### Map of the World

**by** seperis

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#### Summary

The world's already over and they're already dead. All they're doing now is marking time until the end.

#### Notes

Beta by nrrdygrrrl and obscureraison, with advice from lillian13, scynneh, and norabombay.
Art by nrrdygrrrl
Series title and summary taken from Harry Takes the Field by bratfarrar.
TKodami created an incredible art series as well: Scenes from Down to Agincourt. Highly recommended and hilarious both.

Spoilers: Seasons Five, Six, and Seven. Set after the events in 5.4 The End.
--Day 1--

The blood is still fresh enough for his boots to leave a trail behind him as he makes his way through the remains of the city's residential district, the occasional abandoned convenience store slotted between crumbling apartment buildings and elementary schools, narrow alleys choked with debris from overturned dumpsters and chunks of broken concrete, glass crunching beneath his feet. The roads here are nearly impassable, the blackened skeletons of long-forgotten cars slowly rotting to rust between jagged craters where the asphalt was ripped from the grey-brown earth below.

Following the hazily familiar length of a brick wall, he emerges into the courtyard of a burned out apartment building, lawn grown wild, a grey stone fountain pushes out of the chaos like a landmark as tangled vines creeping up from the empty base. Bathed in the thin light of a cloud-choked sky, the world seems to be fading more with every moment the passes, sickly yellow-greens and muted browns melting into a unending grey, and Castiel crosses a silent lawn the stretches the length of the universe beneath the gaze of windows like lidless eyes.

In a tiny clearing of bare dirt broken by scrubby knots of dying grass, Castiel stumbles to a halt,
and the slow crawl of time comes to a stop as he looks down at the end of his world.

Dropping heavily to his knees, Castiel tosses the blood-clotted knife to the ground beside his rifle before resting his fingers against the non-existent pulse, the fragile warmth of Dean's skin already vanishing with the fading day. Reaching for his jaw, he ignores the dull grate of shattered bone as he carefully straightens his head and looking into the still, quiet face. The fine lines of fighting an unwinnable war are smoothed away from the corners of his eyes and from beside the bloodless lips, still half-parted to take an unneeded breath. Lying on the undisturbed grass like the sacrificial victim he never wanted to be, Dean's green eyes stare sightlessly into the stillness of the dying sky.

"You look good on your knees, little brother."

Castiel observes pristine white-clad legs emerging from the gloom, shoes polished to a brilliant white gloss, but the instinctive hatred is muted, heat leeched away like a half-forgotten memory that belonged to someone else entirely.

"I didn't think you meant to survive," Lucifer continues, coming to a stop beside Dean's hip. "I know he didn't mean you to."

Castiel allows himself to brush his fingers one last time against Dean's rapidly cooling cheek, the skin rough with stubble, before he gazes up at his Brother.

Lucifer wears Sam Winchester's body with the casual entitlement of unquestioned ownership, hands shoved casually into his pockets as he studies Dean's body with clinical interest. It's only a container, however, no matter how well he's learned to use it, a faint glow limning the lines of his body, a sketched suggestion of wings looming behind him fading in and out of view. The brown eyes are nothing like he remembers Sam's: the cold of a heatless universe looks back, devoid of even the memory of light.

He's aware of being the subject of the same chilling scrutiny, eyes flickering over him in undisguised curiosity. Looking down, he realizes in surprise that his hands are coated in still-drying blood, violent arcs splashed across his sleeves to the elbow and trailing down the faded material of his jeans in tacky blot.

Lucifer's mouth quirks in amusement. " Didn't feel like going quietly into the good night, I take it?"

Mouth dry, he licks his lips and tastes iron and copper, tacky-wet, the smell filling his nostrils more with every breath. Lucifer's pitiless stare deepens, groping beneath his skin as it searches a body that is no longer a vessel, that houses something that is no longer an angel.

"Not that I expected anything less from you. Or him." Lucifer looks down at Dean's body, expression unreadable. "Sam knew he'd never stop fighting. I should have believed him." The fondness in his voice is obscene, warmly approval and wistful regret in each word. He supposes, skin crawling sluggishly, it might even be genuine. "Why did you come to me now? To spare your life or end it?"

"Neither," he replies. "I came for him."

Lucifer hesitates only a moment before his lips stretch in a humorless smirk. "Humanity has so many meaningless customs, it's ridiculous. I wouldn't have thought you, of all people, would be susceptible to that." He waves a hand at Dean's body before making a show of stepping back. "Your last words to the dirt, if you must. I'll even burn the body for you after you're done." He smirks down at him. "It's the least I can do."
"Thank you." As if they belonged to someone else entirely, he watches his own bloody fingers close the dulled green eyes that had once housed the last light left in all the world, quenched by a single bullet that didn't succeed and a broken neck that did. Closing his eyes, he presses his hand to Dean's forehead, where even the last ghost of warmth has fled, skin cool and rubbery: I'm sorry. "Go ahead."

Still smirking, Lucifer looks down at Dean's body, and fire burst from the ground to engulf Dean's body and shooting upward, dancing red-orange flames licking at the dark sky for a few long moments, searing air burning across his face in a flash of heat, and vanishing before he remembers to breath. Blinking, he waits for the spots to fade from his vision to see the blackened, charred ground surrounding ash in the shape of Dean's body, already crumbling to join the earth from which it came.

"I promised Sam they'd be together in the end," Lucifer tells him, shrugging to rearrange his still immaculate coat. "Don't worry, Cas, he'll be fine. From what I understand, he had a pretty good time the first time. He'll adapt."

"No," Castiel answers. "He won't."

Lucifer looks up from his sleeve, a pitying smile freezing on his lips, eyebrows knitting together in dawning confusion. "What--where is he?"

"How would I know?" he answers curiously. "Slaughtering the reapers was possibly a miscalculation on your part. Without their guidance, it's very easy to get lost."

The brown eyes jerk up to meet Castiel's, almost incandescent with fury. "What did you do?"

"What could I possibly do? In case you've forgotten, I Fell." Castiel watches in reluctant fascination at the sudden flush across Lucifer's cheeks, hands clenching into fists at his sides, and wonders if it's too much to ask to actually see him stamp his foot.

"What. Did. You. Do." Abruptly, Lucifer's hand closes around his throat, impossibly hot fingers burning into his skin as he's jerked to his feet. "I've waited a long time for this, Castiel. The Host is long gone and lost their claim. He's mine."

Castiel smiles into the enraged brown eyes. "He'll never be yours."

Lucifer's hand tightens, cutting off the last trickle of air, and Castiel's feet hang inches above the ground, lungs burning as he gasps helplessly, fingers too slick to get purchase on Lucifer's wrist. Distantly, he can sense Lucifer pushing around the edges of his mind, poking, pressing, searching for a way inside, rage growing exponentially at finding each connection burned away, sealed shut to encase the mind of an angel in a human form. As black spots begin to consume his vision, Castiel clings doggedly to consciousness, reaching back to the gun at the small of his back and wonders if he'll have to resort to shooting Lucifer to break his concentration. It's not an unattractive possibility; generally, angels don't feel pain as humans do, but Lucifer's spent enough time in this particular vessel to have developed a sympathetic response to it.

Then he's abruptly sprawled across the grass, starved lungs dragging in sulfur and rose tainted air with every gasping, coughing breath. Raising a hand to his swelling throat as he eases himself upright, he traces the beginnings of new blisters rising up on the skin in the shape of Lucifer's fingers and swallows experimentally before looking up.

"I would ask if you have any further questions, but--"
"What did they do to you before they left?" Lucifer asks, staring down at him.

Castiel stiffens. "I Fell."

"The methods of discipline in the Host have changed since I was among them," he observes. "Enslave the infinite to rotting dirt. It would have been kinder to kill you. Fill me in--is that what the Host calls love these days?"

"You were in that cage for far too long," Castiel replies harshly. "Love has never been kind, and the Host least of all."

"You could have come to me." Lucifer's mouth quirks at his expression as he drops into a crouch in front of him. "I left the Host and you Fell, but that doesn't make you any less my Brother."

Lucifer extends a hand, palm warm and unexpectedly soft--it's been years since Sam's body was that of a hunter, years since he held a gun or a knife and had to use them--fingers curving against his cheek. Lucifer's Grace washes over his skin, honey-thick as it soaks into him, searching deeper than irrelevant barriers of flesh and bone; closing his eyes at the slowly spreading warmth, he can pretend for a moment that he never left this for a world of harsh angles and finite surfaces, stark planes of defined space and sharp limits and glaring brightness, the misery and pain and constant, unending work required for simple existence, and he's so tired. He doesn't remember a time that he wasn't.

"They trapped you in there," Lucifer whispers, sounding startled, and Castiel jerks back from the drugging touch, scrabbling desperately at the grass, the absence of Grace like physical pain, bone deep, impossible to ever heal or forget. "Even Hell shows more mercy than that."

"Mercy can only be freely given," he answers roughly. "It can't be bought."

"Mercy is an illusion. This is an offer. I can still help you."

Castiel snorts and regrets it as it sets off another round of coughing, the taste of rotting flora filling his mouth. "If I fall upon my knees and worship you, yes. You should acquire new material."

"That's not the worst idea I've heard today." Lucifer grins at him with a flash of too-white teeth. "I can't give you back your Grace, per se--"

"How surprising."

Lucifer rolls his eyes and stands up. "--but I can offer you a place at my side in Hell. He gesture vaguely. "You know, the usual. At my left hand, raised above all others for all eternity, on Earth as it is in Hell."

It's the end of the world and the death of Dean Winchester, and there was never a time that he expected to bear witness to either one. Staring between the crumbling remains of the man he Fell for and was willing to die for and the Brother who killed him, he wonders why that was not payment enough for whatever transgressions he's committed. Apparently, he also has to be propositioned by Lucifer himself before he's done.

"Or all the kingdoms of the earth, if you really like crawling in the dirt with them," Lucifer adds with a moue of distaste. "I can't decide; which one would you choose?"

"All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it." Lucifer grins at him, and all at once, it clicks into place. "You want me to worship you?"
"You look very good on your knees, little Brother. I think I like it." The grin widens as Lucifer crouches before him again, fingers tilting his chin up, and warm tendrils of Grace burrow enticingly beneath the surface of his skin, a reminder: *and you can have this, too*. The almost invisible glow of Lucifer's true form pushes itself against the confines of his vessel, bathing him in the brilliance of Morningstar's light, the wide sweep of wings blotting out the entire world. "Wearing a meatsuit doesn't change what you were created to be. You were meant to kneel in worship of someone. When I'm done with you, you'll do it for me."

Castiel can't feel the ground below him, the crisp evening air, or his own body; there's only Morningstar, an archangel as far above him as a human from a single cell, and once upon a time, he might very well have done just that.

"You'll want to," Lucifer promises, breath hot against his cheek. "You will. I'll teach you. And then I'll send you to Earth, and you'll teach all of humanity to want it, too."

"You want to be their God."

Lucifer shrugs, amused. "Why not?"

Prophecy's proved itself useless more times than he can possibly count, but never more than at this moment; it spoke of prophets and righteous men and the Apocalypse that would decide the fate of all Creation and somehow missing entirely there were worse things than the end of the world. There was the possibility of Lucifer creating one in his own image.

"You don't need me to help you become their God."

"Maybe I just want it." Lucifer smiles at him. "What do you want, Castiel?"

Castiel thinks: I want Dean to be alive, and Sam Winchester to be free of you. I want the world not to have ended and the Apocalypse never to have begun. I want to have died tonight or died when I Fell or died when I rebelled. I want to go back to before the moment I Fell, when the Host condemned me, and tell myself that it doesn't matter what I choose, that we will always, always lose.

"I want," he says, looking into Lucifer's eyes, "to have told the Host they could fuck themselves before I Fell."

Lucifer's smile vanishes.

"That," Castiel adds thoughtfully, "still bothers me sometimes."

Getting to his feet, Lucifer stares down at him. "It would be a waste to put you on the rack for eternity, but the entertainment value might very well make up for that."

"You don't put an angel on the rack," Castiel answers. "You suborn them or kill them."

Lucifer smirks. "You're not an angel, and I rule in Hell. I can do anything I want."

"You reign in Hell," Castiel corrects him, watching the smirk fade into nothing. "Our Brethren rule it, and I don't think they would let you."

The backhand isn't just physical, fingers of Grace ripping through him in jagged blades like being skinned alive a hundred times--a thousand--as time twists slower and speeds up, seconds like hours, like days, like years, like eternity, but it's nothing at all. Dean suffered worse on the rack, and even more when he left it; Castiel has lived in this human body alone for two years. It's
nothing, no deeper than flesh and blood and bone, an illusion of biology, a reminder how long
Lucifer has been absent from the Host, how much he's missed, unaware of the discipline the Host
once meted out to bring a recalcitrant angel to heel and make him betray his own charge. Nothing
Lucifer could possibly do could match the crawling horror of that.

When it vanishes, aftershocks still sparking from every nerve, Castiel is spitting blood onto the
dusty ground, fingers knuckle deep in the dirt, throat so raw even breathing hurts. Prolonged
screaming can have that effect.

"Are you--" He winces at the sound of his own voice and tries again. "Are you done yet? I have
better things to do than indulge your temper tantrum."

"Even for Dean's brother?"

He looks at Lucifer, surprised. "What?"

"I could set him free," Lucifer answers. "All you have to do is say yes."

"Even if you offered to end the Apocalypse and crawl back into your cage in Hell," Castiel answers
breathlessly. "To know you want it would be reason enough to say no."

Lucifer is so still he could be a figure carved in marble. "That's your answer?"

"I thought that was clear, but to observe the formalities: get thee hence. Be gone. Go away."
Castiel grins, feeling his lips crack and tasting fresh blood on his tongue. "Fuck yourself."

Getting unsteadily to his feet, he tests his balance on legs gone stiff and numb, but the prickling
eases enough to move. Turning his back on Lucifer, he retrieves his weapons and starts back
through the tangled greenery, aware of the eyes burning into his back with every step he takes.

"Even for you," Lucifer says from behind him, "that's a very stupid choice."

"I paid for the right to make it." In so many ways.

"You think I'm just going to let you walk away?" Lucifer asks curiously just as he before he
reaches the mouth of the alley.

Castiel swallows before turning around, gazing at Lucifer over the shadowy mound of Dean's
body. "Yes."

"You're not wrong."

"Imagine my relief."

Lucifer studies him coolly. "Do you want to know the reason I'm going to spare your life today?"

"I don't care." He wonders if Lucifer has ever understood what it means to be tired, so tired that
even caring is an effort. Everything left in him is already fully engaged; there's nothing left for this.
"Is there anything else?"

"You've corrupted yourself so much already," Lucifer says softly, voice perfectly clear in his ear.
"I suppose the question is how long it will take for you to hate yourself more than you hate me."

Castiel sucks in a breath.

"Let's find out."
The sense of demons vanish with the sudden absence of Lucifer, leaving him almost entirely alone in a slowly rotting city.

Leaning against the wet brick just inside the alley, he closes his eyes, concentrating, but there's no sense of any demons or even Croatoans close enough to be a threat. Satisfied for now, he retraces his steps to where he left the jeep, aware of that sense of absence beginning to grow, and something else as well, like an itch beneath the surface of his skin. It could be his imagination, but he's never had one of those before, so he doubts it manifested today just to fuck with him.

Quickening his pace, he emerges into a deserted parking lot, a mess of half-destroyed asphalt and the twisted remains of vehicles, picking his way between them to his jeep huddled against the crumbling remains of a strip mall. The late grey of afternoon is far too still, not even a breezes to stir the rotting remains of the trees, but it's not just that; half-way across the parking lot, he catches himself in a jog, urgency bubbling up stronger with every breath.

Pausing at the door of the jeep, Castiel hesitates briefly, and a surge of adrenaline hits him hard enough to make his hands shake, don't stop as clear as if the words were spoken in his ear, don't look back.

Only Orpheus was stupid enough not to listen to warnings delivered without ambiguity; it's too rare to get one of those to discard with impunity.

I don't want to hurt you.

Castiel stiffens, turning to search the empty parking lot. "What?"

There's nothing but the lack of breeze to answer him.

Pulling the door open, he climbs inside, turning the key automatically. "Don't say anything," he manages, hearing the tremor in his voice as he begins to back out into the nearest clear street. "Not yet."

The silence that answers him is both accusing and wary, which is as much as he could have expected. Turning his attention to the road, he concentrates on driving, the city limits like a flashing beacon screaming along every nerve, get there get out now, and he's not, not, not high enough for this.

Imagination, he thinks: long term drug use, of course: insanity, very likely: trauma, who could blame him. But he's not Orpheus, ascending from the underworld unable to follow a single, unambiguous warning: he doesn't look back.

As if to underline the insanity argument, the feeling vanishes upon passing the broken city limits sign, and Castiel swerves for the side of the road and puts the jeep in park before dropping his head onto the steering wheel and dragging in a full breath like someone drowning just reaching air.

He's not sure how long it is before there's the sound of impatient shifting from the floorboard of the passenger side seat, but it's enough to remind him he's not actually alone, no matter how much he might wish to the contrary. Lifting his head, he looks down at the Dean Winchester glaring at him from the floor of the jeep, cellphone still clutched in one hand. Castiel wonders what exactly it will take to convince him that even if there were any working cellphone towers within five hundred miles of their current location, he doesn't believe they reach alternate worlds. Or at least, not very often.

"Can I get up now," Dean asks warily. "What the hell--"
"I'm not nearly high enough for this," Castiel tells him, dropping his head back against the headrest. "It was a mistake to abstain, it seems. Yes, you can get up."

Climbing into the seat, Dean belatedly tucks his phone into his jacket, and Castiel finds himself tempted to reach across the cabin of the jeep and poke him, just on the off-chance this really is an extended hallucination. It's a lovely thought, but it implies that his life will ever, even in this small way, be that simple.

"Cas?" Less suspicious, still wary, but now threaded with worry. Castiel feels his throat tighten, filling with everything, a range of horror and grief and hilarity and utter disbelief. Leaning on the wheel, he bursts into laughter, vomited out in great, painful gusts that scrape his throat raw and make his stomach ache; this happened, this is happening, and he has no idea what he's supposed to do now. He never thought beyond tonight; there was never going to be anything to think about.

Alarm joins the medley of emotions emanating from the other side of the jeep, which just adds to the hilarity--helpless, breathless, painful, it *hurts*--and it doesn't seem to want to stop. Gasping against the wheel, Castiel tries to calm himself, but focus is beyond him right now; it's all he can do to get enough breath not to pass out.

"Cas." A warm hand touches his shoulder, tentative before the grip tightens, and he freezes, laughter dying in his chest. When he turns his head, Dean is half-way across the seat, green eyes dark with--yes, worry, how strange, how… He's not sure. "You need me to drive?"

Castiel imagines Dean driving into Chitaqua, and abruptly, he's more sober than he's ever been in his not quite human life.

"No." Straightening, he feels the hand fall away--almost reluctantly, he thinks, but that can't be right--and looks at Dean as he settles back into the passenger seat. "I don't think it would be a good idea for anyone at the camp to see you."

Dean frowns, opening his mouth to argue, but as this is a night of impossibilities, he closes his mouth again and nods reluctantly. "Right. So we're going to Chitaqua?"

"Yes." If Castiel could think of another option, he'd take it, but unfortunately, there isn't one. Before Dean can begin to ask any unanswerable questions--the number of which are legion--he says, "You were returned to your correct timeline after Dean died. How long ago was that for you?"

Dean gives him a startled look. "About three years, I guess. How did you--never mind, special angel power?"

"Human aging is erratic, but I know the progression of Dean's," Castiel answers quickly, not wanting to encourage that line of questioning; more importantly, he doesn't like the way Dean answered him. "You don't know for certain?"

Dean's eyes widen in alarm, and he likes that even less. "I was on a job, I think--"

"You don't remember?" Leaning back against his seat, Castiel swallows, trying to decide how to elicit further information without alarming Dean further. Zachariah is sadistic, but generally, there is some form of logic, however twisted. "Why did the Host send you this time?" Literally to watch the end of the world: that's not sadism, that's *insanity.*

"I don't--I don't think they did."
Castiel stills. "They didn't?"

"Zachariah's dead." What an unexpected and gratifying piece of information to have. "The Host--" Dean's eyes skip to him and then away, focusing on the dashboard. "They're kind of distracted right now. It's complicated. We won the Apocalypse, by the way."

"Congratulations. We didn't."

Castiel hadn't realized reality could mimic the effects of a particular unpleasant acid trip with such devastating accuracy.

"Cas, what's going on? Why am I here again?"

"Perhaps we should start with everything you remember about your arrival here?" Dean looks as if he wants to protest. "And everything that you can remember of what happened before that."

Dean snorts. "What, the last three years?"

"Yes," Castiel agrees, ignoring Dean's annoyance at being taken literally and putting the jeep into drive. "Let's start there."

Dean reluctantly agrees to hide in the back of the jeep when they're five miles from Chitaqua and beyond the perimeter of the local patrol. Once they reach the camp, Castiel listens to his own voice coolly summarizing a somewhat edited version of the night's disastrous events to the watch, hyperaware of Dean listening to every word he says.

The garage is unsurprisingly deserted, and as it's well after dusk, it's simply a matter of walking the distance to his cabin with the protection of darkness obscuring the identity of the person with him. If anyone happens to see them, no one will assume something as incidental as a terrible mission with a high death count will interfere with his pursuit of pleasure.

Castiel takes only enough time to wash away the worst of the blood, leaving the ruined jacket and overshirt on the floor of the bathroom before returning to the small living room to find Dean Winchester--how it this happening, why is this happening--sitting on his couch, hunched and staring at nothing. Just looking at him is jarring despite the fact that Castiel blocked the migraine-inducing resonance of a person so dramatically displaced in time and space. He's grateful that he bothered to learn that trick the first time this Dean was here, even though he never expected to have any need to use it again.

He isn't sure how long he stands numbly at the door of the bathroom before Dean's head snaps up, green eyes narrowing in fury as he gets to his feet.

"What the hell was that about?"

The sense of the question eludes him even as Dean stalks toward him, still talking at a dangerously high volume, dissonance in every particular; jeans and t-shirt and jacket, newer boots, unarmed, younger in more than years, but all of it pales before the body memory of Dean's cooling body before Lucifer burned it into ash and dust.

"--didn't tell them he was dead! Why did you…" He has no idea what Dean is saying to him, only that it abruptly comes to a stop, and Dean's staring at him from only a foot away with an expression that Castiel can't remember how to interpret. "Cas?"

Castiel crosses to the couch, leaning over the arm enough to retrieve the mostly-full bottle he never
expected to finish, because he hadn't expected to survive tonight; because he'd never expected to survive the end of the world; because no one survived Dean Winchester and he has no idea how it feels to be the first.

"Cas?" Dean's still standing in the middle of the room where Castiel left him, and it's possible that this is what sympathy looks like on Dean Winchester's face; it might be the strangest thing he's seen this night, but the competition is so high he can't be certain. "Cas, what happened back there?"

"I had to--" he pauses to concentrate on the surprisingly difficult task of unclenching fingers gone numb from their clutch on the neck of the bottle. "I had to see to his body."

"Shit." Dean closes his eyes briefly, anger draining away. "I forgot--that was only an hour ago here. Are you…." Mercifully, he cuts himself off before the word 'okay' can be added; the novelty of a Dean Winchester editing himself in any way is fascinating.

"It took longer than expected. Lucifer distracted me soon after I found him."

"Lucifer?" Dean takes a step toward him. "He was there?"

Castiel nods slowly, tipping his head back to gaze blindly at the ceiling. "I should have anticipated that. He wouldn't be able to resist gloating over the body."

Perhaps it was for Sam Winchester's benefit: a belated punishment for resisting him for so very long. Lucifer would enjoy that very much. Twisting off the lid, Castiel takes a blind drink, but the anticipated burn of alcohol is entirely absent; all he can taste is smoke and death. Wiping his mouth, he blinks in surprise at the presence of this Dean less than a foot away, looking worried. Wariness he knows how to deal with; worry he can't, and doesn't want to.

Smiling up at him, he extends the almost-empty bottle. "Would you like some? I'm sure I have more somewhere--"

"Cas." Ignoring him, Castiel starts to take another drink before the bottle is abruptly jerked out of his hand. "Cas," he says urgently, then frowns, green eyes dropping lower and narrowing. "What the hell happened to your neck?"

Reaching up, Castiel winces at the first touch against blistered skin of his throat. "I forgot about that."

"Lucifer did that." Before Castiel can respond to the obvious, Dean's fingers close over his chin, jerking his head up. "Jesus. Where's your first aid kit?"

"It doesn't hurt." It hurts, but everything hurts, so it is not as if it's a distraction. "He has always had poor impulse control. It's like dealing with a spoilt child."

Dean cocks his head, peering into his eyes. "Cas, you tracking?"

"That is my first bottle."

"Not what I meant."

"He burned Dean's body." There's not enough alcohol in the house for this. Dean opens his mouth then stops, going still. "Patience is a virtue, did you know that?"
Dean swallows, nodding tightly. "I've heard."

"It may be the only virtue I still possess." He searches Dean's face. "Can I have the bottle now?"

"Cas--" Dean unexpectedly reaches out, grabbing his wrist and almost jerking him off-balance, turning it over to reveal a still oozing wound he doesn't quite remember getting. "Cas, I was there when you were fighting. Is there anything else?"

"It's nothing."

"Jesus Christ." Dean stands up, letting go of his hand. "Where. Is. The fucking first aid kit?"

He makes an effort to focus. "Under the sink in the kitchen."

When Dean returns, there's a grim set to his mouth that discourages commentary, seating himself on the couch and doing a quick inventory of the kit with an expression of reluctant satisfaction before taking out the gauze and tape, alcohol and a small tube of antibiotic added to the pile as well as a small pair of scissors.

"Give me your hand," Dean says firmly, in almost the exact voice that Castiel's conditioned to disobey on principle. It's not quite, though, and the delay simply means Dean reaches over himself, taking Castiel by the wrist and setting his hand palm-up on one knee. Head tilted, Dean cleans away the remaining blood with unexpected care, wiping a thin layer of unneeded antibiotic over the cuts before bandaging it neatly, tape secured with practiced ease.

"Heads up," Dean says softly, but the callused fingers are already on his chin, tipping his head back against the couch. It's easier to let him do it than protest the necessity. There's a faint sense of pressure down the sensitized skin, and from his peripheral vision, he sees Dean's mouth quirk in recognition. "First degree Grace burn. The things you learn from being dragged out of Hell by an angel."

"That was a manifestation of my Grace marking your soul," Castiel answers, feeling his lips stretching into a faint smile when Dean rolls his eyes. "It's not an actual physical injury to my body. It'll be gone before dawn."

"So what was he trying to do to your true form in there?"

Dean's very smart. "There was nothing he could do, unless he wished to kill me. The Host, to his dissatisfaction, already destroyed far too much themselves trapping me in here."

"Fuck them." Sitting back, he cocks his head. "You get you're in shock right now, right?"

Oh. "Is that what this is?"

"Yeah." Dean licks his lips. "Cas, you need to lie down or something."

"I need that bottle."

"Drinking isn't going to help."

"Nothing is going to help!" he snap before he can think better of it. "I want it anyway."

Dean visibly counts to ten before he gets up, grabbing the bottle and shoving it into his hand. Being silently judged by Dean Winchester is at least familiar when at this moment, nothing else is. Finishing it takes only a moment; surely there's more here somewhere.
"Why'd you do that to your hand?" Dean asks, settling beside him again; a hunter even now, eliciting information from the most useless of witnesses at the most pointless of all times. "Cas?"

"I don't remember." Reaching over, Dean takes the empty bottle from his hand, leaning over to set in on the floor. When he straightens, he's holding--a full one. "Where--"

"You gave me the grand tour the first time I was here, remember? Bathroom in the bedroom, food nowhere, drugs everywhere, Jim Beam under the table, take whatever I wanted. I paid attention." Dean waggles the bottle enticingly. "Who's your supplier, anyway?"

"Payment for services rendered," he answers distractedly, reaching for the bottle, which Dean immediately raises just out of reach. "Give me that."

"Make it worth my while," Dean answers. "What happened with Lucifer?"

"What always happens with Lucifer? He made ridiculous threats and even more ridiculous offers. I declined and left."

"And he just let you."

"I wasn't interested enough to hear his explanation. Can I have the bottle now?" Dean's mouth tightens, but before he can answer, Castiel retrieves it himself, twisting off the top and taking a long drink, waiting for something--anything--to happen, but while his mind remains distressingly unorganized, there's no appreciable difference in outlook yet. Sliding to the floor, he pulls a box from under the couch, wondering where his lighter is. "Do you have a lighter?"

Dean stares at him. "What?"

"A lighter?" Flipping open the box, Castiel retrieves one of the baggies, weighing it thoughtfully in one hand. "I'll share, of course."

"Seriously?" Dean asks incredulously. "You're doing that shit now?"

"I don't know if you are aware of this, but Lucifer won the Apocalypse," he answers flatly. "The world is over. Now is all we have left."

For a few long moments, Dean is silent. "Lucifer won," he echoes quietly. "I forgot about that, too."

"I am endeavoring to achieve the same." He fumbles the bag, almost dropping it, hands oddly clumsy. "As this is the first time the world has ended, there's a lack of reliable information on the exact progression of events. This wasn't--" supposed to happen, he thinks. For a second, he can't see anything but Dean's body cooling in the grey afternoon, air choked with the smell of roses. "I don't know how long we have."

"Then we gotta get out of here," Dean starts, trailing off in belated realization of how ridiculous that is.

Castiel says it anyway. "Dean, where on this world do you think we can go?"

Abruptly, Dean slides down beside him, pulling a lighter from his pocket and dropping it in his lap before taking the box and removing the papers. Spreading out one translucent-white square on the lid, he holds out his hand. "Give me that. How long do we have?"

"I don't know." Castiel loosens his hold enough to obediently drop the bag in Dean's hands,
watching as Dean expertly rolls the joint before licking the edge to seal it shut. "Perhaps before morning. The wards won't survive for very long against his entire army." Or they'll run out of food waiting to die; it could go either way.

Picking up the lighter, Dean flips it absently in one hand, eyes fixed on the doorway, beads stirring faintly from an unexpected breeze. "That's why you didn't tell them."

"All we have is now," Castiel whispers, picking up the finished joint and almost dropping it; distantly, he realizes his hands are shaking. "They should have that much, at least."

"Hold up." Plucking the joint from his hand, Dean tucks it between his own lips and lights it before handing it back. "Give me a second. I'll get another couple of bottles."

--Day 4--

"Cas?"

Jerked awake at the unexpected noise, Castiel fights down the instinctive panic, blinking uncertainly into the gloom of the room, barely lightened by the weak grey light beginning to spill through the window. Which means it's less than an hour before dawn, a time he didn't expect to ever see again.

Far more unsettling, he's beginning to suspect there's been more than one of them.

"You awake?" the same voice asks with a ripple of amused annoyance, adding a discordant rap of knuckles against wood. Still frowning, he follows it to the doorway, where a familiar body slumps against the wall, idly looping a beaded string around one wrist.

"No," he answers deliberately, tempted to bury himself in the couch cushions and refuse to emerge until she goes away. It won't work, but he can't think of a reason not to at least try. "Go away, Vera."

"And good morning to you, Cas," Vera answers brightly, letting the beads drop and crossing to perch on the arm of the couch, boots knocking his feet out of her way. Resting an elbow on her knees, she smiles down at him. "Long night?"

"What are you doing here?" Sitting up, he's almost painfully aware of the fact that despite his best efforts to the contrary, he's somehow managed to achieve perfect sobriety, and he's not sure how he allowed that to happen. There's also something wrong with the room, though he can't make himself focus enough to work out what with Vera staring at him. Peering up at her, he takes in the twists of hair piled into a messy knot away from a tired-looking face, the dark skin, like her unbuttoned jacket, jeans, and boots, liberally sprinkled with dirt and dust. Distracted, his gaze drops to the worn grey t-shirt, noting her sidearm in its shoulder holster, and flickers a glance at the doorway, where her rifle leans against the wall. "You're on patrol?"

"Just got back." She reaches up to push a stray twist back into the loose knot of locked hair before fixing him with cool brown eyes. "You don't remember?"

"I remember everything." It's true, even if at this moment he's not quite able to retrieve the specific memory. As far as he knows, she wasn't assigned to any patrols this week. And what is wrong with the room? Scanning it, he tries and fails to identify the discrepancy. "Is there something--"

"I'll give you this," she interrupts casually, crossing her legs. "I probably wouldn't have noticed if you weren't so shitty at covering your tracks. What the hell are you doing?"
Castiel keeps his expression neutral as he frantically attempts to recall the last one--two?--three days of memories, searching for some kind of context.

"Let's make this easy on us both," Vera continues flatly. "Hour after dusk to an hour before dawn, you're stealth searching the entire goddamn city for Dean. I get it, you want to find him, everyone does, but going alone to Kansas City every night--Jesus Christ, even you're not usually that stupid!"

"Why would you think--"

"Jeep's still warm," she says flatly. "I checked before I got here. Wanna try again?"

Castiel doesn't flicker a glance in search of his pants. They could, quite literally, be anywhere in this camp, and in any case, their location is now apparently separate from that of his keys. Vera waits for a few pregnant moments before finally saying with an unmistakable quaver in her voice, "Cas, tell me--here, you can lie to me--that you aren't going to the city while you're fucked up--"

"Unless you wish to count speed, no." The faint unease blossoming into panic between one breath and the next as the last three days begin to fall into place with an almost audible click. "I'm not an idiot."

"Because three days no sleep, that's good for you," she says acidly, but the relief in her voice strips the words of any heat. "Cas, why--I mean, I get it, it's Dean, but come on. I know you can take care of yourself, but--look, right now, we can't afford you--" She hesitates so briefly that he almost misses it, "--anyone taking that kind of risk right now. You know Dean's orders as well as I do."

"And I'm famous for my obedience." The jeep is in the garage, she checked, but he's going to need more than that. "Has anyone else noticed--"

"You being more than normally crazy?" Vera asks, rolling her eyes. "Protip: subtle is not telling everyone to leave you alone because you want to spend some time praying for your various sins in alphabetical order. Or was it by severity?"

"That would require far more than three days to accomplish." He can guess who might have thought that was funny, and he must have been very high to have actually said it. "Has anyone been to Dean's cabin?"

"Of course not. I told everyone, it's fine." He blinks slowly at that, focusing on her serious expression. "Cas, he's alive. I know that, you know that, everyone knows that. I get it's hard to wait, but--"

"We can't afford for me to leave the camp." Vera nods distractedly, glancing toward the door, and he notes the darkening circles beneath her eyes that he missed earlier, the weary slump of her shoulders beneath the oversized olive Army jacket, the barely-there tremble of hands locked together to hide it, but while bloodshot, the brown eyes are unnaturally alert for this early in the morning. "You look tired. Is patrol more active than usual?"

No, it's fine," she answers dismissively, turning to face him with a quick smile, though one leg begins to bounce impatiently. "Pretty quiet, actually, Amanda and Mel say day's about the same, though, so no idea. Look, I need to--"

"Give me a minute." Tossing the blanket aside, he ignores her annoyed sigh as he tugs a pair of jeans from under the couch that on brief examination may even be his own. "When did Mel join the local patrol?"

"A couple of days ago," she answers impatiently, then winces before adding, "We had to keep
"Excellent idea," he tells her, standing up to pull on the jeans and make his way across the almost obstruction-free floor to the kitchen to count the number of bottles piled neatly by the trash can, then in the sink and the floor beside it before taking in the entire kitchen, feeling vaguely unsettled by the amount of visible floorspace. "Who's was it again?"

"What?" Vera asks from the living room, sounding strained; a glance shows her frowning toward the doorway again. "I gotta go, so can we--"

"Indulge me." Three days, what was he doing, why would Dean be going to the city; he can be stupid, but it usually involves some form of logic, however incomprehensible it might be to anyone but himself. Opening the door to the small utility closet where he keeps his books, he notes the six missing on a glance, reviewing their subject matter and finding the common theme before he closes it. Turning around, he sees Vera standing by the couch, eyes nervously darting between him and the doorway. "You're expecting someone?"

"No, why would I--" She shifts in place, rubbing her hands along her thighs nervously as Castiel takes in the room again and finally realizes what's bothering him about it. "Just tired. Uh--"

"Has it been this clean every morning?" Dropping his gaze to the rug, he wonders uneasily if it's always been that color. Or for that matter, if he's always had a rug.

"Yeah, I was wondering about that," she answers, looking around with a baffled expression. "Are you drunk cleaning or something? You do that?"

"That's really the only explanation." Concentration is so difficult when there's so much to deal with at once. "Did you say the jeep was still warm?"

Vera shifts her weight uncomfortably, but she nods. "Yeah, that's why--"

"Yes, why you went to find out. Because every morning I was here an hour before dawn, you knew that, because every morning you checked. And apparently right before dusk, though that must be a guess, since night shift goes on duty at dusk."

She stills, brown eyes widening briefly, before she nods again, raising her chin. "I was worried. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"You could have asked Amanda to watch me," he says, leaning his shoulder against the kitchen door. "She would have been happy to oblige."

"You said--" She grimaces. "Look, she was respecting your privacy, okay? Whatever happened in Kansas City--I get you don't want to talk about it yet, fine."

"The camp is running smoothly?" he asks, never looking away from her face. "No panic, worry, belated realization that with Dean missing and all of his lieutenants dead we lack even a rudimentary command structure...." He closes his eyes at the way she stares at the wall just over his shoulder. 'Please tell me I should be congratulating you on carrying out a successful coup on Chitaqua and you wish to be referred to as 'Your Dread Majesty'."

"It wasn't a coup," she says deliberately. "More a re-organization based on our existing resources, which I don't know if you noticed, don't include four of Dean's lieutenants and there's some uncertainty on the exact location of our leader. You had a better idea, you should have voted."

"There was a vote--you were being facetious, thank you, that helps." Spying a t-shirt by the closed
bedroom door, he snatches it from the floor, tugging it impatiently over his head. "I don't have time for this, so if you would, please explain who is currently in charge of Chitaqua since all of Dean's lieutenants are dead in Kansas City?"

"Four of them are dead," she corrects him. "One of them came back."

She glances toward the door, expression melting into resignation, and following her gaze, he sees the four people--presumably the day shift--standing outside, milling nervously near the sagging steps of the porch in the sullen grey light of morning. Biting her lip, Vera goes to the door, leaning out to shout, "Five minutes!" before glancing at him, expression the familiar mixture of resignation and disappointment he's seen it on Dean's face more times than he can count.

Taking a deep breath, she crosses the room, coming to a stop only a few feet away.

"They think I'm getting orders from you," she says simply. "Now, you got a choice."

Amanda, blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, glances toward the cabin, and for a moment, the blue-green eyes meet his; he looks away.

"You get your goddamn gun, walk outside, and give them their orders," she continues flatly. "Or tell them I lied, you're opting out, and good luck with that survival thing, because I'm sure as fuck not doing this for you."

Castiel jerks his gaze back to Vera. "Why not? You've done an excellent job so far."

"Fuck you," she answers, brown eyes hardening. "Playtime's over, Castiel; time to deal. What are you gonna do?"

Outside, Mel and David are talking, flickering nervous glances toward the cabin, expressions tight with growing worry as the sun begins its ascent into the sky, and beyond them are the walls of Chitaqua and the hum of the wards that protect them. It doesn't matter, he wants to tell her; the world's already over and they're already dead. All they're doing now is marking time until the end.

"You said the local patrols have been unusually quiet?"

Vera starts. "Yeah. We checked twenty-five miles out, and there's nothing."

What would Dean do, he thinks, ignoring the slice of pain for later; what Dean would do would know what he's doing. What would he ask, what would he need to know, what would he do--

"Patrol is suspended until further notice," he says. "I need a full report of everything--and I do mean everything--that's happened since we left for Kansas City. Everyone who was on patrol is to meet me here at noon and be ready to answer for every moment of their shifts."

She frowns. "Why--"

"The camp will be locked down for the next forty-eight hours," he continues, trying to think of anything he might be missing. He's lived here all his mortal life; he should know this. "The watch will be informed that anyone trying to enter or leave should be shot on sight." Vera sucks in a shocked breath, which reminds him of what she said about the jeep. "Wake up Sheila and tell her to temporarily disable all the vehicles, and she and Frederick are to find and confiscate every set of keys we have and bring them here by dusk. I know how many we should have and if a set is missing, I'll want to know why."

In the silence that follows, he sees his belt, coiled neatly on a nearby chair, and picks it up,
threading it through the belt loops before pulling his gun from under a cushion of the couch. Checking it automatically, he pauses, remembering the first time Dean handed him a gun and told him it was time he learned how to use it.

"Cas," Vera says slowly, "what happened in Kansas City?"

Dean said: Cas, it's just you and me now. If we're gonna do this, you have to learn everything you can.

"The team leaders were killed," he tells her, sliding it into the holster before retrieving his knife from under a pillow. "Dean's orders were for anyone who survived the confrontation to secure the camp until he was able to make contact."

"He survived?" Vera licks her lips nervously. "You're sure?"

*Otherwise, you're useless to me. So, what's it gonna be?*

"He's alive," Castiel answers, meeting her eyes. "Until he returns, his last order will be obeyed."

Vera closes her eyes, shoulders slumping in visible relief. "Okay. Anything else?"

"I need to check the wards this morning, so I'll be unavailable until noon," he starts, then remembers the day shift is waiting outside for his orders. He doesn't know *anything*--what he might have missed, what will need clarification, what he's forgotten, what he doesn't even know to tell them.

Closing his eyes, he thinks: I can't do this.

"Cas?" Vera says quietly, and he feels a nudge against his arm. "You ready?"

Opening his eyes, he looks at the doorway to this tiny world within the protection of the wards. He has to be ready, because all they have is now. He has to be ready, he has to be, because the world is over and Dean's dead, but asleep in his cabin is a man who doesn't have anyone else.

*So, what's it gonna be?*

"Yes," he breathes. "I am."

The maintenance of the camp's wards is one of the few duties he never relinquished, a routine so ingrained that he could do it in his sleep. Making a clean cut across his palm over the half-healed wound from Kansas City, he mechanically swipes his fingers across the key before stepping back, but finds himself staring at the bright streak of crimson, glistening in the thin grey light of early morning.

Distantly, he hears the thud of the knife dropping from fingers gone numb, but all he can think is that Dean's been dead three days and he's still checking the wards as if he's not.

Abruptly, he finds himself seated on the rocky ground, unable to draw a full breath; the world's over and Dean's dead, but he's not.

Pressing his forehead to his knees, a choked sound claws itself free of his throat and spills into the air; another follows, and another, and he can't stop it or even control it, vomiting jagged-edged sobs it hurts to make and even more to hear.

It's obscene, that he can possibly be alive in a world where Dean isn't; it's impossible, that he can
live when most of him died three day ago and burned to ash before his eyes. Whatever this is can't possibly be called living.

He can't do this, he can't survive this, no one could expect it of him. He can't. He can't.

Castiel quietly opens the unlocked door of Dean Winchester's cabin and slips inside, bone-deep exhaustion making every passing second feel like forever. It's only been three hours since dawn, but years have passed since he woke up in a world that should have already been dead.

Tiredly, he forces himself to recall what he needs to tell this man, to make him understand; even through the numbness, he feels a flicker of hatred for whoever sent him here after winning his own Apocalypse, force him to experience the slow death of a world that lost.

Taking a deep breath, he turns around to see him exactly where he was when he checked this morning on his way to the wards. Slumped over the scarred table, head pillowed on the open pages of one of the books that Castiel so helpfully provided him between equally helpful joints, he seems every minute on the verge of tumbling from the chair and onto the floor. From the quantity of drool and the soft sounds that he's certain Dean would deny could be anything like snores, it's possible his only reaction would be to go back to sleep.

Despite the sleep-flushed cheeks, he looks paler than he did three days ago, faint blue circles growing beneath red-rimmed eyes. It's not a surprise, now that he considers what kind of schedule Dean's keeping; spending his days reading in this cabin or engaged in trading vodka and whiskey for answers to his endless questions, and his nights searching Kansas City with a stolen jeep doesn't leave much time for something as mundane as sleep.

Castiel pauses, the room blurring unexpectedly as he takes in what this Dean's wearing, eyes dropping to the sagging waist of his jeans he arrived in, t-shirt rucked up to reveal a narrow strip of pale skin, then down to the dingy white socks emerging beneath the frayed hem. A quick scan of the table reveals nothing, and before he realizes what he's doing, he's opening the closet door to stare at the pristine collection of Dean's weapons; the only ones that are missing are the ones he took to Kansas City three days ago.

There's an arsenal in the jeep, he reminds himself, but he doesn't think that during that drive to Kansas City that it came up in conversation.

Returning to the front room, Castiel watches blankly as Dean--this is Dean, not the same, no, but Dean--mumbles wordlessly into the pages of the book, smacking his lips before sinking back into sleep with a wet sigh; he was in Kansas City for three nights, unarmed and alone, in the same place that one Dean Winchester already died and Lucifer would choose to begin the dawn of his reign.

Dean could have died at any time in the last three days, and he might have awoken this morning to Vera telling him a jeep is missing and an empty cabin; Vera might not have told him anything, and he never would have known that Dean was dead at all.

Castiel could have died in Kansas City that night and never knew this Dean was even here.

Pushing the table back, he kicks the chair out from under Dean, watching as the green eyes slit open in belated alarm before he hits the floor hard enough to knock the breath out of him. Disoriented, Dean doesn't move for a moment, trying to catch his breath, before he slowly sits up, scanning the room in bewilderment until he sees Castiel leaning against the edge of the table.
"Cas? What--"
"Shut up," Castiel answers, lazily retrieving the chair before planting a foot in Dean's chest and shoving him back to the floor. Ignoring his grunt of pain, he sets the chair on top of him, the legs pinning his arms to his sides. Before Dean can gather himself to throw it off—he isn't used to living in a warzone, Castiel reflects—he sits down and crosses his arms over the back to peer down at Dean's reddened, outraged face, eyes still wide in almost comical surprise. "Good morning, Dean. How are you this morning?"

"What the fuck---" Dean shouts, shoulders just coming off the floor in belated reaction and hitting the metal slats with a hollow sound before thumping back onto the floor. Castiel watches Dean struggle for a few moments before planting a foot in his shoulder and pushing him back to the floor. Blinking, Dean stares up at him, the furious green eyes wary: good. "Cas? Why--"

"I already knew you were far slower than he was," Castiel says conversationally, "but I thought I could use the practice. I didn't realize how optimistic it was to assume you were capable of being even that."

"Let me go," Dean grates out, voice trailing off into a groan when Castiel increases the pressure on his shoulder. "Cas--!"

"You're stupider than he was as well: imagine my surprise." Drawing his knife, Castiel leans farther down, ignoring the audible gasp as he shifts his foot enough to slit Dean's left sleeve to the shoulder, taking in the familiar symbols, almost impressed with himself considering how drunk he was when he came up with that. The black ink from the marker that Castiel vaguely remembers using to draw the sigils on his arm is faded enough that it probably won't last until sunset. "Dean," he says, straightening, "this is possibly the most important question I will ask you, so pay careful attention. What are you willing to risk to test which of you is better at lying to me?"

Dean seems to also lack the ability to control his expression, which might make this somewhat easier. "I'm not gonna lie. Now you gonna tell me what the fuck you're doing?"

"I was visited by a very annoying revelation this morning," Castiel answers. "I wasn't so drunk that I don't remember how many times you asked me to help you, but my impaired judgment meant that I didn't realize what you were actually doing. Unfortunately, sobriety assaulted me at dawn, and you'll pay the price for it. The books and that symbol I understand, but what exactly did you think you were going to accomplish going into the city alone for the last three nights?"

"What the fuck do you think?" Dean asks incredulously. "I was trying to find the place where I appeared so I could figure out how to get back!"

While he guessed the reason Dean was going into the city, it didn't occurred to him that Dean might not even know where it was he had appeared.

"--you weren't really all that helpful when it came to research. What the hell was I supposed to do?"

"I was apparently extremely helpful with your research," he says numbly, trying to think. "I remember answering every one of your increasingly inane questions." Dean glares up at him. "In fact, I remember being very specific when you asked me how you could get back."

"You told me to try prayer," Dean answers bitterly. "That was a lot of help, thanks."

"That's because prayer is your most likely source of assistance, which is saying something." Dean starts to answer, but he cuts him off. "I thought I explained this to you."
"You were kind of busy doing lines of shots," Dean answers contemptuously, and one knee comes up hard against the seat of the chair; Castiel shifts his balance automatically and considers kicking him somewhere non-damaging but very, very painful before he injures himself. "So if you don't mind--"

Castiel savagely increases the pressure on Dean's shoulder, waiting for the stifled gasp before easing.

"If you move again, I'll dislocate your shoulder. Do you believe me?" Panting as Castiel slowly eases the pressure, Dean nods; he isn't, at this moment, lying. "I told you it couldn't be done. Did you bother listening the entire explanation or were you too busy lining up more shots for me?"

"Fuck you," Dean says, looking away, but not before Castiel sees the trace of guilt in his eyes. "Let me up!"

"I'll try again," Castiel says. "This time, pay attention. Your arrival was caused by a deliberate manipulation of spacetime by someone who has the ability to both see and control it. You're human, and your mind isn't designed to even comprehend the multiplicity of time in its entirety, much less hope to manipulate it with any degree of success." He flickers a glance at the books, guessing by number in each stack which ones Dean managed to read. "You've read enough by now to know what I'm telling you is true."

Dean licks his lips, looking marginally less certain. "Then I need to find out who did this, or somebody else who can fix it."

"That would be useful," Castiel agrees. "However, there is a problem with that plan, such as it is. There is no one left who can."

"Bullshit," Dean breathes, face the color of chalk "There's gotta be a way, someone--something--"

"The gods were slaughtered," he interrupts, surprised by the effort it takes to keep his voice steady. "Lucifer was thorough; those who could leave did so, and the rest were hunted down and killed when they were found. When the Host left--" he pauses, horrified by the break in his voice and forces himself to continue, "--when the Host left, those that still lived destroyed themselves rather than face what he would do to them. Only an angel or a god would have the power to do this, and here, there are none left."

"How do you know?"

Castiel fights a brief, bitter battle for control of his voice before he answers. "I know."

"But--"

"Your lack of faith is devastating," Castiel interrupts. "It's also irrelevant. You went alone and unarmed into a city that's populated almost entirely by not just Croatoans and demons, but a variety of supernatural entities without any idea of where it was that you manifested--"

I was careful," Dean snaps defensively. "Not that it mattered, there was nothing around." He rolls his eyes at Castiel's expression. "I'm a hunter, Cas. I know what I'm doing."

Dean would think that. "If you're attacked," he asks, tilting his head, "how does this story end?"

"I just told you--"

"Humor me. If you're attacked, what do you think happens next?"
"You care if I'm killed?" Dean responds bitterly. "Seriously?"

"Lucifer's minions have tried for some time to breach the defenses that were designed to protect this camp and failed. The lack of success has been a constant source of frustration, not least because of the simplicity."

"What does that have to do with--"

"The only way to do it was simple," Castiel continues, resting his elbows on his knees again and looking into Dean's eyes. "Ironically enough, the key only requires one thing: Dean Winchester's blood, freely given."

Dean's expression melts into a frown. "I don't--"

"When you go alone into the city," Castiel says softly, "being killed would be the preferable option but it is extremely unlikely. Anyone who found you would have no reason not to curry favor with the one who won the war. Now tell me, Dean, how this story ends."

"They'll give me to Lucifer." Dean stares up at Castiel with growing incredulity. "You think I--"

"Your tolerance for pain, not to mention your experience with torture, would be a challenge even for him," he admits, ignoring Dean's flinch. "Especially considering 'freely given' is subject to interpretation. But I doubt he'd need to resort to such time-consuming measures when there's a much easier option available."

Dean's mouth shuts with a click.

"I lied to you." Castiel watches as the color drains from Dean's face. "There is someone left who has both the ability and the power to manipulate space and time. All that would be required is meeting the price he would set in payment for the favor. How does this story end, Dean?"

"You think I'd deal with him?" Dean says, voice blank with disbelief. "Cas, you can't think I'd ever--"

"Make a deal with Hell?" Castiel tilts his head. "Of course you would. You've done it before, and this time, it won't even cost you your soul to do it. Just those of everyone here, as we don't have the good fortune of being your brother."

Dean's mouth works soundlessly for a moment. "You son of a bitch! I--"

"After all that we have given," Castiel says softly, implacably, "and all that we have lost, I will not permit you to shorten what little time that remains to us. He will not breach the boundaries of this camp until there is no one and nothing left for him to take. Do you understand me, Dean?"

Dean doesn't answer, eyes fixed on some point in the middle distance. Finally, he takes a long breath, looking at Castiel with an expression that he doesn't think he will ever be able to forget.

"Yeah," he answers, meeting Castiel's eyes. "I do."

"I don't trust you, and that's a problem. I can't let you leave the camp without assuring our immediate and messy deaths at Lucifer's leisure, but if anyone in the camp were to discover that you were here..." He glances at Dean's arm, almost painfully grateful that Dean had both thought of the need for concealment and approached Castiel at a time when he was least likely to wonder if what Dean wanted was even possible. "I can't predict what the response would be to your presence now, and I don't intend to test it."
Dean doesn't move, green eyes fixed on him. "Are you gonna kill me?"

"There are advantages to be an addict," he says quietly, watching the color drain from Dean's face. "I have a great deal of experience with narcotics."

"Accidental overdose to keep your conscience clear?"

"Nothing so final. I can promise you it will be a very pleasant way to live whatever time we have left. Far better than that of anyone else in this world."

"Why the hell are you even asking? So you'll feel better about it? You think I don't get--" Dean stills, head falling back against the floor. "Fuck you, Cas," he breathes, staring at the ceiling. "He wouldn't have to deal. All he'd have to do is show up at the gate with me and every fucking person here would walk out of their own free will. Right?"

Castiel nods slowly. "You understand now why you are a problem."

"I didn't think…." Dean closes his eyes and abruptly stops fighting. "I didn't think I was risking anything but myself."

"Now you know differently." Castiel take a careful breath; he can't afford to make a mistake now. "So are you ready to negotiate the terms of your residence here?"

Dean blinks, surprised and wary. "What?"

"They are simple. First, you will remain within the confines of the camp at all times and make no attempt to leave. Before full dark, you will return to my cabin for the night," he answers, watching him carefully. "Don't look so horrified; I assure you I won't be there when you are. Otherwise, your time is your own to do with as you please. As long as you wear those sigils and avoid egregious errors, you should remain undetected in the camp. No one can know you are here, Dean; when you are not within the confines of this cabin or mine, you must be careful. Do you agree to these terms?"

"Or you'll drug me to death?"

"Or I may as well kill everyone here immediately; it's a kinder fate than what Lucifer has prepared for us. Your choice."

Dean's jaw locks for a minute, and Castiel fondly hopes that Dean will take that literally. "Okay."

"Then we have a deal." Standing up, Castiel removes the chair and steps back, watching Dean sit up warily, hands deceptively loose at his sides. "There are seven hours left in the day. What you do--" As expected, Dean's on his feet before he finishes the sentence; catching the punch easily, Castiel turns him before shoving him into the wall hard enough to knock the breath out of him. "That was incredibly stupid."

Before Dean regains his balance, Castiel pins his hips and twists his arm up and behind his back, ignoring the grunt of pain. Even relatively immobilized, Dean continues to struggle for several long seconds before Castiel feels him go still.

"I told you that you weren't as fast as he was," Castiel tells him. "What I didn't tell you is that neither of you will ever be as fast as I am. He was very good, and he could compensate for that. You aren't, and you can't." Freeing his wrist, Castiel turns him, holding him there effortlessly with one hand against his chest. "Are you done?"
Dean blows out a breath, mouth a rigid line, then nods shortly, and Castiel lets him go. Stepping back, he watches Dean straighten, aware of the way the green eyes tracking him with the cool evaluation of a hunter.

After a few long seconds, Dean says, "What the hell are you?"

"I Fell," he answers. "It didn't make me human."

"Not even close." Dean crosses his arms. "I mean, I get why you decided to hide it. I liked you better as a junkie, too."

Dean's aim has never been less than flawless, cutting into the raw edges of an open wound that even time could not bother itself to heal. He doesn't understand how after all this time it can still hurt like this. "Is there anything else?"

"You know that the deal we made isn't binding," Dean says. "Contracts require I know what I'm dealing with, and I thought you were human."

Of course Dean would see it that way, of course he would. "For my purposes, your word is sufficient."

"Why the hell should I keep it?"

Turning around, Castiel forces himself to meet Dean's eyes. "Because you know the danger it would be to everyone in this camp should you break it, and I trust you to protect them the way you wouldn't bother to protect yourself."

"That's not what I meant!" Dean almost looks uncomfortable. "Cas, look, I didn't--"

"I know the value of a hunter's word," Castiel says, choosing each word for maximum impact. "That's why I will not be at the cabin when you are there."

"What?"

"Eventually I have to sleep, and I would prefer to do so with some assurance I'll wake up."

"You think…" Dean stares at him. "I'm not gonna kill you, Cas, Jesus!"

"Do you give your word?" Castiel asks, smiling slowly at Dean's horror. "Unless I take your soul as collateral, why on earth should you keep it?"

Opening the door, Castiel goes out, just avoiding slamming it closed behind him and cutting off whatever Dean might say to that. He's halfway to his cabin when he realizes that his day has just begun, and somehow, he has to get through the rest of it.

--Day 7--

Dean marks his one week anniversary in Camp What Fresh Hell Is This with three hours of throwing each useless book at the walls of this Dean's cabin that seem to be steadily closing more closely around him. They aren't telling him anything he can use and what little seems applicable also seems to be quoting Castiel on exactly how a person goes about traveling time. The overwhelming opinion seems to be they don't, which is a surprise to Dean considering how much time he seems to spend either dead or alive not in his own time.

Picking them back up, he dumps them in a rickety chair before dropping into the other one with a
sigh, staring up at the exposed beams of the ceiling, aware of a sense of growing panic. The truth is, there's nothing in the books that he didn't already know. One thing holds true for any version of Castiel, angel, proto-god, or junkie; they might lie for a lot of reasons, but at least in their own minds, it was never to cause him actual, physical harm. Whatever Castiel is here, this much he's pretty sure of; he doesn't want him to die, and if there was a way to get him back, he would have found a way to do it. If for no other reason than the fact he seems to resent his existence, which Dean will admit, in retrospect, he's given him pretty good reason to do.

Leaning back in his chair, he props his feet up on the table and tries to think of something--anything--but his world is contained inside the wards of this camp, and since Castiel's managed to avoid him entirely since their friendly chat earlier this week, it sure as hell it's not for his company.

Half-listening to the drone of the radio, his only link to the outside world, Dean considers the fact that this is the most positive and optimistic Apocalypse he's ever experienced. Even granted the lack of knowledge about Lucifer--who is noticeable in his army-of-demons-leading absence--these people are way too calm about the FUBAR of the world.

Leaning over to turn it up, the perky voice of the happiest radio host in history talks about traffic and rationing before moving smoothly onto the fallout from the destruction of Houston. Apparently, all the Croats were wiped out, good news, but he's not hearing a lot about survivors.

You don't go to bombing unless you're pretty damn desperate, but turning major metropolises into rubble isn't something anyone sane announces between car commercials and ads for Axe deodorant. Which makes him think of the reasons you don't even try to hide it; maybe, and he might be reaching here but hey, he's been in two major cities now so he can think this, maybe because you're distracted by hiding that it's happened before, and possibly in plural.

He surfaces from his thoughts to realize the room is a darker shade of grey and edging into full night. Getting to his feet, he pretends it's his agreement with Castiel and not his own uneasiness that drives him from Dean Winchester's abandoned cabin come dusk and has nothing to do with the fact that this cabin never feels like anything other than a prison or an open grave for a man no one else knows is dead.

Checking the sigils on his arm--and God, he wishes he could find out what the hell they are, he could have used something like this on a hunt--he slips out of the cabin, crossing the wide expanse of tangled brush as the sun dips below the horizon and ignoring the feeling of exposure. It's getting chillier, what should be late summer melting into what feels like an uneven fall, and he has yet to identify anything like a working heater, or for that matter, where the hell the generators are that are powering the cabins.

Taking the steps two at a time, he brushes by the beads in annoyance, reaching for the lightswitch and flipping it up as he crosses toward the kitchen and whatever Castiel left him in the way of food. He's three steps late in realizing that the lights aren't coming on and stops short, frowning into the darkness.

So that generator question is kind of urgent now. Blinking, he tries to think of what to do next when he's startled still by the sound of Castiel's voice.

"Someone tried to fix the generators again. It seems they failed."

Turning in the direction of the sound, he waits impatiently for his eyes to adjust to the gloom, eventually making out the shape of the couch and Castiel stretched out on it.

"More like broke them." Dean scans the room a little frantically; he's not ready to deal with
Castiel's social life right now. "What happened?"

"My understanding of the results of the industrial revolution are more theoretical than you seem to believe," Castiel answers with a faint snort. "I have no idea."

So that helps. "When'd it start?"

"I don't know," Castiel replies without interest. "Dean's cabin wasn't affected?"

"No idea," he answers, squinting a little into the darkness, trying to get a better read on Castiel. "Mysterious lights going on and off in the missing leader's cabin? I'm not sure how I feel about anyone attempting to exorcise me."

"I didn't consider that." There's a faint sense of movement from the couch. "Have you found anything of use to you in your research?"

In no world does any Castiel do small talk. That's not a human or angel thing; that's a Castiel thing. "Not yet." Unable to stop himself, he adds, "Haven't summoned Lucifer to deal, either."

"There is a spell for that," Castiel answers in amusement. "Would you like me to show you where to find it?"

"You don't have to work this hard," Dean assures him uneasily; every instinct is telling him there is something profoundly wrong here. "I really don't like you already."

"And my work here is done." Castiel lifts one shoulder in the impression of a shrug, like he can't bother himself to even make the effort to do it right. Dean didn't realize he started toward him until he's close enough to see Castiel's face, a blur-edged oval with skin bleached of all color in brutal contrast to smudges like bruises beneath shadowed eyes. Feeling like he's walking on glass, he crosses to the couch and eases into a crouch, frowning when Castiel looks away before he can get a good look at him.

"Cas, what's going on?"

"It's not working." Tilting his head back, he gives the ceiling a betrayed look. "It's supposed to make it easier, and it's not working. It always did before. At least for a little while."

Dean does the math. "What did you take?"

"I'm not sure," he says after a while. "Not enough, it seems." He stares up at the ceiling. "Why are you still here?"

Because that's what I promised and I'm keeping my word, you dick, Dean almost says; he doesn't. "Why do you want me to come back here every night?"

"Habitation rules are ridiculous." Castiel's eyes flicker to the door, so quickly that Dean would have missed it if he wasn't watching for just that. Glancing back at the beaded curtain--Jesus, what the hell--he pushes to his feet and goes to the doorway, seeing dark smudges too regular to be shadows. Running his fingers over the wood, he finds exactly what he was expecting all along and wasn't able to locate no matter how closely he looked: the unmistakable curve of a sigil, the carving so shallow it would be invisible to the naked eye, following the grain of the wood almost flawlessly. There's only the faintest tackiness, almost gone; the blood was refreshed an hour ago, tops.

He patiently traces the line of sigils to the floor where it meets the salt line before checking the other side, then the length of the top, trying to get the shape of them with his fingers so he can draw
them later. Enochian, he thinks vaguely, and at least a couple of them match the ones on his arm. He cocks his head, wondering if it's worth it to ask; Jesus, after a week, Castiel should be able to suck it up and--

It's been a week since he got here, suddenly scrambling for footing behind broken dumpster and staring at eight demons surrounding an armed man that even after three years Dean would recognize anywhere. The skinny, slumping mortal body in a too-big jacket with an indifferent hold on a rifle stared at him with the infinite blue eyes of an angel who might have traded his sword for a gun and immortality for the dirt of humanity, but had never stopped being a soldier. And very abruptly, to the surprise of those demons, he seemed to remember just that.

It's been a week since Castiel took him out of the city, a week since Lucifer had won the war. It's been a week, seven days, since Castiel looked for the last time at the body of Dean Winchester and watched him burn.

Yeah, he thinks blankly, nothing works when it's something like that, not for long.

"I wasn't supposed to survive him," Castiel says, voice stripped of expression. "That was never part of the deal."

Three years ago, Dean watched in disbelief as his very own ghost of Christmas future sent his team to die, sent Castiel to die, before going off to die himself. They knew what Dean sent them to do; even then, he guessed that much. He understands being willing to die for a person, a cause, an idea down to his bones; he also understands the difference between choosing to step in front of a bullet for someone and someone stepping behind you because they know you'll take it for them. It's not that he thinks that the Dean Winchester who watched Castiel walk away to die for no better reason than a distraction didn't know the difference; it's that he didn't care.

Turning around, he watches Castiel staring into the shadowed ceiling, strains of faded moonlight spilling through the window catching on shimmering silver trailing down the pale skin like a punch to the gut. Abruptly, he realizes his hands are clenched into fists, fingernails digging ragged half-moons into palms already growing tacky with blood; a little distantly, he wonders if that should hurt, because he can't feel a goddamn thing.

It's been a week since Dean Winchester died, and in this whole camp, the two of them are the only ones that know. And in this entire goddamn camp going about its daily routine, the one person with the most right to do it can't even grieve.

"I can't get drunk enough to forget," Castiel whispers, eyes fixed on some distant point; from his expression, wherever it is, it's not any better than here. "But that doesn't mean I can't spend the night trying."

With an effort, Dean unclenches his fists, numb fingers sluggishly tingling back to life as he wipes them clean on his jeans.

"Where's the generator?" Castiel's head snaps around, and he hadn't thought it could be worse, but Jesus, he was wrong; he hadn't seen what was in Castiel's eyes. "I saw a toolkit at Dean's. You think you can wait that long? I'll make it fast."

Taking a step toward him, he makes himself meet the wide blue eyes, the stunned look of animal in the middle of a highway as death bears down on it at sixty miles an hour, nowhere to run, or maybe a man staring down at the lifeless corpse of his brother stretched out on a cot in front of him. There's more than one way for a world to end, and Dean knows them all, every goddamn one.
"Cas--" Dean licks his lips and tries again. "Me being here, is it gonna make it harder?"

After a moment, he sees his head move, an abbreviated shake. "Nothing can make it harder."

"Okay." He lets out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He wouldn't have left, even if it was exile on the goddamn porch all night, but he didn't realize either how badly he wanted to stay. It's a lie, about time healing anything; those kind of wounds never stop bleeding. "Okay. Where's the generator?"

Cas swallows. "Dean--"

"I can't get drunk enough to forget, not anymore," Dean says roughly. "Sometimes I can pretend, though. I'll show you how it works. Now where's the goddamn generator?"

Cas blinks at him, another gut-punch of shocked blue eyes and searing grief, but maybe relief, too, there and gone in a moment. "I'll show you."

Dean doesn't get drunk enough to forget that night, and he doesn't think Cas does either. But they both pretend that they do.
Chapter 2

--Day 10--

"...tell Chuck to make me papers. I know how to cross, you know that."

Dean flattens himself against the wall by the door of Cas's cabin. Cas is late in his vanishing act come dusk, and he's got company, which he so isn't interested in seeing. In the pause that follows, he risks a glance inside to see Cas and a woman, and surprisingly, both are fully dressed.

Tall and angular in a faded grey long-sleeve t-shirt and jeans, she looks like she's about to go on patrol, locked hair twisted into a knot at the back of her head, with sharp brown eyes and a full mouth currently a tight line of dissatisfaction, and the dark skin has the unmistakable grey edge of someone running on almost empty. Rifle slung with professional ease over one shoulder, she stares at Cas like she's trying to decide if applying the butt of her rifle to his head will get her anywhere. From experience, Dean knows it won't.

"Chuck doesn't have the latest credentials to pass the border," Cas is saying stiffly, not quite meeting her eyes as he fishes a flannel shirt from under the couch and tugs it on. "They should know what's happened." Dean jerks back against the cabin wall when she turns, wondering if Cas kept angelic hearing like he kept the strength and deciding if he did, he probably learned to control it by sheer self-defense in a camp this size. "Look, I don't need papers, I know the weak points even at the eastern checkpoint. Just let me--"

"No one is allowed past the patrol perimeter at this time," Cas answers flatly, and even without being able to see him, Dean can guess the look on his face. "That's an order, Vera."

"Understood. Permission to leave, sir?"

Dean winces. Cas is just lucky he doesn't have a middle and last name to drag out and throw at him; that tone just begs for it.

"Vera...yes, you may go," he says finally, and Dean eases farther from the door for her to pass him. She may not be able to see him, but Cas is probably going to realize he'll be showing up soon and just a guess, he's pretty sure this is something Cas really wouldn't want him to see. As she comes outside and goes down the stairs, anger obvious in every jarring stride, he doesn't have long to wait, Cas coming out and then stopping short on the stairs with an expression that Dean can't read.

He tries to remember if she's was among the groupie contingent he's seen coming and going from a distance; there's no way to tell, though if she is, he's guessing Cas isn't going to be enjoying her company for a while. Holding his breath, he watches Cas lingers on the porch before he abruptly returns inside for a few minutes. Sinking down in the shadows, he waits for Cas to leave, not moving until he's well out of sight at the cabin.

Just inside the door, he pauses, looking around with a critical eye. He hasn't once found a single sign of random bouts of orgies (something he's checked for very carefully since that couch is kind of his home away from home right now), and the drug paraphernalia isn't what he'd call hidden but definitely shoved out of the way. While the number of empty bottles hasn't noticeably decreased,
they seem to be migrating consistently toward the kitchen and within view of the trash.

If Cas were less a dick, Dean would kind of think this is some kind of half-assed try at being thoughtful.

Despite the slightly improved living conditions, Dean notes that the pile of newly-washed clothing behind the couch that seems to be Cas's idea of clothing storage grows and wanes but never finds its way into something like a closet or a dresser. Washing dishes seems to be on an at-need basis, and tentative exploration has confirmed nothing in that kitchen works. The dishes thing he gets, but there's an actual bedroom here, tiny but functional, the bed stripped to a clean if dingy mattress and cheap box springs, but everything's under a layer of dust. The closet, which currently holds a haphazard pile of watermarked boxes and a truly impressive arsenal, at least shows Cas has some of his priorities straight.

A life lived in motels of the budget variety means that Dean isn't exactly an expert on long-term habitation, but he stayed enough with Bobby (and Lisa) to get the basics beat into him and Sam reinforced it with prejudice. Thinking about it, he's uncomfortably aware this isn't entirely unfamiliar; say, if Cas had spent his life-skills learning time in a variety of crappy motels and didn't grasp translating that to less-temporary living conditions.

Dean thinks, appalled: so this is what happens when everything you need to know about life is based on the gospel of John Winchester, as interpreted by a Sam-less Dean.

In unholy emphasis of who exactly took care of Cas's human-training, Cas keeps his books and his weapons immaculate, the books kept in a tiny room off the kitchen that was probably a glorified utility closet in a former life with obviously recently augmented shelving. Feeling masochistic, Dean pulls open the bedroom closet door to confirm the reason that he should never be placed in charge of a small child, a pet, a houseplant, or a Fallen angel unless the conditions are wartime and Sam is willing to be his fulltime co-parent.

In contrast to the bedroom--and for that matter, the rest of the cabin--the former closet is immaculate, dust free and redolent with fresh gun oil and enough herbs to make Dean want to sneeze on principle. At some point it had been thoroughly gutted and stripped down for its new and improved personal arsenal use, the top third of the back wall pegged to hold a survivalist's wet dream of guns ranging from handguns to the kind of rifles that usually require active duty in the military to even look at, much less use, all meticulously cleaned and ruthlessly organized by type. Below them hang several sets of knives from the basic pocket and utility up to a machete kept at razor sharpness line the wall beneath them. The bottom third of the closet is taken up by neatly installed shelves with the top holding an assortment of worn leather and battered metal cases where specialization is key. There are blades made of pure lead and blessed silver to bronze so ancient they can't even hold a decent edge and covered in faded runes. Some of it he recognizes from what Bobby had had, some from other hunters he's met, some from pictures he's seen in books, but the rest is a mystery.

Crouching, Dean does a quick inventory: a neatly folded dropcloth beside cleaning and repair kits in well-worn cases showing frequent use take up the second shelf, while the third holds boxes of ammunition sorted by type and function in carefully separate stacks of regular, silver, and salt. A triple line of bottles of holy water make up half the bottom shelf, along with a half-empty box of cases for more salt loads and a smaller one of scrap silver. There are bags of herbs as well, each neatly labeled. On the floor are industrial size bags of rock salt slumping against stacks of water-marked boxes taped enthusiastically enough to discourage surreptitious exploration but a quick feel confirms they're mostly books.
Stepping back, he doesn't need to be told who was responsible for designing the collector's edition of the hunter's ultimate arsenal; one of his most recent explorations of Dean's cabin showed him the even more impressive prototype, and on a guess, one of these is probably in every cabin here. Even if he didn't see Dean's, though, he would have known who made this for Cas.

Shutting the closet doors, Dean wanders back to the couch, dropping on it with a squeal of ancient springs and cloud of dust as he thinks over what should have occurred to him before. This is Dean fucking Winchester of the dystopian future, and in Apocalyptic times sentimental attachment to old friends need not apply. Cas may do junkie as a lifestyle choice, but the Dean Winchester here wouldn't have let him get away with that when it came to what mattered, and all that ever mattered was killing Lucifer. He was way too pissed at Dean sacrificing his team, sacrificing Cas, to wonder why he had chosen to bring Cas along at all.

John Winchester's training is the kind of thing that's bone-deep, inescapable no matter how far you go and God knows, Sam did his damndest and still couldn't lose it. Staring around this suddenly familiar cabin, he thinks that some things must pass in the blood or something, because if he peels away the cheap gloss of the hedonistic druggie, his own fingerprints one universe over are all over Cas.

Tipping his head back, he thinks about Vera here earlier, asking permission for something and Cas saying no. Cas gave her an order and didn't bother to tell her why, and how fucking familiar that is when he imagines the voice giving it is Dean's.

More than that, though: she listened.

It belatedly occurs to him that for a camp whose fearless leader is noticeable in his absence, it's running just fine.

--Day 11--

Dean's first visit to the hellhole that is Chitaqua wasn't in the kind of circumstances that encouraged a lot of observation. Evacuating Cas's cabin at dawn on the eleventh day of Apocalypse Almost Now, he's suddenly aware of the camp slowly awakening to yet another Lucifer-free day that to them is business as usual and he still has no idea what business as usual even is.

Watching discreetly from one of the least-grimey windows, Dean waits as Cas does his usual morning ward-checking routine with the grim determination of someone going to their own execution, vanishing into the early morning fog that's been a feature of Dean's entire stay and won't clear until well into the day as the temperature sluggishly rises to something just around muggy with an option to abruptly drop to clammy without warning. This much of Cas's day Dean nailed down in post-cabin-chat inspired avoidance.

Like he's on some kind of sadistically inclined internal clock, Cas reappears thirty minutes later, emerging suddenly from the fog slouching in the too-big army jacket like the most depressing miracle in history and making a straight line for his cabin to eventually meet with his groupies for their regularly-scheduled bouts of debauchery.

Only Cas, Dean reflects depressingly, would apply a strict timetable to his wild fits of hedonistic indulgence. In all honesty, it really couldn't have happened any other way.

Once he's sure Cas is cabin-bound for the morning (noon will see a mysterious lunch appear on the porch, and while he knows Cas can't teleport, he has yet to catch him at it), Dean emerges from the
cabin into the slightly-lessening fog and decides it's about time to find out what kind of wards can protect this camp from not only Lucifer but possibly from his entire army.

There's a well-worn path that despite the low visibility is almost impossible to miss, which explains how Cas can do it when the only sign of true dawn is an overall lighter shade of dark in the general direction of the east.

When he gets to the walls, he scans them carefully until he finds the sigils, all well-worn and from the look of them, frequently refreshed with a convenient knife, though few show bloodsign at all, much less anything fresh. Considering the number and that Cas is the only one he's seen out here, he'd probably bleed out well before he got more than ten feet if he tried to do them all.

While some of the individual sigils are familiar, the way they're put together isn't like anything he's ever seen. On the surface, they look almost random; there's Enochian, no surprise there, Sanskrit, hieroglyphs of various origins, even Latin thrown in like an afterthought mixed with complex whorls and shapes that have no relation to any language he has ever seen. Trying to read it is impossible; even looking at it for too long makes his head ache, like there's more there than his eyes can actually process.

Taking a step back, he cocks his head, unfocusing his eyes from the specific symbols to get the pattern as he calls up every memory of every goddamn time Sam shoved a book in his face with an excited expression or Bobby explained something he'd recently found and wishes he'd paid more attention, but he thinks he's getting the gist from simple familiarity with the rules that govern ritual magic.

This isn't an active ward, or at least, not one that requires a lot of regular maintenance, okay. From what he can tell, someone who knew what they were doing had pulled elements from a lot of different places and shoved them together, though how the hell they're joined is pretty much a guess. Setup alone would have taken weeks, maybe even months depending on how many people worked on it. He's familiar enough with Bobby's work to recognize him in the design, though, and on a guess, his consultant was a certain former angel with the entire history of time in his head and zero inhibitions using what he knew. Following the pattern, he finally finds the most painfully complicated mix of symbols he's ever seen in his life, the beginning and ending of the entire goddamn structure tied together into a single key, and every line of it is coated with a layer of fresh blood.

Lucifer needed Dean's blood to breach the camp, and seeing it, that makes sense; these kind can't be opened and closed at will, not without destroying them and remaking them every time. So somewhere in here is a way to recognize who has the right to cross them and this being a place where paranoia would be a survival trait, he's guessing it's selective to the point of working on an individual level. More than that, he's not sure, but Jesus, if Sam could see this--

With an effort, he pushes the thought of Sam aside; like Cas, he's on a time limit, but unlike Cas, ignoring it still works.

Concentrating on the constant, inaudible hum, it strengthens, almost as if it's aware of his attention, which is not a thought he wants to follow. It's not unpleasant, though, skating along the surface of his skin like a tuning fork leashed to a perpetual motion engine. He can't imagine the kind of power it would take for him to feel it like this; for that matter, he still can't figure out where the hell the power's coming from or how the hell they got the power to raise it in the first place.

On impulse, he reaches out and ghosts a touch over one of the key sigils, still tacky with drying blood, and only has a moment to think what before the hum changes and everything stops.
Abruptly, the world expands, rippling outward around him like he's a pebble dropped into the limitless depths of an infinite ocean. It sees him, knows him, recognition expressed in warm, welcoming tides washing against every nerve; even more than that, he knows it, too.

Pulling back in surprise, mouth dry, he stares at the sigils; he gets now where Cas was coming from that morning in the cabin. As far as the wards are concerned, he and the other Dean Winchester are one and the same, and all the power invested here, wards that can lock out fucking Lucifer, he could shut down as easily as he breathes.

With the memory of forever still trembling on the tips of his fingers he also thinks he knows how they got these up in the first place. His mind is crowded with memories of when he felt this before, where, but mostly of what he can't remember at all: when he was consumed within it, an infinite flashburn of light and brightness and truth in crawling darkness, a promise in a place that was nothing but lies.

It's repurposed into something else now, but he'll never not know it; he's looking at where Cas placed the last of his Grace before he Fell.

Dean spends the rest of the morning observing the three members of the watch doing their damnedest to look less bored with the sheer lack of activity at the camp entrance. This must be the shit job you get when you've fucked up or something; he's never seen four more miserably bored people in his life, and being that bored, the best source of information he could have asked for. Settling himself close enough to listen to the combination of complaints and gossip, he wonders how it works out that the end of the world actually lowers the amount of supernatural activity. What he's getting from them by implication is that boredom is a pretty new development.

Then again, there's a lot of new developments, not least of which is that three days after Dean arrived here (apparently starting the day with an interrogation and intimidation was, for Cas, the equivalent of coffee), Cas abruptly called the camp into a meeting that defined the new world order until Dean Winchester's presumptive return. Patrol was reorganized and seems to be focusing on a slightly extended local route and the perimeter of the city where Dean died. It makes sense, since the implication is that they're watching for Dean, or would, anyway, if they weren't forbidden to enter the city at all, and for the most part, they don't seem to wonder why.

As the camp comes to life more and more as noon approaches, Dean finds himself watching everyone go about their duties with the assurance of long-formed habit, occasional laughter drifting from the makeshift garages where the mechanics seem more interested in shitty apocalypse jokes than maintenance, others lingering outside the cabin that seems to house the general mess if the fact people seem to emerge carrying food is any indication. Which explains why, despite the fact Cas's cabin was stocked exclusively with alcohol and enough drug paraphernalia to supply several respectable crack dens (Cas doesn't seem to realize some shit should be kept out of sight) and never cooks, when Dean shows up every night, there's always food waiting.

Dean ignores the fact that he will never be able to make another angel-stalker joke in his life, too fascinated by the mundanity of life being lived at the end of the world in observation.

From his perch on the porch steps of one of the empty cabins, he watches Chuck and another person emerge from another cabin, gesturing toward a mound of freshly dug dirt some distance away from the inhabited part of the camp with a worried expression that Dean hopes doesn't mean those are supposed to be latrines. Cas's cabin as well as Dean's both had running water, but the situation with the generators had been a sharp reminder that, like electricity, plumbing might not be something that can be taken for granted.
As they walk toward the mess, still talking, Dean gets up to investigate Chuck's cabin more closely, remembering his comments on the toilet paper supply. Rainwater barrels line entire back, strapped inexpertly into place and slumping slightly, which would be a problem if they weren't almost empty. Circling around, Dean notes that all but two windows are boarded up from the inside, and both of those on a glance seem to be Chuck's living quarters.

Glancing toward the mess to assure Chuck's not on his way back, he slips inside the front door, pausing to let his eyes adjust to the dimness before trying the first of the two doors. It's the bathroom, and--after flushing the toilet from sheer morbid curiosity--still working, so maybe not latrines, after all. He checks out the window again for Chuck before he tries the second door, unsurprised it opens on a touch. Going inside, he carefully shuts the door and flips on the light and looks around the room that houses the camp supplies.

Hastily installed shelves are shoved up against three of the four walls, nailed into place, he notes approvingly, circling the small table and chair in the center of the room stacked with paper bearing Chuck's unmistakable scrawl. Stacks of canned goods fill the top three shelves along the back wall, bags of flour and cornmeal and sugar stuffed at the bottom, and coffee alone take up two shelves all on its own, toilet paper and paper towels among other non-food goods on the shelves nearest the door, but the number of empty shelves outnumber the filled ones and from the wear on them, that's new. Two ancient industrial refrigerators flank the door, both supplied with cheese and packages of foil wrapped bundles with indecipherable names but less than he would have assumed; a glance in the freezers shows the same situation. Closing the door, Dean does the math in his head and doesn't like what he's coming up with on what's required for a camp this size.

Where they're getting their supplies is also in question; the abandoned cities are the obvious answer, but while he hadn't seen many perishables, they definitely had meat and that had to have come from somewhere. They could be trading locally or something, but there's also the possibility they have to hunt, which considering this is Kansas makes him wonder uneasily what they might be hunting. Frowning, Dean turns in a circle, taking in the shelves again, and get a glint of foil on the right bottom shelf. Dropping into a crouch, he takes in the stacks and stacks of depressing beige packages and pulls out one, turning it in his hands thoughtfully before putting it back as he gets to his feet.

Slipping out of Chuck's cabin, he looks around, trying to decide where to be invisible next. Chuck's cabin marks the edge of the inhabited cabins, and taking in the view, he thinks about the fact that for a camp that's been a permanent residence for years, no one seems to notice they're living in refugee conditions.

He'd spent two nights working on the generators after seeing the state of the first one Cas showed him. The only real surprise was that they were still working at all, haphazardly gathered together in hastily built sheds and apparently forgotten until they went out and needed more gas. How the hell they'd been going this long is a mystery: fishing out the weeds growing up around and into them, he replaced the worn parts with newer ones cannibalized from several broken ones stored behind the garage that, given access to a hardware store or hell, a Home Depot, he could have probably gotten running fine. As far as he can tell, no one's even noticed the repairs, much less wondered who did them, but considering where they live, they may think a good elf is involved. From the sheer lack of anything but the most superficial maintenance, it's actually the most likely explanation for why they're still able to run at all.

The cabins themselves aren't much better; the only difference between those in use and those that aren't being the people inside of them; windows are regularly boarded up and doors left half-fallen off their hinges, those with porches slumping alarmingly into the ground, those without accommodated by shittily constructed stairs or nothing at all between the ground and the door. The
industrial cable strung between the cabins and the generators is showing enough wear to indicate replacement should have happened like, *yesterday*, but the risk of a camp-wide fire seems to elude everyone even when it starts to spark, which occurs way too frequently for Dean's peace of mind.

Wandering the lush, overgrown grass and weeds that grow on either side of the well-worn paths between cabins, vines twining between the wheels of a few rusting gas grills that seem to still get some use and weaving traps for unwary feet, he wonders irritably why no one could take the time to get a goddamn *lawnmower*. Life on the road had adapted him to variable living conditions, but this is ridiculous.

Lost in thought, he didn't realize how far he wandered until he finds himself surrounded by nothing but weeds and the sounds of the camp almost inaudible. He looks around, surprised to see what looks like the roof of another cabin peek above the sea of weeds and a few scraggily tress. Curious, he continues toward it, wondering why it's so far from the rest of the camp and why on earth there's a path to it until it comes fully into view and he's abruptly standing on the edge of a wide swath of ground stripped down to bare dirt.

The clearing extends from his feet to the cabin in a wide, rough circle, the center burned black. Reluctantly, he crouches, running his fingers over the ground, already knowing what he'll find: rock salt glinting among traces of old ash that clings to his fingers, mixed with glimpses of familiar blackened splinters and the faint, unmistakable smell of kerosene. Glancing up, he notes the piles of brush and roughly chopped wood on one side of the cabin, numbly following the industrial wire from the roof to the four heavy wooden posts strung with camp lights that mark the boundaries of a rough square of methodically salted earth big enough to minimalize the risk of setting off a wildfire.

Standing up hastily, he wipes his hand on his jeans, giving the cabin a glance as he starts back toward the camp; he can guess what kind of supplies are kept in there.

Absently, he climbs back onto the porch, thinking of the bodies that were left in the city and those freshly cut logs. He gets why Cas forbade patrolling the city, but he's gotta know why they have to go back for the bodies of Dean's team. If Cas won't, promise or not, Dean'll do it himself; he's sure as hell got the time.

Reaching for the beads, he looks up and stops short; it's not dusk yet, but it's way too late to have remembered that.

There are things you just don't want to ever see, ever and family having sex is pretty high on the list. He really should have been paying attention to the time, since no matter the world, Cas pretty much always qualifies as family. Even so, Dean can't remember he's supposed to move; at that moment, if anyone had asked, Dean couldn't have reliably told them his own name.

It's not that Dean doesn't get there's a difference between theoretical knowledge and live action verification in the naked sense. It's not like Cas's groupies are subtle in their comings and goings, or that Cas has developed any concept of shame. He just hadn't thought about it except in the most abstract, Cas's casual mention of orgies, his nightly vanishing act into various cabins throughout the camp, the people who show up at the cabin between dawn and dusk, all ending in a fade to black that Dean was perfectly happy not to think about any more than he had to.

He has no idea how long he stands there as reality slams into him in full color and stereo sound; later, he'll wonder, uncomfortable, if he'd even wanted to. The Cas he'd become unwillingly familiar with, brittle edges and too-wide smiles, bitterness and disappointment shaping every word, who wore his human body like it was a degradation, wasn't anywhere in this cabin. Dean's gaze finds him instantly among the bodies, unmistakable and vividly alive in a way Dean hadn't seen.
him before. Watching the long-fingered hands skim up the length of a woman's back, cup an unshaven male face for a kiss that seemed to last forever, the distant indifference is absent and open desire taking its place, uninhibited and unleashed; Cas tilts his head back against the worn rugs as the woman sits up, straddling his chest, smiling up at her in a flash of brilliance, nakedly enjoying her as much as he enjoyed her touch, losing himself in the kind of pleasure that only comes from being shared.

He's still sees that smile when he's sitting on Dean's porch and makes himself think of anything but that.

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So the groupies: he might have been wrong about that.

Before yesterday, he never really thought about the various times he saw people wandering to and from Cas's cabin other than to note to himself Cas's hedonism seemed to involve a terrifying worth ethic, which is so not a surprise. This is Cas, and be it rebelling against the Host, war in heaven, godhood, better living through chemistry, or adventures in sex, when he commits to something, moderation is not in his vocabulary. Now, however, from the safety of this Dean's porch, he watches the participants of Cas's group orgasm project trickle out only minutes before dusk, almost immediately noting another small group approaching, and it's not that he's gonna start wondering what kind of stamina a former angel has (or dangerous kinks), but they're way too well-armed for a quickie.

He waits until they're inside before getting up, bracing himself in case he's wrong, then makes his way toward the cabin, wondering when he got used to being invisible, enough to have lost even the memory of a sense of exposure when he walks before a camp full of blind eyes. He hears voices even before he gets up the porch stairs, and pauses, listening.

"…no," Cas is saying. "I mean, yes, please continue. This is utterly fascinating."

Peering through the beads, he spots Cas near the couch, looking the worse for wear and facing still-dressed camp members, and has to bite his lip to keep from grinning. That particular expression he knows from the inside out; it's when Cas is pretty sure everything is going to hell and has hit the why-not stage of what to do next. In general, this ends in Cas doing things like taking on groups of archangels, carving Enochian into people's bones, Molotov-cocktail his brothers, and putting banishing sigils in unusual places for surprise-related purposes. Dean didn't see his expression when he came to the conclusion opening up Purgatory was a workable plan, but he suspects it had looked a lot like this.

"Very well," Cas says abruptly, cutting off the way too earnest guy currently saying something about rocks while staring at Cas with an expression that makes Dean deeply uncomfortable. "Does anyone have anything useful to report?"

"Same as yesterday," a woman drawls, and Dean recognizes Vera leaning against the wall, regarding Castiel thoughtfully. "Might help if we knew what it is you want us to be looking for."

"I didn't think I needed to instruct you in your duties," Cas answers sharply before closing his eyes with a pained look, and Dean's pretty sure he doesn't imagine Vera's flicker of satisfaction.

"Anything that might explain current events would be helpful."

Vera nods, doing the most expert weaponization of respectful attention that Dean's ever had the privilege to see, and just for that, he really wishes he could get to know her. "Yes, sir."

As far as Cas's impulse-driven decision making skills are concerned, Dean's gotta admit that
keeping a paramilitary camp running during an Apocalypse is definitely not his worst, not least
because it seems to be working out pretty well. He's got the calm certainty thing down, and being
dead sober, all that time being an angel seems to assert itself enough for Cas to project the kind of
confidence that from experience Dean knows can convince anyone of almost anything when he
puts some effort into it.

Cas pauses as he picks up a stack of paper from the coffee table, eyes scanning the room and
stopping short on Dean. He smiles back, leaning against the doorway casually.

"There will be no alterations to the route," Cas tells them, interrupting the low-voiced argument
going on between two of the men. "Continue your observations as instructed and report
immediately if you find anything unusual. I'll expect your full reports in twenty-four hours. You're
dismissed."

Dean jerks to the side as they obediently turn to leave, waiting until the last clears the porch before
going inside and watches Cas drop onto the edge of the couch, looking--actually, Dean's not sure.

"Hey," he tries, making his way to the opposite side of the coffee table, and tries to remember if
that's always been there. "What's up?"

Cas doesn't look up from whatever he's reading. "You're early."

"I got bored." Dean glances at the door. "Was that the patrol?"

"The night shift, yes," Cas answers shortly, frown deepening as he flips to the next page. Giving
Dean a glance, he hesitates, but his cover is pretty obviously blown. "Feel free to entertain yourself
while I finish this."

"What is it?"

"Reports from last night." Flipping another page, Cas tilts his head. "When I said to record all their
activities, I didn't expect them to interpret that quite so literally."

Dean eyes the stack warily; that's a lot of paper. "All of them wrote reports?"

"Only whoever is leading the patrol team that day is required to do so, but as they're taking turns,
perhaps they misunderstood." Cas gives him a sardonic look and extends the report. "Feel free to
examine it for yourself. In addition to monotonous descriptions of the variety of rocks and flora on
their current route, it goes into surprising detail regarding the unacceptable length of lunch periods
and the unconscionable number of bathroom breaks."

"You're kidding." Dean nicks the reports from his hand and skims the first three pages. Years of
dealing with how humanity recorded information in the days before Gutenberg means that if Dean
knows the language, he can read it. He's gotta be honest, though; illuminations and calligraphic
flourishes are one thing, but no one should be able to print this small without magic being
involved. "You're not. Is he saying nothing is going on but a need for bladder control? For six
pages? Why?"

"You skipped the riveting description of the current state of the roads and the number of potholes
per mile," Cas answers tiredly. "Phil is unnaturally fond of words, relevant or not, but
unfortunately, everyone seems to suffer from the same problem."

Dean glances up at the strain in Cas's voice. "You're not gonna tell them what they're looking for?"

Cas doesn't look at him. "No."
Crouching, he pages through the stack to give himself time to think, pausing to read snatches of the other team members' reports, but none seem to hit the level of the first one; the nearly page-long description of the skyline is almost hypnotic in its sheer level of monotonous detail.

"How long do you think you can--"

"I don't know," Cas interrupts. "I'm surprised it's lasted this long."

Right, okay. Turning his attention back to the stack, Dean frowns. "What exactly did you ask them to do?"

"Record everything that they observed. None of them have ever led the patrol, and some have never been on regular patrols at all, so any attempt at correction could cause them disregard something important."

"None of them?" Dean whistles. "Talk about a learning curve." Dropping the reports back on the coffee table, he starts to ask why he wants reports at all--if he's watching for Lucifer, whoever sees that probably won't wait to write a report about it--but stops short. "Wait, what happened to the leaders?" Cas raises an eyebrow. "You're kidding. That's who he took to Kansas City?"

"The entire command hierarchy," Cas confirms, slumping on the couch. "That the patrol doesn't know what they're doing is probably the only reason they seem to be oblivious to the fact that I don't either."

"And you just...took over patrol?"

"The camp," Cas answers bitterly, and the last of Dean's amusement dies. "Do you have any idea how to run a militia? That isn't a rhetorical question." Dean shakes his head mutely. "Apparently, there's more to do than fight evil and drink to excess during downtime. Chuck came to inform me that, among other things, the toilet paper situation has become untenable, and I'm responsible for doing something about it. I informed him that I don't care, but I doubt that will inhibit his ongoing assessment of the situation. It hasn't stopped him yet, and our current situation isn't going to improve."

Dean has a bad feeling about this. "Are there any--is anyone left here who can even fight?"

"You don't come here if you can't."

Cas abruptly gets to his feet to restlessly pace the length of the room. It's weirdly fascinating to watch; he doesn't do it like a human does even now. He walks like he expects the universe to clear a path for him, knocking into a low table hard enough to bruise himself without noticing, looking vaguely surprised when walls show up like they've personally offended him and smiting's on the table.

Dean's familiar enough now with Cas's habits to recognize that he probably hasn't indulged in anything particularly recreational other than a lot of orgasms. The faint, languorous looseness still lingers beneath the surface tension, and all at once, Dean remembers what he saw earlier before he ruthlessly pushes it aside.

"The problem," Castiel says quietly, "is that if they question me on what we're doing now, I don't have any answers to give them."

From Dean's observations so far, the likelihood of anyone here asking a question would be a lot higher if even one of them was actually capable of conceptualizing the idea that orders might have reasons, much less that they could be questioned. It wasn't just the team that this Dean Winchester
sent to die to give him a shot at Lucifer; it's the watch, perfectly happy to watch absolutely nothing, and the patrol, who took Cas's orders today and didn't even seem to care what they were or why he gave them and looked surprised when Vera asked Cas a question. What went down that night they attacked Lucifer hadn't been a one-off; that had been policy.

"Tell me about the checkpoints," Dean says abruptly, getting Cas's attention again. The radio's occasional mention gave enough context to confuse the fuck out of himself. "In Kansas, I mean, there are three of them--"

"Six," Cas corrects him. "Four are not general passthroughs, however, and are restricted to military use only."

Military use: interesting. "How long have they been up?"

"Twenty-one months, from what we were able to find out. Kansas was the third state that was isolated to slow the progress of the epidemic. Any area where Croatoan has become epidemic is quarantined and its borders guarded to prevent the spread of further infection."

"Infection zones." Dean thinks of that conversation he overheard between Cas and Vera. Getting between uninfected states would mean a lot of shitty routes unless you could just go through: solution, credentials. "But you can cross at the passthroughs?"

"No one can leave a state once it's been zoned infected," Cas says, confirming Dean's growing suspicions. "The two checkpoints that allow crossing the border are for commercial use to carry products between uninfected zones when going around them would require…." He frowns, irritated. "I think crossing the Canadian border in some instances, which from what I understand Canada frowns upon and does so very heavily armed."

Canada's armed: who saw that coming? "How many states are infected?"

"You've been listening to the radio," Cas says, looking amused. "Yes, that would confuse you; they're very careful not to be too specific when reporting the news. Though it does make one wonder how on earth you can pretend half a country doesn't exist."

"Half the country….." Dean takes a breath.

"Though it's probable they're not pretending."

"Not all the zones are public knowledge?" Dean asks. "So no one knows how bad it actually is."

"No one knows their true extent, no," Cas agrees. "We had informants at the checkpoints, but unfortunately, they're rotated out every six months--I assume due to the stress of keeping people trapped behind the borders of infected states or more likely, to lower the chances of bribery--so our latest information is somewhat out of date."

"So we can get across the border?"

"Any member of Chitaqua, or you?" Cas's mouth quirks at his expression. "I thought that might be where you were going with this. I wouldn't advise trying."

Dean hesitates, eyeing Cas's expectant look. "Just tell me why and get it over with."

"You might not be first on the ten most wanted list for the FBI," Cas admits after a moment, and for no reason at all, he's getting the impression that Cas has been looking forward to telling him this, "but I doubt it."
Okay, he didn't see that coming. "I'm supposed to be dead--"

"Yes, faking your own death is among the charges," Cas agrees easily, seating himself on the arm of the couch. "I forgot that one."

"What else am I wanted for?"

"It's a very long list. Do you want it in categorical or alphabetical order?" Yeah, Cas is enjoying himself. "If it's any consolation, so am I. I haven't been out of this state since we arrived here for that reason."

When he stopped being able to teleport, he interprets. He makes an effort not to ask to see what he's wanted for these days; it's gotta be amazing. "So they'd recognize me."

"There is no one living on this planet who would not recognize you, and I'm not even sure that's not literal."

"Holy shit." He has no idea how to deal with that. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I didn't think that we'd live long enough for it to become a problem," Cas answers, regarding him sardonically. "Yet we continue to survive, so why not. Even if we could bribe the checkpoint guards to allow you to cross—which is unlikely—there are very few places that your name and your face are not very well known. The current reward being offered for your capture contains more zeros than I was aware your treasury contained and for those trapped in infected zones, a way out of them."

"Just my capture?" For some reason, Dean doesn't like that.

"They don't want you dead," Cas says. "Not yet, anyway. They need you as a very public example of justice being served."

"What the hell do they think--" He cuts himself off, wondering if he really wants to know. "Just tell me."

"Treason against the United States government as well as acts of both domestic and international terrorism," Cas recites. "Among the many, many charges listed: planning and executing attacks against military personnel to break quarantine when infection was confirmed and deliberately causing the uncontrolled spread of the Croatoan virus."

Dean stares at him.

"The evidence, when not conveniently circumstantial, was manufactured," Cas continues with deliberate indifference. "Dean didn't cause the spread of infection."

"But he did break the quarantines," Dean says, watching Cas's carefully neutral face. "Attacks on the military?"

"For the purposes of assuring the escape of those who were trapped in the infected zones, yes. None of them were infected and they did not cause the spread of the virus."

"Right." Dean blows out a breath; that's not all of it, not from the way Cas looks right now. "What else?"

Cas hesitates, looking into the middle distance. "My familiarity with the current political structures in this world is superficial at best. When I was a member of the Host, it was not relevant, and since
"I Fell, I've been--here."

"You said no one on this planet doesn't know my face," Dean says, mouth dry. "What does that mean?"

"When the government introduced Dean as the cause of the spread of Croatoan, his activities on the borders of Canada and Mexico were considered evidence that he caused its spread beyond the United States."

"You're saying the entire world thinks I'm responsible for Croatoan?"

"For obvious reasons, international news is not entirely reliable," Cas says evasively, which means that yeah, they do. "It might be some consolation to know that while Chitaqua as a whole is considered equally guilty, very few of their names are known."

Dean nods blindly; he knew this could get worse. "Right. Except yours."

"Jimmy Novak, alias Castiel." Jesus Christ, Cas is a freak, because he sounds really goddamn amused. Looking up, Dean is completely floored by the slight grin. "You don't see the humor."

"Not really, no."

The grin widens, reminding Dean that Cas is actually kind of crazy. "It helps to have cultivated a sense of dramatic irony."

"Really?" Because Dean's not seeing it.

"Maybe you had to be present at Sodom's destruction to appreciate it."

Dean blinks, wondering if Cas is trying to make him feel better. Shaking his head, he straightens, dismissing his current status as the most wanted man in the world with an effort.

"So I'm pretty much stuck in this camp even if Lucifer's having an extended post-victory vacation," he says, trying not to sound bitter and failing. "There's nowhere I can go, that's what you're telling me."

Cas looks away before Dean catches his expression. "Nowhere that you would not be recognized as Dean Winchester, no."

"Okay." Suddenly, Lucifer looks like a much less depressing topic. "Speaking of Lucifer, hey, anything happening with the end of the world yet?"

The world is right again as Cas remembers he really doesn't like him all that much.

"I told you the first night, I do not know the sequence of events after Lucifer's triumph," Cas says flatly. "Why do you--"

"I'm over the shock and dick treatment in Dean's cabin last week," he answers challengingly, crossing his arms. "So you know what? Fuck a timeline; we're going to talk about what's not happening right now. I don't know if you noticed, but the end of the world is stalled."

To his surprise, Cas just nods. "I noticed that, yes."

"That was easy." Suspiciously easy, actually. "Got anything else? Like why we're not all dead?"

"The wards are very powerful, which would be a factor had he tried to breach them."
"Or if his army was here to try. Not seeing an army, Cas."

"Your grasp of the obvious is breathtaking." Dean's never wanted to punch anyone as much as he does right now. "Unfortunately, we must live in ignorance, since the only person who can explain its absence is not currently available for questioning."

Dean tries to remember just how fast Cas is. It might be worth trying just for the sheer satisfaction of wiping that smug look off Cas's face. "Yeah, I don't think questioning Lucifer is on the agenda."

"It isn't," Cas agrees, "because he is not here to question."

"Yeah, and…you don't mean in the camp, do you?"

"On this plane." Like it's incredibly—wait, breathtakingly obvious. "His presence is as unmistakable as his absence."

Dean smiles over gritted teeth. "How long has he been MIA?"

"Since we left him in the city."

That's new. "And that's not worth mentioning before now?"

"That he left? No. Nor did I care why he did," Cas throws out, because God fucking knows it's been five entire minutes since he reminded Dean that he hates everyone and everything and especially being alive to have to deal with all of it. "However," he adds with noticeable reluctance, "even gathering his entire army shouldn't take this much time."

"Three years and change," Dean agrees, because his Hell to Earth math is pretty damn good. "How long would it take him to gather an army?"

"Less time than it took you to think to ask that question." Cas gazes into the distance, expression speculative. "I could think of many reasons he might be delayed."

"And?" Dean cocks his head curiously. "What are they?"

"I haven't bothered to actually think of them. They all depend on knowing something I have no way to discover."

"He killed the only person who could end the Apocalypse and the only thing he does is burn Dean and beat you up before going home? What the hell is he waiting for? I mean…” Dean glances at Cas and stops short, words frozen on the tip of his tongue. He'd forgotten how it felt to be the sole focus of Cas's attention, tangible as a physical touch and impossible to escape, like standing in a spotlight the size of a planet.

Even that morning in the cabin when Cas had told him he wasn't human, he hadn't really grasped what that meant; seeing this, he wonders how he missed it. He isn't living a mortal life as a not-quite human; an incorporeal being whose existence was defined by the infinity of time and space is trapped in the limits of a finite space, imprisoned in the sharply defined limits of a human body with no possibility of escape but death.

Dean stares at him, shocked silent; even Hell in all its horrors wasn't that cruel.

"You'll have to excuse me," Cas says abruptly, getting to his feet, and Dean lets out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Pausing at the doorway, he glances back, giving Dean a sharp smile. "It's growing late, and I have much more enjoyable ways to spend my time than this Good
The radio makes a lot more sense when he assumes that they're lying through their teeth. The tension in the news briefs is a lot easier to hear, too. He guesses that's probably the natural result of someone with a military rank wearing a gun standing a couple of feet away making sure they're following the right script.

There's no way to tell how many cities were destroyed before Houston, unreported within infected zones that the public has been happy to ignore if that was the price of their own safety. They'll probably keep thinking that until they see the planes in their own skies, and from what Dean can tell, that's not just a vague possibility; it's gonna happen and probably soon.

While it's impossible to be sure about the current locations of all infected zones, the East-coast heavy reporting gives him a hazy idea that a lot of the Midwest may be terra ignore it these days. The previous Dean Winchester in residence didn't leave much of a paper trail, with the occasional brief note from informants tucked between pages of books Dean recognizes from his and Sam's or Bobby's collections, masses of undifferentiated papers and a notebook holding up one leg of the table he has yet to feel inspired enough to check out. A skim of his journal, however, confirms that most of his attention was on the supernatural threat in the general and Lucifer in particular, which sure, that makes sense. Except for the fact that while he was chasing Lucifer for the great battle that wasn't, the world was falling apart piece by piece and from what he can tell, on the rare occasions this Dean paid enough attention to notice, he really didn't seem to care.

Cas's collection of patrol reports covering a single week already outnumbers everything that the other Dean collected in his entire tenure in Chitaqua. Taking a stack with him back to this Dean's cabin, he spends most of the day reading through them, starting with the earliest, which by date (Cas has patrol date them, Jesus) was five days after he arrived.

Despite the sheer repetition and unholy minutia that the truly anal among them (Phil) seemed to think was worthy of documentation, it's interesting reading. From them, and using the journal as a reference point, he gets not only the current patrol routes, but a hazy idea of what the patrols were trained to look for and how it must have worked under this Dean. Even more interesting, though, is seeing the changes Cas made to standard operating procedure, especially requiring written reports when his memory is probably just as creepily perfect as it was before and this could all be done in oral form.

On a guess, Dean thinks Cas isn't just doing this to keep the patrol distracted from wondering what the hell is going on (though great idea, he'll give Cas that one). The fact he's not making any attempt to lower the word count is pretty telling, and he's got an idea why. An angel's used to a shitload more information at their fingertips--or gracetips, whatever--and Cas is restricted to his human body in all its limitations. Even if he could tell them what to look for, he probably couldn't afford to take the risk that would make them miss something he didn't expect and needed to know, or worse, didn't know how to explain. As a very roundabout way of training an entire militia to be very thorough spies, it's not the worst way to go about it.

In the piles of uninspiring narratives, however, Vera and a member of group checking the perimeter of Kansas City, Joseph, break the curve by combining brevity with thoroughness. Dean concentrates on theirs, marking cryptic one line references to other missions, the history of the occasional skirmishes at the borders stuffed into only a few words, and when he puts those together with the little he's picked up around the camp, he thinks he gets the other reason Cas is taking a minimal approach to instruction. The lack of supernatural activity--all of it--is worrying him, and
not just because it might mean that Lucifer is preparing to march on earth with his full army of whatever will fight for him. Reading between the lines—and especially the pages that have been folded back numerous times, ink slightly blurred from fingers that aren't Dean's or the writer's—Cas is beginning to wonder if it's because of Lucifer at all.

It's a chilling thought. Like maybe Lucifer's not taking advantage of his victory because there's something else out there that's keeping him safely in Hell and out of its way.

All the more reason to be there for the evening patrol report, Dean thinks philosophically. He really doesn't want to miss this.

An hour before dusk, the night patrol straggles toward Cas's cabin trying to look enthusiastic and ready for duty when they're already resigned to a night of being bored out of their minds followed by a writing an essay about it. Thinking about it, that might explain the creative license being taken to the most recent reports that are starting to resemble the beginnings of a mediocre survivalist novel.

Dean's flawless timing assures he arrives in time to ignore Cas's alarmed look and settle himself in the kitchen to watch how Cas, formerly of the Lord (and most recently of the Junkies), exercises his people skills.

It's just as amazing and weird as he expected.

Cas's entire strategy seems to entail everyone else talking as much as possible while looking interested—or trying, anyway—and answering questions if they occur—which is not often. That Cas doesn't know what he's doing isn't nearly as obvious as it should be, which Dean puts up to the fact that anyone who looks that utterly serious can generally get away with almost anything.

It's the same group from yesterday, which reminds him to find out what kind of schedule Chitaqua has for patrol, but makes it a lot easier to put names to faces and get a decent idea of the kind of people Cas is dealing with.

Vera takes up valuable wall space to give Cas the best performance of respectful attention he's ever seen, but he gets the impression it's also genuine; of all four members of this patrol group, she's the only one who seems to have some idea that something else is driving Cas, even if she doesn't know what or why.

Phil—short, brown-haired, and terrifyingly focused on every move Cas makes—begins a soliloquy not unlike his reports: long, boring, and way too interested in what his team members should be doing in an unsettling amount of detail (fifty-six potholes, recited in order of size and severity; seriously?).

The tall blonde behind Phil, Amanda—or at least, she turned around when Vera said that name when they came in—doesn't say anything, but like Vera, she's weaponized listening, and despite the fact she's ungodly hot, Cas noticeably avoids looking in her direction, which isn't easy considering she towers over Phil. Dean can't prove it on two days of observation, but he doesn't think it's an accident that she keeps a wall at her back and a line of retreat to the door at all times.

The fourth member, a tall guy with stringy black hair who's natural position seems to be a disconsolate slump, hangs back with the sulkiest expression Dean's seen since Sam, age eight and denied permission to go to the State Fair because they were moving on the next day. By process of elimination using last night's reports, Dean figures this must be Sidney, who's only claim to fame so far is that when he's not staring resentfully at the floor, he's doing it to Cas, who ignores it so
completely that Sidney looks about two seconds from doing something incredibly stupid.

Someone, Dean thinks, isn't happy with the current situation, and that someone is wearing a miniature armory and looks like he knows how to use it. Despite himself, he moves to hover in the kitchen doorway, watching Sidney until he finally gets back to making the floor the object of his discontent. Sure, Cas is a dick, but Sidney gets no points for acting like doing his goddamn job is a waste of his time, and looking like that at anyone who's technically on his side isn't cool by any stretch of the imagination.

Vera, who seems to be this night's patrol leader, is the last to report, succinct in summarizing the events of the night before, much to Cas's almost-visible relief. Before he can relax, however, she straightens from her slouch against the wall. "Cas?"

Cas's eyes flicker to her with a hint of uneasiness. "Yes?"

"Chuck's wanted me to ask you about the supply sitch," she says, cocking her head. From Cas's expression, that isn't the question he expected. "We're about three weeks from this being a problem, and he's pretty worried about the--"

"Tell him to explore the myriad uses of leaves," Castiel snaps before closing his eyes in a visible effort to stop himself and completely missing Vera's here-and-gone smirk, Amanda finding the far wall really interesting, and Phil's glare--Sidney, no surprise, doesn't react at all. "I'll speak to him. Is there anything else?"

Vera shrugs, straightening the rifle at her back unnecessarily. "That's it."

"Then we're done today. Please report anything unusual immediately." At Phil's hesitation, an unexpected note of command creeps into his voice, the kind he used to use when talking about anything from the Lord's work to the bitter reality of the limits inherent in cell phone plans. "I expect your reports in twenty four hours."

Dean waits long enough for the patrol to vanish out the door and out of sight, Vera in the rear, before he abandons the kitchen, ignoring Cas's steady stare of accusation to drop on the couch and pick up the latest reports.

"It's not like they even knew I was there."

"I don't know what you found so amusing," he answers flatly, which makes Dean grin at him before flipping to Vera's latest report for a sneak peak of future events. They're getting more acidic every time, and remembering that conversation he overheard, he's getting the impression that every one of these is a continuation of that argument. He just wishes he knew what exactly she had in mind that she was willing to risk the border guards, who was important enough to contact about Dean's disappearance.

"You wouldn't."

Joe's team isn't due until tomorrow morning from their check around Kansas City with strict instructions to not enter for any reason, so he's saving Vera's for last, since it's gonna be the only interesting reading and motivate him to get through the rest. Phil's is beginning to have some worrisome aside about the moon and its allure and beauty, which is weird since he has yet to see a break in the constantly overcast sky. Dean's not sure where that's going, but it's definitely going somewhere.

"If it wouldn't be too difficult for you, try to avoid requiring the sigils to compensate for your lack
of control," Cas answers tersely. "Not to mention hysterical laughter is annoying."

"What do they do again?" Dean asks curiously. "You said I'm not invisible or anything--"

"You're not, technically speaking." Cas looks around the room with an irritated frown, as if searching for something. "When someone sees you, they are--convinced, I suppose--that nothing is there. Humans," he adds, falling into the voice of angelic superiority specifically to irritate Dean, "are trained from childhood to trust their perceptions. The dichotomy is enough to make them avoid the source of that mental dissonance, and they forget it."

"Who are you going to believe, magic or your own eyes?" Dean says with a smirk. "Nice."

"It's not as effective," Cas says slowly, and kind of like maybe he's talking between his teeth, "if it must combat two of their senses at once."

"So sex is probably out of the question," he answers flippantly before he thinks better of it, and right, he had to go there, didn't he?

Cas's head snaps up. "Personally, I would enjoy the novelty." There's a genuine note of bitterness somewhere in there, though, and Dean has just enough time to wonder where the hell that came from before he adds, "Your disappointment in my activities is, as always, crushing."

Whoa, didn't see that coming. "You gotta know that you aren't doing anything I haven't--that he probably hadn't done," Dean answers a little desperately, wondering in existential horror what the fuck he'd become. Bed hopping with an entire connection speech is a-okay, but getting it on with a dozen people is like, wrong? Cas raises a mocking eyebrow, and Dean grudgingly adds, "Or seriously thought about."

Cas's expression doesn't change, and Dean wonders if this is the middle of an entirely different conversation, and for that matter, not with the current Dean Winchester.

"I apologize," Cas says abruptly, looking away. "I haven't been sleeping well. Or at all, really."

Disarmed, he swallows. "I get being around me is--" he forces himself to keep going, "--a problem for you, but if me being here every night is fucking with you like this, I can stay at Dean's cabin."

Even saying it makes him faintly nauseous. It's bad enough to be there during the day, but most of the time, he can distract himself from the fact he's more or less a ghost in his own dead self's cabin. At night….

"No." Cas doesn't glance at the sigils on the doorway, but Dean remembers what he said that night, *habitation rules are ridiculous*. He still has no idea what that means exactly and a glance through Cas's books haven't given him much to work with. Establishing domicile he gets, but why it has to be here, specifically, he doesn't. "In any case, whether or not we're in the same place has no effect on the fact you're a problem."

Dean doesn't wince; it's all he's got, but he'll take it.

"However, you can absolve yourself of any responsibility for how well I sleep," Cas adds, looking surprised by what he's saying. "That has nothing to do with you. I'm becoming accustomed to your presence."

"Thanks," Dean tells him, startled. "Glad to hear it."

Cas seems to accept that, padding through the open bedroom door toward the bathroom, one hand
rubbing absently at the back of his neck, and Dean sees a flash of dark red edged in the beginnings of purple where his collar pulls down, an outline that is not at all unlike teeth, and wonders all over again when the fuck Cas sleeps. When he comes out again, for an unguarded minute Dean can see the exhaustion underneath the brittle calm, which goes to show responsibility and hedonism just don't mix, especially with the schedule Cas is doggedly keeping to like it's his last hope of sanity. This may be the first documented case of sex actually adding to someone's stress level, Dean reflects depressingly. He hadn't even known that was possible.

"If it helps," he offers when Cas rubs his eyes tiredly, "you're doing the leader thing okay."

"You're a terrible liar." Cas glances at him with a flickering smile that he thinks may actually be genuine. "I now appreciate Dean's restraint during meetings when I was sober enough to provide commentary and he was fully armed."

"If I see you start to draw on one of them, I'll stop you," Dean assures him. After a second of thought, he adds, "And I wasn't lying. I don't like you that much. You're doing okay."

Cas pauses. "Thank you."

"What's Sidney's problem anyway?" he asks before he can think better of it. Cas looks at him blankly, but Dean doesn't think he didn't understand the question. "Just curious."

"His team leader was among those who died in Kansas City," Cas answers too casually. "It's stressful for everyone right now--"

"Because Dean's not here or because you're in charge?" he asks deliberately, watching Cas's face carefully. "Gonna go out on a limb and say it's you."

Cas raises his eyebrows in exaggerated surprise. "That bothers you?"

"Yeah," he answers honestly. "I mean, above and beyond you're the only person who even knows I'm here, it'd be shitty to show up and find someone shot you in the back for the glory and the dream of running a camp low on toilet paper."

"They wouldn't--"

Cas catches himself a moment too late, and Dean goes still. "'They'?"

"It's not important," Cas says dismissively on his way to the kitchen. "But I appreciate your concern. That's what you say when people tell you things you don't care about and you want them to stop, correct?"

Dean reminds himself firmly that he's not here to fight, though it's starting to feel inevitable whenever they're in the same given space "Fine, but you might think about finding something to keep everyone occupied and not considering mutiny. I get why you don't want them in any of the cities right now...."

Holding an unmarked bottle, Cas stops in the kitchen doorway. "You do."

It's not a question, but Dean treats it like one anyway, since he's kind of tired of guessing and Cas may just give him some answers.

"The military," he answers casually "Chitaqua had a deal with them. So Dean wouldn't be shot on sight or arrested or whatever? You worked with them."
Crossing the room, Cas tugs a second bottle from somewhere, dropping it into Dean's lap. Kicking the coffee table back a few feet from the couch, he sits down, giving him the entirety of his attention. "Keep going."

"You're worried that if anyone runs into someone from the military, they may want to talk, and patrol may ask them how the search for Dean's going," he says, picking up the bottle and trying not to react to that much undiluted attention focused on him all at once. "What is--"

"Beer, Joseph has a useful hobby," Cas interrupts. "What search for Dean?"

"The one you told them the military was doing," he answers as he twists off the lid, taking a wary drink and fighting not to moan. "I'm guessing that's the reason everyone here isn't wondering why they aren't spending every moment searching for him themselves."

"Dean's standing order was not to search for him should he go missing--"

"Which I'm guessing by this time, everyone would start ignoring," Dean finishes for him. "You needed to make sure they wouldn't go looking anyway."

To his surprise, Cas smiles at him, some invisible tension easing, and it hits him how alone Cas is right now. End of the world, his leader dead, hiding Dean, doing a job he doesn't know and hates, and lying to everyone about pretty much everything because the alternative is worse. Thinking of Sidney, of Cas's aborted 'they', he adds in 'may be in danger of being killed' and has to admit he'd be drinking like a lifestyle choice by now.

"You're correct," Cas says, taking a drink from his own beer before studying Dean thoughtfully. "You saw the MREs in supply? You haven't been to the armory yet--"

"There's an armory?" Dean asks, trying not to sound too eager and from Cas's expression, failing badly. "Where?"

"I'll leave you the keys in the morning," Cas answers, smile widening, before he continues. "Soon after Kansas was quarantined and the military units arrived, Dean was able to negotiate a deal with them. We received supplies and information, and they had our help patrolling the cities and eliminating those infected with Croatoan."

"So they'd look for him."

"They liked him a great deal," Cas answers, taking another drink before Dean can identify the here-and-gone flicker of something on his face. "The team leaders were the only other ones who had contact with them, but I couldn't risk that patrol might take it on themselves to speak to the first person in a uniform they saw."

Dean nods. "How long do you think you can keep it up?"

"When I told them that, I didn't think we were going to survive long enough for it to become an issue," Cas admits, looking annoyed with the continued existence of the world. "As that seems to be in perpetual delay, however…."

"And Kansas City is where you think Lucifer will start when he comes back." Cas's startled expression tells him he got it in one. "Lucifer would like the entire ending the Apocalypse thing to start in the place he killed the only person who could stop it, not really a surprise."

"Yes." Cas's mouth quirks. "Archangels are prone to bouts of melodrama. When his army arrives, it will be, if possible, literally on the ashes of Dean's body." There's a long pause before he murmurs,
in a voice Dean doesn't recognize, "He can be surprisingly predictable."

"So you need something for them to do," Dean says, cocking his head. "Preferably something that keeps them busy and not fomenting rebellion when you turn your back. Which gotta say, when it comes to Sidney, don't turn your back. Just a suggestion."

Cas's smile fades, but this time, he doesn't blow it off. "Being deposed wouldn't necessarily be unwelcome."

"Yeah, if you survived it, but I'm guessing there's a reason you haven't quit yet," Dean answers, meeting Cas's eyes. "You said no one else would do the job, but what you meant was too many people wanted it, right?"

"With both Dean and the team leaders gone, there was no clear line of succession," Cas answers, turning his bottle absently. "I'm not sure what would have happened if I hadn't accepted, but it wouldn't be an improvement, even by my standards."

"There's something you're not telling me."

Cas rolls his eyes before taking a drink. "That list is very long, Dean. I appreciate your concern--"

"But you don't care," Dean finishes for him, not hiding his frustration, and Cas pauses, bottle halfway to his lips. "Tell me another one. Something makes it worth getting up every morning, and it's not the orgies."

"They are fun." Cas puts down the bottle, subjecting him to a searching look before saying, "You read the reports today? They aren't particularly stimulating reading, which is possibly the only thing that is at all interesting about them."

"Nothing's happening," Dean agrees reluctantly. "On a guess, the current peacetime is weird."

"Even minus an apocalypse, I would call it unprecedented in human history," Cas replies. "However, the explanation for this seems to be that there is nothing within a fifty mile radius of this camp that might be a danger to us." Before he can absorb that, Cas adds, "In fact, I suspect that may also include most forms of wildlife, unless patrol is editing itself when it comes to fauna while waxing lyrical on every other conceivable subject."

"The animals are gone?" He has to have heard that wrong.

"Or hiding extremely well, yes."

Dean mentally reviews the reports with a sinking feeling and realizes Cas is right. Phil, at least, would have used a sighting for at least two pages of material. "How'd I miss that?"

"Generally, it's more difficult to notice what's absent, rather than what's there," Cas answers, taking another drink.

"You saw it." Cas shrugs, not looking at him, and Dean files that away for later thought. "What about the rest of the state? If it's just here or--"

"I thought about that," Cas says, sounding annoyed. "But I don't--I may not have been clear enough on this point, but I don't actually know what I'm doing. Patrol, at least, I had experience with from observation, but this….

"Think of it a long patrol," Dean says encouragingly. "You said everyone here can fight?" Cas
nods in surprise. "So get everyone split up into teams--you always do four people or that just patrol?"

"Yes," Cas answers, setting the bottle aside. "That's how they were trained."

Interesting, and something he's gonna follow up one day. Tipping his head back, he tries to think what they've got to work with realistically. Mobilize everyone not needed to keep them in working plumbing and food, split up the state, and send them out for a fast and dirty check of what's going on. The reports will be unreal after over a week under Cas's paper fist, but they'll also be thorough as hell. Straightening, he looks at the kitchen table; he needs a map, like, now.

"You could…." He trails off belatedly when he realizes Cas is watching him. "Uh, not that I--uh, know how this works." He already knows he's gonna regret this, but he says it anyway. "I could help you figure it out, if you want."

Cas gets to his feet and goes to the kitchen before Dean's got the last word out, getting the stack of maps by shoving everything else to the floor and then ducking under the table briefly before returning to the living room . Dumping a second bottle in Dean's lap, Cas kneels to spread one out on the scratched surface of the coffee table--he tries to remember if he'd always had one of those or if it's a new for no particular reason--anchoring it with a bong (used recently, he notes in private amusement) and an empty bottle fished from under the couch. Unearthing a broken pencil, he makes a mark on the map.

"We're here. This is the local patrol route," drawing a circle so perfect it's gotta be some kind of leftover angelic power. "Dean designed our patrols to protect the camp and to assist the military in containment of the major cities and on the border."

Dean's head jerks up. "Wait, the borders? Keeping people in?"

"Keeping Croatoan from getting out of--or into--the state once we'd successfully isolated them in the cities," Cas answers. "Dean's agreement with them was to handle the supernatural threat, nothing more."

In the spirit of retaining his own sanity, he decides to believe it. "That's it?"

"Yes." Cas continues outlining the patrol routes, and Dean watches as Kansas City, Overland Park, Olathe, Topeka, and then Wichita get their own circles before adding the eastern border and sitting back. "With the additional requirement that any demon discovered was ours, no questions asked." He shrugs, indifferent to demon-torture in exchange for services rendered. "The army units assigned to the major cities quickly discovered they were fighting more than human monsters, and their training was often not sufficient to deal with it. That's part of the reason Dean's help was accepted."

Dean studies at the map, the cluster of circles in the east with a single exception for Wichita in the south, eyes travelling over the uncircled vastness west of Topeka. If the military was having problems handling the reality of every fairy tale they ever heard, the civilians couldn't be doing much better, but then it hits him: infected state. Croatoan spreads fast, he thinks numbly; quarantined to avoid the spread of infection, the people who lived here had been acceptable casualties. After this long….

"That's everything I remember." Blinking, he takes the pencil Cas offers him, wondering what he's supposed to do with it when Cas glances expectantly at the map and then at him again. "What do you have in mind?"
Dean stares at Cas blankly. "What?"

"Currently there are sixty-five members of Chitaqua still alive," Cas says, apparently interpreting that as a request for more information about their resources. "Eight are needed for local patrol, eight for watch, and Chuck should be excluded from consideration as he handles our supplies, of course--"

"Wait, Chuck can fight?"

Cas raises an eyebrow. "Yes."

Until this moment, Dean entertained the vague hope that he was actually in a shitty dream after too much Jack or something, but that's blown out of the water. Apocalypse, sure, random fucking time travel, fine, but Chuck able to pick up a gun--and know how to use it--isn't the stuff that even his brain would be able to come up with.

"Dean taught him," Cas adds straight-faced, but the blue eyes are suddenly animated, a glimmer of someone else lurking in their depths: not so bitter, not so jaded, not so goddamn angry that it burned out everything else. Someone Dean wouldn't mind meeting, maybe.

"Oh." Still clutching Cas's pencil, he stares down at the map, trying to figure out what he's supposed to be doing here. He's read enough of this Dean's journal to be painfully aware of how much he doesn't know; it's not just the history he's missing, but what this Dean learned how to do. Reminding himself of what this Dean became and how it ended doesn't change the fact that while they both began as hunters, this man became so much more than that, and was really fucking good at it.

It's gotta be the idea of Chuck fighting or something, he thinks bitterly; there's no fucking way he's feeling inferior to a fatalistic dick who tortured demons and turned his own lieutenants into bait for a chance to fail at killing Lucifer. Willing bait, willing to die just because he told them to. Because they believed in him.

"How many other people do you need--minimum--in the camp to keep it running other than watch and local?" Dean asks a little desperately, and then realizes that's actually a good question. "Mess, laundry…whatever."

Cas hesitates. "Five?"

"I like it," Dean says firmly. "Supplies: give 'em those MREs. How long are you willing to let them be out of the camp?" He really wishes right now that the cell towers weren't a casualty of isolation; they could really use some phones. Tentatively, he starts at Chitaqua, mentally dividing up the state into something vaguely possible, then starts to sketch potential routes. "Five days work for you?"

Cas hesitates, eyes following Dean's penciled lines uncertainly. "I don't know how much time they'll need to be thorough. If it can be done in five days--"

"We can't be thorough in less than a month and a shitload more people, but five days will give us an idea." He pauses, tapping his pencil on the map when Cas doesn't answer. "Cas?"

"How long do you need--"

"We can finish this tonight," Dean answers, meeting Cas's eyes. "Everyone doing overnights are back tonight, right? They can all leave tomorrow morning.” Cas nods slowly as he stares down at the map, but Dean's pretty sure what he's seeing right now isn't anywhere in this room. "You mind
if I stick around when you give them their orders?"

_That_ gets his attention, startled blue eyes meeting Dean's, wide and relieved and grateful, there and gone in an instant like a flash of lightning across a clear sky and leaving nothing but a retinal burn to prove it was there at all.

"Not at all," Cas says, looking down at the map again, and Dean swallows, wishing desperately he didn't see that look; he thinks he might like to get to know the guy who made it.
"Not one animal," Dean says again, just to make sure he's not missing something, like hell, sanity.

Sorting through the reports they've received so far--the south and west haven't checked in yet, but it's still a couple of hours until dusk--he tries to put this in some kind of perspective.

"Not even squirrels? Or--" he struggles to remember what kind of animals should be around and fails; his source of food has always come with a side of barbecue sauce or ketchup its natural hamburger form. Chitaqua, on the other hand, has actually hunted when supplies run low, and since they aren't getting army surplus right now, things are gonna get sketchy pretty goddamn soon even with the MREs. "Okay, start over; how the hell long has this been going on and how the hell didn't anyone notice?"

"I don't know," Cas answers flatly, scanning another report. "The last few months have been devoted to tracking Lucifer, which left very little time for taking note of the flora and fauna. In regard to supplies: Chuck would report to Dean when something was needed, and Dean would assign someone to do something about it."

"'Something'."

Cas closes his eyes, and he wonders idly if he's counting to ten. "I don't know what he did. I didn't pay attention because I didn't care, satisfied?"

"I didn't mean…" He blows out a breath, wondering if it would help to remind Cas that his experience with food involves a waitress or a drive-through, because nothing can beat spending a night playing competitive inadequacy. Looking down at the map, he traces the routes the teams took across the state and reminds himself that five days in a very few places is barely a sampling, and there's an entire fucking state out there.

And they just happened to be in all the places there weren't any animals.

"Kat reported seeing several towns that seemed to be occupied," Cas says, a thread of uncertainty in his voice as he finishes scanning the page. "She considered stopping to inquire on the status of their livestock, but she wasn't certain how they would react to armed strangers in SUVs questioning them about their supplies."

Yeah, there's no way that can't end in disaster. "Right. So--"

"Of course, it wouldn't be particularly enlightening," Cas continues, frowning at the reports. "The selective breeding that led to the creation of domesticated animals changes how they perceive their environment."

"I have no idea what that means," Dean admits after a moment.

"I don't either." Throwing down the report, Cas stares at it, and Dean wonders uneasily if 'smite' might be an angelic leftover and if the coffee table is gonna be the sacrificed to discover it. Getting to his feet, Cas starts his pacing thing, making the already incredibly small room feel even smaller, as if it's barely able to contain him. "This isn't telling us anything but squirrel won't be a menu item in the near future."
Dean opens his mouth—*squirrel?*—and then realizes that actually, he doesn't want to know.

"It's telling us that not only are the monsters are laying low, we got missing animals." Dean slumps as he hears the words he's actually saying. "This doesn't make sense."

"None of it makes sense," Cas says brittlely.

Dean kind of wants to just agree and be done with it, but he has the feeling that he and Cas may be approaching the end of their mutual unspoken denial of one really big possibility. "Cas--"

"There is no way to verify when they left," Cas continues irritably, taking the lack of wildlife like some kind of weird personal insult, "but since it's been some time since we--"

"Cas," he says more loudly, resting his chin on the arm slung across the back of the kitchen chair he dragged into the living room. Cas's mouth shuts as he stops mid-pace to give Dean a wary look. "We gonna keep pretending nothing's happened recently here that might, you know, be related to this?"

"I don't see how Lucifer winning the Apocalypse would cause--"

"Yeah, except we don't know what happens when he wins," Dean interrupts before Cas can really get going. "Maybe, I don't know, the animals sensed something."

It sounds stupid enough when he says it, but Cas's expression doesn't help.

"It seems I haven't been clear," Cas answers, glaring at him. "The wildlife fleeing in abject terror would be the only logical response to Lucifer's victory, but generally they would only discover this when there something to actually flee from."

"So they wouldn't have felt something that night--"

"No," Cas says slowly. "They're animals. They can't sense the end of the world."

He really hates when Cas has a point.

"As for the lack of supernatural enemies, most of what we fought would have had no reason to leave," Cas continues with rising aggravation, like the Apocalypse is just fucking with him now. "They were waiting for the moment of Lucifer's triumph, and at least some of them would have known when the Apocalypse was over."

"What if it wasn't over?" Cas stops short, and yeah, time to talk about it. "Cas, *how* would they have known if it was? Radio, TV, natural disaster, what?"

"Cosmic events tend to be very noticeable," Cas answers, which doesn't tell him much. "Even a human with the most rudimentary psychic ability would have sensed something like this."

"Chuck's a prophet," he points out. "Why didn't he sense it, write a novel about it, whatever? I mean, he still buys the Dean's missing thing."

"Prophecy is divine," Cas answers dismissively. "Chuck's last prophecy was of the Host leaving; after they left, he said there was nothing there."

"The Host didn't make Chuck a prophet," Dean says slowly. "Whether they're here doesn't matter."

Cas snorts softly. "My Father has--using a human expression--left the building."
Elvis references aside, Dean can't really argue that one, since hey, how would he know? "Okay, but what about you? You sensed it, right? Cosmic event and everything."

"I Fell," Cas says automatically, but the blue eyes flicker away, fixing in the general direction of the window. "I didn't feel anything that night other than the moment of Dean's death." The blue eyes narrow on Dean again. "Then I was distracted."

"Cosmic fucking events are pretty distracting. You didn't feel anything, did you?" Cas tenses, but honestly, Dean doesn't actually need him to answer; looking at him is all the answer he needs. "Why the hell didn't you say something?"

"Because it doesn't mean anything!" Cas answers hotly, turning on Dean with something so far beyond anger he's not sure there's a word for it. "I Fell, Dean; all this proves is how much I've been diminished since I was imprisoned in this form!" Looking away, he closes his eyes, adding bitterly, "As if every second of this existence is not reminder enough."

Dean fights down the urge to tell Cas to get the fuck over himself; they really don't have time for this right now. "Cas, I get it, but right now? I don't know if you noticed, but you've got a lot of people depending on you and it's been, what, two weeks since--"

"It's been sixteen days since Dean died."

Dean takes a breath, dialing back his frustration with an effort. It's easy to forget that Cas is grieving, probably because Cas works pretty hard at hiding it. "Sixteen days since the world was supposed to end," he says evenly. "I can do the math in how long that is in Hell, and come on. Either Lucifer's slacking at world conquest or--I don't know, maybe Dean dying wasn't the--"

Cas's head snaps around. "It was."

"Look," he says, groping after what remains of his patience, "prophecy's been wrong before, so what if it wasn't--"

"Dean, in this single instance, prophecy was extremely straightforward," Cas interrupts. "Looking at you is all that is required to know what you are."

Abruptly, Cas meets his eyes, and Dean stills, breath caught in his chest at a glimpse of something vast and impossible; it's like drowning in the frozen depths of an infinite ocean.

Even when Cas was still an angel, it wasn't like this. Otherworldly, awkward, that slightest bit off, weird, sure, but unless he was doing something particularly impossible, it was background noise, barely worth a second look; God knows, he's met people who were worse at being human, and they didn't even have the excuse of not actually being one.

Looking at him now, Dean can't imagine how anyone, anywhere, could mistake Cas for anything but what he is.

"The world has never ended before," Cas is saying as he turns away, leaving Dean blinking at the bare walls of the cabin. "No one knows what happens next."

Feeling unsettled, he glances at the map on the coffee table and says the first thing that comes into his head. "We need to go back to Kansas City."

"No." Looking up, he takes in the slumping junkie almost swimming in a dingy khaki shirt and jeans at least two sizes too big, dark circled, red-rimmed eyes, and tries to see nothing else; he can't. It's like seeing one of those goddamn posters with the hidden picture; once you see it, you
can't stop. "When Lucifer rises, it will be there."

"When he rises, we're dead either way. It's not like distance will make any difference, only how much time it takes him to break through the wards." Cas doesn't respond. "Look, if nothing else, Dean's ashes are still there, along with the bodies of the team leaders. If they haven't been taken already--"

"Everyone in Chitaqua has protection from the possibility of possession," Cas interrupts, but to Dean's surprise, he hesitates before nodding reluctantly. "They were hunters, however. We should retrieve their bodies so they can be given a clean burning here."

"Yeah," he agrees warily; of all the arguments he could have made for going back, he wouldn't have called that one as one that worked. "So let's go get them." He stands up, swinging off the chair and trying to decide where he can get some weapons without anyone noticing. "Dean's ashes, too. Even burned and salted--"

"The body wasn't salted."

He stops short, staring at Cas. "What?"

"I didn't go there expecting to survive." Cas rubs his palm against his thigh before stopping himself. "This is Dean Winchester. Whatever your differences, neither of you would allow yourself to remain a poltergeist on earth."

"And both of us wanted a fucking salt and burn at death. You knew him well enough to know that."

"Even with the ashes," Cas continues distractedly, "he couldn't possibly resurrect him and has no reason to do so. His defiance of our Father severed him from being able to control life or death."

Dean blinks, feeling something in his stomach drop. "What?"

Cas's head jerks up in belated surprise, eyes wide.

"Lucifer--" Words are hard. "Can Lucifer--I mean…"

"Can't, no, and in retrospect, I should have realized you wouldn't think of that."

"Someone can be resurrected from ashes?"

"The state of the corporeal body has no bearing on resurrection," Cas answers, making a special effort to make it sound like everyone knows that; it's almost reassuring. "Remaking the flesh is simple; joining it to a human soul and giving it life is not." His eyes fix on Dean, filled with something he can't begin to define. "You can't understand, of course. You can create life easily; it is part of your birthright, given the gift of Creation to use as you will. It burns in you so brightly, our Father's greatest creation; it's always drawn us to you."

"Not all of you," Dean manages, unable to look away.

"All of us. To be denied that….love doesn't mean you cannot learn to hate what you are forbidden to touch, only watch." Cas seems to shake himself, frowning. "In any case, in the absence of the Host, there's no one left in this world with the power of resurrection."

Licking his lips, he nods; there probably will never be another time to ask this. "What about you?"

"I Fell," Cas answers almost by rote. "That ability is--"
"Yeah, the mojo's gone, I get that," he interrupts. "But you're not human, either."

Probably the wrong thing to say; Cas gives him a flat look, daring him to keep up this line of thought, but he's never backed down from a dare yet, even a stupid one. Especially a stupid one.

"Look, you still knew just looking at me I was from another time, even when, and I'm pretty sure that's only standard when it comes to angels." Frustrated, he tries again. "Okay, just for the hell of it, tell me this--if you had Grace, could you do it? I mean, is that all that's missing? Is this like healing, it comes from the Host or Heaven or whatever?"

Cas blinks, eyes distant for a long moment, and Dean wonders if at any time since he Fell had he thought any farther than what he'd lost. "Resurrection comes from my Father. The Host has no power to give it or take it away. I think."

Dean thinks briefly of the Host resurrecting Adam as Michael's vessel. "You think? So you don't know?"

"I think," Cas answers tightly, "that the only reason I wasn't killed before the Host left was that I had no useful skills when it came to stopping Lucifer. Resurrection would have been useful. You see where this is going?"

The Host weren't all that bright if they thought mojo was the only thing that made Cas dangerous. "Why did Lucifer burn his body?"

"He thought he could claim Dean's soul, and he found it amusing to make me watch."

The expression on Cas's face, however, kind of implies there's more to it. "What else happened?"

"What?"

"You were gone for a while." There's a hunted look on Cas's face now. "What else did he do? Why'd he let you go, Cas?"

For a few long moments, Dean's not sure Cas is going to answer, but then he slowly takes a seat on the couch, not looking at Dean. "He was going to kill me."

"Right. But he didn't."

"In battle, he would have, but--" Cas makes a face. "Given the choice, however, he'd spare my life."

"Because he's your Brother." He thinks of the Host and winces; family has a whole different context when it comes to angels.

Cas's mouth twitches, but something in his expression tells Dean it's not from amusement. "He can be very predictable," he murmurs before looking at Dean thoughtfully. "I didn't expect that or I wouldn't have risked going there and left you alone. I didn't have a great deal of time to think."

Dean cocks his head. "What happened?"

"He made me an offer."

"He tried to deal. With you. You're kidding." God, he wishes he could have seen Lucifer's face when Cas turned him down. "Did you tell him to fuck himself before or after you said no? You used those words, didn't you?" Cas blinks slowly, and Dean's subject again to that searching
regard. "What? Dude, it's something you'd do. Probably while he was giving you that Grace burn."

"You--" He stops, still staring at him in surprise. "Lucifer is very proud, and refusal tends to--bother him. Once I refused, killing me would be admitting he lost. In this case, there's no urgent reason for my death; I'm not a threat to him, so he can afford to indulge his hurt pride and try to wait me out."

Dean's gotta admit, he didn't think Lucifer was that stupid; the more you know. "Oh yeah, you're a puppy, no threat there." Cas's eyebrows draw together in bewilderment. "Never mind, just saying, it's gonna be a hell of a long wait."

Cas starts to answer before he seems to change his mind. "It was a stupid risk to take, going back. I just--" He wets his lips, looking uncomfortable. "He can be petty, perhaps even especially in victory; it confirms every slight against him was unjust and demand recompense. I didn't know--what he might do to Dean's body."

Dean pauses, startled. It never occurred to him that Cas--of all people--would think like that. "Oh." Yeah, this is uncomfortable. "What did he offer anyway? Power in Hell, all the kingdoms of the world--" Cas bites his lip, and Dean takes a moment to wonder if Lucifer ever met Cas. "You were Jesus on the mountain?"

"Almost the exact words," Cas admits, and this time, yeah, amusement. "In his defense, while it's never worked before, there's a first time for everything."

"That's not a defense."

"This might be," Cas says, looking eerily thoughtful. "Lucifer only reigns in Hell; he doesn't rule it."

Somehow, he's getting this: pride. "So he kills you and sends you to Hell now after you refuse a deal--"

"There's a reason that angels are killed if they won't bend the knee to him. The rulers of Hell are angels, Dean. To put an angel to the rack before all of Hell as if it were a human soul would be a degradation of what we are. For Lucifer to kill an angel is his right, but--"

"Pride," Dean finishes for him, rolling his eyes. "Anything's better than being treated like a human."

"There are disadvantages to making your platform how far humans are beneath us and then building a kingdom on it," Cas agrees maliciously. "Even if Lucifer could gird himself to do it--to see an angel so reduced, in his view--the obedience of angels in Hell isn't love; it's fear. And fear is notoriously unstable to maintain in balance. None of my Brothers would see me on the rack when he did it; they'd see themselves."

"He could wipe out all of Hell."

"If we could only be so lucky," Cas murmurs, smiling slowly, and Dean feels himself smile back. "Power is less than useless without understanding its limitations. I doubt the Cage has improved his ability to general, and Hell isn't nothing like it was when he was locked away. Two, three dozen millennia from now, he might even remember earth between the bouts of fighting."

"So I won't hold my breath."

The blue eyes light up for a moment in memory, and Dean takes in his expression, startled. While
he spent thirty years on the rack and ten putting other people on it, Cas was fighting his way across Hell to find him. He knows, because Cas told him, that few of the angels who entered Hell survived it, but he never thought about what that meant. Dean didn't come out the same as he went in, but until this moment, it didn't occurred to him that the Cas that left Hell with him wasn't the same one who went in there, either.

"You're correct, however, regarding Dean's ashes," Cas says abruptly. "And the bodies of the team leaders."

"Yeah," Dean says quickly, hearing the faint edge in his voice. "So when do we leave?"

Cas stiffens. "Dean--"

"I'm going, unless you want to take the morphine solution. You're not going alone."

Cas actually looks a little uncomfortable at the reminder. "Of course not. I don't know why I assumed you would embrace common sense at this late date." The blue eyes flicker to Dean, cool and chillingly focused. "I suppose reminding you of the danger you pose to everyone here should you be seen by any being who knows you should be dead is pointless."

Dean flinches at the sudden, ice-edged shot. He'd forgotten--Jesus, how?--that he and Cas aren't actually friends.

"As you're adamant, it would be prudent to bring someone I can trust as well."

Dean nods mutely at the deliberate hit, feeling more alone than he had even those first hellish days here.

"Give me half an hour," Cas says coolly as he turns toward the door. "Wait in the bedroom until I return." He stops at the doorway to give Dean an impersonal glance, eyes resting on his shoulder, where the sleeve hides the fading remains of the sigils. "Having to redraw the sigils is tedious and using ink on the surface of your skin makes them unstable, requiring you to constantly refresh the spell when it fades."

Dean realizes belatedly Cas is waiting for an answer. "You have a better idea?"

"Tattooing them would make it more stable and increase its strength," Cas answers with clinical detachment. "Once cast, the only thing that would remove it would be its counter, and only by the person who cast it. It would be safer."

Cas waits for him to respond, but this time, Dean can't answer, can't even think through an unexpected rush of horror, hand automatically covering the place where the sigils seem to suddenly burn.

With a slight frown at Dean's silence, Cas finally leaves with a rustle of beads, but it's several minutes before Dean can trust himself enough to move, making his way to the bedroom door and dropping onto the bed, shaking so hard he wonders if he'll ever be able to stop.

"Chuck?" Dean says blankly as Cas closes the bedroom door on Chuck's bewildered expression from his perch on the edge of the couch. "You're kidding."

"He met you before, so your existence won't be a surprise," Cas answers, looking more and more like he's regretting the lifestyle of the clean and sober, not to mention his continuing existence. "He was also a prophet and that comes with a certain amount of--knowledge, you might say, which will
hopefully shorten how long we must endure the tedium of repeated explanations." He makes a face. "I wouldn't spread the knowledge of your existence to anyone else if there was a way to avoid it."

Sitting at the foot of the bed, Dean just manages to unclench his fingers from the blankets, stretching them surreptitiously. "Maybe once you do the tattoo, it'll be strong enough that he won't see me even if he knows I'm there. Out of sight out of mind, right?"

"That's what I was thinking," Cas says absently, glancing toward the door. "Though I doubt--"

"Would it work on you?" he blurts out, unable to stop himself. Cas's head snaps around, looking at him in bewilderment, like he has no idea what he's talking about. "I mean, if it's stronger--"

"There is nothing on this world powerful enough to conceal you from me," Cas says slowly, eyebrows drawing together. "Dean--"

"Right, former angel, sucks to be you, huh?" Dean shrugs stiffly, not really wanting to hear again how much it sucks to be Cas these days. "Okay, so we're doing this?"

"I'm doing this," Cas corrects him, but the frown doesn't fade. "It's not your responsibility."

"Cas--"

"Don't argue with me," he interrupts, then closes his eyes. "I can anticipate what his initial reaction will be, and I won't make you endure it."

Startled, he wonders what the hell Cas thinks Chuck is gonna do.

"I don't think--" Cas shakes his head, glancing toward the door, and even barefoot, rumpled, and looking like he's been on a two year bender, Dean sees the angel who understood duty and what it meant; following it, after all, was the reason he Fell. "Stay here. I will inform you when you should--let him see you."

Dean nods. "I'll be ready."

Even through the muffling of the bedroom door, he gets a pretty good idea of how Chuck is taking it. Hearing the actual words isn't necessary; the tone comes through loud and clear.

When Cas opens the bedroom door again, Dean gets to his feet and follows him out, making himself look at Chuck even though that's pretty much the last thing he wants to do. He only gets a glimpse of searing horror and something even darker before Cas blocks his gaze; shaken, Dean blinks as something cold is placed in his hand.

"That's the key to the armory," Cas says quietly. "It's just behind Chuck's cabin. Choose whatever you feel comfortable using tonight."

"Oh." Cas turns away, glancing in Chuck's direction as he passes Dean on his way to the kitchen. Putting the key in his pocket, Dean looks at Chuck again, currently staring at the floor. "Uh. So--" What the hell do you say at a time like this? "Look--"

Chuck's shoulders drop for a second before he straightens, but he avoids looking directly at Dean. "Yeah, it's--weird."

Jesus, this is going to be a shitty night. "So I'm gonna go--"
"Go ahead," Cas says, leaning against the kitchen door way and looking at Chuck intently, which makes Chuck look down again, hands clenching on the edge of the couch. "Chuck will be fine."

Dean gets the feeling Cas wants him gone like, now. "Got it." Breathing the spell again, he feels it settle over him in a faint tingle. "Be right back."

"Take all the time you need." Glancing back, Dean sees Cas is still staring at Chuck, and what the hell. "We'll be ready when you return."

Castiel watches Chuck slump over when Dean is gone, hands coming up helplessly to cover his face.

"Don't make this more difficult than it already is," Castiel says softly, pushing off the doorway and crossing the room to crouch before Chuck. "Look at me."

Lifting his head reluctantly, Chuck wipes his eyes, gaze stubbornly fixed on the wall behind Castiel. "Fuck you. I can't just--"

"Threats tend to have a counterintuitive effect on Dean. They do, however, work very well on you. Possibly because unlike him, you know very well not only do I mean them, I'll carry them out. Do we understand each other?"

Chuck shivers, wrapping his arms around himself. "Dean's dead, Cas. How can you just--"

"I don't have a choice," he answers flatly, waiting patiently until Chuck finally looks at him. "I understand this is difficult for you, but you can control yourself for the few hours this will take us. After that--"

"What?" Chuck answers defensively before he slumps again. "I don't believe it. How can he be dead?"

It's an unanswerable question, so he ignores it.

"How--I mean, Lucifer, I get that, but--" He gestures as his voice trickles off, How long did Lucifer have him, what did he do to him before he died, was he--

"He broke his neck," Castiel tells him, and Chuck's face crumples. "He didn't suffer. Lucifer couldn't risk taking more time than necessary; he knew of Dean's ingenuity."

Chuck nods, rubbing his rapidly reddening eyes. "You're sure?"

"Yes," he answers. Dean told him what he saw, and five years with one Dean Winchester translates effortlessly to this one, who lacks even the most rudimentary of his counterpart's defenses. "I'm certain."

After a second, Chuck asks, "The team leaders. They all died?"

He hesitates as the brown eyes meet his. "Yes," he answers carefully. "I confirmed their deaths before I went to find Dean's body. We'll collect their bodies tonight as well."

Chuck wipes a shaking hand across his face, craning his neck to look at Castiel directly. "You were the only survivor, huh?"

Castiel nods shortly as he straightens, retrieving his boots from beside the door. When he turns around, he's surprised to see Chuck staring at him, eyes filled with resentment.
"You survived," Chuck repeats bitterly. "But it wasn't for us, right? It was _him_.

Castiel ignores him, sitting on the chair that Dean used earlier and concentrating on the inexplicably tangled laces.

"You know, it's not like everyone didn't pretty much know where Dean went, you'd go. That's why everyone believed that shit about him getting away. Even me." Chuck takes an audible breath like a strangled sob. "I mean, this is you, and who the fuck cares what happens to the rest of us, right, fuck humanity, Dean dying was your get out of life for free card."

Fumbling the boot, he looks at Chuck, who smiles unhappily. "I guess we gotta thank whatever brought this Dean over, huh? Must have pissed you off when--"

"Chuck--"

"Shut up!" Chuck shouts, face reddening. "You were here with him first; you got your ass kicked out of Heaven because you didn't toe the line; when the entire angel brigade fucked off, you _stayed_. Like maybe, some part of it was because you wanted us--wanted humanity, okay--to win. Like maybe you thought we _could_." Chuck wipes his eyes roughly. "At least we could pretend, you know? I mean, not that you made that easy to do--"

"Chuck, please be silent."

"--but maybe it was okay to believe you were in it for more than just waiting for Dean to die. That you thought we--everything--was worth fighting for." Chuck wipes his face again, frustrated. "You came back. Dean's gone, game over, you're all that's left, and--and you're only here because _he_ is."

Castiel wonders what world Chuck seems to have inhabited before today. "This discussion is pointless. I never wanted--"

"Yeah, what you want, wow--" Chuck laughs with an edge of hysteria. "Jesus, you think anyone wanted to live like this? You think anyone wanted the goddamn _Apocalypse_? The rest of us, we had to learn to deal. You--God knows what the hell you call what you're doing--"

"We couldn't win," he interrupts, because it's true, because it's self-evident, because there's nothing else to say. It falls like a stone in the air between them, but not for the inevitability, but for what it encompasses: _we_. Not _you_. "Even Dean knew that."

"Yeah, he did," Chuck agrees, eyes intent, and for a moment, Castiel's an angel in the presence of a prophet, and there are something things said that must be listened to, be _heard_. "Maybe we all did, but we didn't give up, we kept trying. Plain old humans, but we still did it; what the fuck is your excuse?"

He doesn't have an answer to that.

"Yeah," Chuck whispers, the energy draining out of him. "That's what I thought. Not like it matters now, right? How long you gonna keep this up? I mean, don't get me wrong, I appreciate you faking your interest in everyone's survival and everything, but I'm guessing the minute you find a way to get him back to wherever he's from, you're checking out again, so some warning would be appreciated when that happens."

"The wards will protect you whether I'm here or not," he says uncertainly, watching Chuck's shoulders slump further. "Chuck, whatever it is that you want from me--"

"Yeah, I don't know either," Chuck breathes, covering his face. "If you can't get him back--Jesus,
how can you stand to even *look* at him? It's--"

"Very easily. They are nothing alike."

Chuck gives him an incredulous look over the tips of his fingers before dropping his hands again, looking nervously toward the door. "Cas, maybe you can--" he swallows, throat bobbing nervously. "I can't do this. Even being around him--"

"You can," Castiel answers quietly, getting Chuck's attention. "And you will."

Chuck licks his lips. "Cas, you gotta know--Jesus, if the *camp* knew about him--"

"They won't," Castiel interrupts, closing a hand over Chuck's chin and jerking his head up to meet the wide brown eyes. "No one will know. I would have spared him your reaction, but in this, I had no choice, and you were the least dangerous option."

"You think you can hide him here forever?" Chuck shakes his head, incredulity written into every feature. "Cas, I don't know how you've kept him hidden this long, but come the fuck on."

"Forever, in this case, is relative and will probably be very short."

"And if--" Chuck swallows under Castiel's stare. "Someone's gonna find out and then what? Even you can't protect him from everyone here, what are you gonna do, kill them all?" Chuck's eyes widen when he doesn't respond. "You'll...."

Castiel lets his silence stretch for a few moments before saying, "I doubt it will be necessary. If it becomes--a problem--we'll leave." At the faint sound of footsteps approaching the porch, Castiel takes a breath. "Chuck, he has enough to deal with. Don't make it worse."

"What?" Chuck asks in bewilderment, but the discordant jangling of beads interrupts him. Castiel notes in approval the two rifles and the handguns Dean had acquired, as well as the excess ammunition. Glancing at Chuck briefly, he finds himself studying Dean again, trying to see him as Chuck must, as anyone else would, tracing out the familiar lines of his face and body, and fails. Not least because in recent memory, he can't recall Dean ever looking at either of them as anything more than necessary liabilities he would be happy to do without.

"Okay, think I got everything," Dean is saying. "So we should--" he pauses, looking at them for a minute. "Uh, so you need more time?"

"Chuck had a question regarding the layout of the city," Castiel answers, giving Chuck a warning look. "Chuck, how long will you need?"

"Ten minutes," Chuck answers flatly as he stumbles to his feet. "Uh, since you got the ammo covered there, I'll just--uh--be right back."

"Cool." Dean shifts the rifle awkwardly as he watches Chuck make his way to the door before turning to Castiel and noticing his frown. "What? I know how to arm myself. You wanna check me?"

He finds himself remembering Dean telling him that he didn't have to work so hard to assure that he didn't like him. "Actually, I do."

"Go for it." Dean's grin widens, spreading his arms in amused challenge, easy. Taking a step forward, Castiel reaches for his belt, and smiles despite all his efforts when Dean says, more quietly but just as amused, "Have fun with that."
Chuck and Cas are both dead silent the entire drive to the city, which is just about as unnerving as he expected. Cas doesn't look at him at all, which Dean's officially both used to and hates, while Chuck stares a goddamn hole through the seat at him when he's not looking. Subtlety, not something they seem to know how to do, and the quality of Chuck's stare makes him weirdly uneasy.

%Chuck% makes him uneasy. It is seriously a whole new world here.

They go for the team leaders first, all pretty much contained in the area just outside the building where this Dean sent them. Doing a fast count, he's relieved to know they're all still here and relatively intact considering the various nasty possibilities of what demons might do to bodies that they couldn't use.

Chuck produces body bags and gloves from the back of the jeep. Dean's not surprised that they're standard issue for any mission, enough that they'd come with the jeep; the masks retrieved from the backseat were apparently Chuck's own addition and a stroke of goddamn genius. There's been enough time for decomposition to set in, and a lifetime of dealing with the supernatural means Dean can probably identify time of death on a glance even if he didn't know exactly when they died already, but he's never really gotten used to the smell. Even through the mask, he knows he'll still smell it for days, but any little bit helps.

As they carefully place each bagged body into the back of the jeep, he tries not to remember their faces from before; the two intervening years since this day should have dimmed his memory more than it has. That Cas isn't one of the bodies is just a cosmic accident, a fluke, and he has to pause in surprised relief, take a long breath despite the heave of his stomach at the stench of rot. All the times Cas has died--Jesus, way too fucking many--he's never had to deal with the body after. He's fine with bodies after a lifetime of hunting; it's just that Cas, like Sam and Bobby, aren't just bodies even after their dead.

To this day, he still isn't sure what he would have done if he was able to find Castiel's body in that reservoir; most of it is a blur of sleeping, eating, and searching that precluded anything like actual %thought% that only ended with Sam's insistence that he needed to stop, that maybe there wasn't a body to find. The rules might be different for semi-gods or whatever the fuck Castiel became, he said, and hell, he might have been right. The thing is, he's pretty sure Sam was less worried about Dean on (another) pointless mission looking for something that wasn't there than what Dean would do when found what he was looking for.

Sealing up the last bag, he follows Cas back to the jeep, waiting for him to place it with the others before he strips the gloves off, tossing them with the mask into the bag that Chuck's holding ready for them. Despite the fact the brown eyes are blank and have been since they started, Chuck's hands are surprisingly steady as he waits for Cas before adding his own and sealing the bag to place it carefully in the back seat of the jeep. Without commentary, he takes the shovel Cas extends and follows him to their last stop while Dean takes rear, because no matter what Cas said about everyone being able to fight here, just looking at Chuck tells him that doesn't mean he should have to.

As they approach the end of the alley, he swallows at the sight of the fresh green grass spreading out in manicured perfection before him and has to pause, breathe, the visceral memory of Lucifer standing over Dean's body flooding his mind.

Until this moment, he didn't give any thought to how he'd react to see his own burn sign. Before now, he would have said digging his way out of his own goddamn grave probably burned out anything like sensitivity on the subject. Now, with his--Dean's ashes about to come in sight, he's
not sure just how well that theory will stand up to the reality of not just seeing it, but having to actually deal with it.

He doesn't even realize that Cas had paused at the mouth of the alley until a hand on his arm stops him short. "Stay here."

"What?" Dean tries to look at him, but only a dozen or so yards away, the too-green grass--Jesus, it's fucking night, how the hell can the color be so goddamn bright--dips into a dark shape that's about the length of a human body. Dean's body, he reminds himself, not his, not his, because seeing this, seeing this world, was how he escaped having to actually live it. "We should--"

Cas makes no visible effort, but Dean still doesn't even get a step before he's at a dead stop; looking at Cas's hand, the fingers wrapped around his arm aren't even noticeably tense. "Cas, what are you--"

"You're staying here," Cas answers shortly, watching Dean with an unreadable expression. "Someone should keep watch."

"Cas, there's nothing here." Dean doesn't need to search the entire city to know that; even without special angel powers of whatever, it's not something anyone could miss. He remembers when he got here that first time, going outside to stare incredulously at the devastation, but even then, it didn't feel anything like this, dead and rotting from the inside out.

Cas concedes the point with a reluctant nod, but the grip on his arm doesn't change, and he's not sure whether he's actually pissed at Cas for doing this, or pissed at himself because honest to God, he doesn't want to go out there. "Cas--"

"This isn't--" He looks away. "This is ours to do, not yours."

Before Dean can argue, Cas lets him go, joining Chuck where he's waiting a few feet away. As they turn their backs to him, making their way across the flawless lawn, he almost follows them anyway before he stops himself. Watching them pause as they reach the right spot, he thinks he gets what Cas was saying; they don't want him there, don't want him near them while they do this. Not when he's a still living, still breathing copy of the man they followed for years and whose death is an open wound. Just knowing he was here was bad enough; having to see him standing there when their Dean is gone would be infinitely worse.

Taking a deep breath, he stays where he is and watches them begin to gather the ashes of their dead leader.

It feels like forever, trying to think about anything but the fact that it's his own future self being shoveled up. Vaguely, he wonders about stray ash or if in this case that could be a problem; a burn with literal cosmic mojo attached just doesn't come up enough for him to have a plan on what to do when a burning lacked that certain something and wasn't done in a crematorium or a contained pyre or a grave.

He watches as Cas kneels on the pristine ground to carefully zip what remains of their Dean Winchester into the bag. Chuck crouches beside him, and even from here, he can see Chuck is shaking, one hand resting on Cas's shoulder for a moment before he pulls back and wraps his arms around his legs, forehead pressed to his knees. Cas doesn't move at all for what feels like years before he smooths a hand over the bag and picks it up.

Dean quickly averts his gaze to the alley wall, studying the crumbling brick blindly until Chuck scurries past without so much as a glance in his direction, heading for the jeep.
Cas, however, pauses, but even when Dean makes himself look up, he has no idea what the hell he's supposed to say. To his relief, Cas doesn't seem to expect anything, simply turning away with the expectation that Dean will follow. The silence continues until they reach the end of the alley, and Dean gets a brief glimpse of Chuck's face as he waits by the jeep before he goes to open the back for the last time; the shocked, searing grief is like a slap in the face, freezing him at the mouth of the alley.

He's distantly aware of the sound of the back of the jeep being closed, of footsteps echoing loudly on the loose gravel, but even so, he's surprised by the start of the engine; blinking, he stares at the jeep and wonders if they forgot he was here, or more likely, want to do exactly that starting right the fuck now.

He's still staring when the driver's side door opens and Castiel says, "We should return to the camp immediately. Just because the city seems deserted does not mean it will remain so."

Blinking a little, he nods, obediently walking the few feet between them and climbing inside, nearly stabbing himself with the goddamn rifle. An accidental glance at the rearview mirror gives him a single flash of Chuck's swollen eyes, circled in angry red before he can fix his gaze out the goddamn windshield and pretend the last hours of his life didn't happen.

Halfway back, Cas abruptly breaks the silence. "Chuck, when we return, I need you to locate a copy of your final prophecies."

There's a sound of rustling clothing from the backseat before Chuck's head abruptly appears above the seat between them. "What?"

"There might be something in them to explain Dean's second arrival here," Cas continues, and Dean has to think that life was a lot easier when the supernatural world didn't crossover with shitty sci-fi. "In the absence of the most likely suspects, there may be something from your documentation of Dean's life that might provide a clue. He has had a great deal of experience with time travel, so we should concentrate on those periods to--"

"Why?" Dean says in confusion. "Three times, Cas, and two of those were because of you. What, you don't remember?"

Cas's eyes flicker sideways. "Perhaps rampant drug use has damaged my memory," he says thoughtfully, making Dean want to kick himself for opening his mouth. "Of course I remember. But there may be something that I wasn't there to witness, and since both your memory and observational skills leave something to be desired, Chuck may have recorded something that neither of us would be aware of."

Yeah, he's not talking anymore.

"Under the circumstances, that may be our only hope of discovering anything about how this happened." Cas's eyes never leave the road, but Dean sees his hands tighten on the steering wheel and wonders if there are fingerprints in the metal from when he does that. "Moving in time and space can have an effect on memory retention. Retrograde amnesia is not uncommon in humans."

"Oh." Surprised, Dean wonders why Cas hadn't told him that before. "You didn't tell me that when you sent me back in time. What did I forget?"

There's a weird silence from the other side of the cabin before Cas says, "I had no reason to tell you because there was no sign of it when you returned."
"You never asked--"

"Let me rephrase," Cas interrupts. "I had no reason to tell you because it didn't happen. This isn't a guess, Dean; I was an angel, I know you didn't have any memory impairment. However--"

"You think I have it now? From this?" Dean licks his lips, unsettled by the idea. "I don't remember what happened that got me here. That's what's bothering you."

"It's on my list, yes," Cas says, giving Dean a short, annoyed glance. "And as I'm not the one who brought you here, there's no way to be certain."

"Certain I don't have random time-traveling amnesia you never mentioned as a side-effect because it's not a side effect and you're making shit up."

"Possibly, Dean thinks incredulously, to make him feel better. "You think it was deliberate? Like Gabriel did--"

"We'll discuss it after I have reviewed Chuck's work."

Which he takes as Cas's way of saying that's the end of this conversation. His expression is the one Dean's finally categorized as exactly that; he's not getting more right now no matter what he says. Sitting back, he lets the passing road lull him into a semi-conscious haze; if he's careful, he can almost pretend that none of this is happening.

"What's that?"

Chuck's voice so close to his ear jerks Dean back into the present. Scowling, he turns his head, following Chuck's gaze down to his arm, where he notices the bottom of the sigils are visible just below the edge of his sleeve.

"Uh, it's--Cas, what's this really called anyway?"

"I didn't think to name it." Cas glances at Dean's arm as he pushes up the sleeve. "Do humans have particular naming conventions I should be aware of?"

Chuck's head snaps around. "How did anyone know to use it without a name? I mean, do angels just--" he trickles off, like he's not sure how to finish that sentence. "Know it?"

"No, of course not. Everything was given a name when time began."

Dean's pretty sure he's wearing Chuck's confused expression, but in his case, it's more from wondering what the hell they're talking about.

"This didn't exist then," Cas continues. "Hence, it did not receive a name. Here, the rules must be different, unless…" He pauses, giving Dean a sidelong glance. "Do you remember what I told you when I drew it?"

"Dude, I'm not sure you were even using sentences," he answers, but he tries to remember anyway. "Something about hoped for, uh, the evidence of--unseen?"


Dean glances at Chuck, who looks--Dean's not even sure what that is--then at Cas. "Seriously?"

"I suppose the irony appealed to me. The Darby translation of the Bible isn't nearly as lyrical, and Aramaic lacks…." Cas shrugs, bored. "I was very high. You can call it anything you wish."
Dean looks down at the sigils a little blankly. They'll need to be drawn again when they get back, unless Cas's 'tattoo Dean into not existing' plan is on the agenda tonight. Swallowing, he drops his sleeve, aware Chuck is looking at him. "What?"

"You've been doing it in magic marker or something?" Chuck shrugs at Deans' glare, reaching out a finger and smearing the edge speculatively before he can jerk away. "I may have a permanent marker somewhere. Just saying, doesn't look like it lasts long."

"It doesn't." He really wishing they could get off the goddamn subject already. Once they get close to the camp, he'll have to be a semi-ghost all over again, observing everyone mourning their lost friends and wondering what happened to their lost leader.

"You think checking my prophecies will really help?" Chuck asks Cas suddenly. "I mean, even if we know how he got here, sending him back--"

"Chuck, unless you possess knowledge of time and space that I don't, I don't think you're fit to judge what might be useful."

"Still, if it's not an angel or a god--which not a lot of those left around here--it must have happened in his world." Chuck turns his attention to Dean again. "Were you chasing something with an influence on time or something?"

"I don't know." The last hunts are still a blur of time and exhaustion, which happens when you're doing everything you can to avoid thinking and if hunting was off the table, there was always alcohol. The goddamn city tonight brought it all back, and he's stuck in this jeep and now he can't stop thinking: Bobby, Castiel, the reservoir, everything that went so fucking wrong he doesn't even know where it started, and Jesus, that's the worst part, knowing that. He should have noticed, should have seen it coming, when he could have stopped it, when Castiel would have listened, when--Jesus, he's gotta stop this.

Chuck seems to get it, dropping back into his seat in silence; after a few minutes, he makes an annoyed sound followed by impatient rustling, and Dean shuts his eyes, wondering if there's any way he's gonna be able to sleep tonight.

"We're almost at the gate."

Reluctantly, Dean opens his eyes, seeing the faint lights from the watch and straightens, dragging the words of the spell into his memory. Before he can finish the first word, however, his sleeve is jerked up and something cold swipes across his skin, and the faint tingle he's almost grown used to vanishes into nothing. Grabbing his arm, he jerks around and is hit in the face with the smell of rubbing alcohol, but despite watery eyes, the blurry outline of Chuck holding a piece of gauze and a bottle is pretty goddamn telling as the jeep comes to an abrupt stop, almost throwing Dean into the dashboard.

Wiping his eyes, Dean jerks his damp sleeve up enough to see the sigils are gone, not even an outline left, then at the gate--holy shit, they're coming toward the jeep. Turning around, he stares at Chuck, but Chuck's looking at Cas, unhappy and defiant and angry, Christ; Dean didn't see that before, didn't even guess.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Dean hisses, but before he can move and punch the shit out of him, Chuck's got the door open on the passenger side and is getting out. Hand on the door, Chuck stares back at Cas for a second.
"Yeah, you remember when you asked me what I wanted?" Chuck says, completely random, like this makes some kind of sense. He glances at Dean and then away, too fast for the guilt to do more than register. "This is how I'm getting it." Before Dean can process that--what the fuck?--Chuck is shouting, "We found Dean! He's back!" and holy fucking shit.

"What the hell--" Dean twists around to see the patrol pushing open the gate, people starting to emerge. "Did he just--Cas, what the hell just happened?"

Cas hasn't moved at all, eyes fixed on something in the distance. Dean sees his knuckles go white against the steering wheel, and there's no way it's gonna last long at this rate.

"Cas!" Dean says sharply, and now they're close enough to see him, really see him, and he can see them, too: joy and shock and incredulous, life-changing relief, hope so bright it hurts to see it. For a second (only for a second) Dean feels a hot rush of bitter envy (of the Apocalypse, how fucked up is that?) because he's never been this to anyone, for anyone; no one's ever looked at him like this. "Cas, you gotta do something--"

"You injured your ankle and couldn't walk," Cas says abruptly, then a hard boot collides at the absolutely wrong angle, and Dean has something entirely new and horrible to add to his collection as he feels his ankle not actually snap. "That's why you were delayed," he hears Cas saying over the rush of pain. "We found you while collecting the bodies. You were on your way back. Don't say anything else."

Dean's still trying to remember how to breathe when the door is pulled open and then it's a blur of people and voices and someone yelling for medical supplies and he doesn't have time to think of anything at all.

It's thirty minutes, two painkillers, and the presence of a way too excited brunette who goes by Alicia who may or may not have EMT training at some point in her life before Dean's finally mostly alone in the infirmary, the door closed firmly on the crowd outside. Sitting back on the salvaged hospital bed, he watches Alicia fumble nervously with the gauze and drop it--for the second time--and smiles at her, deciding he's done with dealing with this shit.

"Alicia, Dean is still not entirely cognizant," Cas says abruptly when Alicia finally manages to get his boot off. Taking the gauze from her hands, he steers her back to the door. "I'll do it."

From the relief on her face, he's pretty sure at no point in her life did she think becoming an EMT would end in having to play doctor for her leader. Cas closes the door almost in her face and turns the lock before crossing to one of the dingy medicine cabinets bolted to the wall and takes out fresh gauze. Taking Alicia's place by the bed, he pulls a rickety tray close enough to reach the tape and scissors and just out of Dean's current kicking range.

"What passed for our doctor died a few months ago," Cas says calmly. "She's understandably nervous."

Dean lets his head drop back on the flat pillow, completely unsurprised by the cloud of dust that puffs up around him. "Wouldn't be a problem if you hadn't broken my goddamn ankle."

"It is barely even sprained," Cas answers dismissively as he goes to work. Watching him, Dean has to admit he's knows what he's doing, with the easy expertise of someone who's used to having to treat injuries without the benefit of professional help. "You don't have any visible injuries, and Dean's been gone long enough to require some explanation. It had to be real or Alicia would have noticed, and she's confirming it to everyone now. It will also excuse you from having to deal with"
the entire camp, at least for tonight, and you can choose how long your recovery will actually take."

Licking his lips, Dean reluctantly admits the logic. Even through the door, he can hear the crowd outside, and he's almost sorry when Cas is done, because that means--Jesus, he's gotta go out there.

"I can't do this, Cas."

Cas takes his time putting everything away before returning to lean against the side of the bed with an unreadable expression. "Dean--"

"Look, I get it's shitty, but we gotta tell them who I really am." Cas's blank expression isn't encouraging. "Come on, we'll tell them that Chuck, I don't know, made a mistake--or lied through his fucking teeth--and...."

"We can't."

Dean stares up at him. "What?"

"They can't know who you really are." Cas eyes flicker to the door with a trace of desperation. "Before, it would have been a risk, but now--"

"Look, I get nothing would make you happier than making me disappear for good!" he snaps. "But making me a goddamn ghost by sigil just so you don't have to deal with me--"

"You thought that is why..." Cas takes a step back, the blank expression hardening. "Dean, how would you react if someone who looked and acted just like your former leader appeared claiming to be from another time?" His eyes narrow. "Before you answer that question, how did you react to a person claiming to be a past version of yourself? I'll wait."

The stupid part is, he didn't even think of that. "They wouldn't believe me."

"No one who met you the first time you were here besides me and Chuck are still alive. So no, I don't think they would wait for an extended explanation of spacetime. Especially since we don't know how it happened."

"But you could tell them--" he trails off at Cas's expression. "They don't know you can tell the difference."

"That would be one reason," Cas agrees, crossing his arms. "Do you have any less suicidal ideas?"

Dean stares up at the ceiling, brown-edged water stains from inexpertly caulked holes, networks of cracks spreading incrementally toward the bare wood of the cabin walls, and wonders what the hell he's supposed to do now.

"Dean," Cas says more normally, "we don't have a great deal of time for you to decide what you will do."

"I don't think I have much of a choice," he answers bitterly, hands clenched into helpless fists at his sides. "Look, can we just get out of here?"

There's an uncomfortable pause. "Where do you want to go?"

The question makes absolutely no fucking sense for an entire second before it hits him that being Dean--at least for tonight--comes with a cabin.
"You mean his cabin," he says flatly. "Right."

"It would have the advantage of...." This time, the pause is longer, and when Dean finally looks at him, Cas is frowning into the middle distance. "Privacy, which would last for as long as it took someone to open the door." He tips his head back thoughtfully, and damned if he doesn't look amused. "To nurse you back to health, of course."

Dean tries to convey by staring how much he isn't up to any kind of nursing, period.

"Not to mention what you might say if someone asks you a question," he continues, amusement vanishing. "Under the circumstances, considering our lack of medical professionals, it would be reasonable for you to be kept under observation. That much, I'd usually volunteer to do."

Dean grits his teeth against the faint throb of pain from his ankle, warning him that whatever Alicia gave him is starting to wear off. He really doesn't give a shit as long as he gets the fuck out of here, because it's possible in about two second he'll be asking Cas if the morphine solution could be put on the table again. Drugged out of his mind for the rest of his life--which isn't gonna be long anyway--is starting to sound pretty fucking good.

"So can we get out of here?"

"Give me three minutes."

Dean nods and closes his eyes, listening as Cas opens the door. The murmur of voices turns into a dull roar before lowering enough to hear Cas's voice. He can't quite make out what he's saying, but whatever it is, it seems to be working. A woman's voice follows, somewhat familiar, and then the door is closing again and Cas is by the bed.

"If you're ready--"

"Beyond. Words." He sits up, letting Cas slide an arm under his shoulders without protest. "Uh, what happened out there?"

"They're leaving so you can rest." Easing Dean to his feet without noticeable effort, they go to the door, and to Dean's surprise, they emerge into welcome silence, not a person in sight. "Vera said she would take care of it, I didn't ask how."

He concentrates his energy on staying upright as they start toward the cabin, leaving Cas to handle the logistics. Despite the lack of visible evidence, he's painfully aware of the gazes following his every stumbling step, unbearably grateful that at least he doesn't have to actually see the stunned, happy faces that believe they're looking at their missing leader.

Going up the uneven porch steps, they pass through the darkened living room, and he only belatedly notices they've bypassed the couch when Cas opens the door to the bedroom and flips on the light. Blinking away spots from the sudden brightness from the bare overhead bulb, Dean stares at the neatly made bed in surprise.

"You have sheets," he observes as Cas flips back the blankets and lowers him onto the bed.

Cas glances at him, flooring him with an actual, honest to God smile.

"I anticipated your decision while you were being taken to the infirmary," Cas answers with a flicker of amusement. "I thought you could manage to remain silent until I joined you there."

"Good call." Swiveling around, he drops back onto the sagging mattress, listening to a soundtrack
of protesting springs and creaking wood contentedly. This may be the shittiest mattress in the world, but right now, he doesn't even care, because it's contained in a room with an actual goddamn door. "Why don't you ever use the bed anyway? Not big enough?"

Cas's grin widens unexpectedly. "I have no idea why you always seem so surprised I have a sex life."

"You don't have a sex life," Dean corrects him as Cas goes into the bathroom. "You have several of them, and dude, come on. Five years ago, you were freaked out by a brothel, and now you're--" There really isn't a word for it, or at least, not one Dean thinks he should use when he's kind of forcibly immobilized in the guy's cabin. "Okay with it." When in doubt, go with a dramatic understatement.

Emerging with a nondescript prescription bottle, Cas glances up from reading the label. "Two years."

"Huh?" He reluctantly levers himself into a comfortable slouch against the peeling headboard. "Two years--?

"Two years ago," he answers absently, looking back down at the label. "After I Fell. That attempt, as must be obvious, was far more successful."

It takes a second to put together. "You waited until you Fell to try sex? Really?"

"Angels have no biological imperative to indulge in sexual intercourse and while we are within vessels, it's--different without that context." Seemingly satisfied, he gives Dean the bottle. "I know your tolerance for opiates, and you need to be able to sleep tonight, so take two more. I'll get you some water."

Curious, Dean squints at the unreadable label before opening it and verifying the contents as a generic hydrocodone. Taking out two pills, he decides Cas is probably right when he returns with a glass of water. When he's done, he hands Cas the glass and sits back to wait for them to kick in.

"And you picked up the pharmaceutical hobby when group sex got boring?"

Cas's expression doesn't change, but Dean gets the distinct impression that he's surprised. "Does it matter?"

Dean shrugs, but actually, he's kind of curious now. A thousand easy answers, but instead, Cas chose to avoid the question. "Just wondering."

This is the first conversation they've ever had that's really touched on Cas personally, and honestly, if Dean was thinking about what he was saying, he would have expected a much different response. It's also the longest they've gone--ever--that Cas didn't take some time to remind Dean how much he resents his existence here, and he wants a little more time before Cas remembers that he kind of hates him.

"Cas--earlier, what I said about making me disappear--" Cas's expression goes blank again, but Dean's already committed, so he grimly keeps going. "--it was stupid, and I should have asked--" His imagination fails on how he would have started that conversation. "Okay, I don't know, why no one in the camp should see me?"

Cas doesn't respond for several moments before he finally seems to come to some kind of decision, stiff shoulders relaxing. "I had assumed you understood the reason why. I forgot that your experiences here are from years in your past. You were only here for a very brief time and wouldn't
have thought to extrapolate Dean's reaction to the camp at large."

"It's that dangerous?"

Cas hesitates, looking at nothing. "Yes. It wouldn't be the first time someone tried to impersonate a member of the camp, and the results were--memorable."

"Paranoia is a survival trait." He feels like he should follow that a little further, but between the painkillers and this goddamn endless day, he decides to leave that potential trauma for another day. "So--sorry about that."

"There's no reason to apologize," Cas rouses him to say, the blank look fading. "If you'd asked me, I'm not sure I would have been able to come up with a believable lie." One corner of his mouth quirks reluctantly. "Thank you for sparing me the need to do so."

"Why?" He wishes desperately he'd held off on the goddamn painkillers. "Chuck--?"

"Chuck knew you the first time you were here and he's also a prophet; that mitigated the risk." Cas looks conflicted, not quite meeting Dean's eyes. "He and Dean are the only two people here who I knew and who knew me before I Fell."

"You're friends." Cas makes a face but noticeably doesn't deny it. "Okay, really, really familiar acquaintances and shit, whatever. You trust him."

"Obviously that was a mistake," Cas mutters, mouth tightening before he shakes himself. "However, I knew he'd trust my judgment about you. In any case, you're not easy to forget."

Dean nods absently, but he's still stuck on the entire not going to tell him thing. "Why--"

"--wouldn't I have explained if you'd asked?" Cas regards him with a hint of exasperation. "I wasn't certain how you would react. There were two possibilities: you would want to leave, the danger of which you are already aware of, or you would...." He sighs in annoyance. "Dean, you may not be aware of this, but your misery was obvious. I didn't think increasing it, much less adding an element of constant paranoia, would be particularly helpful."

"You were...being considerate of my feelings."

Cas's eyes narrow. "Please pretend to be less surprised."

He's not that good an actor. "Thanks."

"I should let you get some rest." Cas gets to his feet. "Your ankle--and for that matter, your doubtless traumatic experiences before we found you--should give us some time to decide what to do."

"What traumatic experiences are we talking about again?" Dean asks curiously. "Since I can't talk about my actual trauma."

"I'd leave that to everyone's imaginations. They'll come up with much more interesting possibilities than anything you could say," Cas advises on his way to the door. As he opens it, he turns around. "I'll be here tonight if there is anything you need."

He nods, not willing to admit that he's relieved. As Cas flips off the light, door closing almost soundlessly behind him, Dean closes his eyes, but he's pretty sure there's no way he's sleeping tonight.
Dean awakens abruptly, head aching enough that it takes him several moments to realize he's not on the couch. Shifting, he stills at the sound of rusty springs and straining wood, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. There's a window to his right, limned in weak strands of moonlight, and a deeper darkness in the wall in front of him that eventually resolves into a door. Pushing himself up, he starts to swing his legs out of the bed, but the shock of pain--oh *fuck*, mildly sprained his *ass*--stops him short. Grunting, he tries to catch his breath as he waits for it to subside, but the pain clears his head enough for memory to slam into him, the entire hideous day rushing back in goddamn 3D surround sound.

"*Fuck,*" he hears himself say, as much for his ankle as his goddamn fucked up life.

There's a soft scrape of wood before the door opens, spilling pale yellow light into the room. "Dean?"

"I'm fine," he answers, annoyed with himself. Cas starts to reach for the lightswitch. "Don't."

Cas's hand falls from the switch immediately, but he comes inside before shutting the door behind him. As he pauses at the foot of the bed, the moonlight washes him of color, but even now nothing can quite drown the electric blue of his eyes.

"Dean--"

"I'm fine," he interrupts angrily. If Cas wants to be the object of it, fine. He's been Cas's since he got here, and he thinks he's owed this. "You want something?"

"The list grows longer every day," Cas answers dryly. "Do you need anything?"

"No." It's not really a lie; there's nothing he wants that he can have. "Anything else happen tonight? Lucifer, his army, really determined visitors?"

"No, no, and yes." It's hard to tell in the dim light, but Dean thinks he's amused. "But they left eventually."

"That winning personality of yours probably helped." Even now, he knows that's a shitty thing to say to the guy who's basically running interference for him. "Sorry."

"I've found it useful." To his surprise, Cas sits down on the foot of the bed. "Dean always refused to see anyone when he was injured, so no one was particularly surprised. He worried about its effect on camp morale."

"Wanted everyone to think he was invincible," he mutters. "Yeah, that's something I'd do."

Cas snorts. "I never paid attention to that rule."

"And that's *definitely* something you'd do." He feels an unwilling smile tugging up one corner of his mouth. "Not like you ever listened to me before."

"I always listened." It's quiet, and it's true, but here, it has a history that Dean doesn't know and can barely imagine. "I just didn't always agree."

"How long did he bitch about it?"

"Always." Cas shrugs. "He thought I did it to annoy him, but really, that was just a bonus."

Dean wants to ask how they were really, if they were still friends, if they were anything but
reluctantly bound by what Cas did for him and with him. It's tempting, with Cas sitting here like this in the quiet darkness, like he can ask and maybe he'll even get an answer.

That alone is enough to dry up the words on his tongue. Thinking of Kansas City, when this Dean sent Cas to die, may be the only answer he needs, but that doesn't mean he wants to hear it confirmed. Cas may be crazy--and come the fuck on, it's not like this Dean was much better--but at least he's alive and he's here and he may have changed, but he's still Cas… After a lifetime of losing everyone that mattered one by one no matter how he tried to keep them--Jesus, even giving up Sam, even Sam becoming Lucifer's goddamn vessel doesn't justify that.

Dean shies away from that; he just can't deal with this right now. "What the fuck was Chuck thinking?"

Cas goes still. "Chuck was misguided," he answers flatly, and if that's not a voice for smiting with a vengeance, Dean doesn't know his scary-ass former angels. "I'll deal with him."

"I think it's a little late for that." Which is about all the effort he's gonna put into saving Chuck's ass. "I'm not Dean--this Dean, your Dean, whatever. I don't know shit about this world, he had to know--" Dean stops short, wondering if he can blame shock and Cas's fucking boot almost breaking his ankle for being this stupid. "He was talking to you."

He wonders what Cas will blame for hesitating a split-second before he answers. "What?"

"In the cabin before we left, in Kansas City, in the jeep, right at the gates of Chitaqua: pick one." Cas's expression doesn't change, but that only works on someone who hasn't spent years learning how to read him. "Did he get it?"

"Get what?"

"What he wanted from you," Dean replies softly. "Pay attention Cas, because I'm about to ask you a really important question; you willing risk it?"

Cas hesitates. "I don't understand the question."

"What I'll do if you can't lie to me better than Castiel could in my world."

Cas stiffen. "He was afraid we'd leave."

"He didn't even know I was here until tonight," Dean answers, wondering what the hell he's missing. "Cas, come on, this isn't about me, this is about you! Why--"

"Certainly not for the pleasure of my company," Cas interrupts. "Why do you think?"

Jesus. "Everyone else is dead, right. So why would he think you'd leave now?"

"Because before tonight," Cas answers, "he didn't know that Dean was dead."

"He thought the only reason you were here was because you were, what, waiting for Dean to get back?"

"Yes."

Dean almost says: that's stupid. Cas is all that's keeping Chitaqua running. Of course he wouldn't do that. "You really weren't coming back." Too slowly, it comes together. "That's why everyone believes Dean's still alive. You wouldn't have come back if he was dead."
"No," Cas answers, never looking away. "I wouldn't have."

All at once, Dean's so angry he can barely see.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" he shouts, and only the warning throb from his ankle stops him from grabbing Cas and just fucking shaking him. "Everyone who was in charge here was dead, you knew that! Who was going to--if you weren't here, how would they have--" He has to stop to take a breath, suddenly remembering where they are. He's pretty sure there are people awake still and it's probably not a good idea for them to hear him screaming at Cas, what with the miracle day and all. "You stuck around all this time just because Dean made you? You were just going to die the second he--"

"You think I would live like this for any other reason?" Cas's voice is brutally calm, and somehow, that's the worst part. "Trapped in this rotting--"

"Meatsuit?" Dean interrupts in dawning horror. "It's that fucking lowering to be in the dirt with the rest of us but hey, until you get to die, you're okay with fucking us?"

"Carnality with humanity has never been forbidden, merely procreation," Cas answers with a slow smile. "The pleasure you can provide is almost worth the degradation. At least it passes the time." Dean's still reeling from that when Cas stands up, looking bored. "Is there anything else?"

"Why'd you save me?"

"Because I had to." Cas never looks away. "I didn't Fall for you, Dean, but because of who you are, I still have to protect you."

"There's always a choice."

"If there had been one, I would be dead and you would belong to Lucifer."

For a long moment, it's impossible to draw a full breath.

"I can't even tell what pisses you off more," Dean whispers finally. "That he died, that I'm here and alive, or that you survived at all. Do you even know?"

The door closes, an answer in itself: all of the above, and fuck you. He gets the message loud and clear.
Chapter 4

--Day 19--

Dean spends the next day and a half sleeping and pretending he doesn't hear anyone knocking at the doorway, voices calling his name hopefully from the porch, gentle taps at the closed window behind the curtains in the bedroom. At least one thing is going right; everyone's staying out of the cabin, and that much, he guesses he should be grateful for.

Food still appears at regular intervals, though now it's left on the tiny kitchen table. He hates even seeing it, feeling like a pet being fed and watered by a dutiful owner, and that pretty much kills any desire to actually eat it. Cas also left the painkillers on the counter, but while it's food or starvation, he'll cut off his own foot before he takes even one of them. Considering Cas is notable in his utter absence, it's possibly the stupidest form of rebellion possible, not to mention Dean's the one that actually suffers for it, but right now, he doesn't give a shit.

The throbbing of his ankle is a lot better by the time he wakes the second morning, enough that Cas was probably right about how bad it was, though the hobbling around probably isn't doing it any favors. Unfortunately, he only has about thirty minutes to enjoy it before he twists it again on a brief, reluctant foray into the kitchen when he thinks he sees a shadow on the porch and almost knocks himself out trying to get back to the safety of the bedroom with its door and more importantly, an actual lock.

Which means that right now, his entire world is contained within the walls of a tiny bedroom that he can't leave unless he wants to face all the people here who think he's someone else, or redraw the sigils and get the fuck out of this goddamn camp.

It's not that he hasn't thought about it, because fuck his promise to Cas about staying in the camp, he's pretty sure that deal is pretty much over. But even if his ankle was okay, once he leaves, there's nowhere he can go. If anyone's alive who knows him and isn't here, he doesn't know how to get in touch with them or where to find them. If there was anything to work with, he might be willing to risk Lucifer, his still-missing army, and the entire United States government, but he doesn't, and he's still sane enough to know leaving just to spite Cas would be stupid.

He's the most wanted of pretty much everyone in the world right now, and some of them don't even know he's here. Whoever sent him here either hated him a lot or this is the worst possible accident in history.

He's not sure when he drifts off--sleep right now is a matter of a couple of hours before either pain or unremembered nightmares wake him up sweating and terrified with no idea why--but he awakens all at once at the sound of the door and sits up so suddenly the rush of blood makes him dizzy, black spots dancing in front of his eyes.

When his vision clears, he blinks at Chuck sitting in a chair almost against the wall, which isn't all that far but still out of Dean's best lunge on a good day. This isn't a good day, and strangely, he just can't bring himself to actually care. After that little heart to heart with Cas, he's not sure anything else that happens in this hellhole will get any farther than the surface of his skin.

"I'm going to kick your ass," Dean says for form's sake, settling back down and closing his eyes again on the off-chance that Chuck will just go away.

"I probably deserve it," Chuck answers, voice wobbling dangerously. He reluctantly slits open his
eyes enough to see Chuck slumping into as good an approximation of a fetal position while sitting in a chair as anyone can get. "I wanted to--to apologize. I didn't mean--"

"Are you fucking with me?"

Chuck's eyes come up from their stare at the floor, and the sincere misery in them is undeniable. "Dean--"

"Get the fuck out of here," he interrupts tiredly, the brief flare of anger burning out almost as soon as it had begun. "I don't care anymore."

"I didn't--I didn't plan it or anything. I knew it was a bad idea, but it was the only one I had." Chuck curls up even more, shoulders shaking, but because this is Dean's shitty life, he doesn't make any move to get up and leave. "You may not believe this, but I really didn't--I didn't think about what it would mean for you."

"No, that part I get," Dean answers flatly, meeting Chuck's eyes, and just barely controls the urge to flinch; Jesus, he's not sure he could do anything to Chuck that's worse than what he's doing to himself. "You were trying to get at Cas, and I was the way to do it. Right now, I'm not the one you should be worrying about here. Talk to him."

"If I could find him, I would." Dean snorts. "Dude, find the cabin making the most noise and I think you'll be okay."

Chuck jerks his gaze up from where it drifted to the floor. "No, I mean--no one knows where he is. He left orders with Vera and Joe for the patrol yesterday morning to continue the current routes and suspended further reporting, since you'd--" he trails off, probably because of Dean's expression. "--be giving them their orders from now on," Dean finishes for him. At some point, he's gonna react to this. "Did he leave the camp?"

"No," Chuck answers positively, adding at Dean's skeptical look, "He just does this sometimes. It's not personal."

Briefly, he wonders if Chuck's crazier than he thought. "You get for him I'm like, a hideous duty that he has to see through because even Falling didn't get him a get-out-of-having-a-charge card?" He thinks about getting up but just doesn't see the point. "I'm not him, his Dean, the guy he did all this for. You chained him here for someone he doesn't give a shit about but can't get away from, his own goddamn personal Hell."

Chuck blinks, uncurling a little to give Dean a searching look. "He said that? That he didn't have a choice?" He frowns, eyes distant. "Huh."

"What?"

"How long have you been here again?" Chuck makes a face. "Not his best work, but hey, you bought it, so--"

"He's fucking with me?" Chuck looks at him incredulously, which yeah, that was actually a pretty stupid question. "Jesus, he's like this with everyone? All the time?"

"When he's not high, stoned, or drunk, pretty much." Chuck shrugs. "He won't leave, Dean, not as long as you're here. It's you not being here that was gonna be a problem."
"So you outed me to make sure Cas stuck around?"

Chuck winces. "I get it, it sucks for you, but--"

"It worked?"

Chuck winces again, but at least has the grace to nod. "Look, you have to understand. With Dean gone--"

"Someone had to do the job, and Cas somehow not only got stuck with it, but also made it work." He frowns at Chuck's expression. "How did that happen anyway?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Chuck admits, frowning uncertainly before shaking his head, brown eyes hardening as he looks at Dean. "No one expected Cas to survive, no matter how it fell out. Everyone thought he came back because Dean was still alive, which what other reason would he do it, but still, he was here. Except Dean's dead, and the only reason Cas survived is because of you. The only reason he's still here is because Chitaqua is the safest place on this planet he could take you. So question: what happens if Chitaqua stops being safe?"

He has no idea how to answer that.

"He hid you because he couldn't take the risk that the camp would kill you even if he was able to explain, assuming they would even stop long enough to listen."

"Cas said something about that." Hearing it from Chuck makes it more real, somehow. "That could really happen?"

"Saying it was only a risk was wildly optimistic on his part," Chuck answers. "It wouldn't matter who you were; nothing was gonna save you if they found out you weren't our Dean Winchester."

"And you ented me without even a goddamn warning--"

"Like you would have gone along with it. Think about it, Dean; how long was this gonna work?" Chuck gestures at Dean's arm. "I get it, the sigils were doing a great job hiding you, but--I mean, it's ink. Doesn't take all that much to break it."

Which Chuck would know really well. "He mentioned a tattoo."

"Yeah, and how long until you got careless about activating it? Or just forgot to do it?" Chuck counters. "You've been here what, since the night Dean died? That's just over two weeks--you're telling me you could keep this up forever?"

He'd been pretty careful about not asking himself that question. "Well, the world is kind of ending, so--"

"It's not over yet." Chuck's expression darkens. "It could happen two ways, okay, but it was going to happen: either you told Cas you can't do this anymore or you forgot and someone saw you. The result would be the same either way: Cas takes you and leaves, and best case scenario, he doesn't have to kill half the camp to get you out of here."

"He wouldn't…." He can't put that in any kind of context. "Chuck, he doesn't even know me. You think he'd…."

"Leave with you if he had to? Kill us to do it? Yeah, he would. He wouldn't like it, but it wouldn't slow him down. You being here at all is a loaded gun to everyone's head. Revealing you--"
"--lowers the chances he'll pull the trigger." What the hell is he supposed to do with that? "So what now? Cas fucked off--"

"He'll be back," Chuck interrupts with a shrug. "Look, trust me on this one; he just does this sometimes."

"Dude, you lost me at 'sometimes'. Try every fucking time we're in the same goddamn room for more than five minutes." Chuck blinks, looking dangerously like he wants to explain--again, and Dean's not sure what's weirder, that anything Cas does has an actual explanation, or that Chuck seems to be doing something a lot like defending him. "Whatever, I just fake it until he comes back."

Either way, he's probably going to have to leave this room, if for no other reason than to hunt Cas's ass down and get him with the current program. Whatever the hell that is.

Chuck nods, getting slowly to his feet, and abruptly, Dean remembers something else. "The bodies. Where are they?"

"The bodies?" Chuck frowns, then his eyes widen in horror as he drops back into the chair. "Uh, at the cabin--" he gestures toward the wall in the wrong direction. "There's this cabin where we--"

"Yeah, I saw it. They burned yet?"

"No." Chuck hesitates. "Cas took Dean's ashes, I think. They're not in the cabin, anyway."

Which might, Dean admits reluctantly, explain why Cas is no-show right now. But that gives him an idea.

"The other bodies, we need to burn them, and we're doing it tonight." He pushes the covers back and slides to the edge of the bed, feeling better now that he's actually got something to do. Might as well do something with this leader thing. "In the kitchen, there's a bottle of painkillers. Bring 'em here while I get dressed."

Experience has taught him that just because his threshold for pain is astronomically high doesn't mean his tolerance for dealing with people follows, and it gets lower the longer he tries to combine the two. When he's hunting, this works out pretty well, but it becomes a lot trickier when he's got to interact with people and regularly remind himself not to kill them no matter how annoying it is to hear them breathe.

Hobbling toward a pile of what looks like clean clothes at the foot of the bed--he deliberately doesn't think about the fact he didn't bring them in here--he grabs a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. By the time Chuck gets back, he's mostly dressed and trying to remember where he left his boots. Shaking out a couple of painkillers from the bottle Chuck mutely extends, he swallows them with the water and drags up his sleeve as he waits for them to kick in.

"You remember the sigils or do I need to draw them for you first?"

"I remember," Chuck confirms, holding the pen uncertainly before sitting down on the edge of the bed. To Dean's eye, even upside down, it looks right, but only one way to find out. Leaning back, Chuck cocks his head, eyes narrowing in thought, but before Dean can ask him anything, he sets the pen aside. "I saw your boots by the door. Should I--"

"Yeah, go."

It's almost embarrassing that Chuck has to help him with them, but by the time he stands up, testing
his ankle, he thinks he should be okay. Breathing the activation, he glances at Chuck to indicate it's time to go, but Chuck's staring at his arm again.

"Okay, what?"

"I don't know," he says slowly. "You need some help?"

He debates all of three seconds before deciding he better man up and take it already. "Yeah." If he has to, he could probably do it on his own, but this is not a has-to situation. As Chuck slides under his arm with a grunt, Dean steadies himself as they start toward the open bedroom door. "So you have no idea where Cas is?"

"Nope." Chuck huffs a little as they reach the beads, and it's an effort for Dean not to tear them down just for the hell of it. As they reach the porch, he looks around warily, but no one's around yet, so no way to tell. Once they're down the steps and on flat land, he lets go of Chuck, and okay, yeah, this should work. "I asked around, but no one's seen him, so no point looking. Where we going?"

"Dean's cabin," Dean tells him after a moment of savoring his (limited) freedom, mostly because honestly, he can't think of anywhere else to go. "Where the hell is he? The camp isn't that big. I mean, come on."

"If Cas doesn't want to be found, it gets a lot bigger," Chuck answers unhelpfully, matching Dean's slow pace. "Though gotta say--"

"Does he always pull shit like this?" Dean demands.

Chuck looks at him in annoyance. "Gotta say," he repeats, "that even for Dean, it took a special effort to piss him off enough to bail." His expression crumples briefly, reminded of his Dean's death all over again, before he shakes himself, looking at him curiously. "What did you do--"

"Nothing," he answers shortly. "He's been a dick pretty much since I got here. End subject." Chuck nods quickly, looking straight ahead with a bad attempt at casual, and Dean sighs. "What the hell happened to him anyway?"

Chuck trips over nothing. "Uh, you're kidding, right?"

"No, I mean--he's not an angel," Dean answers, glancing at Chuck. "I thought if they Fell, they became human, and he's--" He struggles for a moment, but there really isn't a word. "Not."

"Oh." Chuck chews his lip uncertainly. "That."

"That." The chewing gets more enthusiastic, and Dean starts to worry about the state of Chuck's lip. "What?"

"Dean wouldn't talk about it," Chuck says, which tells him both nothing at all and some serious, serious shit. "Cas--I don't even think he remembers much of it, honestly."

"Remember…."

"After he Fell. When he got back here," Chuck clarifies, looking uncomfortable. "Dean and Bobby handled it. Mostly, they sent me for books and told me to stay out of the way." He swallows. "You could hear him all the way across the camp."

There's nothing about that sentence that isn't horrifying. "It happened here?" This probably isn't a
great place for conversation. Even if they can't see him, Chuck standing around for no particular reason talking to himself might get some attention. Starting again toward the cabin again, he asks, "Bobby was here?"

"Yeah." Chuck skips a few steps before falling into step beside him again "You know this was a twofer for Dean, right? Sam had just agreed to be Lucifer's vessel a few weeks before, and Dean was still..."

He can guess. "Yeah, got it. So what happened?"

"Yeah, so he...wasn't in a great place," Chuck temporizes in what has to be the most epic understatement of all time. "Cas had been pretty much Grace-free for weeks, and we all thought that was it, he'd Fallen. Then--it was so weird. Me and Bobby and Dean were working on Dean's cabin, it wasn't really habitable yet. And Dean was trying to fix the roof and he just went still. Bobby yelled at him that it was almost dusk and we didn't have time for him to screw around, and then he slid to the edge and jumped down and made for Cas's cabin."

Dean considers the distance from the roof to the ground incredulously. "Seriously?"

"Sprained his ankle pretty badly, not that he noticed," Chuck admits, eyes following Dean's. "Bobby was still yelling, and we were halfway to the cabin when I felt--something." He shakes his head. "I don't know how to describe it, like--like the whole world just stopped."

Dean nods as they reach the steps and gratefully lowers himself down, stretching his leg. Leaning absentely against the bannister, Chuck frowns at nothing.

"And?" Dean prompts.

"Sorry." Chuck shakes himself. "We got inside--back then, the cabins we were working on had a ramp for Bobby's chair, so Bobby was already in there and with Cas by the time I got there. Dean wouldn't even let me in the cabin. Next day, he installed a lock on the bedroom door and said anyone even tried to go inside, he'd shoot them first and not give a fuck about questions after."

Dean props an arm on the step behind him, staring in the direction of the front gate, not sure he wants to admit that sounds like him, because that means he also can guess why. "What were they doing in there?"

"No idea. I stayed out," Chuck answers in surprise. "I helped with getting supplies and you know, kept the few people we had back then calm about it--no one here now--and went to Bobby's for more books."

Books.

"Are they still here?" Dean asks casually, heart pounding. "You remember which ones?"

"Cas may have them? I don't know, you'd have to ask him." Chuck shrugs. "I don't really remember the titles, sorry. It's been a while. Why?"

"Just curious." He tilts his head back, staring at the edge of the roof and trying to get his thoughts in some kind of order. "So what, now we just wait Cas out or something and he'll come back in his own time? That how it works?"

"Pretty much if you were anyone but Dean."

"How did Dean handle it?"
"Your guess is as good as mine," Chuck sighs. "If Dean needed him for something, Cas would show up. Late," he adds with a faint smile, almost affectionate, reminding him that Chuck is probably just as crazy as Cas these days. "But I'm pretty sure that was deliberate."

Making up shit and hope it works, then. "How's the toilet paper situation?"

Chuck shudders all over: bad, then. "Not really sure how well leaves are going to go over," he answers, looking hunted, which if he's inventory, means he'll probably need to sleep somewhere well-fortified as well as be well-armed.

"Like, there's not any more at all?" Chuck's miserable nod abruptly rearranges Dean's priorities; it's one thing to deal with goddamn end days, but doing it without toilet paper is something else. "There's are at least two major cities we can get to and back before dusk. You're telling me we cleaned them out?" A lot of really questionable bathroom jokes are suddenly uncomfortably relevant and he may never laugh at one again, which just sucks.

"No, it's just, demons? Croats? Supply runs are necessity-only; it was too dangerous."

"Dude, we were in the city last night and there was a real lack of opposition to our pick-up duty. So what are you waiting for?"

Chuck blinks at him with an expression that's a lot like dawning worship. "They might be back," he says slowly, but Dean can practically feel him wanting to dash back down the stars and make a wish list. "I mean, if you ordered it--"

"So this is what power's like," Dean says thoughtfully. Planning a risky mission into a once demon and Croat infested city he doesn't know probably isn't better than sitting alone in Dean's cabin and thinking, except yeah, it is. "I like it. Tell me how it works."

Chuck shrugs, less than helpful. "Dean always planned it out and decided who did escort and who salvaged; we just kind of went along with it."

"So make it up as I go along: got it." He can do this. "Okay, two things. We're burning the bodies tonight--get someone on that. Second, we're going on a supply run in an hour, and everyone's invited. I got some questions for you, so get back as fast as you can. Got it?"

"Got it," Chuck hesitates, giving Dean a searching look. "You know, Cas is--if he finds out you left the camp…"

"Yeah, too bad he's not here to ask about that." Dean grins at him. "Think it might get his attention?"

Dean may have never actually led a formal raid for supplies into foreign and presumably hostile territory before, but the truth is, he actually does know how this works. Dad was military, and for all he was a loner, command was part and parcel of his and Sam's education. Its major applications mostly involved getting civilians the hell away before they were possessed, eaten, dissolved, or just plain killed, but exchange 'civilians' for 'militia' and he figures the same rules apply. He and Sam were small for an army, but he can do the math to encompass something bigger than two. Fake it 'til you make it is a valid plan; God knows it's not like he has a lot of options.

Grabbing his counterpart's journal on his way out of the cabin (some things, he reflects, just don't change at all and keeping a journal seems to be one of them), he skims through it as he walks, looking for standard operating procedure on supply runs, and tries not to be impressed by the fact that this Dean was good at this shit. He had to be, he reminds himself irritably, but adequacy issues
don't really respond to shit like logic.

Going in Cas's cabin, he tosses the journal on the couch and turns back to survey the front doorway, tracing each near-invisible sigil to memorize their positions before going to the bedroom and studying the inner frame carefully. It's the same dark wood as the front door, and relatively new compared to the one surrounding the bathroom door and the closet, the wood well-worn and much lighter, the dull heads of each nail easily visible even from the center of the room.

Going back out into the living room, he walks through cabin, checking every door and every window, wondering how the fuck he could have missed something like this. The two exterior doors and the windows, like the bedroom door, all have the same newer, darker framing, but the utility closet-slash-library matches the bathroom and closet, older, lighter, and he's going to guess are what came standard with this cabin, since they match the ones in Dean's. As a pattern, it's unmistakable, but that could have been done when they were repairing the cabins.

Returning to the bedroom, the stark, bare walls almost taunt him in their sheer lack of clues, and he suddenly thinks of the missing animals: look for what should be there and isn't. Stark bare walls, like no one's so much as touched them since they were painted, no strips peeled away, watermarks or the normal wear of people and time--You could hear him all the way across the camp--or a Fallen angel locked in a room.

Grabbing a chair from the kitchen, he pulls it to the bedroom door and climbs up, not surprised to see the splash of paint on the dark frame beneath what's probably about two years' worth of dust. Swallowing, he gets down, staring at the bedroom door: so that's the reason it's got such a good lock.

On impulse, he circles around the far side of the bed near the window, studying the smooth floor beneath the layer of dust and dirt and crouches to run his fingers over the surprisingly smooth surface before studying his fingers carefully, noting the dots of off-white in the undifferentiated mass. Rubbing his fingers together, he feels the unmistakable texture of residual sawdust.

New doorframes, sanded floor, painted walls, all in a room Cas hates from a time he doesn't remember in a cabin Chuck wasn't allowed inside after getting books from Bobby's: plenty of perfectly legit reasons for all of it. He just wishes he knew which of those totally legit reasons it is.

You could hear him all the way across the camp.

Straightening, he dusts his hand clean on his jeans, remembering he's got something else to do right now. Grabbing the journal off the couch and the box of keys from the pantry--he's got a good idea why all the keys are now in Cas's possession, though their storage location really makes him wonder if Cas knows what a kitchen is actually for--he flips it open as he goes back outside and tries to pretend he's not relieved.

Hearing multiple voices approach, Dean looks up from the worn map of Kansas City he found among the debris of leadership, Dean Winchester-style: to wit, shoved with a bunch of papers in a corner under a couple of rusty knives because basic organization is for losers who don't have Sam riding their asses about losing shit.

At some point, he's gonna have to man up and search the entire cabin, see what this Dean left behind, but he doesn't have a lot of hope there's much that's gonna be useful, and in all honesty, finding the city maps were a genuine surprise, neatly folded sheets between pages ripped from old books with print so faded it's a guess on language, much less function and abbreviated diagrams for rituals that Dean finds himself carefully setting aside for later.
"Chuck," he says to the man sitting across the table from him who's begun to look annoyingly nervous, "go. I'll be out in a sec."

As Chuck leaves with an uneasy glance, he scans the sheet one more time, marking the notations on entrance and exit points again, obviously added at different times, which are pretty much the only thing that makes any intuitive sense on a glance. Thick lines of unknown purpose sometimes follow what may or may not be roads in marker, and entire areas of the city are inexplicably crossed out or circled with cryptic notes that could mean anything. On a hope, references to other, more detailed maps, but he hasn't found them yet.

Standing up, he folds it carefully before sliding it between the relevant pages of Dean's journal that describe the first of several missions in the city that's as close as he's got to guidelines and makes a note to himself to ask Chuck who the hell drew these maps and hope they're still alive for a repeat performance. Though not library quality, they're not bad. He's halfway to the door before he realizes that a handgun and a rifle are underdressed these days and forces himself to open up the miniature closet armory, because it's stupid to be this goddamn weird about using these weapons.

Everyone's waiting when he finally comes out, grimly prepared for a small war and making Dean somehow still feel underdressed while carrying more weapons at once than he ever has in his life. Standing on the edge of the porch, he does a quick count and comes up with about half the population, ignoring the sudden silence, and thinks (hopes) that he'll get used to being the center of attention. Not like he's got much of a choice.

"Okay, Chuck told you what we're doing. Sarah, Kyle, Mel, and--" It's an effort, but unfortunately, Cas was right about the number of people who have experience on patrol according to an increasingly reluctant Chuck, "Sid, congratulations, you're promoted to team leaders, we'll get you a nice badge for it later, alright?"

There's some faint, polite laughter, like they're not sure that's a joke. Glancing at Chuck holding the box of keys, he just catches the tail-end of his expression, not enough to identify but enough to make him wonder.

"Chuck's giving you each a copy of the list and keys to the jeeps. Split up everyone and decide who stays with the jeep, who's on watch, and who's playing scavenger. Whoever stays with the jeep, keep the motor running; gas is still more replaceable than people, and ask me what I'll do to anyone who comes back without their whole team. Or don't, just imagine it."

Dean does a quick check in the ensuing silence (not encouraging, but not worrying, either) and chooses the only two faces here he's pretty sure he recognizes by name: Joe, at six foot three and built like a linebacker, is memorable, and Kat, who fortunately is right in front of him.

"Joe, you and Kat are with me and Chuck." Dean pauses automatically for non-existent questions and doesn't sigh; he gets why Cas instituted those long ass verbal reports now as well as written. "Everyone know where they're going? Each of you have four locations and fifteen minutes each; if you run out, improvise. We'll meet outside the city in two hours; more than that, I come after you and no one wants that. We're good?" Dean doesn't wait for an answer since he probably won't get one. "Let's go. Chuck, you're riding shotgun." Because Dean kind of misses driving, like a lot.

"Um, you know I don't usually go on these," Chuck murmurs urgently as everyone disperses. "I'm more the stay at home type."

"So we'll both fake it," Dean says, slapping him on the shoulder before turning him firmly in the direction of the garage. "Let's go."
"You never went on one of these before?" Dean asks as the shitty county roads they've been following for what feels like forever finally comes to a bumpy end. Making a sharp left onto what he'll generously still consider a highway because that's what the signs say and who is he to argue with properly approved signs anyway, he glances at Chuck. "Faster, Chuck, this is not a drill; I repeat, this is not--"

"God, shut up," Chuck answers, twisting to look at Dean worriedly. "I only went along a couple of times when we were short people."

"So what was it like?" The city is getting closer and, if Dean remembers correctly, while everything was all-clear the other night, he's still going to err on the side of avoiding those who work for the military. It just feels right.

"Not like this," Chuck admits, trying with admirable success to sink to his seat. "Dean wasn't usually that--enthusiastic."

"Whole new world," Dean tells him cheerfully. "Anything else?"

"Oh, wait." Chuck digs in his pocket for a second, frantic, then slumps in relief as he pulls out a well-worn map, carefully unfolding it. On a glance, not library-issue, either: hand drawn and with definite signs it was done after Kansas was zoned, like the ones in this Dean's cabin. "Everything's marked here--"

"So you had a map and didn't tell me?" He's made his peace with Chuck making him their fearless leader, but there's no reason not to have a little fun anyway.

"Inventory," Chuck hisses. "I'm not on the planning side of these things; I keep a backup copy."

"So you can't think for yourself?"

"Did I ever give you the impression I did? Sorry about that; no, I follow orders so I don't die or Croat out or get a demon where the sun doesn't shine. Survival, really liking it." Looking bitterly aggrieved that Dean ever doubted he's a follower, not a leader, Chuck opens the map carefully, spreading it out on his knees. "Okay, so it looks like we cleaned out almost everything in a ten mile radius from these points," Chuck spreads his fingers out to indicate three of the ten dark red dots. "Escape points; all of them keep us about the same distance from camp if the highway's out of commission. We never got more than ten minutes once we arrived." Chuck looks up, uncertain. "Longer, there's time to block all our escape points and trap us in the city." Chuck swallows, face turned away. "Dean got it from one of the demons he questioned about how long it took to find us. He had this entire--system for this."

Well, it wouldn't be the Apocalypse if this Dean couldn't indulge in some righteous torture for the greater good. "Great. Show me the point closest to where we haven't already cleaned up. This still accurate?"

"We get regular reports, of course. And--um." Chuck doesn't look at him, very deliberately. "We have a lot of different sources. It's accurate."

Read: torture for accurate cartography as well. Just what he needed to hear. "Right," he says flatly. "How far to that last point from the city limits?"

"Um." Chuck squints down at the map. "Ten miles, I think." He looks worried. "Look, I know you're kinda taking this on faith, but Dean knew what he was doing when he made the rules for
this. We don't know why the city was clear last night; could just be to fuck with us because he can."

"Clear all three nights I was there," Dean tells him airily and is rewarded with Chuck's most horrified stare. "It was fine. Keep going."

Chuck's mouth works soundlessly before he manages to say, "I'm saying, this is dangerous. I mean, toilet paper is great and all, but--"

"You might have noticed your Dean's not here," Dean says, watching the road. "What with the making me pretend I'm him and everything."

"Which is why I'm saying you don't know what you're doing. This isn't like hunting alone; there's a lot of people who trust you not to get them killed."

And this just stopped being funny. "Trust me to not get them killed, huh? Cause they think I'm him. Except he's dead. And so we come back to the point--"

"So you're pissed enough at me to risk killing everyone here?" Chucks' voice hits a register Dean formerly associated with helium abuse, or maybe his fairly horrific memories of being forced to watch an opera one Christmas on TV. He never thought any sound could be worse than Sammy's inhumanly well-developed lungs (he had to have had like, four of them or something) and was proven horrifically, mind-scarringly wrong. "Look, I'm sorry! Just, uh, kill me, don't punish anyone else--"

"Oh my God," Dean mutters. "You seriously think I'd get everyone killed because that's fun for me? Really?"

A glance at Chuck's face confirms that yeah, he does.

"Right." Dean draws a breath. "There are ten safe entrance points and the one we're going to isn't ten miles away and Jesus, you can't read a map for shit; it's fourteen miles, forty-six feet. Fifteen minutes is the maximum time limit for all the safe entrance points. Two years, never deviated even once, this entire thing ran like a machine, because you know, infinite number of supplies in a finite space? Makes sense." Reaching back, Dean grabs the bag and tosses it in Chuck's lap as they pass the last safe entrance point. "I read his mission notes while you were getting everyone since I had some time to kill."

Chuck stares down at his lap blankly.

"His map's in there; see, he did the math and I think figured that he'd only get a year out of it before the demons or the army cleared out all the safe points. Huge underestimation, by the way, but what can you do? Lots of demons and not one of them ever thought to just destroy everything in the fifteen minute zone."

Chuck jerks the zipper open, reaching inside and pulling out the journal. He doesn't open it, holding it in one hand like he's not sure what it's for. "Oh."

"There are five more points he mapped himself; he's never gone near any of them except to chart them. Because if no one bothered to figure out a way to catch him when they knew exactly where he might hit and how long it would take, he figured it was safe to bet that they wouldn't immediately catch on if he shook things up a bit."

Chuck nods slowly, eyes fixed on the dashboard like revelation might be imminent and he's waiting for the words to write themselves in gold script right there.
"I thought his plan sounded good. Since I haven't done this before, and I don't know what I'm doing, though, what would I know?" Dean eases his foot from the gas for the turn. "I marked the page in there. You read up while I manfully deal with your crushing lack of confidence."

Chuck, to Deans' epic lack of surprise, doesn't move, fingers closed tightly around the fading brown cover.

"Might want to check," Dean says into the silence, because he's a dick. Chuck (and Cas) have no reason to trust him or even like him. It wasn't him who apparently built an entire camp on the strength of making pathological clinginess a workable long term strategy, and it's not like Dean's ever been unaware that being unable to give up on anything, ever, is not in any way a virtue. Christ, they don't even know him, and he keeps forgetting that. "Better get to reading before the screaming starts," he adds, wondering tiredly if he can stop anytime soon.

Chuck takes a deep breath, staring out the windshield. "I'm good." After a second, he adds, voice wavering a little, "Was hoping I'd get a chance to get more paper anyway."

Dean ignores the implication of an extended olive branch, but he thinks that if he was a better person, a much better person, he'd appreciate the thought.

With the exception of Chuck, no one really seems all that weirded out by his orders. If there's any difference between him and Dean, either no one notices or they just don't care. Feeling incredibly self-conscious, he paces around the two jeeps like it's really useful when there's literally nothing alive in a ten block radius but them.

With Joe and Kat at either end of the street, the entire stay-with-the-vehicle thing is up to Dean, who flagrantly ignores his own orders for someone to stay in the jeep and keep it running; he figures it's close enough to pace around them, and hey, they are still running, so there's that.

Being here during the day isn't any better than being here at night, with added flashbacks to his first time here: running away from Croats and freaked out by the sight of armed tanks rumbling over broken concrete, like the entire world was taking notes from shitty Hollywood blockbusters when it came to life during an Apocalypse. Vaguely, he reminds himself to ask Cas where the hell the military stored their tanks, because Jesus, it may be the end of the world, but that's no reason not to fulfill a childhood dream and drive one of those things.

Dean surveys the still-standing heap of former superstore that once housed groceries, a photo store, budget optometry, and a McDonald's and tries not think about this in global terms. No matter how many times he tells himself that he gets what an Apocalypse means, it keeps hitting him out of nowhere, this incredibly stupid, petty shit that even a camp didn't make quite so concrete. This is--was--civilization, and Dean's not done all his reading, true, but he's heard enough to know this city isn't unique in any sense of the word. This is happening, has happened, is happening, will happen, everywhere, and to all humanity.

It's not that all was well in the world as long as there was still a McDonald's left standing, if Starbucks was still selling hideous overpriced coffee, if Wal-Mart's discount on t-shirts was still going strong, or even that right now he has a massive craving for a Big Mac. It's that he's circling two jeeps running on gas that's only plentiful because there's a real lack of vehicles to use it around here, and gas, from his admitted hazy understanding of the supply chain, like fast food, has to be manufactured by people from the raw resources at hand. Lacking fast food, you can get back to basics and learn to love your Brussels sprouts, but there's really no back to basics when it comes to shit like oil. He just doesn't think, off the top of his head, Lucifer decided to spare the oil industry and just take out the dollar stores and anywhere with a two for one taco deal.
Oil, he thinks; electricity, maybe, but they have generators, and he remembers writing that damn history paper on the industrial revolution, and power grids are great, but there are options that may or may not involve rivers. That was almost half his life ago and he never did get back his grade because they moved on the next day so who the hell knows; planes--see oil; trains, coal still around, how does he not know this shit? Nuclear power plants, Dean thinks with a flash of horror; what's going on with those these days anyway?

Granted, Lucifer's clever plan of wiping out humanity makes all this speculation pointless, since they aren't going to last nearly long enough to worry about returning to horses as their major source of transportation, but a nuclear holocaust doesn't take all that long, if he thinks about it too much, and he's really got to stop.

Chuck, struggling red-faced and panting from three goddamn boxes of printer paper, spirals, and legal pads, makes the mistake of pausing to look at Dean inquiringly and only Dean grabbing the top box saves Chuck from a really painful meeting with asphalt.

He stares at the boxes. "You were serious about the paper?"

"Can't write on leaves; trust me, I tried." Putting the remaining boxes down, he leans over, hands braced on his knees and pants for a few seconds. Dean slings his rifle back and opens up back seat, figuring putting it up himself will reduce the amount of time he'll have to spend pretending like he and Chuck aren't in a really awkward place right now and Chuck will go away.

"Everything okay?" Chuck asks, staying bent over even though there's a real lack of panting now and no reason to stick around.

"Oh, everything's great," he answers brightly. "Was thinking of grabbing a burger--hey, what are closing hours these days?"

Chuck's eyes narrow. "How long am I looking at having to nod in shame so I'll feel less like a horrible human being who kills puppies in their free time?"

"I wouldn't bother penciling in a final date just yet." Adding the last box--fourteen boxes of paper now, what the hell do you write about when life is a dystopian melodrama already?--he shakes his head. "Did you know that more people are--well, were five years ago, anyway--alive now than have died in the history of the world?"

Chuck tries to look like he's following, and also like he's interested. Dean's not ready to grade for effort yet, but he's sure one day he'll get there.

"Well, it's bullshit, so don't believe it. But let's do some math; seven billion and change people living on this planet and in the last five years, we're talking what, a few million--"

"Depends on if you believe the radio these days."

He stops short, feeling unsteady. "How much higher? If Croat's only been around two years--"

"Dying of Croatoan is the least of our problems," Chuck answers with a snort. "Weird thing, international epidemics cause panic."

"Like bombings of major cities?" Chuck looks surprised. "I heard."

"Like mass panic, social breakdown, fragmentation, revolution, any of that ring a bell?" Chuck gestures wildly. "Croatoan isn't what's going to wipe us off the planet; we're taking care of that ourselves. Much longer...." He trickles off, realizing again that with Dean's death, this Apocalypse
thing was already won. "Anyway--"

"Where are you getting your information?"

Chuck shrugs, failing at casual. "I pay attention."

Big numbers aren't helping with being calm and leader-like, but they're big enough to feel pretty unreal, so he can deal with it. "Right." He tries to remember where he was going with this. "Math, whatever, Hell has more demons than there are humans, by a couple of magnitudes." This, he has no doubts about whatsoever. "Lucifer's got lots of ways to get them here and not like there aren't bodies to spare. So what the hell are they still doing in Hell? I just don't think everyone salts and burns, and anti-possession sigils can't have made it all around the world this fast. Have they?"

"Magnitudes," Chuck says, and he realizes Chuck's got a familiar look on his face, kinda like the one Dean's been fighting the last hour or so. "Like, we're talking math, as in, numbers. Big numbers--"

Dean thinks: I did not just break Chuck.

"Like, big numbers, millions right?" Chuck nearly walks into the jeep trying to look like he's not about to start crying. "Millions of demons."

"No," Dean says, and God help him, what comes out of his mouth is like the unnatural progeny of John Winchester at his most emphatic and Cas at his most angelically absolute, coated in righteousness; if Dean wasn't so freaked out by his own voice even he would believe unquestioningly. Chuck's head comes up, hopeful; it probably helps if you add in a deeply personal need to believe in the face of all evidence to the contrary. "Not even close, I was just fucking with you. Hey, you want paper, this may be your last chance for a while. We still got room and--" Dean swings an arm over Chuck's shoulders, which unfortunately makes checking his watch impossible, "--five minutes. Need--ink? Toner? Some pens? This is our last stop, so better make it good, okay?"

Chuck nods hesitantly, picking up enthusiasm when Dean nods with him. "Yeah, I should--yeah. Uh, I'll just go--"

"Follow the muse, man," Dean hears himself say; what the hell did he just say? "Go with God."

Chuck retreats toward the megastore with what Dean thinks is more about getting away from him than the last thousand pens in the world. Dean can't even blame him, because he kind of wishes he could get away from himself--go with God, and why the hell would anyone follow a goddamn muse unless they had a death wish? On the upside, Chuck has a way more concrete reason to be afraid than theoretical numbers that he doesn't know are actually not theoretical at all.

"Not millions," Dean says, because he can't handle this, he knows he can't, but he's a fucking master at all the ways you can fake it. "Not even close."

Even if they can hardly remember the vague shape of what it was like to walk beneath an open sky, to wear flesh that never belonged to anyone else, that sliver of time they were here in an existence that spans eons in a place that strips them of everything that made them human, that, that much, Hell always lets them keep. They know that they were human, once, even if they have no context to define the word; they know that this is their home, even if they lost what that means; that both of those things are true and that they'll never have them again. No one could hate humanity as much as those that have been exiled from it; no one, even Lucifer, could possibly hate like a demon does, a hatred that Hell shapes into defining them. "Billions, and that's just the start."
Dean marks time in an empty street while people who think he's the one thing standing between them and the end of everything fill up the jeeps; no demons attack, no Croats lumber past, no tanks skim by, and they're on the back on the road and heading for camp before Dean reminds himself to pretend that the clawing echoes beneath his skin aren't a memory of what it felt like to be nothing but seething, helpless hatred that would raze the planet to burned rock and rotting bones if he was given a chance.

That was a long time ago (it's now, it's always) and he knows now what it means to be human.

Dean ignores Cas's absence by spending the rest of the day helping Chuck and several very enthusiastic volunteers organize their additional supplies and getting more names: Kamal, a Nepalese national who speaks like a thousand languages and wears his black hair in a ponytail, is bar none the most cheerful survivalist he's ever met; Jody, a short brunette whose occasional surreptitious smiles give him some uncomfortable flashbacks to the entire Risa and Jane thing from the first time he was here; and Justin from the watch, who Dean already knows from (invisible) observation never shuts up, ever. That Kamal and Jody don't kill him after the first hour is a genuine miracle on earth.

He learns (between Justin's epic monologues about absolutely nothing) that Kamal's hobbies include translating epic Nepalese poetry into English (hobbies. In an Apocalyptic militia) and that he misses competitive rollerblading, a feeling Jody seems to share and talk about (over Justin when necessary) at length. Which introduces Dean to the concept of competitive rollerblading and the fact in a sixty-something person camp, two people used to do it enough to have opinions about equipment brands. Even by the standards of a non-Apocalyptic world, this has got to be seriously astronomical odds.

Checking Chuck's inventory list with the new updates, Dean does some quick math, trying to work out what a camp this size needs, filtering Chuck's mournful predictions of starvation to get actual facts. Fact: they're probably okay for at least three months, and with the MRE's maybe longer. As far as canned goods, flour, coffee, sugar, toothpaste, and paper products go, they're golden (also so many MREs; thanks, American military), and there's a surprising amount of meat in the third deep freeze he missed the first time around (untyped, not asking), but for the first time in his life, he wonders uneasily how the food thing works when the mess is the only diner around. His understanding of the food pyramid is sketchy at best, but remembering Sam's love affair with salads and lectures on nutrition, life lived on beans, bread, unknown animal, and canned green shit might be horrible for reasons other than the fact they're not hamburgers.

As dusk approaches, however, he finally calls a reluctant halt to the joys of non-starvation and Jody's sad commentary on the lack of concrete pavilions in the camp, aware of the surreptitious glances thrown his way that remind him that being Dean Winchester here means he'll have to lead the way to the night's main event. Keeping Chuck firmly with him--the guy owes him this--he makes his way to the out of the way cabin with most of the camp dogging his heels.

It's not uncomfortable at all. Really.

Dean's footsteps check as he comes in view of the cabin; there's a new addition to the bare ground, and even though he knows what this is for, the sight of the already huge pile of wood makes his breath catch in his throat. He lets Chuck take the lead, noting that several weathered picnic tables have been added, which he supposes makes sense. A fire like this probably takes a while. It's almost a relief when the area begins to fill up. It's not like he can get lost in the crowd or anything, but he can pretend, and somehow--later, he'll still have no idea how it happened--he ends up holding a beer and involved in what passes for normal conversation at a militia camp at the end of
the world.

To say it's surreal is a goddamn understatement.

He's always known that people tend to get really attached to those they depend on (caveat: helps if you are also actively saving their lives from, well, Hell). Here, the best hunter still living and their way out of Hell carried the face Dean wears, so he barely even has to try; they do all the work for him. Conveniently, he's apparently the height of conversational excellence these days, which is possibly the number one indicator that the world is so very fucked.

(Dean's conversation hasn't ever been anything but pretty narrowly focused on what he knows--hunting, monsters, classic rock, food, avoiding hideous ways to die, that sort of thing. His expansion to a very specialized skillset via Hell, metaphysics as it applies to angels and the non-corporeal world, and the Apocalypse aren't a really big departure from that. He apparently has an entire collection of hilarious jokes that require a working knowledge of Aramaic and a passing understanding of the creation myths of three major and four minor religions; everyone loves them. If this was high school, he'd be the quarterback and the rebel with the motorcycle and the super sensitive guy that all the girls sigh over at the same time. Not that Dean has any bitter memories from ten to fourteen high schools or anything. He's over it. He's grown beyond that bullshit.)

Being the utter and complete focus of attention distracts him from more than a vague impression of people dragging or carrying wood or buckets of coal. The smell of woodsmoke, however, jerks him out of listening to Mark and Amanda sharing a convoluted shaman-rabbi-shtega in a multidimensional bar joke that he apparently made up and is now the single most hilarious thing ever. Conversation dies off almost like some kind of signal was given, and reluctantly, he turns around and remembers exactly why they're all here.

It's a pretty impressive feat of engineering to build a pyre that's almost twice his height and covering a good thirty feet across. He thinks to burn those bodies, that may be just about the right size. He's always known the math when it comes to what he has to salt and burn.

He glances sideways when someone knocks into him; to his surprise, it's Chuck, one hand wrapped white-knuckled around a half-empty bottle of beer, eyes fixed glassily on the slow curl of smoke rising from the wood, faint glimpses of orange tongues licking at the edges before vanishing. Following the orange flickers upward, he watches several people perched precariously near the top of a couple of industrial ladders pouring salt and kerosene over the wood, making sure that salt inhabits every stray space in the wood. They work with the ease of old habit, something they've done so many times they've lost count, and as Dean takes a drink from his surprisingly full beer, he wonders if they salt the ashes again when they bury them. It's something he thinks he would have done.

"Do I need to say anything?" Dean murmurs as the fire starts to take off, the ladders quickly cleared and taken away, vanishing into the quickly growing shadows as the sun vanishes behind the horizon.

"No. Dean--" Chuck sucks in a shaky breath, taking another swig from his bottle, which from the smell isn't actually beer. Taking a sip from his own, he realizes that's not what he's drinking either, aware of a harsh burn as he swallows it down. "He said words didn't do shit."

Finishing his bottle, he glances around at the people perched on the picnic tables and sitting on the ground just outside the circle of bared earth. In the flickering light of the slowly growing fire, he catches glimpses of pale faces set in grim determination, some crumbling into grief, shiny trails tracing their cheeks, others hidden in shaking hands or nearby shoulders. He didn't realize he was looking for Cas until he realizes he's on his third search of the grieving faces, and he isn't
masochistic enough to do that voluntarily without a good reason.

When the first body bag is brought out, someone--he can't tell who or where they are--finally breaks, a heartbreaking sob that drags on and on until he wonders how long they can do that and not stop to breathe. There's no way to know who is being carried out, still wrapped in body bags because a week out in the open hadn't been kind, but it may not actually matter who. This is a small camp, and he doubts anyone is a stranger here.

The sounds of a few choked sounds, strengthening at the approach of each body, ripple through the air like a wave coming to shore on the cusp of high tide, but that's still better than the waiting silence. Beside him, Chuck's nearly silent, but tears run unchecked down his face faster with every excruciatingly long moment that passes. Dean keeps his gaze on the fire, barely wincing at the sharp, unexpected crack of what looks like half the trunk of a goddamn tree and fire shooting upward in an almost blinding gout of red-orange-gold.

As if from a distance, he sees Joe stand up from his perch on the table closest to the pyre and walk slowly toward the line of bare ground, stopping just a few feet inside. Taking out a small book, he visibly swallows as he looks at the faces turned toward him before he closes his eyes and starts to speak, the skullcap perched precariously on his head a vivid contrast to the worn jeans and the flash of a gun holster half-hidden by a flap of his faded khaki jacket. Dean can't hear him--he's not sure anyone can with the roar of the fire--but he thinks he recognizes a prayer for the dead.

When it ends, he pauses, turning a page without looking down, and Dean watches as his lips move in the familiar cadence of Latin. The woman he was sitting beside, who Dean remembers vaguely from the supply run today, has a rosary twisted between her fingers. Pushing back loose red hair with her free hand, her red-rimmed eyes are fixed on Joe as her lips move in a silent echo between choked-off sobs. Another pause, another page, and Dean's mind finally catches up with what he's seeing, and he wonders exactly how many religions their resident rabbi is going to be covering tonight to represent the beliefs of both the still living and the dead.

It's almost obscene to watch, the words that soundtracked orderly funerals in manicured cemeteries spoken as if they could possibly have any meaning here. They belong to a world where coffins held whole bodies surrounded by quietly grieving families in their best clothes who believed, honestly believed, that their loved ones were somewhere better, not one where there was no hope of comforting illusions on what happened next. Oblivion was all you could hope for, because the other option was so much worse.

Gritting his teeth, Dean looks down, staring at the empty bottle still clutched in one hand, fingers yellow white around the neck and hairline cracks starting run up and down beneath the surface of the glass. For a second, he can't remember how to open his hand; it's almost impossible to let it go, the feel of body-warm glass stuck to the surface of his skin. He's so close to the still-growing fire that it feels like the first acid-edge of a new sunburn on skin that's forgotten anything but winter.

Someone touches his arm, quick and sympathetic, before moving on, followed by another, and then another, brief flares of warmth that vanish almost as soon as they begin. It takes him a second to understand why, but then it hits him; they think he's part of this, that these are his people, maybe even his friends. They think he's standing here too close to a funeral pyre playing out the image of a guy who's just too fucking manly to let them see him cry. That's such bullshit he can't even deal with it, because he can't even match names remembered faces except Risa--Erica, Stan, Terry, just words that were once people--but he knows if they were his, they'd get his grief honestly. Christ, they fucking earned that much.

Eventually--forever, seconds, he's not even sure anymore--he's aware that the picnic tables are
almost empty, a couple of people just visible sitting against the cabin wall, probably to watch the fire and passing a bottle between them. He appreciates the sentiment; everyone not blind drunk and fucking away the memories until morning is just fucking stupid.

Shifting in preparation to go--where, he has no idea--he realizes that his legs are unexpectedly stiff, and his ankle throbs a warning to get the fuck off his feet. Taking a step, he hears the audible creek of his knees, which probably means he's been standing here being creepy for way too long.

Stiffly, he makes his way to one of the now-empty picnic tables and climbs on top, wondering if eventually the remaining watchers will put the fire out or they'll just let it burn itself out under their increasingly drunken supervision. Under the circumstances, the chances of a wildfire are really not even worth the effort of worrying about. They probably know what they're doing. Because this is a world where burning the body isn't just policy; it's necessary. It's normal.

Swallowing, he unclenches his hands, closing them over the edge of the table, and really wishes for another beer.

Staring at the still dancing fire, he doesn't bother reacting when he hears the creak of wood as someone sits down beside him, close enough to feel the brush of a shoulder against his own. Taking a deep breath, he braces his elbows on his knees and thinks he should probably wonder why Cas is sitting here with him, but it's not like he ever figured out his own Castiel, so why even make the effort.

"You probably wouldn't appreciate that before I met you, I had no context for the concept of frustration," Cas says, pushing an unfamiliar bottle into Dean's hands. Frowning, he takes in the lack of a label combined with the near toxic smell and thinks his life just got marginally less shitty. "There are many words that you've taught me to understand: irritation, aggravation, a rather petty desire to smite, just for a moment--"

"God, shut up." Dean tips his head back for a long drink and almost regrets it. It burns his mouth raw and he can map its entire journey down inch by excruciating inch. Jerking back, he coughs helplessly, trying to draw a full breath, but he can't taste burning wood and ash anymore, and that makes it worth it. "Thanks," he wheezes. "Smart move with the bottle," he adds, "or I'd be out of here."

"I'm sure your hobbling speed would have been impressive, provided your ankle would support you for more than a few steps," Cas observes, taking a drink like it's nothing stronger than water and not even having the decency to cough afterward, the fucker. "Petty," he says more quietly, not looking at Dean. "That is another word you taught me. Five thousand years ago, it was far easier to deal with humanity; I know this empirically. Humans were simple and they were all very much the same."

"Fuck you." Grabbing the bottle from Cas's hand, he takes another drink. It's even worse the second time around; wheezing, he's aware that Cas is slapping his back just a little harder than even a really violent coughing fit could possibly justify. "Stop," he gasps, sitting up more to make Cas stop than because he really wants to, but the rush is fucking amazing. "What the hell is this?"

"The particular combination of substances could possibly awaken an Elder God," Cas says thoughtfully, studying the bottle, "but I'm not sure it's been aged enough to risk trying." He takes another drink, blue eyes fixed on some point in the far distance and utterly sober on a night that no one sane should be.

"Shouldn't you be doing something more, I don't know, naked?" he asks curiously and gets hit with
the full force of impossibly blue eyes, unmistakable even set in circles as dark as a new bruise. "With half the camp? That's beneath you?" Before his incredulous eyes, Cas's mouth actually twitches. "No pun intended."

"You've seen the size of my cabin," Cas answers, tilting his head thoughtfully. "I could only accommodate a quarter at best."

Dean's surprised by his own guffaw of laughter, laughing even harder as Cas smiles at him in something a lot like satisfaction. Tilting his head back, Cas takes another drink, and for no reason at all, Dean's mouth goes dry at the stretch of his throat, something buzzing under the surface of his skin like touching a live wire.

"Cas…." He stops there, stumped on what comes next. There's just so fucking much, he can't even figure out where to stop. "What are you doing?"

"Waiting for you to decide that you can torture yourself just as easily in the cabin as here."

Well, fuck. "I'm not drunk enough for this conversation."

"No, you're not," Cas concedes, materializing a lid for the bottle and sliding off the picnic table. "But we have all night to try."

Dean squints at him for a moment--skinny and pale, jeans trying to slide off bony hips and almost drowning in a faded t-shirt--and tries to work out something he's been wondering for a while now.

"I know you're not taller than me," he says, craning his neck. Cas's eyes narrow curiously. "But sometimes you are anyway. How do you do that?"

"Perhaps this is stronger than I thought."

Dean shivers all over at the hand that wraps around his arm; it's barely even a pull, but he obediently slides off the table and this time, his ankle doesn't bother with a warning shot of pain as it folds under his weight. Cas drops the bottle and catches him so fast Dean doesn't have time to do much but stare at the ground and think there are some great perks to hanging around people with even extremely downgraded mojo.

"Thanks."

"I see you haven't been careful with your injury," Cas observes, easing Dean's arm over his shoulders and taking his weight effortlessly. "I didn't really expect anything else by the way you avoided the painkillers I left for you."

"Didn't need them."

"By that you mean sulking?"

That is so completely not what Dean was doing it's unbelievable. "How the hell do you get anyone to sleep with you?"

Cas blinks slowly. "Is it usually supposed to be difficult?"

Dean kind of wants to hit him, and he would, but the faint uptick of his lips when Cas says it makes it hard not to grin back. So he stops trying not to. "Fuck you."

"The human body isn't that flexible," Cas answers almost wistfully, turning them effortlessly
toward the cabin. "Trust me, I tried."

Dean doesn't stumble because Cas is mostly doing the heavy lifting and walking for him here. "Too much information," he mumbles, and wonders why the hell he sounds a little breathless, suddenly ultra-aware of the hand on his hip, warm and solid even through a layer of denim.

It feels like only seconds before they're climbing the porch steps, and Dean just manages to avoid a face full of beads, letting himself sprawl on the couch where Cas deposits him, feeling surprisingly warm and comfortably numb and like maybe with the help of Cas's really awesome alcohol, he can get through anything. Even what he watched tonight.

When Cas sits down beside him, he's holding another bottle that looks gratifyingly full, and it's really getting hard to remember why he should be pissed at him. Taking a drink, Dean slumps back into the couch; it burns less this time, and he wonders if that's a good sign or a really, really bad one.

"Do you have to work to be such a dick or does it just happen naturally?" he hears himself say.

"You're angry at me," Cas observes intelligently. "What would help with that?"

"How many bottles of this do you have?"

"I built the still that produces it."

So this is what an apology from Cas looks like these days: Dean would laugh, but he's way too busy drinking, and from the way the room seems to be shifting, he thinks he may have just found something that can surprise his liver.

"I'm not that easy," he lies.

"I'll work on that."

Settling into the most comfortable slump possible, Dean tips his head back on the couch and watches vapor trails cross the ceiling, following them down to waft around Cas as he reaches for the bottle, fingers brushing against Dean's in a bright warmth that leaves a glittering trail along his skin. Raise an Elder God or get blasted out of your mind; only Cas could come up with that combination and make it work. Cas is studying him with an expression that he's never quite been able to interpret, because even Cas's body speaks a different language and sometimes, he thinks even it's not sure what it's trying to say.

"The toilet paper situation is under control," Dean offers into the comfortable silence. Cas's head jerks up, blue eyes way too sharp for the amount of that shit he's been drinking. "Totally nailed it, by the way. Paper, too."

"Chuck took you on a supply run." Cas flickers a glance toward the window, and Dean's kind of hoping that's not Chuck's direction. There's a lot of smiting in that look and honestly, he's not convinced yet that Cas couldn't just will a good smite if he felt inspired enough. "When? This afternoon?"

"You mean when you were sulking?" Dean shrugs, not sure why Cas's surprise bothers him. "It was cool; we got everything. It was great."

Surprisingly, that's true. Being able to actually do something besides stand around being invisible or being their fake Dean really works for him, and he's not gonna feel guilty about that, even if Cas's expression suddenly reminds him of what Cas said about trusting his honor.
"The current situation effectively nullified the terms of our original agreement," Cas says flatly, and Dean wonders in vague horror if mind-reading is still on the table. He should ask about that. "I should have discussed it with you."

"Being around to have a discussion might've helped." Dean snatches the bottle away and takes a drink, wondering what the hell he's saying. "So, you taking off again anytime soon? Better things to do and all that shit."

He doesn't have to look to know he's got Cas's undivided attention. It belatedly occurs to him that it might be possible to be too drunk to have any kind of conversation, because right now, he's not sure what he'll say.

"I could," Cas says finally, getting up without even a goddamn stumble, and for a second, Dean can't breathe, chest tight. "Or I could get another bottle."

Blinking, Dean looks down and realizes the one he's holding is empty. "Oh. Yeah, good idea."

"I thought so," Cas says to him on his way to the kitchen. "Be right back."

Dean has just gotten off one drink from the new bottle when he notices Cas isn't on the couch and there's a weird pulling thing going on around his feet. Blinking, he focuses his eyes with an effort and sees Cas crouching on the floor, staring at the laces of his boots intently before there's a knife in his hand.

"Uh." Dean has no idea how to handle this. "What are you doing?"

"Hold still," Cas answers as he slices through the laces and pulls off his right boot and then repeats on his left, stripping off his socks almost as an afterthought before tossing everything in the general direction of the bedroom. "I need to rewrap your ankle."

That makes sense. Dean takes a small sip, watching Cas produce the first aid kit out of nowhere and go to work. It doesn't hurt, which he should really wonder (worry) about, but it's weirdly soothing to watch Cas doing something so incredibly mundane, the little frown of concentration, the surprising care he takes. It's almost a disappointment when he's done, packing the kit up and pushing it out of the way.

Sitting back on his heels, Cas surveys him with a frown, and for no reason at all, he's suddenly, vividly aware that Cas is kneeling between his legs. In a room that Dean has visually confirmed there are orgies, and in plural.

He takes another drink.

"Why're you here?" Even to himself, he has no idea what he wants to know.

Cas tilts his head, expression unreadable. "You asked me once if it made it harder and I told you nothing could. Do you remember?"

Weirdly enough, he does. "Yeah?"

"I lied." Pushing himself up, Cas takes the bottle from his hands and sits down beside him, close enough that all Dean would have to do is lean a little to touch him. Then the meaning of what Cas said hits him, and he jerks away. "You not being there. That would have made it harder."

He has no idea what to say to that.
"You knew it would help, because that's what you would need, too." He wets his lips, looking uncertain. "Not to be alone."

Dean struggles for some kind of response, but in the back of his mind, there's something like the tick of a clock, counting down the time that's running out. Licking his lips, he tries to pretend he has no idea what the hell Cas is talking about, but when he reaches for the bottle, his hand is shaking so hard he can't even get his fingers around the neck.

"Dean."

Throat closing, he tries again and nearly falls into Cas's lap, watching helplessly as Cas sets the bottle on the floor way beyond Dean's most enthusiastic drunken leap. Straightening, Dean braces a hand on the back of the couch, but before he can work out what to do next, Cas cups his jaw, turning his head until he can't see anything but those impossible eyes.

Home: no Apocalypse, no goddamn official place to burn bodies, no win for Lucifer, cars, McDonalds, hunting to protect a world that wasn't already dead, Sam. Sam. Jesus Christ, Sam.

"You said you can't get drunk enough to forget," Cas says quietly, fingers tightening when Dean tries to jerk away. "Do you remember telling me that?"

He nods, numb.

"Neither can I." Cas doesn't look away. "But I've learned how to pretend."

--Day 20--

Dean wakes up in hell. Kind of.

"God," he thinks he whispers, but his entire body shakes from something that sounds like a fucking gong. "What. The. Fuck."

Dean tries to take some kind of stock of the situation, but his body is a mass of conflicting impulses, most of them ranging from unpleasant to horrific, and his eyes feel swollen and scratchy-dry, skin tight and sore. "Christ," he says out loud, not even caring about the gong in the existential horror of his life. "What--"

"Please be quiet." Cas, he'd know that voice anywhere, but rougher than he's ever heard it even bleeding out after a fight, gravel and smoke and too much whiskey, Jesus. It occurs to him how close that voice is just as whatever he's lying on seems to start moving. Couches, he thinks vaguely, shouldn't do that, and decides he's just not gonna come to any obvious conclusions right at the moment. "You're making it difficult to pretend this isn't happening."

Dean licks his lips with a tongue that feels like sandpaper and fails at ignoring the fact that's denim under his cheek and so fucking not a couch.

"Cas?" Very distantly, he remembers the last, far less traumatic time he and Cas got drunk, which if nothing else proved between them two of them, they could create a whole fucking new standard in competitive drinking. "You okay?"

There's a silence that resembles, on the surface, endless humiliation. "I hadn't tested the potency of this particular distillation as thoroughly as I had assumed." Then, "Apparently, four bottles is excessive."
"Four?" Dean opens his eyes, and it's all brilliant, horrible light and oh God, he hates everything. Shutting his eyes, he buries his face in the warmth of the definitely not a warm, wash-softened flannel couch that happens to have disturbingly prominent ribs. Despite the pounding headache, there's something wrong with that math.

"I didn't share the last one since you had already passed out."

Jesus Christ. Reaching up to rub his eyes, he flinches at the abrasion of his own fingers against the supersensitive skin and realizes what that means. "Did I..." Cry, he doesn't ask; he did, in front of Cas, moving on now. "You have anything to help?" Arsenic is a pretty attractive option; he just doesn't think he has the hand-eye coordination yet to risk suicide with a weapon. Wherever those are now.

"With the hangover?"

Or that. "Sure."

"It's been a very long time since I had one, but I think...." Cas's voice trickles off and much more upsetting, there's no movement to get up.

"So? Get it."

Another silence, not encouraging. "Can you move?"

Even thinking about it makes him nauseous, so there goes that plan. "No."

"I don't think I can walk anyway," Cas answers, like he's trying to be comforting or something, and Dean feels something not unlike a hand petting his head, and he will, actually, risk a shitty headshot before admitting how incredibly good that feels. "Nor am I sure where the floor is in relation to where I am."

Cas just sounds so defeated, like physics plus Cthulhu's own hangover are fucking him over so hard and he just can't understand why.

"Yeah, it's okay," Dean slurs, keeping as still as he can to avoid reality and not because Cas fingers are now threading rhythmically through his hair. "Me either."

Hazy, unformed memories keep trying to resolve before the headache pounds their asses to dust, and it's the weirdest fucking thing to realize he really doesn't remember exactly what happened last night, and also, that it might be possible to die from sheer self-defense in the grips of a hangover that he's pretty sure Alistair would have thought was kind of overkill when it comes to torture.

As Cas's fingers shift down to his neck, rubbing into the muscles like some kind of touch-morphine of pure goodness, Dean's head clears enough to consider in its entirety where he is and what he doesn't remember that he might have done getting here, and (possibly) how much he should be prepared to deal with knowing for sure.

He's had some honest to God shittily considered hookups, and every goddamn one of them started with way too much fucking alcohol and some general personal misery, so at least it'd be consistent. That they didn't involve guys isn't particularly relevant, because they also didn't involve alcohol that probably kills Elder Gods after it summons them.

He wonders idly if it would be worth it to check and see if he's wearing pants. It might confirm or deny, but then there's the whole hideous light thing, and in all honesty, he's not sure he actually cares that much. This would be so much easier if Cas would have his goddamn drug-fueled orgies
in a bed like a normal person. Not like he couldn't get a bigger bed.

"Cas?"

There's a long enough delay that Dean's already considering how big a bed would be necessary--would falling off be a problem? Jesus, imagine laundry day with those sheets--when Cas finally says, "What?" in a really insultingly annoyed voice, like Dean is just bothering him from sheer spite.

"We didn't have sex, right?"

In the history of Dean's shittily considered hookups--and it doesn't say anything good that while he can remember all of them, they're officially outnumbering the well-considered ones--there are certain rules that you just don't break. Asking if it actually happened is right at the top, along with What's your name again? and may in fact beat crawling out the window while they're in the bathroom, which as far as his post-coital shitty behavior goes, shouldn't be something he's aspiring to surpass. He hopes guiltily that they didn't; he can deal with a guy, fine, he can even deal with it being Cas (at least he knows his name), but he'll never be able to look at himself in the mirror again if he forgot.

Cas's fingers stop abruptly, and Dean is on the edge of promising a repeat performance in perfect sobriety to get that back--he's still very drunk, he reminds himself firmly--when Cas sighs, and if Dean were sober enough to trust himself, he might think it was regretful.

"No."

Taking a deep breath--and rewarded for it with life-ending nausea--he waits for the urge to vomit out a lifetime of meals passes, and then Cas's fingers slide up to his hairline, scratching just right against the scalp, and his entire body just goes boneless in sheer relief. Turning his face into the blissful warmth of soft flannel, he carefully nods. "Okay."

"Guys, is everything--"

"Chuck."

Dean, jerked out of comfortable misery when Cas's hand stops moving, thinks he's never heard a single word able to encompass death and dismemberment and dry leaves in unmentionable places, a lot of them, and that's just how it starts. At this moment, he agrees with all of it and so much more; if he could stand up right now, Chuck wouldn't be breathing--well, panting, from the sound of it--any longer than it took him to--

Chuck, it occurs to him, is standing up and that probably means he can walk. To the kitchen. "Cas?"

"I'll come back later," Chuck is saying, like he just realized if he gets out now, he may live a few more hours. It's cute that he thinks that.

"Cas," Dean says, making a herculean effort and getting his fingers to close around a handful of flannel. "He can walk."

"Not at this moment, if he values his life," Cas says pleasantly, and to Dean's relief, he curves a hand over the back of his neck, fingertips sketching soothing circles against his skin. Chuck makes a helpless, horrified sound, which is as it should be, he thinks contentedly, perfectly happy to let Cas be fucking terrifying at anyone he wants for a greater good. "Chuck, considering how much time the archangels spent repairing your liver on a daily basis, I assume you know a remedy for a hangover. Make one."
“Two,” Dean adds, just in case the terror wafting from Chuck means he takes that way too literally. Carefully, he opens his eyes to squint in Chuck's direction, the better to let in less hideous light, and finds Chuck's general shape cowering near the doorway. Positive reinforcement might be needed. "Do it and I'll make sure he kills you fast," he says comfortingly, then goes limp and figures Cas can handle this shit from here on out. He's done his part.

He opens his eyes again when he's viciously jerked upright and his nose held closed; before he can wonder about the sheer stupidity of suffocation--what, not even a pillow?--something is pouring down his throat and oh my God, he just did not know. Batting feebly at whatever unnatural dick (Cas, totally Cas) is holding him down for this, he ends up swallowing anyway and the universe is just horrible, horrible nauseous agony.

…for ten seconds. Blinking, Dean stares up at Cas with blurry eyes--yes, he's crying, and fuck everything, anyone would--and realizes the headache has receded to a sullen burn and he can, maybe, someday, want to think about living again. "What--"

"You'll need the bathroom," Cas says, pulling him to his feet and pushing him toward the bedroom door. "Go."

Dean almost disagrees--actually, he's feeling pretty great--but before he can form the words, he feels something dangerously like a twinge. He looks at Cas, slumping onto the floor by the couch, looking less close to death but also really, really sure, and stumbles another step toward the door as the second twinge warns him that yeah, now, now is good.

"So, you guys don't need me anymore," Chuck is saying when Dean's jerking the bathroom door mostly-shut. "So I'll--"

"Sit down, Chuck," Cas says, pulling him to his feet and pushing him toward the bedroom door. "So I'll--"

"Sit down, Chuck," Cas says, but Dean misses what comes next, since he's kind of busy and toilets don't conduct sound all that well.

When he comes back out (teeth brushed three times, a long shower, a change of clothes, and a lot of water) he almost feels normal. Hair still wet, he crosses the darkened bedroom and opens his mouth to tell Cas what he thinks of his post-hangover methods (yeah, it worked, but not the point) when he's stopped short at the doorway, words drying up on his tongue and then forgotten.

Cas is pretty much where he left him, one knee tucked against his chest, feet bare and pale against the rug, looking tired and annoyed, nothing new there, watching Chuck on the nearby armchair with the thousand mile stare that the Host perfected. Even to himself, he can't explain what's different now, but something is, like a thousand tiny things slowly trying to come into focus.

He must make some kind of noise, though, because Cas's eyes snap to him abruptly, and he's only aware of Chuck jerking around from his perch on the edge of a threadbare chair when Cas looks away.

"Feeling better?" Cas says, tilting his head with impersonal curiosity, and for no reason at all, Dean feels a start of wariness.

"Yeah." Leaning against the doorway, he tries and fails to ignore Chuck radiating self-loathing in his direction. From the way Cas looked when he came in here, he can guess what kind of conversation he's so fucking glad he missed. "Chuck, thanks for the--whatever that was."

"Anytime," he says miserably, taking a visible breath before bursting out with, "I'm sorry for endangering your life for frivolous luxuries that my ancestors would have scorned." His eyes dart
hopefully to Cas before returning to Dean. "I won't do it again."

Yeah, he called that one. Turning his attention back to Cas, he contemplates the infinite ways Cas can radiate smug self-righteousness like breathing. For a guy who got himself shit-faced on possibly semi-mystical moonshine last night and has sex in a group setting, it's pretty fucking impressive.

"What the hell did you do to Chuck?"

"I told him I was very disappointed," he answers comfortably, the very picture of justice being served in post-hangover repose. "He understands the error of his ways and is prepared to make amends."

"And I will never do it again," Chuck adds right on schedule, knee-jerk pathetic. Even if he squints and turns his head sideways, no matter what Cas says, he just can't see Chuck able to pick up and fire a gun. Chuck's expression gets frantic, and Dean belatedly realizes he's probably freaking him out. "I'm--"

"You didn't do anything wrong," Dean interrupts, looking back at Cas. "I gave him an order, Cas, come on."

"He should have known better than to obey it," Cas answers pleasantly. "And I should have known better than to trust you not to break your word. I won't make that mistake again."

Dean sucks in a breath, feeling like he was punched in the gut. Dimly, he's aware of Chuck opening his mouth before he sinks back into his chair, staring at the floor.

"You seem to be under the impression that we have developed a bond due to excessive alcohol consumption while you shared your feelings in monotonous detail and I pretended to care," Cas says expressionlessly. "We didn't." Over the inexplicable buzzing in his ears, he hears Cas add, "This time, we're not negotiating. You won't leave this camp again."

"How are you gonna stop me?" Before Cas can answer, Dean sees Chuck's face go white and can hear his voice, bitter and honest, saying, Leave with you if he had to? Kill us to do it?

You being here at all is a loaded gun to everyone's head.

"I won't leave the camp again," Dean says, and from the corner of his eye, he sees Chuck relax all at once, and thinks maybe now he believes it. Turning to the door, he tells Cas, "We're done."

Pausing briefly halfway up the porch steps of Dean's cabin, it occurs to him that as of this moment, he's probably actually now supposed to live here and nearly stumbles on the step before he jogs up the rest and makes himself go inside.
--Day 22--

So this is his life: a dark, crowded, miserable cabin in the goddamn middle of a lost war.

Two days of trying to make something livable out of three rooms means running face-first into distorted reflections of himself everywhere he looks: water-stained boxes tumbled into tired piles, faded ink scrawling over the sides in his own hand and filled with short glimpses of a life before the Apocalypse more horrifying for being his own, parts of the history that he and this Dean shared.

He gets to the half-melted, broken remains of the tapes from the Impala, labels smeared to illegibility, and has to stop, shaking so hard the plastic rattles in his hands before repacking them between age-yellowed, ragged t-shirts and hex bags crumbling to dust at a touch, piles of fading papers and old credit cards, cracked leather wallets with half a dozen fake IDs and ink-stained notes.

Sitting back against the bedroom wall as his second day in the cabin starts to end, hands filthy with dust and smeared with drying blood from papercuts and unexpected staples, he looks at the remains of a life excised of half itself, all the way back to the start, obvious in its very absence.

There's nothing of Sam here at all.

None of Sam's books or his notebooks or his handwritten notes or his fucking gift for finding and using the shittiest available printer in any given library; no red pen correction and passive-aggressive notes and no flyleafs with *Sam Winchester* in idiotically typewriter quality print because Sam was--is--was like that. It's not just five years of absence, not here; this is his entire life at four, at fourteen, at twenty-four ruthlessly stripped bare and clean, Sam at one, at eleven, at twenty one scrubbed clean as if he never existed at all.

Dean thinks of the Impala with seats that once shaped themselves to Sam's body, upholstery victim of a half-dozen fat-free soy mocha lattes and dashboard that hosted his fucking huge feet, a car that carried Sam in every inch of metal, dragged here and piled with boxes and memories before it was burned and salted to exorcise ghost that lived only in this Dean's memory.

The stripped down bunk bed is shoved into a far corner of the room, making way for the pile of blankets he bullied out of a terrified Chuck where he failed at sleeping before getting up again to fail at coping. He avoids the patrol wanting anything but orders and the people offering smiles that belong to a man so much like him that no one can tell the difference. He's beginning to wonder, really wonder, if that's because there's no difference to see; it's almost like he's not here at all.

He's not sure how long he's been sitting here, but when he looks up, the late afternoon has vanished into a dull orange-pink dusk on his twenty-second day in this world and fifth of being Dean Winchester. He's still invisible, though, behind a name even more powerful than Cas's sigils, because now they look right at him and talk to him and take his orders and still don't see him at all.

He wonders if Cas is having a blast fucking himself unconscious full time now that there's a replacement Dean to take up the duties of the original.

Almost as if the thought's enough, he listens to the open and close of the front door, waiting without particular interest for someone to call for Dean and expect him to respond. After a few
minutes--or hell, hours, he has no idea--footsteps cross the distance to the bedroom door before coming to a stop, and the sheer weight of attention is unmistakable, inevitable, something that he's never been able to entirely understand and never quite learn how not to want. Even now, maybe especially now: now, it's from one of the only two people on this goddamn planet who look at him and can see who he really is.

"Don't tell me," he says tiredly, tipping his head back against the doorframe. "I'm late for check-in."

"Two days, but who's counting." From the corner of his eye, he sees Cas fold himself down on the opposite side of the doorway, drawing up one knee. "You're very late."

Dean isn't sure he's up for surreal conversation, but he also can't make himself want Cas to leave now that he's here; an empty cabin shouldn't have so many ghosts, and he's only one of them. He tries to think of something to say--Jesus, after the last two days, four days, three weeks, he has a fucking list--but he can't remember a single thing.

Not that Cas seems to be doing much better, breaking the growing silence with, "It's been rather quiet."

"Because I'm not around?" Dean gives him a disbelieving look. "You run out of groupies?"

"Have you had many visitors?" Cas asks. "Other than patrol, I mean. It's not a rhetorical question."

Dean pauses at the genuine curiosity in the question, rewinding through the last couple of days and realizes that actually, no, he hasn't. Even the few times he's been forced to leave the cabin for food or Chuck or patrol-related purposes, he got smiles and waves and hopeful expressions, but no one--no one--came any closer than they had to.

"Not really--wait. " He looks over at Cas, who doesn't seem surprised at all. "Are they avoiding me?"

"They're avoiding both of us," Cas answers, leaning his chin on the arm stretched over his knee, and damned if he doesn't look amused.

"How do they know--"

"This is a very small camp." Dean blinks at Cas's sudden smile. "Everyone knows everything. Though your extremely public stalk from my cabin two days ago in full view of everyone did help, yes."

"I wasn't that obvious." He was, actually, that obvious. "Sorry I fucked up your sex life."

Cas shrugs. "I wasn't in the mood anyway."

"That--" he hesitates, trying to decide if he actually wants to know. "You and Dean--that happened a lot?"

"Not recently." Cas looks away before he can see more than a flash of grief. "I had to work to get a reaction from Dean, and it was rarely worth the effort involved. On the rare occasions I bothered, he dealt with it as you did and simply left."

Swallowing, he stares at the far wall. "Cas--"

"I want you to come back."
Dean chokes on a strangled laugh. "You've gotta be kidding."

"Dean--"

"I said I wouldn't leave the goddamn camp," he interrupts, too tired to feel like arguing this one. "I'll be careful about what I say to anyone. If it's the wards in the cabin--I mean, can't you do them here?"

"You hate it here." Dean stills, unnerved by the certainty in Cas's voice. "Dean's cabin. You haven't slept, you don't eat--"

"How would you know--..." He rolls his eyes, but there's just not enough left in him right now to even be pissed. "Chuck, right."

"If I apologize," Cas says lightly, "would that help?"

"It would help," he answers bitterly, "if you said one fucking thing to me that was true."

"I've never lied to you."

Dean laughs breathlessly. "You're so good at it you don't even have to anymore. How the fuck long does it take to learn to do that? Can you even tell the difference?"

Leaning back against the wall, he closes his eyes, aware of the silence emanating from Cas and wondering how long he's got before Cas makes an effort--he's pretty sure Cas didn't get this good at manipulation and not pick up the positive forms--and he's convinced. It's not like it'd be a hard sell either way, because Cas nailed it about this goddamn cabin. It's go crazy alone here or go crazy while Cas is a dick to him somewhere else, and at least one of those options involves a bed and company while he does it.

"Okay," he says finally, deciding to get this over with; he's pretty sure the walls are actually getting closer the longer he's here. "Convince me. Try to make it believable, though."

"Your first visit here wasn't precisely an unalloyed misery for me once the migraine of seeing someone out of time had passed." Dean pauses, looking at him in surprise. "What?"

"Something true," Cas answers with a shrug. "I was very high, with a terrible headache from your presence, and your constant horror and disgust at all you saw was--annoying, yes--but the sheer novelty made up for it. Dean was not so philosophically inclined, of course. To see yourself in terms of what you no longer are, to be forced to recognize what you've become--that isn't something anyone could easily deal with, especially Dean. At the time, I didn't--let's say the last three weeks have been enlightening on what he was going through, but then I had no idea. Even if I'd known, however, I'm not sure I would have been able to stop him."

All at once, he gets it. "Me being here--it pushed him to that hit on Lucifer before he was ready, didn't it?"

"I don't know," Cas answers slowly, which is as good as a 'yes'. "It wouldn't have changed how this ended. Once Dean acquired the Colt, it was simply a matter of time."

"But he might not have done it that night." Zachariah had to know what would happen. Jesus, he was fucking with both of them. "I thought Zachariah was just--just showing me, I don't know, what could happen or something if I didn't agree to be Michael's vessel. Like Gabriel did with Sam."
"Zachariah didn't create a pocket of time for you to explore a potential future, no," Cas answers. "Instead, he moved you within time itself to see your own future. When you were returned to your own time, it was not the same world you had been taken from; it was one that your knowledge of the future created."

"He did it on purpose." That doesn't make sense. "Why?"

"Revenge," Cas says simply. "In your world, he couldn't risk any injury to Michael's vessel. So he forked time itself and allowed an entire world to be created so it could happen, with the bonus of making you watch yourself die."

For a moment, Dean can't think, can't even breathe; all he can see is that moment two years ago, staring at Lucifer standing over Dean's dead body and looking at him from behind Sam's eyes. Nausea rises sharp and bitter in the back of his throat, and he wonders if he's going to throw up.

"That sick fuck," he breathes. "I wish I could kill him again."

"His didn't anticipate your ultimate reaction to what you saw, of course." Cas looks at Dean, blue eyes filled with chilling approval. "You destroyed Lucifer without the interference of the Host and in the end, Zachariah died by your hand. Thank you."

Dean swallows, looking away.

"You can absolve yourself of any responsibility for Dean's decision. He chose to attack Lucifer that night because he was Dean Winchester," Cas continues. "Because Sam Winchester was Lucifer's vessel. Because Lucifer wants nothing less than the destruction of all humanity. And because at the beginning of time, Lucifer rebelled against my Father and promised he would destroy my Father's most precious creation. It was inevitable."

"Destiny, you mean?" Dean snorts. "Destiny is bullshit."

"Destiny is a word far more vast than the definition would imply." Cas frowns, eyes distant. "Sometimes, what you've become makes it impossible to see all potential paths. What you know--limits--what you believe can be achieved."

"You can't believe that."

Cas shrugs, like he can't bother himself to even disagree. Dean stares at the ceiling, thinking about Zachariah causing an entire doomed world to exist simply because he wouldn't be Michael's vessel. No fucking wonder Cas hates him; his entire existence was destroyed because of Dean.

"When you first came here and I saw you, I knew that you would create another path, one where our mistakes might not be repeated." Cas's mouth quirks in the suggestion of a smile. "Which you did. Though I could have been content with knowing in theory, it's pleasant to know for certain."

"The Apocalypse is always being beaten somewhere," Dean agrees, not quite sure he could take it so philosophically when it wasn't his somewhere winning. Well, he knows he wouldn't; not like his counterpart was thrilled to see him the first time, and Chuck isn't throwing a party right now for the survival of a world they don't even get to see. Then again, this is Cas and he's crazy. Maybe knowing one world existed meant there were other ones out there, better ones. Somewhere, they saved the world, Sam settled down with a nice girl, and Cas is sheriff of heaven, an angel of the Lord, and never crawled through the sewage of humanity behind another Dean who turned his own fucking personality disorder into a working theory of existence. "Okay, I'm convinced."

Cas tilts his head. "You're not pretending very well."
Dean snorts, pushing a hand into the floor; the idea of even Cas's shitty mattress is taking on epic proportions of comfort and sleep, Jesus, just get out of here. "Didn't promise I'd be good at it."

"Strangely enough, I'd prefer you meant it."

"Take what you can get," Dean snaps back. "You're getting what you wanted, so what the hell is the problem?"

"And what are you getting?"

"Somewhere I can sleep," he answers. "Someone who looks at me and knows who the fuck I actually am. Any questions?"

"That can be dealt with," Cas says softly. "We can leave Chitaqua."

Dean drops back onto the floor. "Leave."

"Your existence is known to the camp, and it's now inevitable Lucifer will discover it. Leaving would be the most prudent course of action."

"And what about everyone here?"

"You can order someone to take your place," Cas answers, so easily that it dawns on him that this sounds suspiciously like a plan, like maybe one he's been thinking through. "Tell them we're going on a mission for something--I can make something up that sounds sufficiently impressive--and we go somewhere less visible than the first place Lucifer will look to exterminate who's left of those who followed Dean."

Including Cas, and Chuck, too, Dean realizes belatedly; maybe especially them. Even now, Lucifer can't think it's a good idea to leave an ex-angel and an ex-prophet alive longer than he has to, no matter what Cas thinks. "So cut and run and leave everyone to die?"

"Once you're safe, we can try to find a way to send you back to your world. My lack of Grace does not erase knowledge that stretches to when time first began. Given time--"

"Yeah, and I also remember something about everyone being gone who could help except Lucifer. Not that I think you're lying or anything--"

"Implying it is much better, thank you for the effort." From the look on his face, Cas might be counting to ten. "I'm not lying. It's not impossible that there's something I haven't thought of. I need time, Dean."

Dean grits his teeth, trying to think. "And while you're doing that and I'm sitting on my ass in hiding and Lucifer keeps up his reign of terror--"

"His reign of terror, as you call it, will remain unaffected either way, I assure you."

"But you--realistically here, tell me the chances I'm getting out of here without a goddamn miracle? If there's anyone left who could do one, which I'm guessing there's not, so stop fucking with me. You brought me here in the first place because it was the safest option. What are the actual chances you'd manage to find something before he hunted us down if you haven't thought of anything yet?"

"Better than if we didn't try at all."
"And leave everyone behind to fend for themselves? You could do that?"

Cas stills, looking away, but Dean doesn't need to hear him say it; he will. Of course he will, Dean thinks bitterly; he Fell for him and died for him, marked time in a shitty mortal life for him, and even this Dean's death didn't set him free because another one took his place. He'll leave if that's what Dean needs, and it may kill him to do it, but he'll still do it.

"You think--" Dean swallows hard. "You think I'd make you do that?"

Cas looks surprised. "Dean--"

"You still think you chose the wrong team?"

"Your memory is becoming annoying," Cas answers testily. "And in this case, imprecise. Better is relative, but wrong is absolute. I never said I was wrong. I wasn't."

"I have no idea what that means." But actually, he thinks that he does.

"It probably would help if you'd been subject to Bobby's interest in professional sports during the Super Bowl," Cas says. "He used to throw things at the television, it's not important. What is important is--"

"Okay, tell me this," Dean interrupts challengingly. "The odds that we'll figure out how to get me back before the actual, literal end of the world, humanity, everything, are they better than zero? While we're on the run, by the way."

"They are better than zero," Cas begins, then visibly reconsiders. "They are also somewhat higher than Lucifer spontaneously repenting and lower than the Apocalypse coming to a random and inexplicable halt."

"Which," Dean points out, "is actually happening right now."

Cas sighs. "However, your survival is required if we are to raise them to any significant degree."

"I can't just--these people believe in me. Hell, they kind of depend on you right now. Tell me how I'm supposed to live with fucking them over?"

"I don't think there are enough options for you to feel a crisis of conscience."

"So let's get some new ones!"

Dean thinks: I have no idea what the hell I'm saying here.

"Dying horribly is the most likely so far," Cas answers, voice edged with incredulity. "What options do you think--"

"I don't know!" Dean answers a little desperately, wondering if it'd be worth it to punch Cas in his stupid mouth just on principle. "Jesus, Cas, you're better than this! You can create invisibility when you're so high you're seeing Elvis, you fake your way through running the camp so well no one knows you're making it up as you go, so I think you can drop the bullshit for a few fucking seconds to help me figure how the fuck we're gonna handle this!"

It's almost as good as a punch, maybe better; he didn't break his hand, and Cas's expression goes utterly blank.

"You realize," Cas says slowly, "that if you choose to stay, you're effectively accepting command
of the camp."

"Chuck nailed me to the job already. Not like I haven't done the apocalypse thing before. Five days so far, no one's dead yet." Cas's expression isn't encouraging, but it's not like Dean doesn't know this is a stupid idea. It's just the only one they've got. "So you gonna help me do it or what?"

For a moment, he's standing in a room with an angel who learned to doubt, arguing that free will trumped prophecy, that the paradise the Host sought on earth would be won in a war in which humanity would have no say in their own fate. Dean does appreciate the irony of asking Cas to help him now, considering how well listening to him has worked out for him so far.

Then Cas stands up. "You've convinced me," he says. "Let's go."

"What?"

"I'm going to help you," Cas answers irritably. "You're going to stand up, come back to the cabin, eat something, and try to discover a course of action of relative sanity before one of us realizes what a terrible idea this is."

He lets Cas pull him to his feet, mostly because he can't figure out what else to do. "But you're going to help anyway."

"I rebelled against the Host," he says deliberately, spacing the words for maximum impact, "fought archangels, threatened my superiors, defied my orders until I was sundered from Heaven, and finally Fell to earth instead of fleeing with the remaining Host. I'm a drug addict whose only hobby is sex and I have effectively founded a very minor yet by definition actual cult encouraging enlightenment through the use of psychedelic drugs via sexual congress based on almost offensively adulterated Buddhist principles and a documentary on Woodstock I watched on the History Channel three years ago." Castiel pauses, studying him. "In retrospect, I can see why you might think this seems out of character."

Dean can't think of what to say there (though it does make him wonder who the hell thought giving Cas unlimited and unsupervised access to the wonders of cable was a good idea). Put all together like that, it just sounds crazy. Like, who does that?

"Why?"

"It's going to work," Cas answers firmly, turning away. "It's not as if I have anything better to do."

Dean will later blame his post-Cas-makes-fucking-terrible-life-decisions-like-as-a-habit realization for the fact they're back at the cabin, Dean's made his way through something that involves beans and unidentified meat--not squirrel, he tells himself firmly, they're all gone--while Cas stares at the sigils on the doorway like they're talking to him. Which who the hell knows, maybe they are.

"Okay, level with me. Dean's cabin was shitty, but why do you want me here instead? Don't tell me it's just for the pleasure of my company."

"Dean didn't like it there, either," Cas tells him absently. "To be honest, I'm not sure he ever slept there."

Dean starts to object--what the hell does that mean?--then rewinds to remember the condition of the bunk beds and the fact he was sleeping on a pile of blankets he got from Chuck. Suddenly, this Dean's state of serial semi-monogamy kind of makes uncomfortably practical sense.

"Girlfriends?"
"That is the word I have heard used in reference," Cas answers discouragingly. "Preference seemed to depend on the quality of their mattresses."

"Tell me you're joking."

"I'm joking. I'm sure there were other factors involved." And whoa, Cas is palming a knife that came out of nowhere. "Come here."

"You want my blood on the wards," Dean interprets correctly, getting up from the couch and crossing to the doorway. Taking his hand, Cas brushes the tip of the knife against his finger and then takes his wrist, guiding him to one of the sigils. Dean obediently brushes his finger against the wood and checks his finger when Cas lets go. There's a tiny smear of red at the tip, but licking it away, there's no sign of a cut. He squints at the sigil dubiously. "That's it?"

"I want to check something. If it works, I'll know within a few hours, and if it doesn't, nothing will happen."

Dean gives them a final look before crossing back to the couch. "Where'd you get these wards, anyway? I looked through your books, but there wasn't anything like this."

"That's because they didn't exist until after your arrival." Sliding the knife behind his back, Cas drops onto the opposite arm of the couch, bare feet resting on the cushion and regarding Dean thoughtfully. "Anyone else might have asked why their blood was needed before offering it. Do you plan to do so anytime soon? I can wait."

"Dude, if you were bent on evil and all you needed was my blood to get the ball rolling, newsflash: I've been sleeping here every night. Not like it was hard to find me and get it."

"Maybe I needed your consent," Cas says, crossing his arms defensively and not giving a single goddamn inch. "Do you usually give the bodily fluid with the greatest potential for mystical abuse to anyone who asks for it? You were always far more scrupulous when it came to sex and the worst that could happen would be passing an STD or fathering a child."

"No, I don't, and are we really talking about this right now?" Dean asks incredulously. "The wards, tell me what they're doing."

"It's more how they're doing it," Cas answers, settling himself in what could be answering the goddamn question mode. "Do you know about the principle of contamination?"

"Leftovers, right?" Dean answers promptly and is rewarded with a surprised smile. In the spirit of--whatever they're doing--he's not even taking it personally, but come the fuck on, he's still a hunter in his world and shit happens. "Before you do some rituals, you have to purify a place, get rid of whatever might have been done there before."

"That's one aspect, yes. It also applies to those who are involved, but generally it can never be entirely removed from a person," Cas answers. "When you came here, I knew who you were even though I didn't have Grace. Did you ever wonder how?"

Dean shakes his head; he figured it was some former angel thing.

"I created your body and sealed your soul within it when I raised you from Hell. Every cell in your body is--for lack of a better word--contaminated."

"Okay." Dean files that away: angel thing. "Contaminated by what?"
"For the purposes of this conversation, me." Before Dean respond to that--or even work out the response--Cas continues. "You can't make a corporeal being invisible. The sigils you use now are a very simple distraction; when someone sees you, they say you're not there, and as I explained, the human mind doesn't like dissonance, so they're believed despite sensory evidence to the contrary. The simplicity is why they work, but the problem is that they're telling a lie. That makes them vulnerable, and once someone knows you're there, they stop working, rendering them useless. I needed something true."

"Okay, fine, got it, something true," Dean agrees, not following at all. "Let's go back for a second; what did you mean by--"

"In addition, certain protections can only be established in places that someone claims as their habitation--their home, in essence, or in any case their residence."

"Wait," Dean says, startled. "You live here, that's a personal claim and it creates a connection--wait, that's contamination? You living here contaminates the cabin? Like ghosts haunting their old houses?"

Cas grins at him. "Yes, exactly. It's in everything to a greater or lesser degree, but generally, it's only noticeable when it's negative, and in those cases dramatically so: poltergeists, coercion spells, compulsions, summoning the more disreputable supernatural beings for various reasons, ritual human sacrifice."

"Demon blood fed to a kid," Dean says quietly. "Contamination."

Cas's smile fades. "Your experience with it as a hunter has almost always been in its negative or neutral forms because the positive don't call attention to themselves. Contamination itself is neutral; why it exists is not." He pauses, studying Dean for a moment. "The reason that you don't notice contamination--the reason that word with all of its negative connotations is used to describe it--is because its positive form suffuses your life from birth to death."

"I'll take your word for it," Dean agrees impatiently. "Now, how does this relate to my--did you say 'atoms'--?"

"All protective wards are based on a single set of five symbols--ones created, in case you're curious, before language itself had progressed beyond its most rudimentary oral form," Cas tells him, settling into something not unlike Sam in 'Telling Dean Things' mode. "The most accurate description would be the definition of self; in short, each person belonged first to themselves, discrete and separate from one another. The first claim a human made of ownership was to themselves, and thus, you became self-aware. My Father created you in his image, but that moment is when humanity created itself."

Dean thinks about that, intrigued despite himself. What Cas is saying is probably only a small part--maybe the smallest part--of what that really means, but it's enough to get the shape of it. He can't imagine--literally, he can't even wrap his mind around--what it meant to exist without knowing who you were, and this is not even knowing there was something there to know about--but he gets this much; until that moment, that thought never existed and there was no context for its conception but that of the mind that thought it. There's power in what you claim, all right; a single thought claiming themselves had made beings who were just another animal into something so much more."

"At their core, all that wards are doing is define what is to be protected; they do nothing else," Cas continues, watching him carefully. "Once you've defined what is being protected--or later, contained--you add the specific elements that suit your purpose."
"Devil's trap to hold a demon," Dean says absently, thinking about the symbols on the doorway. "I've seen some of those symbols in wards and protective charms before, but each one only shows up once and it can be anywhere. The Enochian, though...." He trails off, thinking. "They look like the ones I wore around the camp, but the cabin itself isn't invisible, so--wait, I'm invisible in here? Is that what they're doing?"

"Congratulations," Cas says, sounding pleased. "Your ancestors would be impressed with your perspicacity."

"Every time I was in here during meetings, I didn't need to worry about those goddamn sigils?" Dean demands. "Dude."

"I was distracted by your constant laughter," Cas answers, raising an eyebrow. "My apologies. Now as I was saying--"

"But you said those could be broken because it's a lie, so what...." Dean pauses: contamination. "Hold on. When I'm in here, what do people see when they see me?"

"Something that isn't a lie. I formed every cell of your current body, and that's a great deal of contamination, down to the molecular level. Within this cabin, those symbols tell anyone who isn't specifically excluded from their effect that you are simply part of me and should be disregarded as an independent being. And according to the laws of contamination, that's true."

Huh. "So they see--you? Literally?"

Cas grins. "Of course not, that's an entirely different spell, and incredibly difficult to maintain. No, you aren't me, so the senses are confused, and per usual, since they prefer to avoid dichotomy, they see nothing. Same effect, different reason."

"So I'm practically invisible in here.‖ Dean turns to stare at the doorway, then at Cas. "That worked?"

Cas's expression changes briefly, barely a flicker--two parts pleased, maybe a hint of smug, but it's the last part that makes Dean blink: surprised. Really, really surprised. "Yes, it works. I tested it with Chuck while you were sleeping one morning, just to be certain. He almost sat on you."

"I slept through that?" Dean asks, but he's beginning to grin: he's invisible. Practically, anyway. "Can we do it again so I can watch? Wait, if he knows I exist--"

"Yes, that's my favorite part," Cas interrupts, almost bouncing, and Dean sees that other guy again, the not-dick one, but even more. "It's not a lie, just extremely confusing, so it can't be broken by knowledge of your existence or even knowing what's happening. The only way to avoid the effects is to be excluded from the range, and that requires me to consent to someone being excluded. The truth really does set you free. Or confuses the senses a great deal, I mix those up."

"Where did you find this?‖ Dean asks, thinking about the potential, or to be honest, what Bobby and Sam would do with that, since fuck if he knows. "Seriously, where did you get this?"

Cas looks at him for a moment. "I told you, in the days your ancestors were working on sentience--"

"I think being invisible would have been pretty useful before now!"

"That part is somewhat--experimental." Cas shrugs, not really casually. "I'm not sure why no one tried it before. It's relatively simple, though to be fair--"
"You made it up." Will wonders never cease. "Right, they're from the sigils you made up for me to wear. Jesus, you always do that when you're high?"

"--it's rare that this particular situation would occur," Cas continues as if he didn't say anything. "My blood proves contamination to be true, and my right to claim you--as me--by right of ownership."

Cas sits back with a smile of malicious satisfaction, obviously waiting for exactly what happens next.

Dean doesn't disappoint him. "Ownership?"

"I asked Joseph for as much of his supply as he would part with in exchange for a bottle of Eldritch Horror, as you named it," Cas says, returning from the kitchen with an entire cooler--which explains how he has cold beer without a working fridge--and dropping a bottle in front of Dean. "I assumed we'd both need it."

Dean figures this is a two beer minimum kind of night, so he waits until he's looking at his third before deciding he's ready for anything else. Cas is on his fourth, which makes Dean think maybe this should be a straight tequila kind of night.

"So that's why you weren't worried about me being here at night without refreshing those sigils I was wearing," he says carefully, turning the beer in one hand and regarding Cas as neutrally as he can. "Even if anyone came in, they wouldn't see me."

"No one would come in here without my permission," Cas states, taking a drink that empties half the bottle. "I thought it was prudent that you wear the sigils at all times to assure it was a habit so you wouldn't forget to do so outside the cabin."

Dean starts to protest but thinks better of it. If Cas wants a fight tonight, he's gonna have to work at it, and he's curious why he's even trying. "So in here, no one can see me, hear me--and it won't break because I'm talking to them while standing in front of them?"

"No one," Cas confirms, going for his fifth beer and passing Dean one as well. "It takes advantage of all the senses by which the world is perceived and trust in them working correctly."

Dean takes that in as he unscrews the top. "You mean an angel in their vessel could be standing right in front of me and he still wouldn't know I was here?"

"As long as they're in a vessel, they're as vulnerable as any other corporeal being." Cas rouses himself from vague dissatisfaction (possibly with the lack of rampant hostility from Dean, interesting) to look interested. "Practically speaking, if you decided to engage in single combat with one, they might have a clue that that they're missing something, but even if they knew for a fact you were here, it wouldn't help them see you. In this case, knowledge isn't power. The wards are telling the truth. A very loose comparison would be to someone who is red-green colorblind; being told the brown is actually red doesn't make them see the color red."

"Huh." Reluctantly--ownership? Later--he's gotta admit this is kind of cool. "How'd you get the idea anyway?"

Taking a drink from his half-empty bottle, Cas rolls his eyes. "It's simply taking advantage of natural law, in a sense. It's not something as complex as a devil's trap or ritual magic. It's the equivalent of theorizing that an apple is subject to gravity if it falls. You don't need to see it happen to know it will."
Lowering his beer, he tries to decide if Cas is serious. "This is like gravity, anyone can figure it out."

"Now that you mention it," Cas says seriously, "it does seem strange that no one has before. The requirements seem to be an angel laid siege to Hell to successfully claim a damned soul, resurrected them on earth, and then Fell into their own vessel to live the remainder of their mortal life, at which time they have a very motivating reason to want to provide limited invisibility to someone in a cabin during an Apocalypse." Looking at Dean, he gives him a picture-perfect impression of earnest curiosity. "Certainly that's happened before. Let me think for a moment so I can provide relevant examples. Oh, wait--"

"It hasn't," Dean finishes for him, wondering why the hell he wants to laugh. "And it works on humans and angels in human vessels. What about, I don't know, werewolves? They're human most of the time, but what about when they're not?"

Cas pauses, bottle halfway to his mouth, and God help them all, he's thinking about it.

"It shouldn't matter," he says, lowering the bottle. "It affects how the senses perceive the world around them, and that applies to everything with a corporeal form on this plane. Maybe a god's perceptions would be different enough to not be affected the same way, but to interact fully on this plane, they still need a human body to do it, and like an angel, it would affect them in the same way. Other than that...." He trails off and starts to grin, all pleased malice. "Gabriel's reaction would be worth any number of terrible second rate gameshows, just to see his expression when you punched him. It probably wouldn't have been a good idea to risk Kali, she'd set the cabin on fire and be done with it, but Serapis was notoriously slow when it came to anything later than burning of Pompeii--Diana was pleasant enough, I wouldn't try with her--"

"Cas," Dean interrupts, "you'd use your cabin of invisibility to play practical jokes on gods if they were still around?"

"Yes, of course." Cas looks at him, cheerfully malicious grin and incandescent blue eyes and Dean can, actually, see him doing just that. "Why not? Gabriel certainly enjoyed doing it to us, and he'd appreciate the humor. Eventually."

Dean opens his mouth to answer--there are a lot of reasons, and all of them sane--but the laughter that comes out instead cuts him off at the knees. Punching Gabriel in his smug face knowing he couldn't even find him, even if he was standing a couple of inches away; that's fucking awesome.

It's not just that, though, or even mostly that. He's got a list and it's growing by the second: Crowley, Meg, every demon ever, the goddamn Host, Horsemens, Lucifer, sirens, gods, witches, everything that's ever fucked with his head. Just once, they'd have to fight like he does every goddamn time, depending not just on what he knew but for the other side to fuck up. One advantage, just one: God knows, everything he fights has dozens of them, so why can't he have a really good one?

Before Cas can start again with all the other fun things you can do with a cabin of invisibility (cabin of death, of lots and lots of dead monsters) to fuck with people (gods, angels, werewolves, vampires, this list is getting way to long), he makes himself stop and take a long drink before moving on to practicalities.

"So what are the rules for the wards to keep it working inside the cabin?"

"Very few, but to compensate for that, they're also very strict," Cas says, tucking a leg underneath himself and reluctantly turning his attention to practicality. "The cabin's wards define the space you
need to be in for this to work, and *that* requires there be unchallenged ownership to that space. Not only to keep anyone else from being able to control the wards and give consent, but due to their nature; they're strongest and work best when their creator owns the space they're protecting. In this case--as there's no one who's challenging me for the cabin--ownership is simply defined by this being my residence, and habitation is satisfied by this cabin being the place where I sleep." He pauses, thinking about it, before adding reluctantly, "In this case, by me, I mean both of us."

"Because you own me," Dean says flatly, taking another drink and pretending not to notice the earlier lingering amusement fading from Cas's face, or the way his voice loses its animation.

"Essentially," he agrees colorlessly, finishing the bottle in a single long swallow and reaching for another. "Though it may also be satisfied by simply not sleeping anywhere else and spending some amount of time here daily. I haven't tested how long that would be." He shrugs, but Dean gets the unsettling impression that as of now, this is a priority for testing. "As of now, degradation begins to occur if twenty-four hours have passed without both of us sleeping within the wards, and they vanish entirely at thirty-six hours, which I can assure you is accurate to the second."

Because he's been living in that other cabin, which is probably not the preferable way to go about testing the limits. "And blood?"

"Provided we follow the habitation rules, it's purely symbolic; a weekly offering on the key is sufficient. Mine, not yours," he adds deliberately, finishing off his eleventh beer--Dean missed a couple apparently, but the number of bottles on his side of the couch is growing fast. "Adding yours was to see if it made them stronger, but there's no sign of any change so far. Anything else?"

"So that's it?"

"Strict, but simple," he confirms, then pauses to finish the *entire twelfth bottle*, and Dean's abruptly grateful this isn't a tequila night after all, *Jesus*. "They have another advantage," he starts, going for another one--how many did Joe give him anyway?--and opening it. "It must be a relic of your hunter-gatherer ancestors having no permanent residence, but in theory, habitation can also be satisfied by both of us sleeping in the same space, provided it has no other claimants. At least, it should, or your ancestors wouldn't have survived long enough to discover fire."

"I feel a 'but' coming on."

"I'm not sure what that means in modern terms or how long it would take to count as habitation, so that part is going to require live testing, I suppose. Until then, assume one sleep period in a given space would be the minimal requirements to confirm habitation, after which time the twenty-four hour limit goes into effect. At least, that seems to work; it's not as if I had much time to experiment."

"It's still kind of new," Dean supplies, morbidly curious how much it might take for Cas to get drunk on just beer. He knows his own tolerance, and Cas's is better by an order of magnitude if he can shoot *bottles* of Eldritch Horror. Cas nods shortly, starting to take a drink. "You just made it up, what, three weeks ago?--so I'll cut you some slack."

Cas gives him an annoyed look, but he lowers the bottle. "Thank you."

"Anytime," Dean says brightly, taking a small drink before adding, "Cabin of invisibility."

"Bobby was an advocate of using what you know," Cas answers, beginning to relax again. "He used to say that research was all well and good when there was time, but in most cases if we wanted time we'd have to make it, so the five minute rule should apply."
"The five minute rule?"

"He phrased it differently, but in essence, five minutes is all you might have at any time, so if you can't kill it and can't run away from it, you should already know a way to--buy time to find out how to do one of those two things."

He can hear Bobby saying that, adding 'idgit' with a snort when they looked blank. "Bobby was awesome like that."

"He was." There's another, shorter silence as Cas stares at nothing before saying in a completely different voice, "Dean, I would have chosen something else if there was anything that was this effective."

Huh. "What?"

"Power." Cas gives that fucking bottle a long look, and Dean's about a second from snatching it out of his hands when Cas finally looks at him again. "Wards usually require power to do anything, and short of a blood sacrifice, I don't know how to get it. These don't require power; they're passive and only require they exist to work. That they work at all is--I won't say miracle or the irony might actually strike me dead for abusing it, but something very like that. On this plane, it doesn't mean anything, why they work. It's symbolic."

So maybe--just maybe--it's possible he can guess where this is coming from: goodbye bottle fucking fifteen, hardly knew you. In retrospect, maybe he can also guess why Cas has put off a ward disclosure speech for three weeks.

"Uh, Cas," bottle sixteen, yeah, let's get this over with, "is something bothering you?"

"Why would you think that?" Cas asks pleasantly, twisting off the top like he's imagining it's someone's (Dean's, probably) head. "The list is very long, and I think I've told you the major points of dissatisfaction before, but if you want a recital, in order--"

Reaching out, Dean snatches the bottle out of his hands. He'd be impressed with his cat-like reflexes and getting the drop on Speedy McStrong of Dean's cabin interrogation fame, but he's pretty sure it was sheer surprise that got him that bottle. "Cas--"

"You want me to tell you the truth," he says tightly. "You're going to need to be much more specific on when that's acceptable and when you'd prefer a lie so I don't upset you. As a guideline, only the truth if you want to hear it is far less useful than you might assume."

Dean's gotta say, it sucks to suffer not just for the sins of his predecessor but for his own. "You get I don't like the idea of you thinking you own me?"

"I don't particularly enjoy having to claim you," Cas answers flatly. "I don't like you that much."

Dean drops back into his corner of the couch and grips both bottles until he's sure he's overcome the urge to walk out, punch Cas in his stupid face and then walk out, or to up the ante, throw both bottles at him and then punch him and walk out. This isn't going to work unless they can stand to be in the same room (cabin) with each other, and--Cas isn't walking out to fuck someone in the spirit of dickhood. Wait.

"Cas, are the wards working right now?"

"It could also be I don't like claiming a person like a piece of property because it's obscene," Cas says out of nowhere, eyes fixed on a point over Dean's shoulder. "It's possible the problem isn't
"They're working, but habitation rules aren't satisfied yet," Dean continues, filing that away to come back to in a second. "I've been sleeping in that other cabin. Not sleeping, whatever."

"I haven't slept here in two days," Cas admits, shoulders slumping unhappily. "When I did it before, I came back every day to maintain habitation, but I haven't been here at all. As I said, this is very simple but very strict."

"Where did you sleep?" Dean asks before he can stop himself.

"I haven't," Cas answers distractedly, frowning in concentration. "They're working, yes, but I think they might collapse if either of us leave without sleeping first to start the twenty-four hour clock. That's interesting, considering the origin; humans were migratory for most of your history--"

"Cas?" Though honestly, Dean kind of wants him to keep going; the unhappiness is lost beneath the power of intellectual curiosity. So that kind of thing works on people other than Sam; he's gotta remember that.

"--so it's possible intent to inhabit might also work. I'd like to test that." Cas begins to smile to himself, small and faintly pleased, and oh God, now he gets it. Cas said he didn't have power and got these to work anyway.

"You can sense wards?" he asks casually. "You can still do that?"

Obviously, not the question Cas expected.

"I don't know I ever could as an angel," he answers slowly. "I had Grace, which is--different; any ritual that used my Grace I could sense, and I rarely needed or used any other kind. Human practitioners of ritual magic often can, however. Especially those that use their own blood in the binding."

"Have you ever," Dean asks, returning Cas's bottle to his hand--his expression is totally worth it--and taking a drink from his own, "considered easing into a subject isn't the same thing as lying?"

Cas stares at his bottle like he's kind of wishing invisibility worked on him about now. Bingo.

"You're stuck with me until you sense the wards are up and running and this cabin isn't that big. How long until we can leave? I mean, right after we wake up, what?"

"One period of sleep should be enough," Cas answers shortly, and there goes half the bottle. "Though technically, we've both been absent for long enough that it may require a full day for them to be satisfied, so--"
"Twenty four hours," Dean confirms in satisfaction. "Will it take you that long to admit you were trying to piss me off with the ownership shit to test me on how committed I am to you telling me the truth? You spent almost three weeks not telling me because--going out a limb--you thought that part would bother me and you didn't want to deal with it or me. Fine, I get it, being around me isn't fun for you."

"Dean--"

"But you're gonna have to deal with me now if you're gonna help me do this--your decision, Cas--so this is how you want to start? Making an effort to see what kind of mileage you can get out of being an asshole and excuse it by saying that's what I wanted?"

Cas looks at him bitterly. "I've never noticed method of delivery makes any difference when telling humans something they don't want to hear."

"You mean Dean didn't." That last meeting before they all went to Kansas City that day looks a lot different now. "Cas, look: you made a cabin of invisibility--there's literally nothing not awesome about this--and derailed the entire imaginary ways I'd fuck with Gabriel and everything I've ever met by making it sound like I'm something you won at poker."

"I'm terrible at poker," Cas murmurs, but something tells Dean maybe he made some progress. "A siege of Hell is nothing like poker, and you're not a pile of currency."

"Then just tell me what it means."

Cas hesitates before setting his half-full bottle down. "It has no meaning on this plane of existence, and very limited applicability anywhere else; free will does have some protections inherent to it. I can't make you do anything--even if I wanted to or knew how--or do anything with it, but in this form, because I resurrected you as well as rescued you from Hell, it offered an unexpected benefit, the one thing I can still do--" He breaks off abruptly. "When I was an angel, you had the right to expect me to protect you."

Not. Guilty. "Cas, just because I'm here--I mean, I never expected you to--" There's no good way to say this.

"You didn't," Cas interrupts quietly, and in his voice, Dean hears 'useless' like some kind of fucking chorus and wonders if he ever hears anything else. "Without Grace, my options were limited, but this--it worked, so I used it." He hesitates, looking uncertain. "With Grace--with any power--I would have less--distasteful alternatives. However, I can't think of many ways to gain power that aren't obscene, so--"

"So cabin of invisibility," Dean finishes for him. "You know, you could have started with what you just said and saved us some time and beer, just saying. Did you even taste it? It's good beer, and it's not like you can get drunk off this unless you got about four cases in here somewhere." He pauses, giving the cooler a suspicious look. "Do you?"

"Joseph didn't have that much," he admits reluctantly, slumping further before giving Dean a narrow look. "And for the record, you could have asked 'what does ownership mean' instead of jumping to the conclusion I considered you the results of a successful game of poker. Especially considering it's fairly obvious we weren't speaking of slavery."

That's also a valid point. "This is going great so far," Dean tells him glumly over the rim of his bottle. They're going to kill each other, sarcastically. "What do you think?"
"I think you'd feel better if you'd actually thrown both bottles at me. I appreciate your self-control." Disarmed, Dean stops clutching his bottle quite so tightly. "To be fair, I didn't find that part particularly comfortable personally, so I might have been needlessly blunt."

This is definitely progress. "I could have asked," Dean admits. "Truce? Dude, it's a small cabin. We gotta get along here."

"I don't have to be here...." Cas stops, and Dean watches in interest as the obvious kicks in. "Except to help you, of course."

"Couple hours a day, right?" Dean tries not to take Cas's alarm personally, but Jesus, way to make a guy feel almost tolerated for existing. "It's only what, a few years of history, how everything works, names--hey, I could use everyone's names. Which one is Evan again?"

"You're enjoying this."

"You can change your mind," Dean says quickly, keeping his voice carefully neutral, though now that he's thinking about it--really thinking about it--he's got no idea how this is supposed to work. He can ID maybe a third of the camp on sight, *maybe*, and that's being really goddamn optimistic. "Free will thing."

"Don't be ridiculous," Cas says, starting to frown. "I'm trying to remember if Chuck has any writing implements and paper."

"He does," Dean confirms in bewilderment, watching Cas half sit up before shaking his head and sitting back again. "Uh, why?"

"Disadvantages of a mortal body and lifespan," Cas says cryptically. "Having a perfect memory but not all of time to search it. Notes would help."

After seeing Cas's interpretation of reports, that's terrifying. "For me?"

"For both of us. The invention of written language was a great step forward in human development. I'll speak to Chuck in the morning." He pauses, giving Dean a critical once-over. "You should go to bed. The day patrol meets an hour after dawn in the mess before they go on duty."

"Why weren't they meeting here?" Dean asks in confusion. "I left at dawn every morning."

"You rarely woke at dawn; you're simply not used to the weather enough to tell the difference without a clock," Cas answers, a hint of amusement in his voice. "I don't have one here and I know Dean's cabin doesn't have one. And your watch is broken: I noticed when we talked in Dean's cabin a few days after your arrival."

"That's what you want to call that?" Okay, on the list for today--tomorrow: get a goddamn clock. "You could have woken me up."

"I didn't," Cas says with a shrug. "I'll wake you at dawn so you can prepare yourself and then tell them they'll be meeting here for the foreseeable future. You've attended enough patrol meetings to know they're not terribly difficult. The abbreviated version you were doing from Dean's cabin was acceptable, but as you said, you're still learning their names. Their personalities might be also be considered need to know information, and this will give you the opportunity to learn more about them."

"I'm meeting with them alone?" Dean blurts out before he can stop himself.
"No, of course not," Cas answers in surprise. "That's why I need to talk to Chuck. I'll be taking notes to make this easier for both of us."

Right, okay, so far so good; he's not being abandoned (again) to stare at people he's never met who expect him to know what he's talking about (not even a little). Sleep's a good idea, actually. Finishing his bottle, Dean considers the small army of them on the other side of the couch and decides to let Cas deal with it. "Cas…"

"Hmm?" He glances up. "Don't worry; two days is my effective limit without sleeping unless I have reason to abstain, so the wards should be stable come morning. In the future--"

"Look, it's just--" Okay, just get it over with. "Where are you going to be when you're not helping me? Groupie?" Cas hesitates, and yeah, that's what he thought. "One of the empty cabins so no one would notice you aren't living here and wonder why."

"Dean, it would take something truly unusual for anyone to be surprised by anything I do…" Cas trails off, expression changing, which Dean thinks might mean he sees the problem.

"Would someone notice?" Now that he's thinking about it, he always wondered about that. "Cas, how'd you find out I was going to the city anyway?"

"Contemplating my sins," Cas answers shortly, giving him a glare, but whatever, that shit was hilarious. Their faces when Cas said it…. "Vera was worried. She checked on me every morning and told me the jeep was warm."

"Think anyone will wonder why you're not here when this is where you live?"

Cas sighs. "I take your point."

"Or," he adds carelessly, "they'll think I'm an asshole that'd throw you out of your own cabin for no particular reason…." Cas raises an eyebrow, like maybe that's an idea he could live with. "No."

Cas shrugs, but his next drink is moderate enough that Dean feels confident enough to keep going.

"Everyone's living double and triple because the extra ones don't have roofs; I'm not that much of a dick." God, he hopes this Dean wasn't. Cas looks startled. "Took a tour while I was invisible, it was interesting. So break it down for me; why are we doing the timeshare thing again? You have to sleep here anyway to keep up the wards and if you're gonna help me you gotta be here at least sometimes, so--what's the point?"

Cas's expression melts into genuine surprise. "I thought you would prefer it."

Right, he can work with that. "That's the only reason? I mean--" There's no way to ask him if it's because of him without just asking it. "Okay, one, it's your cabin, and I don't know about you, but it's--I'm not okay with feeling like I'm throwing you out. To a roofless cabin, Jesus."

"Most have a least some--" Cas makes a face, conceding the point. "What's number two?"

"Is it because of me?" His mind scrambles desperately to figure out a way to clarify that, but the way Cas's face goes blank tells him that he got it, and possibly the answer.

"Yes," Cas says slowly, blue eyes suddenly finding something really interested in the wall by the bedroom door. "In the sense I assumed you would appreciate the privacy."

Privacy, isolation: so similar, yet really not. "I'm okay with you being here."
"I could always--" He cuts himself off with an appalled look.

Dean recognizes that look. "You were gonna say hang out in Dean's cabin. Trust me, I would have used a tent if I could have found one."

"A tree would be preferable," Cas agrees, then looks at Dean, blue eyes speculative. "Your recent forays have proven that you no longer require nursing but you may be well enough for regular visitors."

Okay, he can probably handle social calls. "That sounds fine, but we were talking about…." Cas's sincere expression almost but doesn't crack. "What kind of visitors?" he asks suspiciously.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Cas answers with suspicious disinterest. "I didn't keep track of Dean's social life."

Dean almost drops his bottle: Risa, Jane, Jody, oh God, and only one of those isn't here to haunt him. How many women are in this camp anyway? "Dean's girlfriend."

"That title may not be singular," Cas says after a terrifying moment of thought. "I don't know for certain, and you may appreciate how much effort that took in a camp this size. However, it shouldn't be difficult to discover. I've found that a very good indicator of someone desiring sex is the removal of significant clothing--"

"Shut up," Dean breathes, horrified by a brand new aspect of something that was kind of questionable and horrible already. "Okay, yeah, that's--no. You can't find out?" Cas's bursts into laughter, nearly dropping the bottle, and yeah, that would be weird, but Jesus, the alternative-- "Not helping!"

"I am helping," Cas says in a strangled voice, looking at Dean with dancing blue eyes. "You're still traumatized by your encounter with Lucifer and your time hiding in Kansas City, so you require time to process your experiences before finding closure."

Dean blinks at him, dazed by the sheer number of words in that sentence. "I have no idea what that means."

"You're in an extremely bad mood," Cas clarifies, finishing his bottle and setting it on the floor with a satisfied expression. "You want to be alone, and I won't let you isolate yourself further. That, actually, isn't out of character." Cas's grin fades, a flicker of grief that vanishes almost immediately. "We weren't always on speaking terms, but neither were we always…not on speaking terms."

Dean tries not to read too much into that. "That means--"

"He liked my couch more than I do," Cas says with a hint of amusement. "And I like it a great deal."

Dean almost asks what the hell was up with that bedroom and stops; that Cas might have vague dislike of it because he was locked in there doesn't mean that this Dean liked it any better as the person who did the locking from either side of the door.

"My winning personality, as you call it, should do the rest. Of course, if you change your mind regarding social--"

"No." Dean glares at him as he gets to his feet, not at all relieved to see Cas is relaxed again. "I'll keep you informed if that changes."
"Please do." Cas at least has the decency to hide his smile before continuing. "It would also remove a source of constant stress as far as your safety is concerned."

"From what?" he asks, confused. "I mean now, not the coming of Lucifer. I'm not doing anything."

"Dean…" Cas stares at him for a moment. "The existence of danger at any given moment where you're concerned is not only probable, but almost guaranteed to occur, usually in a completely unexpected form, and often the results of your own actions."

Dean cocks his head. "You're saying I'm asking for it?"

"More that, much like my philosophy regarding sex, you don't refuse when it offers an invitation." Cas's smirk fades into--Dean wants to say he's nervous. "However, you must keep in mind I haven't lived with anyone since I Fell, and before--I didn't necessarily understand what I observed."

"It'll be an adventure," Dean says honestly. Considering his own experiences as an adult--two, Sam and Lisa, Dad doesn't count by any stretch of the imagination and Bobby was occasional at best--he can't say he knows much more. This'll go, he thinks fatalistically, either unsettlingly well or end in murder-suicide. Maybe both: like he said, adventure. "Right, so--you sure you don't want the bed?"

Cas snorts. "Not at all."

Yeah, he figured as much. "Cool."
Chapter 6

--Day 29--

It's an hour after the night patrol goes on duty when Castiel glances up from his book to see Vera hovering on the far side of the cabin. Curious, he nods when she looks a question, and she crosses to the stairs, hesitating at the bottom. For a moment, he wonders why she looks wary, brown eyes fixing on the doorway. Dean, he realizes belatedly; she watching for Dean.

"He's resting." His supposition is confirmed when her shoulders relax, and smiling more naturally, she slowly ascends the steps, favoring her right knee before seating herself beside him with a sigh, reaching up to tighten the long ponytail, locks of dark hair trailing halfway down her back. It's been a long time since he's seen her hair down; on duty, it's ruthlessly bound from her face, a quiet rebellion against the former team leaders' disapproval. Setting aside the book, he watches her stretch her leg, frowning at her wince before she settles. "How are you feeling?"

She took a bad fall two days ago on patrol when a bridge on one of the county roads collapsed while she and Joseph were testing it for stability. She managed to get herself and Joseph back to the bank with minimal injury--the water being slow and not terribly deep--but Joseph suffered a minor concussion and was taken off-duty for three days, and she wrenched her knee badly enough to require at least a week before she was cleared for anything outside the camp.

"Fine, swelling's down already. I was about to ask you the same question." Despite the smile, the brown eyes are serious. "Everything okay?"

"Dean is still recovering from--"

"I was talking about you," she interrupts, smile vanishing. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," he answers in surprise. "Why?"

Vera's eyes narrow before one corner of her mouth twitches. "Just wanted to see what was going on with you. You're really quiet at patrol meetings these days."

"I never used to come to patrol meetings at all if I could help it," he answers with a frown. "Now that Dean has returned--" Oh. "He asked me to continue to attend, yes. The words 'unexpected insight' were used unironically, so it seemed best." It's far more interesting than it used to be, when tripping was the only way to make it through one without saying something Dean would very much regret.

"And you're doing it." Her eyes flicker to the notebook in his lap. "And taking notes."

Castiel glances down; it's still open to where he was finishing a brief explanation of why patrol routes were changed a year ago (trolls) before he remembered Dean's earlier question regarding the location of the rest of his books and went to find them.

The notebook has become a semi-permanent fixture in his life, pages dog-eared and stained with early morning coffee from Dean's lack of coordination before dawn, filled with notes to himself, to Dean, reminders and history and patrol schedules and suggestions. He understands better now why both John Winchester and Dean kept a journal, but what he can't is how they managed to keep only one. It's only a week old and is already almost completely filled.

"Organizing your thoughts via expressing them in textual form is surprisingly effective," he
answers, flipping the pages idly and noting the progression between the beginning--almost solid with text and nothing else--and now, where text is sometimes surrounded in boxes to draw Dean's attention, numbered lists, and underlining if needed. The appearance of Dean's own questions in the margins began three days ago, and now is occasionally supplemented with surprisingly astute commentary on what he's read as well as requests for clarification that Castiel answers in kind.

"I always assumed the purpose of taking notes was simply to aid in memory retention, but seeing something in writing…." He trails off, not sure how to explain. "It helps me think. I don't know why."

She searches his face for a long moment before sitting back in surprise. "How many days have you been clean?"

"I'm not." She raises her eyebrows. "Anything purely recreational, you mean? Nine days, nineteen hours, and twenty-two minutes, not that I'm counting, of course. It seemed best to continue to abstain in view of Dean's recovery. How did you--"

"I don't need to be high to follow this conversation," she points out, starting to smile, and to his surprise, he finds himself smiling back. "It's been a while, you understand, but mostly-clean and sober really works for you."

"Dean is still…recovering," he says diplomatically, aware of the question she's not asking. "With everything else…"

"That bad?" she asks with a flicker of unwilling sympathy. "He talk about it yet? What happened in Kansas City?"

"A little." He has, which makes more obvious the things he doesn't. "He simply needs time. Or so I've heard."

"By the way," she says, changing the subject. "Amanda told me to tell you--and I quote--'fuck yes' and if you're fucking with her, you're dead. That last part's from me. Ten tonight okay?"

Dean's usually in bed by then; the more time to brood over that journal. "That's fine."

"Cool." She glances at the notebook again, undoubtedly recognizing it from its presence during patrol meetings. "What are you working on anyway?"

"Collating data from the statewide survey against our previous and current routes," he tells her. "I didn't realize how much has changed since we arrived here, including the deterioration of public works." Dean's comments on the latest news from the radio--in electric green pen, no less--made him curious. It was enlightening, once he was able to confirm he wasn't high and therefore it wasn't an auditory hallucination, which took longer than he expected. "While I've always been aware the radio's not particularly reliable, the latest commercials are beginning to resemble not terribly creative fiction."

"I'm wondering what the Ford 'Glow' will be like," she concedes, digging a toe into the step. "They're promising something we've never seen before. Isn't Detroit still on fire?"

"Surely by now some of it's gone out," he answers uncertainly. "In any case, Ford is located in Dearborn, which is a suburb of Detroit. I think it was unaffected."

"Angelic knowledge covers the location of auto manufacturers?"

"Possibly, but in this case, Dean once had to acquire parts for the Impala and the garage owner was
both very educated in the subject of automobile manufacturers and loquacious. I paid attention. It was interesting."

"Only you." She pauses, frowning at him before she seems to come to a decision. "Cas, what are we doing?"

The problem isn't that he doesn't have answer; it's that he has too many. The years of living within Dean Winchester's single, unwavering purpose was, for the most part, familiar to him after an existence defined by purpose. The world is so much bigger now that he sees it in more than a help or hindrance to fighting Lucifer.

"As the radio is somewhat unreliable," Vera snorts agreement, "Dean wants to re-establish our contacts with the border guards and see if we can get more up to date information."

"We shouldn't have lost those contacts in the first place," she says hotly. "With those military units still no-show, the supply situation is going to go to shit if we depend exclusively on salvage operations and wildlife, of which there's not any." After a grim pause to ruminate the potential menu choices should this continue much longer, she sighs. "By the way, thanks for updating the maps and making copies for everyone. Sid's got no sense of direction and it's a lot easier to argue when I can show him where's he's gone wrong." She slants a curious glance in his direction. "I didn't know you could draw."

"I didn't either." It never occurred to him that he inherited anything from Jimmy's body--considering it was rather questionable if this could be considered Jimmy's body at all after its resurrection and the lack of Jimmy's presence--but the ability to accurately reproduce and update their few existing maps isn't something he thinks would have been included in his initial creation. Dean's surprised relief at having a convenient way to learn the new geography of the state was unexpectedly gratifying. In the spirit of exploiting any resource in his immediate vicinity, he sent a team to the city for what supplies they could find to further Castiel's efforts, and what time he isn't spending trying to impart years of history is spent reproducing the layout of all the major cities of Kansas and their patrol routes in them as well as the current geography of most of the state from memory, aided by the invaluable reports by the patrol. Stretching his fingers absently, he glances down at the now-constant lead and ink stains on his fingers, new calluses developing from the constant use of a pen.

He's still surprised that he doesn't necessarily mind, even if his hands are starting to ache constantly from the unfamiliar activity. There's something immensely soothing in devoting the entirety of his attention and energy to drawing, rough pencil-sketches he improves over hours before confirmation in pen. When he told Dean that, however, he was inexplicably amused but refused to explain why.

"No wonder you're clean," she says teasingly, following his gaze. "Wearing Lady Macbeth's inkstains there, you don't have time for anything else. Though really, do we really need to know where each still existing tree in Kansas City is on a street map?"

"The ones growing in the middle of what used to be major thoroughfares qualify as necessary information," he argues. "Especially considering someone managed to mistake a city park for a thoroughfare in the first place."

She snickers. "You gotta get over that. Not like Dev was a cartographer. He did the best he could."

He glares at her. "So he mistook park benches for cars?"
Listening to her laugh, he realizes that this may be the longest conversation they've ever had when he wasn't stoned. It's been over three quarters of his mortal life since the day they met, but he still remembers that first time she looked at him on Chitaqua's training field, one of Dean's newest recruits. Like all humans, she knew he wasn't what he appeared to be, even if she didn't know why, not then; she simply didn't care. It was far too late at the time for him to appreciate it, but it seems that wasn't true for her.

The sound of beads jerks both their attention to the doorway. Dean pads across the porch, rubbing the back of his head absently, but the green eyes are anything but dulled from the rest he claimed that he needed, a faintly dissatisfied expression curving one corner of his mouth.

Almost immediately, Vera's smile stiffens and she gets to her feet to face him. With Dean on one side and Vera on the other, he suddenly feels surrounded, the space between them charged with claustrophobic portent. So far, Vera and Dean's interaction has been sharply limited to patrol meetings, and professionalism and unfamiliarity can cover many things that direct conversation can't.

"Hey, Dean," she says with artificial enthusiasm, demonstrating exactly that. "How's it going?"

Dean smiles back, gaze sharpening. "Don't let me interrupt or anything, I just needed to ask Cas something."

"Amanda's expecting me back." She glances down at Castiel expectantly. "Talk to you later?"

Aware of Dean watching them both, he nods as casually as he can. "Of course."

Dean looks after her speculatively until she vanishes from sight before taking her place on the step. "How's her knee?"

"She said the swelling was down, but your order keeping her off-duty should remain in effect for the full week," he answers. "Joseph may need another day or two, however. Alicia says he'll be fine, but he suffers from regular migraines, and this has triggered a severe one."

"I don't want that team going out without Vera anyway," Dean answers with a grimace. "If the bridge is any example, Joe'll be dead in a day if the other two are all he has to back him up. Sid's leadership skills need some work if he doesn't know to come back when two of his team members are injured."

"He's a very good fighter," Castiel says neutrally, "but he wasn't a team leader before now. He also lacks initiative."

"Pulling people out of a river doesn't require initiative, it requires common sense," Dean says stubbornly. "A rope helps, but that just means problem-solving capabilities are in order when you don't have one, and he doesn't seem to have any of that either." He blows out a breath. "You weren't kidding about them being new at their jobs. Six people in all four teams were on regular patrol before this, and dude, we know more about the job than they do."

That's depressingly accurate. "They aren't that bad."

"No," Dean says slowly, eyes fixed on something in the distance. "They're just all much better at taking orders than working out what to do for themselves." He slants a glance at Castiel. "That's why you were rotating them? I really should have asked about that."

"It would be more accurate to say I had no idea how to judge who should be doing it, and rotating them was preferable to choosing wrong," he answers. "Also, I wasn't in the mood to deal with the
issues that come with establishing a hierarchy."

"Jealousy," Dean agrees glumly. "Fighting evil at the end of the world, still gotta worry about what you rank fighting it. Why are people like this?"

"The Host had a more caste-based system, but it wasn't much better." At Dean's disbelieving look, he almost smiles. "Having dealt with angels, this surprises you?"

"Zachariah did have the middle management thing going on," Dean concedes, cocking his head. "You--even when Castiel was sheriffing Heaven, it wasn't a power thing. I mean--not a power thing because he liked power, not at first, anyway." Dean's expression darkens at the reminder. "Power corrupts, huh?"

"So it's said." He considers his answer. "I've wondered if it's more that power gives the corrupt the ability to exercise their nature upon more people."

"And everyone's corrupt," Dean finishes in gloomy satisfaction.

"Everyone has weaknesses," he counters. "Those that know them, and are willing to work against them, are very different from those who neither acknowledge them nor attempt to regulate themselves."

"For an angel is nothing more than a shark well governed.'" Turning on the step, Castiel stares at him, and Dean's innocent expression cracks almost immediately. "I can also do the entire Mark Antony funeral speech from Julius Caesar."

"What was her name?"

"Victoria, junior year, fourth high school that year." Dean's grin widens. "Couldn't play football, we were moving too much, so had to work with what I had."

"That would be Herman Melville and Shakespeare," Castiel answers blankly, almost ashamed of how surprised he is. "How is your Dante?"

"My Dante is fucking awesome, and so is my Milton and Blake," Dean confirms smugly. "And unlike anyone else in class, relevant to my life and times. Though didn't realize how much then."

"And useful in picking up young women."

"Like magic," Dean answers in satisfaction, eyes drifting in the direction that Vera went again. "Speaking of women, do I want to know why Vera hates me or we gonna pretend that didn't just happen?"

"She doesn't hate you."

"You really want to go with that?" Dean asks him. "I remember what she was like when you were running patrol meetings, and come on. I don't even rate passive aggressive, and that's--I don't know, but I'm guessing bad considering how pissed she was with you then."

He tries not to wince. "You could tell?"

"Oh yeah," Dean confirms maliciously. "It was funnier when it was you. So just spit it out and get it over with."

"She doesn't hate you," he repeats firmly. "She doesn't. She is--ambivalent."
"Right. About what?"

He considers how to frame his answer and realizes there's no way to ease into this particular subject. "Her partner--Debra--was infected with Croatoan soon after they arrived here."

"Does this story end with me shooting her in full view of her girlfriend?"

Castiel almost sighs. "Yes."

"Jesus," Dean breathes, closing his eyes before he looks at Castiel speculatively. "Friend of yours?" Did you sleep with her remains unspoken but crystal clear. He nods uncertainly, not sure of the relevance. "Close?"

"Despite the fact that I agreed with Dean's decision, I had the advantage of not having actually pulled the trigger. She and Debra had only been here a few weeks when Debra died, so she had few people she knew, and as I was one of them, I assume she made the best of a very limited selection."

Dean's mouth quirks. "Huh."

"Sex," he explains, not sure what's making Dean look at him like that, "doesn't indicate any particular intimacy other than that achieved physically."

"Anyone but you, that would sound cynical," Dean observes. "I have no idea here, though."

"You don't agree?"

"Didn't say that. I'm saying, she hates me but still comes over here because she wants to check up on you--dude, I saw her face, didn't hear a thing, promise--she isn't in it just for the orgasms."

"It was only a few times and a very long time ago."

"A few orgasms," Dean corrects himself, rolling his eyes.

"From my understanding of friendship," he answers carefully, "I wasn't making any attempt to have that with her. Or anyone, for that matter."

He shrugs. "I'm betting she saw whatever it was with the two of you better than you did. Considering you were pretty stoned half the time."

"She and Jeremy did voluntarily spend time with me when certain experiments with substances I doubt anyone sane would have considered attempting failed. I assumed they were simply very bored. It's not as if there's much to do here."

"Cas, trust me when I say this, that's the gold standard. The only person I ever held their hair back while they found God in the toilet was Sam." Getting to his feet, he inclines his head toward the doorway. "You want a beer?"

"Yes," he answers immediately, watching Dean go back inside before returning to his notebook, flipping the pages thoughtfully.

There's nothing like occupation--necessary, indispensable occupation--to provide surcease from pain, and Dean's days are now as full as Castiel can manage to make them. While it doesn't change the hours of the night he spends awake, it provides an excellent distraction during daylight hours, and sheer exhaustion limits the amount of time Dean can spend brooding before he finally goes to sleep.
It's helped that Dean's shown a hitherto unknown love of routine and the need to have one, the novelty of which has yet to diminish. His ruthless enforcement of who has possession of the shower at what time and the appropriate and inarguable time for meals and sleep were something of a revelation, splitting each day into blocks of time devoted to specific tasks that, while not always entirely enjoyable, have the advantage of being extremely predictable, a trait Castiel's learned to appreciate a great deal after two years of humanity's sheer lack of same.

Which is why the offer of a beer is worrying; that's routine, too, but never before dinner for reasons that he suspects probably have a great deal to do with Vera's comment on his sobriety. He learned very quickly exactly how inadvisable it was to try and do anything when not entirely in his right mind--reading Phil's first patrol report while coming down still lingers, traumatically--but even so, he supposes Dean doesn't want to provide excessive temptation.

As Dean returns, handing him the bottle as he sits down beside him with a sigh that's become very familiar. "Thank you."

"Anytime."

"I'll remove that from Chuck's supply list, then," he answers, matching Dean's tone. "Should I write it down?"

"Funny."

"I'm not having sex with Vera. That was a very long time ago, as I explained."

Dean scowls at him. "Not what I was talking about--"

"I can make you a list of who I have if you wish," he offers idly. "Or you could simply ask--"

"I'm saying," Dean continues with an alarmed frown, "sitting out here pretending to work or read or whatever you're doing all the time when you could be doing…." He waves a hand in eloquent explanation. "Hang out with your buddies."

"You mean having sex?"

"Jesus, Cas."

"In this case, it is, unless you were under the impression I hosted very enthusiastic Parcheesi tournaments on a nightly basis."

"Daily," Dean mutters, rubbing his face helplessly before sighing. "Forget it, okay? Just getting that out there."

"Your concern for my sex life is appreciated but unnecessary." The cabin's plumbing, he's found, is excellent, and as he has a designated time to use it, he takes advantage of it. Dean's preference he not engage in chemically assisted sexual congress in the cabin didn't need to be articulated to be very clear, and it's not as if he has either the time or the inclination at the moment. "I wasn't pretending to read, I was reading. I like to read."

He does, though it's been a long time since he did so for no other reason than pleasure. Slanting a
glance at the book, however, he wonders if that's something he wants to admit under the circumstances

"What are you reading, anyway?" Dean asks immediately, craning his neck to decipher the illegible title. Resigning himself, he picks it up and passes it to Dean, who flips it open, squinting at the pages with a dubious expression before turning it sideways. "Okay, I give up, what is it?"

"Evidence suggests it's the greater part of a very bad epic poem by a disappointed Athenian student who was refused study in the Library of Alexandria," Castiel tells him. "More specifically, a very grammatically questionable but extremely detailed account of a hero calling on the gods to help him strike down a soul devouring monster who preys on the young and helpless, which in this case is a symbolic representation of the head librarian at the time, Eratosthenes."

Dean looks back at the page, tilting his head in confusion. "But not in Greek."

"Depressingly, he attempted to write it in demotic Egyptian during a tour of the Nile, the quality of which explains why he wasn't accepted to study in the Library. From context, I assume this was a portion of a trip arranged by his family to console him for his failure as a scholar."

Dean cocks his head. "He didn't get into college so he went on a road trip and wrote a pre-Myspace poem about it? Two thousand and something years ago?"

"Two thousand, two hundred and fifty-nine years ago, and yes," he agrees, taking the book back before the binding loosens too much to hold the pages, and with any kind of luck, inhibit further inquiries on the subject matter. Closing it and smoothing the cover, he sees Dean's grin widen, pink lips still wet from his last drink of beer. "What?"

"Where'd you get it?"

"Oh. It was part of a collection of books that Bobby acquired." Dean raises his eyebrows in a silent request for more information, and sighing, he gives up. "I originally vetted the contents and identified it as a work of fiction, not a particularly convoluted ritual to summon Tawaret, if the prevalence of hippopotamuses in the narrative is any indication."

"Goddess with a hippo head, got it. Wasn't she into childbirth or something? Why would anyone summon Tawaret?" Looking between the book and Castiel, he cocks his head curiously. "Why are you even reading it?"

Yes, that "I found it again earlier when I was looking for the rest of my books, as you requested," he answers, then glances toward the doorway hopefully. "Speaking of, they're in the living room if you wish to…."

"Why do I feel like you're trying to avoid the question?"

"I'm not. When I saw it, I remembered…." He struggles for the right words. "I was an angel then, and context was often a problem with literary works, especially interpreting subtext correctly. Observation isn't the same as experience, as you must know, and infinite knowledge is surprisingly limited."

Dean rests his head in one hand, watching him in fascination. "How long can you keep this up?"

"Not much longer," he admits, staring resentfully at the cover. "It may be fair to say at this point that I hope Tawaret will eventually make an appearance in the narrative, because otherwise, there are very few excuses for why descriptions of a water-based land mammal are entering the realms of erotic. Admittedly, some of the poem is missing, but I'm less than a quarter of the way through
it, and it's already verging on the unnerving."

Dean stares at him, eyes wide, then bursts into laughter, collapsing back on the porch beneath the strength of his own hilarity. With a sigh, Castiel sets the book aside for later and takes Dean's bottle so he can more fully indulge himself.

"You had a question?" he asks politely when Dean finally recovers enough to sit up, flushed and still grinning between breathless attempts to stifle further laughter. It's an extremely good look for him, Castiel reflects; he has yet to find any look that doesn't, and he's started to make an effort to do just that. "Other than in regard to my taste in reading material?"

"Dude, whatever floats your boat. Even hippo porn." He chuckles again as reaches for his beer and takes a long drink before continuing, amusement dimming abruptly, "I was reading Dean's journal-"

"There are moments I have considered burning it." So that's what he did instead of resting. He should have guessed.

Dean's mouth drops open. "What? Why?"

"You read it for hours every night, and I'm beginning to suspect that you're using it in an inappropriate manner."

"Dude, you're reading hippo porn!" Dean turns on the step so that Castiel has the full benefit of his glare. "I'm not jerking off to descriptions of run-ins with demons and dwarves."

"I'm not--" Dean smirks at him, unrepentant. "While it would be somewhat unsettling if you were using his journal for masturbation purposes--in which case hippo porn, as you put it, would be a considerable step up--I'd feel better if you were." He pauses, thinking about how to put this. "Why are you reading it?"

"Croat infection statistics turn me on."

"The brownie infestation would provide more stimulating material than Croats," he answers, ignoring Dean's scowl. "Dean's journal is information you can utilize, not to mention a somewhat accurate, if not entirely unbiased, historical record."

"What the hell happened with those brownies that didn't make the public record?"

"It is not, however, an instruction manual on how to become someone you're not." He closes his eyes at the change in Dean's expression. "I could have put that better."

"I know what you meant." Dean takes another drink before staring pensively into the distance. "How else am I supposed to figure out how to do what he did?"

"Why do you need to? If you're going to do exactly what he did, why learn it at all? I could do it for you."

"Dude, are you pulling a coup?" Dean sits back, green eyes dancing. "Not judging you here, just didn't see that coming. And I could sleep later than dawn, so actually, it's kind of tempting."

It wouldn't, he reflects, be the first time he's inadvertently accomplished a coup; for some reason, he thought they were harder. "Given a choice between again being required to do what you're doing now and dealing with Lucifer, I'm not sure which one I would choose. Also, you're never voluntarily awake at dawn. We've discussed this."
"That's not a no," Dean points out smugly. "Break it down for me."

"You told me I should make my own options. While that is still an almost painfully simplistic philosophical point--platitudes have a higher level of sophistication--"

"Jesus, just coup me already," Dean mutters.

"--in this case, it has the advantage of being true. Dean's journal can tell you what we did, but it shouldn't be a guide on what we do now. Using it as anything other than a reference guide can only lead us to repeat the same mistakes. You need something new."

"So not a coup," Dean answers with mock sadness before he slumps, frowning at nothing. "Something new. Yeah, I'll get right on that." Shaking himself, he straightens, looking at Castiel's notebook significantly. "Whatcha got for me?"

Flipping it to the correct page, he hands it to Dean. "I finished the alternations to the routes the regular patrol will begin using next week. If my calculations are correct, it will take ten more days for us to find and attempt to contact the communities that were noted during the five day survey with the current number of people in the camp without compromising functionality."

"We're almost living like people these days: only two generator failures this week," Dean tells him, skimming the page. "It's a new record. Let's keep that up. How were they running before I got here anyway?"

"I'm not sure," he answers honestly as Dean flips the page, frowning in concentration. "Dean, is something--"

"He didn't have much contact with the people stuck in here," Dean says abruptly. "Even the ones that knew we were even here don't know where Chitaqua is, just where to put a signal if they need help, which will arrive two days or less, probably guaranteed. Amazon could get me Himalayan rock salt faster than that." He waves a hand when Castiel looks at him curiously. "Uh, this thing--had to be untouched by human hands and grind it ourselves. Unprocessed or something counts, but there was pink dust everywhere after we were done."

"Couldn't find any in black?" Castiel says, fighting down a smile at Dean's disgruntled expression.

"Amazon India didn't have it in stock," he answers, daring him to comment. "The current lack of anything is really working out for everyone, since it was getting kinda dicey for a couple of months there."

The implicit accusation is impossible to miss. "I could point out the lack of people available to offer assistance, but the actual reason is probably obvious."

"When he got a line on Lucifer and prepping for death by failure of the goddamn Colt," Dean agrees caustically. "So that worked out."

"If it had worked, the Apocalypse would have been over."

"If it had worked, Lucifer wouldn't have won," Dean corrects him. "It'd just be a different kind of apocalypse. We don't need Lucifer to destroy ourselves."

Despite several conversations and all they have been able to glean from both the radio and the patrol's reports, the current state of the world is still hazy, but even so, Castiel's knowledge of human history is both extensive and exhaustive, and it supports Dean's conclusions.
"The cities continue to be devoid of activity," Castiel tells him, deciding to return to a less fraught subject. "So the current weekly patrol schedule should continue, but as there are reports that the animals are beginning to return...."

"Or maybe the cows didn't actually leave," Dean says. "Squirrels and deer are still a no-show, and that reminds me, remember what you said about domestic animals--"

"I made that up." Dean raises his eyebrows meaningfully. "I don't know why--there's no possible reason for there to be a difference."

"There's no reason we got fleeing animals, either, but a cow was seen, and seriously, we should have gotten Sidney off patrol when he came back without it."

"Apparently, he didn't connect it with the current supply situation, though how he could miss that...."

Dean shrugs, taking another drink, but the green eyes are hard. Dean's dislike of Sidney is becoming more obvious every time they interact, something even Sidney might eventually notice, though the way Dean avoids him should by now be some indicator that there's a problem. While Dean was genuinely angry regarding what happened with Joseph and Vera on patrol, Castiel can't quite shake the feeling that he was waiting for just such an opportunity to remove Sidney from duty.

Considering how well Dean gets along with the other members of the camp, the effort he makes to get to know them and their extremely positive response to his attention--something that didn't surprise him at all, having a great deal of experience with what Dean could do with sheer force of personality even without motivation--Sidney is an aberration.

"Speaking of supplies," he says, deciding a change of subject is in order, "I've reviewed both Chuck's supply list and our inventory at your request." He hesitates; Chuck was a wealth of information without sufficient context, but it was clear that Dean's observations regarding their future needs were accurate. "You were correct; without the regular trade with the military, we're going to need another means of acquiring supplies very soon."

"How are the people around here getting food anyway?" Dean asks suddenly. "I got the impression that the government sent supplies in or something?"

"Yes, there's a quarterly drop, though I couldn't tell you more than that," he answers, another thing he somehow missed in the last two years. "Apparently it was organized to assure that those trapped within the zones were kept supplied until Croatoan was eliminated and it was safe to open the borders again."

"Yeah, check's in the mail, I didn't sleep with that waitress, and no idea why that grave's on fire," Dean murmurs under his breath. "Translation: they didn't want to look like total sociopaths by leaving a whole bunch of innocent people to die of starvation unless they got lucky enough to become Croats, not even being sarcastic. Since Croats don't seem to eat much." He makes a face. "Except uh, anything living they can get their hands on. Each other when there's nothing else."

"They actually don't need to eat," Castiel informs him. "They enjoy killing, but they only eat humans or those infected with Croatoan. It's not required for their survival, however, so I assume it's an issue of taste."

Dean stares at him, bottle hanging forgotten from one hand. "The cannibalism thing was just added for fun?"
"And to increase the horror factor exponentially, I assume. Croatoan was designed to offend all human taboos and encompass all human fears as well as destroy the human population. I wouldn't say it covers all of them, but it does provide an excellent representative sampling." He pauses, waiting for Dean to look less horrified. "Should I continue?"

"Yeah, please," Dean makes a visible effort to return to the subject at hand. "So, supply runs for now, see what we can get from what's left in the cities and go from there. Wait, anyone but us playing salvage yard for supplies?"

"The people here?" he asks in surprise. "No, because--"

"Shot on sight by the military on suspicion of being Croatoan?" Dean asks brightly, finishing his bottle and looking at it as if considering going for another one. "Don't answer that."

"The cities were loci of infection, which assured they were avoided by civilians," he answers. "Not to mention they were controlled by Lucifer's minions, which is part of the reason they were the focus of our attention. Unlike us, he had access to teleportation and regularly supplied Kansas with more Croatoans whenever we seemed in danger of running out. Keeping them contained in the cities was the only way to lower the risk of it spreading throughout the state."

Dean doesn't respond for a moment, frowning into the middle distance. "We could do it for them."

"What?"

"Cities are empty--now anyway--and military's on leave or something," Dean answers thoughtfully. "Not like we're not all in this together, so why not start acting like it?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"Trade." Dean looks at him curiously. "So what do you think?"

"There are reasons the location of Chitaqua was secret and our interactions with the people here limited," Castiel says. "You and I--and probably Chuck--aren't the only ones in Chitaqua who have warrants for our arrest. Even those who don't would be arrested for harboring us."

To his surprise, Dean's mouth tightens. "Because someone might alert the US government to where their most wanted's hanging out, right?"

He nods slowly, wondering why Dean's looking at him like that. "Yes. Dean was extremely didactic on the subject."

"Cas," he starts, then seems to change his mind. "We'll be careful, take it slow, but Cas, it's this or MRE's in our near future. So who can we send with people skills?"

"People skills?" he echoes. "I won't go, of course."

Dean bites his lip. "Yeah, I forgot; you've spent all your life here."

"Only two years and--"

"Your entire mortal life. Pop quiz: how many weapons are you wearing to sit on the porch?"

Before he can grasp the question, Dean continues, "Answer: at least two that I saw, and that's only because I started watching for it. It's not just you, don't get me wrong; getting coffee from the mess in the mornings is stressful as fuck. Way too many sleepy people carrying enough firepower to start a respectable war over the state of the oatmeal; just saying, that shit wakes you up fast."
Castiel frowns. "You eat in the mess? Then why do you insist on cooking in the morning?"

"Not anymore," Dean says with a shudder. "At least not until Zack's off mess duty. I was ready to
draw on him myself after the last time I tried. Anyway, not the point--though maybe he needs non-
food related duties before we have a mutiny, just a thought….

"What," he asks firmly, "is the point?"

"The point is half this camp scares me, and it's my camp and I'm allowed to shoot them," Dean
says patiently. "Now imagine if you aren't--well anyone here…Cas, you were an angel fine, but
you gotta remember when people didn't go to bed like they were expecting an ambush at
midnight?"

Castiel hesitates. "I've wondered if--"

"They didn't, they don't, and I'll be really goddamn surprised if that's changed much for the civilian
population here," Dean assures him. "Semi-survivalist apocalyptic militia carrying more weapons
than the army equals hide the kids and run far, far away." Tipping his head back, he thinks about
it. "Joe was one of the ones that used to work with the border guards, right? Send him and maybe
Vera--she did missions out of state for Dean when you were looking for the Colt, right?"

"Yes, she and several others generally--oh." He nods. "People skills."

"The skill not scare people," Dean agrees. "Which I assume if they were good at their jobs, they
could do." He blows out a breath. "Considering most of the people we've seen so far weren't
exactly excited to see us--"

"We've never been a threat to them."

Dean snorts. "Dude, we don't have to do shit to them to be a threat; we are a threat. When they ask
us to protect them from anything they can't handle, we show up--tell me we did that, at least."

"We did."

"Thank God," Dean mutters. "But we don't need anything from them. You get what I'm saying?"

"They would prefer having a hold over us?"

Dean grimaces, leaning his elbows on his knees. "If I were a fucked up cynic, yeah, but it's more--"
He thinks for a minute. "Reciprocity. We show up and help them out and then walk off like they're
not worth our time."

"We save them," he says slowly. "But don't know why we do it if we're not interested in interacting
with them."

Dean nods encouraging. "Human 101: keep going."

"They don't trust us," he continues, putting it together. "They don't know us, and our actions may
help them, but they can't trust us, because they don't know who we are, why we do it, or if at some
point we'll--demand payment for it and deny them our help if they refuse. Even if we've never
done that before."

"We could, and that's all they need to know," Dean answers bluntly. "And I'm gonna bet they didn't
call us unless it was pretty fucking dire, survival-level dire."
He never considered the possibility there were other times they were in danger and didn't call them to help. Before now, if he had thought of it, he would have assumed it was something they could handle themselves, but now, he thinks of those calls for help that no longer came, from places the patrols had found empty when they once weren't.

"You think trade would assist with that?"

"Can't hurt," Dean answers. "Vera and Joe, Mel and her team keep out of sight and make this friendly. Maybe find a way for them to communicate with us so they're in trouble, they can get to us, I don't know. Jesus, how did hunters work without fucking phones?"

"If Joseph is to negotiate with them, why not assign him his own team and have them regularly visit each of the communities that seem amenable? We can accommodate two more regular teams in the field."

"Yeah, I was thinking about that. Joe for now; I want to think before we add anyone else." Another Sidney, his expression implies. "When Joe's cleared, we'll start with the border and go from there. Vera should be clear to leave the camp by then."

Castiel nods, making a note of it for Dean's benefit. It's not that Dean won't remember, but it helps a great deal during Dean's frequent outbursts that he's doing nothing compared to what Castiel still does for him to have it at hand to show him. He's even taking to crossing off items that have been accomplished. "May I continue?"

"There's more?" Dean asks blankly. "Really?"

"Turn the page," Castiel says helpfully. "Inventory and supplies, continued."

"There are headers," Dean observes, flipping back a few pages in surprise before returning to the correct page. "And bullet points."

"Ease of reading and to attract attention to the relevant points: Chuck advised it," he agrees. "Our supply of gasoline is adequate at this time, but my projections suggest that within the next six months we will either need to acquire more or begin rationing use of the generators." He pauses, surprised at what he just said: six months. As if they'll be here in six months, or in any condition in which planning for it will be at all useful.

"Do you sleep?" Dean demands.

"Yes, but--"

"Right. When would you find the time if you wanted to?" Dean frowns down at the notebook again before handing it back, mood abruptly shifting into discontent. A glance at the page assures him there's nothing there that should have elicited that reaction—there are checkmarks showing progress toward their goals, one of which is having a less nebulous goal than 'something'. That narrows down the potential reasons instantly. "Cas--"

"I will, actually, set that journal on fire, salt the ashes, and bury it in the closest approximation to holy ground I can find," Castiel tells him and is rewarded with Dean's undivided attention.

"What?"

"After reading it, you're invariably moody--"

"Moody," Dean says flatly.
"--not to mention irritable, and it was bad enough to experience that only in the mornings," he says ignoring Dean's expression. "That makes sense at least--no one sane likes mornings, except Alicia, who may be the case to prove the point--and you improve after coffee. However, adding this as a regular feature during daylight hours--which the last two days suggest is a possibility of not probability...if you want my human skills to improve, consider modeling better ones."

Dean almost drops his bottle. "What?"

"I don't suggest my former habits were anything but self-destructive," he continues a little desperately, "but at least they were enjoyable while doing them. What you're doing isn't, at all: I tried that. It made nothing better, some things significantly worse, and--"

"Are you giving me human advice?" Dean asks incredulously.

"...no." It's not a lie, exactly. "I'm trying to work out why extensive brooding is superior to making life livable via chemical assistance."

Dean shuts his mouth with an audible click of teeth. "So I'm--driving you to drink? Just to be clear here. I'm driving you to drink?"

"No, of course not...you told me to be honest," he says, trying a different tack. "You insisted that any disagreement should be discussed like rational people--I have no idea what that means, but I'm deferring to your judgment on that--and this is me, discussing your questionable relationship with that journal before I'm forced to acquire kerosene and take matters into my own hands, which I assume you would disagree with very virulently and at length."

"Wow." Dean glances down, looking at the empty bottle with bitter regret; he knows the feeling. "You're trying to avoid a fight?"

"I think so," he answers warily. "Nothing's on fire, in any case."

"Because I'm annoying you," Dean says, bottle clenched in one hand in a way that suggests Castiel may need to move very quickly in the near future. "Cas, everything annoys you--"

"When you're not reading that journal to fuel your feelings of inadequacy, you generally don't!" he snaps before he can stop himself, and Dean's expression abruptly goes blank.

"Got it, be better company to the recovering junkie before I drive you to drink again," Dean says, with an edge that suggests unless he wishes for a fight, this subject is closed. "Anything else?"

Castiel considers it for a full minute as he finishes his own beer, trying to decide if another attempt will actually be useful for anything other than a very uncomfortable evening. An uncomfortable, sober evening, at that.

"Since the cities still seem to be free of supernatural influence as of this morning's report," he starts, "this would be a good opportunity for you to become familiar with the regular routes we use on patrol."

Dean's set expression softens into wary interest. "And that means..."

"You wanted to see our patrol routes yourself and not merely on a map," he answers. "I withdraw my objections to you leaving the camp, provided you're escorted."

"Really?" Dean brightens immediately, early anger forgotten. "Wait, what does escorted mean? Tell me that you're not sending every goddamn person in the camp along to watch me."
"Actually, I was thinking--"

"I swear to God, I get the safety thing, but come on. It's just the getting a feel for what they're dealing with, see it for myself. And it'd be suspicious, because why would I need an escort? Cas--"

"One, no one goes outside the camp walls alone willingly," he interrupts. "However, your point is taken, so as they're off patrol until Joseph and Vera are well, Sidney and Robert are available."

Dean's hesitation is so brief that he almost misses it. "We're not going over any bridges, right?"

"No."

"Right," Dean tells the camp walls. "Just saying, Sid can't handle organizing a rescue of his own teammates without someone holding his hand."

"There won't be any bridges, Dean."

"Rob's okay," Dean continues as if he hadn't spoken. "Nice guy, quiet, might have a personality but I can't prove it...."

"Or I could go with you," he adds casually. "If you wish."

"You--" Dean's outraged expression cracks into a grin. "Seriously, you couldn't just say that and not offer up fucking Sid? I'd take Vera first; if she killed me, at least it wouldn't be by accident."

"That's not what I--" It might have been, actually. "I thought you might prefer it be somewhat private, and you could order them to leave you alone."

"I could order you to do that," Dean counters.

"Yes, but they'd actually obey you."

"Point." Dean's grin fades into something more thoughtful. "Kind of surprised you're okay with that. I figured you'd want one of the teams along, because you're like that."

"You think I can't provide sufficient protection for you?" he asks, wondering if he should be offended. "I've improved when it comes to combat on this plane. It was rather necessary for my survival."

Dean snorts softly. "No, I kind of figured you were good in a fight these days. I just didn't think you'd want to."

"I want to."

Dean nods after a moment. "Okay, mess is doing meatloaf surprise and guess what? I don't like surprises. So looks like the range is getting another workout tonight." He looks wistful. "Christ, I miss diners."

"I could cook tonight." He's still not sure what this development means; Dean here never showed the least interest in cooking before, though his comment on Zack's oatmeal does at least provide some context. "I won't get better without practice, though I still don't understand your objection to my efforts."

"Yeah, I don't get it, either," Dean answers, looking baffled. "Everything's canned. How can you mess that up?"
"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Which is why you're not going near the goddamn stove. Hurry up and I'll let you choose what kind of beans we want tonight." Dean flashes him a grin on his way inside. "Since there's only one kind, shouldn't be too hard."

---Day 30---

The patrol confirmed the lack of supernatural activity in the city more than once, and their last report was no different than any other since Lucifer left the earth, which Castiel's verified several times on his own. That doesn't alleviate the instinctive desire to keep Dean as far away from any urban area as possible, but it does remove the only excuse he finds acceptable for doing so.

"So why can't I drive again?" Dean asks. Again.

"Because it will help you concentrate on learning the routes in the city if you don't also have to navigate them at the same time," Castiel answers patiently. Again.

"Supply run," Dean says, kicking a boot onto the dashboard, which Castiel fights to ignore. "Try again."

"Because it gives me pleasure to annoy you unnecessarily." He glances at Dean. "Is it working?" Dean flashes him a grin. "Yeah, but there's another reason." Settling back in his seat, he turns his attention back to the road, but the lingering smile is disconcerting, and he suspects this is not the last time they will visit this subject today.

Castiel tries to identify the growing tension that he can't quite categorize. The familiarity of the route is written into his bones from years in Kansas, following the switch between the county roads and the remains of the highway almost automatically, and he finds himself checking the rearview mirror, searching for something, but he isn't sure what. As the city limits come into view, slowly decaying suburban neighborhoods beginning to surround them, he glances over at Dean and swallows, time bending nauseatingly: in thirty minutes, Dean will order them to stop; in forty-five, Castiel will be ordered to leave him; in an hour, Dean will die, and Castiel won't.

Two hours from now, he'll leave the city with this man and expect never to return; then again, when he enters it, he'll never expect to leave it at all.

"Cas?"

If he were an angel, time would have no meaning for him. Two weeks or two days, two hours or two seconds, it would always be now, and it could always be changed. If he were still an angel, two weeks or two years ago would always be now, and all his mistakes could be fixed; if he were still an angel, perhaps there would never have been any mistakes for him to make.

If he were still an angel, Castiel thinks distantly, Dean would still be alive and this man wouldn't be here, sentenced to die in a world that doesn't yet know it should already be dead.

"Cas."

With a jerk, Castiel hits the brake, staring out the windshield at the sullen pearl-grey of morning, hands shaking despite their grip on the steering wheel. He's dead, he realizes, the wound so fresh it still feels like it's bleeding; Dean's dead and he's still alive. This isn't how it was supposed to happen.
A hand reaches over, putting the jeep into park and turning the key in the ignition, the hum of the engine melting into unwelcome silence.

"You don't have anything to prove here," Dean says softly. "It's not that important. You don't have to do this to yourself."

"It--" His voice cracks unexpectedly, and swallowing, he tries again. "I don't know why I…."

"It's the first time you've been back since we got his ashes." He can feel Dean looking at him and doesn't want to imagine what he must be thinking of him now. "Yeah, you wouldn't know. This is kind of a learn by getting through this shit kind of thing. It's different for everyone."

Castiel steadies his breathing by sheer will, but nothing can stop the cascade of memories as if they happened only moments before, as if they haven't happened yet and might not happen at all.

"We can go back," Dean offers. "This isn't a test."

Everything is a test, and he's failed them all. "I'm fine."

From the corner of his eye, he sees Dean sigh, crossing his arms. "Sure, go for it."

"I don't need you to--"

"--babysit you? Be around just so if you gotta go through this, you don't have to feel alone while you do it? Take your goddamn pick."

The anger drains away, leaving him hollowed out, empty.

"Not that I know anything about that," Dean finishes flatly.

It's the fate of all those born mortal, finite lives a drop in eternity, their short existent spent in the knowledge of the inevitable loss. Dean's grief over the death of Sam drove him to the Crossroads, as humans have done almost since the beginning of time, trading eternal suffering for alleviation of a pain that no matter how strong was transient at best.

It was as if he looked upon a puddle and believed he could understand the depths of the ocean. Life is so much longer when living it; gutted alive and still breathing, it's forever.

"Cas." A hand rests on his shoulder, fingers squeezing firmly in wordless reassurance. "You want to do this, we can do it, but you don't have to. This isn't a test, and if it was, surviving is all you gotta do to pass."

"Time," he says bitterly, wondering at the vastness of the lie he once took as truth; it's forever here. "So I've heard."

"Yeah, that's bullshit, the time heals thing," Dean answers with a laugh that is anything but amused. "Nothing works until you figure out how to even want to. Never mind, you wanna do this?"

Everything's a test, and he always fails. He's never done anything else. "Yes."

Dean squeezes his shoulder one more time before pulling away. "Then let's get going."

Reaching for the key, he turns over the engine and reaches for the gear shift, aware of Dean's attention despite his steady gaze out the windshield.

"So there are three routes you use on patrol in Kansas City," Dean says out of nowhere. "So
different world, you still call these roads here, right?"

Castiel pauses, mind grinding to a halt.

"Just checking. So tell me everything you know about this route on the way."

He looks across the jeep. "That's not much."

Dean shrugs. "Then make it up."

This is the shortest of the three routes they use in Kansas City, and while it usually takes very little

time to travel, Dean insists on stopping at certain points for no reason he can fathom. The first

three, he doesn't make any attempt to get out, scanning the street and then the buildings, a line

appearing between his eyebrows that deepens at every stop.

"I should know it," Dean says sincerely when Castiel is unable to control his impatience after ten

minutes at the third stop. "I really want to know it, Cas. Deeply."

"You're enjoying yourself," he observes, carefully navigating a corner that has almost become

blocked by debris. That should have been reported, he thinks in annoyance, making a note to have

Dean remind the patrol to report any changes to the route as well as their duty to clear any

obstructions themselves if at all possible.

"You ever see Mad Max?" Dean asks. He shakes his head, though it does sound vaguely familiar.

"Never realized it was a documentary."

Dean reaches down absently to shift the holster Chuck found among surplus, the leather still new

even to be stiff, the straps not yet softened and shaped to his body. Assuming he would be

disinclined to use his counterpart's weapons, Castiel chose what he needed for today. Dean hasn't

had an opportunity to practice since he arrived, which reminds him to ask if he would prefer to find

somewhere outside the camp to increase his familiarity with those weapons in the armory that he

hasn't used before. He gets the distinct impression that being surrounded at the range would not be

welcome and make the exercise less enjoyable than it should be.

"Hey," Dean says abruptly, interrupting his thoughts as he leans forward in his seat. "Stop here."

Obligingly, he stops as Deans squints out the windshield intently before reaching for the door,

asking belatedly, "Any reason I can't take a look around?"

"No," he answers reluctantly, but Dean's already out the door. Reaching behind the seat for a rifle,

he throws the parking brake and gets out, trying to decide what captured Dean's attention. "In case

this isn't obvious, if you see something move, shoot it. It won't be friendly."

Dean doesn't answer, and after scanning the street for any sign of activity, he crosses to the other

side of the jeep, frowning at Dean's fixed expression. Following his gaze, Castiel takes in the half-
crumbling remains of a hotel and puts everything together.

"The first time you came here," he says softly. "It was here."

Dean nods slowly, eyes distant. "That's where I woke up."

He tries to see as Dean must have that day, when he emerged into a dying city in stark contrast to the

living one he unknowingly left. He imagines Dean stumbling down street after barren street, seeing the decay of the buildings and streets, the overcast bathing the city in sullen grey, the end of the world already in all but name.
He remembers Dean as he was then, appearing at the doorway of his cabin like a ghost from a past he would have been happy to forget, demanding his assistance as he vibrated in timespace like a perpetual tuning fork and disappointment written across his face as loudly as a shout. In retrospect, he would have been more offended, but his focus was on the half-hidden flash of red that circled each wrist, so new it was obvious exactly where he'd just been.

"You guessed from the map." Dean studied them last night for longer than he expected before he made his choice. "You were looking for where the military routes crossed ours."

"I remembered that the road was clear when I came down. Eventually a tank saved my ass," Dean says absently, closing the door with a push of his hand. "You or the military clear the routes you use regularly, and this route crosses theirs twice. I hotwired a car a couple of blocks down and it took me ten minutes to get out of the city, straight shot to the west. Beta seemed the most likely, or close to it."

"You remember all of that."

Dean shrugs, eyes drifting back to the hotel again. "Kind of memorable."

"The first three days you were here, this is what you were looking for." In retrospect, it's almost embarrassingly obvious. "In case there was something here that might help you."

"Nothing around that fucking dumpster," Dean agrees indifferently. "Seeing a tank around might have helped a little." Shoving his hands in his jacket pockets, he shrugs. "Stupid idea."

Castiel takes in the dilapidated state of the building and slides the rifle over one shoulder. "We should look anyway."

Dean searches the cramped room with professional efficiency and a hunter's flawless instinct, but there's very little to search and nothing to find. The rusting metal headboard creaks as he strips the bed of the sagging, water-stained mattress, springs squealing shrill protest, eyes skimming the dull wooden floorboards before he moves on, checking the doorway, fingers sliding down the splintering wood to feel for anything that he might not be able to see, checking the floorboard before going to the window, the grimey window looking out on a scene of devastation that must have been his first view of this world.

He pauses there for only a minute, and Castiel sees the green eyes glaze as he relives a memory of disbelieving horror, then he turns grimly to search the floor, crouching on the other side of the bed and going suddenly still.

"Dean?" He starts toward him and stops half-way there, uncertain; the set of Dean's back isn't encouraging. After a second, Dean straightens, shoving back his rifle and holding something in his hand.

"Lighter," he says, tossing it casually, but the long fingers close around it white-knuckled before tucking it in his pocket. "I had it with me when I got here the first time. Forgot I even lost it."

Castiel remains silent as Dean comes out from behind the bed. "You ready to go?" he asks, on his way to the door. "Let's get out of here."

When they emerge on the street, only faint traces of Dean's discomposure remain, mind turning firmly to the present. As they approach the jeep, he finds himself staring at the sleeves of Dean's jacket where they cover his wrists, and realizes that might not have been the only--
"What else happened?"

Dean stops short, turning to look at him. "What?"

"When you arrived at Chitaqua, Dean found you," he says before he can stop himself. "What did he do to you when he took you to his cabin?"

"Nothing," Dean says in surprise, continuing to the jeep before turning around, leaning against the hood. "Just made me prove who I was."

"Before or after he handcuffed you to the bed?"

Dean's eyes widen. "How did you--"

"How did he prove it?"

"How--uh, this memory we both..." Dean shifts, tension fading into reluctant amusement. "Dude, some things you take to your grave, and this is one of them. Trust me, this one we never told anyone." The green eyes search Castiel for a long moment. "Then he handcuffed me to the bed and forgot we both know how to get out of handcuffs. Why?"

He didn't realize he was holding his breath until he lets it out. "I never asked you what happened when you arrived at Chitaqua."

"You were a little distracted back then," Dean says with a nod, cocking his head. "How'd you know about the handcuffs anyway?"

Involuntarily, his eyes flicker to Dean's hands. "You had marks on your wrists, very fresh, and signs of abrasions less than ten minutes old."

Dean starts to push himself off the hood, then stops. "Wait, how'd you know he took me to his cabin and handcuffed me to that bed? That happen a lot or something?" There's no time to think of a way to answer before Dean straightens. "He hated that cabin, and so do you. Never slept there. Cas, is that where he took the demons he captured? There?"

He licks his lips. "Yes."

"The handcuffs," Dean breathes, looking sick. "Getting out of them didn't usually matter with who he left in there, because there was a devil's trap on the ceiling, wasn't there? Jesus, how did I miss it? I was there for two days straight!"

"The light comes only from the northwest window," Castiel answers without thinking. "It's carved directly into the wood. You can't see it, no one can, unless they know exactly what to look for and where."

The unblinking stare continues for several long seconds before Dean says, voice surprisingly even, "I wondered how you knew how shallow you could make those sigils so they'd still work." Turning away, he adds, "I'm gonna take a look around."

The afternoon is just beginning to darken, hanging on the fragile cusp of early evening, when Dean's indicates they should make one last stop as they near the end of the commercial district before it melts into the edges of the suburbs. Giving Castiel a perfunctory glance, he gets out, automatically swinging the rifle over his shoulder as he shuts the door.
Closing the driver's side door, Castiel watches as Dean paces from one side of the street to the other, the green eyes searching the street and climbing the sides of crumbling apartments and over the craters where stores and shopping centers once stood. Returning to the jeep with unusual swiftness, he circles around to lean against the hood on the driver's side, arms crossed tightly as he stares at nothing for a few moments.

"Okay, if I'd thought about it, I would've known you--" His jaw tightens visibly. "You helped him. I mean, why wouldn't you, I get that."

Castiel nods warily. "There weren't many people who had the knowledge or experience to be of assistance."

"Or could stand to watch," Dean says flatly. "Unless you want to tell me this wasn't Alistair's apprentice's greatest hits going on in there. I can tell you right now how many can be done on earth without even trying." He takes a deep breath. "Did he teach you?"

"I knew some methods from the Host and my time in Hell," he answers. "He taught me more."

"Did you enjoy it as much as he did?"

"It wasn't arousing," he answers steadily. "I didn't do it for pleasure, and while the method used was new, the act wasn't. Do you think in all my existence, I've never been required to interrogate a demon?"

"Right, I forgot the Host went in for torture."

"In our Father's name, there is little we are denied in pursuit of carrying out His will on earth."

"You weren't carrying out God's fucking will!" Dean shouts back, turning to face him. "You were taking your orders from Dean fucking Winchester! And in case you forgot, you aren't a goddamn angel anymore!"

He flinches before he can stop himself. "Is your objection that I did it at all or that I don't offer you an apology for it?"

Dean looks at him for a long time. "Doesn't it even bother you?" Before he can answer, Dean shakes his head, turning back to the jeep. "Never mind, we should get back. You ready?"

He nods, unclenching his jaw with an effort. "Yes."
Chapter 7

--Day 31--

Castiel has adapted to mornings where his first interaction with Dean is generally both non-verbal and somewhat hostile, but through Chuck's efforts this morning (he is extremely compliant at dawn), he found something to assist with that. As Dean stumbles unhappily into the kitchen, hair still wet from the shower, his expression melts into surprise as he blinks at the appearance of a coffee maker.

"Where did you get--never mind, don't care."

Castiel turns his attention back to updating the map for the route they surveyed last night, aware of the strained silence that has been in evidence since they returned yesterday. Dean went to bed soon afterward in what he assumed, considering that it was just after dusk, was an effort to avoid any further interaction. Perhaps not entirely coincidentally, it was an unpleasant night, and the day doesn't show any potential for improvement.

Abruptly, Dean swings a leg over the other kitchen chair, holding his second cup. "You look like shit," he observes, watching him with unreadable eyes. "You were out pretty late. You get any sleep last night?"

Apparently, Dean didn't either, if he noticed his return. "Not really." For some reason, he can't seem to keep his hand steady; the fresh bruise rising up on his forearm isn't helping, and it's an effort not to rub it. "The patrol should be here in a few minutes. I have--"

"Today we'll keep it short," Dean says suddenly, frowning at his cup. "You can skip this one, so finish that up if you want."

Castiel nods, forbearing to mention he can hear everything from the kitchen, since Dean knows that perfectly well. That seems to be exactly the response that Dean is waiting for; with another unreadable look, Dean gets up just in time for the morning patrol to appear.

Ignoring them, Castiel tries to concentrate on finishing his corrections to the map.

As promised, it's a very short meeting--shorter than even Castiel was able to manage himself--as is the meeting with the night patrol, and the abrupt dismissal is obviously a surprise to everyone, and not a pleasant one. Which shows how quickly people adapt to change, he supposes; they seem to have forgotten entirely that before the attack on Lucifer, Dean would generally only meet with the team leaders, and the rare meetings with the entire team were strictly confined to their orders. As long as he can remember, socialization afterward was almost non-existent.

Dean returns for another cup of coffee, lingering at the doorway and sipping it absently. Castiel wonders if he's supposed to acknowledge his presence in some way or continue to pretend he's not aware of it at all. It's possible it was too soon to declare cohabitation a successful endeavor.

The arrival of Joseph and Alicia provides a welcome distraction, Joseph doubtless to argue that he's well enough to return to regular duty, though Alicia's presence is a mystery. After a few minutes of utterly failing to continue what he was doing, he glances up at a sudden burst of laughter to note Alicia's seated herself on the arm of the couch, leaning over to look at whatever Dean is reading, close enough that her hair brushes against his shoulder.
At the unexpected sound of footsteps, Castiel looks up to see Joseph stop just short of the kitchen table, staring back at him, brown eyes wary. It's an annoyingly common reaction to his presence that even almost two years of familiarity has only softened, not eliminated. Leaning an elbow on the table, Castiel doesn't look away, letting the silence stretch between them; it's been a very long time since sobriety played any part in his interactions with humanity. When Dean told him that day in the cabin that he preferred Castiel when he thought he was just a junkie, he could have told him that the only thing that made him unique among the residents of Chitaqua was that he was willing to admit it.

Hearing Dean's laughter drift toward them from the living room, he abruptly remembers that he's supposed to be helping Dean. Deliberately making his militia uncomfortable as opposed to inadvertently causing it by existing in their presence would probably be considered somewhat counterproductive to his current purpose.

"Do you require something?" he asks politely, dropping the remains of the pencil on the table and grimly amused by the way Joseph's eyes widen at the uneven pile of wooden splinters and powdered lead.

Joseph licks his lips, eyes darting between him and the coffee maker, and belatedly, Castiel realizes he's holding Dean's empty cup. "Uh, coffee?"

Flattening his hand on the table, Castiel takes a deep breath and returns his attention to the maps, reaching for the last of the pencils and wondering vaguely if he could justify suggesting another supply run to acquire more because he keeps breaking them. Writing is far more work that he imagined; remembering the monks bent over parchment in monasteries armed with nothing but a quill and an ink well, he finds himself increasingly surprised that humanity didn't abandon the written word long before the advent of Gutenberg.

"Then do it and leave. I'm working on something."

The sounds of Joseph hunting up an extra cup--and apparently finds one, much to Castiel's surprise--is too distracting for him to ignore him and so hears Joseph muttering in Yiddish beneath his breath as he pours the coffee.

Castiel snorts. "Your ancestors called me far worse."

Joseph jerks around in surprise, hissing as hot coffee sloshes across one hand from one of the cups. Sitting them both hastily on the counter by the sink, he spends an inordinate amount of time rinsing the coffee away and inexplicably lingers there after turning off the tap. When he turns around, Castiel observes a dull red blossoming across his cheeks before he grimaces.

"Forgot you could understand me," he says ruefully. "Sorry about that."

"It's not the first time a human has implied I had a carnal relationship with livestock," he replies. "Though granted, considering the plethora of shepherds, it tended to be limited to sheep."

"They implied you…" He breaks off, looking appalled. "They thought an angel of the Lord came to earth to fuck their sheep?"

"They didn't imply it," he answers, mouth twitching unwillingly at Joseph's expression. "They were both specific and explicit regarding what act they believed I was performing on their flocks." Joseph's expression doesn't change. "To be fair, when they became aware of what I was--and that my intentions towards their sheep were perfectly chaste--they apologized."
"You're kidding." Picking up his coffee cup, Joseph folds himself into the chair on the opposite side of the table, looking fascinated. "Wait, you said my ancestors? Like, humanity in general or--"

"Specifically yours," he answers, feeling off-balance by Joseph's blatant curiosity. "Why?"

"You never told me...." Joseph sits back in his chair. "Infinite knowledge. You still have all of it?"

"Yes." He wonders if there's something specific Joseph wants to know. "At least, all that was, is, and will be as of the moment I Fell." Very little that has been of any use, he could add; the gulf between knowledge and experience is vast, and that was the first thing he learned here that infinite knowledge didn't bother to cover. "Why?"

Joseph shrugs, reaching up to scratch at the back of his neck before pushing a stray lock of curly dark brown hair that came loose from his usual pony tail impatiently behind one ear. Picking up his cup, he stares at it for a minute before sitting it down with a sigh, mouth curving in a reluctant smile.

"Look, I just realized what my grandmother would do to me if she was here and heard what I just called an angel, okay? Give me a second, I'm imagining it out now."

"Former," he corrects him automatically, wondering why Joseph looks away, mouth twitching as he takes another drink of coffee. "She was Orthodox?"

"Very." He grins over the rim of his cup. "And gotta tell you, the former thing? Wouldn't have mattered at all." There's a thoughtful silence before he adds, "She died during my second year of rabbinical training. Never did go back."

"How long were you lapsed?"

"More of a hiatus." Setting his cup down, he absently traces the rim with one finger. "Faith wasn't my problem. I just didn't like the job." Looking rueful, he shakes his head. "Now I regularly minister to sixteen separate faiths, so that worked out well. My Latin's getting better."

"It's not, but by now everyone's used to it."

For some reason, that makes Joseph grin, and Castiel's aware of a sudden sense of envy for the faith Joseph's always possessed, a bedrock certainty that has always infused every word he speaks when carrying out each self-imposed religious duty. Dean chose him for his experience in the Israeli army in his youth and his familiarity with the American military, but it was only well after Joseph finished his training in Chitaqua that he became aware of Joseph's unofficial status as Chitaqua's de facto chaplain.

He still isn't sure if Joseph's omission of his rabbinical training was deliberate, or it simply didn't occur to him to mention it. Both are equally likely--Dean didn't ask for or feel any interest in anyone's religious affiliations--but he thinks that Joseph might have guessed exactly what Dean's reaction would have been if he suspected what Joseph would decide to do once he was established at Chitaqua.

"Not to mention what my ex-wife would say about impiety," he adds with a faint smile, picking up his cup and taking a drink. "She--"

"You said you had no family living." That was a question that was asked everyone who came to Chitaqua.

"I don't." He shrugs, brown eyes avoiding his. "We divorced before all this. Last time I checked,
she left Philadelphia right after quarantine was declared and moved to New York to live with her sister."

Sitting back in his chair, Castiel studies him. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Dean talked to me about re-establishing contact with the checkpoints," Joseph answers, fingers tightening around the cup. "The DMV's still alive and well in the east. It's an easy check, all I need is access to a terminal on the border. I could hack into it myself if we had a goddamn internet connection out here."

"You would know. You've been doing it without Dean's authorization all this time." Joseph stiffens. "Pennsylvania was zoned eleven months ago. Our last contact with the border was seven."

Joseph doesn't move, but the long fingers tighten around his cup. "Didn't think you paid that much attention to what was happening."

"I also know you weren't inquiring only for yourself," he continues and Joseph's face drains of color. "Erica's team accompanied you. She wouldn't have authorized it, but you couldn't have done it without help, and her team might have agreed if they had reason to."

He glances into the living room where Alicia is entertaining Dean at this very moment, and Joseph closes his eyes. "Are you going to tell Dean?"

"Tell me what?" Dean says suddenly, appearing at the doorway and looking between them with a frown. Alicia peers over his shoulder with a nervous expression, eyes fixing on Joseph worriedly. "Cas?"

"Joseph needs your permission to survey the camp and see who might have family or friends that we could ask the border patrol to locate," he answers, ignoring Joseph's soft sound of negation, lost beneath the rustle of paper when Castiel folds up the unfinished map for later. Dean's eyes widen but he betrays no other sign of surprise. "Dean?"

"Yeah, that's fine," he answers distractedly, coming into the kitchen and leaning a hip against the table. "Anything else?"

Joseph's mouth works briefly before he shakes his head, looking desperately at his empty coffee up as if it might contain assistance. "No, that's about it."

"You're cleared tomorrow," Dean says, crossing his arms. "Vera's not, so your team is still in stand-down from patrol. We still need to talk about what goes on the list for the border, but go around the camp and find out who needs info and how much. I assume you can get me an estimate on how much this'll cost us?"

"Yeah, okay." Getting to his feet, he darts an unreadable look at Castiel. "So--"

"So I was being too subtle about getting you to leave," Dean observes, waving him toward the door. "Don't let the beads hit you in the ass on your way out."

Joseph cracks a reluctant smile, like a man spared moments before execution, before he heads toward the door, Alicia murmuring something as she follows, but then Dean taps the table, getting his attention.

"What?" With the lack of other people, the cabin is claustrophobic; before, he always had half a camp of buffer between himself and Dean's constant, endless, pitiless disapproval. Surely doing it from another room isn't too much to ask. "I need to finish this."
"You want some coffee?" Dean asks, picking up Joseph's cup on the way to the coffee pot. Disarmed, Castiel nods, watching him rinse out the cup and set it in in the sink before locating another cup and filling it as well as his own. It's oddly fascinating to see him engaged in domestic chores; as far as he was aware, Dean here lacked them as much as he did, or at least, never bothered to share the principles of how they were accomplished.

Returning to the table, Dean sets the cup in front of Castiel before retrieving the small plastic containers of sugar and artificial creamer that's joined the canned goods and other staples in the pantry and sits back down. He seems in no hurry to speak, however, watching Castiel take a wary drink of the coffee, mouth quirking at his grimace.

"Usually just a couple of Adderall in the morning to get you going, right?"

He stiffens, setting the cup down with unnecessary force. "I never developed a taste for coffee." Or anything else, really.

"Did you try adding sugar?" Reaching over, he pulls Castiel's cup in front of him without waiting for an answer, adding a spoonful of sugar, giving him a critical look, then adding another and a generous helping of powdered creamer before stirring it and sliding it back across the table. "Try again."

Warily, Castiel takes another drink; the flavor isn't nearly as harsh.

"Knew it." Dean dumps another spoonful of sugar into the cup and stirs, then waits for Castiel to take a drink, grinning at his expression of surprise. "Gabriel's candy thing," he explains, taking a drink from his own cup. "Must run in the family."

Looking at the creamy surface of the liquid, Castiel wonders why he never thought of doing that, then at Dean's pleased smile, wondering why he did.

"So if I let you burn Dean's journal in there," Dean says thoughtfully, "can I start his cabin on fire?"

He jerks his head up to see Dean gazing at him over the rim of his cup, expression rueful, and the remaining anger drains away. "I probably should have told you before, but since you weren't living there anymore…."" 

"Not the kind of thing you bring up over a couple of beers, yeah," Dean agrees with a grimace before setting down his cup. "If I'd thought about it, I would have guessed he'd ask you to help, and there was no reason for you not to."

"It still bothers you to have confirmation."

"Yeah, a little." Fingers tapping on the peeling linoleum surface of the table, Dean frowns. "It bothers me more that he even asked, though."

"Why? It was my choice to help him."

"And it was his to ask," Dean answers slowly. "Free will isn't a zero sum game. Just because someone agrees to do something doesn't mean that there are some things you don't ask anyone to do."

He stares down at his coffee, throat tight. "I asked it of you first."

"And he already had a gun to your head before he even asked the question."
"It didn't matter. I would have done it anyway, because he asked."

"So he had more than one gun to use. You think he would have asked if he didn't have them?" Dean blows out a breath, shaking his head. "Never mind, new subject. Coffee pot?"

"Chuck," he answers. "He had one in inventory, I assume. He retrieved it quickly when I asked him."

"At dawn?"

"Chuck was eager to return to bed, yes."

Dean grins in approval as he picks up his cup again. "Okay, so Joe's request this morning. He wants info on his family?"

"Ex-wife." Taking another drink of his much improved coffee, he thinks he understands now why humans enjoy it. "He can't contact her directly for obvious reasons, but he would like to get assurance of her safety."

"He's not the only one," Dean says, waiting for Castiel's confirming nod. "Let me guess; Dean only wanted loners?"

"The potential for hostages--"

"Yeah, and the potential they wouldn't be totally devoted to his goddamn mission," Dean interrupts. "Not like I can't guess. I'm him, after all."

"You're not." Dean raises an eyebrow. "I wouldn't have told you otherwise."

Dean concentrates on his half-empty cup for a few moments. "Do we even have anything to trade? What did we use before?"

"I think we primarily used currency," Castiel says uncertainly; his understanding of economics is entirely based on using credit cards under various aliases and the requirements of a few early jobs years ago. "We traded specialized ammunition as well, since we can manufacture many of those that can be difficult to acquire elsewhere, given adequate supplies. I wasn't involved in the negotiations, so the details are--somewhat unclear."

"Where the hell would he have gotten money?" Dean's face goes through a series of expressions before finally settling on resignation. "Weapons trafficking, right. That's a cash only business. Who was he working with?"

"Other hunters for the most part, especially those who were in the infected zones," Castiel answers obliquely. "He was one of the few that was trusted to act as their agent. Even after we came here, Dean kept contact with his sources for some time in case our arrangement with the military here should become unstable."

"When was the last border run?" Resting his chin on his hands, Dean looks at him speculatively. "Seven months ago, give or take?"

"We had a regular quarterly meeting with them until then, yes," he agrees, not surprised that Dean worked it out for himself. "Then--"

"The Colt, the imminent death of Lucifer, I get it." Dean makes an irritated sound. "So let me see if I got this. We traded at the border for weapons and information and the occasional blind eye so we
could cross over looking for a lead on Lucifer?"

"I'm fairly certain," Castiel says, "that the border guards aren't aware of what Joseph's doing."

"I knew I liked him," Dean says, flashing a grin. "Dean didn't know about the information part, at least as far what Joe was doing, right? He wouldn't have been okay with that."

"No."

"I'm guessing there isn't a pile of money here somewhere--is there?" Castiel shakes his head. "Accounts? Where and under what names? How much is in them? How do I get to them? Do you know?"

"I know all of them," he assures him. "Joseph has the authorization to access at least three of them to do the transfers, but the rest…."

"Why aren't we buying supplies, then?"

"We acquired what we needed from the military," Castiel answers, though Dean's expression makes him wonder now; what they received other than MREs was basic, but enough to assure adequate nutrition for everyone. "There was no reason to take the risk, I assume."

Dean eyes Castiel speculatively. "He didn't tell anyone more than what they needed to know. Including you."

"He told me a great deal, but sometimes it wasn't clear why."

"You don't tell a laptop why, either." Startled, Castiel looks up. "You know all the patrol schedules going back since you got here, all his accounts and contacts, you even know to the last can and MRE what we have in supplies and every last bullet in the armory, but when you took over--"

"Blackmailed into agreeing to stand in for him."

"--you had no idea what to do with any of it." Dean scowls into the middle distance. "It doesn't make sense."

"I make an exceptional computer."

"You make a better partner," Dean counters absently, picking up his cup and taking another drink, then raising an eyebrow at Castiel's blank expression. "Wait, you thought it was you?"

Castiel stares back, unable to think of a response.

"Holy shit," he breathes, sitting back in his chair. "All this time you've been doing this, and it never occurred to you--Cas, you had the information, yeah, but how were you supposed to know how to use it if he didn't tell you?"

"I thought…" He hesitates. "I thought I was just supposed to know. You seem to understand."

"Huh." Dean abruptly leans forward, reaching across the table and picking up the latest map. "So this--"

"It's not done yet. I'm still collating the information from the survey. Some of the roads--"

"Question," Dean interrupts, carefully holding it by the edges as he places it on the table between them. "I told you to make new maps. Why are we color-coordinating the roads again?"
Castiel tries and fails to understand the relevance. "You mentioned the ones we had from the library and the earlier hand-drawn ones were outdated because of the changes in the highway system as well as the location of still-existing communities."

"Didn't ask for colored roads," Dean says, tracing the air above a long, light-green line, mouth quirking when he finds the newly marked position of the unstable bridge Joseph and Vera discovered. "Or quality analysis--dark green means usable but shitty, right?"

"No, there's a legend on the right that explains," he answers impatiently. "What use would a map be for driving and discovering the location of existing population centers if we can't find them or get to them because the roads are either degraded or non-existent?" Dean looks up with a grin. "You had Joseph acquire me the colored pencils and pens!"

"Helps to know why you're doing something, huh?" Dean asks brightly, settling into his chair again with a smug grin. "Just saying."

Castiel stares at him over the map, a warm feeling growing in his chest. "You point is taken. I think."

"Knowledge is power is bullshit," Dean answers, taking another drink of coffee. "It's figuring out how to use it that matters, and that part, we're both still learning."

"I didn't want--to be of help," he says slowly, not looking at Dean. "If I had, perhaps he would have told me more."

"Maybe if you knew you could be, you would have wanted to," Dean answers. "Good thing you got a coffeemaker, by the way."

Castiel's still trying to adjust to the abrupt change of subject when Dean gets up, grabbing both their cups and refilling them. Sitting down, he fixes Castiel's coffee again and slides it across the table, watching his face as he takes a drink and smiling at the response. "Sugar makes everything better, trust me."

"I believe you."

"I was wondering what was going on with Joe the last couple of days," he says thoughtfully, leaning both elbows on the table. "Alicia coming along today kind of cinched it, though why her.... Anyone see you get the coffee maker? I know you noticed."

"What--yes, the morning patrol was already in the mess," Castiel answers. "They could have seen me."

"Right, and I guess one of them told him I wouldn't be going out for coffee anymore--like I do every day about this time, Jesus, he noticed before I did--and he figured he'd need the backup. And Alicia?"

"She was on the team that regularly accompanied Joseph to the border," Castiel confirms, intrigued. "Erica trusted her, which is probably why Joseph was able to do it at all. Why?"

"Joe wanted to talk to you alone." Dean grins at his expression. "Usually, you're around me, which is a problem, except when I go for coffee in the morning. Today's the first chance he's had to talk to you since he was cleared for duty by Alicia--totally a coincidence there--and you messed up the plan by getting me a coffee maker this morning, so she came along to distract me."

Castiel reviews his conversation with Joseph, remembering the diminishing wariness and the way
Joseph watched him. "That's what he was doing."

"Did you know about it before he told you today?" Dean asks curiously.

"No, of course not, there was no reason for anyone to tell me. I guessed when he mentioned his ex-wife's location." Frowning, Castiel tries to decipher Joseph's reasoning. "Why would he come to me--"

"He and Vera friends?" Dean asks out of nowhere. "I'm going to say yes."

"They were in training at the same time," he answers in confusion. "Why is that significant?"

"I was hoping you'd tell me."

He closes his eyes, reminding himself of the value of patience. "I have no idea where you're going with this."

"Maybe--work with me here--he went to you because he thought you could talk me into it? Not like he could talk to me if he thought this was policy," Dean suggests. "Dean didn't meet with anyone but the team leaders for official shit, right?"

"For the most part. Your insistence on meeting with the entire patrol is very new."

"You did it first," Dean points out reasonably.

"Because the team leaders were all dead, and I had no idea what I was doing."

"So why do they think I'm doing it now?" Before Castiel can answer he has no idea, Dean rolls his eyes. "Maybe because I got the idea from you?"

"Even if that were true," he replies in frustration, "why would he think I care enough to mention it to you?"

Dean sits back, staring at him for a long moment. "Well, you did, so he was right." Glancing down at the table, he reaches for the map, expression brightening. "So, you decide where you're taking me today?"

"How did you get used to seeing this?" Dean asks him at their final stop on the gamma route, surveying the remains around them. While exposure has burned out the last vestiges of surprise, the horror remains unchanged.

Castiel watched the rise and fall of more civilizations than this world even knew existed, humanity turning on itself in repeating cycles of destruction and only grieved for how little they seemed to care for the gift they'd been given in creation; this is nothing like that at all.

What was done here, to more places than he's had the opportunity to see, is burned in his memory, a demonstration of Lucifer's only true art; destruction, done in joyful malice, writing his promise of humanity's eventual fate in the chunks of concrete torn from the ground and thrown like children's toys over the broken asphalt of the remaining streets; the slow slump of the rotting buildings, their alleys congested with broken glass and shattered furniture barely hiding the bleached remains of bodies rotted to bare, scattered bone; all familiar landmarks of popular culture that Castiel had only just begun to learn if not understand broken and fading to nothing.

Looking with Dean's eyes at the decaying remains of a great city, he thinks he might understand
what he meant when he said that decisions aren't made in a vacuum. He can't look at the desecration of humanity's own creations and not see Lucifer's guiding hand, no matter who performed the actual destruction.

"I didn't," he answers. "I simply stopped looking."

Dean nods tightly. "That works."

He thought so as well, and he was wrong.

The dark grey cast of the sky edging toward nightfall reminds him how long it's been since they've seen the sun as more than a faint, sickly yellow outline behind the thick hang of clouds over them, stripping the faded color from the world drop by endless drop. Morningstar would appreciate the irony.

"We should not remain in the open for long," he says automatically, even though the quality of the silence around them must inform even Dean that the city is empty of everything living but the two of them.

"There's nothing here," Dean says, but not in refutation of Castiel's statement. "I mean--not just--there's nothing here. No stray animals, no birds, no--no cats, Cas. Where the hell are the cats?"

"Their absence makes sense, considering the disappearance of the other wildlife outside the cities." The patrols didn't mention it, despite having explored several of the routes in the city and knowing about the disappearance of wildlife, and he makes a note to have Dean remind them of the definition of 'everything' when reporting their observations. "I assume they're related."

Dean looks at him incredulously, and Castiel can see how his fingers flex nervously against his jeans, the restless shifts of his body between moments of too-sudden stillness. He forgot what Dean was like before; before he hid behind the polished surface of cool detachment that nothing could hope to breach; before it stopped being a surface at all.

"I read Dean's notes on the cities," Dean says. "Croats and demons weren't the only ones that hung out here. It was monster central, and then what, they had a group meeting of abominations against nature and decided to move on?"

"That is part of the reason that you wanted to conduct a state wide survey," Castiel reminds him.

"We' did that," Dean tells him. "It was your idea."

Bracing a hand on the jeep, Castiel eases up onto the hood, sliding back enough to keep the entire street--and Dean--in view, and switching the handgun to his left so he can reach for his rifle without interference. Dean's eyes track his movements with a thoughtful expression.

"Your idea," he says, getting Dean's attention again. "I simply gave the appropriate orders."

"Maybe," he says grudgingly, not willing to confirm for some reason of his own. "I still got a lot to learn." The subtext is unmistakable; *what if I can't do this?*, and far beneath it, *and why the hell are you going along with this?*

Oh, that reason.

"How disappointing," Castiel tells him, resting his chin on one hand. "I had assumed that nine days would be sufficient time for you to learn how to do what it took Dean Winchester five years to build."
Dean's eyes narrow. "Don't try so hard, Cas. I still don't like you."

"Would another six hours be sufficient?" Castiel sits back. "Standard operating procedure is by its very nature monotonously predictable. You've already expanded it a great deal beyond what we did before. In any case, without the hunt for Lucifer, we have time for you to learn."

He pauses, trying to decide how to say 'otherwise, there would be nothing for anyone to do', because Dean Winchester was nothing if not singularly focused. There's a reason that Castiel could so easily cultivate such time-intensive hobbies and still have time left to participate in semi-regular missions.

"Because the search for Lucifer was kind of the be-all and end-all before this. So gotta give them something to do," Dean interprets with a snort. "Not a surprise. Founding an entire paramilitary organization to do it is the part I kind of didn't see coming." Shrugging, he shifts the rifle awkwardly, before glancing down the street toward the crossroad. "Be back in a second."

"Don't--" Castiel doesn't cut himself off quickly enough and earns himself an amused smirk. "Please stay where I can see you. Consider it a personal favor."

"No problem," Dean agrees as he turns away. "Yeah, Mom, and if any strangers offer me candy, I'll just say no. Happy?"

"Immensely."

Castiel leans back against the windshield, cross-legged and relatively comfortable as he watches Dean make his way down the street, craning his neck upward to study the devastated skyline, eyes flickering over the buildings, the road, taking in a single street that represents everything that this world has become, everything he has to learn about how to live in it for as long as they have left.

When he reaches the crossroad, Dean crouches to study the asphalt for an inordinate amount of time before he stands up again and rubs his palm over his thigh, shifting the rifle back to his shoulder when it starts to slide down.

Observation of Dean in Kansas City over the last few days has been both fascinating and alarming by turn. To his lack of surprise, Dean's an excellent hunter and even more sharply observant than his predecessor. However, it also highlights Dean's experiences in his world have given him no context at all for living in this one.

Castiel mentally notes to himself to suggest Dean wear his weapons even in the confines of the camp until he's more used to their presence and can wear it with the same instinctive ease as his clothing even when combat is not imminent, to treat each moment as if it will be. He does appreciate the irony of having to instruct Dean Winchester in how to carry his weapons like he carries his body: even more the fact he's teaching this Dean Winchester some of the same lessons that Castiel learned from his counterpart.

Eventually, Dean abandons the crossroad, still frowning absently as he reaches the jeep. Tossing his rifle onto the hood, he smirks at Castiel's wince before shoving it over far enough to climb up beside it, rubbing his hand against one raised knee before he abruptly reaches out, catching Castiel's right hand and flipping it over. Even now, despite his best efforts, there are still smudges of faded ink, and the unfamiliarity of having to use a writing implement so consistently shows in the bruised groove on his middle finger and first joint of his thumb, the tip of his index finger bright red.

He's not sure what startles him more; that Dean did it at all, or the fact that he didn't react to the
sudden movement as a potential threat.

"Huh." Dean cocks his head, thumb tracing briefly over the gun calluses, a ghost of warmth that he can feel settling far beneath the skin long after it should be gone. "Ambidextrous or really motivated?"

"Ambidextrous," he says blankly. "Why--"

"You usually carry right," Dean says absently, eyes flickering to his left hand. "You write with your right, at least until your hand cramps up and you switch. It was bothering me. Let's see your left."

Castiel sets his gun on his lap and obediently extends his left hand and Dean's fingers close around his wrist, pulling it closer. After a few moments of study, he nods to himself and sits back with the thoughtful expression Castiel saw him wearing earlier, hands braced on the hood of the jeep.

"You switched hands to use Ruby's knife to kill those demons in the city, too," he says. "Just now, you switched the handgun to your left, even though if we were attacked right now, that'd be the first weapon you'd be using to defend yourself. Your left doesn't have enough calluses for you to pull a trick like that unless it's hardwired." He pauses, looking at nothing before meeting Castiel's eyes.

"Do you hide it?"

He flexes his hand against his knee at the question, suddenly aware of the pull of muscles beneath the skin.

"As an angel, Grace compensated for my lack of--practical experience with a human body. As it began to diminish, I did learn how to perform some tasks when required…." Castiel stops himself; he's never told anyone this.

"So when you lost your Grace, you had to learn how to do what it had been taking care of, right?"

Castiel nods warily.

"Christ." Dean leans back on one hand, stunned. "That must have sucked. I mean--" He gestures with his free hand. "Having to learn how to do everything from scratch."

"Observation was one of my primary means of learning how humans used their bodies. As Dean was my first instructor in combat--"

"Yeah, most people are right handed, so he would have handled that first," Dean agrees. "Then he'd have covered your left, since you would have told him about that if he didn't notice first."

"Yes, of course."

"So you're fine with either hand, doesn't matter which you use, you're not hiding it or anything, it's just habit, that's the reason your left doesn't have the calluses your right does. Because in the middle of an Apocalypse, you're the kind of guy who checks the camp wards every morning, cleans his guns three times a week, keeps an arsenal in his closet, needs two weapons just to sit on the porch and won't leave the camp without three visible, but slacks off on the range when it comes to his left hand. In a militia camp. In the middle of an Apocalypse. Because that, that makes sense." Dean raises his eyebrows sardonically. "You're really good at the junkie thing, gotta give you that one. Almost made me forget you've always been a soldier. You wouldn't fuck off on something like that without a pretty good reason."

Castiel wonders if Dean would be surprised if he told him that 'almost' was as close as he ever
came himself. "Habit can be pernicious."

"When I asked about Sidney that day, you said 'they'," Dean says softly. "Tell me it's unrelated and I may think about pretending to believe you."

"That's not the reason," he answers, startled. "Sidney is--himself. He simply dislikes me--"

"'They'," Dean says flatly, eyes hard.

"--which is a feeling that most of the human population shares, and the feeling is mutual, I assure you," he bites out. "However, if you must know, when this camp was founded, there were only three members: Dean, Chuck, and myself, and Bobby, of course, though he was more a very long-term visitor. When Dean began to recruit, the people we came in contact with were not always entirely trustworthy or even sane. We also were not yet familiar with the military units here."

He licks his lips. "The habit of paranoia is difficult to excise, especially when living in a militia camp during the Apocalypse. Is that sufficient?"

Something flashes through Dean's eyes briefly, there and gone so quickly that Castiel almost thinks he imagined it.

"Makes sense," is all he says before glancing back at the crossroad with a fleeting expression of confusion. Turning his attention back to Castiel, he waves a hand at the street. "Anyway, you're probably thinking that coming here was pretty pointless."

"I'm sure if I knew your reasons, that would not be my foremost thought," he answers, unbearably relieved at the change in topic. "Please enlighten me."

"Funny." Dean settles back on the hood again, looking at Castiel speculatively. "Any thoughts you wanna share with the class?"

"Why I think that Lucifer left the city? Why any of this is happening at all? The lack of cats, which is as much a mystery to me as it is to you, though is consistent with the fleeing of the wildlife?"

"The city's not just abandoned, it's destroyed." Dean glances at the building beside them, sheared off mid-way up its length with razor precision. "I get there were bombings when Croatoan went epidemic, but some of this--is it like this everywhere?"

"That would depend on how much faith you place in the state of journalism at this time." Dean nods sour agreement. "Lucifer's influence is strongest in places that were abandoned due to Croatoan. Twenty-six cities in this country; eighty-five on this continent; one hundred eighty-two worldwide at last estimate, though there's no way to be certain. We tend to rely on unofficial channels since Croatoan became epidemic, as most official channels can be somewhat--questionable in their interpretation of current events."

"And let me guess, military units were sent to all the cities to help contain the epidemic," Dean says sourly. "Jesus Christ, not just quarantine of the states: martial law. Bobby would have a shitsfit if he knew."

"He did," Castiel agrees, mouth twitching at Dean's expression. "The bombing of Houston was not the first, it was simply the first that was admitted to."

Dean doesn't look surprised. "Kansas City--was it the first one?"

"It wasn't the first attempt to--sanitize, I think is the term." Dean winces. "But it was among the first that was isolated in a failed attempt to stop further contamination. That was one of the reasons
Chitaqua was considered viable for us. The military units stationed here were practical. Dean had a very good relationship with them."

Dean nods, but there's obviously something else on his mind.

"Cas," he says finally, "it's been five years since Lucifer got out of the cage. What took him so long? I mean, the Apocalypse is stalled now, but this wasn't a blitzkrieg before, either. Why not just, I don't know, use the mojo and kill everyone instead of fucking around with the Croatoan shit?"

"There's the dramatic irony of humanity destroying itself for his entertainment," he offers, mouth twitching at Dean's glare. "Obviously, he couldn't do anything on this plane without his true vessel-...

"Which cuts it two years and change, which don't get me wrong here, but we could do it faster ourselves with a few nukes. I mean, he's an archangel. It's not like he doesn't have the power."

"Dean, any angel could commit wholesale genocide of humanity. I could have done it when I still had Grace. You might not be familiar with our work; have you heard of Sodom and Gomorrah? Obscure, I know, but--"

"Fuck you." Dean crosses his arms, looking mutinous. "So why didn't he just do that instead of fucking around with Horseman, Croatoan, and the slow decline of western civilization first?"

"--far more obscure are the times angels actually did commit wholesale genocide on earth." Dean blinks, startled. "Death is easy, Dean; when I was an angel, I could wipe out humanity in less time than it would take you to draw a breath. Any angel could do it, but the keyword here is could. Lucifer is still an angel even in Hell. Like the Host, he must ask permission to take a vessel, he must keep any promise he makes, and he believes in prophecy, that this will happen in only one way. Prophecy said he must kill Dean Winchester, as he was the only person who could stop him from taking the earth and ending the Apocalypse."

"It didn't happen like that in my world."

Castiel nods, conceding the point. "Your method of ending the Apocalypse didn't follow accepted canonical prophecy. It must have been a shock to the Host when you succeeded. I wish I could have seen their expressions...."

"Considering I didn't actually end it, yeah." Dean's expression darkens. "Cas didn't want me to give in to Michael, even after I told him what happened here. He was so sure we'd find another way to do it. That'd we'd have time--" He starts to shake his head before stopping mid-motion, an arrested look on his face. "Before I even came here the first time, he didn't want me to be Michael's vessel."

Castiel fights down alarm. "To be Michael's vessel is to be a slave."

"Yeah, that's what he said." Dean frowns. "You know, I never really thought about it, what would have happened if I'd died before Sam did what he did."

It's not, actually, a lie. "I don't know."

"That night--I asked you why you didn't realize that the Apocalypse hadn't ended, and you said--"

"I told you that I Fell," he answers shortly. "Even if it had ended, there's no way to be sure I would have sensed it. In this form--"
"Diminished, yeah, I remember," Dean interrupts, eyes growing distant. "But that was your second answer. Your first was that you didn't notice, because you were distracted. I thought you meant having to save me from those fucking demons, but Dean was already dead--you said you felt him die--before you even knew I was there."

"Dean--"

"Cas didn't want me to give in to Michael, because was so sure there was another way we could win this, like we had all the time in the world to figure it out. I never really thought about it, why he was so fucking sure, even before I told him about here." Abruptly, Dean looks at him again. "Why was he sure, Cas?"

"The righteous man--"

"Who broke on the fucking rack started it and has to stop it and true vessel of Michael, who was the only way to stop Lucifer; I know the litany, chapter and verse, now get to the part where it was wrong. Cosmic event, Lucifer kills Dean Winchester, the only person who can end the Apocalypse, game over, except it's not. You said prophecy was clear on this; it had to be him. The Apocalypse is still going on--"

"And it will continue to do so, world without end--possibly literally--because Dean Winchester is still alive."

Dean goes still, but he's not surprised, not at all.

"Cosmic events are noticeable," he continues, not meeting Dean's eyes. "That night, nothing happened, it couldn't, because there was a Dean Winchester still living when Lucifer killed Dean. The first time you left this world coincided almost perfectly with the moment you returned again."

"How? This isn't even my world."

"This world was your world at the moment of your birth, when you broke on the rack of Hell, on your resurrection, and when your brother freed Lucifer from his cage," he says. "When you chose a different path, two futures were created, but we share a single past. As long as you're here--and alive, of course--the Apocalypse won't end except at your death or when Lucifer is either within the confines of his Cage or killed."

He watches Dean, eyes fixed in the middle distance as the highly organized mind of a hunter ruthlessly slots each fact into place and looking unflinching upon the whole.

"You knew that night." Cool green eyes bore into his. "So what was the bullshit about Lucifer's army coming? Just fuck with my head while you kept the camp busy or what?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I was doing, it's not as if the moment Lucifer returns to earth--and eventually, he will, with or without an army--he'll know as well as I do that the Apocalypse is still very much in progress." Dean's hard expression cracks, uncertainty creeping in. "He believes in prophecy, which perhaps explains his tardiness--there's no reason to rush the end of humanity when the war is over and he's won--but when he returns, the first thing he'll do is come to Chitaqua. Our wards are excellent, but he's an archangel; he'll break them eventually, and when he does...."

"He can't see me in the cabin," Dean says quietly. "That's why you like those wards so much. Even if someone told him--even if they were pointing right at me, he couldn't see me." Swallowing, he meets Castiel's eyes. "For thirty-six hours."
"Lucifer doesn't handle disappointment well," he answers, fixing his gaze on the hood of the jeep. "If he breaches Chitaqua's wards, he won't find any of the militia alive."

"Except me," Dean counters bitterly. "All I have to do is hide in the cabin and let everyone die, right?"

"By the time the thirty-six hour time limit has expired and you're conscious again, he'll have long since left."

Dean's jaw tightens. "And you didn't think I should know…" He stops, looking startled when his voice breaks. "Me being here is the reason he didn't win, and you didn't think I should fucking know about it?"

"No," he answers deliberately. "I didn't."

That seems to silence Dean, at least briefly. "Wanna tell me why?"

"If you are returned to your world now, knowing that you're the reason that the Apocalypse has stopped here, how does this story end?"

"You and your stories," Dean mutters. "How do you think--"

"You return to your home with a new set of burdens to carry to fuel your self-disgust," he interrupts, watching the blood drain from Dean's face. "Our fates here are sealed. Taking it upon yourself the responsibility for that seems excessive. I won't give Lucifer the satisfaction of destroying two Dean Winchesters."

The flat look in Dean's eyes dissolves into curiosity. "You really hate him, don't you?"

"I'd go to Hell itself and incite rebellion against him and have him dragged on his knees before me on my ascension to the throne of Hell to answer for his sins." He's thought about this, perhaps too much. "However," and this is true, surprisingly enough, "I don't hate myself more than I hate him. Or humanity, for that matter."

Dean cocks head, looking unexpectedly curious. "You think you could? Like, take over Hell and rule it and everything?"

"Why not? Eternity in Hell is a very long time, and I'd certainly have time to try." Sliding off the jeep, he asks, "So are we ready to return to the camp?"

"Yeah. No, wait." Dean glances at the crossroad again, frowning. "I wanna make one more stop before we go back."

Dean spends far more time than absolutely necessary exploring the street despite the fact it's not noticeably different from their previous stops. He stops briefly at both crossroads, looking faintly dissatisfied, before making a very leisurely return journey, looking up every so often as if he's never seen buildings before.

When he returns, obviously reluctant, Castiel's suspicions are confirmed; as much as anything else, Dean simply wanted out of the camp for a few hours, and the patrol routes make an excellent excuse that also has the benefit of being perfectly true. As he watches Dean's approach, he make a mental list of all the routes patrol has ever or could ever use that are close enough to the camp for them to return easily but afford Dean several hours of freedom from confinement behind its walls.
Pleased with his solution, he doesn't comment on Dean's visible reluctance to admit there's no reason for them to linger, watching him climb up on the hood, feet braced on the bumper with a determined expression. He supposes he could offer reassurance that they can stay until dusk if Dean wishes, but that would deny him both the pleasure of watching Dean's efforts to come up with a reason for the delay as well as finding out what he'll decide to use.

"So, Lucifer's army," Dean says abruptly.

"That subject would not have been my first guess," he observes, bracing an elbow on the jeep. "I was certain it would be the weather."

Dean's eyes narrow.

"Excellent choice," he adds quickly, biting back a smile. "Lucifer's missing army, yes. Please continue."

Dean takes an ordinate amount of time settling himself on the hood of the jeep before deigning to bestow his attention on Castiel. "Why hasn't he come back yet?"

"I don't know," he answers patiently. "I have theories and possibilities, but Dean, as I told you, this is prophecy, and he's still an angel; he believes in it as much or more than the Host did. If you were given a script that was guaranteed to work, would you deviate from it?"

"Even if something else was faster and more likely to actually work in less than five years' time?" Dean asks skeptically. "Angel thing?"

"Sentient creation thing," Castiel corrects him. "Angels also lack imagination, and in case you weren't aware of this, aren't terribly flexible when it comes to--anything, really."

"Five. Years," Dean enunciates blandly.

Castiel sighs. "Lucifer was in the Cage for millennia, and infinite knowledge can't replace witnessing humanity's progress from fleeing before the mighty mammoth and death due to lack of antibiotics. Plagues used to be much more effective before mass communication and germ research, and the infrastructure to support containment. The only thing that worked as expected is the actual infection rate and incurability of Croatoan, and because it was working, however slowly, there was no reason to change it, even if he were to consider doing so, which I doubt. That would require actual effort on his part, not to mention he's terrible at…." Dean's smile of satisfaction makes him pause. "What?"

"Nothing," Dean answers, chin in his hands. "I was just--so he doesn't have an army until he brings it from Hell?"

"I didn't say that," Castiel says, suspicious and not sure why. "Technically speaking, he has an army now for the purpose of taking advantage of the destabilization of the world. It's just not a very good one, but territory is technically being held in his name, however incompetently."

"Uh huh."

"In the sense of humans fleeing those places and Lucifer taking advantage of the concept that possession is nine-tenths of the law and claiming it in the absence of any resistance," he explains. "His followers on earth move in and take de facto possession."

"That's the saddest excuse for a war I've ever heard of," Dean comments in disgust.
Castiel snorts. "I'd like to see what he would make of waging war. The entertainment value alone...." He trails off at Dean's there and gone grin. "What?"

"Nothing," Dean answers promptly. "Tell me more about his shitty army. What's wrong with it? Too small or something?"

"The size of his army in this case is irrelevant," he answers warily in the face of Dean's earnest attention. "Even given the near-infinite resources available to him in Hell, he wouldn't have any idea what to do with it no matter the size."

"He fought a war in Heaven," Dean points out. "That he almost won."

"He was among the first and most powerful archangels in existence when he fought a war in Heaven against his own kind--and invented the concept of war, in case that needed saying--and even with a quarter of the Host behind him, at least another quarter in sympathy with him, and the element of surprise--and I assure you, Dean, we were all very, very surprised--he still lost," he answers testily. "There was no 'almost'."

Dean's smile widens. "Mea culpa. He didn't almost win."

"Since then, while he sulked within the Cage about the grievous injuries done to him, the sum total of which is more or less that humanity's existence is a source of existential pain to him, the Host has had millennia to learn the art of war both in heaven and on earth," he continues, warming to the subject. "Simply because Lucifer was created to be a soldier doesn't mean he has the least idea how to wage a war on earth, or even experience enough to understand how to fight it. The Croatoan virus has three purposes: the reduction of the population via attrition, the dissolution of your social and political structures to create world-wide anarchy, and to make a frankly ridiculous philosophical point in an argument with my Father that started almost before time began."

"Okay, but if me dying was the way to win," Dean says slowly, sounding puzzled, "why even bother? Kill me, it's done, he's won."

"Other than prophecy said so?" Castiel shrugs. "Conquest is much easier when the other side of the war can't even step on the field and fight."

"So he's stacking the deck, I get that part."

"He's not stacking the deck; he's eliminating the need for a deck to be stacked," he explains, fighting for patience. "Consider this: in five years, Lucifer has only taken territory as his own after humans abandoned it due to the spread of Croatoan; he didn't have to fight for any of it. Currently, his entire army, such as it is, consists of Croatoans, who are not known for their ability to strategize or have enough brain matter to do so even if he wanted them to, those demons under his personal control, who are carefully conditioned against any sign of independent thought, and human followers, the quality of whom you can probably guess."

"Sound pretty terrifying to me," Dean says with a shrug. "Yeah, conquest would be pretty fucking easy when we're too scared to even step on the goddamn field."

"Humanity's response to terror generally consists of finding new and improved methods of destroying it," Castiel says dryly. "Unfortunately, that also includes using it against each other. His method of conquest will work eventually simply due to a lack of resistance, but it's both slow and almost painfully inefficient. Not to mention that watching humanity destroying itself has to eventually pall from its sheer monotony compared to the variety available to him in Hell."
"Like watching paint dry," Dean agrees, mouth starting to twitch suspiciously.

"I could done it myself in far less time, given a few competent lieutenants and a working understanding of how to proselytize to the masses in a way that encourages them to join me in wreaking havoc upon the earth, which I have, seeing as that was within my job description for most of my existence," he continues unthinkingly. "Lucifer's followers joined him despite the fact that their eternal suffering was a feature of their soul's final reward, which is only attractive to a very specific subset of the human population, and not what anyone bent on world conquest would usually consider a valuable addition to their army. That he doesn't seem to realize this--"

Dean looks like Castiel just handed him a large, gaudily wrapped present. "Bingo."

"What…."  

So your little cult at Chitaqua," Dean says gloatingly, "you'd take that global? I'm assuming sex wouldn't be required or dude, gotta tell you, the human body has some limits, even yours. Don't think you could keep up with those kind of numbers."

"You mean as an angel or as a mortal?" He waits for Dean's grin to fade. "Even as an angel with Grace, creating a religious imperative to bind my followers and build an army would only be useful if I had among them those that could effectively wage war on my behalf, not to mention knowing how to do it myself."

"So if you were conquering the earth tomorrow, that's what you'd do?"

"Isn't that what Castiel in your world did?" he asks challengingly. "All I lack is the power to do it."

"He didn't actually go to war," Dean explains, as if that's the problem with this scenario. "More of a love and fear thing, convert and join my army of the new world order or be smited immediately."

"I don't have access to that kind of power."

"Lucifer has a lot of power, too. Doesn't seem to be helping him speed this up any," Dean says, then starts to frown. "Cas? What's wrong?"

"You think I would…." he fails to finish the sentence; putting it into words would be almost as obscene as the act itself. Pushing off the hood, he turns away, tossing over his shoulder, "Are you ready to return?"

"Cas, come on, I don't think you're planning to take over the world and become the new god!" Dean says, sounding some inexplicable combination of amused and irritated. "I was just thinking--"

"What possible reason would I want to?" he snaps. "Playing Risk would have many of the same benefits, none of the drawbacks, and take far less time."

Dean blinks. "You've played Risk?"

"Only when stripping was involved." He opens the door of the jeep. "It's getting late."

"Yeah, time's like that." Dean sighs, looking faintly guilty. "Cas, stop. I wasn't checking to see if you were thinking of world conquest. What you said--Cas was reading from the same playbook as Lucifer, I guess. I mean, Lucifer's making us kill ourselves and Cas was converting us, but neither of them were willing to fight, even though they had to know they'd win."
Hand on the frame of the half-open door, Castiel reluctantly closes it. "There is no such thing as a guarantee when it comes to war. Both Lucifer and your Castiel would know that from experience. Lucifer waited until he was certain he could win before he went to war against the Host, and he still failed."

"That's against other angels."

"And he was an archangel," Castiel answers, drifting away from the door. "In terms of power, most of the Host were as far beneath him as you are beneath us."

"And you still won." Dean's expression darkens. "Even against humans, they weren't willing to take the risk. Guess we got lucky they never tried to test that."

"Considering that you assume you'd lose before there's even a battle to be fought, yes, I'd say so."

Dean's head snaps up, startled, before he makes a face. "Okay, maybe I deserved that. Feel better?"

"Actually, yes," he admits. "Provided we have put to rest the suspicion I have a latent desire to achieve world conquest or godhood, that is."

"I'm convinced," Dean assures him, raising both hands in mock defeat. "I didn't really need convincing. Though you know, not a lot of people would say no if they had the chance."

"You would."

"I hate Risk. Not seeing how doing it in real life would be much better. That's how I know you mean it." Before he can answer that--or make enough sense of Dean's answer to find an appropriate response--Dean cocks his head, mouth curving playfully. "Okay, gotta know. An eternity of preaching the word of the Lord, so you're pretty good at the convincing thing. So why didn't it work on me?"

Castiel sighs; he should have known. "Maybe I'm less skilled than I think I am."

"Maybe you're avoiding the question," Dean counters. "Don't get me wrong, you made an effort, I'll give you that much, but that couldn't have been your A game."

This is exactly the conversation that Castiel would prefer to avoid. "You wouldn't understand." That was a mistake; Dean straightens, looking challenging, and reluctantly, he says, "You're my charge."

"You mean him, right?"

"No, I mean you as in you, second person singular, sitting in front of me here, as much as he was until his soul left this plane of existence."

There were many reasons he didn't mean to live beyond Dean's death and hoped to precede him if at all possible, not least of which was what it would feel like when that bond broke. The eternal seconds between the death of Dean and this Dean's arrival are seared into his memory so deeply he can barely think of it without nauseous horror, like an abyss opening up beneath him that promised not oblivion but tortures that even Hell could not hope to match.

"Like the job of being a charge is now fulfilled by me in the absence of your actual charge, the dead guy?" Dean asks with some combination of annoyance and contempt. The response is so predictable that Castiel could have scripted this conversation himself. "Dude, at least with the Apocalypse, me taking over the lead role here was kind of a good thing."
"You make it sound like a fate worse than death."

"Since death seems to be the only way you're getting out of it, yeah." Dean gestures, but the significance of it is beyond him. "I mean, the Apocalypse is one thing, but being tied up to a person who you barely know--you know what I mean. What if you hated me?"

He frowns. "Why would I hate you?"

Dean rolls his eyes. "Not the point. I'm just saying, you don't get any input, it just--you Fell, and you're still bound by that? What, heaven doesn't have toilets to clean when you piss them off, so they came up with the charges thing?"

Abruptly, Castiel is so angry he can barely think. "Is that how you felt about your bond with your brother?"

That wipes the smirk off Dean's face instantly. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Was that insulting?" he asks bitterly. "I apologize. I assumed by what you said that you were speaking from experience."

"That isn't the same thing," Dean grinds out, looking outraged. "Me and Sammy, that's nothing like--"

"The only difference between how you feel bound to Sam and how I am bound to you is my Father wasn't John Winchester, and there was no genetic relationship," he interrupts, too frustrated to care how Dean interprets that. "You may regret our connection, but I don't. It's one of the few things that I've never regretted."

Dean starts to answer that then stops himself, staring at Castiel for a long moment before visibly calming himself. "Okay, let's try this again. What is a charge?"

"Why? So you can continue to mock me because you find it an amusing way to pass the time?"

"No," Dean says, keeping his voice deliberately even. "Because this is a stupid fucking thing to fight about, and I want to know."

It's tempting to ignore him, but since he agreed to help Dean, they've avoided the kind of fights that at one time would have led to teleportation and since he Fell, a variety of both substances and activities that in hindsight he's beginning to think might have been a mistake. He also suspects conflict when they both share a single finite space is going to be far more unpleasant than when they were in different cabins on different sides of the camp and had very few required interactions. Last night is not something he wants to repeat in the near future.

"To be entrusted with a charge is very rare; it's been millennia since the last time it happened," he says finally. "It's covenant, to be entrusted with a human soul to care for and protect from harm. The opportunity to know Creation in that way is a gift."

"Even if it wasn't a choice," Dean says slowly, not quite a question.

"Perhaps perspective would help," he answers, thinking of Uriel and Zachariah and the other angels Dean met. "No angel has ever been other than joyful in being given this. There is no way to know my Father's will--" he falters there, not sure he wants to examine this too closely, "--but perhaps it is not given unless it is desired."

"And you did." Dean doesn't look away. "Before or after you dragged my ass out of Hell?"
"Always," he answers in surprise. "My Father didn't have to make you my charge simply because I rescued you." He stops again, longer this time, thinking of all the ways he could have been killed during the endless search of Hell. Stronger angels fell to demon hoards or were lost within the infinite horrors and traps that made up the vastness that was Hell, soldiers who he knew were his superior in all ways.

Among the Host, he was a soldier, but only one of many equal in skill, and without the drive of competition, he felt neither shame nor satisfaction in how he ranked among them. Yet he succeeded, driven almost to mindlessness once he sensed--once they all sensed--Dean break on the rack; when time was no longer of the essence, it became the only thing that mattered. In retrospect, he wonders why: taking him back to earth was simply a matter of choosing when he would be resurrected and going to that point in time. For the purposes of the Host--to better assure that Dean would be willing to become Michael's vessel--the more time Dean spent as a demon would be preferable, knowing his weaknesses as well as his strengths.

Castiel didn't know Dean's ultimate purpose then--and not for the first time, he reflects on the weaknesses and strengths of the Host's secrecy--but if they told him to assure Dean would be returned to humanity whole in body but irreparably shattered in essence, it would have changed nothing. His obedience to that point was unquestioning and absolute, his faith without flaw, and he would have understood his instructions. There would have been no difference except in one thing; he would have committed his first act of disobedience within the bowels of Hell, and the Host would never have known it.

"When the Host first accused me of caring too much for you, they said I was becoming too human, that my service was given first to my Father and not to humanity." Dean nods, obviously remembering that time as well. "They were correct regarding my feelings, but they believed, and I suppose still do, that it was a flaw that I should be able to correct when I became aware of it."

"They put Uriel over you to control you," Dean replies. "If caring was part of the charge package and everything--"

"Being entrusted with a charge is not the equivalent of a love potion, Dean. I didn't have to like you to love you as my Father's creation," he answers impatiently. "I loved spiders as my Father's creation, but I don't feel any particular fondness for those that end up in my shoes, and I deal with that without any feeling of regret." Before Dean can ask if he's like a spider--this is Dean, and there's no possible way he could say anything else--he hurries on. "What the Host wanted for you was not--strictly speaking--contrary to my duty to you as my charge. That I saw differently was a problem, and was possibly why they didn't execute me at the first sign I was wavering. Without me, they had no claim on you at all."

"Ownership." Dean's eyes narrow. "You mean you personally, not the entire Host?"

"It's always personal," he answers softly. "The Host as you know it is not as it always was. I claimed your soul by right of combat, and the victory, as well as the spoils, were mine to do with as I would; no angel would relinquish their rights so easily. What is ours we keep, and we've gone to war against each other for far less than possession of a human soul. They knew the rules; I felt no need to tell them I knew them as well."

Dean blinks after a long moment, nodding jerkily before looking away, a sharp reminder of the limits of human tolerance.

He debates for a moment before adding with deliberate lightness, "In addition, you were also my charge, by my Father's order, not the Host's, and you might say what my Father has joined together--"
"No one can sunder?" Dean covers his face, groaning theatrically, and Castiel relaxes. "Dude, we're like, angel married? You never told me that."

"On certain planes of existence--"

"What, the astral?" Dean says, muffled, as if he's desperately trying not to laugh.

"--it could be interpreted like that, yes. And despite the fact you have never put out, there can be no annulment except by my Father's will." Dean's head jerks up, startled. "As even death seems more a suggestion than a rule at this point, merely Falling certainly couldn't change that."

Dean looks away before he can make sense of his expression, palms rubbing rhythmic circles against his knees before he abruptly seems to notice what he's doing. Bracing it behind him, he grins in Castiel's direction. "So the Host couldn't control you, couldn't replace you, and when they pushed, you blew them off before they could take the combat option. No wonder they wanted to kill you."

"It's a very long list by now," Castiel agrees thoughtfully. "I certainly made an effort the last five years to add to it."

Dean hesitates. "And that doesn't bother you. The charge thing, I mean."

He supposes Dean's doubts are understandable; he certainly made every effort to make him believe the opposite.

"I don't regret he was my charge or that you are now," he answers honesty, meeting Dean's eyes. "You aren't a replacement, Dean. If I'd been given the choice--" No, that's not right. "Covenant is a promise that can't be broken, but that might be because no one enters into one who will ever want to break it."

"To be fair, the Host didn't realize what a charge was, and until you, I didn't, either. If I had understood better what it meant, I would have been far less spiritually stressed our first year of acquaintance. I don't think an angel has ever caused their vessel to develop an ulcer, but it was a very close thing."

Dean blinks incredulously before he begins to laugh, and something in Castiel warms at the sound of it, easy and uninhibited and light, pleasure without the stain of anger or bitterness, free of mockery or contempt. He doesn't remember the last time he heard Dean laugh as he has today: this Dean, or his counterpart.

"I'm pleased my trauma amuses you," Castiel observes, watching Dean's shoulders shake. "Do you need more time?"

"No, just--" Dean's shoulders tighten as he looks up, face flushed and green eyes dancing. "I don't know, this conversation started about one of the biggest angelic rebels ever who Fell because he hated humanity, and I'm talking about it with the biggest angelic rebel ever who Fell because he was doing his job."

Castiel feels an uncomfortable prickling sensation spreading across the surface of his skin at Dean's words. "Your hierarchy of rebellion is rather flawed. Most if not all the angels who rebelled against Heaven or who chose to leave were far more powerful than I, and none of them lost their Grace in the process."

"Lucifer got a cage in Hell but a nice prophecy if he just waited for a while. Gabriel got to be a pagan god when he jumped ship. Hell, at least Anna got to be born human, which is pretty much
what she was going for in the first place." Dean props his chin in one hand, grinning at him. "You Fell and got trapped in a kinda-human body you can't stand, shitty food you gotta eat anyway, crappy living conditions in a militia camp, mortality, and while not knocking the benefits of orgasms or anything, if sex was the only highlight--" He shakes his head. "Jesus, you make worse deals than I do, and that's saying something. You'd been living here long enough to get the low-budget preview of the entire shitty apocalyptic movie that would be your mortal life, not like you didn't know what you were getting into."

Castiel tries to think of a response to that and fails.

"You wouldn't even make it easy for the Host and just Fall already like a normal angel," Dean continues cheerfully. "You never give up on anything. I'm not sure you even know how."

For a moment, Castiel can't breathe, staring at Dean mutely.

"Cas?" Dean straightens, looking at him in concern. "Hey, what--"

"We should go back," he says flatly, turning to open the door of the jeep, dust swirling lazily around his boots. "There are creatures other than Lucifer's who hunt at night and watch the roads for the unwary. That the animals are returning could mean they are as well." Castiel starts the engine, waiting impatiently until Dean is safely inside the vehicle before locking the doors and jerking the jeep into drive.

"Whoa," Dean says with a grunt, hand braced on the dashboard from the sudden start. Despite the fact his eyes are fixed on the windshield, Castiel can feel Dean's focus on him in his peripheral vision. To his relief, however, Dean does not attempt to resume their conversation, eyes fixed on the world outside of the windshield.

Their return to the camp is interminably long and utterly silent.

One of the few privileges of being one of the first to settle in Chitaqua was the choice of accommodations. Dean, unsurprisingly, chose a central location, easily accessible to everyone in the still-growing camp. It took him several days to notice where Castiel settled, showing up at the gaping doorway with an uncomfortable frown that was an unspoken question as to why Castiel would choose the cabin as far from him as possible.

Proximity to Dean wasn't actually a consideration at the time, though the fact that Dean assumed it might be was probably an indication of how the next two years of their lives would unfold. What had attracted him had little to do with anything but the slight incline that the cabin was placed on, which made it the highest point in the camp. It was nothing like flying, to sit on the peak of the roof and observe the world forever from the level of the ground through human eyes, but it was all he had, as painful as it was impossible to give up.

Coming here is a privilege he rarely accords himself, and only when he's certain not to be observed; only when he is sober, only when he is clean, only when he hasn't fucked himself to exhaustion; only when the confines of his mortal body, of this camp, of this tiny world close around him too tightly; only when he can't stop himself from remembering that once, none of those things were true.

A human body has no context to translate what can only be experienced in an incorporeal form; he can remember when he had wings, flew the currents of spacetime and light and thought, his existence bound by nothing but infinity itself, but in a body defined by its own sharp limits, he can't remember exactly how it felt.
He can't remember it as it must have been, not in a form that has no context for it. He's not sure what to call this, however, how to define what he does here, what he feels here, when he looks over the confines of a mortal world. When the wind blows across the land and the moon hovers fat and dream-blurred behind the clouds in a sky that stretches the length of a single place and a single time, when he breathes in the clean smell of summer, spring, winter, fall, and wonders how they would feel on wings that have never existed here and every time, every time, he thinks it might have been like this.

Night has turned the world into a hyperreal black and white vision of rolling hills broken by the stark outlines of trees, ink-dark dips of lakes and ponds and pencil-narrow loops of rivers twisting through copses of young trees and newborn meadows. In the spring the landscape blooms into a riot of colors, bluebells and sunflowers, wild strawberries draped over overgrown bushes, patches of unexpected mint and sage scenting the air.

Bracing a bare foot against the rough surface of the tile, he studies the world beyond the protection of the camp walls. He can remember exploring it in those early days when Dean's absences were more frequent and of greater length, surprised to realize how much different Creation was when in a form that was part of it, with an immediacy and intimacy that within his vessel he never felt, having no context to understand it.

The scent of wildflowers and rain-drenched grass that crowded the air and filled his lungs with every breath, the rough texture of leaves and softness of petals between his fingers and the firm smoothness of grass beneath his feet, the spectrum of colors in all their infinite shades everywhere he looked had been overwhelming, distracting, a sensory experience that made him wonder how humans managed to do anything at all when exposed to all of this at once. Familiarity eventually eased the feeling of sensory overload, but nothing could diminish the wonder of it, not just of Creation, but of humanity's own creations tucked within it; concrete and steel and glass rising dizzily toward the sky, asphalt roads cutting marker-thick trails between cities and towns and houses, outlining cultivated farmland in golden-brown sheets and carrying the vehicles that travelled between them.

Experiencing the noise of a metropolitan city, crowds moving unthinkingly through the world that they created within the world they were given, the libraries that carried only a fraction of man's progress in the written word where there once was nothing but uncertain human memory and oral records lost in their unremembered history, computers with instantaneous information available at a touch, the Sistine Chapel, television, Picasso and Rembrandt and Mozart and Metallica, the internet: a people who once crouched around tiny fires in terror of the world that could so easily have killed them finally claimed it and invented it in their own image. As an angel, Castiel knew this was what they were, what they were supposed to become, but only mortal, within a body that changed from minute to minute, hour to hour, and rarely of his own will, did he begin to understand what perfection meant and why humanity would never achieve it. Perfection was to say there was a finite limit to be reached, a place that they must stop and could go no further, and limits were the only thing the human mind could not comprehend.

When Dean's absences grew less frequent and of shorter duration, when Castiel joined his team and their mission began to coalesce into a singular focus, the last of his freedom came to an end. His world was contained within the narrow parameters of Dean's camp and its wards, broken only by the unyielding structure of Dean's missions and his goal.

Idly, he wonders if this Dean will feel the same, surprised to find himself wondering if he should ask, or if he needs to. He won't, not yet, wanting to prolong the illusion of freedom for a little longer, the possibilities still only glittering potential, before he has to acknowledge again the reality of their absence.
You never give up on anything. I'm not sure you even know how.

Of course, this Dean is insane, so anything is possible. He might not even understand the question should Castiel choose to ask, which would be a fair trade, considering how often he asks questions that Castiel didn't know required answers, much less what those answers were supposed to be. Far more unsettling, however, are the questions that Castiel wasn't aware existed, that Dean asks him, that he now asks himself. It's not simply that he doesn't know the answers, but that they might not exist, and perhaps never will, unless he discovers them for himself.

The Fallen sometimes kept certain aspects of what they were before, those most compatible with human minds and human bodies, but none, as far as he knew, had ever been born into bodies that could be used as vessels by other angels. None had ever Fallen into the body of their own vessel, its very genetics designed to contain and channel the entirety of folded space and living light that made up an angel. Remembering how he'd sensed the dissonance of Dean Winchester out of time and space before he was able to suppress it, the sense of what and who he was, he didn't himself how or why he felt it, only wanting it to stop instead of wondering why on earth he felt anything at all.

The vastness of the loss that encompassed what he gave up didn't lead to particular interest in discovering what remained, or if anything had beyond what little before Dean's arrival he already knew of and ignored as so much less. He wonders now, and the reasons for that are far more complex than simply for the protection of the man sleeping in the cabin beneath him.

Dean thinks he doesn't know how to give up when his life reflects someone who has never done anything else. He's wrong--the number of reasons is infinite, and time will end well before the number of digits do--but once said, he can't forget it.

Tilting his head up, Castiel stares at the sky for a pensive moment. "It isn't prayer if I have no faith that you're listening. Even if you were, the chances of getting an answer if I were to ask a question would be so close to zero as to render it meaningless. If there is some point to be made, I have yet to see it." (For humanity, the point isn't perfection, because the infinite has no limit; there is always something more to strive toward.) Closing his eyes, he shakes himself free of the thought, but it lingers on the edges of his consciousness, ready to assault him given the least opportunity or excuse. "This is ridiculous. I don't even have the excuse of intoxication or chemical assistance for this."

The sound of something scraping against the wood jerks his attention back to the once-silent night. This late, most of the camp is either sleeping or engaged in activities in their cabin that tend to demand their entire attention, and in any case, none of them would have any reason to come up here. Frowning, he focuses on the fragile quiet, now aware of the not-quite random, almost furtive scrapes and nearly inaudible grunts. After a particularly jarring snap of wood, an unmistakable voice drifts toward him, the words muffled but considering their source, he can easily guess what's being said. The only question is if it's him or the cabin that is being more viciously maligned.

Standing up, he follows the increasingly frequent sounds across the length of the roof, peering over the edge to see Dean clinging to rotting slats apparently by nothing more than his fingernails and sheer force of will. As if aware of being observed, Dean cuts off a particularly convoluted description of his antecedents, jerking his head up to stare at Castiel accusingly from behind narrowed eyes, silently condemning him for making his life so difficult that despite the fact this is a terrible, terrible idea, he's doing it anyway.

Bewilderment, Castiel thinks: that's another word I didn't know before I met you. At least, not this often.
"You're going to fall," he observes. "What are you doing?"

"Thought it was a nice night for a broken leg," Dean grinds out, turning his attention back to grimly navigating the wall of the cabin without any noticeable reluctance despite the sheer lack of hand and footholds. "Match the foot you broke, you dick. What does it look like I'm doing?"

"It wasn't broken," Castiel correct him automatically, eyes flickering down to the thin t-shirt and grey sweatpants Dean wore to bed, a strap crossing his chest leading to the bag banging against his hip, and fixing incredulously on the inexplicably bare feet whose toes are barely clinging to the edge of the least stable slat possible. "Why aren't you wearing--" Dropping to his knees, he reaches down to catch Dean by one wrist as the slat he was reaching for crumbles at the first touch of his fingers. Dean's eyes widen, but he doesn't fight Castiel's hold even his toes scramble for purchase on crumbling wood. "There's a much easier way up. Would you like me to show you for future reference?"

"Yeah, sure, but maybe right now you could pull me up?" Dean curses when the wood begins to splinter more under his weight, jerking his foot back and staring down at it unhappily before turning that gaze on Castiel again with the addition of a sense of feeling personally betrayed by both Castiel and his cabin. The fact that Castiel is supporting his full weight and that the only thing between him and a short fall to the ground followed by a long period of intense pain is his hold on Dean's wrist seems to be of very little interest to him at all. "Or you know, hang here all night. How's it going?"

He honestly has no idea how to answer that.

"Yeah, I'm great, thanks for asking," Dean adds as he extends his other hand toward Castiel imperiously, a silent but unmistakable command that his expression implies he's annoyed that he even has to make. "Nice trick and everything, but I wasn't serious about literally hanging here all night. You can do it one handed, really impressed. Now pull me up."

"I wasn't--" Huffing a breath in sheer aggravation, he takes Dean's other hand and pulls him to the dubious safety of the roof, not bothering to hide the lack of effort involved. On Dean, the pretense, which he doubts he'd even notice, would be wasted. Letting him go, he puts himself between Dean and the edge, which earns him a brief scowl before Dean turns his attention back to maintaining his balance on the uneven tiles. "Do you want me to show you how to get down without killing yourself?"

"I just got here," Dean points out, looking around the stretch of roof warily. "I brought alcohol," he adds, jerking his chin at the bag hanging over one shoulder and immediately shifting his feet when the motion throws him off. "What?"

"You came to the roof to drink?"

Dean rolls his eyes. "I'm not that much of a dick. I brought enough for you."

"You want us to drink on the roof?" Castiel asks slowly, wondering if this might be a particularly strange acid flashback. It's the most likely explanation. "Do you see any potential drawbacks to that plan?"

"Who has to go get more beer when we run out? That'd be you, in case that wasn't pretty goddamn obvious," Dean answers irritably. "For the record, I'm usually running for my life when I'm this far off the ground. Kind of different doing it for fun. Is there anywhere--" He looks around, licking his lips nervously. "Where the hell were you sitting, anyway?"
"Over here," he answers helplessly, reaching for Dean's arm, surprised again when Dean doesn't stiffen at the contact, content to let Castiel guide him toward the center of the roof and far enough from the edge that even drunk, Dean would have to make a concerted effort to fall to his death, and only then if Castiel already fell off and been rendered unconscious.

Settling on the ridge facing the camp walls, bare feet braced comfortably against the incline, Dean hooks the bag around a loose nail before he frowns, craning his neck to look at Castiel expectantly. "You gonna stand there all night?"

"I thought you'd fallen asleep," Castiel says, feeling defensive and not entirely sure why. Sitting down beside Dean, he gives the bag a dubious glance. "If I'd known--"

"I was faking it," Dean assures him, mouth curving briefly in smug pleasure at his success. "If I'd known you'd be climbing the roof to get away from me, I could have stayed at the other cabin tonight."

"Don't be stupid," he answers shortly. "I would leave if your presence was a problem." Which he only belatedly realizes is an admission of something, at least from the way Dean's gaze sharpens, but of what he isn't sure.

"Okay," is all he says, however, reaching for the backpack and pulling out two bottles of beer. As he passes one to Castiel, he adds, looking around with exaggerated thoroughness, "You come up here a lot? View's great. Really--dark." Cocking his head, he looks into the moonless night for a long moment, and Castiel's surprised to see the tension melting from his shoulders, one corner of his mouth quirking in unconscious appreciation. "I bet it's amazing during the day."

"It's quiet. Not that I object to company," he adds when Dean pauses, bottle halfway to his mouth. "I worried that I might have disturbed you last night."

"You were up here?" Dean looks surprised and something else before he abruptly takes a drink and stares intently into the darkness, bottle hanging loosely from one hand.

Castiel considers the fact that neither of their lives to date would indicate that they'd be allowed to die by something as mundane as a drunken plunge from a roof and twists off the lid off his bottle, staring at it for a few seconds before taking a deep breath.

"It wasn't you."

He gets a raised eyebrow and a hint of a disbelieving smirk and supposes that wasn't a very good example of his ability to convincingly proselyte on demand. Or even introduce reasonable doubt.

"Not in your being," he clarifies, ignoring Dean's snort. "Admittedly, your presence is the reason for the dissonance of my existence, but I've come to terms with the fact you're not actually responsible for that."

"Thanks."

Reaching over, Dean roughly taps their bottles together. "Here's to dissonance. Drink up."

The beer is slightly warm and more than slightly flat since the refrigerator is still a work in progress and their supply of ice is sharply limited, but cold beer is a rare occurrence, and in any case he's always chosen his alcohol by its proof, higher being better. From the look on Dean's face at the first taste, however, the refrigerator's status as semi-broken will be coming to an end very soon.

"How did you know where I was tonight?" he asks; it's possibly the least important question he's
ever asked in his life, both mortal and not.

Dean shrugs. "I played 'if I were an ex-angel that needed to think where would I go?' That didn't require going down the porch stairs, I mean." Turning the bottle between his knees, he takes another drink, eyes fixed on some point in the distance. "Wanna tell me what's going on with you?"

To his own surprise, he hears himself answering with the truth. "What you said earlier--" He frowns. "It was unsettling."

"About how you Fell?" Dean blows out a breath. "Yeah, kind of figured. Listen, I didn't mean--"

"It was a compliment," he interrupts. "I understand that. I don't understand why you see it--" He struggles for the appropriate word; English has so many limitations. "Is that how you see what happened?"

"So what part was I wrong about?"

All of it, Castiel wants to tell him; it has to be, somehow. "I don't know."

"Get back to me when you figure it out." A short silence follows before Dean seems to come to some kind of decision. "'They' is everyone in Chitaqua, isn't it? That's why you didn't want to talk about it."

"Dean, I've given everyone very good reason to dislike me." He gives Dean a sidelong glance. "Including you, for that matter."

Dean inclines his head and takes a drink, as if he could wait all night.

"I only look human." Aware of Dean's attention, Castiel forces himself to continue. "I'm not. Humans can sense that."

Dean lets out a quiet breath. "Not just habit."

"No," he answers, staring at a chipped tile near his foot. "Human instinct, especially with hunters, is very highly developed, especially with something that appears to be human and isn't, and never has been." Even demons can pass more easily, something that he often required considerable chemical assistance to avoid thinking about in depth.

"And people don't like it. Like Sid?" There's a pause. "Everyone? When did it start?"

"After I Fell. Grace apparently covers many things, including that. At first…." He hasn't thought about those first weeks in a long time, the problems it caused he didn't anticipate, the slow realization of what changed. "At first, I didn't understand the reactions, even from those I met before, and when I did, I--didn't handle it well."

"I'm betting they handled it worse." Startled, he looks up to see Dean regarding the night in disgust. "People are gonna be people. Always thinking up new ways to be shitty at it."

"They can't control it, for the most part--"

"Can't control what they feel, maybe," Dean allows with obvious reluctance. "What they do about it? Different story."

"You don't."

Dean pauses, glancing at him over the rim of his bottle. "Don't what?"
"In Dean's cabin that day," he says, forcing out the words. "You didn't know until--"

"You slammed me up against the wall at light speed," Dean finishes for him, scowling briefly in memory. "Yeah, so? I've known you--well, between you and Castiel--five years. Why would I....."

"No, of course not. That's also not the point."

"Then what the hell's the point?" Dean asks in exasperation, and the fact he asks that question tells Castiel everything and absolutely nothing. "So you're not human. You weren't human when I met you, you're not human now. My brother had demon blood in him and is Lucifer's fucking vessel, and I was a demon, in Hell, and that's just my immediate family, so come the fuck on. You gotta have tentacles or something these days to get my attention when it comes to weird, so good luck there."

Tentacles. "I haven't yet discarded the possibility that you're insane."

"Dude, wouldn't be a surprise," he agrees, clicking their bottles together before taking another drink. "What, it bothers you or something?"

"No," he answers in unthinking honesty. "It's simply new."

"What you are shouldn't matter. What you do, that's what matters."

What a terrifying thought. "What I've done isn't an improvement."

"Yeah, well."

"I get where you're coming from, though." Dean stares at his bottle, expression melting into something darker. "Everyone here sees him when they look at me. Even Chuck. I mean, he tries to hide it, but I can see it and--dude, I'm getting your thing for acid. I'm tempted to trip my ass off for a couple of days just to feel normal; it can't be more surreal than my life."

"Do I--"

"Not once." Dean glances at him curiously. "You don't see him at all. Is it the being out of time thing?"

"No, I suppressed that for my own sanity. The migraine was ridiculous." At Dean's expectant look, he sighs, but in all honesty, he's curious how Dean will reaction to hearing this. "There are also physical differences you must take into account, and not merely scars. You are two years younger, you weigh seventeen pounds more, your muscle development--"

"How the hell," Dean says incredulously, "could you guess my weight?"

"It's not a guess." He ducks his head to hide the beginnings of a smile. "Some abilities are inherent to what I was created to be and were retained after I Fell. In general, they tend to be both distracting in a corporeal body and of no possible practical application whatsoever. This is one of them." He
hesitates, but the temptation is far too strong to resist. "The body you wear is one that I created. I could identify Dean Winchester by his blood vessels and note the changes that have occurred since his resurrection. Having met you, I could now even identify which Dean Winchester of the two of you was the original owner of those blood vessels."

"Holy shit that's creepy," Dean says wonderingly, taking an appalled drink. "Anything else?"

"Your counterpart," he continues with no idea why he's adding this, "also didn't borrow my clothing."

Dean almost drops the bottle. "You noticed that, huh."

"Strangely, yes, it becomes apparent when doing laundry."

Dean blinks. "You do laundry?"

He opens his mouth to answer that inanity and hears instead the unfamiliar sound of his laughter, effervescent and startling, belly tightening as he gasps for breath between each shocking burst, Dean's "What the hell? I never saw you--Jesus Christ, get over it," almost lost beneath it. "Sorry I made laundry day suck for you. I'll stop."

Eventually it eases off and Castiel straightens, fighting back another burst of ill-timed hilarity. "How, exactly, did you think we--"

"Dude, I figured you got the groupies to do it."

"The groupies, as you call them, are extremely well-trained soldiers, and several don't disarm even when engaging in sexual activity. I'm not that stupid."

"Whoa."

Dean takes another drink, eyes wide. "That's--never mind. I didn't think about--uh. I can use--"

"I don't mind," he says quickly. He suspected as much his disinclination to use his counterpart's weapons. "Chuck may have some in storage somewhere, but the supply situation has become precarious. Your supply run to the city was needed badly, and I do appreciate the surplus of toilet paper more than I expected now that I contemplate the alternative."

"You're welcome." Dean carefully focuses on the horizon, which he supposes means perhaps a change of topic would be a good idea.

"Will you tell me now what you were looking for in the city today?" Dean frowns at his bottle, looking embarrassed. "You were looking for something specific."

"Yeah, kind of." Rolling the bottle between his palms, he frowns. "So the military is gone, right? Which is also weird, I guess. I mean, I don't know, maybe they have orders to leave regularly or something?" He gives Castiel a hopeful look.

"I know they occasionally had changes of personnel from what Dean said, but other than that…" He doesn't know. He never asked, was never interested enough to particularly care. "Why?"

"Yeah, I was just thinking…” Dean gives his bottle a resentful look. "It's the tanks."

"You were serious about stealing a tank?" Despite his inebriation, Dean's plan for doing so was surprisingly detailed, and he was tempted to let him try.
"Jesus," Dean breathes, closing his eyes. "Couldn't you just pretend you didn't remember what I said that night? That's the point of getting drunk and pretending to forget."

"No." He ignores Dean's sigh. "You were looking for the tanks?"

"Not to steal one," Dean answers with an unconvincing scowl. "Look, those reports from the patrol, two weeks of nothing happening, right? Demons and Croats and Lucifer's flunkies, Lucifer takes off with them for his army, whatever, it's Lucifer, who the hell knows what he's doing. Cats and dogs don't like him, they aren't there--"

"Or rats," Castiel interrupts. "Never mind, your concern for the local wildlife seems to be contagious. Supply runs were always enlivened by competition with them for supplies. We were lectured on rabies regularly; it was annoying."

"Uh." The frown deepens unexpectedly. "There weren't any rats. I mean, I didn't ask--"

"You took Chuck. If there were rats, everyone on this planet would have known about it. The wildlife is one thing, but if there was a mass exodus of rats, much less cats or dogs, that's not something we should have missed. They were legion."

"Yeah, and the tanks," Dean says. "Cas, what happened to the tanks?"

"The military took them with them?" he hazards; he has no idea what the military does with its tanks when they leave. It seems logical, but humans sometimes aren't.

"Yeah, I thought so, too. So I went back to those first reports you ordered--that's why I was faking sleep tonight," Dean adds, gleeful that he fell for it. "First one, the bathroom guy--Phil, right?--Phil's first literary effort--"

"Five thousand six hundred and eighty-two words with complete documentation of his team's excretory habits as well as a riveting description of the exact dimensions of every pothole on their patrol route." Dean grins at him. "It's not easy to forget. I've tried."

"Like a nightmare, but more boring," he agrees. "All of that, plus everything he saw, including the color of the sky at five minute intervals. Other than that, nothing happened, right? Fast forward a few weeks, and the only thing that's different is that he's up to twenty pages and Cas, in case you missed this, he's hitting on you and using word count to express his affection."

Castiel blinks. "What?"

Dean waves a hand. "In this case, you being oblivious and him going above and beyond to get you in bed works out. I read all his reports back to back, because of everyone here, he's the most motivated to find something--anything--to get your attention. So why would he leave out watching the tanks leave the city?"

Castiel frowns, uncertain; he didn't know humans expressed sexual attraction with reports. Usually, they simply ask. "He wouldn't?"

"Exactly," Dean says triumphantly. "So if the tanks aren't in the city and no one saw them leave--and he would have, guy was motivated--where are they?"

"The patrol's reports were very basic for the first three days," Castiel says slowly. "Before that--"

"Yeah," Dean says, green eyes fixing on Castiel thoughtfully. "Day we had that little chat in Dean's cabin. And you went to written reports, which makes sense now that I know you were trying to
sober up and worried you'd fuck up and miss something."

Castiel nods a little numbly. "I didn't know if I'd--slip. It'd been a long time since I tried to abstain for more than a day or two."

Dean smiles in satisfaction. "Thought so. Good call, by the way: it made this a lot easier. Anyway, that's a few days where we can't be sure what happened because human memory is like that and they forgot to mention it, even Phil, fine. Maybe orders came in for them to move out--which would be a weird coincidence with Dean's attack on Lucifer, and the mass animal migration of cats, rats, every fucking supernatural entity in the state that we somehow missed….

"They didn't leave."

"Not in three days," Dean says. "Unless there were other exit points we weren't watching, maybe--"

"There weren't." He stares at his bottle for a moment; he's far too familiar with failure to be surprised. "When they said the city was empty, it didn't occur to me to wonder about what had happened to the military units."

"The imminent arrival of Lucifer's army probably distracted you," Dean says thoughtfully, fixing him with a sardonic look. "Another Dean Winchester showing up. Being responsible for an entire militia camp while effectively going through withdrawal. Your leader's death. The Apocalypse? Whatever! Let's get onto the important subject of the missing military units and those goddamn tanks; what's up with that?"

"That does not excuse the fact that I didn't notice--"

"I mean, sure, you'd had three entire days to learn how to do what it took Dean five years to figure out," Dean continues blithely. "I mean, how hard can it be to run a camp in the middle of the apocalypse when your entire leadership is dead and their replacements are still working on finding their asses with both hands? While hiding an alternate version of your dead leader? I can keep this up for a while, so either get over yourself or go get us something stronger than beer so we can do this right, make a night of it." He smirks. "Modeling human skills. Watch and learn."

"You're incredibly frustrating." Even to himself, his voice sounds strange. "I understand what you're trying to do."

"You just don't believe it." Dean nods. "We'll work on that. Moving on. Our last stop, when I asked you to stop and let me look around, it was because that was the first time I saw tracks from one of the tanks."

Castiel straightens. "That's why you wanted to do beta and gamma first in Kansas City; they were the ones with the most regular crossover with the routes the military used."

"From what I could tell, only a tank could use most of theirs," Dean admits, rubbing his knee before cupping it tightly, frowning at nothing. "It was at the crossroad."

So that's why Dean was interested. "It crossed there?"

"More like it stopped there." Dean shifts uncomfortably, rubbing his palm against his knee one last time before closing it around the neck of his bottle. "The tracks stopped like it hit a wall or something."

"Was there any sign of--"
"Crossroad demon? Yeah, I was thinking that, too. No fresh burials or anything, but from where the tracks stop and for about twenty-five, thirty feet, the asphalt was different." Dean shifts his bottle to his other hand and taps it against his knee, expression tense. "It was weird."

"Can you be more specific?"

"The entire city was fucking creepy," Dean snaps, but the green eyes don't quite meet his. "Saying 'the asphalt is creeping me out' was pretty much status quo. Also, crazy."

"Crazy is a relative state. At this point, it might also be considered a positive selection trait for survival." Castiel finishes his bottle and tucks it inside the bag. "We can ask patrol tomorrow about the military units leaving and review the reports to see if there is anything we might have missed."

Dean nods reluctantly, but the tension doesn't ease, and belatedly, Castiel realizes how late it is.

"You should sleep," he says, earning himself a snort from Dean. "The morning patrol will require instruction at dawn before they go out and the night patrol will report to you directly afterward before they go off-duty."

Dean gives him an exasperated look. "You know, I never asked about that. Why do I have to see them all before and after? You didn't."

"I had them write their reports so anything of interest could be discussed before they went back on duty the next day," he answers absently, wondering what else he missed in those reports. He can remember them, yes, but the experience of taking notes makes him think re-reading them might be of assistance. "It reduced the amount of time I had to spend listening to inane attempts at casual conversation or blank staring." Dean scowls at him. "You need to know them, Dean; they're your soldiers. In your case, listening is educational. You also seem to enjoy it."

"A whole lot of nothing happening," Dean says, sounding sullen as he finishes his beer. "Gotta talk about something."

"Which you also don't seem to have any problem doing," he points out, getting to his feet. "Now, if you will turn your attention to your survival--difficult for you, I know--let me show you where to climb down and perhaps avoid your untimely death."

Dean flashes him a grin. "Aww, Cas. It's like you like me or something."

As they reach the edge of the roof, Castiel looks down at the earth below them. "You're very frustrating," he says finally. "In ways I did not know existed prior to meeting you."

He thinks he can hear Dean rolling his eyes. "Thanks."

"I don't know if the number of ways is actually infinite or only seems to be, but it seems I'll have the opportunity to find out." Castiel glances at Dean. "Follow my instruction exactly. If you slip, I'll catch you."

Dean snorts. "I know."
In retrospect, his comfort level with Dean's presence has grown far greater than he'd have thought possible; it's only when Dean says, "Okay, seriously, sleep, you know it's kind of non-negotiable?" that he realizes he's not alone.

Castiel drags his gaze from Phil's latest attempt to make patrol reports a literary genre--surely if sex was desired, he'd simply say so?--to the far more welcome sight of a sleepy, disheveled Dean waving a prescription bottle with an irritated expression.

Seeing that he has Castiel's attention, he looks at the faded label irritably. "Where do you get your supply anyway?"

Dean didn't sleep well last night, and even most of a pot of coffee didn't seem to help this morning when he finally dragged himself from bed. He was distracted during the patrol meetings, a restlessness that graduated into constant, unending motion, pacing the floor in elongates spirals between brief moments of stillness, migrating between the couch and the kitchen table and the floor, arrhythmic tapping soundtracking every attempt to sit still, rubbing restlessly at his knee, chewing a pencil until it snapped between his teeth.

Evaluating the lavender circles beneath the red-rimmed eyes and the tired scowl, Castiel wonders if it would have been better to ignore Dean's insistence they spend today re-reading the reports and left the camp instead.

"You should be sleeping."

"So should you." Dean drops down on the floor with a graceless thump, rubbing his eyes before staring resentfully at the two neat stacks of reports between them. "Re-reading these all day was just so fucking riveting that doing it all night sounded like a good idea? Don't tell me," he adds with a glare. "You can read faster than a human."

"If it were a dead language, yes," he admits, unable to ignore the headache growing behind his eyes. From recent experience, it won't dissipate until he finally goes to sleep. Human bodies are ridiculous sometimes in their requirements, and seem to delight in adding something new at random. "Living languages, however, are subject to the changes in the societies that speak them." Dean looks unconvinced. "In other words, your dictionary is always being updated, and I do not mean simply in your official publications. Even the definitions change by the nature of their context and the identity and location of the speaker. It's--different."

Resting his chin one hand, Dean's frown is almost accusing. "I thought you could remember everything."

"I can--" he starts

"So why read them again if you can remember them?"

He tries very hard to remember that insomnia makes humans irritable. "I don't know."

"Sleep might help," Dean says, tossing the bottle into Castiel's lap with unnecessary force and absently running his palm over his knee, wincing slightly. "Or hey, more Adderall, that seems to be working for you."
"Picking up the bottle, he sighs. "After the morning patrol leaves, I'll rest for a few hours."

"Face down in those reports," Dean says knowingly. "Dude, take the bed. I promise, I'm not doing anything in it but sleeping."

"I like the couch."

"I noticed," he adds, glancing at the doorway again with a faintly hostile expression which Castiel has yet to decipher. "But the bedroom? Has an actual door."

"Why are you awake?" Dean shifting slightly, rocking forward to pick up another report, bare foot rubbing absently against the rug. Castiel watches in morbid curiosity as one hand descends to the floor, waiting for the endless tapping to begin again.

"Same reason you are, I guess," he answers, straightening to sit cross-legged, almost still if one ignored the fact that he was nearly vibrating in place; it's exhausting just to look at him. Tomorrow, they're leaving the camp. Dean's sanity aside, his won't last another day of this. "Wanna figure out what we're missing."

"And sleep isn't of assistance? How unexpected after your assurances it might help." To his surprise, Dean doesn't respond to his bait, eyes darting down to the floor again.

"I couldn't sleep," he admits, hands settling uncertainly on his knees and looking at Castiel with an expression he can't quite read before he says abruptly, "Those sigils you're using, the ones that make people not see me. When I was just wearing them around the camp, you said it fucked with their heads, told them nothing was there, right?"

He puts down the report. "Yes."

"You said it was a problem when they had to cover more than one sense." Dean looks down again with a frown. "Just--okay, when I was wearing them around, what if I'd touched someone? How would they have reacted? I mean, how would it feel?"

"For them?" Interesting question. "I don't know."

"But they'd feel something, even if it told them nothing was there. I mean, it'd be weird, right?"

"Yes." Weird would perhaps be the best descriptor possible under the circumstances. "The wards we use in the cabin don't have that problem. Why?"

Dean grimaces, glancing down again. Following his gaze, he realizes Dean's looking at his own hand, rubbing restlessly down the length of his thigh before closing tightly over the curve of his knee, knuckles going yellow-white under the strain.

"What if nothing was really there and it said something was?" Dean asks. "What would that be like?"

He watches Dean's fingers loosen from their hold, sliding back up his thigh and revealing uneven dark patches against the faded olive. Glancing at the bottle still in his hand, he focuses on the dingy label, torn and faded and streaked with something dark and tacky, edged in angry red. Before he can think better of it, he reaches out, catching Dean's wrist mid-motion and easing it away, taking in the streaks of drying blood, patches tacky-wet and still glistened on fraying cotton.

"Cas?" Dean asks, sounding confused. "What's going on?"
"Don't move." Shifting to his knees on the pile of crinkling paper, he turns Dean's hand over, sucking in a breath at the raw, bright red abrasions spreading from just below the fingers to the heel of the palm, fresh blisters forming between gun calluses, patches of skin worn to almost nothing that are seeping new blood. Taking a deep breath, he meets Dean's eyes. "Dean, how do you feel?"

Dean glances briefly at his own hand as if he's never seen it before, eyes glassy and not quite focusing, pupil contracting and widening as if trying to see something that keeps moving in and out of his line of sight.

Finally, he blinks, looking up at Castiel in utter bewilderment edged with something like fear. "I don't know."

"This needs to be treated." As if they're speaking of any wound that required attention. It seems to convey some kind of reassurance to Dean, because he nods in unconcealed relief, slumping as Castiel lets him go and gets to his feet.

Finding his kit in the kitchen, he checks it automatically, even though since Dean's arrival he's done so every day, buying time for his hands to stop shaking. When he's sure he can convey at least the pretext of calm, he washes his hands and dries them methodically, getting a clean cloth and wetting it thoroughly before returning to the living room with the kit.

Dean doesn't move when Castiel shoves the reports to the side and seats himself cross-legged in front of him. "Give me your hand."

Dean extends it without hesitation, and the lack of argument is possibly the most terrifying thing that has happened tonight. Wrapping his fingers around the fragile wrist, he notes the slightly too rapid pulse before placing Dean's hand palm-up on his knee, gently spreading the reddened fingers to check for further damage. Dean winces at the touch against the broken blisters trailing down his index finger but not when Castiel brushes a thumb against the worst of the abrasions at the heel, where the flesh is almost entirely worn away. No wonder he couldn't sleep tonight.

"Does that hurt?"

"Not really," Dean answers after a too-long hesitation, looking down indifferently as Castiel drenches his hand with half the bottle of alcohol, splashing the rug as well as the reports, the smell surrounding them both.

"Your tolerance for pain is very high." Wadding up the cloth and setting it out of sight behind him, he reaches for the alcohol and clean gauze. "Infection is a problem," he adds casually, concentrating his efforts on thoroughly cleaning each abrasion. "As there is a dearth of hospitals, even the most mild wound receives prompt treatment to lower the risk of complications."

"Can you even get infections?" Dean asks curiously, sublimely unaware of Castiel drenching his hand with half the bottle of alcohol, splashing the rug as well as the reports, the smell surrounding them both.

"It hasn't happened yet," Castiel answers easily. "For all intents and purposes, I'm an entirely different species, which may be the reason, but as bacteria and disease are subject to mutation, that could change at any time." Setting aside the used gauze, he reaches for the topical antibiotic and begins to spread it over Dean's palm. "When did your hand begin to bother you? You didn't sleep well last night, either. Was it bothering you then?"

Dean's expression goes blank. "I don't know. Maybe. I kept waking up, feeling like I'd forgotten something. Like an itch or something, but when I noticed it, it'd stop."
Castiel reviews his memory as he continues his ministrations. Today's restlessness, the tapping, last night he slept badly, yesterday--on the roof, he remembers Dean playing constantly with his bottle--the city, Dean asking him about his left hand--sitting on the jeep, watching Dean walk toward the jeep from the crossroad--at the crossroad, where Dean was crouching and reached out to touch the ground and then stood up, rubbing his hand against his thigh as if he'd touched something repulsive and wanted to remove the feeling from his fingers.

"At the crossroad." He closes a hand around Dean's wrist in anticipation of his instinctive flinch, thumb against the suddenly-rapid pulse. "Yesterday, when we were discussing the tanks. You said there was something odd about the road where the tracks stopped. Was there something on it when you touched it?"

"No." If he so much as breathed, he wouldn't have heard Dean's answer. "There was nothing there."

With his free hand, Castiel takes out a pre-cut bandage, listening to Dean's fast, shallow breathing, the slowly escalating beat of his heart, and forces himself to calmly tape the bandage into place, smoothing his fingers over the edges. "You said that the road looked different there. How was it different?"

"It was lighter that the rest." Dean pauses, uncertain. "Smother, too."

"Stretch your fingers so I can be sure the tape won't pull." As Dean complies with his request, he tries to think of another question, aware of Dean's pulse speeding more with every moment of silence. "The asphalt was worn down from the tanks?"

Dean tenses, breathing becoming uneven as well. "No, it was smooth, like someone had sanded it down or something." He stops short, hand trembling in Castiel's. "Or maybe melted, I don't know. I've never seen anything like that before."

"The tape is pulling and reducing your flexibility." Pulling one side free, he tosses it aside. "I apologize. I'm out of practice treating injuries." Getting another piece, he concentrates on slowly smoothing it into place, trying to think of what else he should ask. "You said it was lighter as well. Was it painted?"

"Dude, why would anyone paint a road now?" Dean answers, reassuringly irritated.

"You'd be surprised what boredom can inspire." He needs more time. "Flex your hand again. I don't want to inhibit your aim. Describe it."

Dean is quiet for a few minutes, flexing his hand obediently. "It was--kind of shiny."

"Like it had been freshly painted?" Castiel asks very carefully, and Dean stills, pulse increasing abruptly.

"Like metal."

Castiel catches Dean's eyes. "It didn't feel like metal." Dean nods hesitantly. "What did it feel like?"

For a moment, he's not sure Dean can answer, green eyes unfocused, then he swallows, focusing on Castiel. "I told you. How the fuck do you feel something when nothing's there?"

All at once, Dean's pulse begins to slow, tension running out of him as he slumps in exhaustion. Freeing Dean's wrist, he repacks the kit from reflex, aware of the steady gaze following him to the kitchen as he puts it away and washes his hands again. When he returns, a glance at Dean's hand,
lying still in his lap, is somewhat reassuring, but that doesn't mean it won't return if he doesn't at least witness what it was that Dean saw.

"You should go to bed," he says, stacking the reports together and smoothing down the crumpled edges, more to give himself something to do until Dean is back in bed than because he cares. Dean's hand clenches alarmingly in his peripheral vision, but when he looks up, Dean's expression tells him that it was a voluntary reaction. "You haven't been sleeping well."

"But I'll be able to now."

"I hope so," he answers honestly, unwilling to lie and knowing that Dean wouldn't believe him if he tried. "Dean---"

"You're going back to the city," Dean interrupts. "You want to get a look at it. Whatever--what just happened, Cas?"

"I don't know." Giving up, he shoves the reports to one side to care about later. "Go to bed. I'll be back before you wake up."

"You know what it is?"

That's the problem. "I won't know until I see it."

"Okay." Dean gets to his feet. "Let me get my boots."

"I don't think you should--"

"Cas?" When he looks up, Dean is watching him with a faint hint of amusement. Seeing he has Castiel's attention, he holds up his keys. "I'll get my boots."

"How did you--" Dean's mouth twitches reluctantly. "Never mind. I'll wait."

"Good call." Dean turns toward the bedroom. "Give me five minutes."

Lit by the headlights from the jeep, Castiel circles the circumference of what was once a road, fighting down the instinctive recoil that's dogged him ever since he first saw it.

While it has all the visible properties and reflective capabilities of iron and trace properties of half a dozen other elemental metals and what might be human DNA, the actual composition eludes him entirely. Even to the untrained human eye, there's no possible way to visually interpret this as asphalt in adequate lighting. Human instinct is very, very good at identifying when something isn't what it appears to be; to a hunter, to Dean, this would have normally been identified as an immediate threat without question.

After marking out the dimensions seamlessly joined to the unaffected road, he crouches, taking a deep breath before making himself run his fingers over the surface. He registers asphalt, rough despite the visual of a flawless smoothness, traces of dirt that seem to skate along the surface, but when he presses down, it's sickeningly springy, flesh-soft, humid like cooked meat. Jerking back, he barely holds his balance at the sickening rush of vertigo, rubbing his fingers against his thigh as Dean did, vainly trying to rub away the memory that seems to cling to his skin.

"Everything okay?" Dean asks, conveying with his voice alone that answering him is not optional and better happen in five seconds or less.
"Yes." Castiel hesitates, looking at Dean; with the headlights behind him, there's no way to see his expression, but from vocal cues, he's worried. Looking back down, he tries to decide whether or not to try; the migraine from Dean's presence in this world was bad enough, but that's why painkillers were invented, after all. "I want to try something. It won't take long."

Dean takes his time before answering. "Five minutes."

"I won't need more than that." Standing up, he concentrates on Dean for a moment, deliberately letting himself see Dean vibrate in spacetime--the purely visual interpretation of someone out of sync with their environment--and turning it off again before the headache can manifest. He didn't realize at the time--there wasn't reason to--that it wasn't all that was still available to him. Doing this deliberately should be easier; this time, at least, he know what he's trying to do.

Closing his eyes, he takes a deep breath and searches his mind, trying to find it. For a second, bitter beyond imagining, there's nothing--of course there's not, of course, why would he ever, even by accident, be able to do something useful--then something responds, like an immense pressure against an uncertain barrier, and he touches it before opening his eyes and the visual spectrum dissolves before his eyes.

The rush of sensory information alone is staggering; he barely avoids stumbling and alarming Dean, biting his lip as he struggles to control it, trying to filter it into sight alone until the sickening lurch of the world finally resolves into something he can interpret. Even so, overflow scratches sharply along the skin of his back like nails on a chalkboard, joined by a high pitched sound like metal scraping against itself, and a flat iron taste in his mouth that isn't just blood from his bitten lip.

Angels in their vessels don't need to filter their sight through their corporeal body, but like being able to see Dean, it seems it's possible. His entire nervous system is being utilized to carry information that has very little sensory equivalent and isn't sure how to interpret any of it, sharp and hard and the smell of decomposition and possibly screaming and he hopes in a corner of his mind that he's not actually doing that or Dean will be rather worried by now.

All in all, he's had worst trips; this, at least, has the benefit of being useful.

After what feels like hours and is probably only seconds, he finally manages to work out how to organize it into something that makes sense, slowly settling the layers into place that make up the fabric of reality. The world tilts sickeningly in a starburst of colors and sound before it settles again, the corporeal world ghostly outlines beneath a superimposed reflection of the multiplicity of reality of which it is only a single, tiny part.

If he ever could have expected to see anything at all, it wouldn't have been this.

The road is limned in silver-white like clean water and ice, marking out the boundaries of the affected area, a sharp delineator between warm, healthy green-yellow outside it and a band of sickening grey-green corruption that melts into a dull, empty stillness within, a darkness that has nothing to do with the absence of light. There's a sense of endless heat and infinite cold as one and the same, the joining between that absence and reality like an endless squeal of metal on metal and grinding glass, like existence being peeled alive before it vanishes into that dull silence like a physical ache.

*How the fuck do you feel something when nothing's there?*

"Cas?"
Distracted, his focus on the area slips, and the city itself begins to spread out before him before he can stop it, peppered with more of these, the shape of absence burned through the fabric of reality sprinkled everywhere. The sheer magnitude of it is overwhelming, far too much to process, but there's no way to stop seeing, his vision stretching farther outward with every second that passes, the overflow like nails on a chalkboard and a growing itch beneath the surface of his skin.

Distantly, he can feel a headache flare to screaming life behind his eyes; it would probably be excruciating if his nerves weren't already so overloaded that even pain can't get through. Reaching the city limits--nothing alive in the city except them, good to know, stop now--the taste and smell of iron strengthen with a feeling like a very dull knife carving into the middle of his back, fingers tingling warningly. This form, even as a vessel, was never meant to channel the breadth of what his true form could see without the protection and buffer of Grace. For that matter, it shouldn't even be trying; surely it will stop soon.

Or, he thinks vaguely, he should stop it himself and never, ever do anything like this again.

Taking a careful step back, he tries to remember how he started in the first place, but another spurt of sensory data drowns him before he can find it; he thinks he just reached the county line with a taste of what's definitely blood.

"Cas?" Despite the distance, despite the sheer glut of information, Dean's voice is perfectly clear, cutting through the cacophony like a knife sinking into bare flesh, and he grabs onto it gratefully. "Everything okay? Talk to me."

Turning his head in the direction of Dean's voice, the ghostly outline of Dean shifts, vivid in verdant greens and healthy blues, glowing golden (of course he does, of course; it's only a surprise there's not a musical accompaniment, something in Bach by way of Metallica, with harps), a living refutation of the atrocity only inches from Castiel's boots. It's unexpectedly soothing simply to look at him.

"Under the back seat," he says as clearly as he can, hoping he's actually speaking. "There's a bottle. Get it."

"I'm going to hate this, I just know it." Dean answers in resignation, but the edge sharpens. The ghosts of the real world shift alarmingly, but Dean is very vivid, giving him a decent idea of the location of the jeep in more than theory as the sound of the jeep door shutting again reverberates through him. "Need any help?"

Years ago. "No. Stay where you are."

Focusing on Dean's relative position--passenger side of the engine, probably--Castiel starts toward him, skirting the edge of the obscenity at his feet until he's beyond it. Warily, he reaches out once he's reached where the jeep should be and feels the reassuring firmness of metal drowning the subdermal itching, sliding his fingers down the grate before dropping to the ground in relief, head resting against his knees for a few moments.

Closing his eyes shuts off the visual component and seems to slow the progress, but he can still sense it reaching further, finding more of the holes with every moment that passes, flares of nothingness in a living world scraping brutally across his skin, the shrieking of bending metal louder each moment that passes, a sweet-rotten smell winding through it and making the headache much, much worse. Opening his eyes again eases the strain somewhat; humans are sight dominant, they're better adapted to interpreting information, yes, that makes sense. Staring straight ahead, he struggles with how to convey reassurance; it would help if he could think of something reassuring to say.
"You want to tell me why you look--" Dean pauses for an ominous moment. "Look at me, Cas."

He looks up, hoping it's not too obvious that he's not entirely sure where to look. The green-blue of Dean's shape shifts constantly, making it difficult to focus on where his face should be.

"You can't see me, can you?"

"That depends," Castiel answers shakily, "on how you interpret 'see'."

Dean's voice is dangerously calm. "You tell me."

"This is very different in a corporeal body," Castiel observes; it's slowing a little now, not quite so overwhelming, but he's going to reach the state line very soon. A great deal of wildlife has returned, it seems; he wonders if he concentrates, he might be able to identify cows so as to end Dean's endless reminisces about hamburgers. "It seems that a form of synesthesia is accessed to symbolically represent--were you aware you actually appear to vibrate when I see you out of time? It's both nauseating and yet fascinating to watch. Right now, however, you're rather--" Green, and you glow: of course you do. You could light the world if you tried.

"What did you do?" Dean interrupts flatly, an entire novel of emotion beneath it. "You didn't act like this when you saw me out of time. This is something else."

"If it had felt like this when I saw you, I certainly wouldn't have attempted doing more of it."

"Great, glad we cleared that up," Dean says shortly. "Now tell me what's happening to you now."

Castiel swallows, a taste like something rotten coating his tongue, and fights the urge to throw up. "I'd like a drink first. I'm not prevaricating, this is--"

"Got it." A bottle is shoved into his hand. "Top's off."

The burn of the first swallow is almost pathetically welcome, almost enough to pretend the throbbing of his temples isn't increasing to the point of potential aneurysm. Lowering the considerably lighter bottle, he tilts his head back against the grate. "I should have shown you where I kept the Eldritch Horror before we left."

"Cas." Dean's voice is very quiet. "What's going on?"

"Humans who are potential vessels are born with the ability to channel almost all of our abilities and Grace acts as a buffer to prevent damage." He pause for another drink; he's heard the placebo effect can be very useful in times like this, especially since he just reached Kansas's state line. Making an effort, he manages to slow it again. "When I saw you--I realized I may not have lost everything." Useful, one thing, just one thing: it's not so much to ask. "It didn't occur to me that in this form, using human senses alone would be somewhat--overwhelming."

It would be more accurate to say he didn't think that it would work like this if it worked at all. He assumed--and why did he assumed it?--that it would either work within the parameters of the human body or if it was incompatible, simply fail to work at all.

"What did you need to see that you couldn't do without--whatever you're doing?"

He wets his lips. "To see what it--I needed to see more."

"How much more?"
"Everything and all things," he says on a breath. "But just there, not--everywhere. I didn't think it would work like this." There's a sharp feeling like something cracking. "I just reached the state line. I think I saw cows…"

"Short version; just because you can doesn't mean you should, am I getting this right?" Dean's voice rises in volume with every word. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"I was thinking," he snaps back, because Dean has no idea how right he is and it's galling, "that if reality is preparing to unravel around us, some warning would be appreciated." He tries to stop it again as they crawl toward the continental edge, trying to force it back to the city alone and realizes with growing panic that he can't. More points appear with every moment that passes, pinpricks of dull stillness in a living world, and abruptly, he realizes what those hundreds--thousands--of pinpricks mean spread unevenly over the continental United States. "They're in groups," he breathes. "What did he--"

The throbbing becomes a searing pain, slicing through his skull in endless, agonizing repeat like sharp knives gouging out his brain. Castiel's head snaps back against the grate of the jeep, and something cold drips across his lips. Reaching up, he touches his mouth and realizes his nose is bleeding.

"Jesus!" Dean's pressed against his side, slapping his hand away as he wipes the blood away with his thumb in an almost painful scrape of skin on skin. "Cas, stop it! Whatever the fuck you're doing, make it stop! Now!"

"I don't--" Focusing on Dean again, he's surprised to feel the pressure ease. "I can't."

"What?"

"Angels can see everything, all at once, everywhere, all times, always," he explains breathlessly, wondering vaguely what first aid suggests for treatment of a bleeding nose--does he tilt his head back? "It didn't occur to me that it would--" all be there, everything, it shouldn't be, a corporeal form shouldn't even be able to access what it couldn't understand, much less what could hurt it. "Everything," he repeats, swallowing a mouthful of blood. "But in this form, on this plane, the only place I truly exist now, everything has to happen in linear time, so it's not instantaneous. It takes time."

"Everything as in the city, the state?" Then. "The world?"

"As in everything." He reaches up to wipe the fresh blood away with his sleeve. "All planes, all that exists right now." All times may be coming eventually--linear time should make that impossible, but what he's doing is also impossible, so there is that.

He can almost hear Dean thinking--for all he knows, he might be doing just that and just hasn't noticed Dean's thoughts with the distraction of everything in the universe trying to pour itself into him--before he says, very quietly, "How much of that can your body handle now?"

The answer to that is currently in progress. "I don't know."

"And you thought learn by doing was a good idea," Dean says flatly. "Christ. What happens if you can't stop it?"

"I'm not sure." It isn't quite a lie; there are many possibilities, each more horrific than the last. "When the amount of sensory information is too great, I could lose consciousness, which might cause it to stop--"
"Might?"

"I did it deliberately," he answers in frustration; the headache faintly recedes, not a surprise really, Dean is impossible to ignore. "I'm not sure it can be stopped without--stopping it myself."

"What happens then?" Dean asks immediately, obviously having already assumed worst case scenario as a matter of course. "If it keeps going after it knocks you out, then what?"

"It will eventually burn out my optical nerve as it is what it is currently the primary channel," he answers reluctantly. "However, it's utilizing all my senses, so it would still have four more to concentrate on. I assume given time, it will burn out my entire nervous system, provided that--"

"So it's gonna kill you."

Castiel nods blindly, wondering in disbelief if his last conversation with Dean will be exclusively devoted to describing the many hideous ways he could die. "A vegetative state is possible, but that assumes the strain doesn't result in a cerebral hemorrhage."

"Yeah, much better, thanks." Dean huffs an impatient breath. "Tell me again why you thought this was a good idea?"

"I thought--" Castiel swallows, startled by his own anger; surely by now, he should have accepted this. "I thought I could control it. Choose what I wish to see, focus on one thing, a single thing among many and ignore the rest of it. I didn't think there would be this much…." Despite himself, Castiel's eyes drift away from Dean, and the expansion continues immediately--there's so much, how could he have forgotten that, and the pain stretching across his forehead increases exponentially, long fingers stretching into the tight muscles of his jaw. "Angels see everything, but humans can see one thing, focus on that one thing and exclude all else. I thought I could do that, too. If it worked at all."

"Cas!" Abruptly, a heavy weight drops into his lap and warm, callused hands cup his jaw, jerking his head up until there is nothing but Dean. "There we go," he murmurs, thumb wiping across his upper lip again, the smell of iron overwhelming. "Keep talking. Why can't you stop it? Break it down for me here. Use small words. Do you know how?"

"I think so, but it's--" He tries to think of some way to explain. "Imagine crossing an entire house you have visited only once filled with hundreds of people constantly getting in your path while you are searching for a single lightswitch with extremely loud music playing at full volume in every room." He hesitates. "The house keeps getting bigger as well. And sometimes the other people beat you with machetes so you forget what you're doing."

Dean makes an unidentifiable sound. "So you're distracted."

"That would be a word for it, yes."

"So you gotta focus." Dean tilts his head up further, fingers digging into the flesh below his chin, and somehow, he can feel. "No, keep looking at me…..huh." Dean's gaze, intent and thoughtful and more focused than he's ever managed to be in all his corporeal life, gives the impression of satisfaction. "That's what I thought," he murmurs, almost as if to himself, sounding oddly satisfied. "Keep looking at me, Cas; got it? So you need something to focus on, right? Slow this down so you can catch your breath and figure out how to fix this?"

At this point, Dean's judgment is definitely superior to his own. "Yes, I think."

"Your one thing," he says cryptically. "Let's try this: make it me. Can you do that?" He nods,
which gains him the harsh bite of Dean's fingers digging into the bone as if he plans to leave his fingerprints as reminders. "Say it, Cas. Use words."

"Yes," he says obediently, making himself focus on Dean alone, the pressure of his fingers, the weight across his thighs, the sound of his voice. Falling had taken away his ability to see Dean's soul, to read his mind and follow the complicated emotional currents that then he was able to observe, never entirely understand. This is different, filtered through human senses, and different, because this time he understands, at least a little, of what he's sensing. Dean's fear is discrete as he evaluates the situation as a hunter, but the lines keep blurring, leaking worry and anger and a terror under strict control, but over it all is a bedrock certainty you could build an entire world on. "I can do that."

"Yeah?" Dean wipes away more blood, the coarse fabric rough against his skin. "Okay, the bleeding's stopped, that's gotta mean something. You with me?" He waits for Cas to nod. "Good. Now turn this shit off."

It could his imagination, but even the headache seems to recede in the face of Dean's aggressive confidence. He shouldn't be surprised; in all his existence, nothing and no one's ever been able to so effortlessly elicit his undivided attention. Oh.

"I would like you to remember I have yet to attempt to seduce you." More than anything at this moment, he wishes he could see the expression on Dean's face. "So there should be no misinterpretation of what I'm about to tell you: don't move."

He doesn't wait for an answer--in all probability, Dean's still circling that first sentence in baffled horror--reaching up until his fingers circle Dean's wrist and sucking in a startled breath at the contact.

Five years on this world and two trapped within this form, and only now, the vast gulf that always seemed to exist between what he knew of humanity and what they truly were, what he was here, seems so much smaller. The theoretical knowledge written into him since time began, all of humanity and what it, has context in this improbable man who is everything that humanity is, was, and could be in all its limitless potential.

Castiel thinks: if there was ever a good time for revelation, this is the opposite.

"Cas?" Dean's voice is quiet, a contrast to the fast beat of his pulse against Castiel's fingers, the only sign of fear that he can't control. "You okay? Talk to me."

"I need a moment."

"Take all the time you need." Dean is both the mountain that will not come on command and the man who could make it want to. To his surprise, callused fingers wrap around the back of his neck, Dean's forehead a point of bright warmth against his own. "You can do this," he breathes. "I'm gonna fucking kill you when it's over, just so you know."

He nods, careful not to dislodge that fragile warmth. "So noted."

Concentrating, he goes back to the beginning, anchored by Dean, their first meeting, how this began. He remembers the day he first saw Dean out of time, too high to care what was happening or why, only that it stop. There are certain benefits to long-term abuse of mind-altering substances; he's had far stranger trips than watching someone vibrate in spacetime. Then, it didn't occur to him to wonder if it was possible to make it stop; he just did it, thoughtless, as instinctively as he breathed. He didn't consider the possibility of failure, and even if he failed, the consequences
would have only been to himself.

This time, the consequences of failure aren't a migraine that won't end or even just his own life. Dean's life hangs in the balance as well, living in a world he doesn't know, the Apocalypse still held in abeyance because of him, and what he saw tonight, what he learned, and the fragile, newborn suspicion of what might have done this.

The headache increases immediately: *don't think about that*, good idea.

Fingers dig into his jaw again as if in emphasis, and he drags his attention back to where it should be. "Uh huh--keep it right here. You're doing fine."

Dean thinks he can do this, and he's so tired, so very tired of disappointing him. Just once--this one time--he won't. "I can do this."

"I know." Dean's fingers tighten briefly, reassuring, possibly to them both. "Now do it."

Focusing on Dean, he thinks of the world as it can only be seen with human--no, with his *own* eyes, the body that he no longer simply wears but has to exist within as well--separating out what belongs to it--*sight, hearing, feeling, taste, smell*--the boundaries of a corporeal form it's meant to see.

It's shockingly easy; he's lived this way so long, living in the world as a human does, the limits so sharply delineated they're impossible to mistake and he wonders for a moment why he thought it was hard. Carefully, he folds everything else up and tucks it into the place in his mind he first found it.

It doesn't quite fit yet, leaking around the edges in rainbow coronas around the slowly focusing blur of Dean's face, but the green of his eyes are unmistakable, light incandescent, as if by will alone he could force this to work. Staring into them, Castiel tries again, waiting for the tap--almost like the snap of something falling into place, set aside and away--and he closes his eyes, hearing Dean's slow, even breathing and matching it, the beat of his own heart, the soft sounds of the city at night, the smell and taste of the air, the ground hard beneath him, the jeep against his back, and Dean's hand on his neck and the anchoring weight of him in his lap.

When he opens his eyes again, it's full night, and Dean draws back far enough to peer down at him suspiciously, face a pale oval but the green eyes are still impossibly bright, as vivid as Creation itself.

"You were glowing," he hears himself say, and Dean's eyebrows jump in alarm. "You did, I mean. You don't anymore."

Taking a deep breath, he realizes belatedly his fingers are numb and carefully unfolds them from Dean's wrist, letting his hand drop to the reassuring solidity of the asphalt beneath them.

Dean's frown deepens. "Cas?"

"I--," He stops, his voice rasping unpleasantly in his ears and wonders if he's sounded like this through their entire conversation. Clearing his throat, he tries again. "I apologize for…"

"What?" Dean follows his gaze to his wrist, now circled in already-bruising purple in the shape of Castiel's fingers. He could have broken it, he thinks in distant horror, still getting acquainted with his body again, senses still somewhat jumbled and almost painfully visceral, like Falling again and finding himself in a human body without the benefit of being human, but no, it's nothing like that.
It's familiar: no longer an unknown, hostile territory in which biology seemed to be constantly attacking him from nowhere, engaged in a constant, grim battle that he had no choice but to lose. He's fought it so long that he forgot he was even doing it, much less how to stop; it feels like something wound tight loosening, easing.

"Cas, talk to me," Dean says, dangerously flat. "You okay?"

He clears his throat again, and this time, his voice sounds more normal. "I didn't mean to--"

"It's fine." Dean's eyes narrow. "Answer my question. You okay?"

"Yes. It worked, thank you." Without the distraction of imminent sensory overload, the pain from biting his lip, the beginnings of what will be a spectacular headache, and lingering ache in his right hand from far too much writing make themselves known, followed by exhaustion, the cold of the night, and horrifyingly--because biology does this--that Dean is sitting in his lap.

Castiel thinks, trying to keep very still: I don't believe this.

"Good." Dean's eyes close, shoulders slumping in patent relief and shifting in place as if to emphasize the horror. "Don't do it again."

"That will be difficult to promise," Castiel tells him, feeling lightheaded and trying to find the motivation to ask Dean to move before he notices anything--would 'awkward' be the correct term? "Fighting to keep from burning out my own senses is such an enjoyable way to pass an evening. But if you insist--"

"Shut up." Sliding back to the ground beside him, Dean picks up the bottle, oblivious to Castiel's mix of utter relief and regret. "And fuck you. I need another drink."

It's almost fifteen minutes before Castiel can think clearly again, organizing a mind that feels bruised and tender. Concentration is almost impossible, but that's nothing new. Dean is slumped beside him, one arm draped across his upraised knee, still gripping the not quite empty bottle.

"May I--?" He almost reaches for it, but Dean's glare isn't encouraging. After a moment of resentful attention, the bottle is shoved in his hand and Dean's head drops back against the jeep. "Thank you."

"Don't do that again," Dean says quietly, not looking at him. "Tell me you won't ever do that again."

Castiel finishes the bottle, licking his lips before he sets it down, relieved his hands are no longer shaking. "The Apocalypse may not be such a pressing problem as we assumed. To think that may be a preferable subject of conversation at the moment. Beside him, Dean goes still for a long moment before he blows out a breath. "Right. How are we going to die this time?"

Death is the least of their concerns at the moment. "It's complicated."

"It always is," Dean answers with a sigh, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Okay, what is it?"

"You were right," he says finally, regretting the empty bottle more with every moment that passes. "There's nothing there. It's nothingness at its most essential; it's the meaning of absence."
Dean's eyes flicker to the road, evaluating. "So what we're looking at is what?"

"I'm not sure how to explain." Dean frowns at him and Castiel tries again. "After you look at something that's very bright, when you look away, you still see spots, correct?" Dean nods slowly. "Think of this as the equivalent that extends to all senses, and even as we speak, it is in the process of fading."

"That's why it looked like metal?"

"No. That--what it appears to be--happened before it was dissolved." He can feel Dean's frustration and tries again. "Two things happened in sequence. Something destabilized the molecular structure of everything in this place and it was reformed in an undifferentiated mass an instant before it was dissolved from existence."

Dean licks his lips. "So the tank and everything around it was destroyed."

"Creation itself was dissolved," he answers deliberately. "There's nothing here, Dean: it's absence. Not just of everything, but of all that was and is and will be, and on every plane of existence. There is nothing here, not even reality itself." Almost involuntarily, his eyes drift back to the road, remembering all those points of darkness. "This isn't the only one."

Dean nods; it always gets worse. Always. "How many?"

"I'm not sure." Even now, he can see those points of glowing light surrounding absence sprinkling the entire world. "They seem to be confined to metropolitan areas, however. More specifically, at least in this continent, in the areas zoned as infected, but they're worldwide, I think." He's fairly sure he didn't get any farther than the outer stratosphere before it stopped.

Beside him, Dean is uncomfortably still, probably waiting for him to explain what did this and how to fight it, but to his surprise, he asks, "Okay, is this gonna kill us tonight? I mean, we drove over it yesterday, so…." He trails off invitingly, which Castiel assumes means that he should answer.

"No." Honestly forces him to add, "At least, I don't think so."

"Good enough." With a grunt, Dean pushes himself to his feet before extending a hand. "Come on," he adds impatiently when Castiel stares at it blankly. "You're about five minutes from passing out; I know the signs. Let's get out of here."

Blinking, he tentatively takes the offered hand and is dragged to his feet so quickly his vision blurs, black spots dancing in front of his eyes.

"Whoa," Dean murmurs, catching him when he stumbles and sounding weirdly satisfied. "That's what I thought. You can pass out in the jeep, promise."

He's aware of being pushed into the passenger seat and starts to protest, but Dean shuts the door in his face, waving his keys cheerfully in front of the passenger side window. Giving up, he leans his head back against the headrest, trying to organize his thoughts enough to explain to Dean what this means, but what he really wants to know is when Dean became such a skilled pickpocket. This is becoming embarrassing.

He's out before Dean starts the engine.

Castiel awakens in a bed surrounded by walls painted in dull, dying orange that's almost familiar. He waits for the instinctive panic at the weight of his mortal body settling over him, binding him
to a single place and time, the helpless terror of being trapped with no hope of escape, always brand
new and always horrifying and always, always present the moment he awakens from slumber no
matter how quickly he suppresses it.

He's still waiting when a voice interrupts. "Hey."

Startled, he pushes himself upright, fighting back an unexpected wave of lethargy, and sees Dean
leaning into the doorway, the smile stretching his lips not quite reaching his eyes. Feeling
unbalanced, he searches his memory and then glances at the slowly growing twilight and realizes it
must be dusk. "How long did I sleep?"

"You woke up at dawn for a few minutes," he answers, pushing off the doorway and pacing to the
foot of the bed. "Got you some water and a painkiller, asked how you felt, but you fell asleep
before I got an answer." The smile fades. "You okay?"

"Yes," he answers automatically, perfectly willing to lie if it means removing that expression from
Dean's face. However, a rapid internal inventory confirms that it actually seems to be true; the
tender, bruised feeling has settled into a low ache, and physically, his body seems unharmed other
than a sense of unfamiliar tiredness. It's nothing like the hard, blurry exhaustion that usually
precedes sleep; this is softer, more gentle, a comfortable blur that tempts him to sink back into the
mattress and indulge the pleasant lassitude.

Gazing at the window, he counts the hours since dawn; in all his mortal life, he doesn't think he's
ever slept so long without the benefit of injury or medication, sometimes even prescribed to him for
that very purpose.

"Thank you," he adds uncertainly into the waiting silence. "I don't remember anything after getting
in the jeep yet."

"That's because you'd passed out by the time I got in." Dean's shoulders relax even as the green
eyes narrow, mouth tightening in a narrow line. "You slept eighteen hours. Hungry?"

Castiel shakes his head at the question; he never is.

Dean frowns. "You should be. Give me a minute."

Dean disappears out the door, giving him the opportunity to decide what he should do. Get up and
perhaps shower, follow Dean to the kitchen and sit at the table as Dean has insisted is the correct
way to consume regular meals: he's still debating moving blankets that are inordinately heavy
when Dean reappears, holding a tray--one of many objects that Castiel has noticed appearing in the
cabin without explanation, origin unknown--and sitting it on his lap. Besides the unidentified, thin
yellow substance in the bowl, the tray also has two pieces of toast, a full glass of water and two
more painkillers that he recognizes from his own supply.

"Sam would get these headaches after he got visions," Dean says, seating himself on the edge of
the bed, one knee pulled up to rest on the mattress, socked foot occasionally tapping air. "The
really bad ones, he'd sleep forever, but it was hard for him to keep anything down. We learned fast
how to deal with it. Figured it'd work for you."

Tentatively, he picks up the spoon, not entirely surprised that he's being carefully watched. Dean's
cautious observations on his eating habits isn't entirely unwarranted; even he knows his maintenance
of a human body can only be considered successful in the sense he's kept it alive and relatively
functional. It may be annoying on some level to be treated like a child, but not any that he cares
about exploring, and the results inarguable; he's officially eating more in a single meal than he used
to over the course of entire day.

It's not until he's finished the entire bowl--Dean makes a production of checking--and both pieces of toast that the tray is taken away, and he seems to decide that conversation is in order.

"Good thing you're still pretty much skin and bones," he says, as if picking up an earlier conversation. "I had to carry you to the cabin. Didn't even twitch until you woke up at dawn. I figured since you could see well enough to drink a glass of water before you went back to sleep, you probably weren't a vegetable yet. Not like there was a doctor around for me to ask if you were gonna wake up again, so I had to go on faith there."

Castiel's perfect memory helpfully replays the entire conversation regarding the potential consequences of his actions last night; from the look on Dean's face, he remembers it as well.

"How close?" Dean asks roughly. "How close was that to killing you?"

Looking into the clear green eyes, he thinks how easy it would be to lie. He wouldn't even have to try and be convincing; Dean would do all the work for him. "It was worth it."

Dean goes dangerously still.

"It would have been worth it if it killed me," he continues steadily, hideously aware of the ache in his head, the lethargy that keeps tying his tongue in knots, the words he needs eluding him, and right now, he needs to think most of all. "I can explain, but--" He needs Dean to leave for a few minutes if he has any hope of accomplishing that.

Something hits his chest with a thump, landing in his lap. Slowly, he reaches for the half-empty prescription bottle still stained with Dean's blood.

"I'm gonna make coffee," Dean says flatly. "If you're gonna shoot up in the bathroom, take a goddamn shower so I can at least pretend you're gonna stick to what's in the bottle."

He actually does take a shower, leaning back against the cracked, dingy tiles under the weak spray of lukewarm water, still feeling more tired than he thought possible. The lethargy would be worrying if he could summon the energy to care; every limb feels impossibly heavy, movement belated, as if he's moving through honey, and his mind feels like it's encased in solid lead.

Closing his eyes, spots dance hazily before his vision before bursting into sudden brilliance against the backs of his eyelids. His head snaps back against the tiles with an audible crack as they multiply into dozens, hundreds, thousands, screaming across the surface of existence like bending metal. Fingers scrabbling desperately for purchase on the slick shower wall, he opens his eyes to infinity shattering in white-limned holes spinning outward before his eyes. When he looks down, an abyss stares up at him that swallows each bending shriek of living light into silence, the entire world opening up again around him as it starts again.

A shock of pain reverberates up his arm, and he realizes he's crouching on the floor of the shower, knuckles buried inches deep in broken tile and splintering wood, candy-pink insulation puffing in scratchy wisps almost to the wrist.

Head clear enough to think, he concentrates on the memory of Dean: one thing. Stop.

Distantly, he hears the harsh sound of his own gasps for air as his body slowly closes back around him in a warm cocoon of flesh and bone, spitting out a mouthful of fresh blood as water falling across the surface of his skin, joining the sharp throb of his hand. Pulling it free from in a rain of
slivered ceramic and wood, he mechanically flexes his fingers, checking for broken bone, relieved that even now, his body remembered how to throw a punch appropriately.

Sitting back against the curve of the tub, he takes a deep breath, then another, absently swiping a thumb beneath his nose, blood bright against his skin before it's washed away, swirling in fading pink trails down the drain. When he's certain the dizziness has passed, he gets to his feet, reaching for the soap with renewed energy and tries to think of how he'll explain the hole to Dean before he needs the shower.

Tramping out of the bathroom in a cloud of dispersing steam with the first aid kit, Dean glares at him but restrains himself until, freshly clothed from the basket of laundry he did yesterday, he sits obediently on the bed.

"I swear to God, Cas--" He cuts himself off, shaking his head tightly as he sits down, slamming the lid open and unpacks the necessary supplies with absent ease before he stares at Castiel in silent command until he extends his hand.

Curious, he watches as Dean, with surprising gentleness, unwraps the washcloth from his knuckles, hissing at the half-coagulated blood speckling the split skin of his knuckles, swollen reddened skin just beginning to darken into what will be some truly spectacular bruising.

"Do you know how to repair bathroom tile?" he asks as Dean expertly cleans it, reaching into the kit for a fresh piece of gauze and rewrapping his knuckles, thumb securing the bandage as he tears of a piece of tape with his teeth.

"Looks like we're gonna find out," Dean answers grimly, concentrating far too intently on the most effective placement of the tape. "You sure nothing's broken?"

"I did learn how to throw a punch without injuring myself," he answers as Dean turn his hand palm-up, smoothing the last of the tape into place, automatically checking the tightness before nodding and sitting back, the better to unleash the full force of his glare as Castiel withdraws his hand. He has to admit, evaluating Dean's work, there are advantages to having someone else do it; it's much neater than anything he could have managed himself.

Settling cross-legged against the headboard, Castiel watches Dean's face flicker through a plethora of expressions before he finally settles on exasperation. Brandishing his right hand, he shakes his head. "Looks like we're bandage buddies. Jesus, why the hell are we worried about the Apocalypse killing us anyway? At this rate, we'll kill ourselves before it gets around to doing the job."

"Not unless we inexplicably acquire hemophilia to inhibit coagulation." Ignoring Dean's narrowed eyes, he sips from the cup of coffee, still warm, that Dean made while he was in the shower. Looking down, he studies the lighter color, sweetness washing away the lingering taste of iron; despite his anger, Dean still took the time to add the optimum amount of cream and sugar.

Abruptly, his cup is pulled out of his hand and replaced with a piece of clean gauze. "Your nose is bleeding again."

"Oh." Wiping away the tiny trickle of blood, he fights the urge to sigh. "This isn't a cause for concern. The damage last night isn't entirely healed, and I hit my head in the shower. It's residual."

"Probably wanna wipe your mouth if you want to be more convincing. Unless you're into drinking blood now."

"I bit my tongue. Do you want me to show you?"
Dean cocks his head, like he may be seriously considering it, bandaged hand moving to rest against his knee and drawing Castiel's gaze. Dean glances down, fingers flexing reflexively before he looks up again, eyes filled with a question he isn't sure he wants to ask, because the answer may not be something he wants to hear.

"Has there been any further--"

"Me being crazy? Nope. You, though...." He unconsciously makes a fist, knuckles pressing against the bones of his knee. "Good place as any to start, I guess. What happened last night?"

"What you saw at the crossroad...." He pauses, searching for a way to explain something that he's not sure he understands himself. "The comparison to the sigils you wore to hide you from sight is perhaps the most accurate analogy. As a human would feel dissonance should they come in physical contact with you while you wore them, so did you when you touched the ground at the crossroad."

"Because there's nothing there even if it looks like there is." Dean begins to nod before frowning. "Wait, so if I hadn't touched it--"

"You shouldn't have stayed there long enough to want to, much less want to at all. It took a great deal of effort for me to do it, and it was even more unpleasant than I expected." He fights the urge to look at Dean's hand again. "That's probably the reason you felt compelled to--"

"Rub all the skin off my hand?" Dean looks at him challengingly. "So that would happen to anyone who touched it?"

He licks his lips. "What you touched was antithetical to Creation, to existence itself. The human mind isn't designed to retain a memory of nothing, which is the definition of what you sensed. Patrol's probably seen it several times by now, but they wouldn't have remembered anything unusual about the crossroad, even if they had touched it. Their minds don't want to."

"But I did."

Leaning back against the headboard, Castiel tries to think. "You didn't remember it as what it was. You remembered it as what it wasn't, which, while effective in retaining the memory, isn't something most people would think to do." That anyone would do, if they were capable of even knowing there was something to retain. "Do you know how you did that?"

Dean blinks at him incredulously. "How the hell would I know? You're the--" he makes an elaborate gesture that is eloquent in its lack of meaning. "You! Infinite knowledge, angel--former angel whatever--this is your territory! You tell me!"

"Former angel," he agrees, unable to keep the sarcasm from his voice. "Not current. Also not a god or oracle. If I were, I wouldn't have a headache."

"You deserve it," Dean says venomously. "So guess, make something up, not picky here. What if it happens again? Jesus, what's next? Disembowel myself to remember my birthday?"

"I'm almost certain that disembowelment to encourage memory retention is counterintuitive to the purpose; you have to be alive to share what you remember."

"Then what--"

"It stopped after you told me all that you could remember," he interrupts. "As the symptoms haven't returned, you were successful."
"Yeah." Dean hesitates, glare turned searching. "Last night, you knew what to do."

"You were exhibiting all the classical symptoms of a powerful compulsion last night; that's why I knew to question you. When you responded appropriately, you confirmed I was the object. Essentially, the goal was to tell me what you saw as best you could." At Dean's silent request for clarification, he shrugs. "It's a fixed thought, sometimes involving a set of instructions that must be completed. Deviation tends to be…" he stares at Dean's hand for a moment. "Discouraged."

Dean follows his gaze, nodding slowly. "Yeah, that'd do it."

"Not if the instructions weren't clear enough for you to know what to do. Or drastic measures were necessary to get my undivided attention." He closes his eyes, wondering how he missed it. "You were trying to tell me since you left the crossroad. You just didn't know what it was you were supposed to tell me; it was my responsibility to ask."

"Uh, Cas, not to…." When he looks up, Dean makes a face. "Just throwing this out; how would you have guessed before last night?"

"Your behavior was unusual since you were at the crossroads. I noticed, but obviously--"

"Yeah, insomnia and…." He huffs a breath, annoyed. "Restlessness, irritability…you were tapping."

"Tapping." An entire universe of disbelief fills the word.

"On everything," he explains. "Including me if no other surface was available."

To his bewilderment, Dean's expression progresses through an assortment of contortions before he says, "If you start getting paranoid when I have insomnia or--tap, I guess--and randomly questioning me on--think about what you're saying here. I think we can set the bar a little higher than that." A hint of amusement creeps across his face. "You're not an oracle, remember? Though why the hell that would have helped with this, no idea."

"I don't either," he admits reluctantly. "I must have missed something, however. You shouldn't have had to do damage yourself to fulfill the compulsion. That's generally only implemented to force compliance when all else fails."

"I knew." Dean frowns into the middle distance. "I mean, I wanted to tell you about it--Jesus, more than I wanted to sleep--but I couldn't figure out why I wanted to so much. It bothered me." Almost in unconscious confirmation, Dean stretches his hand briefly before shaking his head. "Okay, so next, this compulsion--"

"Yes, I was about to get to that, but I was sidetracked." Castiel sighs. "The only problem with that theory is that usually, that requires someone to set it. They're not difficult, provided you lack even the most rudimentary ethics, but knowledge is necessary, as well as opportunity, and Dean, not only have you not been out of my sight long enough for someone to do it, there's no one who could, not here. I could," he adds in the spirit of honesty. "Provided I decided to embrace evil very abruptly and for no particular reason, but…."

"I think we can safely exclude you." Dean blows out a breath, but he doesn't look nearly as alarmed as Castiel would have predicted. "Could I do that to myself?"

He frowns. "Why--"
"Lack ethics, evil, shitty side effects to force behavior…” He glances down at his hand with clinical interest. "This is amateur. Get someone to slowly disembowel themselves because they can't carry out the instructions, now that takes skill." He meets Castiel's eyes. "Not that I remember or anything."

"How often does that happen?” he asks quietly. "What memories you were able to retain shouldn't have been--"

"The skillsets?" Dean takes a breath. "Not often. More the last year or two, but Cas, come on. There was a reason you called me in to question Alistair. You knew I kept some of it."

"What you demonstrated then was all you should be able to remember enough to accurately reproduce."

"How much did Dean demonstrate to you with those demons?" Castiel stiffens, swallowing. "You didn't think about what he was teaching you? Did you ever wonder why he even wanted to?"

"No," he answers unevenly. "I didn't ask."

"Yeah, he probably counted on that," Dean answers, something unrecognizable edging his voice before it vanishes. "Compulsion--if it's something a demon knows, I got it in my head somewhere. I don't remember much of what happened at the crossroad except what I told you, but if it was enough time--"

"To do it to yourself? Yes, there was." Enough time to set the discipline in response to deviation; it could have been anything, and there were dozens of more effective options available, but something slow and painful with no risk of permanent damage, and indirect enough to assure there would be time for damage before it was broken--it was nothing, really, except for the reflexive malice that inspired it when there were only moments to decide what to do.

Dean nods shortly. "Mystery solved. So, about those holes--what are the chances that we got a completely new monster fucking shit up when we've got one of those already working the Apocalypse angle?"

"Occam's razor," he agrees. "The only thing that can dissolve Creation is Creation itself. That narrows the possibilities to those who can control the forces of Creation, and in this world, there is only one individual with the power to turn it on itself to its own destruction."

"Lucifer," Dean says, leaning his chin on one hand, tone implying that he thinks Castiel's treating him like an idiot. "He used his Grace to do it."

"Only Grace could do this, yes." While he wouldn't put it past his Father to decide to wipe out existence, He would do a far better job of it. Those thousands of lights are seared into his memory, beacons flashing their warning of destruction.

"Okay, so give me the bad news," Dean says, breaking into his thoughts. Frowning, he looks a question on what Dean thinks could be worse than holes in Creation. "You told me what they are; now what are they gonna do?"

"They don't do anything," he answers in surprise, then realizes Dean's bandaged hand is clenched into a fist against his knee. "Touching it didn't cause you any damage. They're where reality no longer exists; they can't do anything right now."

"And what about later?"
"In themselves, they simply reflect where reality no longer exists."

"Get to the 'but,'" Dean says in resignation.

"I'm trying," he says, not entirely untruthfully. "The afterimage you can see and feel acts as an inadvertent form of protection by giving human senses something it understands to redirect attention. When that fades--and it will eventually do so--there will be nothing there to distract attention."

"You stare into the abyss, what happens when nothing stares back?"

"A remarkably apt description. The human mind can't conceptualize it, which is why memories can't be formed, but without something to distract it, it will keep trying to do so."

Dean stares at him for a moment. "They'll just keep looking at it until something gets their attention or someone stops them?"

"Yes, and the longer they look, the more it will take to do that."

"And then?"

"I don't know." He thinks for a moment. "Other than compulsion-caused, have you ever--been unable to stop thinking of something?"

"Like a shitty song? Indy music," Dean says in disgust. "Sam thought it was funny."

"I hate when that happens," he agrees, remembering the first time that had happened to him; eventually he'd been able to stop, but the experience of two lines of a very annoying song constantly playing in his head isn't one he'll ever forget. Dean's mouth curves into a surprised smile, and he's almost distracted by wondering why that seems to please him, other than shared suffering.

"In this case, it's not something you remember, but that your mind hasn't been able to define so you can do so. Human minds react to that in two ways; they ignore it entirely, as they did with the sigils you wore to redirect attention, or if there's no distractor, they keep trying. In this case, there's no way to know which it will choose to do. The risk would be the same each time there was exposure; instead of dismissing and forgetting it, the human mind will attempt to understand it. Possibly even after the exposure is ended."

"So they'd just keep--trying? Even if we dragged them away? For how long?"

"Seconds, minutes, hours, the rest of their lives, I don't know. The human mind is complex, but it's not built to understand what's the opposite of reality itself, and because of that, it may simply continue to ignore it."

"Best case scenario." He nods. "Now worst."

"Worst case, they keep trying. Like a fixed thought, but without anything to trigger it to stop. Depending on the progression, it might be days before cognitive function is noticeably disrupted because their attention is so focused on trying to define what they saw," he answers reluctantly. "Perhaps two weeks before they enter a catatonic state, at which time their nervous system will begin to degrade due to brain function being distracted from maintenance of the body. They'll be unable to sleep, to eat or even process any form of nutrition, and eventually, their autonomic nervous system will no longer receive commands, leading to a cessation of respiration as well as pulmonary function."
"They'll forget to breathe and their heart will stop. Just seeing this can kill people?"

Castiel reaches for his coffee cup, ignoring the splash of cold liquid across his wrist and finishing it in a single, breathless gulp. He only realizes he's shaking when he drops the cup, fingers unable to grasp the handle any longer, and he watches numbly as it falls to the floor with a muted thump.

"I don't know," he says, staring at the overturned cup. "No one could, because this--this absence was what there was before there was anything at all. Before all things, there was nothing. Existence defines everything it's not."

"Fuck." Dean sits back, looking helpless. "So what, now Lucifer's bored with the conquest thing and is just gonna destroy everything? You said he wouldn't destroy the world, but this? Looks a shitload like just that."

Tearing his eyes away from the cup, he focuses on Dean's pinched face, skin drained of color, lips a tight, bloodless line. "He's not trying to destroy the world."

"Then what the hell do you call this?"

"If I were to make a comparison," he answers, "I would wonder if the kitchen was covered with broken dishes because someone had a terrible day."

"What the fuck does Lucifer hypothetically trashing his kitchen have to do with…." Dean trails off. "He lost his temper."

"This has never happened before," Castiel answers obliquely. "He has no idea what is supposed to happen when he won at Dean's death other than potentially a great and nightmarish celebration in the bowels of Hell--"

"So he threw a temper tantrum that night?" Dean finishes grimly. "So what was he targeting?"

"Not the cats. That was just a side effect due to location."

Dean blinks at him. "What?"

"Your observation regarding the absence of cats, the wildlife fleeing, I should have realized--" Castiel breaks off, aware of Dean's steady gaze and tries to put it into words. "The holes aren't evenly distributed across the earth; they're in clusters in specific places. Places that he's claimed, that he considers under his control, mostly urban areas. All of them are in the infected zones."

"Why would he destroy the places he controls?"

"Not so much the places--the buildings are intact, insofar as they were before--but anything living within them. If Grace were released without much in the way of instruction to what it should destroy--kill all living things for example--"

Dean looks blank. "Instruction? Why would it need instruction? I mean, it's not like it can think for itself…." He stares at Castiel. "It can think?"

"Of course not. If it could think, it would know to choose his enemies," he answers reasonably, which inexplicably makes Dean look more alarmed. "In this case, it was indiscriminate and seemed to be limited to the animal kingdom, which would include Croatoans and humans in those places he controls, as well as cats and rats. In the absence of that--Dean, if you shoot into a crowd without looking, you can't pick what the bullet hits."
"An accident." Dean shakes his head, looking stunned. "He destroyed his own goddamn army by accident."

"And all the animals and people within those discreet spaces as well. The wildlife outside the cities, unlike humans, wouldn't be affected the same way by seeing those holes in reality; however, they would have sensed a release of Grace like this as inimical to them without bothering to wonder what it is, and they wouldn't need to be in the city to sense it occurring."

"So they made a run for it."

"Away from the unleashed power of Creation, yes. They have much better survival instincts than we do."

Dean lets out a breath. "An accident."

"It should be impossible for an angel to lose control of their Grace like that. We can't make those kinds of mistakes. That he did…" He's not sure what's more terrifying; those holes, the possibility that Lucifer managed to overcome the strictures of his own creation in a fit of rage, or--worst of all--that he didn't.

Dean frowns at him before his gaze slips down, focusing on Castiel's bandaged hand. "If he didn't have Grace, he'd have punched through a wall by accident when he lost control of his strength."

"I doubt you can use me as an accurate model for what an angel would do," he says, reluctantly amused.

"Yeah, you're more than that, but you're kinda all I got to work with." Dean lets out a sigh, unaware of Castiel blinking at that last statement. "Jesus, okay. The fading thing, how long do we have on that?"

"I don't know, which I'm as tired of saying as you are of hearing it," he answers. "If I'd been observing it from the moment it occurred, I'd be able to calculate the exact rate of decay, but at rough estimate, probably a year at minimum. Two weeks of daily observation will give me a better idea of--"

"Uh, no."

"Not that way," he tells him, seeing Dean marshaling arguments for what he can tell will be a protracted war if he's not careful. "It feels wrong, Dean, and believe it or not, I can actually quantify that objectively just by being near it."

"I don't want you near that thing." Dean's expression doesn't change, but the awareness that there isn't any choice is clearly visible in his eyes. "How long?"

"A few hours--" Dean's eyes widen, so probably not that much. "An hour."

"Thirty minutes, and since I'm going with you to watch, good time to ask you any questions I have."

Every minute, probably: yes, he should have known. "Agreed."

"Good. It wasn't worth your life."

Startled, Castiel looks at him. "What?"
"What you did last night--what we found out, nice job, I get this is something we should know, thanks--but getting it, not worth your life. Promise me you won't do anything like that again."

"I can't promise that."

"Yeah, you can. You can break it later, I get that, but you're gonna promise anyway, so I can pretend to believe it. Give me that much, Cas. It's not so fucking much to ask." Dean looks away, licking his lips. "Your life, your choice, I get that, but it's not zero sum, never is. You're not the only one who has to live with them, Cas; I do, too." He's still circling that statement when Dean adds, "Anything else about this I need to know?"

"If it's any consolation," he says uncertainly, "it is unlikely this will happen again."

"So we only have to worry about the holes already here. Lucifer acting like toddler with phenomenal cosmic powers, sure, but he'll limit himself to shit that won't destroy reality. Jesus, here I thought this might be hard." Dean stretches elaborately, shirt riding up to reveal a half-inch of smooth golden skin, stop looking, stop looking--then checks himself. "So I was thinking."

"Please don't," he says, alarmed by Dean's expression.

"You sure you don't want to conquer the world?"

"What?"

"I liked your plan," he says sincerely. "Proselytize to the masses, happy stoned sex cult? We could do that. Be fun to try to pull off, anyway. God knows, this Apocalypse could use some of that."

Castiel is startled by his own smile. "I'm not a general, Dean."

"I could learn," Dean says, grinning back. "I've got some time."

"And my army?"

"We got a militia to start." Dean considers that for a moment, then make a face. "We'll leave Sid here. The world has a fuckload of bridges. We hurry, we have time for the victory party before Lucifer finishes up the Apocalypse." Stopping, he looks briefly appalled. "Think Lucifer would have a party in Hell when this is all over?"

Castiel tries to conceptualize his Brother's idea of a party and fails. "I'm sure everyone would have an utterly horrifying time."

"Ours would be way better. Less torture, more drinking." He thinks. "Then get a sandwich and sleep for a week content in the status quo. What about you?"

More than anything at this moment, Castiel wants to say sex, and a lot of it, but the truth is so surprising that instead he hears himself say, "Milkshakes."

Dean head comes up sharply. "What?"

It's almost embarrassing. "I have never--I don't remember ever sampling one, not since I Fell. As refrigeration takes a great deal of power--"

"Making milkshakes is not a component of the mission, so yeah, no opportunity these days." Dean laughs quietly. "I just realized--your entire exposure to food since you Fell has been, what, canned or--"
"Had only an hour before been running desperately away from us, yes." He can't believe he's thinking about this right now. "When I Fell, I had far too much to learn to pay more than the necessary attention required for maintenance of this body. It wasn't relevant, it still isn't, but I remember you and Sam would order milkshakes often and you enjoyed them. When you cook, you seem to enjoy the results of it. I don't have context for that, but maybe--"

"Context. For food?" Dean says blankly. "Hold up, for enjoying food? You don't--dude, you don't know what you like? Is that why you don't eat?"

"I eat," he answers defensively. "Food is a necessity for survival. I've never grasped how it could possibly be enjoyable, however." For a moment, the memory of hamburgers in three digit quantities lingers, but Famine's influence makes that experience with food suspect. "I found more accessible sources of pleasure."

"Life is more like Pringles; you can't have just one." Dean gives him an appalled look. "That's sad shit, Cas."

The comfortable silence stretches long enough that he almost forgets what they were discussing earlier. Rousing himself with surprising difficulty--the edge of the exhaustion is eased, but without intervention, he'll need to sleep again very soon--he sighs, getting Dean's attention. "I can reproduce the locations of the--"

"Not tonight you're not," Dean interrupts, looking him over critically. "You remember where they all are?"

"The holes? Yes."

"Much as I appreciate your willingness to hand draw our maps, we're gonna need something bigger for this. I'll get Joe to get whoever's free and find a few world maps for you. Let's figure out where this shit is before we get around to worrying about the fact we don't know how to deal with it."

"It's likely that Lucifer will complete his conquest of earth before they become a problem," Castiel offers, then unexpectedly yawns, startling himself.

"Get some sleep," Dean says in a strange voice. "Seriously, you still look like shit. This'll wait until tomorrow."

It's such a common statement, and so ridiculous in this world; even more ridiculous is that he's starting to believe it. "I can't remember ever sleeping this much at one time before without sedation being a factor. Or so often, for that matter." He shrugs at Dean's frown. "Something I noticed recently regarding my sleep habits."

"You get tired, you sleep," Dean remarks. "It's not rocket science."

"Of course it's not; rocket science is something that can be learned, and infinite knowledge fortunately covers that in some detail." Fixing his gaze in the space between them, he says with studied casualness, "The track marks are almost entirely healed; I was very careful. I assume you saw them last night."

"Six, seven months old, yeah." For a few moments, there's only the sound of Dean's breathing. "I checked your collection out the other day after what you said about Vera and Jeremy."

"You thought I'd confined myself to hallucinogenics and prescription stimulants." Why Dean would assume that is a mystery. "I've tried everything at least once--even now, very little can't be acquired provided you can meet the price--but it was far simpler to limit myself to what could be
easily and regularly obtained or what I could make myself."

"Infinite knowledge," Dean says softly. "Comes in pretty handy."

"All of human history, all of existence in its entirety, and I use it to manufacture high quality MDMA, hallucinogenics, and amphetamines."

"And the alcohol of the Elder Gods," Dean adds, mouth quirking. "Can't fault you there. At least once the hangover's over."

"I didn't shoot up. Earlier." Dean stills, eyes intent. "I generally don't--the effects can be unpredictable, but heightened aggression combined with lowered inhibitions are only advantages when I'm in the field." His eyes are drawn to Dean's bare wrist, purple darkening to black; he can trace each individual finger without effort. "I couldn't risk accidents when I wasn't."

Dean frowns, following his gaze and then looking at him again in confusion. "This? Not a problem. Got worse getting out of bed."

"Not unless when you got out of bed, something was trying to hurt you," he answers, voice breaking despite his best efforts. "I wasn't even trying."

"You know how to throw a punch," Dean says in a tone implying agreement, though with what is a mystery. "So you'd know how much pressure it takes to break bone. Makes sense."

"I could have crushed your wrist past any possibility of repair, even if we had someone who could repair it and the facilities to do it."

"You didn't." Dean cocks his head, unimpressed with the potential for emergency amputation in his future. "So you learned something new; going crazy from the definition of too much information and you still didn't hurt me. Awesome. Anything else?"

It takes several seconds for Castiel to remember how to speak. "Not at the moment, no."

"Get some sleep. Yell if you need anything. I'll be around." He jerks a thumb over his shoulder before turning away too quickly for Castiel to read his expression. "Night, Cas."

Castiel watches him reach for light and finally manages to speak. "Good night, Dean."

--Day 33--

Despite having showered, Castiel feels only marginally more conscious than when he woke up to the sound of Joseph's far too enthusiastic greeting to Dean at his arrival. Despite that, it's still a massive improvement over dawn, when Dean took one look at him and ordered him back to bed with a painkiller and a glass of water. From the quality of the light coming through the window, he's fairly certain that it no longer qualifies as morning any longer.

Leaning drowsily against the frame of the open bedroom door, he watches Dean engaging Joseph in enthusiastic discussion, gesturing broadly to punctuate each statement. Joseph's usual reserve is almost absent, worn away by the sheer blunt force of Dean's personality deployed with all the subtlety of a battering ram, all the more effective for the fact that Dean has no idea how powerful it actually is or what he could do with it. Worlds have burned to ash in the name of people who could do far less than what Dean does as instinctively as he breathes, and his major use of it is to make friends of his own soldiers.
Joseph bursts into laughter, collapsing into his chair, years of wariness washing away before his eyes, and Dean isn't even trying.

He clenches his hands in the edge of the soft flannel overshirt and can almost pretend they aren't shaking, feeling the burst of pain across his knuckles beneath the bandage. The ghost of a headache ripples across his forehead, the memory of pain; he can only blame the opiates for the fact that until now he didn't think about what he almost did to himself last night.

"Hey," Dean says suddenly, turning to look at him, and the force of that smile is blinding, overwhelming, destroying everything in its path. "You want some coffee?" Getting to his feet, he glances at Joseph belatedly. "You?"

"Sure, thanks," Joseph replies with an admirable lack of visible surprise, as if Dean offers to get people coffee all the time. His "Good morning, Cas" however, is followed by a long pause. Joseph's face goes through a bewildering series of contortions--it's far too early to try and interpret even if it is noon--before composing itself into what might be polite interest. "You okay? You look…." There's another extended pause before he gestures at the couch. "Sit down already."

An excellent idea: he wonders why he didn't think of it himself. Surprised by his own yawn, he makes his way to one end of the couch and sinks gratefully into the cushions, aware of a lingering lassitude pervading every cell of his body. It's rather pleasant, all things considered.

"I'm not used to--" He's startled by another yawn, along with an inexplicable desire to avoid movement in the foreseeable future and perhaps acquire a blanket and pillow. "I usually don't sleep this late."

"Looks like you might need a few more hours," Joseph observes, cocking his head. "Which is what he's gonna be getting when we're done," Dean tells him, returning to the room with two cups and handing one to Joseph before dropping into a crouch, studying Castiel's face critically before saying more quietly, "Feeling better?"

Are you going to bleed to death from your own stupidity, yes, he understands the question. "Much," he murmurs, fighting back another yawn as he focuses on the coffee cup; the aroma is somehow both enticing and soothing.

"You need to eat something," Dean says, inexplicably still holding the cup just out of reach. "I'll see what we got. Forgot to raid Chuck's yesterday for more supplies, but we got enough for another meal."

"Fine, yes," he says immediately, and Dean smiles smugly as he hands over the cup. Gratefully, Castiel takes a drink and fights back a sigh of sheer satisfaction as Dean, retrieving his own cup from somewhere, drops onto the couch beside him. When he looks up, Joseph is staring between them as if he's never seen them before, cup forgotten in one hand. "I like coffee," he explains. "No one told me it improves with the addition of sugar."

"Sugar makes everything better," Joseph agrees, taking a sip as if to prove the point, but the brown eyes dance with amusement before he looks at Dean. "So--"

"You convinced me," Dean tells him sincerely. "You're back on duty."

Joseph raises an eyebrow in polite disbelief.

"And to celebrate, I have a job for you--two, actually. First, I need some maps, biggest you can find. Cas covered the state already, so get me country and global. Anything else?" he asks,
glancing at Castiel questioningly.

"Things you use on maps to show locations--"

"Map pins?"

"Those, yes. And more pencils--I'm almost out."

"Might as well as Chuck if he needs anything if you're knocking over an office supply store," Dean says. "Think you can get that done by dusk or you need another day?"

"No problem. I saw some last time I checked the central library," Joseph answers, taking another drink. "What's the other thing?"

"You're leaving for the border tomorrow morning. Who you taking?" At Joseph's confused look, Dean grins. "You've been promoted, effective now. Who do you want for your team? Not Vera: I need her for something else."

"Ana." Joseph answers after a moment, valiantly attempting to hide his surprise. "Leah and Mike. Uh, what about Sid--"

"I'll talk to him." Dean sits back, giving Joseph an evaluating look. "How long will it take? Ballpark?"

"Three days including travel, probably less," he answers. "Last time, it took them about a week to get everything. I'm using the estimates from last time on what we'll pay, but if they want more, I'll send someone to clear it with you."

Dean waves a hand. "I trust your judgment. Cas is gonna give you access to all our accounts; I need a balance check while you're there, see what we got to work with. I'm guessing if you can break into the DMV, you can figure out how to get that without them seeing what you're doing?"

"Uh, yeah." Joseph shifts in his seat. "So anything I should add to the list…?"

"We'll go over it again before you leave, but add this now," Dean says. "Any sign of the military entering or leaving Kansas."

Joseph stills briefly before nodding. "Got it."

"And by the way, officially, this is going to take you about two weeks," he says. "Check with Chuck on rations."

Joseph lowers his cup. "It will?"

"You got another mission when you're done. Secret," he adds, grinning at Joseph's expression. "In case that wasn't clear."

"Sure," Joe says, straight-faced. "What am I doing?"

"You're going to Wichita, Topeka, Olathe, Overland Park, and Kansas City. You get two days per city, so pay attention. I need two things: first, go to where the military was bunking, see if anyone's left; if they are, leave. If they aren't, I'm sending Alicia with you, and she'll report to me." Leaning forward, he rests his elbows on his knees. "Can you get a camera?"

"Yeah," Joseph answers, intrigued. "Chuck has one."
"Perfect. Second thing: if no one's there, don’t touch anything." Joseph nods firmly. "Get someone to photograph every room and do a full inventory of what they've got first. Better if you can get it off their systems, but if their generators are out, we'll worry about that later. When you're done with that part, this is a salvage operation; start with rations, gasoline, ammunition, and weapons, all you can get in one jeep, but take good notes. Eventually we'll get everything they got."

"Right." Joseph regards them both for a moment. "And if they show up while we're there--"

"If they're not there, they're not coming back," Dean says, picking up his half-empty cup again. "So might as well put what they got to good use."

"Just one thing--I don't know where they were bunked."

"Have a little faith, Joe." Reaching over the arm of the couch, Dean retrieves a rough stack of papers, some crumpled and with visible water stains; on top is a series of faded Xeroxes, much folded and worn. Startled, Castiel straightens, just remembering not to ask where Dean got them. "Locations, floor plans, and where they kept everything, or as much as I could see during my visits. Think I'd send you out blind?"

Joseph's mouth cracks into a smile. "You got keys, too?"

"Dude, why would I make this easy? I got the passcodes, but most of the doors just need a lockpick. Take enough C4 in case the codes are outdated or need power and for the armory."

"Ana can set the charges," Castiel inserts blandly. "She was trained in explosives during her time in the Marines."

Dean tosses him a quick, grateful smile before turning back to Joseph. "Alicia will be assigned to bring me daily reports and any supplies you get, so someone needs to record everything--hey," he says, looking pleased. "I think Phil's just found his true calling. I'll talk to Sarah. Make your bathroom breaks short, though; he's got some kind of thing about that."

Castiel closes his eyes. "He's entered the realm of the novella."

"God bless him," Dean says maliciously. "Anyway, report to me tomorrow morning after patrol and I'll go over the details with you. You've done patrol in the cities, but take Cas's maps with you anyway. Get Phil to do any updates if they need 'em."

"Right." Joseph looks down at his empty cup regretfully. "Anything else?"

"One thing," Dean says casually, taking another drink of coffee to hide his discomfort. "Only people who need to know what you're doing is your team, but not until the negotiations are done at the border. Then you tell them everything you know. Anyone else asks, this is just a border run."

"Yes, sir." Joseph hesitates, brown eyes flickering to Castiel briefly before visibly bracing himself and looking at Dean directly. "You're sure they're not coming back?"

"I'm pretty sure they're dead, and from what I know about their deployments, even if the military knew they were gone, they weren't gonna be replaced."

Joseph snorts. "Surprised they kept it up this long. They wrote off the zones when they made 'em. They're just waiting for everyone in here to die." Looking at Dean, he hesitates again. "Does this have anything to do why it's been over a month and everything's quiet on the western front?"

"And the lack of squirrel stew in our lives? Probably, but I can't be sure. What you find will help
figure it out." Dean gives Castiel a brief glance. "Joe, if anyone reports something feels weird when they touch something, get away from it. Take a picture and make sure you put it in the daily reports."

"All right." Joseph visibly tries to decide how to ask his next question. "Weird, like something the military is experimenting with or weird as in bad feeling?"

Dean stares back at Joseph a little blankly, and Castiel realizes only belatedly the danger just as he opens his mouth. "A feeling," he says quickly before Dean can speak. "They won't want to touch it or will avoid it entirely. They might not even notice that they're doing it if there is nothing visibly unusual. If possible, have someone required to act as an observer at all times and document where it is occurring."

"Is it dangerous?" Joseph asks neutrally.

"At this time, no, or I would evaluate it myself before sending anyone else."

Joseph nods again, slowly getting to his feet, expression schooled to polite interest. "So anything else?"

"No," Dean answers easily. "See you tonight."

When he's gone, Castiel reaches over, taking the papers from Dean's hand, paging through them until he finds the notes on the military. Frowning, he glances at the Xeroxes, wondering how on earth they were acquired, much less why.

"Everywhere. The bottom ones were holding up the table leg," Dean says, then abruptly slams his coffee cup down. "So Joe thinks we're being secretive dicks."

"No, you think we're being secretive dicks," Castiel answers, scanning the next page, filing away the information at a glance for later thought. Dean made notes: contacts, names, ranks, locations, tracking his meeting with surprising regularity. It makes sense, he supposes uncertainly; in case he was unavailable, one of the team leaders could take his place. "He thinks that we have information that we're not yet ready to disclose for good, albeit unknown, reasons. Which has the benefit of being true."

Dean glares at him. "And that doesn't make us secretive dicks?"

"It makes you," Castiel answers as evenly as possible, "his commander, whom he trusts has good reason to not tell him yet. It makes me a hypocrite, which is nothing new."

"Fine, I think we--plural--are secretive dicks. So tell me why the hell we can't tell him about this?"

This discussion would benefit from either more coffee, a class two stimulant, or perhaps Dean having it with someone else. Any would do. 'For one? Because then everything will feel 'weird', as you put it. To confirm their existence, relative objectivity is needed, and unless there are very obvious visual disparities, all we have to work with is 'a feeling'. I'd prefer to go myself--"

"No."

"I understand your reservations, so I won’t insist," he agrees, though he doesn't, not at all, but the way Dean looked last night gives him pause. He's regularly tested another Dean Winchester's temper and patience as a matter of course: a solution to boredom, a way to pass the time, or simply to prove he could, and knew exactly how to elicit the response that he desired, as predictable as clockwork and reflexive as breathing. This Dean, however…. "Practically speaking--you're still..."
thinking like a hunter in a world where what you do is best known by a series of bestselling novels that are considered fiction. Here, those things are not only fact, but assumed to be a clear and present danger of immediate death until proven otherwise."

"Paranoia," Dean says sourly, crossing his arms. "I get it."

"Survival," he corrects him. "Considering our mission, it's also generally a valid concern. Which brings me to my second point; this is a militia of hunters. Whether or not it was possible to win the Apocalypse, Lucifer was something concrete that we could fight and could, in theory, be stopped or killed, preferably killed, of course, and humans can be ridiculously optimistic. While it's known an archangel's Grace is very powerful, the worst that could happen was he'd win and wipe out humanity. Or possibly become the new god, I'm still unclear on--"

"God?" Dean straightens in alarm. "Lucifer wants to be a god?"

"I doubt he was serious," he answers impatiently. "Which is beside the point."

"I really, really think this should be a point somewhere."

He closes his eyes, wondering why counting to ten is recommended for moments like this. It never works. "So decided, later." Reluctantly, Dean nods, slumping back into the cushions. "The worst potential ending was the destruction of humanity, and as you may have noticed, his weapon was more or less visible and we could kill it. Telling them that Lucifer's Grace, released upon the earth, can create permanent holes in the very fabric of reality would lead to the obvious question of can he do that to the entire world--the answer is yes, it's possible--and if the war goes badly and we seem to be winning, he'll take the eraser method of dealing with it."

"How is the end of humanity better than punching holes in existence?" Dean demands.

"It shouldn't be." There's no way to explain his own visceral reaction to idea; even if he wanted to do so, words haven't been invented yet to define what he felt when he'd see those holes. "But it is, and I don't think you actually disagree with me."

To his relief, Dean grimaces, conceding the point. "Yeah, I get it. Keep going."

"At this time, the problem is relatively contained and completely harmless, and it will remain so in the near future."

"And if there's more of them because Lucifer has another temper tantrum?"

The headache gets worse, and Castiel wonders vaguely if perhaps he was wrong about damage. "I almost killed myself getting you this information," he says, and distantly, he hears Dean's breath catch. "I think it's very little to ask of you in return that you delay disclosure to everyone in this world until we know more about it."

He regrets it immediately; easing into a subject is far more difficult when you don't usually care about the audience enough to have practice doing it.

"I mean--"

"You're right." The couch shifts, and to his surprise, Dean tips his face up, an inexorable pressure that might define the futility of resistance. Green eyes peer searchingly into his, worried. "Headache?"

"A little," he whispers, clutching the cup. "And tired."
"Hungry?"

"I'm never hungry," he answers without thinking and freezes at the admission. "I suppose I could eat something. Maybe sleep. Someone told me once that it helps."

Dean's worried expression lightens. "I got some reading to do before Joe shows up tonight anyway. I'll get you something to eat, then you can get some rest while I research the fuck out of myself. Sound good?"

He doesn't trust himself to do more than nod, which seems enough. Plucking the empty cup from nerveless fingers, Dean gets to his feet. "And more coffee." A trace of smugness threads its way through his voice as he adds, "Fridge is working, by the way."

Castiel looks toward the kitchen and then at Dean, who radiates satisfaction. "Can you make the dryer stop beeping? It's annoying, and now I have to deal with it on a weekly basis."

"Joe offered me all the beer I want if I fix his range," Dean says thoughtfully. He sits back. "What do you want?"

"Where's the Eldritch Horror?"

"Top of the utility closet behind the stack of Farmer's Almanacs," he answers immediately.

"And the still?"

"Please." He crosses his arms. "What are you offering?"

Dean rolls his eyes before starting toward the kitchen. "I'll think of something."
Chapter 9

--Day 39--

To his surprise, Dean doesn't argue when he insists on visiting Kansas City regularly to verify the integrity of the holes--or rather, one specific hole, as he lost the argument to seek out any others at this time. He also lost the argument to perform daily checks, which he now admits--at least to himself--would have been pointless. The rate of degradation is slow enough to be almost imperceptible, even to him. After almost a week and three separate visits, however, he's able to tentatively revise his estimate to two years before the integrity of the afterimage is less than fifty percent.

Unfortunately, there's no actual way to know at what point in the progress of degradation it will become actively dangerous to humans, a disadvantage inherent in things that have never happened before.

As he tries to concentrate on observing the hole for any other signs of change, he's aware of Dean watching every movement he makes from his seat on the hood of the jeep parked nearby. He already knows to the second how long he has before Dean requires verbal confirmation that he's not attempting to commit an obscure and hideous form of extended suicide with only the lack of power of his mind.

"Well?" Dean asks as Castiel's silent countdown reaches zero. "Got anything?"

"No," he answers, trying to relax into passive contemplation and failing utterly. It should be easy; he spent most of his existence doing just that, but human bodies have an annoying habit of interrupting him with demands for attention at the least opportune times. It should be easy, but it's not; his attention wanders constantly, latching onto anything and everything, including his own random thoughts (Dean), without regard for importance or priority, another irritating characteristic of humanity that, all unwitting, he seems to have adopted as well. "I'm thinking."

The addition of a faint, arrhythmic tapping on the hood of the jeep doesn't improve his limited powers of concentration. Taking a breath, he rests his hands on his knees and closes his eyes, tuning out the corporeal world with all its crude, overblown distractions, shallow as a puddle of water after a summer shower already evaporating in the heat of the sun….

"About?"

Opening his eyes, he glares at the jeep, where Dean conveys unrepentant impatience with a lazy slouch. Even for Dean, the restlessness is unusual, and at this point it's not simply deliberate, but deliberately annoying.

Seeing that he has Castiel's attention, he makes a production of checking his still non-functional watch. "You got five more minutes, by the way. We got paint to watch drying next: can't wait."

"This isn't particularly entertaining, no," he says finally. "However, of the two of us, you don't have to be here; I do."

"Why," Dean asks, with every indication of this being a very non-rhetorical question, "don't you want me to come with you again?"

He does enjoy repeating himself, multiple times. "I don't like you near it."
"I don't like you near it either, and of the two of us, you've come the closest to actually dying because of it."

"You don't trust me?"

"Have you ever set yourself on fire just because it looked interesting?" Dean asks sincerely, in triumphant example of non-sequitur as topic. "This is boring now, but the thing is, I can't risk it getting interesting when I'm not here to stop you--"

"--from setting myself on fire, very descriptive. I assume this is a metaphorical fire?"

"--because you're always bored and this?" Dean points at the stretch of not-road. "Probably the most interesting thing you've run across since you Fell. I mean, eventually, anyway."

Dean's appalling correct in his assessment. "Your appearance here was also interesting."

"You were stoned out of your mind the first time we met," Dean tells him. "Dude, vibrating out of time or whatever was probably the only way to get your attention."

Castiel smiles at him. "If you take off your clothing and let me watch, that would have my undivided attention."

"And now you know why I'm here." Dean grins at him. "I even wore button fly in case of emergency."

He stares at Dean, who looks back with beautiful unconcern. He would probably do it; peel off his (now favorite) jeans, pull off his (their?) t-shirt, and the only mystery will be if there's another layer to consider. He's rarely if ever noticed clothing other than the need to wear it; now, he can identify particular favorites as showcased by Dean's body.

"There's nothing else today." Getting to his feet, he ignores the flash of Dean's grin as he takes out his keys. "You realize you're being a cocktease and that's extremely annoying?"

Dean shrugs carelessly, climbing inside the jeep without further commentary, and to be fair, the length of his next shower is probably his own fault for baiting Dean in the first place. As they start toward the city limits, Castiel focuses on the road with far more attention than he's needed to drive since the day he received his first driver's license.

This isn't an apology. "Two years, perhaps, before they degrade to fifty percent and possibly become actively dangerous, but it's only a guess and not an educated one, a pulled out of thin air one."

"I figured there was a reason you were pissed," Dean says in magnanimous acceptance. "You get no one knows everything, right?"

"My former job description," he answers brittlely, ignoring Dean's second annoyingly insightful observation, "included just that. Call it the remains of professional pride. I like to be relatively good at what I do. Infinite knowledge is actually rather difficult to be bad at; my success in managing it isn't something to be admired."

"This is new, though," Dean observes. "Even when you were an angel, you didn't get this thrown by shit you didn't know."

"Then, it was a novelty, not a constant."
"So all this time on earth, you didn't get used to that? You gotta be good at other things by now." Before Castiel can offer the most obvious answer, he catches Dean's little smirk and wonders if he thinks up responses beforehand to deploy when needed. It's possible. He's making an effort to get along, and that seems to include pre-emptively being prepared for Castiel to anger him with ready replies. It's somehow both annoying and frustratingly, ridiculously endearing, and neither of those things bring out whatever passes for the best in him.

"You're better than this", Dean told him, too angry not to mean it. He still hasn't ruled out that Dean's insane.

"It depends on what you mean by good," he temporizes as they pass the city limits "Adequate would be generous, but considering I've survived, that seems the best available descriptor."

"I talked to Amanda when she was on the training field yesterday afternoon," Dean says casually, bracing a foot on the dashboard. "She wanted an hour or two to get her Zen back with mindless violence against air or something. Dude, she's good. Offered me a one on one--"

Castiel almost swerves off the road. "Tell me you said no."

"I said fuck no," Dean assures him, and Castiel relaxes only for the length of time it takes Dean to add, "She was sorry she missed you last night, though. She was enjoying having a sparring partner that could give her a real workout."

Castiel keeps his attention on the utterly featureless road.

"Not to mention it's the best entertainment in the entire camp right now. Ten to midnight showing, come one come all, because Castiel's on the training field for the first time since he dismissed his last class."

He does swerve then, coming to a stop at the side of the road.

"Bet you didn't know about the audience," Dean adds. "Maybe I wasn't supposed to tell you that part. Think she'll be pissed?"

The silence between them stretches out until his ears ring with it.

"Honest to God, I'd be pissed you were hiding this, but I'm still trying to figure out why." The mix of anger and frustration and something else that's uncomfortably like hurt is too raw for him to ignore it. "Talk about a fucking blindside, thanks for that. If Amanda hadn't been up on endorphins from beating the fuck out of a practice dummy, she might have been a little suspicious why I didn't have any idea what she was talking about. Lucky for me, she's a talker, so nodding along worked out okay."

He should have thought of that as a potential consequence. "I apologize for putting you in that position," he answers blankly, loosening his hold on the steering wheel with an effort. "It didn't occur to me it would be a topic of conversation."

"You didn't think..." Dean turns in the seat, outraged expression melting into incredulity. "You really didn't think it would come up? You trained Dean's soldiers and you didn't think it would come up?"

"No," he answers numbly, eyes fixed on the dashboard, marking out the spots where Sheila and Frederick have failed to perform adequate maintenance. "I didn't." At this moment, he has no idea why. From the corner of his eye, he sees Dean slump into the door, green eyes unreadable. "Dean, I--"
"It's stupid," Dean says quietly, almost as if to himself. "How the hell could you forget something like that?"

"It helps," Castiel tells him, "that I don't think about it if I can help it."

"Because the junkie thing, that really works for you?"

"You told me you liked the junkie better."

He knows it's a mistake the moment the words leave his mouth. The other side of the jeep might as well be negative space, Dean entirely absent except in that strictly controlled anger he's so careful to keep leashed. Because he's trying very hard, and ironically, Castiel has been as well.

"You told me," Dean says in a dangerously even voice, "that if you'd had the choice, you would have left me for Lucifer."

Before he can summon anything more than the echoes of horror, he hears the passenger door open before slamming shut. Startled, he turns off the engine and is out the driver's side door before he realizes that Dean hasn't gone any farther than the hood of the jeep, staring out at the featureless landscape of Kansas beneath the eternally churning grey of the overcast sky.

Uncertain, he clutches the open door, trying to decide if he should offer some kind of explanation immediately or let Dean have his space before attempting it. Dean's shoulders, usually a determined square, dip into slumped weariness, as if only for this moment, he's unable to pretend the burden he carries is far too great for him to bear. His hopes are small ones: survival and something other than the constant, grinding misery of his first weeks here. Occupation and activity could provide distraction for his waking hours, as much as Castiel could give him, but he knows how many nights Dean walks the length of his room until exhaustion drives him to a bed that holds the promise of rest only after payment is rendered in nightmares. He doesn't know how many nights those first weeks they haunted Dean's rest, but he knows how often they do now.

Before he can organize his thoughts, Dean straightens again, pushing off the hood before circling around the engine toward the passenger side door as he says evenly, "We should get back."

"You have to stop doing this."

On the other side of the jeep, the sound of boots comes to an abrupt halt. An ominous pause, filled with portents of things not yet decided, ends with the slow, methodical footsteps circling back to the front of the jeep and coming to a stop.

"It must be pretty useful," Dean says quietly, "to be able to remember everything anyone says--every fucking thing--so you never run out of ammunition. People forget shit--most of the time they want to, but you--you're like a living, breathing history lesson of every shitty thing they ever said."

"If it's any consolation, I remember everything I do as well. People forget, they blur their own memories of what they've done and even why they do it; they can rewrite their own history to suit themselves. I can't, not like they can."

"Cry me a fucking river," Dean says, voice still painfully even. "You done yet? I want to get out of here."

Castiel tosses the keys across the hood, reaching into the jeep and retrieving his rifle before shutting the door, almost relieved. "I'll see you back in the camp."

He doesn't expect argument, passing Dean as he starts up the road. His only actual regret at this
moment is that there's very little possibility of something attacking him; he wants it far too badly at
this moment for the reports to be anything but accurate. Behind him, he hears the jeep start and
briefly considers the potential combination of Dean with a jeep directly behind him before it passes
him entirely, growing smaller as it approaches the horizon and eventually vanishing from view.

This isn't the stupidest thing he's ever done, but he can't know for sure, not until he knows the
reason he's doing it. Starting down the road again, he supposes he's given himself plenty of time to
find out.

One hour and sixteen minutes later, he hasn't come any closer to discovering the reason he's
walking from just outside Kansas City to Chitaqua, but he thinks it's possible he'll need to resole
his boots after this.

Two hours and five minutes later, he considers and discards the unpleasant thought that Dean will
order someone to come pick him up. It's probable he'll refuse to get in the jeep, and while he's not
yet sure of the reason why, it's stupid enough that there's no possible way he'll do anything else.

The three hour mark finds him sitting on the side of the road, contemplating the lack of wildlife
when a jeep abruptly obscures his view. Tipping his head back, he blinks slowly as the window
rolls down and Dean regards him like a new species of insect that may or may not need the
application of gunfire to eradicate.

Castiel thinks: no, I still don't know why I'm doing this.

After a pregnant pause--one in which entire worlds are born and die, Apocalypses are ended with
time to spare, and after he Falls, he wakes up an actual person, a far better one, one who likes food
and people and breathing and living--Dean cuts the engine and climbs out of the jeep, that
hideously familiar calm expression on his face, one that promises understanding and rigidly
controlled sympathy and counting to ten before every response because someone sadistic once said
that was supposed to help and unsurprisingly, humanity is very masochistic.

He thinks, startled: Dean was right.

"Tell me," Dean says finally, "that you actually know what point you're trying to make here so
winning it is worth this kind of effort."

His lack of answer doesn't deter Dean in the slightest, and with a sigh, he pushes off the jeep,
crossing the few feet between them before dropping onto the grass beside him, long legs bent as he
leans an elbow on his knee. Tired, Castiel thinks, yes: I know the feeling. Welcome to my life.

"You never met Ben, did you?" Dean says conversationally, pulling a long piece of grass from the
ground between his knees. Castiel shakes his head. "I tried the normal life thing once--definitely an
experience. Anyway, baseball practice, I picked him up after, and we argued about--I don't even
remember, kids do shit like that. I told him he could be quiet until we got home and talked to his
mother or he could get out of the car and walk home. The little fucker got out of the car." From the
corner of his eye, he sees Dean's expression soften. "Kids need boundaries, I get that, and you gotta
follow through or they won't respect you. So I left him there, circled around, and followed him for
about a mile then gave the fuck up. By then, he could take it as a win and get in the car, and he was
quiet all the way back to Lisa's."

What's your excuse, unspoken and crystal clear, followed by right, this is you, and maybe So I was
wrong about the better thing, or far worse, I guess this is your better. It's probably all true.

You're useless to me. And that, too.

"I don't know what I was doing," Castiel tells the closed door of the jeep. "Comparing me to a recalcitrant child under most circumstances would be insulting, but I don't have a better theory to offer."

"Kids test boundaries because they want to know if you care." Dean glances at him with the ghost of an understanding grin, so patently false that there's no possibility he won't walk the floor of the bedroom half the night in sheer frustration. "Check if you're paying attention and shit, it's a thing, psychology bullshit. Sam took a class once at Stanford and told me all about it." He pauses, picking another piece of flora at random and twirling it absently between his fingers. "So I really wasn't supposed to tell you about ten being the new prime time."

Castiel jerks around, surprised by the rueful expression on Dean's face.

"Humans forget," Dean continues, staring down at the piece of flora. "The junkie thing. I forgot about that. Why you--why you wanted people to think that."

"It's true."

Dean nods easy agreement. "Best lies usually are."

"There was no reason to assume it wouldn't be noticed," he says uncertainly, drawing up his legs and resting his chin on one knee. He knew the risk, knew that Amanda would never betray him, but there was no possible way he wouldn't be noticed eventually. He still needed to do it; with Dean here, he can't afford to leave anything to chance. "Amanda has sufficient confidence in her skills that she's a challenging opponent. Most of what we fight is stronger and faster than a human, so she looks forward to the opportunity to test herself in controlled conditions."

"Trusts you not to hurt her by accident," Dean interprets with a sidelong glance "And you get a workout with someone who's not scared of you. On a guess, not a lot of people will do that?"

He shakes his head. "It can be dangerous, especially now when I'm out of practice with humans. Amanda, however, was already a skilled hunter when she came here, and she enjoys her work a great deal. She considered training here less a reflection of her skills, but an opportunity to become better."

"So she's gonna kill me." Leaning back on one arm, Dean tips his head toward the darkening sky. "I just figured it out. I was supposed to tell the camp to back off so you wouldn't find out about it so she wouldn't lose her sparring partner."

Startled, Castiel looks at him.

"Dude, she was talking really fast, okay? I can fix this; I'll give the order tomorrow, you don't tell her I told you, problem solved." He shrugs at Castiel's blank stare. "I'm pretty sure the one on one thing was actually a threat, now that I think about it."

"I doubt," he says finally, trying to remember how they arrived on this subject, "that she'll kill you. She's a member of your camp."

"If that practice dummy was any example, I'd sure as hell wish I were dead when she was done."

"You have to stop doing this." He hears Dean suck in a breath. "It's been almost three weeks. I
understand you don't have a choice, but--"

"--this isn't working, yeah. Three fucking hours of driving, that's a lot of time to think about why you looked so goddamn relieved in the rearview mirror." Taking a deep breath, he starts to turn toward Castiel, saying, "Look, I get it, okay. Give me a couple of days...." Dean's eyes widen as they stare at each other. "That...wasn't where you were going with that."

"No." Castiel gets to his feet, scooping his rifle from the ground and heading toward the jeep. Opening the door, he glances back at Dean. "Are you ready to leave? It's dusk. You can question me once we're back in the camp.

"What are you doing?" Dean asks in bewilderment.

"Returning to the camp." He glances at the empty ignition before reaching into his boot and pulling his knife, uneasily aware of how long it's been since he last did this. "If you'll--"

"Are you hotwiring the jeep?" Behind him, he hears Dean getting to his feet. "I have the goddamn keys right here!"

"I don't," he snaps, reaching beneath the seat. This isn't hard, it's a skill, and like any skill, it must be maintained, and he's neglected it by using his own keys all this time.

"Why," Dean asks incredulously, "didn't you just ask me for them?" Then, "Are you going to leave me here?"

"Not for three hours." He blames the fact that the correct wires elude him--possibly he should have done this before on this particular model--for the fact he isn't aware of Dean's proximity until he's suddenly jerked stumbling from the door, the sound of the automatic locks engaging before it's slammed shut. Regaining his balance on the shoulder of the road, he watches incredulously as Dean throws the keys into the growing darkness.

That didn't just happen. "Why did you--"

"You...." Dean trails off, hands fisting at his sides as if considering a potential future of violence with Castiel as the subject. "You said to leave you here!"

"I didn't expect you to actually do it!"

"You were acting like an asshole!" Dean shouts, face reddening as he takes an abortive step toward him. "I ask you a simple goddamn question about something you fucking admit you were hiding from me--something I needed to know--"

"I tried to explain!" Castiel shouts back. "You got out of the jeep, stared into the distance to emphasize your terrible pain, and then said you wished to return to the camp. Forgive me for not looking forward to sharing the return journey to Chitaqua with both you and your patient disappointment, not to mention however long it takes you after we return to decide to explain why you're angry so we can discuss it like some mythical race you call 'rational people', and I still have no idea what that even means--"

"Why I'm angry? Are you shitting me?" Dean covers another two steps before visibly stopping himself. "You're said you'd help me--I asked, Cas, you made the goddamn choice! I thought--and I get this was stupid--that maybe, just maybe, we were at the point where you--" He stops short, the hot anger mixed with confusion. "Drugs, sex, torture, the monotonous fucking details of how you fucked off because you don't give a shit, that, you have no problem talking about. That once upon a time, you helped Dean train the hunters that came here, that you hid. Tell me how that's supposed
to make sense!

It doesn't; at least, not in any way that Dean would understand or respect

"When you told me that you'd spoken to Amanda, the only actual question you asked me was if I thought that it wouldn't come up in conversation, not that--"

"Fuck you," Dean breathes, and turning on his heel, he stalks back to the driver's side door, seemingly having forgotten it's locked. "This is bullshit. I'm done with--"

"Me? Please don't say that. I'll so miss being constantly aware of the incredible amount of effort you put into interacting with me."

Dean stares at the door, long fingers closing over the handle until his knuckles show yellow-white from the strain. "This argument. You, I'm stuck with."

"You don't have to be." Dean freezes, turning around to look at him expressionlessly. "That choice is yours. What I don't understand is why you continue to do it when it's such an effort for you."

"So that's what I'm supposed to stop doing." He finds himself almost taking a step back at the look on Dean's face. "You getting tired of me, Cas? You want out?"

It takes two attempts before he can form an answer. "You have the right to be angry with me earlier for not disclosing that information to you before Amanda did. Then--"

"Answer the question."

"Then you drove away for three hours so I could think about my sins, which you should be aware, three hours wouldn't get me past B if I contemplated them in alphabetical order, so I didn't bother to even begin," he continues bitterly. "I resent the fact that it's past five and by the time we return, it will be late and I won't get to have a pleasant evening--" He has to stop, stop now. "It's my fault, I know that. I remember everything, always, including the exact sequence of events that led to this moment. I could have responded better, but I didn't."

"You're right about that," Dean agrees flatly. "Now answer the goddamn question."

"I'm not tired of you," he answers, meeting the green eyes. "I'm tired of your disappointment when I don't meet your expectations." He takes a breath, wondering why he's even bothering to try. "Humans forget things, they have that luxury, they're allowed latitude in memory, so why can't I have that as well?"

Dean leans a shoulder against a jeep, green eyes narrowing. "You said you remember everything. Make up your mind."

"Two years ago, I trained two groups of recruits in Chitaqua," he says. "That's why Dean trained me; so I could help him when Grace was no longer--so I'd be useful. It wasn't a secret I kept from you, I didn't deliberately hide that. It didn't come up, and other than as history, it's not important now."

Dean rubs a hand over his face, visibly making an effort, which Castiel fails to appreciate after having seen it so many times before. "So you just didn't think about it."

"Exactly."

"Right. So--" Dean abruptly drops his hand, eyebrows drawing sharply together. "You didn't think
"Yes," he agrees tiredly. "I don't think about it, I haven't in years. I made an effort not to. I can't forget, only a human can do that, but this is a human body that exists in linear time and--"

"Infinite memory," Dean interrupts in a different voice. "Not all of time to search it."

"An angel's memory and a mortal body and life aren't entirely compatible, but in this one instance, that was an advantage. It's too much, obviously, to think of all at once, so it gets--stored, I suppose. I still have it, but it becomes subject to a system of priorities. All I have to do is not think about something, and once the habit is set, I simply--don't."

"Like what you said--seeing all things," Dean says unexpectedly, expression thoughtful. "That's why you thought you could do that in Kansas City, focus on one thing. Because you could do that with your memory."

"Yes," he agrees, startled. "Though that didn't work as well as I'd hoped."

"No shit." Dean gives him a strange look. "Does that bother you?"

"What?"

"I didn't ask--" Dean shakes his head, annoyed. "I was pissed you did that to yourself without knowing if it would work, which yeah, you're still not allowed to do shit like that without talking to me first." Castiel nods obediently at Dean's sharp look. "I didn't even ask you if it bothered you. That you can't--do that. And the memory thing, I guess. Not being able to know everything at once."

'Yes' is at the tip of his tongue, a response so automatic that he hasn't thought about it for--years, perhaps. Examining it, however, he's less certain of its truth, or even its applicability. He lets himself remember how it felt in Kansas City, stripping out the traumatic aspects, and focusing on what he was actually doing.

"It has very limited applicability to my life here."

Dean frowns. "What does that have to do with missing it?"

"Do you remember how I described it?"

"A big party at a huge house, no lights, everyone getting in the way, machetes, yeah."

"All that was, is, and will be: I know those things, I always knew those things, I will never not know those things. Imagine from the moment of your birth knowing everything that would happen to you in your life until the moment of your death, in excruciatingly mundane detail."

Dean cocks his head. "Are you saying that knowing all things is boring?"

"Knowing the span of a life in its entirely isn't the same as living it, and living it--" He stops, surprised by the obvious conclusion. "Yes, that word, boring: it's boring. Now, though rarely pleasant, does have the advantage that every moment is new. This moment has never happened before and will never happen again, and I didn't know about it beforehand. It may also be boring, but not in the same way. Mortal life seems to consist of a great deal of that."

Dean's expression is unreadable. "Angels don't get bored?"
"The concept of boredom is alien to angels; we can't imagine, so we have no basis of comparison. How can you be bored when that's all that you are?"

"It's almost like you're saying--I don't know--that it's not so bad here." Dean cocks his head. "Something new all the time."

It does sound like that. "In case this never occurred to you, human bodies require a great deal of maintenance just to keep them functional. Between its demands and the constant drudgery you call survival," which for some reason makes Dean's mouth twitch alarmingly, "I had to learn to focus. I don't forget, I can't, but I can set things aside, not think of them at all. That's possible for me here."

Dean nods.

"That's not an excuse, however," he continues. "I reacted badly, and I apologize for that. You are within your rights to be angry with me. I agreed to help you, and this compromised that agreement. I'll tell you whatever you wish to know about it."

"Okay." Before he can decide if that's an encouraging statement, Dean trudges to the front of the jeep and lithely boosting himself onto the hood. Twisting around, he pats the space beside him. "Get your ass over here, Cas. Let's talk."

Dean's questions, however, aren't what he expected.

"Weeks?" Dean asks incredulously. "Dean trained you for weeks? Why? You've been fighting forever."

This isn't at all what he anticipated for his evening, but despite the location, it's a perfectly acceptable substitute.

"That doesn't mean I was good at it on this plane," he answers ruefully, and Dean makes a face, inclining his head in silent agreement. "In a corporeal form, without Grace, it takes practice to use those skill with a vessel, especially those that don't already possess the skills or training themselves. My body had to be taught as well, and Jimmy wasn't--inclined toward excessive physical activity."

"You couldn't just--" Dean makes an inexplicable gesture. "Use the mojo or something to get it up to speed?"

Yes, he tried that argument once. "The point was to teach me for a time when I no longer had Grace. There was no way to know how much I'd retain later, or if I'd retain anything at all. Dean thought kinetic reinforcement--in this body--might assure that whatever happened, I would at least physically retain what I learned more thoroughly, and my body would still have the necessary reflexes and conditioning. Otherwise, it would be pointless to teach me anything since it wouldn't be of any use to anyone."

Dean's eyes narrow so briefly it's possible he imagined it. "Learn by doing. The old fashion way."

"Repetition *ad infinitum,*" he agrees glumly. "Strangely enough, he was correct. Keeping my strength and speed was a bonus, but without the skill to use them correctly, they have limited practical use. Even with them, I'd be at a disadvantage when faced with someone whose actions are automatic to the point of reflex and have no advantage at all against anything we fought that could match or surpass me in both. Generally, having those abilities comes with the physical capacity to not be damaged by it or to heal at a consummate rate, but for reasons that escape me but do satisfy irony, that wasn't included in what I retained."
"And the rest of it?"

"The rest of what?" he asks in bewilderment.

"All you told me is about combat, which--you don't see it?" Castiel shakes his head in confusion. "Whoa. Yeah, I guess you wouldn't. Know yourself and everything."

"See what?"

His grin widens inexplicably. "Cas, you didn't need to tell me Dean trained you, that I picked up just watching you. Jesus, you clean your guns the same way I do, it's surreal. You do salt lines in the same goddamn order. That's not shit you just pick up by observation; that's--"

"You watch me clean my guns?" he asks in surprise. "When?"

"When you think I'm still asleep in the morning," Dean answers, still looking far too amused. "Before morning patrol."

"You never told me you were watching."

"Pot," Dean drawls. "You ever meet kettle?"

"I don't understand that reference." Dean leans his head against one upraised knee and mouths 'bullshit', which he probably deserves. "When I didn't need sleep, I used to get very--impatient waiting for Dean to wake up, so I offered to do maintenance on our weapons if he would teach me what to do. He took me up on the offer very enthusiastically."

"I bet he did."

"It's very relaxing," Castiel continues more thoughtfully. "No matter what went wrong the day before, or would in the coming day, for now, there were guns to clean, ammunition to check, and occasionally repairs to be made. I prefer occupation to idleness. I suppose," he adds reluctantly, "that surprises you."

"You would be amazed how not surprised I am," Dean assures him earnestly, looking as if he's thinking of something else entirely and finds it extremely funny. "So basically, he taught you like Dad taught us. Just faster."

"There are a few advantages when teaching an angel," he admits. "I didn't need sleep, or food, or even rest then, and could heal myself of any injury immediately. As Dean's purpose for me was my purpose as well, it became the focus of all my attention. That sped the learning curve significantly."

"Kind of late, I guess, but welcome to the family," Dean offers after a moment. "Dude, you survive a Winchester training, that's like adoption." He stops, frowning suddenly. "Hold up--what'd you mean earlier about healing?"

"That it's slow, tedious, and boring in a human body?"

"No, about having your speed and strength and fighting--" Dean gestures again. "What did you mean?"

"Human bodies generally aren't meant to retain the abilities an angel imparts to their vessel without Grace to protect it," he explains. "There's a reason why demons have to use a form of stasis on the human body during their occupation of it; it's still human and subject to human biological
limitations. Unlike me, they also don't have Dean Winchester to train them in how to best use it with those abilities. Not that I have any reliable way to discover the upper limit of what I retained now. While the human body is extremely flexible and adapts, I heal too slowly to test that with impunity, and being mortal--"

"Let me get this straight," Dean interrupts. "You could hurt yourself by moving too fast?"

"I have hurt myself with injudicious use of speed, yes, and I've pulled muscles when pushing them abruptly beyond human tolerance. In retrospect, what happened in Kansas City with my sight shouldn't have been unexpected."

"What kind of fucked-up shit is this?" Dean bursts out. "When you Fell, I thought angels became human, but Chuck said you…." He grimaces, looking uncomfortable. "I mean, from what I--heard. Somewhere."

The other Castiel, yes; there's a subject he'd prefer to avoid at all costs. "What did Chuck tell you?"

Dean wets his lips. "He didn't know what happened. He said it was a couple of weeks before you were--okay, I guess."

Okay: Dean's being uncharacteristically discreet. "Falling is--erratic in its results when being literally born isn't involved," he says slowly. "Before they left, the Host was less than enthusiastic regarding my plans for my continued existence."

"How'd the Host get you, anyway?"

"They banished me from my vessel when they called me back, which I assume was because without the presence of a soul--"

"Jimmy."

He nods tightly. "--or some other animating presence within it--or a sophisticated life support system--the human body tends degrade rapidly. I assume the goal was to assure that when I was able to return to my body, it would already be dead, and I wouldn't have any place to go."

"Son of a bitch," Dean breathes, looking sick.

"Which may explain…." He trails off, surprised at himself.

Dean's voice is very gentle. "What?"

"I didn't come back--right." Dean's jaw tightens, every muscle clenched tight. "I don't remember what happened with the Host or the two weeks after I--returned here. Both Dean and Bobby refused to talk about it, and Dean especially…." He stops, remembering how Dean would look at him after. "That time is a blank, and you may appreciate how unsettling that is."

"Because you don't forget anything, yeah."

"Yet I don't remember any of it," he answers. "I don't know how I managed to return to this body, much less how it survived my absence. It works correctly now, in any case, or so I assume."

"Okay, so what's the problem?"

"By process of elimination, the problem is me in it." Dean scowls at him. "Don't pretend you aren't aware I'm not very--good with it."
Dean scowls in blatant disregard of facts. "You can fight in it just fine."

"What I could learn," Castiel answers deliberately, "was easy to transfer and accumulate; that's simply a matter of experience. But there are some things that can't be learned. They generally come standard," which makes Dean reluctantly smile. "Those things--instincts, I suppose, and biological functions--they seem to work when left to their own devices, but I'm not very good at interpreting those that require my input. As a human would, in any case."

"There's nothing wrong with you." Dean glares at him, as if by will alone he could make that true. "Besides being crazy, that is. Dude, so you have a learning curve. It happens."

"Did it happen to Castiel?" Why did he mention him?

"You got sex down just fine," Dean counters with a smirk. "Which makes sense, now that I think about it. Built-in reward system for getting it, am I right? Motivation to practice."

"Human reproductive urges are very strong and extremely unambiguous, which makes sense, considering your mandate includes being fruitful." Belatedly, he realizes he's smiling back. "And people are remarkably enthusiastic in sharing knowledge when it comes to sex. As often as physically possible, as it turns out."

Dean's smirk fades. "And the other stuff?"

"Observation," he answers. "Trial and error. And repetition ad infinitum, amen. Survival is an excellent teacher, and the human body was not designed to forgive mistakes."

Dean grimaces. "Everyone's different, Cas. Humans fuck up knowing their own bodies, and they were born in 'em."

"They're human," he says shortly. "I'm not, and I never will be. There's a difference."

Inexplicably, Dean frowns into the distance, and uneasy, Castiel wonders what he's thinking.

"We should be getting back."

"Give up?" he finishes, not quite able to hide the edge in his voice. "You thought I was going to."

"That's not...." Dean winces, looking away. "Yeah, look, you're always cranky after we come here, I knew that. It was a shitty time to ambush you, and I knew better."

"You're blaming yourself?" he asks in bewilderment. "Why?"

"Not always you, Cas, believe it or not. It pissed me off, what Amanda told me," Dean says. "I took it out on you. I could have just asked."

"I understand why," he says carefully. "You needed to know what I used to do--"
"Not that," Dean interrupts, still staring into the distance. "You go practice your smack-down with Amanda at night, fine. You can do whatever you want, not like you need my permission."

"You thought I was hiding that from you." Sometimes, he wonders if he'll ever get this right before multiple failed and traumatic attempts. "That's what you're angry about."

Dean nods shortly. "It's your business, I get that--"

"I was, actually, hiding that from you."

Dean looks up, hurt flashing across his face before he can hide it. "Okay."

"You sleep less than thirty feet away from me," Castiel says, forcing out the words. "You share a very small cabin with me, and you're seemingly oblivious to--or pretend to be--what I am. Amanda is unique in being unnaturally comfortable with that."

"Wait." Dean straightens, staring up at him incredulously. "Is this actually because I said I liked the junkie better?"

Castiel closes his eyes for a moment. "Dean--"

"Still?"

"It's not…." Something should go after that; what that is, he has no idea.

"All right, Cas, let's talk about exactly what happened that day," Dean says flatly. "You woke me up by kicking me out of my chair, pinned me to the floor, called me slow, told me I was going to sell the entire camp out to Lucifer, and threatened to drug me for the rest of my life. Did I miss anything?"

A great deal, but none of it particularly in Castiel's favor. "I had a very bad morning."

"Really?" Crossing his arms, Dean's eyes narrow. "Sam doesn't have leftover angel mojo and he can beat me seven out of ten times when we spar and sit on me when he gets bored, so it's not like I'm not used to losing a goddamn fight. Yeah, I liked the junkie, you know why? The junkie told me I was pretty--"

"I did not."

Dean smiles at him, all teeth. "You really liked my mouth. You're not the first, but I appreciate the sentiment." Castiel stares at him in wordless horror. "The junkie was a fuckup, but at least he was too high to remember he hated me, made me some cool sigils so I could leave the goddamn cabin, and told me I rolled joints better than anyone in Chitaqua. The dick in the cabin that day told me I was into mass murder and buddies with Lucifer and then told me he thought I was gonna murder him in his sleep." Leaning against the jeep, he adds, "Yeah, what was I thinking when I said that?"

"You were in the city for three nights and if you'd been killed, I wouldn't have known about it." Castiel draws in a breath, chest tight. "If Vera hadn't been worried--if the jeep hadn't been warm, if she hadn't known to check--if I'd been stoned that night in Kansas City, if I'd been killed before I saw you…if Lucifer had killed me when I went back for Dean's body….""

"Cas--"

Castiel ignores him. "I was stoned and drunk for three days, because why not, I had no reason not to be--"
"Dude, to be fair, I helped with that," Dean admits. "It was kind of like Sam said his freshman year at Stanford was like. Even quoted Dante at me between joints."

"I let you tell me what excuse to give to all my sex partners and actually used it!" Dean's mouth twitches smugly. "You said it was the only way you could stay in the cabin without being caught. So at the time, it was the best idea I'd ever heard."

"It was fun." He pauses, realization dawning on his face. "Oh."

"I had to make a choice," he says bitterly, "between being pleasant company and--keeping everyone alive, and helping you."

"Being yourself works a lot better. Ever think of trying that? Just to see what it's like? God knows, you've tried everything else, and that may be literal."

"You don't know me--"

"I want to."

Castiel shuts his mouth with an audible click of teeth.

"But it's your choice if I get to," Dean continues, almost but not quite hiding a flicker of uncertainty. "You tell me to back off, I will. Or….

It takes him two tries to ask. "Or?"

"Or next time you throw down with Amanda, you ask me if I want to come and watch." He's still struggling for an answer when Dean looks away. "Look, you can think about it--"

"Habit." Dean looks up, eyebrows drawn together in confusion. "I didn't tell you, that part was deliberate, but until you asked me today, I didn't think about why I was doing it. If I had--if I had, I would have realized that didn't apply to you, of course. You should know how I fight."

Dean nods warily. "Because Dean Winchester needs to know, yeah."

"Because I've become very good at combat on this plane," he says slowly. "I teach other hunters. Surely you're curious how I perform without Grace."

Dean cocks his head. "Eight demons in Kansas City. Not bad, I guess."

"So you'll enjoy watching, and I'll enjoy watching you pretend not to be impressed."

Dean's eyebrows jump before he brings his expression under control, projecting blatant skepticism. "I don't know. Without your mojo….

"It takes longer," he interrupts. "But I've found weapons and sufficient practice can achieve similar results, and far more enjoyably."

"You know that sounds creepy when you put it like that."

"You know that there's a very thin line between violence and sex?" he answers, tilting his head and biting back a smile at Dean's expression. "I can confirm it's almost non-existent. Humanity did come with some perks."

"Jesus, you're a freak." Dean glances at the night, cheeks beginning to flush. "Guess it'll be too late by the time we get back--"
"Not if we leave now."

Dean cocks his head. "Patrol meets an hour after dawn. Don't wanna fall asleep while they're reporting…"

"I'll take patrol in the morning so you can sleep later."

"Well…" Dean bites his lip against a grin. "Every time I'm up late watching you and Amanda playing? Sorry, sparring."

He doesn't even try to fight it. "Of course. Is there anything else?"

"Actually, yeah." Dean smiles at him, bright as a new morning, before pushing off the jeep and circling to the passenger side door. Sliding onto the ground, Castiel scans the area that Dean threw the keys. "You know how to hotwire the jeep, right?"

"Of course," he answers distractedly. "But I can find the keys--"

"Then you know keys are for losers. Start with the locks." Startled, he looks at Dean, who grins at him over the door. "Come on, Cas. Show me what you got."

"I didn't say you had a pretty mouth," Castiel tells him half-way to Chitaqua.

Dean gives him a bored look from the other side of the jeep. "Not thinking about it again?"

"I said you had a gorgeous mouth," he says, drawling out the word gorgeous and watching in fascination as the faint heat spreads across Dean's cheeks again. "And what I'd like to do with it."

"Get in line," Dean advises him, bracing a foot on the dashboard and giving him a challenging look. "Not the first to tell me that."

"I'd like to be the first to actually do it."

Dean goes still, eyebrows knitting before he nods, almost to himself, then looks at Castiel seriously. "I'll give you this one. If I'm ever interested, you're first on my list. Happy?"

Castiel stops the jeep, putting it in park, and ignores Dean's squawk of bewilderment to collapse against the wheel and laugh so hard he can't breathe.

--Day 41--

Over the previous weeks, Castiel showed Dean almost all of their patrol routes, both present and historical, explaining what he understood of the reasons for choosing or discarding them (very little), one of the ubiquitous hand-annotated maps spread on the dashboard for Dean to consult if he has questions. Like his counterpart, it seems almost instinctive to him; he only needs to ride each once before they're slotted away in that extraordinarily practical mind, understanding the way that Castiel never quite has how and why they were chosen.

"And Dean really never told you his reasons?"

He shakes his head, again. "Why would he? I didn't ask."

Dean sighs, picking up Castiel's open notebook as he consults the journal thoughtfully. Having finished with the first one, the second notebook is already almost a quarter filled, almost entirely
composed of everything that he remembers of the camp's standard operating procedure for missions as well as patrol. It's simple to recall the relevant events, but lack of understanding makes it a challenge to know what to relate other than a verbatim recital of all details. Dean's getting better at asking the right questions, however, and to his own surprise, he's getting better at knowing what Dean actually needs to know and what's simply irrelevant detail.

"All right, last six months he had two teams on patrol while the other two were helping with the hunt for Lucifer and catching demons for fun with interrogation," Dean says, squinting at the journal. "The rest did patrol. Question: why are there only four teams? He was using everyone, I get that, but why only four official teams?"

"Five," he corrects him absently. "Dean also had a team."

"You were on that one, yeah. He went out regularly?"

"Of course." He looks up in belated understanding of this line of questioning. "No, not yet. You're not ready."

To his surprise, Dean lets it go with suspicious ease. "But that night," a euphemism as strange as it is welcome, "he didn't take his team, just his team leaders and you. Forget his team; why didn't he take the whole damn camp? This is the big battle, end of the line, Apocalypse or bust--"

"Your point is noted."

"Glad someone does, since he didn't." Closing the journal, Dean fixes his gaze out the windshield with grim dissatisfaction. "It doesn't make sense."

"Very little Dean did made sense to me," he offers. "You get used to it."

"Really?" Dean makes a face, filing away the problem for future rumination, like so many of his unanswered questions. The problem is, Castiel finds himself ruminating as well. It's strange; the differences between them are far more noticeable than the similarities, spaces that Dean pokes at with a kind of morbid fascination.

"You know," which Castiel has come to recognize as Dean returning to an earlier subject, "Ana was a Marine. Kamal came from a line of Nepalese hunters, did time in the military there, and he was--" he starts to reach for the journal, but the skillsets of Chitaqua's residents are familiar enough that it's not necessary.

"Kamal speaks thirteen languages, including Chinese."

"How many books do we have in Chinese?" Dean demands. "What the hell did anyone here do that wasn't on one of those five teams?"

"Everyone who came here could fight," he answers, stopping automatically at the rusting remains of a stop sign. It's impossible for him not to do it, and it has the unexpected benefit of making Dean smirk every time. "That doesn't mean they were all equally skilled--"

"You're saying you didn't get them into shape during training?" Dean interrupts in elaborately staged shock. "Where's your professional pride?"

Castiel makes himself ignore that. "--or that they didn't have other, more individual talents that were also needed."

"Like speaking Chinese."
"Kamal is a professionally trained translator as well as an interpreter in several languages, but more importantly, given a minimum amount of text in a previously unknown language, he can learn it well enough to give an accurate, if minimal, summary of the text."

Dean rolls his eyes. "I'm convinced." He's not.

"Ana is a former Marine engineer whose experience in explosives translated to designing controlled demolitions in urban areas," he continues determinedly. "Patrol was only one of responsibilities of the camp."

Dean lets out an exaggerated sigh. "Break it down for me again. Twenty people in a camp of sixty were on those teams and everyone else did…what?"

"Besides patrol? Automobile and generator maintenance, supply, weapon repair, mess and inventory, watch, ammunition manufacture--"

"Salt load and silver bullets, not something the military could get us, yeah."

"--and those with the skill were sent across the borders on specific missions for Dean when he was unable to go himself. For obvious reasons, they couldn't be integrated into the regular teams because they had other responsibilities that precluded a regular mission schedule."

"Because patrol was only one of the duties," he says, and encouraged, Castiel agrees. "Right. You know I can count, right?"

Castiel pauses. "What?"

"Cas, you make the patrol schedules now, and you've explained enough for me to do the math. There were twelve regular patrol routes, but only four team leaders and their teams. Either they didn't sleep, they were wizards, or they didn't actually lead patrol."

He should have anticipated this. "Their teams--"

"Words, they mean something," Dean continues casually. "I just realized that team leader isn't the same as patrol leader. You said the entire leadership went to Kansas City that night, which on a guess, means that the team leaders did more than lead patrol teams, if they even actually did that."

"They supervised all the patrol teams as well as led teams of their own," Castiel says, ignoring Dean's scowl. "Among their duties, they oversaw those who provided local coverage while they and their teams would handle the cities, as they were the most experienced."

"Their duties also included running the entire camp for Dean," Dean finishes, eyeing him mockingly. "Bingo. He went on missions, and guy can't do it all. Though on a guess, he tried; he used them to do it."

"More or less." Dean raises his eyebrows. "Those assigned to various duties around the camp as well as the patrols reported to them, yes. Dean couldn't always be here."

"And you didn't feel like explaining….wait." Dean turns in his seat. "The team leaders now only worry about patrol. So who's doing the rest?"

"Fortunately, most people know their duties, so they simply need to be told to keep doing them."

"You're doing them." Dean's eyes widen. "You've been doing all of it since--"
"Vera's successful revolution, yes."

"Holy shit," Dean says, sitting back with a dangerously thoughtful look. "I knew that was too many people going to your cabin every day even once I got patrol down...."

Castiel just avoids running into a pothole. "You counted?"

"Yeah, of course." Dean shrugs. "It was like a sex train wreck or something: once you see, you can't unsee that shit. Morning orgies: don't tell me, you were actually regretting sobriety while listening to Chuck talk about toilet paper and Penn about food."

"You--"

"Explains why Zoe always looked cranky in the mornings when she left," he adds thoughtfully. "Ammunition, right? You know, this--"

"I really think we should talk about something else," he says firmly, aware of Dean's smirk. "Anything."

"You're right," Dean says unexpectedly, turning in his seat triumphantly. "You're still doing it. Why?"

Sex was a safer topic after all. "I made Chuck take some of it, of course. He reports twice weekly."

"And the rest of it?"

Castiel sighs. "They report to me weekly--"

"When?"

"When you're asleep."

"Of course they do." Dean looks at him incredulously. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Patrol has priority," he answers truthfully. "There's no reason to overwhelm you at this time. It's not a hardship. They report once a week, so it's only an hour or so a day--"

"An hour."

"Maybe two, I don't really notice. Compared to having to run patrol meetings, it's much less stressful." Compared to patrol, unarmed combat with a troll would be far less stressful.

Dean nods dubiously, chewing his lip before saying, "If you want the team leaders to do it...."

"They don't know how, any more than I did when I started doing it. At least I have month's experience pretending I understand their duties." Carefully, he adds, "You wish to encourage more autonomy from those in the camp, correct? They know I know less than they do, and it encourages them not to ask me questions I can't answer and honestly don't care enough about to even try."

"That works?"

"Surprisingly well," he admits. "It's simply of being willing to sit relatively still while they expound about their week. They don't even insist I pay attention, only give the appearance of it."

"I could help...." Dean grimaces. "With my non-existent free time, yeah."
"It would be better to wait until you are comfortable enough with patrol to have time to familiarize yourself with their duties yourself," he says, concentrating on the extremely featureless road. What he wouldn't do right now for some obstacles, perhaps a large pothole or convenient dragon. "Besides, it's educational. Penn is extremely interested in the culinary arts, and apparently not many have time to listen to her expound on methods of flame broil. It's fascinating."

"Flame broiled spam, she came up with that one?" Dean looks impressed. "If you're sure--"

"Before, it was more practical to have the team leaders handle those duties, but that was when our population was much larger and we had a great deal more to do. The new patrol leaders are also still very new to their duties. There's no reason to overburden them right now." In retrospect, he should have started with that. "Do you have any objections?"

"Yeah," Dean answers flatly. "You shouldn't have to do everything."

"I don't mind." He doesn't, which is still a surprise; after years of having only the vaguest idea of how the camp functioned, it's unexpectedly fascinating to realize what that meant. "I took very thorough notes, I assure you."

"Can I see them, at least?" Dean asks, a thread of amusement in his voice. "Just to get caught up."

"Of course," he agrees cautiously.

"Maybe sit in on the meetings once in a while," Dean adds. "You know, if you're not worried that it'll scare me."

He should have anticipated this. "Dean--"

"I get it," Dean interrupts, grinning at him outright. "Thanks, by the way."

Relaxing, he smiles back. "You're welcome."

Dean opens his mouth and then stops, frowning at him for a moment, then abruptly sits back in his seat far too casually. "Okay, just hear me out."

Castiel stops the jeep in the middle of the road and puts it in park, turning in his seat to meet Dean's startled eyes. "What?"

"We're in the middle of the road."

"Yes, the heavy traffic might be a problem if it existed," Castiel agrees, crossing his arms. "Please continue."

"Yeah, this is gonna be fun." Dean sighs, sounding annoyed. "Look, I was thinking. I should see this live and in action, right?"

"The patrol routes?" Dean nods. "This is--not those things?"

"Not--okay, let's get this over with." Dean straightens, boot dragging down the dashboard as he turns to look at Castiel. "I want to go out with the patrol."

"No."

"That's an order," Dean points out. "Patrol meetings don't tell me anything but how they act in the camp, not how they work in the field. That, I gotta be there for. Sidney and bridges, let me remind you here."
"True," Castiel agrees. "The next time the patrol goes out, you can go with them."

Dean starts to answer, then looks suspicious, "When's the next time they're going out?"

"After they finish a training exercise that will doubtless take some time. Weeks, perhaps. Even months."

"I could countermand you," Dean answers in resignation. "It'd be like living a shitty prime time comedy, if it wasn't for the Apocalypse thing."

"Dean, if those are your orders, I won't disobey you. You don't have to ask me for permission."

"And you wouldn't argue with me?"

It's an effort, but he manages to fight down the reflexive response to that. "No."

"You had to think about it," Dean observes. "You aren't used to taking them."

"My entire existence was predicated on taking orders."

"And Dean trained you into hating them just on principle." Before he can argue that he obeyed--most of the time--Dean shakes his head. "You'll obey, great, fine--"

"I don't understand. Your job is to give orders and I assure you, I'll obey them."

"This is exactly what I was worried about. What if they're the wrong ones?" Dean turns in his seat again, looking at him challengingly. "Would you tell me or obey just to prove to me you're totally into orders? If I was about to get everyone killed, would you stop me or stay the goddamn course because you said you'd obey?"

"Why would you--" He stops short. "You think I should have done more to stop Dean from going to Kansas City."

Dean blinks at him, startled. "Uh, no, and Jesus, that came out wrong. You couldn't stop him--trust me, I was there, I know--but hey, you could stop me from suicidal stupidity. By telling me, because me? I'll listen."

Castiel nods warily, which makes Dean sigh.

"Okay, consider this a test run. I'll listen to your reasons I shouldn't do this, you listen to mine, and if you still disagree--I'll table it."

'For now' is both implicit and crystal-clear, but the fact Dean's willing to do so at all is novel enough that Castiel finds himself nodding agreement. "All right."

"So give me a good reason why I shouldn't go with them. Yeah, the whole monsters coming back thing could happen at any time, but we're doing what they do every day right now. What's the difference?"

"I'm here."

"Right, and that's great, but on the off-chance anything happens, a whole goddamn team is gonna be there."

"Dean," he asks carefully, "have you been falling asleep when you observe Amanda and I on the training field?"
"Yeah, you're---fine. I'm impressed, happy?" Dean says impatiently. "But you're can't always be with me, and hey, I can take care of myself. So why--"

"You can't."

Dean blinks. "What?"

"This isn't a criticism of your abilities. It's a result of the world we live in," he says quickly, seeing the flash of hurt Dean almost immediately hides. "I wasn't merely mocking you when I told you that were not as good as he was; you aren't, but more importantly, you didn't even realize I was there before I pinned you to the floor."

"Thanks for the reminder," Dean says sourly.

"Your reflexes and your reactions, as well as your training, were more than sufficient for the world you lived in. Here, they aren't enough, not for what we do. That was why Dean taught me; so I could learn from him and from other hunters and pass that knowledge on to others. Dean didn't have me train Chitaqua's militia simply because it was something to do with my time on earth; it was his purpose for me. This world required that kind of skill just to survive and be able to fight back."

Dean looks into the middle distance with an unreadable expression.

"If it were simply a matter of skill, I'd worry less," he continues a little frantically. "But I've watched you every time we leave the camp--"

"You've been evaluating me," Dean interrupts. "I thought you were just being your creepy angel stalker self when we're in the city, not like I'm not used to it." His expression is curious. "You were testing me?"

"More passive observation," he admits, which has the unexpected benefit of increasing Dean's curiosity, hostility and hurt fading. "I needed something to do, and you were available."

"I'm that bad?"

"Not at all," he assures him somewhat untruthfully, trying to find the right words to explain. He's never had to before, and unfortunately, that was left out of his education. "You weren't ready."

To his relief, Dean understands immediately. "Nothing was in the city, Cas. We both...." He sits back. "It didn't matter nothing was there. Like in the cabin, got it." Dean gives him a long look, and to his bewilderment, his mouth quirks. "I stressed the fuck out of you wandering around like that, didn't I?"

"If there had been any cats or rats, they wouldn't have survived inadvertently revealing themselves, no. I'm not used to being in the open without the expectation of combat at any moment." Dean snorts. "When we left Chitaqua, we weren't simply hunting; we were hunted, every moment we were outside the wards. There was never a time we weren't under attack."

Dean's amusement fades. "That must suck."

"The adrenaline rush was adequate compensation. I understand far better why you chose to be a hunter as your life's work. " Dean rolls his eyes but doesn't deny it. "It's just a matter of time for you to adapt."

Dean looks at him speculatively. "Okay, so you'd know. How far off the curve am I?"
"If you were a recruit, you would be accepted, but I wouldn't have let you outside the camp walls for the entire three months training would require," he answers honestly. "Don't take that personally, everyone had to complete the entire three months of training, including other hunters, by Dean's order."

"They were okay with that?"

"No," he replies. "But Dean set the requirements for new recruits; they had to finish three months with me or they couldn't stay. I didn't care how they felt about it either way."

"What if they weren't good enough after three months?"

"That never happened."

The speculative look strengthens. "You evaluated them first, like you did me these last few weeks."

"Dean did that himself, though he liked to have me confirm his judgment." Dean's interest sharpens considerably. "If I was going to teach them, I had to know what they were capable of. Usually, I did it on the training field, but watching you in the city was adequate, if extremely stressing."

"Right." He nods firmly. "So you gonna take care of it or what?"

"What?"

"You said it's gonna take three months," Dean answers reasonably. "So when do we start?"

He couldn't have heard that correctly. "You want me to train you?"

Dean frowns. "What? That's what you do, right?"

"It's been a very long time since I trained anyone."

"I won't hold it against you." Dean shrugs. "Get back to me on that. Okay, patrol--look, we don't know how long this hiatus is gonna last. If you're right, I might not have another chance to see how patrol works for a while."

"I know," he answers reluctantly. "I wouldn't have risked taking you outside the camp if there was any sign of anything returning."

"So you get why I gotta go."

"I know that you feel you have to," he agrees warily. "What I don't understand is why."

"Yeah, I'm not sure either." Sitting back, Dean taps his fingers absently against the seat, thinking. "I want to take just the patrol leaders."

"The patrol leaders," Castiel repeats blankly; suddenly, this afternoon is showing a pattern.

"Yeah." Abruptly, he realizes Dean is watching him. "There's something going on with them, and I get the feeling--never mind. They're not gonna question me, I get that, but if I go out with them, maybe I can, I don't know, get something out of them."

"You mean they may talk to you if I'm not present."

"I was really careful not to say that," Dean protests, expression half-guilty, half something else. "If the old team leaders used to run the camp for Dean, they probably know that their predecessors..."
reported directly to Dean about any problems. So maybe if you're not there--"

"I could stop attending patrol meetings."

Dean rolls his eyes. "Jesus, Cas. No."

Castiel's hands tighten on the wheel. "You think their problem is me. That would be the easiest solution to the problem."

"I don't know what their problem is," Dean says. "They're new at their jobs, maybe. I could be imagining it, I get that."

He's not; the only surprise is that it took this long for him to notice. Before Dean can continue, he puts the jeep back in drive and resumes their return to the camp. "You could be evaluating them."

"What?"

"The reason you want to take only the patrol leaders," he says, keeping his gaze fixed on the road. "In that case, if you don't give them any orders, or give them ones that they don't expect, they'll assume you want to evaluate their competence. They'll probably assume you waited this long to do it to give them time to adjust to their positions."

"Sounds good." He can feel Dean studying him. "Cas--"

"I apologize for what I said," he interrupts. "You surprised me, and I reacted badly. You're right, of course; Dean often took patrol shifts when he didn't have a mission, and it's been enough time since your miraculous return that they would expect you to return to your regular duties. I'm sure the last few weeks have been very confusing for them."

"Maybe they miss the way things were," Dean says casually, then abruptly changes the subject. "Joe's back next week. I’m almost gonna miss Phil's reports. No one can make a salvage job sound like an epic novel in progress."

"His reports seem to have acquired a narrative voice," he agrees warily, glancing at Dean, who smirks back. "I've read worse."

"Dude, you read hippo porn," Dean answers, smirk widening. "So you gonna wait until he hits novel-length before you tell the poor guy you're not interested?"

Castiel snorts. "If all he wanted was to have sex with me, why wouldn't he simply ask?"

"You know, not even gonna argue," Dean says meditatively, straightening as Chitaqua comes into view. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"No."

Dean grins at him as they reach the gate, and it's almost as if the earlier conversation didn't happen at all. "Wanna bet on it?"

Standing at the doorway of her cabin, Vera blinks at the sight of him sitting on the sagging stairs of the small porch.

"Hey." Belatedly, she comes out, pulling the door closed behind her and joining him on the step. "How long've you been sitting here?"
"Why I'm sitting here would be more to the point."

"Trip to Georgia by any chance?" Started, he looks at her. "It's been six months, Cas; much longer, they're gonna be wondering…." 

"I know." He thinks of Dean in the jeep today. "I need more time."

"Okay." She nudges him with her shoulder. "So, if you came here to talk--well, that'd be different, yeah. If you didn't, I'll get it out of you eventually anyway."

Castiel gives her a sidelong glance. "I'm sober."

"So I can't use my old tricks," she agrees. "I don't mind learning new ones."

"Your knee seems better," he observes, which makes her grin widen.

"Yeah, it's great," she says, straightening her leg ostentatiously before cocking her head. "The weather's nice, too."

"The flora is very lush," he offers. "Small talk is complicated to utilize appropriately."

"It gets easier when you use it regularly," she says, hiking up one leg and resting her chin in her hand. "Or ever. I didn't think you even knew what it was."

"Asking inane questions to acquire answers I either already know or have no interest in always seemed a waste of time I could be spending doing--well, anything else. Watching paint dry, for example."

"You've watched paint dry?"

"It would be interesting to calculate the exact speed of coagulation and compare the rate of the first coat compared to the second."

"Start small; paint your fingernails," she advises. "The answer is, the amount of time it takes you smudge it; it'll dry right afterward, every goddamn time."

"A corollary of Murphy's Law, I assume." It's well past dusk, and Castiel finds himself staring at the sky, wondering when he last saw the stars. "When Dean was gone, whose decision was it for me to assume his duties until he could be found? Don't tell me there was an actual vote; the sheer irony might kill me."

"I wondered if you were ever going to ask about that." Stretching her legs out in front of her, she looks down. "Still pissed?"

"I'm sure if I had the time, I would be," he answers. "Until then, assume this is simply morbid curiosity."

"Okay." She sighs quietly. "You get there wasn't a lot of time, right?"

"The obvious solution would have been for someone on one of the patrol teams to take command." Sidney or Kyle, he doesn't say, but she knows that as well as he does. "So why didn't they do so?"

"Command, yeah, that would have been nice," she says reflectively. "What we got was a continuous argument on whether to go search for Dean immediately or wait since he'd ordered us not to, and God knows you don't disobey Dean's orders. Not that they'd do anything," she adds in disgust. "Good luck there, though; it bought us some time. We followed the chain of command,"
like we were taught when we were wee hunters, and everyone fell right into line, it was like magic."

He lifts his head. "'We'."

"Mark was on watch that night." She gives him a sideways glance, unrepentant. "Fine, maybe it was a little coup, I had to move fast, okay? Not like anyone argued with a *fait accompli*. The revolution begins in your mind, and no one had a lot of that going on that night."

"You mean obedience," he agrees bitterly.

"I mean, the only person besides Dean no one *would* disobey. You better thank whatever you believe in these days that was true or--Cas, you ever think, really think, about what would have happened if you hadn't come back that night?"

The break in his voice would be reminder enough if he hadn't. "I know."

"So what's the problem?"

"When you came to see me the other day, you said you wanted to know if I was okay. I thought at the time it was small talk."

Vera doesn't answer for a moment, then lets out a breath. "Okay, I'm impressed. I didn't think you noticed."

"I didn't, then," he answers. "I was just reminded today why that might not have been a casual question. Dean is taking the new patrol leaders on patrol to evaluate them."

"That's what he told you?" she asks neutrally.

"That's the excuse I told him to use, since he didn't want to tell them outright that he'd noticed they want to tell him something and my presence was inhibiting them."

"Yeah, the old team leaders didn't have a problem getting Dean alone. Now?" Vera kicks her heels against the step restlessly. "Cas, gotta tell you, I'd be surprised if--"

"Do you trust them?"

She hesitates, biting her lip. "I don't know yet. Which is more than--do you?"

"I don't know." Castiel doesn't look at her. "I should have told Dean that there would be repercussions from having me--"

"Doing something?" She shakes her head. "I think he knows that, better than anyone here. If he doesn't care--which Dean is known for--then why do you?"

"The former team leaders thought I had too much influence on Dean before this, when I was actively working to alienate him in the rare times I wasn't drunk or high," he answers brittlely. "Now--"

"They're dead." He remembers Chuck asking him about the team leaders the night they went to retrieve the bodies; he sounded the same. "Cas, I don't think they…wait." She straightens in alarm. "Are you worried about them turning on Dean? You think they *would*? Why?"

"No, of course not." He closes his eyes, trying to think, but there's no way to explain. "Perhaps I'm paranoid."
"Welcome to the club," she answers wryly. "He's--different."

Fighting down alarm, he looks at her, but she's frowning at her knees. "How?"

"Nothing big, and--I mean, whatever happened with Lucifer, maybe that--I don't know where I was going with that. He's doing new things. I mean, change is great." She blows out a breath, looking surprised at herself. "I don't even mean that ironically. Never thought I'd say that."

"Everyone thinks I had something to do with it." She shrugs, non-committal, which for her is as good as agreement. He closes his eyes. "Vera--"

"It's more the other way around, though. What he's doing has something to do with why you're--" She gestures with her free hand. "Seriously, did you start a twelve step program? Are there meetings? Where?"

"He asked for my help."

"Which right there is--well, not a miracle, we don't have those anymore, so--something." She looks at him thoughtfully. "You gonna tell me why?"

"Why I'm helping him?"

"For a start, yeah." The brown eyes are suddenly very sharp. "Cas, come the fuck on. He's back and a few days later, it's a whole new world where Castiel actually gives a shit about what happens on Earth." She winces, closing her eyes. "Okay, that wasn't fair."

"It was very fair." Castiel waits until she looks at him. "I didn't think it mattered what I did because it wouldn't change anything."

"And now?"

Castiel wonders how to explain; because he thinks what I do matters, and while I don't believe that, I know it matters to him. "I don't actually know what I'm doing."

"Yeah, but you know who you're doing it for," she answers quietly. "It's a start."

"Are humans always this oblique?"

"We do it to fuck with ex-angels. You didn't know?"

"I suspected." Vera flashes a grin, glancing down at his hands; following her gaze, he sees the lead still smeared on his fingers. "Not maps this time. I'm translating something for Dean. I thought he might find it interesting reading."

"What? Wait, let me get some coffee, I just made some." Automatically, as humans always do, she adds as she gets to her feet, "Uh, you want anything?"

"I'd like some coffee as well." She blinks at him in surprise. "Do you have cream and sugar?"

"Yeah?"

"I like those," he says. "Four spoons of sugar. I'm not sure of the amount of cream, but it was very light."

She cocks her head. "I'll make a guess. Be right back."
When she comes back, he takes the cup, pleased to see the color of the coffee is similar to that Dean achieved. "So what are you translating?"

Castiel waits patiently until she takes a drink. "Hippo porn."
Limping carefully toward Cas's cabin in the dull light of the setting sun, Dean pauses long enough to straighten and try to walk normally, because yeah, his ankle isn't broken, but it's very sprained right now. Again

Honestly, he'd blame Cas for that shit, but no one (so far) held a gun to his head to make him jump out of the jeep and take off at a dead run even though he felt that landing was bad. On the plus side, he's not dead and he figures (hopes) he can hold his own here. On the not so plus, Jesus, he hates anything fucking with his mobility.

He's distracted enough by sheer irritation that the sound of voices doesn't penetrate until he's in full view of the cabin, where Vera, Cas, and a tall blonde kid he vaguely recognizes from the watch seem to be just on the verge of yelling at each other. Well, Vera looks hostile, anyway, while the kid has the sense to look kind of scared of her. Cas, on the other hand, is sitting on the steps looking like sobriety just isn't worth this shit.

There's no way to retreat gracefully, and Cas's ability to sense him at twenty feet has got to be some kind of post-angelic superpower or something; the blue eyes flicker from the combatants to Dean and pause for an ominous moment.

"Dean," he says, and suddenly he's the center of everyone's attention.

He wouldn't usually mind, but in this case, the expression on Vera's face when she sees him gives him the impression that he may be the reason that she's pissed. He starts to acknowledge the greeting and unfortunately forgets why he's standing really still, a sharp slice of pain cutting from instep to groin in vivid reminder. And he can hide a lot of things, but he can feel the color drain from his face even as he catches his balance and that he can't hide.

Mojo or no mojo, Cas does something very like teleportation; before Dean's even caught his breath, one hand is below his elbow, and Cas is saying, "What happened?"

Beyond Cas, two sets of eyes watch him warily, and Dean's going to guess the guy must be Jeremy, who with Vera used to hold Cas's head out of the toilet or whatever the hell it was that happened when former angels go junkie in a big way.

"Erotic potential of brownies," Dean grits out before he gives up and lets Cas take his weight. The patrol leaders all milled around looking a combination of worried and freaked the fuck out until he got rid of them by the sheer awesome of being Dean Winchester (and limping bravely away), but unsurprisingly, this doesn't work on Cas.

"That was sarcasm, and--were you attacked?" Castiel leads him to the cabin beneath two pairs of bemused eyes before almost shoving him down on the stairs. Crouching on the lower step, Castiel shoves up Dean's blood-soaked sleeve to stare at the makeshift bandage. "You were attacked by a colony of brownies?"

"One, didn't know they came in colonies," Dean hisses, hideously aware of Vera and probably-Jeremy drifting closer. "Not in front of the kids." Literally, in maybe-Jeremy's case: what the hell?

Cas ignores him. "What happened?"
"There was a thing," Dean says. "They went after our wheels when I asked to stop so I could look around."

"You asked them to stop." It's not a question. "Why?"

Dean tries to impress by dint of staring how much he's not answering that right now. Cas's eyes flicker to Dean's boot and then to his hastily wrapped arm, eyes narrowing. He's not sure if it's him or the patrol leaders who are the actual target of that look, but if it's them, he really feels bad for what they're going to be dealing with in what will probably be the very near future.

"We should go the infirmary," Cas says finally, sounding a weird mix of pissed and resigned. Even weirder, it's not exactly unfamiliar; he gets that a lot from Cas.

"No fucking way." Dean tries to think about moving and feels a warning twinge straight to his knee. So moving may be a bad idea, but he's pretty sure his ankle is swollen in his boot, and he probably needs to deal with that. "It's just--"

"Do you know the infection rate caused by brownie bites?" Cas interrupts. "Dean, any potential infection could--"

"I'll take care of it," Vera says unexpectedly. "Alicia's with Joe anyway. Your kit up to date?"

"In the kitchen under the sink," Cas answers, never looking away from Dean. "I checked it this morning." He conveys with a look this is the very reason he did, which hey, good thinking.

"I'm fine," Dean tries, already knowing he's going to lose this one. He actually doesn't know what's in brownie teeth, come to think; he also didn't know they were vicious little fuckers, so the more you know. "I don't need--"

"Oh, we learned this lesson a while back," Vera says as she passes Cas. "Jer, help Cas while I'll get prepped." Taking the steps two at a time, Vera goes inside with a swish of beads as Cas helps him get to his feet and Jeremy hovers in easy helping distance on the off-chance Cas needs it.

"Jesus," Dean breathes as he hobbles inside, feeling like an idiot and drops onto the couch with a grunt. Over the blinding pain, he can almost hear Cas thinking how right he was about never letting Dean leave the camp without his supervision again and just hates everything, ever.

The truth is, leaping boldly after goddamn brownies was pretty much his only option after the growing weirdness of the six hours that preceded it. Which on a guess, he doesn't think Cas will appreciate as an excuse.

He checks back in on current events when something that feels like acid washes across his now-bared arm and Cas is saying, "…no hospitals available, if you'll remember, much less a doctor. If you're seriously injured, our resources are limited."

He watches, a little nauseated, as Vera expertly dresses the brownie wound. Honest to God, while he's been ripped up by hellhounds, those fuckers at least are truth in advertising. Brownies' tiny jagged teeth just come out of nowhere and while the wounds are tiny rips in flesh and muscle, the similarity is uncanny and way too familiar for Dean's peace of mind.

"Think he knows about that," Vera is saying in amusement, stripping off a pair of latex gloves, another interesting note. Wearing gloves for something as simple as a bite seems like a lot of extra trouble, especially for former civilians, but the way she folds them together before turning them inside out and tossing them is way too automatic for anything but bone-deep habit. "I'll get him some z-pacs from the infirmary."
Dean really hates those. "I don't think--"

"Yes, please get them. The infection rate is seventy percent and from what I understand, it's not pleasant," Cas tells Dean as he helps Vera clean up. Watching him work is an unnerving reminder of how much experience he has doing this; as good as he and Sam ever did in a motel room, though Dean could live without the live audience in attendance. "Take off your boot."

"Wait," Vera says before Dean can argue, going down on her knees as Castiel repacks the first aid kit, long fingers ghosting over the boot and pausing just above the faint bulge. "Cas," she says, looking up with carefully restrained worry, "we're going to have to cut this off. Dean, did you run on this? You get you weren't even healed from the last injury, right?"

"Adrenaline," Dean says, trying not to twitch beneath the steady, unblinking stare that is Cas silently judging him; he forgot how he could just do that. "It's just--" he cuts himself off when Vera very gently touches a finger against the leather; okay, maybe that was actually worse than he thought. "I can do it."

Vera looks at him incredulously, reaching back to pull out a knife from nowhere, and Dean remembers at the most inappropriate moment possible what Cas said about some of his partners being the type to stay armed during sex.

"Cas, can you cut it off for me?" she asks, flipping the knife and offering it to him, hilt-first. "I'll be right back."

"Fuck my life," Dean says with a sigh, closing his eyes as he reaches for the back of the couch, more to brace himself than anything. After a moment, he feels Cas start to cut the laces; it hurts but nothing he can't handle, letting it wash through him in hot, jagged waves.

After a while, Dean opens his eyes as Vera tapes his ankle, mouth set in a stern line. "Done yet?" he asks hopefully. Her head jerks up, a few loose locks of hair brushing against her face as she looks at him incredulously. "What?"

"Sorry I'm taking so much of your valuable time making sure this actually heals right," she answers acidly, going back to work. Jeremy winces, shooting her a glance like he's not sure she's entirely sane, while Cas just looks like he's considering how to make sure Dean never has fun again in his life. "Second degree, maybe, but I'll check it in the morning. That's two weeks of no walking for you," she says as she sits back, stripping off the second pair of gloves with professional inattention. "Cas, get the morphine. His tolerance is too high to bother with anything else and we don't have a muscle relaxant in inventory."

"I don't need painkillers." It's a lie; he really does. Straightening, he accidentally drags his heel an inch of rug and feels every goddamn fiber all the way to his teeth. He suppresses his reaction, but he's never yet figured out how to suppress his body's tells and feels a cold sweat rising on his skin. "Uh, it'll. Be fine."

"Look, it's not about your ego right now, it's about making sure that doesn't get worse. You get you may have run yourself into a hairline fracture, right?" Vera turns her attention to Cas. "Give him half a field dose; that'll take the edge off."

Dean watches Cas retrieve the dose with the uncomfortable expertise of someone who did time with IVs recreationally and is reminded he used to do just that. Before now, Dean made an effort not to think much about what Cas was doing in more than hazy outlines and generalities, though Cas's collection definitely didn't help with that.
He takes the shot, mostly because she's probably right; twitchy team leaders or no twitchy team leaders, he really should have stopped the moment he felt the strain. If he's really honest, it wasn't even just that; watching them all day, it was brought home in force that he's way off the average here, and live lived like a paranoia fantasy minus the fantasy is an understatement. Being outclassed by the supernatural he's used to, but other people not so much, and he doesn't think it's going to bother him less as time goes on.

On the other hand, there's this. He suspects Vera's interaction with Dean Winchester since Debra has been at a distance and filtered as shit. Sure, it's embarrassing to sit here like an idiot getting patched up for a goddamn brownie bite, but if he's gonna get anywhere with Vera, her threat assessment of him has to get a lot lower. It's not just what happened to Debra, though; she's living at the end of the world in a militia, for fuck's sake. That she'd accept eventually accept if not forgive, but she sure as hell wouldn't be afraid of him, and he's pretty sure now she is, and he really wants to know why.

There's a semi-awkward silence afterward; awkward as in, there's some kind of silent conversation between Vera and Jeremy that seems to reference Cas, who looks at them like humans are just that goddamn annoying, and from the glances shot his way, he's pretty sure it's about him.

"I guess that means I'm stuck with your cooking," Dean tells Castiel finally. From the corner of his eye, he sees Vera straighten abruptly. "I heard good things about fasting."

"Shut up," Cas says pleasantly, leaning a hip against a chair. Yeah, when they're alone, it's gonna be a lot of fun around here. "Dean--"

"I'm saying, I fixed the range and everything, yet fire still confuses you."

"Not in certain contexts." Cas remarks, giving the general impression he's imagining Dean on fire right now. "If you try to stand up for the purposes of heating a can of substandard root vegetables...."

The sad thing is, he's going to have to. Cas can cook in theory but his views of food are so fucked up that he transmits his contempt or something into whatever it is they're supposed to be eating.

"So everything okay?" Dean breaks in a little desperately. "When I got here, looked like something was going on."

Cas's expression doesn't change, but Vera's hits some cross between anger and wariness, eyes flickering nervously to Cas. "Nothing. I mean, I was supposed to go back on patrol duty tomorrow. Just wondering why I'm not."

"Oh yeah, that." Vera blinks, mouth opening helplessly, which Dean takes advantage of immediately. "I have something else for you to do. But seriously, food would be good here."

"I'll get something from the mess if you want," Jeremy offers uncertainly, eyes darting frantically between them. Dean's guessing it's less altruistic than a deep, deep desire to get away; he has the look of a kid whose parents are bypassing the couch and approaching the motel accommodations of indefinite length relationship milestone, which is just so weird a thought he's not sure what to do with it. "If you don't mind, Cas--"

"Bring enough for everyone," Dean agrees happily, smiling at Vera's expression. "You free? I need to talk to you anyway."

Vera visibly hesitates before she nods. "Sure. I'll help Jeremy and stop off in the infirmary on the
"A great day, saw the sights, all of that." When he lifts his head, Castiel's expression is almost aggressively neutral. "You're dying to say 'I told you so', aren't you?"

"I only wish I could," Cas admits. "But even in my most pessimistic moments, I didn't consider the possibility of you being injured due to accidentally encountering a hostile colony of brownies."

"How did I not know brownies came in colonies?" Dean demands.

"The American education system is a disgrace."

Blowing out a breath, Dean straightens—carefully—and tries to think of what he's going to say. "So Vera's pissed?"

"More at you than me, but as I was here and you weren't, I'm not sure that makes much of a difference."

Dean winces. "Sorry about that."

"It might have been worse," Castiel answers philosophically.

"And Jeremy?"

"I think he was hoping his presence would be a restraining influence. He and Vera are very close, and he dislikes conflict."

"Seems like a nice kid," Dean says casually. "So his next birthday, should I get beer, or wait a couple more years for him to be able to legally drink it?"

"I'm sure he can legally drink anywhere in the Midwest; there is not a great deal of legal oversight here." Beneath Dean's steady gaze, however, he sighs, dropping to sit cross-legged on the floor. "The rule of law is somewhat difficult to understand when there's a lack of anything resembling law."

"How the hell did a kid end up here?"

"About sixteen months ago, Vera was on an extended mission for Dean that required spending several weeks on the west coast," Cas explains. "She went to LA to meet with one of Dean's contacts, unaware that the city was on the verge of being quarantined due to suspicion of a Croatoan outbreak. When the quarantine was imposed and the city became subject to martial law, it entered a state of anarchy from those trying to escape before the state could be classified as infected and measures taken to curtail its spread beyond the borders."

Dean's mouth goes dry. "What kind of measures?"
"Officially, all residents who wished to leave would report to one of the military checkpoints and
after three days of isolation, if they showed no symptoms, they were allowed to leave."

"And unofficially?"

"I don't know," Cas answers, looking into the middle distance. "Within six hours of the
announcement, the checkpoints were overwhelmed as people fled for the borders, where they were
shot on sight by the newly established border patrol supplemented by the army."

"The state was already zoned as infected before they even made the goddamn announcement,"
Dean says softly. "They didn't have a chance."

"They never do." Cas shakes himself, looking at Dean. "Vera didn't know LA well enough to be
able to escape, but staying for much longer was equally dangerous, and the information she had
was important. She met Jeremy, who offered to help her get out of LA and to the state borders,
which she had experience in crossing. His parents had been killed in the initial rioting and as his
chances of survival alone in LA were non-existent, she brought him back here."

"To a militia camp," Dean answers flatly. "Tell me he's eighteen on his next birthday and I might
believe you."

"He's seventeen now."

Jesus: he wanted to be wrong about that. "And no one noticed or Dean just didn't give a shit about
recruiting kids?"

"Dean was distracted due to an extended mission that required frequent absences from the camp.
By the time he became aware of Jeremy's presence, he'd been trained enough to take up duty with
the watch."

There's no fucking way anyone could have missed his age; he probably wasn't even shaving yet.
"Cas, you gonna tell me what actually happened or just keep pretending that what you're telling me
makes any kind of sense? There's no way that anyone got into this camp without Dean knowing
about it. You telling me she got back from a mission in a goddamn infected zone and no one did a
basic check in case she'd been compromised and found him hiding in the jeep?" Dean stops short,
feeling like an idiot. "You got him in."

"Vera told me the day she returned that he was concealed just beyond the local patrol route and
asked for my help."

"And you did it. Because they wouldn't check you." After today with the patrol leaders, that's not a
guess; explains how Cas got him inside the camp that first night, too.

"No," he answers with perfect composure, and for a minute, something inhuman looks out at Dean.
No, he thinks, feeling pinned by that cool regard; no one would ask Cas a damn thing when he
looked like that. "I evaluated him and told Dean when he returned that he was adequate for our
purposes and there was no reason he shouldn't stay. Dean accepted my judgment."

"Did you?"

"I'm relatively sure I must have been on the training ground at some point when he was also there."

"Because Vera asked you to."

Cas shrugs. "The sentimentality of her request appealed to me, as did the fact here could possibly
be preferable to anywhere else. She was correct, of course. He had nowhere else he could go."

Dean does the math on the timing. "That was soon after Debra died, right?"

"It had been several months."

"Why didn't she leave after Debra died?"

"I'm not sure," Cas says, and for the first time in this conversation, Dean can hear the almost-lie. "As I said, there weren't many places to go, and that was true for most of those here."

Dean pauses, not sure if he wants to know the answer to this one. "Was it you?"

"No, not in the sense we were involved when she was in training," Cas answers in surprise, the cool look cracking. "For one, she was grieving for her lover, and two, at the time, I was her instructor and sex would have been inappropriate." Dean doesn't smile at that, but under any other circumstances, he'd really want to; somehow, it's not a surprise this would be where Cas would draw a line. "She believed in what Dean was doing here, and there were other reasons she preferred to stay rather than try to find somewhere else to go. Most people come here for a very good reason, Dean; they want to fight. She wasn't any different in that."

"Is Jeremy good enough now? To fight, I don't mean we throw him out or anything, just--he's a kid. He shouldn't have to do this."

"He is very good. I was responsible for him coming here, so I handled his training personally, of course." Of course. "He promised to kill me when we were done every day, but he was far too exhausted for his aim to be a threat." Castiel raises an eyebrow. "I would also like to remind you that you were taken on hunts with your father well before puberty. His age is irrelevant to his abilities, and I assure you, left in LA, his life would have been far shorter than here."

Dean wants to argue that was with his dad and it wasn't fucking Lucifer they were chasing; it's also a really stupid argument. "Right, so you think he'll be okay on a team?"

"I don't think he'll object, no." Cas looks thoughtful. "Do you plan to tell Vera tonight what you have in mind for her?"

"I was going to wait until Joe got back and get a personal report on what he thinks of the people he took with him," Dean admits. "No real reason to wait, though; she can have Jeremy and pick two more and that'll get me five teams. When Joe gets back, she'll be used to them and I'll send both of them to start talking to the people here, find out if they need anything."

"Supplies."

"Unless you wanna start ploughing the training field and learn to farm, we're gonna have a problem with food we can't shoot," Dean agrees grimly. "Might as well start now; if it doesn't work, we need to know sooner than later and start thinking about how much we can get over the border. Getting supplies from the border guard is a whole different ball game when it's necessities; they think we're desperate, they'll triple the price on everything."

Cas nods, but his expression is speculative. "Five teams." Yes, Dean can do math, surprise.

"I'm not putting Sid back out there until I'm sure his team'll survive it." Cas tilts his head, which tells Dean that he knows there's more. "With Joe and Vera, that also makes two team leaders that aren't scared of you."
Cas's expression doesn't change, but Dean can see him go still. Sitting back, Dean ignores the sharp pain from the inadvertent jolt to his ankle, staring at Cas. "You said humans react to you weird, I get that. I don't get how after all this time, they haven't gotten over it."

"What are you accusing me of?"

"What?" Dean blinks at him before he realizes what Cas means. "Cas, I'm not accusing you of beating them up for shits and giggles, okay? Just level with me; what's their problem with you? They don't even know you. I mean, they really don't, it's weird. So just get it out there."

"They were all on the team leaders' personal teams."

"Yeah, Chuck told me, that's why I figured they'd be okay as team leaders," Dean answers. "Mistake with Sid, yeah, lesson learned. So it was the old team leaders that had a problem with you?"

"Yes," Cas answers unhelpfully. "We didn't get along."

"Risa seemed okay with you," he tries, groping for the memories of Risa and Cas. He didn't get the impression she particularly liked him, but it wasn't anything like what he felt today. Vaguely, he remembers Chuck saying something about Cas and the old team leaders: he really should have followed up on that.

To his surprise, Cas hesitates a moment before answering. "Except Risa, yes."

Dean tries to decide how much it's worth pushing right now. Cas is way too good at giving him answers that aren't lies, but might as well be, and he's getting tired of it.

"I know you made a point of being a dick, but that doesn't explain this kind of reaction to you. Out of all of them, Mel was the only one who's dialed back to defcon three around you, and today she wasn't--never mind." He's not sure what to make of Mel's glares at Sidney, who wasn't nearly as good as he thought at hiding how he felt. "So they got this from the former team leaders, okay. What was their problem?"

Cas doesn't fidget, twitch, tap, or do anything a normal person does when they're stationary for any length of time, which over a month of exposure has taught Dean isn't Cas's default state, not anymore. Cas is restless, barely leashed energy indifferently contained, and it's an effort for him to be still.

This stillness, however, isn't like that, and Dean honestly doubts that Cas lets himself do this very often; like the strength and speed, he minimized what couldn't be hidden, and like those two things, with Dean, the habit seems to be slipping. Of all the times to realize that, this may be the worst; this conversation already has the earmarks of something that Cas didn't like to think about (forgot?), and Dean wasn't excited about doing this before.

"When we settled here," Cas says slowly, "and Dean began to recruit, the majority of the recruits were either hunters or victims of Lucifer who then became hunters." He pulls up one knee, looking at nothing. "As I told you, some were unstable, but their skills were invaluable, and few of those who survived the early attacks were particularly sane in any case. Dean offered them the possibility of vengeance, and for many, vengeance was all that they had left. Considering the nature of our mission, commitment was a very desirable trait in a recruit."

"You mean obsession," Dean counters. "How many John Winchesters does it take to kill Lucifer anyway?"
"We haven't managed to yet, so the answer is obviously more than we have." Cas shakes his head, eyes distant. "At Chitaqua, they found others among the recruits who shared their suffering and understood their need for revenge. Dean gave them hope, companionship, purpose in living, and in return, they gave him their loyalty." He hesitates, and already, Dean knows what's coming next. "I don't think Dean understood what he had become to them or what that would mean when he told me to train them. I didn't, not then."

"He wanted fanatics. He understood what he was looking at it, Cas; he was counting on it." Cas looks away. "When did you figure it out?"

"You mean, when it became a problem?"

"Yeah."

"Between Lucifer's genocidal intentions and the Host's disappearance, angels were not very popular. Even Fallen and mortal, I wasn't what I appeared to be, and--I was tired of pretending I didn't notice--I didn't handle it well." A flicker of something raw crosses his face before vanishing, but it's enough. "It was the first time a human had ever referred to me as Lucifer's brother."

Dean lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding. "You didn't tell Dean."

"Technically speaking, Lucifer was also Dean's brother," Cas answers with a flickering glance. "They were unaware of that connection, and it seemed wiser to not bring it to his attention."

He wonders what that is translated from Cas to English; if he thought Dean would react badly, or if he already knew Dean wouldn't care enough to deal with it. "So they didn't trust you."

"That would be an understatement. They saw me as both a threat and a dangerous influence on Dean. They resented me openly, but at the time, I didn't particularly care."

What do you do when you meet a genuine Fallen angel of the Lord in a militia camp at the end of the world? He's faster, stronger, and he doesn't care if you hate him because he's got a job to do and is getting that shit done whether you like it or not. Dean knows how he'd react--history is useful like that--but it turns out some people double down on that kind of thing.

"That sounds stupidly dangerous."

Cas snorts. "After training with me, they were well aware of what I could do. The former team leaders also knew the risk of failure was far too high to test with impunity."

"They wanted to kill you?" Cas's expression doesn't change, but Dean knows him, and that says everything. "They actually tried, didn't they? They tried to kill you."

"I doubt that could possibly become a problem with the new patrol leaders," Cas answers, like that's even fucking relevant, or even comes close to answering the question. "None of them would risk almost certain failure when they know how I would react."

"Which would be...."

"I would kill them."

Dean swallows hard. "That's what you told the old team leaders?"

"No," Cas answers calmly, meeting Dean's eyes. "I killed the first one that tried."
Dean's still taking that in when Vera and Jeremy make the porch; they're louder than they need to be, but he figures this conversation was going to be over right there anyway. He leans back into the couch, hiding his face with a blank stare at the ceiling that hopefully looks more pathetic than freaked out; Cas just says, "You needn't have gone to the trouble; I can cook."

"You really can't," Dean hears himself say in a surprisingly normal voice. Straightening, he smiles at Vera and Jeremy and grits his teeth; he can deal with this. "Vera, you want your own team?"

Vera stops short, a box from the infirmary dropping to the floor with an audible thunk. Jeremy almost runs into her before he corrects himself, both of them staring at Dean. "What?"

"Team leader," he says, grinning more naturally at her expression of disbelief. "So what do you think?"

Dinner isn't so much awkward as weirdly charged, though Dean can't tell if it's him or Vera and Jeremy. Cas is just Cas, calmly eating whatever the hell this is, which actually isn't bad, though he thinks it helps that he has no idea what's in it or if the meat was recently alive and what animal it was attached to. The company also encourages Cas to actually eat more than some internal minimal requirement.

That little explanation about his relationship with his body explains a lot about Cas's flirtation with heroin-chic, and it makes him think about what Cas said about trial and error, repetition, life lived were something as simple as eating needed to be remembered or he wouldn't do it. Watching Vera methodically time her eating to drag out the meal and add social pressure to Cas actually finishing his plate (good idea; he's gonna try that) tells him a.) she's done this before, and b.) she probably knows why she has to.

(It occurs to him that this may be a reason Cas didn't put up nearly the kind of fight Dean expected when he got them on a sane living schedule; he needs to think about that, too.)

Dean knew Vera wouldn't refuse his offer and after today, he's got a pretty good idea why. Knowing she was the one who led the coup that put Cas (very reluctantly) in charge of Chitaqua means she's probably motivated now to even out the odds among the current team leaders, but what he doesn't know and can't ask is why the hell Vera did it in the first place.

The story about Jeremy gives him some context on why the hell she seems to like him, but he wonders what she was thinking to go to the resident goddamn junkie in the first place for help, even if he was her instructor when she got here. Considering everyone probably knows why Cas and the former team leaders didn't get along, Vera's attitude--like Amanda's and even Joe's--is refreshingly free of fear and God knows, she doesn't have any problem facing off with Cas the former angel when she's pissed, which argues--fuck if Dean knows.

After Vera and Jeremy leave, Dean watches Cas, without prompting--though after a considerable delay, but visible proof that Dean's made progress on teaching Cas about habitable living conditions--take the dishes to the kitchen. The sound of water running--after invisibly examining the other cabins, he knows now that working plumbing is less a right than a privilege you really have to work for--is something of a minor revelation; Cas is practicing his cohabitation skills for the purposes of avoidance. Of Dean.

It's a few long minutes before the water turns off, and even longer until Cas appears at the doorway. Dean wonders if anyone else would notice Cas's reluctance to so much as come back into the room.
"Do you wish me to help you get to bed?"

Dean tries to think of something to say and gives up, aware of a faint headache forming behind his eyes, along with a belated throbbing from both his arm and his ankle which may or may not be psychosomatic. Not like he's going to sleep tonight anyway.

"Sure," he says, then adds, "Look--"

"You don't have to offer reassurance you don't believe," Cas interrupts, pausing beside the couch. "His name was Luke and he was one of Dean's lieutenants. He tried to kill me, and I retaliated by killing him."

There isn't a word for how Dean feels about this right now. Mostly, all he can think of is Cas telling him in Dean's cabin that day that he wouldn't sleep in his own goddamn cabin while Dean was there so Dean wouldn't kill him. Like maybe that part wasn't bullshit; he meant it. It wasn't personal or anything; he learned humans did that kind of thing. They kill people they don't like. It happens.

"If you hadn't killed him," Dean asks, "would someone else have tried?"

"I know that was the last time anyone tried to put a bullet in my head in this camp," he answers flatly. "Do you have any other questions?"

Jesus, yeah, starting with how the hell could Dean fucking Winchester let that happen. "No--"

"Then you should go to bed. It's very late, and I can give you more morphine later so you can sleep tonight without pain."

Right. "Yeah, okay." Letting Cas help him to his feet, Dean wishes the goddamn headache would go away so he could think. "Cas--"

"You need time to think about it." Leaving Dean on the edge of the bed, Cas retreats to the door too quickly for it to be anything other than an escape. "If you need anything--"

"You'll be there," Dean interrupts, meeting Cas's eyes and trying to convey something--anything--that will make Cas stop looking at him like something just ended, like maybe he should sleep somewhere else tonight and every night after. "I know. Thanks."

Cas hesitates before nodding. "You're welcome. Good night."

Dropping back on the mattress, Dean stares at the ceiling, thinking of the team leaders today on patrol, what they didn't know how to ask him and he didn't know enough to answer. It helps to have the context, but he's still not sure of the question: if Cas would do it again, or if he would let him. The answer's the same either way: no.

No, Cas won't do it again; no, he won't let him; no, because he won't have to. He's not the Dean fucking Winchester who wanted a camp of fanatics but didn't deal with the shit that came with them. Anyone pulls a gun on Cas and means to use it, he'll take care of them himself.

Half-awake, Dean gropes blearily for the covers he kicked off during the night, so cold he can feel his teeth chattering. Getting the blankets in one hand, he hesitates, suddenly aware of the silence around him; it shouldn't be this quiet. He should be able to hear--something.

Vaguely alarmed, he swings his legs over the edge of the bed and has to pause at vertigo strong
enough to make him almost throw up. Swallowing frantically, he ignores the distant throbbing in his arm when he tries to use it to brace himself, trying to remember what he was doing. Snoring, that's what he's missing, Sam's goddamn snoring, the annoying soundtrack of his life.

Frowning, he raises a hand to rub his eyes, wondering what the hell they were doing today--and why they're doing it in fucking sub-zero temperatures--and the vivid-white of the bandage around his arm catches his attention. Flexing his arm, he tries to focus, but the pain is distant, and not like a really good painkiller, either.

"Sam?" he says uncertainly, getting to his feet and barely catching himself on the mattress at the sickening tilt of the room that makes his stomach churn unpleasantly, ankle throbbing with every beat of his heart. As soon as he can see past the black spots dancing in his vision, he starts toward where he thinks the other bed should be, but the faint light coming from around the motel room door gets his attention, and he feels like an idiot. Sam probably went for a soda or something, right.

He thinks about getting back in bed, but a soda sounds like a pretty good idea right now; his mouth tastes like shit. It seems like forever crossing the bare wood floor, catching himself against the doorway with a grunt; Jesus, what the hell were they hunting? And where for that matter; that's something else he thinks he should probably know.

Opening the door, he stumbles out, and only belatedly becomes aware he's still standing on wood, not concrete. Looking around, he tries to make sense of what he's seeing. There's no concrete or asphalt or cars, no sound of the highway, no stretch of starry sky, just a room he's never seen before, and dimly, a blurry figure stretched out on the couch that sits up, head turning in slow-motion to look at him.

The rush of adrenaline makes him dizzy; blur or not, no one has blue eyes like that.

"Cas," he breathes in horror; this can't be happening, not again. It can't. "How?"

"Dean," Castiel says, getting to his feet. Panicked, Dean realizes he doesn't have a weapon and how the fuck had that even happened? Not that it would matter, he thinks in groggy horror as Castiel comes closer; he still has no idea how to kill a god. "Dean, what are you--"

"Where's Sam?" It's so stupid, he hadn't even thought about it, but of course, of course he'd go after Sam. He thought this was over, he--Jesus, it wasn't over. The reservoir was a lie, the hospital, everything. Of course it was. "What did you do with him?"

He backs up a step and nearly falls when Castiel comes closer. "Dean, I don't think--"

"You can't do this," Dean whispers, mouth dry. He never thought Castiel would go this far. Kill him, yeah, but not Sam. Not Sam--and he doesn't know why he believed that. Gods don't play by anyone's rules, and Castiel…. "Give him back."

Castiel stops short. "Dean, where are you right now?"

"You know, you son of a bitch. Give him back." Dean feels the open door at his back, but he doesn't know where Sam is and Castiel might do anything, anything at all, and he can't--why can't he think? Is Castiel fucking with his head, too? "Worship, that what you want? That what it takes?"

Castiel's eyes widen. "Where are you, Dean?"

"Fuck you, you want that? Fine." Dean drops to his knees, the floor angling up to meet him. Catching himself on one hand, wood scraping against his palm, he thinks vaguely there's something wrong with this, but right now, he can't worry about it, because Sam. "Pledge--pledge--"
"Dean, don't--"

"Pledge my loyalty and love," he spits out, a convulsive shudder shaking his body, and he can't quite make his teeth stop chattering. It's so fucking cold. "You got it. Give me Sam back."

To his surprise, Castiel doesn't respond. When Dean looks up, there are two of him--Christ, he thinks, two--and he's so still that Dean can almost hear the wind outside.

"Please," he adds, wondering what else Castiel wants from him; he's got everything now. "I'm sorry. Give me Sam back. Please, give him back."

In the silence that follows, Dean can't hear anything but his own panting, arm shaking as it tries to hold him up. He feels it start to give out--he's going to fall on his face in front of Castiel, he thinks blurrily--but his face never hits wood, worn denim suddenly appearing beneath his cheek. A warm hand is pressed against his forehead, making him shake even more; he knows it's Castiel's, but it feels so good that he just doesn't care.

"I'm sorry," Dean tries desperately, not sure what he's apologizing for. "Please--"

"There is nothing to forgive," Castiel murmurs, sounding--he has no idea. "This is what he tried to do to you."

Dean tries to lift his head, but angelic strength--divine strength?--holds him in place. He's not exactly sorry for it; giving up shouldn't feel this much like relief. "Sam. You gotta--"

"I need you to go back to bed," Castiel says firmly, fingers threading through Dean's hair with surprising gentleness, and God, he's so tired. He doesn't think he's ever been this tired in his entire life. "Your brother will be returned to you. Please avoid making any further vows meant to last into perpetuity, please."

Dean nods weakly, feeling Castiel shift beneath his head, hands gentle on his shoulders, fingers trailing down his arm to the bandage and skimming over the soreness he didn't realize was bothering him until it flares into active pain.

Castiel must use his new god mojo at some point, because the next thing Dean knows is he's in bed again, light flaring in his peripheral vision. Wincing, he blinks the afterimage from his eyes as Castiel sits on the edge of the bed, holding--something, Dean has no idea.

"Where's Sam?" he manages; he's got to know. "You said--"

"I keep my promises," Castiel says, touching his face, the rough scrape of calluses against his cheek a surprise. Why would Castiel have calluses? "For now, I need you to take this." Something is pressed against his lips; obediently, Dean takes it, rolling it on his tongue without interest before swallowing it dry. Not like he has any reason to refuse; Castiel can do whatever the fuck he wants now. It doesn't even matter anymore. Several smaller ones follow--pills, he realizes belatedly, bitter-sharp edges like aspirin or maybe ibuprofen, Dean has no idea. "Go to sleep," Castiel says, helping Dean stretch out on the bed. "It will help."

"Freezing," Dean murmurs, surprised his breath doesn't freeze in the air. "Why--"

"Sleep," Castiel interrupts quietly, piling the blankets on top of him until it's almost possible he might eventually get warm again. "I need to see someone."

"Don't worry," a woman's voice is saying, and it's only in their sudden absence that he recognizes
the presence of her hands as she draws back. "Get Alicia in the infirmary and tell her what's going on. She'll know what we need. This shit happens sometimes."

"You're certain?" Cas, he thinks blurrily. "It's only been a few hours since he was bitten."

"He'll be fine," she answers confidently. "Couple of days, no problem."

He's out again.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

--Interlude--

It gets much weirder when Lucifer shows up.

Dean tries to refresh the wards again, but for some reason, it's just not working, and he can't figure out why. It feels like he's been standing here for decades, surrounded in fading grass under the grey light of a sun forever dying behind so many layers of clouds it may never find its way out again. His right arm aches, tightly swollen skin crisscrossed with angry red lines that continue to leak fluid even after they stop bleeding. He's got to finish this, but no matter how often he cuts his arm for fresh blood, the sigils vanish almost as soon as he finishes writing them.

Eventually, he figures he'll feel dizzy from blood loss--at this point he thinks he should maybe be dead or something--but mostly, he's thinking that Lucifer's interruption is not helping him concentrate. That goddamn stare is annoying.

Tipping his head back, he glares into Lucifer's smug face. "You want something?"

Lucifer smirks down at him from his seat at the top of the wall as the last sigil vanishes before Dean's bloody fingers even finish drawing it. Frustrated, he wonders if Lucifer thinks wearing Sam's body is supposed to make this harder. They don't look alike at all.

"All I want is everything," Lucifer tells him, like he thinks he cares or something. "I think I've waited long enough."

"We had it first," Dean tells him impatiently, slicing a new line along his forearm until he hits the elbow. Slicking his fingers through the fresh blood, he doggedly tries again. "What the hell gives you the right, anyway?"

"Spoils of war," Lucifer answers, tapping each point against the top of the wall. "Possession is nine-tenths of the law. What is ours, we keep."

"It's not yours."

"What you give up, you never get back." Lucifer's eyes flicker to the symbol vanishing even as Dean draws it. Frustrated, he pulls out his other knife with a jarring shriek of metal on metal and blinks down at it, startled. It's familiar: sharp and dull, stained with old blood that still drips fresh and new, rotting flesh clinging to the edges and around the hilt, agonized screaming written so deeply into the metal that he can almost hear it now. "It was a lie, you know. You never left."

Hand shaking, he shoves the knife back into its sheathe and gets the first one out again. Watching the well of blood and pus, his entire arm throbbing in time with the fast beat of his heart, he bloods his fingers and turns back to the wall. The sigil's absorbed like its being written into a sponge, gone almost before he starts.

Stepping back, he stares at the key, wondering what he's missing. "Why the hell isn't this working?"

"Blood is very powerful," Lucifer observes, dropping to the ground. "Wards to keep out the
supernatural generally require it be human. Maybe yours just isn't human enough."

Dean ignores him, making another cut and dipping his fingers into the still-bleeding wound as an image begins to form in his mind. It's familiar, too, but in a different way; he draws it from memory, easy, and this time, it doesn't vanish.

When he steps back, he recognizes the whorls that form Cas's true name. "Oh."

"I offered him a place in Hell," Lucifer says in annoyance as he looks at it, like he's continuing a conversation that hey, they aren't having. "I offered him all the kingdoms of the world. I offered him all that he should want. He still refused."

"And he told you to fuck yourself." Lucifer scowls, crossing his arms, and Dean's really seeing the resemblance to a spoilt kid. "It's killing you, isn't it? You have no idea what he wants."

Lucifer gives him a dark look. "That he should even understand what it is to want anything is obscene. The Host certainly failed at discipline. When I was among their number, he would have been executed for his disobedience."

"Kids these days," Dean agrees absently, his attention riveted on Cas's name. Something's definitely happening now; thin lines of light emerge, absorbing the blood before spreading over the wall like living vines, and with a sense of growing anticipation, Dean watches them crawl toward the key.

He's not disappointed; at the moment of contact, there's an almost audible click, the key flashing into brilliant life, alight with the Grace of the last angel on earth.

Fascinated, Dean turns in a slow circle, following the edge of light as the sigils that protect the camp began to light up one by one across the length of the wall. It's fast, like watching summer lightning flash across a clear sky, glittering lines of gold zigzagging over the surface of the wall and back toward them, aiming right for the key and meeting it with a second flash of light.

Abruptly, the grey day is consumed with light so bright it's almost blinding, joyous welcome he can feel all the way to his bones. Swallowing, Dean touches the key with one bloody finger and--

"Wait," he says, startled. "You hear that?"

"I should have killed him when I killed Dean," Lucifer mutters sulkily, apropos of fucking nothing. It's like he doesn't even notice he's standing in a bowl of light. He's not even notice he's standing in a bowl of light. Like he can't even see it. "What was I thinking?"

"Archangels tried; remember how that went? The whole Host tried, and he still came back." He grins at Lucifer's scowl while surreptitiously scanning for where it's coming from. "He refused you, and you just let him walk away. Dude's like the Terminator. Worried he'd just come back again?"

"My Father," Lucifer grinds out, "isn't here to care."

"Think he'd tell you if he was?"

Lucifer rolls his eyes, skin washed to a sickly yellow in the light of walls, each sigil gleaming gold and bright enough to light up the whole world. "Maybe I don't want to kill him. Maybe I just want him to give up."

"On his dad, or on himself?"
"On you." Dean stiffens, rubbing his arms restlessly, looking around again; it has to be pretty close. "Humans are always such a disappointment, he should know that by now. What makes you any different?"

That, he reflects, is a very good question.

Looking away, he blinks at the wall behind Lucifer; the light is moving again, the suggestion of a rectangle like a door forming before his eyes. Wiping the sweat from his eyes--when did it get so hot?--he tries to work out how to get Lucifer to leave; he's pretty sure he shouldn't see that.

"Fuck off, would you?" he says, concentrating on the shape of the door; so that's where it's coming from. "No, wait, you're doing that now. Having problems with your army? Where is it, by the way?"

"What do you think you're doing?" Lucifer asks softly, brown eyes boring into his. "You can't fight me. You don't even know where to start."

He really wishes Lucifer would shut up already.

"You already lost, Dean. Humanity lost before you were even born."

*Conquest is much easier when the other side of the war can't even step on the field and fight.*

"You can't win," Lucifer says confidently, no room for argument; he says it like water's wet and the end of the world's already done, like prophecy foretold since the beginning of time. Dean really hates prophecy, and it says something that Lucifer's the only thing he likes less. "It's over, Dean. Surely you can see that."

*You assume you'd lose before there's even a battle to be fought.*

"I haven't even stepped on the field." Behind Lucifer, the door yawns open, spilling warm yellow light over them both and yeah, it's *definitely* coming from there. Fuck Lucifer. Shoving him aside, Dean starts toward it. "It's not over yet."

"…isn't responding, why isn't he responding, this doesn't even make *sense*!"

Someone, Dean reflects dazedly, is pretty pissed right now.

"Then we should try something else." That's Cas; no one monotones like that.

"Yeah, why didn't I think of that?" the first voice answers tiredly--a woman, he thinks, but he can't get his eyes open long enough to be sure. His first attempt to move sends a bolt of pain shooting up his arm and he almost blacks out. Desperate, he clings to the sound of her voice to keep conscious. "Okay, let me think, it's been a while."

"What are your options?"

"Not a lot, the infirmary doesn't have….I need--" She laughs a little hysterically. "A hospital would be nice."

"We can do that."

There's a long pause. "Yeah, right, okay. Uh, we need--Jesus, everything--"

"Make a list," Cas says calmly. "Be specific, be thorough, and I'll order a search of every major
city in the state."

"Okay, that'll work. I also need some--" her voice cracks. "Reference books, the library in Kansas City's still standing. Jesus, I searched it for Dean once, where were the fucking medical--I should go--"

"You can't go."

"I know," she answers impatiently. "Send Alicia, she's an EMT, she knows what to look for. She might think of something I wouldn't."

"How long do you need?"

"Um." There's a pause. "Thirty minutes, I need to check with Chuck on inventory first."

"I'll stay with Dean. Send Joseph and Alicia here before you see Chuck. They'll coordinate the teams' efforts so they'll be ready when you finish your list. Go."

"Got it."

Her footsteps fade rapidly into the distance and he thinks he hears the sound of beads. Dean makes a massive effort and manages to get his eyes open; Christ, it's like a furnace in here.

"What's going on?" he wants to say; he has no idea if he managed to get it all out, but it must have been something, because abruptly, Cas is beside him. "Cas?"

"How are you feeling?" Dean struggles for an answer for a few seconds before Cas shakes his head sharply, blue eyes dark. "Never mind, I can guess. You should rest."

Dean tries to look a question, even though he has no idea what to ask. He's getting the idea that maybe something's wrong.

"You're currently running a rather high fever," Cas states, and somewhere, that's being written on a goddamn stone tablet or something. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he touches Dean's forehead, then something amazingly cool and wet makes an appearance, draped so gently against the sensitive skin of his forehead it almost doesn't make the headache worse, though it's doing shit for the nausea rolling through him in sickening waves. Two more somethings are tucked under his arms, chilly against his skin; the relief from the heat is almost painful.

"You'll be fine, but you might try to keep a minimal number of undamaged neurons to avoid brain damage. Your current temperature is making that somewhat of a challenge. A tub may be involved at some point, provided we can find one. And an industrial icemaker, I suppose."

Dean wonders if you can convey 'you're such a fucking dick' by staring really, really hard. Cas's mouth twitches, which he takes as yeah, you can. The more you know.

"I suppose that means you'll try." To Dean's shock, Cas's fingers, surprisingly cool, brush against his hot cheek, lingering long enough for him to realize he kind of doesn't want them to move anytime soon. "Get some rest. I'll take care of everything."

Dean nods, licking his dry, cracked lips frantically before saying, "I know."

Before he can get a good look around, the door closes with a finality that makes him stumble off balance, hitting the floor with a muffled curse and a shock of pain up his arm. Scrambling to his knees, he swallows the nausea back with an effort, staring at the faded red carpet for a long
moment before sitting back on his heels and looking around curiously.

Dark wood walls set with stained glass surround him: a church, he guesses, confirmed by the sight of worn, lovingly polished pews, air redolent with the smells of incense and wood oil and lemon. Faintly, he hears the sound of bells, but looking at the altar, there's no priest beginning mass, no parishioners in the pews.

Standing up, he takes a few wary steps up the aisle, lined with clean, threadbare red carpet, and tries to work out where it's coming from; it's supposed to be here, that much he's sure of, but it would really help to know what the hell that is and hey, why he's looking for it.

Looking down at himself, he sighs: not to mention why the fuck he's wet.

Patches of dampness are growing on his faded flannel shirt, trails of water dripping down equally damp jeans to streak across his bare feet and soak into the carpet around him. Where are his shoes, another question, equally pointless: apparently, this isn't a day for answers.

Halfway up the aisle, a sound behind him jerks him around to scan the back of the church, surprised to realize he's not alone. A woman is sitting on the back of one of the last pews, a stick with some kind of hook--he thinks he should know what that is--held loosely in one hand. She's wearing a loose, sleeveless wool dress over some kind of leggings, belted with a knotted sash, and a white band just behind her hairline holds long, thick dreadlocks back from a round, dark face with sharp brown eyes.

She tilts her head, looking him over critically, and he's hideously aware he's not only getting wetter, but his sleeve's also becoming soaked with blood.

"Hey," he says, trying for casual and probably coming off creepy as well as wet and bloody, which come to think, isn't nearly as uncommon as it should be when he meets hot women. A step toward her ends in an audible squelching sound in the soaked carpet, and he closes his eyes in sheer horror. This isn't happening to him.

For some reason, that makes her grin.

"Hello, Dean Winchester," she says in a warm contralto. "You have no idea how long I've been waiting to meet you." Standing up, sandaled feet cross the seat of the pew before she jumps over the edge, landing on the carpeted floor without a sound. Setting her--pike?--against a nearby pew, she walks toward him, pausing a foot away before extending a hand. "This is how you do it now, right?"

"Yeah, sure." He reaches out and fights not to wince at her strong grip, callused fingers closing over his hand enthusiastically. Gritting his teeth, he takes it like a man and doesn't even clutch his hand afterward, which he feels definitely should get him some points here. "Nice to meet you," he says politely, carefully not looking down, because there's definitely a puddle forming around his feet. "And you are…?"

"We'll get there," she answers, eyes darting down to the puddle with a smirk before looking up at him, head cocked. "Yeah, no mistake here. You could burn the world alive or light it against the darkness for a thousand years. Your choice."

Should've seen this coming. "Crazy, hallucination, dream, or psychic?" His life, in other words.

"Maybe," she says firmly, and that damn head-tilt, who…. "The stars are right, the moon's in the right quarter, make a wish and spread your bread upon the water. It comes back, Dean. It always
comes back."

Maybe all of 'em: again, his life. "You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"

She makes a see-saw gesture, which he takes as yeah, she is. "You're only getting half the conversation. The fever's the only reason that you can hear it at all, though, so pay attention."

Reaching for his not-bleeding arm, she pulls him helplessly toward the doors, grabbing her--staff?--on the way, and they emerge into an impossible summer day, all bright sunlight in a clear blue sky scattered with fluffy white clouds and rolling fields dotted with fluffy white--


"You ever count them?" she asks. "I never did, because one was enough for me." She gazes on the expanding flock with an expression he can't quite read. "There's so many, Dean."

He starts to answer that--though with what, he has no idea, they're sheep--but then remembers what she said earlier. "Fever?"

Looking down at himself, he takes inventory: soaking wet and getting cold enough to feel himself start to shiver, and while his arm's not bleeding anymore, it doesn't look good either, swollen round as a sausage and stretching the fabric of the shirt. Rolling the bloody sleeve up, he sees black ribbons running under the tightly swollen skin, stitches torn loose from the angry red rips of still-open wounds that ooze nauseating yellow-pink pus, and neat punctures he recognizes as drainage cuts.

Fuck his life again: he knows what happened. "It got infected after all." And Cas is never gonna let him forget it, either.

"You're dying," she says, wincing sympathetically at his expression. "Sorry about that. The seizures aren't helping either; maybe stop with those? You're causing a lot of stress to a couple of very tired people, not to mention the rest of the camp. They're practically sleeping on the porch."

"Our porch isn't big enough." Yeah, that's the important part here, but it's just not. "I think some of the boards are rotten--"

"Dean," she interrupts sternly. "No one wants anyone to collapse all their veins, you get me?"

"Did I say I wanted them to?"

"Well, let's say it's gonna be a close thing if you keep this up." Reaching out, she touches his forehead before he can pull away, making a face. "Yeah, that's not good. Bring that down a little, okay? That's your brain you're cooking right now."

"I'll get right on it." Annoyed, he takes in the pleasant pastoral scene around them, sheep baaa-ing, the sun shining, the grass--being grass, he guesses, it's green, anyway--and comes to a really unpleasant conclusion. "You're dreamwalking me. Coma-walking me, whatever."

"Kind of. Not an angel, promise: I just learned the tricks from one." Patting his shoulder, she gathers her skirt and sits down on the stone steps, looking up expectantly. "Have a seat."

It's not like he's got any better ideas, and the sun-heated wood of the porch looks warm. Settling down beside her, he shivers as a breeze cutting through his wet shirt and wishes to God someone would get his body a blanket or something, wherever it is. "So you're....?"
"An unintended consequence," she answers promptly, and yeah, straight answer, who needs 'em? He does, but no one's asking him what he wants. "I was born, and when I was seventeen years old, I was supposed to die. I didn't, because when I called, I got an answer. And when I was asked, I said yes. No one says no, Dean, not if they're worthy of the question. You--" She shakes her head, smirking at him. "You'd know. You never said no in your life."

He nods; going with it seems like a pretty good idea.

"Forward and back," she says, demonstrating with her hand in a left to right motion. "All that was, is, and will be, but they can't see could and should and almost, and no one living can see maybe, not yet."

"Whatever you say." He tries not to grin at her sigh. "Come on, cut me some slack, I'm dying--somewhere."

"Slack is the one thing you don't have. You got a thousand miles to go before you sleep." She frowns at him hopefully. "Did I get that quote right? English isn't my first language."

Dean looks at her solemn face and realizes something that should have been pretty goddamn obvious. "You're really enjoying this."

"Oh yeah," she agrees cheerfully. "My teacher had a weird sense of humor. God knows it took him long enough to get one, so not really a surprise."

When she reaches up to push a long lock back from her face, he stares at the small, strong hand, the thick calluses on fingers and palm, the narrow wrist, following the thin lines of old scars up her bare arms, some rising in thick ridges darker than her skin, others so old they're barely even visible, twining between random patches of shiny, too-smooth flesh. Focusing on her shoulder, half-hidden by the unbleached wool of her dress, he traces the lines of her tattoo; it's as familiar as if it was the one he wears on his own skin. Tucked against her elbow is a shepherd's crook--got it, sheep--but the sash she wears holds a long knife as well, riding with easy familiarity against one hip, and the stoppered earthen bottle hanging beside it sloshes interestingly, the symbol burned into the smooth clay indicating it's not just any kind of water in there.

And the sheep--the sheep spread out in front of them aren't sheep at all.

He waves at a tall, middle-aged couple who note his attention and wave back with dignified expressions that indicate he's being weird before they go back to their conversation with an older woman, unbound hair braided with leather and faceted beads that catch the summer sunshine in sparks like contained fire, hands and arms decorated with intricate tattoos that he almost recognizes from the oldest of Bobby's manuscripts and books. Three among many: now that he knows what he's looking at, he gets what she meant about counting, a stretch of smiling faces and murmuring voices and bright laughter all the way to the horizon.

"Yours?" he asks, glancing at her; the dark eyes are fixed on the growing crowd, bright with unshed tears. "Not bad."

"I didn't know." Wiping her eyes impatiently, she grins at him. "How about you?"

"I never counted, either. One--" He swallows hard as a white-clad kid runs from restraining parental hands, shrieking laughter. "Yeah, one was enough."

"Hunter to hunter: never trust a pixie. Fae are bad enough, but at least they don't bite." She leans her head on one hand. "Forward and back, Dean, and they didn't see us. You're impossible, which
helped a lot, because that's what hid us from them. We weren't important to them, so we could make ourselves from the start. We had a choice." Before Dean can ask who she's talking about, her smile fades. "It took all time and space to make you, and they thought that meant you didn't get one."

That's who she's talking about. "I said no when they asked me."

"It's not a choice if there's only one answer you're allowed to give; it's even less when there's only one possible answer." She shrugs at his expression. "Knowing the rules helps, but it works better when everyone's following more than just the letter. You, though….

Dean waits, and waits (and shivers: fuck the breeze), and waits, then gives up. "Me what?"

Reaching out, she takes his hand, lacing their fingers together, and the breeze changes, warm and smelling of sunshine and baked earth, the first days of summer in every breath, chasing away the bone-deep cold.

"Better?" she asks, then tugs his hand until he's leaning against her shoulder. "You got a thousand miles to go before you sleep, Dean. It's gonna be uphill both ways, but you can rest here for a little while."

"I'm dying," Dean protests half-heartedly, the soft wool smooth and warm against his cheek; his eyes are closing before he can stop them. "Remember?"

"Yeah about that." She wraps her arm around his shoulders, and he's falling into a welcoming woolen lap. For the first time in what feels like forever, he starts to relax, muscles loosening under his skin. Maybe he can rest here for a while before he starts looking again; he's safe in the lap of a fellow hunter and under the eyes of an entire world of happy sheep. One was enough, that made it worth it; this is so much more. "You should stop doing that pretty soon."

Reluctantly, Dean turns his head to squint up at her; it may be his imagination, but he thinks she just might be glowing. "You have any suggestions?"

"I have faith," she answers thoughtfully, petting him like she might a dense pet who did a trick badly. "What's happening right now is a miracle in progress. Try," and she frowns at him, "not to make it too hard to pull it off, okay?"

He nods obediently; it's not like he wants to die. "Tell me your name, at least."

"My name is Amieyl," she answers, smiling down with him, and his eyes are falling closed even as she adds, "Get some rest. I'll keep it warm."

It's fucking freezing.

"What….

His entire body feels like it's made of liquid, words slurring into incomprehensibility between his tongue and freezing air. Hands on his shoulders push him down before he can protest: it's like he's not even moving; no matter how hard he struggles, he gets absolutely nowhere. He's got to find Sam. Castiel promised, and a contract is a contract, even with a god.

"Sam. Tell me--" He chokes on a mouthful of frozen air, coughing desperately until he can breathe again, speak again, remember how to form words. "Tell me…where he is."
"Stop fighting me," Castiel says from somewhere behind him, and he's pushed down again, buried to the chest in clinging, roiling heat, fire burning through every nerve. Every muscle locks up in shock, and he feels himself sinking, helpless, but as his chin touches something liquid, he's pulled back up again. "Dean, listen to me--"

"Cas, you need help?" Another voice, female, and Dean vaguely wonders who the fuck calls a crazy god Cas. "I can--"

"Get out." The command is unmistakable and inarguable. After a moment, he adds, "Rest while you can. I can handle this."

Dean swallows, head falling back helplessly against something solid with a thump he can feel in his teeth and pounds through his head, scattering his thoughts like sheep before a wolf's sharp teeth. Even Sam keeps flickering in and out, a motel TV with shitty reception, static fucking up the signal.

"You said--"

"Dean…" Abruptly, the solid surface behind him moves; blinking, Dean tries to focus, but all he can see are blue eyes drilling into his. "Dean," he says more quietly. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Dean nods slow and languorous; it's like moving through honey.

"Listen to me. You have to stop fighting me. Despite what you may think, this is to your benefit."

That's never not been a lie, and he can't believe Castiel thinks he'd buy it now, after everything.

"Try."

Frowning, Castiel rests a hand on his forehead, then eases it around to gently cup the back of his head, a warm buffer between him and an edge like a dull knife he didn't even notice cutting into his neck. Despite himself, he relaxes back into the firm hold with an audible sigh of relief, closing his eyes; even holding up his head these few seconds feels like too much effort.

"You can't give up, Dean, not now." It takes a long time for him to identify the voice as Castiel's, soft and rough and something else, something he's never heard before. "I can't--" His voice breaks off for an uneven breath, and distantly, Dean wonders if he's okay. "If you do, I'll be forced to take measures that will make you very unhappy once you're cognizant again, and I won't care at all. I've done worse for far less. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah."

Slitting open his eyes, Castiel's face comes into abrupt, almost painful focus; going by his expression, he's pissed about something. Making an effort, he tries to think what he missed. "Am I supposed to build an altar or--"

"For the sake of what remains of my sanity," Castiel interrupts flatly, "don't finish that sentence."

Startled, he takes in the deep circles under Castiel's eyes and what looks like a couple of days beyond his normal level of stubble, wondering if he should be surprised that even as a god, Castiel still doesn't get the perks include not looking like shit. Converting the masses and executing the unbelievers must be exhausting.

Lonely, too, he thinks with an unwelcome flicker of pity. Gods don't have friends to tell them to eat their goddamn spamburger and beans--All of it, Cas. Don't look at me like that--and go to bed already--I'm not kidding here. Bed. Now.--the goddamn reports will wait for tomorrow.
"You realize that even if this was a real contract, it's not actually valid until it's confirmed by both parties--" Castiel's voice cuts off. "What am I saying? I need to get you out now, so please be still."

"I have to kiss you?" Dean asks curiously and is rewarded with an expression he's never seen on Castiel's face before. "What? Gods don't do that?" Not like there's a handbook for this kind of shit, and really, why isn't there? Maybe they should write one. Knowing the rules would help, even if the only thing anyone ever follows is the letter.

"Hell can't be worse than this," Castiel mutters, hand slipping away with a brief trail of fingers over his cheek before he shifts into a crouch and settles both hands on Dean's shoulders. "Don't attempt to help me. You're not very good at it."

Dean tries a smirk for the fit. "And fuck you very much."

For some reason, this requires more personal attention and less mojo'ing; as his feet touch a solid surface that he hazily identifies as the floor, he belatedly realizes he's soaking wet. His t-shirt clings to his skin, boxers rucked up in wet, uncomfortable bunches against his thighs, water sliding down his bare legs and dripping onto the floor with almost audible plops and puddling around his feet.

Cas takes his entire weight before his legs have a chance to crumple underneath him, and even so, it's an effort not to just collapse. Lifting his head, he tries to get some idea of where he is, but even with the room shifting nauseatingly in and out of focus, it's pretty clear it's in the same place he was earlier. He's never thought Castiel was a palace and marble floors kind of guy--angel--whatever--but he'd have thought he'd go for something a little more upscale than the budget motel aesthetic: bare, dingy walls, the only light from a bare lightbulb clinging to the ceiling, and what looks like furniture a few decades from new.

Glancing down, he catches a glimpse of--a tub--the smooth, dark surface broken by--water, ice, what the fuck--and stops short, trying to make some kind of sense of what he's looking at.

"Cas--" he starts, trying to hold onto the thought--water, that's what's forming a puddle around his feet, melting ice--but a pull on his arm drags his gaze down to a familiar tube snaking down from his elbow and taped into place. Turning to follow it knocks his other arm into Castiel with an explosion of pain that makes him double over, black dots dancing in front of his eyes from the agony when his weight drops abruptly onto his own feet. "Fuck."

He won't pass out. He won't. He won't.

"...I told you to be still," Castiel is saying, sounding pissed, which makes Dean wonder if Castiel actually thought that obedience thing would really work. Swallowing back the taste of bile and blood, his attention's caught by the bulky, misshapen bandaging loosely wrapped around his right forearm, gauze stained with red-brown streaks beneath a thin layer of plastic. Trying to flex his fingers without success, he realizes in dim horror it's because he can't feel them.

Effortlessly, Castiel rights him again, slinging Dean's arm carefully over his shoulder to dangle uselessly against his back. As they start to move away from the tub--an industrial icemaker, I suppose--things start to click into place: ankle, you get you ran yourself into a hairline fracture, right?, the bandage, infection rate is seventy percent, his head is killing him, why isn't he responding?, he's almost got it.....

You're dying.

Castiel stops short, looking at him. This close, Dean can see his eyes are red-rimmed as well as bloodshot, the iris a thin rim of electric blue around swallowing black. "What did you say?"
Dean licks his cracked lips and tastes dried blood. "Am I dying?"

"No," Cas answers fiercely, fingers digging into his hip hard enough to almost clear his head. \textit{I have faith.} "You're not going to die."

"Why--" Can't I think? He tries to hold onto the thought, desperate, but it's trying to get away, slipping frantically out his grasp. "What happened?"

"You were attacked on patrol by a colony of brownies and the wounds became infected," Cas answers, searching his face. "The infection is proving extremely persistent, but we still have many options available for treatment."

That sounds about right. "If. If you can't. Find one--"

"We will," Cas interrupts. "The problem is, we need time to find the right one, and your fever is dangerously high, which is causing complications in treating you. Do you understand?"

It's almost gone, goddamn it. "Time." A thousand miles to go before he sleeps. It feels like forever. "You need time."

"Yes." Cas closes his eyes for a second. "I need time."

Dean tries to hold onto it--the jeep, the cabin, a woman wrapping up his arm, Cas saying--Cas saying--

"Did you see them when you died? The first time?"

"Dean?"

"I didn't get a chance to count them. Did you?" The ghosts of invisible sheep start to circle them, echoes of non-existent baaing filling his ears. Sheep in Kansas: something's wrong with that. Turning his head, he takes them in and belatedly remembers they're not actually sheep; a couple of them give him glares, shaking their heads frantically, and worse, they don't even stay still, so he can't get a count. "Stop moving."

Fingers bite into his arms and he blinks up at Castiel, trying to remember what they were talking about. Then he does: \textit{Sam}. He almost forgot \textit{Sam}. He has to--do something to get Sam back. All at once, it dawns on him: \textit{contract}. "I forgot." Somehow, he finds the strength to move, half stumbling until Castiel catches him with a muttered curse, which would normally be hilarious, but it takes all of Dean's concentration to stay upright long enough to get this over with. Leaning forward, Dean just manages to aim for Castiel's mouth and kiss him.

He's not sure how long it lasts--he's not sure how long it's supposed to, he's only done this with demons, maybe it's different with gods?--but Castiel's the one that jerks back first. Dean only realizes he closed his eyes when he opens them, licking his lips and wondering at the lingering taste; it's nothing like demons, a thick, rotting sweetness, sour like curdled milk, that he'll taste with every mouthful of food, every drink of water, every goddamn \textit{breath} for days. This is nothing like that. It's almost like--

"Why did you do that?" Cas says it.

I wish I'd done it before, Dean thinks hopelessly. When you were still the person who made me want to try. It wasn't supposed to be like this.
"Sealed the contract," he says hoarsely. "Love, loyalty, obedience, the whole nine yards. It's done."

Castiel doesn't answer for what feels like forever. "You believe that, don't you?"

Before Dean can work out what the hell that's supposed to mean, he's abruptly lying down, completely dry--mojo, fucking finally--and there are pills--this part's familiar, though he still has no idea what that's about--before Castiel does something with his arm. A point of chill begins to spread a cloudy warmth through his whole body, and all at once, he relaxes into the mattress.

Lazily, he glances down, but Castiel catches him, easing his head up before he can see what's going on down there, and honestly, it feels way too good to really care.

"No, you already pulled it out twice. You should be asleep within the next few minutes." Dean nods as best he can with Castiel's hand on his jaw, blue eyes meeting his. "You said I should find other options. I'm taking your advice."

"Maybe," Dean whispers, and wonders what he's even saying: a miracle in progress. "What advice?"

"It's not done," Castiel states. "The contract. I didn't agree to the terms."

"Bullshit." Frantic, Dean tries to sit up, but the hand on his shoulder effortlessly pins him to the mattress. "It's--"

"A contract requires the consent of both parties, and I haven't consented."

This is a nightmare, has to be. "What--" he swallows, mouth dry. "What else do you want?"

"Proof," Castiel answers. "Your obedience is questionable. You need to prove to me that you can be."

Dean manages to nod again; he supposes making a contract with someone who actually knows him is probably a bad idea when it comes to terms. Around the bed, the sheep gather closer, and now they're glaring at him in unison. "What do I have to do?"

"Just one thing," Castiel answers, never looking away. "I need more time, Dean. You can give it to me by doing one simple thing: you won't die. Do you understand me?"

Despite the fact his eyes want to shut like, yesterday, he can't make them do it, not with Castiel looking at him like that.

"Verbal acknowledgement is mandatory." Castiel's hand tightens, getting his full attention. "Say it."

"I won't die," Dean says obediently, though he's got to wonder why Castiel needs his help with that. The entire god package is beginning to look a lot shittier than he thought, and not just because it made his best friend crazy. "Did you know what it would do to you?"

Castiel freezes, staring down at him, then looks away, reaching for a blanket and tucking it around him. "You should sleep."

"So should you." He sold his soul to Hell, and Castiel sold his to godhood; both of them went into it knowing the consequences, but that didn't make having to live with them any easier. "I never wanted…wanted you to do this. Not for me."
He wonders if it's his imagination that Castiel's hands are shaking. "I understand why now."

"You just had to do it," Dean says bitterly. "I gotta live with knowing it was me that made you."

"Dean…" He pauses, then reaches for another blanket, smoothing it over him. "I'm currently debating whether to ever tell you about this. It would be entertaining to observe your reaction, but then I'd have to actually talk about it."

Dean slits his eyes open. "Huh?"

"It's not an easy decision." Castiel rests a hand on Dean's forehead again, soothing. "I need you here so I can make it."

Dean nods, relaxing at the slow, rhythmic stroking, gentle even though he can feel how badly Castiel's hand's shaking. It's almost hypnotic--scratch that, maybe it's actually hypnotic, but he's surprisingly okay with that. A series of vaguely encouraging 'baa's' punctuate the entire surreal experience. Try not to make it too hard to pull it off, okay?

"I'll be here," he says at last; no one, even fucked-up almost-gods, should feel like Castiel looks right now. "I promise."

Castiel nods. "I'll hold you to it."

He's half-finished with his vivisection when he finally gets tired of the talking.

"Dean--" it gurgles through a ruined throat. "Listen to me--"

It cuts off when he shoves a knife through their throat.

"Alistair," he says patiently. Again. "It's Alistair now. What you give up, you don't get back."

"No," the guy says through a severed throat, staring at him with irritated, bloodshot blue eyes before he abruptly pulls out the knife and sits up, organs spilling out into his lap. "That's not your name, and this isn't what you are."

"How are you doing that?" Alistair asks curiously; only demons get up from the rack.

The guy gives him a surly glare. "You aren't this."

"It's exactly what I am; I carry it everywhere, always. Why don't you get that?" Gesturing at the intestines dripping toward the floor, he adds, "You're making a mess, by the way."

"Please don't elaborate," the guy says. "I really don't want to know what you're doing right now."

"I deserved to be here. Did you think I ever left?" He reaches for another knife, balancing it in his hand before stepping back toward the rack. It's his favorite one, sharp and dull, a million agonized screams written into every inch of the blood-soaked metal; he always carries it wherever he goes. "I didn't. Now lie the fuck down."

The blue eyes narrow. "Make me."

Before he can move, the gloom near the rack starts to thicken, curls of darkness forming lines and edges that resolve into the uncertain shape of a door. A door that immediately begins to shake, like a whole bunch of tiny, frantic hooves are hitting it all at once.
He frowns. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" the guy asks irritably. "They say the first step is to admit you have a problem. Why, I have no idea, but let's try that. Do you want to know what yours is?"

"Shut up." Alistair stops halfway toward the shuddering door, wondering when he started toward it in the first place, and turns around to see the guy inexplicably swinging his legs over the side of the rack. "You...can't do that."

"You'd be surprised how many times I've heard that." Tentatively, he sets his feet on the floor and collapses, one bloody arm stretched over the rack.

"Never mind," Alistair says softly, starting to smile. An angel on his knees in Hell: who gets that? "You look good on your knees."

"I've heard that, too. Get some new material." Fingers digging into the rack, the guy spits out a mouthful of blood, glaring up at him. "I kneel for no one and nothing, not anymore. And neither do you. You stood up."

Alistair swallows. "What?"

"You said yes, Dean--"

"That's not my name!"

"--and you stood up." Gripping the rack, he gathers what remains of his legs beneath him, pushing himself up until he's standing unsteadily in a pool of his own blood. Looking up, he meets Alistair's eyes, the blue incandescent. "And you taught me to do it, too."

Alistair licks his lips, trying to speak, but no words emerge.

"We have to ask, even here. I asked, Dean. You said yes. No one says no, not if they're worthy of the question."

"Shut up!" He starts back toward the guy, but the door starts to crack, light shivering along each sharp edge and burning away the gloom, and somehow, he's reaching for the doorknob.

"All you have to do," Cas says softly, "is remember how to stand up."

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A frantic beeping fills the room, almost drowned out by a woman saying, "Breathe, Dean, god damn you! Come on! Breathe!"

He stumbles when the knife is jerked out of his hand, and a slap to his ass with something hard does the rest; he hits the church floor hard enough to rattle his teeth. Rolling over on the worn carpet, he looks up to see Amieyl standing in front of the half-open doors, then follows her appalled gaze across the bloody footsteps staining the gleaming wood to himself.

He's covered in blood, scraps of flesh and entrails clinging to his too-tight shirt, trapped under his fingernails, screaming filling his ears, Jesus, he can taste….


"Oh no you don't," she snarls, dropping to her knees and planting a palm in the middle of the gore on his chest. "No, he's not you, not now and never again. That's past; you carry it, no help for it,
but you don't wear it as your skin. It's not yours anymore; it's too small now, it doesn't fit." She throws the knife toward the doors, the sharp blade burying itself to the hilt. To his horror, he sees her clean wool dress is splattered with blood, dripping with it. "Take it off!"

The collar of his shirt tightens, strangling the words filling his mouth, chest tight and aching for air it can't get. "I'm--"

"Past tense, Dean Winchester, and I don't have time for this." Reaching down, she pulls him upright, grabbing his shirt collar, stiff with blood, intestines and slivers of liver sliding obscenely wetly between her fingers, and rips down the front, buttons flying everywhere. "Got a thousand miles to go and your heart just stopped. Stop fucking with me and get this done!"

Numb, he reaches down, wincing at the slick feeling of shredded organs against the pads of his fingers, bone shrapnel sharp as a new blade tearing at his skin as strips of fresh skin litter the floor around them, still dripping blood, and he remembers familiar blue eyes with a start of horror.

"Cas. That was Cas." He put his best friend on the rack; you don't come back from that. He never left. "Stop, no, I'm--"

"Shut up! Could I get some help here?" she asks desperately, voice shaking as she grabs for his head before he can pull away, fingers sticky as they press into his cheeks like she wants to leave fingerprints behind. "I'll help you, any way I can," she whispers, staring into his eyes. "But first, you gotta want to save yourself. If you can't believe in yourself, believe in me, and I can believe enough for us both. Now help me. Take. It. Off."

Slowly, he reaches to pull off his shirt; it's like being skinned alive, peeling away with a sickening tearing he can feel in every nerve. To his surprise, another pair of hands join in, ripping away the remains of the overshirt in bloody strips and tossing them aside before going for the t-shirt, manicured nails scraping into his chest as she rips it from collar to hem with a shock like being slammed headfirst into the floor.

He gasps a breath, a burst of heat crackling along the surface of his skin, and the tightness in his chest eases by increments as he finally shrugs out of the scraps that she gathers in delicate, olive-skinned hands before tossing away. He only has a moment to take her in--black hair coiled away from her face and held with jeweled clips, olive skin flushed, full mouth a tight, thin line, dark robes and glittering rings splattered with blood…and surveying him with the most skeptical look he's ever seen on anyone's face in his life.

"I thought," she says before reaching for his belt and ripping it through all the belt loops in a single effortless tug, "that he'd be taller."

Before he can process that--or stop her--sharp nails scrape against his stomach as she grasps the waist of his jeans and takes them, boxers, socks, and shoes in a single go, throwing the entire blood- and gore-soaked mess on the floor behind him before subjecting him to a critical survey, head to foot.

Belatedly, he realizes that he's naked. In front of her and Amieyl. In a church.

"Uh." Clothes would be good here. Knowing where to get them would be great. "Maybe if I stand up?"

"Maybe," she answers dubiously, looking over his shoulder. Twisting around, he watches incredulously as Amieyl beats the pile of ruined clothes with her crook as if they personally insulted her and all her friends. It seems to be working; when she steps back with a viciously
satisfied look, there's nothing left but a faint stain on the wooden floor and even that's vanishing into nothing.

Returning, she stops at his hip and stares down at him resentfully, as if he's doing this on purpose to make her (after?) life more difficult.

"Standing up helps, yeah." Amieyl extends him a hand, not bothered by the entire naked thing at all, and God, he wishes that was true for him. "On your feet, soldier. You just got a fuck of a hit; the beat's regular again. Good job."

"I didn't…" He stares up at her, dress once again pristine, then at the place where the clothes were piled, the peaceful church around them, and puts it all together. "You're kidding. You're dreamwalking me again?"

"You keep creating your own hell," she answers irritably. "Can't fight when you're trying to torture yourself to death every time you close your eyes." She snaps her fingers, making him jump and look worriedly for that goddamn crook. "Stand up, Dean Winchester. You kneel to no one and nothing. That was your right from the moment of your birth, and you took it back. All of it."

Licking his lips--no blood this time--he tentatively reaches for her hand, startled to see his skin is perfectly clean, a worn, comfortable flannel overshirt hugging his arm. She jerks him up, looking briefly satisfied at his stumble before pulling him into a hug that squeezes all the breath out of him.

"Don't," she whispers in his ear, voice shaking, "make it so hard, okay?"

"Sorry," he whispers back, squeezing her before she lets him go, wiping her eyes impatiently. "I'll do better."

"It's like you think miracles are easy," she mutters before her eyes flicker to the other woman, and something in her expression tells him she's more than just surprised. "Thanks, Lia."

Lia doesn't move, clean, manicured hands resting neatly in her lap. Wide, thick-lashed brown eyes shift from Amieyl to him, and he can feel it like a touch, cool and impersonal, almost hostile but not quite. "You called for help. I answered."

"Yeah, I did." Amieyl crosses the space between them and extends her hand, mouth curving in a small smile. "Thank you."

"He is better standing," Lia says reluctantly after spearing Dean with another long look. Gathering up her skirts, she accepts Amieyl's assistance, straightening her immaculate dress meticulously around her once she's standing. "You're welcome, of course."

"Yeah, thanks," Dean tells her belatedly at the pointedness of her response. This feels like the wrong time to ask what the hell is going on. "Uh--"

"It's not as if I had anything better to do," she continues, ignoring him. "I've been in the grove for a very long time."

Amieyl's eyes widen, and Dean blinks as the ghosts of trees closing around them, a suggestion of grass beneath their feet. Looking up, he studies the night sky superimposed over the ceiling between outlines of branches and hints of leaves, then looks at Lia again.

"I keep watching him die," she says, staring at some spot over his shoulder. "It doesn't change, no matter how much I want it to. I've never been that strong."
Turning around, Dean sees a dark-haired man kneeling in a nearby clearing, a torn, filthy toga draped over a plain tunic, a knife clutched in one hand. Faintly, he hears the echoing sound of voices, lots of them, and while they don't sound friendly--context says they're really, really not--they never seem to get any closer.

"We can't do anything," Amieyl murmurs, coming up beside him, fingers twining reassuringly through his. "This was, is, and will always be. All we can do is bear witness."

Another man emerges from among the trunks like he just materialized, crossing to kneel beside the first man. Slighter, with long black hair and brown eyes, he waits for the first man to lift his head. Dean blinks, frowning at the incongruity; his tunic is impossibly pristine, the white hyperreal in the gloom.

"How long until they find me?" the first man asks roughly.

"They won't, not until it's over. Take all the time you need."

The first man's head jerks up in surprise, searching the second guy's expressionless face suspiciously before his eyes widen. "You aren't…who are you?"

"This grove is sacred to the Furies," Lia says with the man, voice echoing eerily. Dean feels the hairs on the back of his neck rising at the quality of the sound, not quite something he can just hear. "We have privileges here. Diana of the Grove heard your supplication in her temple, and I carry her answer. The punishment you requested is just; it will be done. It has begun, and it cannot, will not be stopped. All it needs is time."

The first man licks his lips. "You're certain?"

"I have seen it," Lia and the man answer tonelessly. "Does that bring you peace, Gaius?"

"Justice is rarely peaceful; it simply is," he whispers, sitting back on his heels in the thick grass, exhaustion written into every line of his body. "Thank you for your message."

A familiar expression crosses the second man's face, and Dean bites his lip against a surprised grin; glancing at Amieyl, he sees her mouth twitch as well. Interesting. "You are welcome."

"How long have you been watching this?" Dean asks Lia.

"Always." Lia swallows, unhealed grief twisting her features into a caricature of ugliness, hatred and loss so strong even Dean can feel it. "Forever. This is all I ever see."

Still kneeling in the grass, Gaius studies the other man for a long moment. "I can't imagine Diana employing you to carry out her will, much less you deigning to obey her."

The other man blinks slowly, and Dean didn't realize how much progress he made by the time they met if right now this is his best interpretation of 'startled'. "You think my mother was so lax in my education that I wouldn't recognize a Messenger when one stoops to manifest before me?"

From the corner of his eye, he sees Lia flinch. Oh.

He hesitates. "As I've met her, it shouldn't."

Gaius' eyes soften. "You know my mother?" The second man nods shortly. "Why are you truly here, Messenger?"

"My superior assigned me to assist the Pantheon in this matter," he answers obliquely. "My orders
were to help them in any way they deemed necessary."

Gaius raises a skeptical eyebrow, and Dean can see an echo of Lia in his expression. "Really."

"She believes--humanity is an idea," he says slowly, almost as if he's testing an idea he doesn't entirely understand. "It's not static, however; it changes as it defines itself. It is easy to forget our service is to all that it is and will ever be, not to what we--believe--it should always be."

Dean raises an eyebrow. "His superior was playing a hell of a long game."

"You know her?" Amieyl murmurs close to his ear. "Yeah, I did."

He glances at Amieyl, feeling his cheeks flushing at her knowing look. "She was... like that."

"A lesson," Gaius says in satisfaction, beginning to smile, and Dean thinks he may get why this guy is getting this kind of personal attention. Despite the tension, suffering drawing sharp lines on a handsome face, easy humor is reflected in the curve of his mouth, the warmth in the wide brown eyes, and even in the darkened grove, he's bright right now. He could light the world if he wanted to. "You don't believe it, do you?"

Not surprisingly, the question is ignored, though Dean suspects it's because he's not sure how to answer.

"How do you know my mother?" Gaius asks finally.

"She summoned me by name this night and instructed me in my first duty--"

"That's something she'd do," Gaius murmurs ruefully, pride and affection softening his expression further. "Surprised you, did she?"

The other man hesitates, looking at Gaius directly with a heart-stopping tilt of his head. "After meeting her, not at all."

Gaius's smile fades into uncertainty. "My mother: after this, will she...."

"Her journey is longer than yours," he answers, almost gently. "She will endure, and at her death her name will define the word for generations to come."

Gaius nods shortly, and Dean watches his eyes flicker in the direction of those distant voices.

"That is the worst of us," he breathes, expression hardening into determination. Turning to face the man beside him, he lifts his chin. "Qafsiel Kaziel, Cassiel, Messenger, by whatever name, with whatever rite, in whatever appearance it is right to invoke thee, I entreat you to grant me a single request."

"If it is within my power to grant--" Gaius abruptly reaches out, grasping his wrist, and he stills, eyes widening incrementally at the determined clasp. "What would you ask of me?"

"What you will see tonight is the worst of us," Gaius says urgently, brown eyes boring into the other man's. "Promise me you will never believe that's all that we are. We're so much more."

Rising to his feet, Gaius turns toward the sound of the voices. The other man follows him, but his eyes never leave Gaius, and Dean's mouth goes dry at the sudden sweep of darkness behind him, an impression of something vast stretching through the grove. Almost tentatively, he rests a hand
on Gaius' shoulder, and Gaius looks at him in surprise.

"You are unique," he says slowly. "What you are will never be again."

"What I am is what we all are," Gaius answers firmly. "The worst of us can be the best; we all
deserve the chance to discover that, even if we fall short."

"What I see tonight is the best of you."

"There will be better," Gaius says. "If you doubt me, it's easy to rectify; grant my request and you'll
see it for yourself."

"And if you're wrong?"

Gaius grins at him, and that feeling of brightness is nearly overwhelming; it's like he's standing in
the sun. "I'm not."

The other man studies him for a long time, head tilt and everything. "Your request is granted," he
says finally, and not entirely reluctantly. Dean sends a quiet, profound thank-you to wherever his
superior is these days. "I won't forget."

Gaius lets out a breath, shoulders loosening; it's not just anyone who in the moments before his
own death is worrying about how an angel sees the entire human race. "Thank you, Messenger."

"Castiel." Gaius's eyes widen at the offered name. "My true name is Castiel."

"Thank you, Castiel." Turning back to the sound of voices, he takes a deep breath. "It's time to end
this."

Cas follows Gaius's gaze, and abruptly, the muffled voices grow louder, more raucous, screams of
terror interspersed with satisfied shouts, the sound of metal screaming on metal. The worst of
humanity, Dean thinks sickly, but Gaius straightens, mouth curving in an unexpected smile, brown
eyes lit from within with something brighter than mere light. Abruptly, the shadows of wings
sweep through the grove again, striping the trees in something between light and darkness and
controlled chaos before closing around Gaius, protective and comforting.

"It is my privilege to be with you," Cas says, and Dean feels himself matching Gaius's smile.
Turning his head toward the growing roar, the dark eyes narrow, vengeance peppered with
righteousness, before turning back to Gaius. "Are you ready?"

"Let them come," Gaius murmurs as he raises the dagger, the point rests against his chest as he
faces Castiel. "I'm ready now."

Cas hesitates, then steps closer and reaches up, two fingers a breath from his forehead, and
abruptly, his eyes are the blue of the ocean, infinite. "Only men die, Gaius," he says suddenly,
looking surprised at himself. "You made yourself an idea, and that will never die, not as long as
men exist. It will spread farther than you can imagine now."

"You looked?" Gaius's smile widens at Cas's jerky nod, a faint hint of smugness playing along the
edges. "Not wrong yet."

"Apparently not." Slowly, almost hesitantly, Cas smiles back, small and awkward, but there. "Don't
be afraid. I'll be with you."

Gaius is still smiling as he slides the blade into his heart, as Cas's fingers touch his forehead. "I'm
The grove fades back into the walls of the church, the two men slowly vanishing before their eyes, along with that sense of brightness and warmth and exultation.

"I taught him that," Lia whispers, a ripple of bitterness echoing through her voice. "Don't forget in the worst of humanity that there is also the best of it, and all that exists between. He believed that even then."

"That was what he was. He couldn't be less than that." Amieyl takes a hesitant step toward her. "He built his life around it."

"They killed him for it, like his brother before him," she whispers. "Hunted him like a dog for what he was. How could something so bright end as easily as gutting a candle? Tell me how I was supposed to believe in anything after that? Crawling on the surface of the world like maggots, petty, brutish, small, worthless…what value could there be in them when they took so much from me? How could I stand to be one of them?"

Dean stills as the brown eyes turn on him, frozen vastness, a coldness that goes on forever. It's all he can do not to shiver faced with it; Castiel looked a little like that when he told him to kneel. Love and worship, all for his greater glory, but he never hated them for it, not like she does.

"They made offerings in my name; I took them," she continues, revulsion filling her voice. "Their supplication, I heard it; their worship, I accepted it. I endured, to see them destroyed, until nothing of them was left but a memory. My burnt offering was all that I was; it was nothing."

"It wasn't," Dean breathes, mouth dry. "It was everything."

She raises her chin. "I don't remember."

"You wouldn't watch that if you didn't," Amieyl says, and Lia turns on her. "You remember enough to know what you gave up wasn't worth what you lost."

"I remember grief," Lia says savagely. "I remember rage, for what they did to my sons, their bodies defiled, their work destroyed, their names disgraced. You tell me--"

"Starts at birth, ends in death, always does," Amieyl answers. "But in between a life was lived, and they were bright, Lia. They changed the world."

"You think that means something?" Lia demands. "That it makes it worth it?"

"Do you think that the grove was all there was?" Amieyl demands, moving toward her, and to his surprise, Lia takes a step back. "There was more, Lia; you were more. You lived a lifetime before and after, but you made this," she points at the place Gaius died, "all you are and would ever be. And for what? Revenge? It wasn't yours to give!"

"You don't understand--"

"Do you even remember how much you loved them?"

Lia sucks in a breath, color draining from her face.

"That's what you gave up," Amieyl says. "Your burnt offering was everything."

"I don't remember anymore," Lia whispers, and this time, there's pain in it. "You don't get that
"No, you don't. You gotta take it," Dean answers her, and she looks at him in surprise. "So do it. Try again, see if this time, you can get it right." He thinks he knows how to do this. "A war's going on, in case you didn't notice."

"I noticed," she says reluctantly.

All right, then. "You know the stakes."

"You don't even know the stakes, Dean Winchester." There's a brief flare of something dark in her eyes, like she's watching humanity burn and wants to pour more gasoline on the fire. "You're going to lose."

Yeah, just what he needs to hear right now. "We haven't lost yet."

"You will," she starts, the darkness deepening. "What does humanity think it is, to--"

"Crawling, maggots, worthless, I heard you the first time," he drones impatiently. "Like your son?"

"You dare--" She starts toward him, the church floor cracking under each dainty step as she starts to grow; by the time she reaches him, her head's almost brushing the bare beams of the ceiling. Her voice echoes through the church. "Kneel."

Dean stares up at her incredulously. "You gotta be kidding me."

"Dean," Amieyl says, sounding worried. "You should know--"

"Not now," he interrupts before she can tell him how shitty an idea it is to fuck with a god. "Kneel in worship or die: I've heard it before. Cas was right; you all need to get some new material. The answer's always gonna be no."

Lia looks down at him, brown eyes vast, but infinity doesn't scare him. Infinity sleeps thirty feet away from him, wakes up with spectacular bedhead, and drinks half a fucking pot of coffee before Dean's even awake these days. Infinity has a drinking and a drug problem, won't let him drive, can't cook, eats under protest, doesn't like to sleep, and hates his entire goddamn life. Infinity still gets up every goddamn morning to keep living it, and he still can't figure out why.

"So kill me, get with the program, or get the fuck out of my way," he tells her. "I got a war to fight, a world to save, and an ex-angel to teach about chocolate and how life can be fun because he got the shit deal when it comes to mortality. You became a god because you couldn't hack being human when you were born to it; he didn't even get to do that, and he's still trying. What the fuck is your excuse?"

Infinity, he reflects uncomfortably, is also gonna be pissed if he gets himself killed taunting a god.

Lia hesitates, confusion and curiosity surrounding him. Before he can start to wonder what that means, everything goes still; it's impossible to move, even to think, as images of his life flicker past in disjoined, too-fast images, and he can't stop it or even remember how."

"Oh hell no." Dean draws in a startled breath, head clearing almost immediately, and Amieyl's standing in front of him, looking pissed. Reaching out, she pulls her crook out of nowhere, and Lia starts to shrink, folding up into person-size before their eyes. "Consent's not just a word, not anymore. Try that again, I bust your ass straight to Limbo."
Lia stumbles back, projecting startled rage. "You can't--"

"Try me."

"Amieyl," he hisses, trying to get between her and Lia and failing; it's like the floor's moving or something. "What are you doing?"

"Freely given with whole heart and mind in full knowledge: those are the requirements of consent. We will accept nothing less." Shoving her crook into the floor, the wood cracks open with a muted grunt, dull grey not-light rising sluggishly out of it, thick and heavy like fog, seeking tendrils slowly crawling across the floor and curling around Amieyl's feet like a cat wanting to be pet. Lia draws back, eyes wide with shocked horror. "The rules are ours to enforce, and our decision is final."

"We?" Dean echoes incredulously as he slides helplessly back again; the floor really needs to stay still already. Lia may be smaller now, but gods are tricky like that. "You and what army?"

"I am an army. Anyway, it's just a figure of speech," Amieyl murmurs, gesturing vaguely at him with her free hand. "Sort of. Just go with it."

"Who are you to pass judgment on me?" Lia demands, but her eyes never leave those dead-grey ribbons curving around Amieyl.

"We are the scales and the weight and that which weighs all things," Amieyl answers. "What you want must be asked for, and his consent given in full. Or I, singular, will enforce the penalty here and now. Got it?"

"Ask what?" Dean says into the ensuing silence. "Catch me up here: what does she want?"

Lia licks her lips, tearing her eyes away from Amieyl and those grey ribbons to look at him. "I want to know why."

"Why what?"

"Why did he do it?" she asks in a rush. "What made it worth it?"

He swallows; he asks himself that question every morning. "I don't know."

She hesitates, looking at Amieyl warily, then at him, bleak and endless, an empty stretch of eternity. It must be lonely to exist with nothing but what's in that grove, he thinks: grief and rage and loss forever in repeat, never ending. She forgot everything else. "Anything you would ask of us we will give you, if you will--"

"You have nothing I want," Dean interrupts, and Lia visibly flinches. "What do you want, Lia?"

She searches his face. "I don't remember what I was. I want to see what it is that I forgot."

Startled, he frowns; that's easy. He's done it before, though right now, he can't quite remember when. "Go for it. Uh--freely given and everything." He glances at Amieyl, who nods encouragingly, smiling bright enough to light the whole church. Facing a startled Lia, he closes his eyes. "You want to know what makes it worth it? Check it out."

Deliberately, he forms his life for her: a picture of Sam as a baby, a toddler stumbling after him, a thousand different motel rooms, on the edge of an endless ocean, warm and inviting them in to play, infusing the memories with everything he ever felt for his brother. Annoyance and irritation
and frustration, admiration and amusement and pleasure, the horrific loss that shattered him when he died, grief and rage and the stupid shit you do when you can't think of anything else. They're all part of the one thing, the only thing, the thing he never wants to give up again: how much he loved his brother, how loving him was worth all of it. Nothing was worth losing that.

Oh. Lia closes her eyes. That's how it felt.

He gives her everything of his life: Mom and her death, the heat of the fire as he held Sam and the screaming that never stopped; Dad and the vengeance that ruled his life and created the foundation of his and Sam's; Bobby's gruff warmth and kindness, Jo and Ellen, the hunters he met and worked with and watched die; Cassie and Lisa and Ben, friendship and love, blighted hope almost before it had a chance to take root, shriveling before his eyes; he wasn't enough.

Castiel and Anna, Zachariah and Lucifer, the Host; the room where he challenged Cas for his brothers' life and the decision Cas made that day; being shoved up against an alley wall by a Falling angel who didn't know how to give up even when Dean almost did; the war that wasn't fought, that they won, paid in full, bitter measure with Sam's life and soul; and the one here that they haven't lost, not yet, and all it took was Dean trading one life for another.

They got a shitty deal, no argument there: save the world, as if. He never measured up to what anyone needed him to be--Dad, Sam, Cassie, Ellen and Jo, Bobby, Lisa and Ben, Cas--even by accident he never got it right. Every time he's tested, he's failed.

Lia draws back: Then why...

That doesn't mean he's ever gonna stop trying; when he loses, it won't be because he didn't step on the goddamn field.

It's not quite a memory, but something else pushes through, dragged up from somewhere impossibly deep: a place so dark it never knew light, screams and blood and nothing but horror until even horror was mundane, cut with a shock of light, and the moment he was given a choice, in a place where he forgot the meaning of the word. Where he remembered just enough to say...

"You said yes," Lia whispers, snapping them both back into the church. "You stood up."

"Yeah," he agrees, startled: how'd he forget that? "I did."

He starts to move and almost staggers, catching himself before he tumbles to the floor in front of them and adds that to public nudity and being a demon in his lexicon of embarrassment today. "So what's it gonna be? You in or what?"

"No," she says slowly. "I don't."

"Then let's get this done," he says impatiently. "What are you waiting for?"

"What you did...." She swallows. "I've never been that strong."

Amieyl grins. "Yeah, you are. You just don't know it yet." Tossing her crook toward one of the pews, she reaches out a hand, palm up. "You can have my strength until you do."
"Mine, too," Dean offers uncertainly; his heart's beating, after all. Lia looks at him, eyes wild and afraid. "I didn't think I was, either. I had help until I realized I was wrong."

Lia looks between them before she takes Amieyl's hand, letting herself be drawn down onto the threadbare red carpet covering the hardwood floor, skirts settling haphazardly around her. Joining them, Dean reaches for her other hand as her head snaps back, spine stiffening as a sickly glow surrounds her; long red streaks cut across her cheeks as if the bones beneath are trying to split them apart, and the soft robes seem to become tighter with a flare of sullen light that burns out before their eyes.

With a gasp, she slumps over, panting, and only belatedly is Dean aware of the tight grip of her fingers, nails cutting into his skin. All you need, Dean thinks in determination, tightening his own grip so they sink in further, blood welling up in sparks of pain, chest tightening sympathetically: all I got, everything, you can have it. You can do this.

"I--" She jerks again, skin beginning to tighten over bone and muscle. Clinging to his hand, she gasps through it before looking at him again, terrified. "Does it always hurt like this?"

"Always," he says helplessly, because he can't lie--possibly literally--and it's only gonna get worse from here on out. "You can do it."

She shudders again, fingers closing brutally over his hand again, and he winces at the crack of bone, her skin thinning before his eyes and beginning to strain against what it can't hope to hold. Remembering how it felt to get those goddamn clothes off, he tries to give her more. She'll have to take it all off, down to her bones; it's too small to hold all of what she's taking back, and it's gonna hurt like hell to get it off.

"You can," Amieyl confirms, bracing Lia with her own body at the next convulsive shudder, the sickening sound of bones splintering under the thin skin, ignoring the nauseating rip of muscle and flesh under her hands to hold Lia tighter. "You can do it, Lia. Don't be afraid."

Lia opens her eyes, blood trickling like tears down the splitting skin of her cheek. Reaching out, Dean wipes them away, hand shaking so hard he almost pokes her in the eye. Licking her cracking lips, she smiles at them both, long fingers squeezing his. "I'm not."

"Shit, shit, shit...." A woman, Dean thinks distantly; his chest feels like it's made of stone, and for some reason, he can't open his eyes. Something is beeping loudly enough to almost drown out her voice and he wishes they'd turn that shit off. "Oh Jesus, Dean, don't do this again....Cas! Cas!"

This time, the church isn't silent.

The memory of screaming is soaked into everything, thickening the air until he can barely breathe. Getting to his feet, he stares in horror at the people nailed to walls splashed with drying blood, some still groaning, heads dipping limply toward the floor, others painfully silent. None of them are dead, not yet; this is so much worse.

Disbelieving, he takes in the wrecked, splintered pews, hacked apart as several indistinct figures move among the wreckage, making piles. A figure in the blood-soaked vestments of a priest stands in the middle of the church, gloating over the group of kids gathered inside a rough circle carved into the one-flawless floor, carpet skinned back in strips on either side of it. When he turns around, Dean's not surprised at all when unseeing, ink-black eyes stare back.
"What--"

A hand grabs his arm before he gets a step toward them. "You can't do anything like this," Amieyl says quietly, breath warm against his ear. "We're only mostly here." When he looks at her, he sees her expression flicker. "Dean…"

"I'm dead."

"No," she answers, but on a guess, he's pretty fucking close. "Not yet."

Go with it, he reminds himself firmly. "Fine, whatever. What the hell is going on?" Looking around in sheer frustration, he realizes what's he's missing—that sound. "And why do I keep coming back to this church?"

"I don't know," she answers, sounding as frustrated as he is. "It's like--"

A faint, agonized scream cut her off, and they both turn, trying to find the source. Some of those hanging on the walls begin to shift, moving weakly in response and setting off new trails of fresh blood, but the priest only smiles, turning around to gaze toward the front of the church. It's too dark to make out what he's looking at from here, but Dean's pretty sure it's the altar.

"Come on." Amieyl's fingers slide through his as she tugs him toward the right, hugging the wall as they circle around the nightmare in the middle of the church before crossing before the remains of the front pews. Looking up, Amieyl comes to a sudden stop, looking up in horror. "Oh God."

Following her gaze, he catches his breath; a girl in the remains of a postulant's robes is nailed to the wall above the altar--Jesus Christ, they did it over the cross itself. Her wimple's long gone; short, thick black hair surrounds a painfully young face, dark skin slick with sweat and blood, lips bitten bloody as she twists helplessly, panting for breath. The bloodshot brown eyes are fixed on those kids in the middle of that circle, horrified and enraged and determined, like if she can just get down, she can get to them, save them from whatever this is.

Before he can step forward--get her down, Jesus, what are they waiting for?--Amieyl's fingers tighten brutally on his, impossible to escape no matter how hard he tries.

"Don't," she whispers, her eyes on the girl. "I told you; we're only mostly here. We can't do anything."

"Then why are we here? To watch demons kill a lot of people?" he asks incredulously. "Amieyl--"

"I don't know." She licks her lips, eyes narrowing. "But I think it's her."

"I think so, too," Lia agrees, coming up on his other side. He blinks, distracted by how different she looks now, even if the face she wears hasn't changed at all. "Question is, why here and now?"

"God, I wish this was a hallucination. At least that'd make sense." When even the goddamn figments aren't sure what the hell is going on, though, he's pretty sure they've left plausible deniability behind. "What--" He stops, listening, and almost sighs in relief. "There it is."

"What?" Amieyl asks, frowning at him.

"You can't hear it?" It's getting louder; how the hell can anyone miss it? "That."

"Hear what?"
The church doors slam open behind them, shaking the church. Turning around, Dean goes still at
the figure standing in the open doorway, and beside him, Amieyl stiffens.

"When was this?" he whispers hoarsely.

"He just Fell," Amieyl answers, shock flattening her voice. "This is after."

After. Dean remembers the bedroom, the new wood of the doorways, the windows, what Cas can't
remember, what Chuck didn't know about what Bobby and Dean were doing, how Cas survived. He
still doesn't know what they did, but looking at Cas, he thinks he knows why they did it.

"That," Dean says, numb with horror, "isn't living."

Cas is skeletal, jacket huge over bony shoulders, t-shirt and jeans looking like they'll slough off
like shed skin as he starts up the aisle in jagged strides, hands roughly bandaged and smeared with
drying black and tacky red. Every bone is pushing brutally against livid, tissue-thin skin pulled
impossibly tight, cheekbones like razors above hollowed-out cheeks, blue eyes sunk in rotting
black holes like he's never slept, not once, not ever. The short brown hair is as brittle as straw
around his face, bloodless lips bitten to unhealed wounds.

The wrongness is so profound it makes Dean's skin crawl just looking at him. Nothing living can
look like that, two days rotting in the grave and still breathing, still dying without hope of death,
still living, still having to.

He gets it now, what Cas meant about Grace and what it hid; humans sense it, he said. Stripped
away like a cheap varnish, no distraction of wings and power, he's an unsheathed sword, a gun
without a safety, chaos incarnate on earth.

One of the less intelligent demons starts toward him, lips stretched in a greedy smile, and Cas
reaches out without looking, hand closing around his neck and slamming him to the floor before
ripping his throat out. Pulling Ruby's knife in a blur of speed, he guts the still-twitching body with a
burst of sullen light before stepping over him, leaving a trail of bloody footprints in his wake.

The priest stares at Cas in unblinking shock; even the horrors of the Pit in all its cruelty and
corruption pales before the angel that once walked through Hell in a forty-year slaughter and
stands before them wearing a living corpse as his skin, watching him with blank blue eyes, still like
a thin skin over something that shouldn't ever get out.

"Something's wrong." It's only Amieyl's grip on his hand that keeps him from crossing the circle:
fuck the demons, he'll rip them apart with his bare hands whether he's really here or not,
something's wrong with Cas. "Let me go! I need to--"

"You can't save him," Amieyl says rigidly. "He can't even save himself. And he doesn't care."

Coming to a rigid stop, Cas's eyes flicker over the circle, the walls, then the front of the church and
pause there for a moment, bone-thin fingers flexing around the hilt of the knife. The back of his
right hand appears between strips of filthy gauze, a blood-streak map of still-open slices and
broken, unhealed knuckles, as he focuses on the demon priest, face like a blank sheet of paper.

"That is new," Cas rasps into the silence, voice like gravel dragged through cemetery dirt, serrated
edges and shattered glass and broken screams, jagged stretches of ice stretching to eternity, glaciers
floating in an infinite ocean. "What are you doing here?"

The priest takes a step toward him, trying not to look terrified; it's not working, and from the way
Cas tilts his head, he's enjoying it as much as Dean is.
"An angel kicked out of heaven and stripped of Grace," the demon priest says with an embarrassing attempt at laughter. "Am I supposed to be afraid?"

"Since you are, that's an incredibly stupid question to ask," Cas answers, putting away the knife with jerky movements, like he can't quite control his hands. "Don't concern yourself with us; we aren't here for you."

"What--"

Another scream cuts off the priest's response, and turning, Dean starts toward the front of the church--Jesus, they have to be able to do something, Cas can do something--but Amieyl and Lia abruptly jerk him sideways into the splintered remains of the pews. Above the altar, the girl goes utterly still, gaze fixed on Cas in surprise, bloodshot eyes widening.

"We are here," Cas says softly, "to bear witness."

Her lips move soundlessly, but even from here, Dean recognizes the shape of the word; he knows it like he knows his own name, the taste lingering on his lips more mornings than he can count, nightmares banished in a single exhaled breath.

"She called," Amieyl says unsteadily as the temperature of the room plunges abruptly into a bone-chilling cold. "She got her answer."

Pulling her closer, he reaches for a shivering Lia as the church tilts nauseatingly. The floor beneath/beside/above them begins to tremble as something sweeps through the room, through them, and it's not cold, no, not that, the word hasn't been invented for this: the airless vacuum between infinite stars unfolding itself in the physical confines of finite space; something this vast can't be defined in the corporeal world. If he were really here, the knowledge alone would kill him; good thing it's only mostly.

He can't quite articulate what he sees twining around the girl's body; not darkness and not light, but something that's both and neither, curling up her legs and waist, looping tenderly around her in protective ribbons, cradling her away from her pain. She smiles weakly, looking at something without form in unconcealed relief, mouth shaping a word, but he doesn't need to hear it to know what she just said. No one worthy of the question would say anything but yes.

It's only a moment, a flash-burn of flowers and summer and music peppered with protective rage, before the world plunges into silence, tranquil like the center of an infinite storm.

Above the altar, the girl effortlessly rips her hands and feet free from the wall with the sickening sound of breaking bone and tearing flesh, dropping to the floor in front of the altar in a boneless crouch that shakes the entire church, fresh blood fanning out around her in vivid-red splashes. After a moment, she lifts her head, and he almost steps back when he sees her face, brown eyes reflecting a vastness beyond comprehension. Lia at the apex of her divinity, before she began to Fall, was like a spark from a campfire; this is a universe burned and burning alive for all of time.

"What the hell," Dean breathes, "did she call?"

Straightening, she starts down the aisle, the ragged hem of her habit flaring around her blood-streaked legs as the wounds on her hands and feet vanish into nothing. Reaching into thin air, she pulls out a knife, blade a foot long, double edged and gleaming, sharper and brighter than anything made of metal.

Coming to a stop a few feet from the circle opposite of Cas, she regards each petrified demon with
the indifferent interest of marked prey to be slaughtered at her leisure, then looks at Cas with something else entirely, and all Dean can think is that he's glad no one's ever looked at him like that.

"Castiel," she says, her voice echoing through the church like a warning of a coming storm, one that could tear the world apart without even noticing or caring if it did.

Cas smiles. "Welcome back," he says, blue eyes meeting hers, and Dean sees the stillness starting to crack around the edges and begin to spread. "It's been a very long time since you last hunted on this world."

And he realizes what it is he's been hearing; it's screaming.

"…son of a *bitch!*" a woman says hoarsely, sounding terrified. "I can't get a rhythm, it's been ten minutes…" She trails off, and distantly, he feels the pressure on his chest vanish. "Cas," and everything in that word kills him: regret and rage and grief, resignation. "Cas. I'm sorry."

"Dean," is breathed against his ear, enough to nearly drown out the screaming that's pounding through his head. Blinking hazily into a night-dark sky, stars hidden by clouds, Dean tries to orient himself to where he is this time. "Dean, talk to me."

Turning his head, Amieyl comes into view, looking worried. "I think I'm really dead now."

"Not yet," Amieyl answers cryptically, but before he can tell her how wrong she is, she pulls him upright, staring into his eyes. "Deep breath, okay? Just relax."

"Relax? Are you kidding?" Pulling back, he looks her over critically. "You okay?"

"Yeah, it's all good," she says, smiling at him. "Breathe, Dean. We don't have a lot of time here."

"I'll get right on that. Wait, where's--" Twisting around, he tries to find Lia. "Lia? You okay?"

"I'm fine." She drops beside him, careless of the crumpled folds of her skirts, expression unhappy. "If I'd waited a little longer, I could have…." She trails off, looking away guiltily.

"Could have what?" He remembers her ripping at his clothing in the church, then reaches under his shirt, feeling the memory of her fingernails across his chest and belly, the burst of heat, the way the tightness loosened. "When my heart stopped. You fixed it. That's what you were doing."

"I just gave you a little help," she corrects him, trying to smile. "I can't this time. You gave me too much, Dean. I shouldn't have--"

"Not your fault," he answers automatically. "I'm not even supposed to be here."

"No, you're not," she agrees, reaching to lay a hand on his knee, squeezing gently. "You're impossible, and this is maybe. It wasn't enough. I'm sorry."

Maybe again. Patting her hand absently, he twists around to look at the dark shape of the church, doors shut tight, then at the cool, still night around them, trying to figure out what feels so wrong. It's not just the lack of sheep--people--either, or the dead feel of the ground under him, the thin hang of air around him. A few stunted, skeletal trees dot the landscape, reminding him of the pitiful remains of greenery in Kansas City, spindly arms reaching piteously toward the uncaring grey of the sky, clumps of yellow-brown grass sprinkled over the bare, lifeless dirt; it's like staring at a
painting, *Apocalypse in Suspension, Without Sheep*, but creepier, because this isn't a painting.

Tentatively, Dean reaches toward one of those clumps of grass, poking a finger at one scraggly blade, and watches blankly as it doesn't do a goddamn thing. "What the hell--"

"Don't do that," Amieyl says queasily. "I'm trying to ignore it."

"How?" Another try produces the same equally horrifying result; pulling his hand away and fighting the urge to wipe it on the knee of his jeans, he hears it again, like it's trying to get his attention. "Okay, I give up. What the hell *is* that?"

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Cas says, "He promised he would be here."

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Amieyl frowns. "What?"

When Dean turns toward the church, it increases exponentially, almost in relief. "That."

"I don't...." She trails off. "In the church, you asked me if I could hear it. What do you hear?"

"Not sure yet." Before they left the church, he almost had it. Speaking of..... "What happened in there? That was real, right? It actually happened." Even his imagination, rich in horrors beyond human comprehension, couldn't have come up with seeing Cas like that. "Two years ago, after Cas Fell, right?"

"Yeah, that's what's happening," Amieyl answers, drawing her knees to her chest and looping an arm around them. "Happened, will happen, is happening." She makes a face. "You know the drill."

He does. "Cas said no one can travel time anymore. I mean, except Lucifer."

"He's--he will be right," Lia corrects herself with a frown, playing with a fold of her skirt. "Just not yet."

Right, start over. "The grove--"

"Yes," Lia says with a flicker of remembered sorrow; pain, but nothing like the unhealed wound it was then. "I took you there. Then."

"And we're here at the church now--two years ago--and the gods aren't dead yet." Lia nods; okay, he's getting this. "When will they be?"

"Tonight."

He really should have asked Cas more about that. "What?"

"Backward and forward, he could see everything, including *us,*" Lia explains, waving a hand left to right in eerie imitation of Amieyl. "He failed the first time he tried to kill us all, because we could hide anywhere in Time. He couldn't risk what we might do in the past or the future, so he changed the rules. He hunted each of us out of Time until he caught us in a single place and time of his choice, and then and there he killed them, one by one, until all that remained alive were dead."

"Which will be tonight." Dean looks at the church again, then at the world that surrounds them, the unmoving blade of grass. Maybe. "If all the gods die tonight, then you--"

"Not me." Lia's mouth curves in a trembling smile. "I met a man who told me there was a war to
fight and showed me why I should fight in it. He was impossible, and he hid me when I pulled out of time to descend. He hides me still, because no one can see the impossible, even Lucifer."

Dean's mouth goes dry. "Me."

"What I see tonight is the best of you," she breathes, smile fading. "I could see you from the grove, Dean; you were so bright, you set all of Time alight. Tonight, all the gods will die, but not me, because when I was called, I answered, and when I was asked, I said yes. You saved me."

"You said--" To his horror, he hears his voice break. Swallowing hard, he tries again. "You said you thought I'd be taller."

Lia tips her head to the side. "You are." He's still trying to work out what to do with that when she adds, "She pulled us out of time. I can keep you here, now, no matter what happens to your body, but that's all I can do; I can't save you, not this time."

So he'll have to do that part himself: fine, he can do that. "Okay, next question: what is it about this church? What keeps bringing me here?"

Just saying it reminds him of the sound still thrumming in the periphery of his mind; it's fainter, like he's hearing only an shattering echo, like it's being filtered through a network of cracks now. Looking at the church seems to both soothe it and make it stronger at the same time, like--

"That's the thing," Amieyl says finally, and something in her voice gets his undivided attention. "You are."

"Try again."

The grass still isn't crumpling beneath them, not even sound escaping when he shifts in place. He must have heard that wrong. "What?"

"You keep coming here," Amieyl says quietly. "I thought it was familiar to you at first--"

"I've never been here before in my life!" Dean's eyes are drawn back to the church--that girl, those demons, those kids, Cas dying and not dead yet, and that's what it is; the stillness is starting to crack. If it shatters, nothing and no one will ever be able to put it back together again, that much he's sure of.

*You could hear him all the way across the camp.*

No one could hear him, though, not really; they didn't understand. He was trapped in there, an infinite being locked up for all eternity in a living corpse rotting around him that wouldn't even die. No matter how much he beat the walls and screamed, no one heard a goddamn thing.

"Except me." He doesn't realize he's gotten to his feet until Amieyl's grip on his arm jerks him to a stop halfway to the church. "I gotta--"

"Dean. Use words."

"I kept missing it," Dean says distractedly, dragging her two more steps before she digs in her heels and brings him to an abrupt stop. Turning to face her, he wonders, incredulous, why she's fighting him. "I kept getting the time wrong--it's not like I know how to do this! Humans can't see
"Multiplicity of time," Lia murmurs, rolling her eyes at his and Amieyl's glares. "I apologize; being a former god, this is a subject I know something about. Dean, look at me: when did you start hearing it?"

"I don't know…." In his mind, an image forms: Chitaqua in a bowl of light, lit by something brighter than the sun. Meeting Lia's eyes, he sees her nod. "I have to get in the church--"

"Why?" Amieyl asks impatiently. "Words, Dean: use them."

"Why do you think?" Dean demands, almost ready to scream himself in sheer frustration. "He's calling me. I'm answering."

Something hot and hideously painful stabs into his chest, screaming through his body like an electric shock, and air floods his lungs in a great, painful burst.

"There we go," a voice says, brutally raspy, like she's been screaming for hours over the endless sound of that goddamn droning that abruptly spikes into semi-regular beats. "Got it. Cas, get the fuck over here and get me that tray. I'll crack his chest if I have to, but it's not ending here, not now. It's not over yet."

"Got you," Lia murmurs, arms circling his chest with a feeling of slowly diminishing warmth. "Sorry, it's getting a little dicey here. I'll be more careful."

Staggering upright, Dean warily touches his chest again: that hurt. Even his fingertips are tingling.

"Thanks," he manages to wheeze, trying to look fine and in control, which from Lia's expression isn't working too well. Glancing down, he's perversely reassured by the lack of crumpling grass; that means it's still okay. What he needs here is a plan.

"Okay, that goddess--you said she pulled us out of time, right?"

"This is now," Amieyl confirms warily. "It's always now until she's done."

"Done with what? Wait," he adds hastily, thinking of the way she and Cas looked at those demons. "Never mind, I can guess. What happens when she's done?"

Amieyl hesitates. "In here, now, your soul is safe, but once time begins….""

"Right, game over," Dean finishes for her, jerking his head toward the church. "So let's get started."

Lia frowns. "What are we doing?"

"First things first," Dean says. "I gotta get in that church."

"Cas, stop," she says, and the shove of air abruptly stops. Distantly, cool air brushes against his lips. "Mark the time. Dean, you got thirty seconds: now breathe."

Amieyl both look at him with matching 'wtf' expressions, which isn't helping, thanks.

"You said I'm hiding you," he says impatiently to Lia. "Lucifer is killing gods tonight, and when
time starts, he's gonna find whoever's in that church with Cas and take them both out. "This'll work, he's pretty sure; Cas is alive in his time, isn't he? Probably sitting by his deathbed with all the drugs in the goddamn world at his fingertips if Dean doesn't keep his promise. He will; just this one time, when someone needs him, he won't fail. "I gotta make her keep us in now until…" Lia raises an eyebrow. "Yeah, I don't know, I'll think of something."

"Dean," Amieyl says, like she's not sure he's sane, which he's not, so whatever, "listen to me…"

"That's why I kept coming to this church: to get here. Now, I mean. Both." Amieyl stills, but she doesn't look surprised. "He's why I'm here."

"Dean, you're only mostly here, you get that, right? You can't do anything like this. So how are you going to…" He looks toward the church and beyond it; following his gaze, she catches her breath, eyes flying back to him, wary. "You remember how to do that."

"I do now," he answers: when Lia saw his life, he saw it too, and what happened after; he remembers everything. Looking down, he sees the knife lying at his feet: sharp and dull, old blood dripping fresh and new, but the screaming's muted now; he's not there anymore, and he doesn't have to listen. "It'll work."

She bites her lip, eyes focused on the blade. "Yeah, it will."

"You carry your past, always, no help for it," he tells her, picking it up and feeling it slide into his hand with a nauseating sense of fitness. "I don't have to wear it to use it."

"Come on," she says roughly over the jagged beeps. "That's it, Dean, keep it up. We're almost there, you can do this. All you gotta do is try."

"Okay," he says as they climb the stairs to the small porch. As he reaches for the handle of the door, he says, "Now, what--" The cold cuts up his arm and goes all the way down to his feet before he even touches it; jerking back, the world--such as it is--darkens briefly, and then Lia and Amieyl are both holding him up. "What--"

"She's locked it," Lia says grimly, one small hand digging into his side to keep him on his feet. The dark brown eyes change briefly, an echo of eternity in them before it vanishes. "If you could summon her--"

"How?" It should be a terrifying thought, but right now, it's not even on the radar; Cas is screaming and he doesn't have that kind of time. He remembers Gaius in the grove, calling on Castiel: okay, yeah, he's got this. "Right, I need her name. What is it?"

"She doesn't have one."

"You're fucking with me."

"No, I'm not," Lia answers distractedly, staring at the door with an expression he can't read. "You can't call her without one, and she'll only answer to one she recognizes as her own."

"Then how did she--" Stupid question; he knows this one. A thin layer of wood and goddamn divine power away, Cas is shattering into pieces and he's here and can't even get through the goddamn door because he doesn't have her goddamn name. Battering it down: he can do that. He's almost dead anyway: why the fuck not. "Okay, new plan--"
"That might work, though," Lia interrupts, letting him go before he can parse what the hell she's talking about. Amieyl catches him before he falls over, cursing softly under her breath in what's definitely not English but does involve indecency with a sheep. "Dean?"

"What?" Lia extends a hand with an expectant look. "You're kidding, right?"

"I think this is how it's done now," she answers testily, snapping her fingers in eerie imitation of Amieyl. "Now, Dean."

Gingerly, he straightens, vaguely surprised he's able to keep on his feet. Taking Lia's hand, he's almost pulled right off them at her hearty shake; what is with them anyway? "Dean Winchester. Now what--"

"Cornelia," Lia says, and suddenly, the brown eyes are vast, sprinkled with the fading remains of galaxies, stars born and dying in a breath of time, but this time it's warm: humanity smiles back at him, too. "My true name is Cornelia, Dean."

Dean doesn't sigh, but it's hard. "Nice to meet you, Cornelia. Now can we--"

"You know my true name because I gave it freely," she says, holding his eyes, and he wonders if it's just him or if she's getting brighter. "Now say it."

"Cornelia," he says.

She makes a face. "I'm used to a little more formality from petitioners, but--"

"I'm not kneeling."

"You don't even know the meaning of the word," she answers, an unexpected grin lighting up her face before she composes herself into a parody of serious contemplation. "You called. I'm your answer. What would you ask of me, Dean Winchester? Freely given: I ask nothing in return."

Holy shit. "To--get in there before she's--does the time thing." Rocking back on his heels, he squints at her dubiously. "Can you still do that?"

"Oh ye of little faith." Turning to the doors, she tilts her head, and the wood begins to creak rebelliously. "She's not going to be happy, Dean. Just keep that in mind."

No shit. "I'll figure it out."

"I know," Cornelia says cheerfully, an insane grin almost splitting her face in two as the wood begins to crack, gold zig-zagging across the wood. For a moment, he sees it form her true name in golden-white light as the church itself lights up. "There we go, almost there."

"I have faith," Amieyl says confidently, warm, callused fingers sliding reassuringly through his, and something butts against the back of his knees. Looking down, he sees a smiling sheep. He didn't know sheep did that, but when he looks around, they're spread out behind them to the horizon, and all of them are doing just that. Right, because they're not sheep. "You ready?"

Dean squeezes Amieyl's fingers as the doors burst open, spilling searing light around them; it's almost blinding. "Yeah, I am."

"Okay, let me….yeah, got it," she whispers hoarsely over the monotonous beeping. "Five minutes normal rhythm, no sign of arrhythmia--respiration normal…. Cas, he's back."
"His fever's dropping," Cas says calmly, like he's reading from a goddamn book. "You were correct; he's responding to your treatment now. He'll recover."

"You can't know that yet...." There's a long stretch of silence. "You know. How?"

"I always know what I create," he answers hoarsely, and Dean thinks he feels the ghost of a touch, warm against his forehead, gentle, but the fingers against his skin are fighting not to shake. There's a short pause, then Cas says, in a completely different voice, one Dean's never heard before, "Thank you."

"Oh. Okay."

There's another sound, like something heavy dropping, and then someone--a couple of someones, he thinks vaguely--are crying.

He can't see anyone, but he feels like shit; that probably means....

"Hey, Dean."

Turning his head, wool scratching softly against his cheek, he manages to open his eyes to see Amieyl grinning down at him, framed by a small church porch beneath a sky as blue as a dream of summer. Turning his head, he takes in the bright day, a friendly sun shining down on an entire goddamn world of happy sheep.

"That," he observes raspily, "is a lot of sheep."

"More than you can imagine right now." One callused hand rests on his chest; he can feel his heart beating against her palm. "You can count them later. Much later."

"You okay?" he starts, then almost sits up; the memories are already fading, but he has to be sure. "Cas. Lia. Did they--"

"Everyone's fine," she interrupts, smiling down at him. "You did it."

That's good, he thinks hazily. "I got it right?"

"You couldn't get it wrong if you tried," she answers, laughter in her voice as she gestures toward the clear summer sky. He assumes that's supposed to be an answer, though he'd love to get one for his actual question. "A thousand miles, Dean Winchester, and you walked them all. You can rest now."

That sounds disturbingly like the exact opposite of what he was going for here. "Uh, wait--"

"Only one thing left to do." He blinks at her smirk. "Wake up."

--Day 56--

It's like falling off a cliff, slamming into consciousness at terminal velocity, but worse, because he has to survive it.

Sucking in a shocked breath, he tries to orient himself, his entire body screaming in pain for a few agonizing moments before it settles into a mid-grade ache in every muscle: even his bones feel bruised.
Right, so he's alive, and taking stock, he's pretty sure he's actually on a mattress instead of lying at the bottom of a gravelly ravine off the side of a mountain. When he warily opens his eyes, he figures the existence of a blurry ceiling and what appears to be walls confirms that he's in a room somewhere.

Turning his head is an effort, but it gets him a window, and from the slant of weak light against the wall, it's maybe afternoon. Sighing, he stares back up at the ceiling and tries to decide how to deal with this; it would help to know what the fuck this is, but maybe he's just asking for too much or something.

"Huh."

Abruptly, the center of the bed dips, and Dean feels something solid and very warm pressed against his right side. Frowning, he tips his head sideways and blinks at the sight of Cas looking down at him from black-ringed, bloodshot eyes. Opening his mouth, he starts to ask him what the hell is going on—not to mention what the fuck Cas has been fighting and hope it looks worse than he does—but before he can get his tongue to work, Cas uses his speed to cheat and has a hand over his mouth.

"Tell me your name," Cas says, voice low and rough, and Dean tries and fails to suppress the thought he could listen to Cas sound like that all goddamn day. Slowly, Cas removes his hand, though it hovers in his line of sight, like he thinks Dean still needs the warning. "Only your name, nothing else."

Dean licks his lips and grimaces: rough, with a residual metal edge, and his mouth tastes like shit. "Dean Winchester. What--"

Immediately, Cas covers his mouth again; Christ, now he's okay with using his speed for totally unfair purposes. "You may only speak when I ask you a question. Nod if you understand me."

Dean nods and hopes he actually rolled his eyes and didn't just imagine he did. Looking wary, Cas pulls back again. "Do you know where you are?"

Head starting to clear, he wonders what the hell is with the twenty questions, but there's something in Cas's expression that makes him really want to know the answer Cas wants so he can tell him and get that goddamn look off his face. He's lied through his teeth cheerfully for a hell of a lot less.

"Dean, tell me you know where you are," Cas says, and Dean hopes to God he's imagining the way his voice shakes. "If you say anything else, I'll have to cover your mouth again."

"Uh. Give me--" The hand hovers significantly, and it's annoying enough that Dean tries to swat it away and fails to move his arm any appreciable distance. "Chitaqua." Cas goes still. "Kansas. Earth. Apocalypse. End of the world."

Cas closes his eyes briefly, covering his face with one shaking hand before looking at him again, and all Dean can see is incandescent blue framed in wet lashes, electric, like he flipped the lightswitch for a living star. "It's not over yet."

Dean feels his lips curve in a grin, tiny pricks of pain from the pull of too-dry skin. Licking his lips again, the gummy taste of his own mouth sets off a flare of nausea; water would be good right now. He braces himself to sit up, and he must have been really out of it not to notice there was a reason he couldn't lift his arm earlier.

Frowning, he follows the faint pull around the area of his wrists when they move more than a couple of inches. Shifting his right arm experimentally, he feels something like a pressure around
his wrist and tilts his head down to stare blankly at--is that velcro?

"Am I--" Dean tries again, tongue thick and sticking to the roof of his mouth; God, he wants a drink of water. "Am I. Tied to the bed?"

"Yes. It was necessary to restrain you for your own safety." A hand rests on his forehead, and it's so familiar that Dean relaxes before he can wonder why. "And ours, for that matter."

Still, though: Dean looks up, waiting until Cas meets his eyes, and smiles at him before saying as seriously as he can, "Cas? I think. I forgot. My safe word."

It's everything he could have hoped for; Cas's eyes widen, staring down at Dean before he starts to laugh. It sounds rusty, rough like his voice, and Dean really has to work on getting Cas to do that more. The guy's finally picked up a sense of humor; no reason not to get some mileage out of it. After he gets some goddamn water.

"How 'bout. 'Thirsty'?"

"I'll get it," someone else says, sounding strangled; Dean tries to see who spoke, but then Cas straightens, laughter trailing off with what looks like a physical effort. "Be right back."

"I think it's safe to remove the restraints now. Hold still." Cool fingers brush his hand as Cas peels open the cuff from his wrist, and Dean tries to flex his hand against the mattress, then move his arm. While his arm throbs at the motion and his fingers feel thick, uncoordinated, like they're wrapped up in layers of plastic, all sensation muted, there's no stiffness in his shoulder. Letting his hand relax, he looks up at Cas speculatively. The more you know: Cas learned the right way to tie someone up.

After freeing his left hand, however, Cas's fingers close around his wrist as he tests it--normal flex, fingers digging weakly into the rough fabric of the blankets, he needs to follow up on that--pinning his arm against the mattress.

"What--?"

"Don't move yet," Cas says quietly, and Dean lets his arm go limp. Turning his head, he focuses on his left arm and sees the tube taped to the crook of his elbow and halfway down his forearm, leading to the inevitable IV bag (bags, plural) hanging from a rack by the bed. It also occurs to him there's been something beeping all this time, but from here, he can't tell where it's coming from or what it is.

Turning his gaze to Cas, he fights down panic, trying to form a question, but he's not sure where to even start.

"You've been very ill," Cas answers quietly, letting go. "You're doing very well, but you still require care, so please don't pull it out again. We're running out of usable veins in easily accessible areas, and while I can be creative, I think you might find my next choice rather inconvenient." He sits back on the bed. "Do you remember what happened?"

Reflexively, he starts to nod before shaking his head. Not even a clue.

"Perhaps--"

"Still up?" Cas looks away in transparent relief, and Dean loses his train of thought when a glass materializes in front of him, held by a dark-skinned hand, fingernails cut brutally short. He follows the hand to a long bare arm and a loose grey t-shirt before he skips up to the tired face that smiles
down at him, red-rimmed brown eyes dancing despite the deep circles beneath them and wet lashes. Looks like Cas isn't the only one who needs to sleep.

He tries to smile back; she's really hot. "Hey, Vera."

"Nice to see you too. Think you can sit up for a second?"

He nods: fuck if he knows, but why not?

Gently, Cas slides an arm under his back, easing him semi-upright, and the wave of vertigo sends the world spinning briefly before he's leaning back against something solid (Cas, on a guess).

"Good," Vera says, handing Cas the glass. "Go ahead and see if he can handle it while I get his meds. Slow and easy; this is just a test." Despite that, she watches intently as Cas gives Dean one tiny sip, just enough to tease, before taking it away, glancing up at Vera. She nods in approval, expression lightening. "Just like that. Dean, you tracking? I have some pills you need to take, all right? Give me a minute; I didn't think you'd be awake this soon."

This soon is almost enough to jar Dean away from the pursuit of water, but when he's offered another sip, he forgets everything else. Eventually, Vera returns, and a reward system is established that requires he take a pill for each swallow of water, which is so fucking unfair that if he wasn't so tired, he'd tell them to fuck themselves. Finishing the last pill, however, he stares at the half-full glass and realizes he's really not thirsty anymore; just thinking about drinking more makes him tired. For that matter, looking at the glass is making him tired.

"Good job," Vera says warmly, patting his shoulder when Cas eases him back down, smoothing the blankets over him again. It's weird how lying still and swallowing on command can be so goddamn exhausting. "How's his fever?"

"Ninety-nine point two," Cas answers immediately, which gets Dean's attention. He doesn't remember any thermometers. "It's been dropping the last hour."

"Really good," Vera says, almost as if to herself, then looks down at Dean. He can barely keep his eyes open, but he tries. "Tired?"

He licks his lips, fighting off the exhaustion with sheer can-do, which is destined to fail in probably a minute or less. "A. Little."

"We're in the process of forming a fellowship for that," Cas answers irritably, apparently not aware he's stroking Dean's forehead. Dean has no intention of letting on; it feels way too good. "If you wish to apply for membership--"

"He means, 'join the club'," the woman--Vera--says, sounding amused. "He's just fucking with you to show affection and relief that you're alive and not pledging your soul to everyone you've ever met. Or exorcising them, which I assume was for variety's sake."

"Did I make good deals?" Dean asks, eyes falling closed despite himself; the stroking is hypnotizing, and he could really get used to this. Which of course is when it stops, because this is his life. Cracking his eyes open enough to make out Cas, he glares as hard as he can. "Don't stop."

To his surprise, Cas starts back up immediately; he always figured the universe hated him too much for that to actually happen.

"You make terrible deals," Cas says roughly in contrast to the gentle stroking. "If you were a Crossroads demon, your service record would be a disgrace."
Vera snickers softly. "Cas, I need to update his chart; you stay with him for a bit, alright?" Cas gives her a look that says there was no reason to assume he was about to do anything else, which makes her laugh again on her way out the door.

Dean watches her leave before looking at Cas curiously. Chart.

"I think she misses the formalities of hospitals," Cas answers, mouth quirking, and despite himself, Dean's eyes fall closed under that slow, rhythmic touch. Secret angel weapon, maybe; who knew? "Go to sleep. You'll feel better when you wake up."

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: moderately explicit torture, mental coercion, needles in a medical setting

Author Notes: Thanks to obscureraison and lillian13 for doing an additional read-through on this chapter over the weekend when my pre-posting panic started several days early as well as scynneh for advice on what a nurse in an Apocalypse would do about a fever and about seventy thousand google webpages for emergency medicine at the end of the world.

Thanks for reading.

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