing at the trees as well. (After forty-five years in the Arctic, he seemed to take a particular pleasure in admiring the trees. It had been quite some time since he'd been able to see tall trees, let alone trees with the lush, green leafy foliage of the long southern summer.)

Wings nowhere in sight now, he was wearing only one of Dean's t-shirts, and a light pair of jeans. It was still a little strange to see him without his backpack.

A small ball of gray fluff shifted on Cas's left shoulder as Dean approached, and let out a perky "chip!" It was the dark-eyed junco. For reasons known only to itself, it had chosen to stay with them for the entire ride down from Alaska. (Nobody, not even Cas, was sure whether the junco was just efficiently hitching a free ride south, or if it planned to stay long-term with them.) At the junco's call, Cas tore his eyes away from the aspen trees and turned to Dean with a smile.

"You and your fluffball both enjoying the view?" said Dean, walking up beside Cas. "The Rockies have some great sunsets, don't they? And, gee, those are some awesome trees. Full of leaves, huh?"

"The trees are wonderful," said Cas, smiling up at him. "And the view's not bad at all. But it's even better now that you're here."

Dean couldn't help laughing as he set down the whiskey bottle and shook out the blanket. "You are getting so cheesy!" he said.

"I hope that's a good thing," said Cas, a doubtful frown crossing his face.

Dean laughed again. "You're just lucky that I love cheese." As he sat down next to Cas, the junco gave another cheerful "chip!" and hopped over to Dean's shoulder in friendly greeting.

"Hiya, bird," said Dean, digging out a sunflower seed from his pocket and offering it up. The junco grabbed it and flew instantly up to the cottonwoods high overhead. This, too, was already routine; the junco had learned quite fast to get off of Cas's shoulder, and out of Dean's way, whenever Dean shook the blanket out and settled down next to Cas at sunset. Just as Sam had learned fast that he might as well pull out a book and settle down by the fire to read for an hour or two.

It had also become clear that the junco was quite a good sentry. From his little treetop perches, he could get a very clear view of the surroundings, for miles in any direction. (There'd been no problems since the Kupaluk battle, but it was nice to know they had some additional backup. Even if the "backup" was quite small and feathery.)

Dean poured them both a half-paper-cup of whiskey. Handing over Cas's paper cup, he asked with a grin, "So, what are those, um, three things that you wanted to show me?"
But Cas was all business (at least for now). "Well, first," he said, looking down at his phone, "Some items on my phone. I was checking the news again, with that google method that Sam showed me yesterday. Look at this."

He passed over the phone. It looked like Cas had been browsing his way through Google News, and he'd pulled up a news item about some strange deaths that had occurred in Colorado.

Cas explained, as Dean read rapidly through the news item, "Some of these deaths have the hallmarks of certain... non-human creatures. Werewolves, in this case. Possibly vampires, in another, on the next page."

"You're kidding me," said Dean, frowning down at the phone. "Those are real things?" Heart missing, the news story said. Full moon.

"All too real," said Castiel. "Werewolves, vampires, and quite a few others. I should have thought of filling you two in more on the status of those species. I'll tell you more about it during tomorrow's drive. We — we angels, I mean — we used to have those creatures quite well-contained, but apparently not anymore. Now that I've noticed the pattern, I think I'm spotting other news items as well." He paused a moment, frowning, and then said, "I'm starting to suspect that Raphael may have halted the usual angelic patrols of the Earth for a while. For at least several years. Maybe for several decades." He drew a breath. "Dean, I believe there are some... well... monsters, to put it bluntly. Some creatures loose upon the Earth. Creatures that should not be here." After another pause, he added, "And I realized something else. We might be able to help."

"Werewolves," Dean thought, now scrolling slowly through the second story. "Vampires. As if global warming weren't bad enough."

"I'm hopeful we can return to Kupaluk soon, of course," Castiel went on.


"I wonder if I could handle a werewolf?" he thought.

The next thought was, "I bet if I had Sam and Cas as backup, I could. All three of us could manage it."

"I don't really want to abandon my research, though," added Cas. "Not completely."

That caught Dean's attention. He looked up at Cas, eyes narrowed, and reached out a hand to set it on Cas's knee. "That's not gonna happen," Dean said emphatically, squeezing his knee. "We'll get back up to Kupaluk. I promised you that, remember? I meant that promise. NSF just needs a few weeks to get the ruined trailers out and the new ones in, and then we'll head right back up. This is just a two-week break. Just a little trip, to get the Chevy down to Kansas — before the university notices it wasn't exactly wrecked like I said it was, I mean — and check in on Bobby, and make sure we got that safe house set up in Lebanon, just in case we need it. But we haven't seen hide or hair, or feather, of any other angels yet, so I'm really thinking we can head back up." Dean finished off by saying, giving Cas's knee another pat, "I don't see any reason we can't keep going up to Kupaluk every summer. With Raphael and Azazel gone, there's no reason to run, right?"

Cas nodded. "I hope you're right," he said. "Maybe we can do something about the monsters in the winters, but return to Kupaluk in spring and summer. There's certainly a lot to do there now."

"Especially with the mammoths," pointed out Dean.

The chaos at Kupaluk had, predictably, resolved with the scientists clamoring to study, and protect, the two woolly mammoths. The mammoths were inseparable now, and were both recovering well
from their battle wounds. They even seemed to regard Kupaluk as something like their own territory, and the humans almost as their own personal herd, as if cooperating in defending the camp from a cave bear had made them develop a bond to the whole site and its staff. Nonetheless, Castiel was still the only one who could communicate clearly with them, and his assistance in those first days had been invaluable.

Rebuilding a species from only two individuals would be difficult, but Castiel had insisted it was worth a try. (The cave bear's body had been recovered from the lake, too. But of course, with only one individual, and that one dead, the species could not be resurrected. Even the single carcass, though, would provide a decade's worth of study.)

It really did seem it would be safe to return. Dean was even fairly sure that Castiel hadn't blown his cover too badly. Or, if it had been blown, the Kupaluk staffers seemed to have decided to keep the secret. Shelly, Phil, Ryan and Teddy Bear had all been acting suspiciously cagey about what they'd seen. Between the four of them they'd managed to convince the various students that the storm had been only a freak event, that Castiel the ornithologist had not had wings at all but only a flapping black backpack that had been shredded by the bear's claws, and that the mammoth's and bear's glowing eyes had only been a trick of the light. The entire episode had been very bizarre, but not necessarily supernatural.

Or so they'd dutifully told all the others. But in the two days after the battle, while Dean had been packing for the drive south, he'd seen them watching Castiel cautiously. There'd been something like awe in their faces. They knew.

Not to mention that Phil had taken to casually calling Castiel by a new nickname, "Jaeger."

But they'd said nothing. And Gabriel and Balthazar, too, seemed to have eluded detection. Everybody had bought their story (or, had pretended to buy it, which was almost as good) — the story being that they'd been just two more stray refugees from the storm, hitch-hikers from the Haul Road who had dashed to Kupaluk for shelter. They'd both pitched in to help during the chaos afterward, though later they'd mysteriously disappeared again. When Shelly had asked where they'd gone, Dean had only shrugged. "Hitchhiked away again, I guess," was the only story he'd managed to come up with.

"You'll fill us in later, right?" Shelly had murmured to Dean a few days later, just before the Suburban had started its long drive south. Dean had only nodded.

And the unexpected appearance of the mammoths had, at last, brought some media attention to the plight of the tundra. "THE MAMMOTHS ARE BACK, BUT WHAT ABOUT THEIR HOME?" the headlines had blared. "SAVE THE MAMMOTHS!" was a whole campaign now (the first hashtag had appeared within hours — #savethemammoths — followed shortly by #savethetundra and #savetheArctic). It seemed only a minor development in the haphazard efforts to slow down the rate of climate change, but every little bit would help.

Even Castiel's long-term research project might help. Dean added, patting Cas's knee again, "We'll get you back up there. You gotta keep your study going. Oh, and, isn't Phil watching your nests for you this week anyway?" (Phil, Shelly, Ryan and Ted were the only campers who were staying through the construction, all of them tent-camping in the dining hall for now.)

"Yes, and, that reminds me, I wanted to show you this too," said Cas, taking the phone back. He managed to navigate his way to the photos, finally pulling up a picture that seemed to bring an uncharacteristically wide smile to his face. He passed the phone back to Dean, still smiling, and said, "Phil just sent some new photos. Look at this."
The picture showed four fuzzy chicks, clumped together like a little fluffy blob. They were crouching together on a flattish spot of moss and lichen.

"The plover nest?" guessed Dean, feeling an equally wide smile spreading over his own face. "The eggs hatched?"

"All four," said Castiel. He was practically beaming. "Alive and healthy. Phil's been checking that nest every day for me; I asked him to let me know as soon as the eggs hatched."

"Aw, that's awesome," said Dean. Cas showed him several more photos. Phil had apparently taken his task seriously, for he'd sent a dozen photos showing the nest from all angles, including a close-up of each individual chick, and several of the two parent plovers standing proudly by the nest. (Followed by a photo of the parent birds leading Phil away, both of them doing a most impressive broken-wing display.)

"Cute couple, those plovers," Dean remarked. "Match made in Heaven." He looked up at Cas with an eyebrow raised. "That reminds me. Was there something else you wanted to show me?"

"Only this," said Castiel. He shifted position, setting his whiskey-cup down and getting up on his feet, and pulled Dean's t-shirt over his head in an easy move.

This alone was a sight of considerable interest, and Dean set the phone down and leaned back on his hands just to enjoy the sight. He watched Cas strip off the t-shirt, watched him fold it carefully and put it on the blanket, and then let his gaze rove lazily up and down Cas's bare upper body.

That lean, muscled strength... the beautiful curved contour of his lower back... that smooth tanned skin (and one new tattoo, of course, on Cas's abdomen, a twin to the ones Dean and Sam both now bore as well). That tousled hair, further tousled now that Cas had yanked the t-shirt off....

"I do like that vessel you've got there," Dean said. "Definitely a nice choice. Want to show me anything lower down?"

"Do try to pay attention," said Cas, though a smile was tugging at the corner of his mouth. "And let me concentrate. This still isn't totally easy yet."

He closed his eyes, frowning a little. Dean did his best to stay quiet.

There was a shudder in the air, a fluttering sound, and there they were. Two immense black wings. Cas flared one out, almost lazily, stretching it very slowly to its full extent.

"The twelfth primary's finished growing," he said, pointing.

Dean got to his feet, a little stunned by the sight. He knew the feathers had put on a bit more length, but Cas hadn't had his wings out for a couple days now (he'd kept them primly hidden yesterday, when they'd crossed the U.S. border from Alberta). The size of the fully feathered wings was startling.

Dean set his whiskey-cup down by Cas's, and took a step closer. Cas watched him quietly as Dean ran his hand along the sleek upper contour of the left wing.

"Dude, this is truly impressive," Dean said. More slowly, he ran his hand over the lower edge, starting near Cas's ribs and moving out toward the wingtip. Feather-tip by feather-tip ruffled past
Dean's hand, and every feather-tip was soft and rounded. As far as Dean could tell, it seemed that every one of the flight feathers was full-length now, or very close to full-length. It all looked just like the illustration in the book. "Let's see, now," said Dean. His hand was, he knew, on the inner tertials right now. "Tertials..." he said aloud, drawing his hand outward along the tertials. "Secondaries..." Past the secondaries he went, moving outward, checking them one at a time. All intact, all long, all with perfect soft tips. "And primaries. One, two, three..." Dean slowed down here, counting the primaries one at a time.

He'd meant it to be playful, almost a kind of foreplay, but something about running his hands across those magnificent feathers was actually making him choke up. "Four.... five.... six...." Dean said, his voice softening.

One by one, the long, soft feather-tips flicked past his fingers, and every feather was tipped with gold.

"Seven...." said Dean. "Eight... nine... ten... " He paused, glancing up at Cas, and found that Cas's eyes were glittering with unshed tears.

"Eleven," said Dean, his voice faltering. He was at the second-to-last feather. He paused here and ran his fingers down the entire length of that feather. Then he came to the very outermost flight feather, and he stroked it very gently, along its full length, from its slender black feather-shaft all the way to the soft gilded tip.

"Twelve," Dean finished. "Twelve primaries. All present and accounted for."

Cas let out a long, slow sigh, closing his eyes.

"You did it, angel," Dean said. He shifted a little closer, moving his hand to stroke Cas's chin, until Cas opened his eyes, with a heavy breath, and looked Dean in the eyes. "You really did it," said Dean. "You got your wings back."

Cas gazed at him, eyes dark, his breathing still a little shaky.

It seemed an awfully good time for a kiss.

A long kiss.

A very long kiss.

"I'm still not fully powered, though," Cas murmured, when at last they separated.

"That'll come," Dean assured him. "You know it will. Sam says that once the tertials are all in, you just gotta bask in the sun for a few days and you'll be all set. He says direct sunlight speeds etheric power-gain. We'll get you some basking time asap once we get to Kansas."

Cas let out a slightly choked little laugh. "I shouldn't be surprised he's learned so much. He's been reading all of Schmidt-Nielsen, have you noticed?" He took an uneven breath, wiping his eyes hastily in an obvious attempt to settle himself. He added, "He's been going through that book for days, when he sits at the campfires at night. I didn't think he'd be so interested."

"It's almost like he's planning on sticking around with us," said Dean. He let out a little snort as he added. "And I think he just got to the Molt-Companion part. Or at least, he's starting to crack jokes about gold feather-tips."

Dean couldn't help smiling at the thought. An answering smile crept onto Cas's face as well.
Dean had only found that part of the book himself a few days ago. He'd been paging through *The Physiology of Angels* while Sam drove. Cas had been conked out in the back that afternoon — with some of his tertials and Primaries Eleven and Twelve still growing in, he had still seemed to need a lot of sleep. So Dean had been flipping through the book. And on a rare straight stretch of the Alcan Highway, in the middle of the endless black-spruce forest of the Canadian Yukon, Dean had finally happened across section 12.5.

Chapter 12 was titled simply "Other Observations." It had seemed to be just a hodge-podge of miscellaneous trivia and random hypotheses. Dean hadn't paid much attention to it until then. But section 12.5 had caught Dean's eye, and he'd paused.

By nightfall that evening he'd read section 12.5 six times over. By the time they'd reached the U.S. border three days later, he had it memorized.

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12.5 Repowering of a Depowered Wing: Observations, Folk Tales, and Speculation

As detailed previously in Chapter 6 (Wings, Feathers and Flight), in certain circumstances an angel may suffer complete or near-complete loss of etheric power, particularly in cases of damage to the tertial-feathers. The tertials, the reader may recall, are the array of stout flight-feathers that are positioned on the medial (inner) segment of the wing, rooted to the humerus and in direct contact with the angel's grace. They are the feathers that are most critical for acquiring Heavenly power from the ether. The wing of a depowered angel can only regain the ability to draw in etheric power if the tertial-feathers are fully regrown, i.e., after a complete molt. The problem, of course, is that molt itself requires power.

There are, in fact, two linked problems. Firstly, the initiation of molt is unpredictable. Once the first alula-feather drops, molt proceeds like clockwork, but when exactly does that first alula-feather fall from the wing? Even a fully powered angel may not know when to expect molt. Angels may molt annually if they spend much of the year in the physical plane, but in Heaven they molt much less frequently, on a century or millennium time-scale in some cases. The variable time-flow between Heaven and Earth can alter molt timing for those angels that travel back and forth between the realms, and such angels seem in a state of perpetual confusion about whether or not they might initiate molt at any given time. Further, in the case of wing-damage, molt may not occur at all. Many an angelic poem or song recounts the anxiety and tension of watching an alula-feather that refuses to fall from the wing (which is to say, a molt that will not start); or, conversely, the surprise of an alula-feather dropping at an inopportune moment.

The second problem occurs once molt is underway. Once started, molt proceeds at a set pace, with multiple long feathers growing simultaneously, but the growth of new feathers requires significant power. It is theoretically possible for molt to proceed with purely physical sources of power, given sufficient caloric intake and sufficient protein, but any angel that is envesseled in human form will experience considerable difficulty during the phase of most rapid feather-growth.

Dogma therefore holds that a depowered angel, then, can initiate molt only in exceedingly rare circumstances, and may be unable to complete molt once it is initiated — in some cases even risking death due to the metabolic burden of the feather-growth.

But is this dogma entirely correct? Intriguingly, several tales recount events during which depowered angels regained power and completed a very rapid molt at a most unexpected time,
sometimes fully regaining the power of flight in a few short days. Though these stories must be regarded as the angelic equivalent of folk tales, a survey of five of these ancient tales reveals the following commonalities:

(1) The depowered angel is invariably described as being in a state of high emotion and considerable stress (e.g., while battling, or while injured) \((n = 5 \text{ tales})\)

(2) Most such tales recount very rapid and unexpected growth of several of the flight feathers simultaneously \((n = 4 \text{ tales})\)

(3) There may be a change in feather color, variably described as the acquisition of "golden" or "luminous" feather-tips \((n = 3 \text{ tales})\)

(4) And in all cases the angel was not alone, but was accompanied by a particularly close companion \((n = 5 \text{ tales})\). In several cases the companion is mentioned specifically as being in physical contact with the angel. \((n = 3 \text{ tales})\)

We know already that there is such a thing as a "molt-companion," a particularly close companion who may assist the angel during molt. A separate set of legends may be relevant here; multiple cherubim hold the romantic notion that the presence of a molt-companion can actually trigger the initiation of molt, particularly in cases of a molt occurring out-of-season or on an earlier schedule than expected. There is, in fact, a set of jokes common among angels, involving feathers dropping from the wing when an angel meets a particularly favored friend.

These disparate folk tales have not, to our knowledge, been linked to a verified physiological phenomenon. However, we may take it as a given that angelic biology is incompletely understood. To the author's knowledge there does not exist any prior literature at all on the physiology of angels, apart from the present work that is now in the reader's hands. Even the angels consulted for this text (several cherubim and one seraph) seem to have only partial understanding of their own biology. The seraph, in fact, was keenly aware of certain areas of confusion, and even took pains to point out numerous topics that require further study.

With this in mind, the author proposes here a novel hypothesis, that of the molt-companion as a power source, a source can actually trigger molt as well as accelerate it. Perhaps, in certain cases in which there is a particularly profound bond between angel and companion, the companion can channel etheric power directly through the feathers of the wing to the angel's grace. In times of crisis, perhaps heightened emotion can even result in sudden acceleration of molt.

As for the change in feather color, it is already known that feather color can reflect the angel's state of mind. Flickering or luminescence of the shed feathers is known to indicate that a color-change is likely underway in the new feathers. We propose that the golden feather-tips described in the tales mentioned above may, in fact, indicate the nature of the emotions felt by the angel while in the presence of the companion. In short our working hypothesis is that golden color on angel feathers is indicative of love.
Dean moved to the other wing, repeating his feather-inspection on the other side. This time he didn't count aloud, but ran his fingers silently over the golden feather-tips, one at a time, all the way to primary twelve. He finished with a gentle touch to the alula, which, like all the other feathers, now had a neat golden crescent on its very end.

Dean picked up both the whiskey-cups and handed Cas's back. He touched his cup to Cas's in a soundless toast, and drained his cup, holding Cas's eyes. Cas mimicked his action, downing his own cup.

"You knew all along what the color meant," Dean said, taking both the empty cups and setting them down again. Straightening up, he added, "You knew right from the beginning."

Cas nodded. "I did. I just never had thought it would happen to me. It's rare, you know; it's really only a few stories. I didn't know about the acceleration of molt, but I'd heard the stories of the color change. So — yes, as soon as the new alula-feathers came in, I saw that their tips were coming in gold. I knew then."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Cas only shrugged. "Didn't want to scare you off, I suppose. I thought the chances that we might actually be compatible were... fairly low, say? All I knew was that you were, um... Well, I thought you were... " He paused, looking a little embarrassed. "I thought that you were merely... carefree, let's call it—"

"Gay," corrected Dean, with a snort. "Well, bi, really."

"Indeed, but I didn't realize that then. Also I estimated the chance that I could ever safely show you my wings to be... extremely low." Cas paused a moment and added, his voice low, "I wanted to keep you safe."

"Appreciate that," said Dean, with a nod, "but remember, you've got quite a few additional tricks up
your sleeve, about safety. More than you might've realized." He allowed his gaze, then, to drift farther down Cas's body. "Some tricks down your pants, too. Which have nothing to do with safety, actually."

"Oh, that reminds me," said Cas. He brought his wings around, lazily, folding Dean in them. "There was something else I wanted to show you."

"I thought I already saw the three things," protested Dean, with a chuckle.

"The phone was a single thing," Cas said, shaking his head. "Everything on the phone was one thing. Primary twelve was the second thing."

"And what was the third thing?"

Cas's hands were already at Dean's belt. "Lie down on that blanket and I'll show you."

This time, Cas kept his wings out.

Sometimes, during the evenings of the long drive south, he'd kept them hidden. Sometimes he wanted to be on his back, or on his side, or he and Dean ended up kneeling in some inconvenient clump of bushes without quite enough wing-clearance. And so, sometimes, when he had to, Cas kept his wings out of sight. (Always to Dean's regret.)

But this time he kept them out.

He straddled Dean, there on the blanket, straddled him and rode him, hard. They'd been switching around among innumerable positions every night, as if Castiel (well, and Dean, too) couldn't get enough of experimenting with every possible orientation and every possible angle. But this position, tonight, provided Dean with perhaps the most stunning view yet: Castiel above him, totally naked now, head tossed back, Dean's hands on Cas's cock as Cas slowly ground his pelvis into Dean's... and those wings. Those magnificent wings, lazily spread, outlined against the sunset sky, as the aspen trees whispered in the warm summer breeze, and the cottonwoods stood tall overhead.

The sight was so incredible that despite the intense eroticism of the moment, despite the heat and the sweat and the feverish, breath-stopping sensations, despite the fact that Cas literally had Dean's cock up his ass, Dean felt a weirdly meditative peace steal over him, as if he were positioned on a perfect balance-point somewhere between passion and a hypnotic trance. Gazing up at Cas outlined against the trees and the sky, Dean felt a flush of amazement steal over him.

My angel, he thought. My very own angel.

Some evenings, they powered right to the end in a heated rush. Some evenings, they traded sensations back and forth, with each, in turn, relishing the sight of the other completely losing control. And some evenings, like tonight, Dean found he wanted to stretch it out, to make it last forever.

Maybe Cas felt something similar, for he kept to a slow, steady pace, grinding his hips in mesmerizingly slow circles. Dean kept his hand on Cas's cock, jerking it gently, but Cas folded his own warm hands around Dean's hand and slowed the pace even further. He gazed down at Dean, his face in increasing shadow now as the sunset deepened and the shadows of the trees grew ever
longer. But even in the increasing dimness, Dean could read every nuance on that beloved face, and he could see the way Cas's eyes were roving over Dean's body, and hear the catch in Cas's breathing, the indrawn breath, the soft groans. Every detail seemed highlighted: the way Cas's breaths deepened as he began to pant; the way he began to alternately hang his head forward, and slowly tip it back, as if almost writhing in slow motion, lost in sensation now, as Dean's cock pressed hard within him, and as Dean's hand stroked him firmly.

The sky darkened overhead to a velvet indigo, the glow of sunset fading and the very first stars coming out. The aspens and cottonwoods whispered overhead. The midnight sun of the Arctic was thousands of miles away now, and yet, somehow, Dean felt he could still see everything, every detail of those wings, great and majestic, spreading to either side, every feather perfect. As if somehow the midnight sun was still shining on them both, and always would. And he tried to make it last forever; he wanted it to never end, to go on like this to the end of time.

Cas buckled down at the end, wings wrapping around Dean from either side. When he started to spasm at last, Dean sped his hand on Cas's cock. At the last moment Dean reached up and took hold of the alula-feathers on one wing. That did it, for Cas; with a choked groan he came. Wings tightened hard on Dean from either side, warm sticky spurts hit Dean's stomach as Cas spasmed there, impaled on Dean's cock, squeezing him repeatedly with what seemed like impossible heat and pressure. It was utterly overwhelming, and after trying to hang on a few more moments, Dean at last came too, bucking and gasping under Cas. He felt pinned under Cas's wings, almost dizzy, as the waves of sensation rolled through him. Cas now seemed to have recovered enough to start watching Dean, and he drank in the sight, gazing down darkly at Dean through hooded eyes. He held Dean firmly between both his wings, through all the spasms, through all the gasps. Through all of Dean's last twitches, Cas held him; and he kissed Dean again, deeply, still holding him enfolded in that silken feathery embrace, as the stars shone above.

"I knew at the very beginning," Castiel whispered in Dean's ear. "Before the first feather fell."

By the time they finally got back to the campfire, Sam had given up waiting for them. He'd apparently finished setting up their pup tent, had put out the fire, and had gone to bed in his usual spot in the back of the Suburban, sprawled diagonally in the bed of the truck with his feet, as usual, sticking out of the back. Sam wasn't alone, though. The junco, apparently having gotten completely bored with Castiel and Dean, had returned to the campfire and was perched atop one of Sam's blanket-draped feet, keeping watch. It greeted them with a very sleepy-sounding "chip" as they finally made their way back, hand in hand.

"I swear it's around here somewhere," Dean said two days later, as he peered through the old Chevy's windshield at the ranks of trees. "Paid all that money to have the property lines re-surveyed and now I can't even find the damn place — wait a sec, there it is." He braked the old black truck to a halt, pointing.

Ahead at the edge of an overgrown field, bathed in the slanting light of a June summer evening, was an old ramshackle Kansas farmhouse.
"That's it?" Castiel asked. He was peering over the front seat between the two brothers. The junco crouched on Cas's right shoulder, peering ahead too.

Cas frowned at the house. "That's the structure that your father purchased?"

"That's it," said Dean.

They all stared at the little house. It didn't look very impressive.

"Chip," said the junco.

"You said it, bird," said Sam. "Just a kind of rundown farmhouse. We never could figure out why Dad bought it. Course, we didn't have the key then — we've never gotten into the farmhouse before. Dean's got clear title now though, remember, got those property lines resurveyed and everything —"

"— which that damn estate lawyer demanded before he would finally give us the key," grumbled Dean.

"Yep," said Sam, saying, "I still don't get why Dad would've put the key in a safety deposit box in an actual physical bank. I mean, what's the big deal about the key to an old farmhouse?" He added to Cas, "It's taken Dean ages to get clear title. But it's all legal now. It's ours." Sam paused a moment, looking at the unprepossessing farmhouse. "Weird-ass real estate situation, actually, is what the attorney said."

"And it's got a weird-ass key, too," said Dean, gesturing at the engraved wooden box that was resting in the center of the front seat between the two brothers. They'd picked it up from the bank that morning. Castiel looked at it thoughtfully, and Sam slid the box open to look at the strange key again, a classic old skeleton key. Castiel had already said there were some "peculiar runes" on both the box and the key, and they were all braced for what might be inside the little farmhouse.

"Well, here goes nothing," said Dean. He popped open his door and stepped out onto a cracked driveway that was overgrown with weeds. It was a warm summer evening, a heavy mugginess in the air, crickets droning.

"Still doesn't feel normal, for summer to feel so lush," commented Sam as he stepped out. "Not to mention hot as hell." He added, with a sigh, "Guess that's normal, these days."

Dean nodded. "I know it's nuts but I'm already looking forward to getting back up north. Not that it isn't nice to get a break down south now and then." He stretched theatrically, working out a crick in his neck. "Nine days from Kupaluk to Kansas," he said. "Not bad. Not bad at all. Might be a record."

"I really think I could have flown you both here," said Castiel, climbing out of the left rear door. There was a shimmer in the air at his sides, and his wings reappeared once again — full-length now, glossy and shining. He glanced over one shoulder at his feathers, and Dean grinned at him. "At the very least, I could certainly have flown you from Montana, once I got Primary 12 in," said Cas, fingering the edge of one wing.

"Not gonna risk those brand-new feathers," Dean said, shaking his head. "You said yourself that you're still low on power. You haven't had your basking time yet. Gotta let you rest up. Besides, I had to get the Chevy down here anyway. Now, c'mon. Let's try out that key."

Cas put his wings away (with a reluctant sigh), and they walked up the driveway to the little house, which clearly had seen better days. Its roof was sagging, its shingles missing in several places. A rundown barn stood in a field just behind.
"This better be worth it...." muttered Dean. "Dad spent so many years trying to buy this place."

But when Dean tried the odd key in the lock, it didn't fit.

"What the...." Dean said. He jabbed the key at the lock a couple more times and frowned down at it. "It's not even close to fitting," he reported. "It won't even go into the lock at all." Sam and Castiel crowded close to look, and then Sam tried the key too, with no better luck.

"Allow me," said Castiel. He waved one hand at the door. There was a snick sound of the door unlocking, and the door swung silently open.

"Okay, you need to save your power and quit showing off," Dean ordered. "Not complaining, though. Let's take a look."

Together, Sam, Dean and Castiel stepped into a barren and dusty living room. Wispy motes floated in a faint beam of light from a dirty window. The place was deserted.

Rapidly they checked all the rooms, and the attic, and the basement.

"There's nothing here at all," Sam reported when they all came back together. "I don't get it. Why'd Dad want this place?"

Dean felt a little puzzled too, and a little let down. All this time and Dad had only bought... an actual farmhouse? No more to it than that? "Maybe he just wanted a quiet place to retire?" he suggested. But it didn't ring true.

They poked around a little more, examining the old 1950's appliances in the kitchen and leafing through some old newspapers left in one room. Everything seemed to date to the 1950s, and it seemed the house hadn't been touched since. Castiel puzzled for a while over a few faded symbols on the walls, but if they had once been glyphs of some kind, they were too faded to read.

Then they turned to the barn. The strange key also didn't fit the padlock on the barn door, and once again Castiel had to do his angel-magic to get them in.

And there she was, covered in dust, tires flat, battery dead, but perfectly intact: A 1967 Chevrolet Impala.

"I don't frickin' believe it," Dean said. Sam let out a low whistle. Cas just murmured softly, frowning, "It looks so familiar...."

"Bobby'll love this," said Sam, walking around it and trailing a finger through the dust on the hood.

"Forget Bobby," said Dean. "I'll love this. Not that my ol' Baby out there isn't the best truck in the world, but, y'know...." He set his hands on his hips, taking in the sight of that sleek black muscle car. A wash, a polish, and she would pretty right up, wouldn't she? "Sometimes you need a car instead of a truck," he murmured, walking closer.

He levered the door open and peered inside. On the front seat was a set of keys along with a folded, yellowed piece of paper. Dean picked it up tentatively, glanced at Cas and Sam, and unfolded it, taking care with its brittle creases. Sam and Cas crowded close on either side to read it too.
Dean, Sam —

Just bought this place. I know you both think I'm nuts for having bought property way up here in Lebanon of all places, but there's a reason. I'll fill you in soon. I figured I could stash this old Chevy in the barn until I get a chance to talk with you both. So, first, the story on this car is, this is a car I almost bought when I first met your mom. Got the old van instead, remember that van? But I always remembered the Impala. It came up for sale again recently. Same car, I grabbed it. Dumb maybe, but I felt like it was a sign. I dunno, felt like it should be in the family.

There's a key in a safe deposit box for something else. I'll fill you in on that too — still working out the last details. I just got title to the land here, got a little fight going on about the property boundaries but I'll solve that. Meanwhile, this barn's definitely ours so I'm stashing the Impala here. I'm off to Alaska soon... got kind of a weird feeling about the trip actually, so I'm just tucking the car here to keep it safe. Superstition, I guess.

Hopefully you'll never read this letter. But if you do, something's gone wrong, so — watch your backs. I think there's some weird stuff going on. I'm starting to think your mom might have actually been on to something.

Your mom used to say something about you boys: Angels are watching over them, she always said. I really hope she's right.

Love you both — but you know that, right? 'Cause if you don't, as Bobby would say, you're just a pair of idjits.

Take care of each other.

- Dad

Dean had to swallow a couple times before he could speak. "Well, one angel's watching over us, anyway," he tried to joke. "Or one angel's leaning on my shoulder and blocking the light, at least." Cas gave him a soft look, and he took Dean's hand and squeezed it gently.

Sam took the letter and read it himself, slowly.

Eventually they returned to the Suburban, Dean and Sam still a little quiet. The junco, which had been hanging out in a bush by the Suburban, flitted back to Castiel's shoulder. For once, it didn't chip; even the junco seemed to sense that the mood had changed.

"We're missing something," Castiel said, looking around at the trees. "There's clearly a reason your father was interested in this property. What's the 'something else' that he mentioned?"

Dean snapped his fingers. "The new survey," he said. "The property lines. New property boundaries. There's a strip in the woods that turns out to belong to us. It's supposedly not much, just some more trees and a hill, but I haven't actually looked at it. C'mon."

They walked past the farmhouse into the woods, following a narrow rutted road meandering into the trees. Ten more minutes' walk and there, at last, a different building came into view. A tall structure, half-buried in the side of a hill. It looked almost like it were fortified, like some sort of bunker.
"What is this?" Sam wondered. "Looks like an electrical plant? Is this ours?"

"Think so," Dean said, trying to peer through the windows.

They found a door, and Castiel walked up to try his angel-mojo to open it.

But nothing happened.

Cas's eyes widened, and he stepped back.

"It's... warded," he reported.

"What?" said Dean, frowning at him. "What's warded mean?"

"I can't open the door," said Castiel slowly. He turned to Dean and said, "Whoever built this knew about angels." He peered at the door again and said, "Odd lock, too. Look at the shape."

Slowly, Sam drew out the old spindly key from his jeans. He took a step forward. Dean and Cas stepped aside, and Sam slid the key into the lock. It turned; there was a heavy thunk.

They all exchanged a quiet look.

Sam turned the knob, and pushed open the door. It swung wide, to a cavernous dark space. No lights were visible within.

Dean drew his pistol. Sam went trotting back to the car to grab the shotgun, and Cas drew out his new blade (the old one had plummeted into the lake; this one was on loan from Balthazar until Cas could "grow a new one," whatever that meant). Once they had regrouped, Cas whispered a word to the junco that made it fly off to take cover in the trees.

There was a moment when Castiel could not seem to pass through the door, but Sam soon noticed a glyph on the inside of the doorframe. It was an anti-angel ward, explained Castiel, and after a little discussion he talked them through the addition of a new glyph, drawn with blood from Dean, Sam, and Cas himself.

"That should allow an exception," Cas explained. "The blood of the new owners, blessing the blood of the exception case."

Dean took hold of his hand, and then at last Cas was able to follow Dean over the heavy iron doorframe. Cas had his borrowed blade ready; Dean had his pistol, but nothing happened. It was quiet inside, and very dim. A curved iron staircase led down into a dark room below.

"Found a breaker," whispered Sam, behind them. "Electrical breaker. On the wall here." He flipped it up, and a battery of wire-caged lights flickered to life overhead.

Below them was a round room. In the center was a wide table with a huge, painstakingly hand-painted world map. Old sound equipment hung on the walls; microphones, headphones and even an old record player. An arched doorway led to another room, where tall shelves of books and wooden tables were dimly visible — some sort of library.

Dean felt Cas squeeze his hand again.

"I don't sense anything bad here," Castiel whispered. "I only sense..." He paused, for a long moment, gazing down at the room. Finally he said, "I have the feeling that this place has been waiting for a while. For you, I think. You and your brother."
Dean nodded. He already knew, as he and Cas moved toward the top of the stairs, that there was no enemy here. This was a refuge.

It was a sanctuary.

This was what Dad had meant for them to find.

This was where they could base themselves, in the long months between Kupaluk summers. Dean was still determined to continue seasonal work at Kupaluk. Mays, Junes, and Julys, maybe — the nesting season, the months when Cas needed to study his beloved birds. Sam, too, had announced, near the end of the drive, that he wanted to spend a season or two working with them at Kupaluk. ("Studying environmental policy and law," he'd explained. "Now that I know how AP works, maybe I can help on the other side.")

Their work in the Arctic would continue. But for the other months of the year, they'd need a safe place. Especially if they were really going to tackle those mysterious monsters that Castiel had mentioned. A spot like this could be perfect. They could be safe here, protected from demons and monsters alike. They could pore over the climate-change issue, the "simpler Apocalypse" — clearly a very thorny problem, and maybe one that would have to be solved through purely non-supernatural efforts, but there was still plenty of time yet to find solutions.

This could be a base where they could research, and study. A base where Dean and Cas could have some peace together; where Sam, too, could recover from his own traumas of the chaotic spring. Here, they could rest, and strategize, and plan. And prepare. For whatever might be coming.

Together, Dean, Castiel and Sam walked down the wide curved staircase, and into their new home.
Northern Sparrow's notes on the text are followed by Delicious Irony's notes on the art.

1. Notes on the text:

*Why an arctic fic?*

I first traveled to the Arctic in 1991, in the first year of my Ph.D. fieldwork on arctic tundra birds, a long-term project that still continues today. I wasn't writing fiction yet. Back then, pre-internet and pre-fanfiction (I now know that fanfic existed, but it was hard to find), I'd somehow convinced myself that writing fiction was impossible. But it was clear instantly, from the first time I drove over Atigun Pass and saw the tundra sprawling for a hundred and fifty miles ahead, that it would be a fantastic setting for an arctic tale.

Kupaluk is based heavily on the tundra station where I worked then, and where I still work today, though I've blended in elements from several other field sites. Deadhorse, Atigun Pass and the Haul Road are pretty much as described (minus Dean's "social activities"). Kupaluk's layout is roughly drawn from the actual station, though Topaz Mountain (Jade Mountain in real life) has been moved and some landscape features adjusted. The Kupaluk staff, though, are all OC's; none are based on real-life people.

I was up there at that tundra station when I first started watching Supernatural. I'd never heard of the show until early 2013, when the show first appeared on Netflix. That April, I had the bright idea of volunteering to assist runners at the Boston Marathon, and the further bright idea that it might be really fun to volunteer at the finish line. It turned out that it was not fun at all to be at the finish line of the Boston Marathon in 2013 (the year of the bombing). I believe I'm one of the very few people who was facing toward the first bomb and looking directly at it when it went off. Three people died, 26 had limbs blown off, and over 200 others were injured. I was uninjured except for two torn-off toenails, and all I could do to help was assist runners, so I assisted runners all week. That is another whole story, but anyway, for several months afterwards I could not sleep. (side note: I was dismayed to find this week that I was totally unable to watch any coverage of the cast at the Seattle marathon. It
turns out I still have kind of a problem with marathons) Anyway, three weeks after the bombing, massively sleep-deprived by then and still missing two toenails, I went back up to Alaska for the start of the 2013 nesting season. With the combination of the 24-hour sun and the marathon images (which were still playing through my head like a little movie whenever I closed my eyes), I couldn't sleep AT ALL. Worst insomnia of my entire life! I was also disturbed to find that the tundra is now changing rapidly. I've been going up there off and on since 1991 but it had been quite a few years since my last visit. Global warming was now rolling across Alaska like a juggernaut, and my little birds were really starting to having some trouble.

But at least the field station had just gotten high-speed internet and wi-if at last (courtesy of a fiberoptic cable that now runs the full length of the pipeline) and lo and behold, I had access to Netflix right from my absolutely freezing Weatherport tent. "You might be interested in this new show we just got, called Supernatural," said Netflix. ("Because you watched Buffy", lol.) So I fired it up one bright sunny night. I marathoned all the way to season 4 in five days. By the time Cas showed up and first spread his wings in the barn, I was doing wing checks on the arriving birds, and I was just entranced by the idea of a character with wings. Wings! A character with wings! And an Apocalypse that actually could be prevented! (Unlike the bombing, and unlike the global warming changes.) I was sold.

So Supernatural has always been linked in my mind with the Arctic. And as I hiked across the tussocks all that season, while getting to know Dean, Sam and Cas for the first time during the sunny evenings at my tent, it was instantly clear that Dean, in particular, had the absolutely perfect personality and skill set to be a field station manager. Field station managers are tough, practical, smart, resilient, good with their hands, brave (yes, bears and blizzards are a real problem), and skilled with both guns and vehicles. And they have that Dean-like caretaker tendency as well — caring for the station and the vehicles, and the people, and the environment. So I thought: I bet Dean would be a great station manager.

And then I thought: And Castiel would be a good scientist. An ornithologist, of course, since he would know so much about wings, feathers and flight. The logical place for Sam was then the nearest clump of law school folks, who were all up at Deadhorse working for Shell Oil and British Petroleum. We used to jokingly call that "working for the devil."

This was shaping up into an A/U idea, of course, but as I was not yet writing or reading fanfiction, I didn't know that A/U's were a thing. So I didn't know what to do with this idea, and I sat on it for a long time. Later, while writing another fic, an idea emerged that Castiel could, if necessary, conceal his wings in a backpack. From that motif sprang the idea that Cas would be working on the tundra partly because he has been stuck with physical wings that could not go invisible - that he needed to keep wearing a backpack to keep his wings hidden. Fieldwork would give him a plausible reason to always have a backpack on. Maybe he'd even been exiled up there and couldn't leave. Why would he have been exiled? What could have happened to his wings? Well, the other angels must have done something to him, of course. And why would they do that? It had already become clear, as the years went on and the tundra kept changing and the birds started suffering seasons of 100% nest failure, that a slow-motion disaster was creeping over the tundra. Many times I've thought about climate change as a gradual apocalypse. I started to think, "Raphael and Michael and Lucifer should've all just gotten out of the way and let us humans destroy the planet on our own. That would have been a more reliable Apocalypse that the whole demon-baby plan." And so the fic came together.

But I still had a reluctance to write an A/U. Don't ask me why, I don't know, but I'm just so fond of the canon show and I like to nest my stories within canon. But then came late season 12, and the codification of the idea that there are other universes, other Earths. I realized that this entire A/U idea could be framed within canon, nested within canon, as an alternate Earth that exists within the canon
multiverse. So as soon as the show displayed that glowing rift to the other worlds, I thought, "Oh! The Alaska thing happens on another world!" Right then I decided to sign up for the next DCBB. The deadline to sign up for the 2017 DCBB had just passed, so I waited, all the way through S13, and signed up for the 2018 DCBB.

Mechanics

I've been plotting the fic and jotting down ideas since last October, and have been working on it full time since early April, about 10 hrs a week at first and then 20-30 hrs a week from July through November. Since Aug 15, most evenings and all weekends have been spent writing. I'd estimate I've put about 500 hours into it. Every chapter's gone through at least six drafts. So, a bit more involved than I expected at first!

The fic was begun in present tense, but partway through it I began to crave a more formal, literary feel, a little more tune with the grandeur of the landscape, so I switched it to past tense. (Many thanks to my beta for catching stray present-tense phrasing).

I have stuck to Dean POV, as I usually do - always my favorite POV. Originally the bear-and-mammoth battle took place all around Topaz and Cas's cave, but after so many chapters describing Kupaluk and its staff, it became clear that Dean would feel that he needed to defend Kupaluk. It also became clear that Cas would do his very best to fly Sam and Dean to safety, and that they would end up somewhere farther away from Topaz. So the final battle occurs at Kupaluk, and there is one POV shift to show the campers' point of view during the storm, from Ryan's POV (I did not anticipate him emerging as a POV character, but he did).

Michael has ended up not showing up in this particular fic. I ended up making Raphael the single archangel-villain, with Michael mysteriously absent. There is a rationale for this that ended up not being in the fic (in short, Michael & Lucifer were off battling each other somewhere else, leaving their seconds in charge). I ran out of time to put this in the fic and it seemed like I'd already bitten off quite a bit more than I could chew with just Azazel and Raphael. But basically, I had to save someone for our heroes to fight in the future, right?)

Balthazar died in the early version of the fic, by the way. Which I felt bad about, but I'd fallen into that weird mindset that has taken over fiction since in the last decade (especially since Game Of Thrones), that one of the good guys has to die for it to be a quality story. But I just hated Balthazar dying. Then one day just a few weeks ago, very late in the revision process, I suddenly thought "Wait a sec here. It's MY story, and I can do what I want, and I DON'T WANT BALTHAZAR TO DIE," lol. I like happy endings, sue me! :D There's quite enough misery in real life.

This is my first DCBB, and my first bang of any type. Which means it's the first time I've had to post the entire fic all at once, instead of posting one chapter at a time. Which also means I haven't been able to gauge reader feedback at all! It's utterly terrifying! I've been haunted the whole time about whether I was on the right track or not, and whether any of my vision would make sense. I hope it came together for you all in the end.

Birds, flowers, and tundra

The tundra itself, and its limitless sky, could almost have been listed as an additional character. This fic is more deeply rooted in a sense of place than anything else I've written (even Forgotten, I think, set in the Tetons). I was unbelievably fortunate that the artist who was paired with me, the incredible Delicious Irony, turned out to have a particular love of bird portraits, flowers, and sky scenes!
The tundra for me is a cornucopia of birds, and I really wanted to the fic reflect that - but through Cas's eyes, and then through Dean's. I didn't even manage to mention all my favorite birds, and there's a few that ended up not playing as big a role in the fic as I'd planned, especially the raven. In the raven's place, the plovers and the junco somehow shot into prominence when I least expected it.

The junco is not a self-insert, by the way. (There's actually a self-insert bird elsewhere representing me, but it's another species and only occurs very briefly, and doesn't interact with the main characters). I really didn't anticipate the plovers or the junco taking such a big role! I was struggling with how to get Dean to find the ice tunnel and to think of climbing it, and finally I thought "if only Cas mentioned something to the birds, the birds could show him" -- and then I realized Cas could indeed mention something to birds, and that he would naturally do so when he was running up Topaz trying to escape the other angels. I didn't foresee where it would go from there. The plover had a nest to return to, but once the junco had led Dean up the ice tunnel, it just kept getting more and more involved. I also didn't plan on it accompanying Dean, Cas and Sam on their journey south later. The junco made that choice on its own.

*Physiology of Angels*

I also didn't anticipate the return of *The Physiology of Angels*, but ended up writing not one but two more sections. *The Physiology of Angels*, like the junco, should probably get its own character tag at this point. One of my main writing projects for 2019 is to complete it as a stand-alone text.

*Infinite thanks*

Infinite thanks to my marvelous artist Delicious Irony, who astounded me with her beautiful watercolors (not to mention her crazy ambition of doing at least one illustration, sometimes two, for every single chapter of a fic that is now well over 200,000 words). Her sense of aesthetic fit my vision so well I kept pinching myself. Watercolors were just the perfect fit for the tundra world of snow and sky. And SHE WANTED TO ILLUSTRATE BIRDS, omg, and THE WING! She was incredibly fun and supportive to work with - and so careful with anatomy, which I really, really appreciated. Not to mention also very patient about talking me through my numerous panic moments about how to actually post a DCBB for the first ever time (Me over Discord about a week from posting: "WHAT DO YOU MEAN I HAVE TO DO A MASTERPOST? WHAT IS A MASTERPOST?" cue soothing noises from Deli)

Thanks as well to my beta MalMuses, who somehow managed to charge through the last 12 chapters of the fic in just a few days. You all have MalMuses to thank for the first half of the last chapter, the whole part with Cas and Dean in Montana; I added that at the very last second (18 hours before posting!) due to an insightful suggestion from MalMuses. (And then she managed to beta even that new scene with about a two-hour turnaround.)

And most of all, thanks to all of you for reading. Fanfic writers could not exist without fanfic readers, and I think I'd wither and die without your comments (PS: PLEASE leave comments!! thank you thank you thank you). The fix posts in six hours as I write this, the culmination of 27 years of thinking about the Arctic, five years of noodling over the idea of Cas and Dean in the Arctic, two years of planning and eight months of writing. I really hope you like it.

- Northern Sparrow
Notes on the art:

When the fic summaries go up, it is always a mad scramble with all the artists working their way through them. I run the Destiel Artists United server on Discord, and we were all online and chatting about the summaries and it was so much fun seeing what caught everybody’s eye and how people went off flailing whenever they found a summary that they just had to put on their list (never mind if there were already twenty fics there). When I read Sparrow’s summary, it felt like somebody had managed to put all my favourite things into one story and onto one list of visual elements - honestly, the fic was pure cat nip for me: The Arctic! Ponds! Wings! WINGS IN A POND! IN THE ARCTIC! I’ve never had the chance to illustrate a fic with wings in it, and I’d been itching to do that for ages, so I obviously circled the number on my sheets of possibles so hard I almost tore the paper. I was lucky enough to get the fic during claims and then had a moment of silent reflection when it turned out that Almaasi had picked my little fic and that I had somehow managed to pick and get NorthernSparrow’s fic. I was very calm and the image of poise and grace for the rest of the day ;)

I’ve been wanting to work on a bigger project in watercolours again for a while now, and right when the summaries were up for artists’ perusal I happened to come across David Bellamy’s “Arctic Light”, which is a wonderful book about painting watercolours in the arctic. Finding that book felt like a sign from above (or the art supplies store, take your pick) to go ahead with picking both the fic and watercolours. I thought everything in the fic would lend itself so well to do in watercolours, and thankfully Sparrow loved the idea. Also thankfully, Sparrow’s just as obsessed with anatomy as I am, so that worked out well. And with birds, obviously.

I started reading and I loved it, it was all so good (I mean, of course it was, because, well, NorthernSparrow, so). I remember leaving a comment along the lines of how I loved that climate change and its effects on the tundra play a part in the fic when they are first mentioned, so well before the plan for the new apocalypse was revealed. The furthest north I have been is the North Cape in Norway, and I remember how deeply the landscape moved me and how fascinating I found the tundra exhibit at a museum. It is heart-breaking to imagine that it might well disappear or at least change profoundly within my lifetime. If I ever get the chance to visit the arctic circle for any prolonged amount of time, I’d pack up my painting gear and go in a heartbeat. (Side note: if you intend to paint in temperatures below zero, the trick is to add vodka to the water ;P) I adored the descriptions of tundra in the fic, all the visuals and the feeling of the wide tundra it conjured, and I kept taking notes and they became more and more, and THERE WERE SO MANY BIRDS. I LOVE birds, they’re right up there with felines as my favourite animals. I was never allowed to keep any birds as pets, partly because we wouldn’t have had the means to keep them in a species-appropriate way, e.g. a big enough cage. So, I drew them instead (and put up an army of bird feeders and home-made fat balls). I have entire sketchbooks full of birds. And then all the landscapes! I am a landscape artist at heart, and there were so, so many. SO MANY. And the birds, obviously.
Nine chapters in, I had notes for twenty illustrations. The obvious, if maybe a teeny tiny tad ill-advised solution was to make small chapter illus, like chapter headings - because this way there were a spectacular 32 birds and landscapes I could do! Inktober was only a month away, so that was a plan right there (and I actually did a couple of the small chapter illus as part of my Inktober, even though it meant that I could’t share them before the fic would be published). The chapter number grew a little, and Sparrow had lots of fantastic ideas for the chapter art as well, so my initial plan of landscapes and birds expanded to include plants, props and few mammals, including a woolly mammoth. I can honestly say that I had not anticipated painting a mammoth and a cave bear, but it was great fun to try! And I also got to paint lots of birds, obviously.

I did end up finishing much later than I had intended - I always think that this will be the year when I avoid the last minute crunch, but alas - because as usual everything takes longer than anticipated, no matter the puffer time, and the “small” illus ended up being a lot more involved than my initial estimate for them had been, but in the end it all worked out and I’m so glad I was bonkers enough to suggest them. I don’t remember how or who came up with adding the image descriptions, but I love them so much. Sparrow went and checked old textbooks in the library and sent me tons of references so we could get everything right. Really, Sparrow was nothing if not incredibly supportive all the way through and I had a blast working on this with her - 10/10, can recommend, would do again in a heartbeat! <3

- Delicious Irony

(Link to DCBB art masterpost here.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!