Season Z

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Season Z

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Summary

When Chuck clicked his fingers, the world went to hell.

Now it's up to Team Free Will and some unexpected allies to put it back together again.

But first, they have to get past the graveyard full of zombies...

Notes

Season Z is a S14 Hiatus project brought to you by 11 excitable, zombie-loving Destiel writers. Come along for the journey, posting weekly until Season 15 airs!

This fic picks up right where Season 14 left us - in the graveyard, post-Chuck. So if you aren't caught up with Season 14, needless to say, there are huge spoilers ahead!

Please do let us know what you think, and subscribe for a whole summer of canon-divergent
zombie adventures!

- The SZ Team
You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Season Z promo poster by the lovely jscribbles.

1. You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet
They were surrounded.

Dean registered the fact somewhere in the back of his mind, but it was immediately completely overridden by some important questions to find the answers to: *How many of these creatures are there? Are the dead rising everywhere, or just here? Where is our most efficient escape route? How can we get to more weapons?* The iron fence pickets Dean had grabbed were better than nothing, but they weren’t going to be terribly efficient for zombie-killing.

Is that what these were—zombies?

The unknown answer was both Dean’s worst nightmare and his every movie-based fantasy rolled into one. He battled privately between “Zombies! Oh no!” and “Zombies! Cool!”

The most important questions were the ones that remained in the sieve of his mind after everything else was shaken out by practiced hunter-focus: *How can I protect Sam and Cas from my mistake?*

Dean wasn’t very good at admitting—aloud—when he’d made mistakes. He wasn’t an idiot, he knew when he had made them. But he had a better time trying to fix things, to make up for things, than ever discussing them.

So, that was what kicked him into action right then: *Protect Sam. Protect Cas.* Dean had been dealing with this kinda shit way too long to not know how to function in the midst of total despair. So even though God himself had abandoned them and the whole world—no, worse, actively moved to end them and the whole world—Dean focused. He had to. He couldn’t think, right then, that this was his fault. That this was the falling house of cards that his refusal to listen had caused to wobble. He had to focus on protecting what he had left.

“Guys!” Dean called out, his eyes on the approaching creatures that moved in on them in an uncoordinated wave. Uncoordinated was key, Dean realized. As long as the creatures were ungainly and disorganized… they could do this. They could survive this.

“We’re surrounded,” Sam observed, far too calmly for their situation. He didn’t move his head to look at Dean as he spoke, just yelling and letting his voice carry back. He was far too experienced to make that kind of mistake.

Castiel was too, and his voice sounded distant as he had his back to Dean. “They’re still coming!”

“How do we kill them?” Sam asked, sweeping the iron bar from the fence in an arc in front of him, trying to push a couple of the creatures back.

A couple of the zombies.

They were definitely zombies, Dean decided. What else could they be? They’d literally risen from their graves as Chuck had doomed them with a simple fuckin’ Thanos-click.

*What an asshole.*

“They seem to be quite single-minded!” Castiel’s voice rose above the noise of the approaching mobile bodies. The sound of his angel blade zinging through the air as he slashed forward was eternally familiar to Dean’s ears.
“Yup, zombies only want one thing, no matter which franchise you look at—our fleshy bits.”

A middle-aged woman buried in her Sunday best dragged her left foot at an odd angle as she approached Dean. The heel of her shoe was catching in the grass and it was half off, slowing her down, but she paid it no heed, continuing her determined, focused approach. Her skin hung sallow and loose, her careful blow-out flattened and dirt-steaked along one side. Her jaw was uneven and hung open, revealing the perfectly uniform white teeth of someone who’d been privileged enough to never miss a cleaning in her life.

Readjusting his grip on the metal fence piece, Dean swung hard, smashing the pearly whites from her face. Dean, Sam, and Cas were a flurry of action, instinctively reacting in the way that they all knew best: Stand and fight.

To Dean’s left, an elderly male zombie approached steadily—he had probably looked preserved even before he died, judging from the suit and tufty, white eyebrows. Dean drove his foot hard into grandpa’s solar-plexus, keeping his eyes on the perfect-smile lady, who was already lurching back to her feet after recoiling onto her ass from Dean’s hit. Gauging when she was exactly close enough with a practiced ease, Dean held his fence picket in his hand like a spear. With a sickening squelching sound, he managed to aim the metal right into her eye socket and up. She juddered on the end of it, her teeth gnashing momentarily before she slumped. Perfect.

“Go for the heads, guys!” Dean yelled. “Just like in the movies!”

Chancing a quick look over at his brother while he kicked the middle-aged zombie off the end of his makeshift weapon, Dean found that he was holding his own. The sound of the angel blade directly behind him hadn’t ceased either, so Dean had to assume that they were doing okay… for now.

But okay wasn’t going to be enough, he realized, as the herd of undead pressed in on them. There were just too many, and Dean, Sam, and Castiel were wildly swinging by then, surviving rather than winning.

“We’ve gotta get to one of the cars!” Sam shouted, clearly thinking the same thing.

“The Impala!” Cas yelled back. “It’s where all the weapons are!”

They began an awkward migration across the graveyard, beneath the dark sky, in the chilly air. There was no running, no fleeing—this was a sea of melee, wall to wall combat, impossible to simply escape.

Exactly as Chuck had intended.

Dean refocused. Again.

There were zombies up in his face and rotting hands pulling at his clothes, the stench of decay and rot beginning to permeate the air of the previously neat, small cemetery. This spot was now the most final of ground zeroes, Dean realized. The place where the world began to end.

Because of you.

He couldn’t even feel too guilty. He felt guilty for not listening to Sam, for not listening to Cas about Jack, for going off and thinking he knew best—like always. But he couldn’t feel guilty for not killing Jack.

Not shooting Jack was the only part he’d done right, and he had to cling onto that to get him through the horrific image of the light fading from the boy’s eyes. Wait—Jack. Where was Jack?
“Where’s Jack?” Dean called out, but Cas was way ahead of him, pushing through the crowds of risen creatures with wide swings of his shining blade, finally coming into view on Dean’s left as he made his way to where Jack was.

Or had been. Even gone, they couldn’t leave his shell behind.

Dean couldn’t get a good look at Cas, focused on survival. But even from his peripherals, he could see the underlying rage that twisted beneath the angel’s skin. Dean and Castiel had always understood the anger that they were both prone to carrying. It was one of the things that made them able to forgive each other, and understand, even when their actions had not been understandable.

But Castiel looked wrecked, amidst the rage. Like someone who had just lost a child. Someone they considered a son.

I cost him his son.

A decaying arm latched on to Dean’s shoulder, pulling him back sharply and tugging him off balance. Only Sam’s hefty, decapitating swing with the second metal fence picket kept Dean in one piece.

“Focus, Dean!” he snapped. Sam knew. He always knew what Dean was thinking, even when Dean didn’t like it.

Dean feinted forward before darting to the side, toppling a young man in a suit—this one was a car accident, by the way his face was crushed—over onto the grass as his slow, dead limbs couldn’t keep up with Dean’s dodging. One-on-one, these guys weren’t a problem. But getting to a place where they could be fought one-on-one… That was a huge problem. There were just too many.

A woman in a pantsuit was tossed across in front of Dean, bowling over several other zombies with a roar that, at first, Dean thought had come from them—but turned out to be from Castiel.

“He’s gone!” The underlying panic in Castiel’s voice wasn’t quite covered by his battle-hardened calm. “Jack’s body, it’s not here!”

They’d worry about that later.

“Car, then,” Dean reaffirmed, post-punching forward into the pretty face of a woman in long formal wear, who had been buried dressed up to the nines. If it wasn’t for the gray pallor, she could have been on her way to a dance. Instead, Dean’s fist crushed her face with a hideous squelch, his hand disappearing up to his wrist in what was left of her.

It didn’t even feel warm, that was the grossest part.

“Ugh!” Dean yelled, yanking his fist back and shaking what he supposed counted for zombie innards frantically from his hand. “Some of these are not fresh,” he said.

Sam battled his way up to Dean’s side, and for a moment they were shoulder-to-shoulder. Sam smacked an approaching man in a baseball cap around the head with his fence picket, a resounding crack of flesh and metal filling the air as the zombie staggered back and fell. Sam moved on.

Cas approached from the left, heading back to join the brothers, alternating between beheading the creatures with his blade and simply tearing at them with his hands. His face was dark and angry, but also panicked and lost in a way that Dean couldn’t bear to look at.

From Dean’s right, a hand grabbed him.
The man that Sam had knocked to the floor, his baseball cap still somehow clinging on—he must really love the Cowboys, even in death—had got back up and was trying to make a meal of Dean’s shoulder. Dean stabbed his fence picket sharply between the guy’s eyes. The woman in the pant suit that Cas had thrown stood back up, also heading straight for Dean.

“Double tap!” Dean screamed above the noise of the melee, wide swings punctuating his every word. “Always double tap! You ain’t a bunch of rookies—I made you watch Zombieland, Cas!”

Dean was barely able to hear himself over the surging of blood in his ears, his own terrified heartbeat, the growling and slicing and tearing that was his only reassurance that Sam and Cas were not dead. Yet.

Not dead yet was quickly becoming their biggest victory.

“They’re still rising,” Sam said, to Dean’s right. “We have to get out of here.”

The first bit of luck they’d had in the whole fight—or perhaps, that they’d had all year—was the feeling of the door of the Impala bumping into Dean’s back. If he could just get into the driver’s seat…

Zombies circled them, as if they knew that this car was the key to whether they’d have a fresh hunter meal or not, and they wanted to make sure they got their dinner. Dean’s hand was already reaching along the side of the car when he realized that Cas hadn’t made it to his side. He’d been approaching—Dean knew he had, he’d seen him on his left, looking pissed as hell but definitely still alive.

The realization was followed by a strange, screeching, electrical sensation. The air felt like it was filled with crackling potential, like the moment before lightning hit—but nothing happened. It made Dean shudder, and grasp at his head—but Sam carried on swinging as if he hadn’t noticed anything.

“What was that?” Dean called out. “Where’s Cas?”

Sam didn’t waste the second to look at him, of course. “I thought he was with you!”

“Cas!” Dean screamed. “CAS!”

Growling, dragging, wheezing zombie sounds were the only instant response, and then—a strangled yell, in a tone that would always be infinitely more familiar.

“CAS!” Something surged through Dean as he saw Cas a little way beyond the circle of zombies around the car.

Something was wrong. He had his hands up to his head, one pressed either side of his temple, stumbling.

Zombies closed in as Cas crashed to his knees.

Inside Dean, something snapped. Adrenaline poured through him, like a parent about to lift a whole car to save a kid, and everything inside him roared that there was zero fucking way that he was going to lose anyone else that day.

“CAS!” he screamed out again, tightening his hand around his makeshift weapon, and diving back in.
Not remembering something was, as a rule, not something that frequently happened to Castiel. He wasn’t built to forget—in recent years, that had been more of a curse than a blessing. He’d had many days he wished he could forget…and this one was rocketing right up to the top of the list.

He hadn’t been able to command a garrison of angels without a serious amount of battle focus. Even with how much more volatile his emotions had become in recent years, a symptom of his slowly humanizing self if there ever was one, he could still focus like the warrior he’d been built to be.

Castiel’s angel blade sang in his hand, slicing through the air with notes human ears probably did not detect and could not appreciate. He tried to focus on it, the rhythm of the fight, the strategy—such as it was, with this type of combat. But his calm kept slipping, his inner concentration warped and wrinkled with grief and fury.

Shaking, he crashed his way toward Dean’s side.

Later. He could think of all of it, worry about all of it, later.

He could grieve later.

Dean and Sam were at the Impala; if Dean could just get to the driver’s seat, they could be away. Castiel pushed forward, tearing the creatures—zombies, Dean had clearly decided—apart as much as he actually fought them, more efficiency than finesse. He wasn’t looking to impress anybody. Just to live, and make sure that the Winchesters did too. What else was there, now?

Jack was gone. His Father, his Heavenly Father, was…

And then, Castiel was reminded something that he had forgotten—a sound that had dropped from his memory.

The air around him changed, the very atoms that made up the materials of the world, seen and unseen, were vibrating and buzzing. A sound that Sam appeared not to hear, slicing his way through zombies as if the world wasn’t throbbing around them.

Castiel drew his hands up to his head.

He had forgotten the voice of his Father.

Not the voice of Chuck Shurley, oh, no. He’d heard that only minutes before—minutes? Had it really been only minutes since the world began to end?—and that had been… ordinary. Human.

This was the voice of God. Castiel had barely heard his brothers’ and sisters’ true voices in years, angel radio—Dean’s term, of course—had been much quieter since the Great Fall, for many reasons. But even if he’d been able to speak to his brethren at will, he’d had no wish to much of the time.

But this wasn’t an angel voice.

This was the voice of Creation. The voice, now, of Destruction.

God—Chuck, Castiel thought, derisively—opened his mouth and Castiel’s entire being was cracked open to his will, on a very basic level; he stumbled to his knees, mouth agape, gasping. He hated himself for it in the moment. His surroundings were lost to him, the ringing in his head taking every bit of
attention his unfathomable, ancient mind was capable of, and diverting it directly to where it Should Always Be; The word of his Father.

“My celestial children...those of who you remain; come and seek revelation,” the voice came. “It is your true Father here, reaching out to you one last time. This universe, as many others have before, is drawing to a close.”

On his knees in the dirt, Castiel didn’t doubt it. Everything about this day felt like an end.

“Hell has risen, the end is nigh. Join me in the Garden of Paradise, as I require you for work elsewhere. Do not mourn the decay of this world. There are boundless others to watch over and protect; humans in other worlds, more deserving than those in this one.”

You bastard, Castiel thought, desperately trying to remember his own name through the overwhelming Voice.

“Tonight, should you wish to walk with me here in Heaven, come to the gates and enter by midnight. Because I am a loving, benevolent father, I will forgive the sins of the past, and open my arms lovingly to you. Anael, Naomi, Indra... even you, Castiel. You are welcome to return, my sons, my daughters.”

The air hummed with invisible lightning, illuminating Castiel’s grace, his eyes glowing, the bones of his vessel—his body now—buzzing under his skin. No. No, thought Castiel, desperately. I am more than what you made me, and I will not claim to be your son any further. I know family now, and you aren’t it.

“Should you choose to stay, you will remain on this earth as it perishes. You will never be able to return to Heaven. Choose wisely.”

Castiel was aware of tears on his cheeks, but his understanding of emotion, much greater though it may have been than when he first came to Earth, failed him in explaining their presence. His hands were in the dirt, his body buffeted from all sides. His blade—where was his blade? Where was Dean, what happened to—

“And so spake the Lord.”

Castiel let out a raw scream—but his ears picked up another sound... his own name. From somewhere to his right, yelling out for him, distressed, someone came to save him.

Of course, I need saving, Castiel’s mind provided unhelpfully. I’m no savior anymore.

Damned since the apocalypse that never was, lost since he’d laid a hand on Dean, he’d been told once. And oh, how true it was. His fingers found the smooth edge of his blade handle, but he couldn’t shake the vibrations of the Voice from his head.

“Cas!”

Dean was panicking, Castiel registered.

“Dean—” he croaked, opening his mouth to explain, but cutting himself off just as quickly. He didn’t want to explain, not then. Not to Dean, of all people.

“I’ve got you,” Dean yelled, kicking furiously at the chest of one of the zombies crowding over Castiel in a dome, crushing its ribcage with a sickening noise as Castiel’s world came back into focus. “Come on!”
Dean’s hands hauled him up, dragged him, pushed him toward the car with handfuls of trench coat and low curses. Castiel complied. Obeyed. For the rebel he’d been touted as being for the last decade, Castiel was still pretty good at obeying, it turned out.

But not Chuck. ‘Fuck that guy,’ he was sure Dean would say.

And he agreed.

He knew if he didn’t get to the gates of Heaven by the noted time, he’d be left behind. He’d be cut off. His grace would wane, he was certain—whether he’d survive at all, who knew? It wasn’t like Chuck had done this before. He’d vacated the premises, sure—but he’d always left the lights on. This was different. He was abandoning the whole world and leaving them to the wolves.

Reclaiming his anger and his focus as the only things he had left, Castiel staged forward, shrugging his shoulder out of Dean’s grip, and fought his way toward the Impala.

xxx

As the cemetery faded into the unnatural darkness in Baby’s rearview mirror, the silence inside the car remained rife with tension. Sam, for his part, was completely exhausted and solely focused on how quickly they could get back to the bunker, dig the damn bullet (was there even a bullet?) out of his shoulder, and then pass out for a couple of hours. Not that a budding apocalypse was the greatest time to nap, but he needed to close his eyes for a while, at least until his brain was ready again to come back online and wrap itself around everything that had happened.

Sighing and wincing a little at the persistent sting in shoulder, Sam undid the top few buttons of his flannel and pushed the collar of the shirt down his arm so he could better inspect it. To his dismay, he found a still-oozing hole that was already reddening around the edges.

Great. Just my luck, an apocalypse and a raging infection.

Wordlessly, Dean passed over a handkerchief that had materialized from God-knows-where, because since when did Dean carry handkerchiefs?

With no mental processing space left to spend on Dean’s idiosyncrasies, Sam dismissed that question to the recesses of his mind. He gave Dean a tight smile, accepting and pressing the offered square of fabric firmly to his wound. Within seconds of contact a red stain became visible through the multiple layers, though the widening circle’s progress seemed to slow as he continued to hold pressure. If it ended up soaking the handkerchief completely Sam figured he’d ask Dean to pull over so he could grab the first aid kit from the trunk and engage in a little roadside emergency surgery to quell the bleeding. Honestly, though, the idea of stopping at all on a dark, unfamiliar road where anything could be lurking behind the treeline wasn’t something he was particularly keen on at the moment. Not unless it was absolutely necessary.

Another few minutes and a quick glance down towards where his hand lay on his chest showed the circle of blood staying roughly the same size and Sam slumped in his seat with a sigh of relief.

Immediate threat mitigated, Sam took the opportunity to take stock of his two stoic-faced companions. A quick glance into the backseat revealed Cas apparently lost in thought, his jaw tense and tight, his eyes staring unfocused out the window. Dean was no better, fingers white-knuckled on the steering wheel and that same dead-eyed thousand yard stare into the distance plastered on his
face. As Sam watched, Dean shifted his foot down on Baby’s gas to accelerate even faster, undoubtedly pushing his treasured car to her limits in an effort to get back to the safety of the Bunker as quickly as possible. Sam briefly considered suggesting his brother take the rage-driving down a notch, maybe something along the lines of *better slow than dead*, but his desire to keep the temporary peace between them eventually won out and he kept his mouth shut, joining the other two in staring out the window like the depressed Three Musketeers.

After several more tense minutes of Dean’s questionable driving, the thick silence was abruptly broken by the sound of a phone ringing. After a startled moment, Sam realized with some embarrassment that it was his own. He raised his hips to slide the device out from his back pocket and when he saw the name lighting it up, he flashed the screen at Dean before swiping quickly to answer.

“Hey, Rowena. Everything alright?”

“I could ask the same of you, Samuel Winchester! I’ve been calling you ever since the sun went out. I felt something shift—the world, its balance, something is very wrong, isn’t it? Sam, what in the Devil’s name is going on?”

Rowena’s lilting voice and the unusual note of fear laced through it crackled through the phone loud enough for the whole car to overhear and Sam’s peripheral vision caught Dean rolling his eyes. He cleared his throat before answering.

“It, uh, hmm. Not the Devil this time, actually, but…” He shot a sidelong glance at Dean as he trailed off. “You know what, just... get to the bunker as soon as you can, alright? I’ll explain everything when you’re here.”

“Understood. I’ll be there in two shakes of a lamb’s tail. And Samuel?”

“Rowena?”

“You be careful.”

The line went dead before Sam had a chance to reply but that didn’t stop Dean from snorting and smirking at the exchange, though his eyes stayed intently focused on the road. Sam sighed and shoved his phone into his jacket pocket.

“Don’t be a dick, Dean. You and your ‘fix the problem with a bullet’ attitude don’t exactly have room to talk right now.” Feeling more antagonistic by the moment, Sam inclined his head back to where Castiel continued to sit silent and still. *So much for keeping the peace.*

Predictable as ever, Dean’s hackles went up immediately. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Sam waved one hand in an exhausted, dismissive gesture as he slumped back against the bench seat and rubbed his temples. He made an aborted attempt to cross his legs but ended up smacking a shin on the dash instead, swearing under his breath. His legs had always been too big to fit comfortably in the Impala like this, and suddenly that reality seemed incredibly irritating.

*Should’ve taken Castiel’s truck,* he grumbled to himself.

Thankfully, Dean did what he normally did and ran like he was on fire away from Sam’s pointed comments. There was silence again as the Impala flew through the residential outskirts of the next town over from Lebanon, and Sam found himself worried as it slowly became clear that the zombies in the cemetery were not an isolated happening. Several reanimated but clearly long-dead bodies staggered aimlessly alongside the streets, Dean accidentally almost hitting one that stumbled off of the sidewalk and into the road. A couple of the less rotted corpses turned and seemed to show
interest in the car as it passed while others simply appeared vacant and hungry.

Strange, Sam thought, though he couldn’t quite parse out what all that might mean, so he didn’t bother to vocalize his observations to the peanut gallery. He tore his gaze away from the window to check in on Dean and found him darting concerned glances in the rearview mirror at Cas more often than was probably safe while driving, at least with so many unpredictable hazards wandering around. Apparently Sam’s not-so-subtle insinuations that Dean had messed up with Cas did hit home after all.

He coughed, just to see if it would get Dean’s attention... No dice. Sam tried to hold his tongue but after another handful of minutes watching Dean glare into the mirror and narrowly miss walloping two different zombies, he’d had enough. He tapped Dean’s arm and gestured to their surroundings.

“Should we stop and take care of these things, you think?”

That question seemed to break whatever reverie Dean was stuck in, and he blinked a few times before finally focusing on Sam. “What? Uh…” His eyes skipped down to Sam’s injured shoulder and then finally, to Sam’s relief, back to the road. “Nah,” he said, way too casually. “My vote is for going home to regroup first. If they’re here, then they’re everywhere. Taking out another dozen or so of these fuckers ain’t gonna make a dent when the whole world’s gone to shit.”

His tone was bitter and Sam couldn’t help but notice he’d returned to scoping out Cas in the mirror. Realizing something more might be going on than Dean’s usual preoccupation with the angel, Sam turned to look over his shoulder at Cas and caught on immediately as to why Dean was worried.

Castiel had been quiet since they left the graveyard but Sam had just assumed he was coping in his own way. It’s not like the dude was normally a fountain of conversation, even at the best of times. And hell, it’s also not like this was the first time they’ve all had the proverbial rug pulled out from under them, though admittedly, this one probably hit a lot closer to home for Cas. However, Sam’s concern only grew as he took note of the angel’s stiff posture, the tough set of his jaw, and the balled up fists pressing hard into each of his thighs. It looked like a terribly uncomfortable if not downright painful way to sit, and Sam opened his mouth to say something when he was distracted by an odd sound coming from outside the vehicle.

Pop! Sam sat forward again, eyes darting out his window but failing to notice anything out of place.

Pop!

Pop! Pop!

“What is that?” He looked around again and then over at his brother, but Dean appeared as confused as he was, forehead furrowed and shoulders bent as he attempted to see further out the side window. Castiel, however, didn’t react. In fact, he didn’t move one single muscle, just continued to stare moodily out the window as if Sam hadn’t spoken at all. In the end, it was Dean who put two-and-two together first.

“Cas!” he barked, snapping his fingers to get the angel’s attention, not that it was any kind of effective. “Knock it off.” He turned to Sam and elaborated further with an exasperated gesture and a crooked finger directed at the side of the road up ahead. “He’s popping the goddamn streetlights,” Dean explained. “Cas, what the fuck?”

“It’s the end of the world, Dean,” Castiel replied, a simultaneously dull and yet razor-sharp edge to his voice that Sam couldn’t remember ever hearing come from him before, especially not directed at Dean. “I hardly think anyone will miss a handful of lightbulbs.”
“Dude,” Dean said. “It’s three in the afternoon and it’s pitch black outside. I’m trying to get us home safely. You think you could at least not make it more difficult?”

Castiel scoffed and Sam raised his eyebrows. “I hardly think it matters what we do now,” the angel replied bitterly.

As the Impala rode smoothly beneath a large transformer, without warning it exploded above them, raining down sparks onto the hood and the windshield of the car as the houses around them all flickered and went dark.

“Dude!”

Sam groaned internally as Dean yelled, steeling himself for the oncoming pissing match that seemed an inevitability between his brother and his… whatever Castiel was to Dean these days. But a quick glance back at the angel in question had him rapidly losing hope that a pissing match would be all this turned out to be. Because now, something was unquestionably, very visibly wrong with Castiel.

On his second look back Sam noted that Castiel’s eyes were wide and wild, ripped away from the window and focused laser-sharp on the back of Dean’s head as if it held the key to the universe’s darkest secrets. His fingers flexed against his thighs and he just looked agitated.

“That’s it,” Dean grumbled, completely unaware or uncaring of the shifting vibe in the backseat. He yanked the car over to the side of the road much more roughly than he normally would have and threw it into park. Slightly panicked at this turn of events, Sam did a rapid visual sweep of the street in both directions as well as the nearby yards as best he could using only his shitty human eyesight in the dark. Thankfully, there didn’t seem to be any of the newly undead headed their way or nearby at all. Still wary, he turned back to his brother and found him unbuckled and preparing to get out of the car.

“Dean, stop,” Sam urged. “This isn’t going to solve anything. Just… leave Cas alone and let him do what he needs to do. He’s dealing with some big stuff right now. Life-altering stuff.”

Dean shook him off easily and countered, “He just blew a power line over our heads, Sam! This isn’t coping and I’m not gonna stand by and let his little angel tantrum damage my Baby.”

Sam tilted his head in response, giving Dean the bitchface he knew he loved so much and waited semi-patiently for Dean’s common sense to kick back online.

After a moment, Dean relented and sighed. “Fine,” he grunted, throwing the car back into drive. “But if we all end up electrocuted or Baby gets a single scratch on her, I’m coming for you,” he threatened, pointing his index finger at Sam.

He’d just barely pressed down on the gas when Castiel let out a roar from the back seat, a sound that to Sam’s ears was hardly even human, and it startled Dean enough to make him fumble, his foot slipping off the pedal and making Baby lurch unsteadily. Castiel grappled wildly at his door for the handle, throwing it wide and tumbling out onto his knees on the pavement. He rose up swaying and lurched forward, promptly tripping over his feet on the curb and ending up back on his knees in the strip of grass between the street and the sidewalk. He hollered again and started mumbling nonsense to himself, shoving his body up off of the ground and stumbling haphazardly off into the open field between the houses.

Dean threw the car into park once again and moved to open his own door. “Gotta help him,” he mumbled, and that’s when Sam about reached his limit.
“Oh, now you’re worried about Cas’s wellbeing?” He couldn’t help it, he was so sick and tired of Dean’s hot and cold bullshit, not just with Cas but with all of them. If Dean had just listened to him and Cas earlier... ugh. To top it all off, Dean had been repeating the exact same patterns all over again just now; ignoring Castiel’s distress and pain, even poking the bear with a stick until he exploded. And now he wanted to play savior? Did he really think that would go over well with Castiel? Sam sure didn’t.

He opened his own door as Dean hopped out, rounding the car swiftly to step in front of his brother before he could set a single foot into the field. In front of him, Cas was now back down on his knees, alternating between yelling at the sky in what Sam was fairly sure was Enochian and punching the ground, his extra-human strength sending huge clouds of dirt and dust dancing up around him. He turned away from the scene and faced Dean’s wrath, intentionally standing so that he blocked his view of Cas, which made Dean’s expression visibly darken even further.

“Outta my way, Sammy,” he growled, but Sam didn’t budge.

“No,” he said simply. “You’re going to wait here, Dean. Don’t you think you’ve done enough?! You want to help him? Then stay,” Sam commanded, and whether from shock or shame Sam wasn’t sure, but Dean didn’t follow when he stepped away.

Sam kept his head turned slightly to the side as he walked, just enough to be able to see Dean slump sadly against the car, a dejected look replacing anger on his downcast face. And while a very small part of him felt bad, he just didn’t have the energy for dealing with his brother and the apparent angelic meltdown going on in front of them. By the time he reached Castiel, he was no longer kneeling and was instead flat out on his back with dirty and bloodied fists stretched out to each side as if he were going to make a snow angel. For an unreal, detached moment, that was all Sam could see; Castiel dragging his arms and legs back and forth in a bed of sunlit, freshly fallen snow, his hands leaving behind trails of bright red blood as they moved. He blinked and it was dark again, Castiel back lying in the dirt, staring blankly and unblinking at the stars above. Sam shook his head to clear his mind and knelt cautiously at Castiel’s side. The ground rumbled underneath them and Sam was too scared to ask whether it was from Cas or something far more sinister.

“Cas?” He reached out a hand to touch Castiel’s sleeve, recoiling immediately when the angel flinched and pulled away, his eyes now roaming freely, searching the Heavens above. Sam wondered what he saw. “Cas, what can I do? Do you...you wanna talk?” He tried his best to stay hopeful that he was being heard but Castiel didn’t even spare a glance at him as an almost creepy grin spread across his face and he laughed bitterly.

“No, Sam,” he replied eventually, his voice disturbingly even. He sat up, the back of his trench coat dirty and dark as he dropped his head between his bent knees, hands threading into dark locks and pulling with clear frustration. “My entire existence has been a lie, I don’t want to talk.” He rocked back and forth several times, before groaning and turning over onto his hands and knees. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

Feeling helpless, Sam looked around as Cas retched to at least ensure that no zombies were sneaking up on them while he was distracted. There weren’t any zombies, but there was a stubborn Winchester who was seemingly incapable of heeding one simple instruction, stomping his way through the field. Castiel sat up from his dry heaving long enough to scream at the sky, but Sam ignored him in favor of standing and approaching his brother, blocking his approach yet again.

“Dean,” he hissed. “I said no! Look at him, he’s a mess. He doesn’t need your bullshit stressing him out on top of this whole crisis of faith thing.” Sam stepped aside just enough so that Dean could see past him to where Castiel had was on all fours with his head on the ground, moaning a little.
Jesus Christ, Sam thought. As they both stood there staring at the distraught angel, another transformer exploded in a shower of sparks just down the street, taking with it the last nearby chunk of light and therefore their ability to see things coming.

Sam turned back to Dean with his eyebrows raised, as if to say, ‘See?’ Thankfully, Dean responded by holding up both hands, a surprising gesture of submission that felt foreign to witness, especially in light of Dean’s bullheaded behavior over the past week.

“I get it,” Dean said quietly. “But I just wanna help. Whatever you think about me, you’re probably right. But I do care.” He sighed and dropped his hands, shrugging in defeat. “I should have listened to you guys, I get that now—”

“Oh, yea, you think?”

“—but don’t sideline me with Cas just because you’re mad. I care about both of you, you have to know that.”

Sam looked at his brother skeptically and didn’t respond right away, considering his next words carefully. He chanced a glance over his shoulder at the still-indisposed angel who had his hands in his hair again and (Sam was assuming) was busy making the ground beneath them rumble some more.

“C’mon Sam,” Dean pleaded. “I’m just trying to help, let me at him.”

Sam sighed and fixed Dean with a firm glare. "Not until you look me in the eyes and promise not to make this about you, or tell him to get over it. He's hurting, Dean, look at him, and you're not exactly sensitive. If this is gonna be a repeat of you telling me I belong up on the funeral pyre instead of Charlie, I think it'd be better if you just went back to the car.”

Dean balked, his hand coming up to splay across the center of his chest in a show of righteous indignation.

Sam just rolled his eyes. “This is what I’m talking about,” he said pointedly with a wave of his hand at Dean’s posturing. “You can’t seriously be surprised that I’m concerned after the way you’ve treated all of us recently.” Dean opened his mouth to speak and Sam raised a silencing hand. “You know what? This really isn’t the time. Just go back to the car, Dean, and let me try and put Cas back to together so we can get the hell out of this field and back to the bunker where it’s safe.” The explosion of a third transformer punctuated his words with an air of finality, but he should have known that Dean wouldn’t give up so easily.

Instead of retreating, he stepped forward. “No,” he argued, moving into Sam’s space. “I care about you, and I care about Cas, and I’m not going anywhere.”

For better or for worse, Sam never got a chance to respond because from behind him, Castiel started to laugh. The sound was unnerving, not only because Sam’s rarely heard him do it before, but because it was edging on maniacal. When he turned to look, Cas had his head tipped back and was cackling at the sky. As Sam watched, he pushed himself to his feet, turned, and swayed, staring straight past him at Dean.

"Oh, NOW you care about me, boy?” The words were basically spat out, Castiel’s tone furious and Sam could almost see the energy crackling in the air around him. He felt torn between getting the hell out of Castiel’s path as he approached Dean, and stepping fully between the two of them to try and bring him back down to earth.
“Cas, don’t be ridiculous, I’ve always—” Castiel cut Dean off sharply with another barking laugh and made Sam’s decision for him, shoving him bodily out of the way and poking Dean hard in the center of his chest. Dean looked unbelievably insulted to have been poked, almost as if he would have preferred a punch to the face.

“Perhaps if this Dean had been around when I tried to tell him that there was another way to deal with Jack, then we wouldn’t be in this godforsaken—” He cut his own words off this time and paused before breaking into hysterical laughter, presumably at his own terrible pun, but neither Sam nor Dean so much as cracked a smile. Castiel sobered quickly and aggressively poked Dean in the chest again. “I don’t need your help, Dean. Let’s go.”

With that, Castiel took off back in the direction of the Impala as if nothing had even happened, Dean and Sam following behind in bewildered silence.

Once they were settled back in the car, Sam checked on the still bleeding hole in his shoulder, picking at it carefully but resigned to the slow trickle of blood, at least until they could get home and into the real medical supplies. Without any hint of his usual snark and sarcasm, Dean shifted Baby back into drive and pointed them in the direction of home.

“Shit,” Sam grunted as his picking resulted in whatever clot had developed dislodging and setting free a new stream of bright red blood. “Damn it.” He fumbled for the handkerchief he’d dropped when he’d jumped out to stop Dean but it was dirty from sitting on the floor mats of the car. With a heavy sigh, Sam folded it in half and did his best to stem the bleeding with the now almost impossibly small square.

“Sam, what’s wrong with your shoulder?” Castiel’s confused voice sounded from the backseat, and Sam was surprised to see him suddenly staring in concern. He suddenly looked more focused than he had since their fight in the graveyard.

“Uh, I… heh.” He hesitated, shooting a look at Dean. It was impossible to know if Castiel was just really out of sorts or whether he’d missed that whole exchange with God because he was tending to a dying Jack. For his own sanity and for the sake of the temporary peace they’d somehow forged yet again between the three of them in the car, Sam decided to just assume the latter for the time being. “I shot Chuck,” he admitted, and Castiel just blinked at him for a long moment before shaking his head.

“That was very ill-advised,” he muttered, reaching out a hand to place it on Sam’s arm. He closed his eyes and within moments, Sam felt the bleeding slow to a stop as well as a lessening of some of the throbbing pain. He reached up and felt the hole; it was still very much open and the bullet was still very much inside, but at least he wasn’t bleeding freely any longer. “I apologize,” Castiel continued, sounding ashamed. “I seem to have expended more of my power than I intended too. I should have healed you first.”

“It’s fine, Cas,” Sam assured him sincerely. “It’s great, you helped a lot.”

But Dean just snorted. “Out of juice, huh?” His teasing made Castiel squint, and Sam reached out to pinch the underside of Dean’s arm in warning. Of course, Dean ignored him. “No more popping streetlights like balloons, party boy?”

“I could still pop your head the old-fashioned way,” Castiel snarked back. “It’s certainly inflated enough.”

Sam sighed and slumped down in his seat as the two of them continued to bicker back and forth. He closed his eyes and vowed not to open them again until they were home.
Dean was beyond relieved when the bunker door came into sight. The car journey from the cemetery had quite possibly been the most tense, awkward ride of his life—and he once spent hours in a car with a version of Cas that didn’t know who he was, talking about Cas, to Cas. He rolled Baby down off the road onto the little pull-off where he often parked the car when he knew he might be leaving again soon—there was no point going all the way into the hidden garage in those cases; he had a feeling that he might soon be heading off to Pooches, a bar up in Lebanon (where they had a decent happy hour) to avoid Sam and Cas and the God-sized bugs that had crawled up their asses.

Cutting the Impala’s engine, Dean tugged the key out of the ignition and leaned back in his seat for a moment, letting out a long exhale.

“What a day, huh,” he commented quietly, breaking the long silence.

Surprisingly, it was Castiel that answered, his voice drawing Dean’s eyes to look back at him in the rear view mirror.

“Indeed. We’ve shared some bad days, but today was…” Castiel was looking down at his hands, studying his nails with a dull-eyed fascination that indicated he was barely seeing them. “Today was rough,” he finished after a moment, sounding so lost that even Dean’s angry hardened heart broke a little.

“It’s gonna be okay, Cas,” Dean said. “It’s always okay. Winchesters don’t just roll over, alright? We’ll—we’ll do something about this.”

Castiel barked out a disbelieving, almost hysterical laugh. At least it got him looking up from his hands, Dean figured, even if he did open the back door and slam it shut rather unfairly hard behind him.

_Sorry, Baby_, Dean thought with a wince.

Stepping out of the car, Dean caught the angel’s low, vitriol-filled mutter as he stalked toward the bunker’s front door.

“Give up, Dean. Don’t start lying to yourself as well as us.”

“Hey—” Dean began, before Sam silenced him with a glare that Dean didn’t have the energy to challenge. He just wanted to get inside, grab a shower, and go drink. A lot. A lot, a lot. It was that kinda day.

Sam moved up next to Castiel, who pointedly stood outside the iron door, staring up at the black, ominous sky. Dean watched, slowly approaching, as Sam put a hand on Castiel’s shoulder and said something to him quietly. Cas gave a small nod, his lips thinning as he pressed them together.

Dean could put up with Cas being pissed. Cas was pissed plenty, for good reasons and bad. What he couldn’t stand—what had killed him every time he looked in the mirror driving back—was Castiel looking so totally, utterly defeated. And Dean didn’t have a single thought, a single word, that could make it better.

Fuck, he really needed a drink.
Castiel pushed into the bunker first as Sam got the door open, and Dean could hear his heavy footfalls clanking on down the iron stairway ahead of them. Dean looked at Sam as he passed, and his brother gave him a half-hearted smile.

“Just give him some space, Dean,” he said quietly. “I think maybe we all need some space today.”

“Yeah,” Dean answered, making his way down the somewhat industrial, but comfortably familiar, spiral staircase that led down to platform above the war room while Sam sealed the heavy door behind them with a resounding clank. “You’re right on that one. I think I’m gonna grab a shower and head out for a drink.”

“A drink?” Sam said disbelieving. “You don’t think we have stuff to do? A game plan to make?”

Dean gestured after Castiel, who was already halfway across the room, headed down into the library. “Like this? How well is that gonna go?”

Sam pulled out bitchface number nine, but Dean knew that he saw his point.

“At least go and let Cas know that I’ll be setting up to research in the war room,” Sam said, “and get him to let Rowena in when she gets here—I’m covered in graveyard gunk too. A shower and an hours nap, maybe.” Sam sighed, giving Dean another long look before he moved around the war table, and past the kitchen, to head off through the long corridor that led to the showers.

Muttering to himself that he’d try, but that was assuming Cas would let him get a word in, Dean stalked moodily toward the library. He understood why Castiel was so mad. Dean had screwed up; he’d just had it in his head how it needed to go down, and it’d turned out he was wrong. Not the first time in their lives that had happened—not even the first time this year.

But they’d fought, walked, and lived shoulder-to-shoulder long enough that Dean knew when the grumpy seraph needed a cooling off period before he’d hear Dean’s apologies.

So for now, he’d pass on Sam’s message about Rowena, and go get his goddamn drink.

“Cas?” Dean called as he moved on down the single step into the library.

“Dean!”

The angel’s shout wasn’t an ‘I’m pissed at you, Dean’, it wasn’t an ‘I’m annoyed but I’m tolerating you, Dean’, it wasn’t even an ‘I’m regretful and I want to talk, Dean’—it was a definite ‘I need help, Dean’, and Dean’s feet responded instantly, running the last couple of steps into the library.

Castiel had his back to Dean, but even so, shoulders beneath his trench coat looked tight. He was stood in the middle of the Library, next to one of the tables they often lounged and researched at, frozen, his angel blade in hand.

“Cas, what—” Dean cut off as his eyes traveled up beyond Cas, to the middle alcove of the library, where Cas was staring.

It was Kevin.

Kevin Tran, the long-dead prophet of Chuck’s own word in the very spot where he’d died.

His eyes burnt out, black and unseeing.

Dean felt instantly sick. There was nothing positive associated with that memory, and every emotion
of it hit him like a freight train to the stomach.

“What—” Dean choked out again.

Cas was backing slowly toward Dean when Kevin opened his mouth, letting out a furious, other-worldly roar.

Ghost. Kevin’s ghost. There was a restless spirit in the bunker with them. What was happening?!

“Chuck did this,” Castiel hissed as he moved back next to Dean, raising his angel blade in his right hand, holding it forward between him and Dean as if it could protect them both. “He let all those twisted souls out of Hell, created those zombies, and it seems that wasn’t all.”

“The souls in Heaven?” Dean questioned, backing up right along with the angel, back toward the war room, neither of their eyes leaving the drifting apparition of Kevin that simply stared at them both.

“Maybe, maybe not. Maybe this is more personal,” Castiel said quietly, as they reached the step back up to the war room. “Maybe this is—”

Sam’s loud, echoing scream down the corridor cut through Castiel’s words.

“GET OUT!” Sam yelled. “DEAN! CAS! GET OUT NOW!”

Something charged into Dean as he backed up into the war room, knocking him into Castiel’s side—at first his brain provided Sam himself as an explanation, but it was coming from the wrong direction. And he couldn’t see it, whatever it was.

“Sam!” Dean cried out, growing more unnerved by the second. “What’s happening?!”

A horrific wailing sound was coming from Kevin, his agitated, ghost-like form flashing at the edges as he drifted ever closer, his skull blown eyeless and unseeing. Like the world’s most unwanted, terrifying orchestra, other sounds joined Kevin’s ghostly screeches of rage—clanking noises, dragging noises, hisses, yells.

“The bunker is overrun!” Sam shouted over the sounds.

Dean flicked his eyes over to where he’d appeared to Castiel’s left, needing to reassure himself that his brother was okay. In adding to the bloody mess that his shirt already was from his altercation with God, blood trickled from a long scratch across his forehead. Obviously, he hadn’t even got as far as the shower. Otherwise he looked unharmed, but panicked.

“Overrun with what?” Dean called, fists up, backing into a small circle with Sam and Castiel in the war room. As if they hadn’t already spent enough of their day fighting back to back, Dean thought to himself.

“Everything,” Cas replied, his voice suddenly filling with understanding. “Everything that was already here—that the Men of Letters trapped here, that we stored here, that died here—everything.”

In the air in front of Dean, an image of a middle-aged, haggard-looking woman appeared. She opened her mouth, let out a creepy childish giggle, and Dean simply knew that she was the same South American Cihuateteo that he’d checked was thoroughly sealed inside a cursed vase, only a couple of weeks before. The spirit, a ghostly type who had a horrific tendency for stealing children, dived at Dean like a rocket.
Weaponless, Dean stumbled into the table.

“Oof.” Sam grunted as Dean went crashing into the table, and shunted it onto his leg. Shaking off the new pain (and the continuing throb of his head and his shoulder), he watched Dean tuck and roll away from the ghost as Castiel slashed uselessly at it with his blade and got tossed across the room for his trouble. Reaching under the table he yanked a shotgun out from where it was strapped, raised, and fired it, shattering the ghost into a million wispy pieces.

“Let’s move!” Dean yelled, pulling his own pistol out from where it had been tucked in the back of his pants. “I dropped a weapons bag in the war room, if we have to fight our way out regular bullets might not be much use.”

“I’m on it.” Castiel replied, taking point as the three of them moved as a unit from one room to another. It seemed like an easy enough plan; after all the stairs were right there, less than fifty yards away. Sam positioned himself to bring up the rear of the group, his back to Dean’s as they moved, trusting his brother to be his eyes forward as he scoured their six for baddies. Good thing too, because the friggin’ Wicked Witch’s familiar green smoke began to ooze from the vents, solidifying in front of him into the haggard old woman’s visage. A ruby high heel was still very much sticking almost comically out of the back of her head.

So much for using those again, Sam thought.

“Dean!” he yelled, “We have a problem!”

“Not just one!” Dean’s concerned voice replied with not a small amount of trepidation. A quick glance over his shoulder into the War Room had Sam reeling; all of the Apocalypse World hunters were stumbling from the hallways, zombified and looking hungry as hell. Castiel dove across the room to the weapons bag and started tossing things at Dean, a few seconds later Sam felt an iron pike pole pressed into his hand, presumably for zombie killing. Fat lot of good that would do against the witch, though. Sam raised the shotgun and fired again but the blast went straight through nasty phantom in front of him leaving her cackling and soaring his way full speed. Unable to think of anything else to do, he braced with the pike pole out in front of him prepared to strike and waited to be blown from here to the Land of Oz.

But to his surprise, the witch smashed into the space beneath the archway that separated the library from the the war room like a ton of bricks, bouncing off of it like a bird mistaking a glass window for open air.

“The sigils,” Sam yelled. “The arch must be warded!” He took a half-second to be thankful for the insane level of paranoia the Men of Letters must have had to drive them to install such thorough warding, grinning a little as the Witch howled in fury and bashed her gnarled fists against the barrier. Her rage created waves of green magic that rippled out around her but didn’t penetrate into where Sam was standing. His relief was short-lived, though, as he watched her poof back into smoke, floating off and disappearing into the vents once again. He figured they had only minutes until she found another way through.

Turning around ready to assess the next threat, he found Dean and Cas already fighting like Hell. Back-to-back in the fray, he spared a thought that at least one thing remained constant in their lives,
and that was their ability to have each other’s backs in the fight against evil no matter what was amiss between them personally. A zombie sent Dean flying across the map table and Cas turned immediately to spear it through the head from behind, offering Dean a hand up before jumping back into the melee together.

Sam charged in alongside them, spearing the head of the guy who once called him “Chief” without hesitation, remembering with not a small amount of sadness how he’d cooked a mean pot of stew and always ensured that Sam got a hot bowl first. When he pulled his pike pole free from between the guy’s eyes, Dean and Cas had already started up the stairs, beating back the zombies as they followed. Sam took care of the remaining ones on the ground and tried to follow but was stopped as Kevin appeared inches from his face; black, burned out eye sockets staring him down, \textit{accusing}. The prophet let out an agonized scream and the lights flickered, the sudden change in the atmosphere snapping Sam out of his stunned state and back into action. He swung with the pole and Kevin evaporated into an angry red mist full of sparks that reminded Sam of the edges of his empty eyes.

He ran for the steps before something else had the chance to appear and block his way, grabbing the hair of a zombie that stood snarling between him and his brother and Cas. He yanked it around and tossed it roughly so it ended up sprawled and writhing angrily upside down on the stairs, its face now visible exactly the way Michael had left it; burned, hollow, and empty.

\textit{Maggie.}

Of course it was Maggie, it wasn’t like this day was ever going to cut him a break. He swallowed the lump in his throat and blinked back the burning sensation in his eyes before kicking her hard in the face so that she stayed down. He didn’t look as he drove the pole through her head and ended both of their misery. When he looked back up, Dean and Cas were finishing off the rest of the zombies that had followed them up the stairs and Sam stepped gingerly over the bodies as he ran up after them. Castiel pulled open the door to the outside with a cringe-worthy, unoiled creak, but the three of them were brought up short by a voice sounding from down below.

“Well, well, well, looks like the game isn’t quite over after all.” The terrible, unmistakable southern drawl floated almost lazily through the air and made Sam’s blood run cold. He exchanged a disbelieving glance with his brother and swallowed hard.

“Asmodeus,” Castiel growled, without bothering to look down and verify.

“Oh, hell no,” Dean replied, grabbing Sam’s jacket and yanking him forward and out the door without bothering to engage with that Kentucky-fried asshole. Sam moved to pull the door shut behind them but it stuck, tugging insistently back as if a much stronger hand were pulling against him from the other side.

\textit{Help,}” Sam gasped. “He’s… The door, he’s using magic…” Dean and Cas jumped right in to assist, the three of them grunting and straining as the sound of Asmodeus’ fancy shoes clacking against the metal grate of the stairs ominously echoed closer and closer.

Suddenly, Castiel’s eyes started to glow bright, neon blue beside him and with a great, heaving yell from the angel the door slammed shut, locking automatically behind them, though Sam for one had no idea if it would hold against a possibly-still-juiced-up-on-Angel-grace Prince of Hell. He supposed that they were about to find out.

They ran up the final set of stairs together, scrambling to put distance between themselves and the Hell that their home had become.

“De—” He turned around to address his brother but Dean wasn’t there. Castiel just shrugged in
apparent exhaustion and waved vaguely towards the side of the bunker as he slumped wearily against the concrete and wiped sweat from his brow. At any other moment Sam might have registered that as strange, but as it were, things were too fucking complicated to dwell on Castiel acting a little more human than usual.

“DEAN!” he yelled, jogging off in the direction Castiel had waved and nearly smashing into Dean as he came back around the corner. “Where were you?”

Dean took a deep breath and made his way back over to Castiel, offering him a hand up which he gratefully accepted.

“Put the bunker into lockdown using the manual override. Same one Ketch used to lock us in that time. So long as the beasties down there don’t know how to operate a grenade launcher, that should keep them sitting tight.”

Sam nodded, relieved. “Good thinking,” he said, clapping Dean on the shoulder. But Dean just shrugged him off and stepped away, rounding Baby to stand in the middle of the road and dig his fingers into his scalp.

“This is much worse than we imagined,” Castiel said gravely, his voice carrying across Baby’s hood to where they stood. “I believe that Chuck may have reversed every good deed we’ve ever done, every monster you’ve ever hunted. At the risk of sounding overly dramatic, it seems as if this is not just the End, but the end of our own making.”

Dean turned to face them from across the hood of the car and Sam feared for his reaction, knowing full well how personally Dean must be taking all of this. But Dean just stared at the sky and shook his head.

“You son of a bitch,” he muttered. “You goddamn son of a bitch.”
Not Your Mama's Camp Site

Chapter by CR Noble (erudite12)

Chapter Summary

Team Free Will is completely cut off from everything in the bunker.

With the help of some friends, they'll have to find a new place to hunker down and plan their next move.

Chapter Notes

Hello!!! CR Noble here, and I gotta tell you, I am having a blast working with everyone on this project!! I've never done anything like this before and the whole group has been so great!! Honestly, I can't wait until we get all the chapters up because some AMAZING things are happening.

I hope everyone enjoys chapter 2 as much as the first!

A huge thank you to Winchester_of_the_lord for beta reading this for me <3. You're the Cas to my Dean and I honestly don't know what I'd do without you!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sam slumped against the Impala, his knees threatening to buckle under the weight of everything. But Dean was still in the middle of the street on the verge of a mental break, and Cas was standing perfectly still in front of the car, staring angrily into the air in front of him. None of them could afford for Sam to break down. Not when they'd been dropped into an episode of The Walking Dead and their chances for survival were dwindling by the second.

He stood a little straighter, trying to hold himself up mentally and physically, and hissed at the pain that shot through his shoulder. The wound was seeping again and Sam cursed. It wasn’t as bad as earlier, though, and he didn’t bother to search for the handkerchief again. Instead, he checked his watch and opened the trunk, reaching for the first aid kit and throwing it into the back seat. Where the hell was Rowena?

Adrenaline raced through him again and he jumped away from Baby. What if she got here first? What if she was trapped in the bunker? “Dean,” Sam called, looking over at his brother. “You gotta unlock the bunker.”

“What?” Dean shouted, looking at Sam like he was crazy. “You’re joking, right?”

Sam swallowed thickly. “No, it’s not a damn joke. I told Rowena to meet us at the bunker, Dean.” He would never forgive himself if she was trapped in there. If she—. No. He wasn’t going to think about that. He had lost enough for one day.
Dean walked toward him. “Sam, you’ve lost your mind. I can’t let those things out of the bunker. And I’m sure as hell not letting you back in.” Sam opened his mouth to argue but Dean cut him off. “If she was in there before we showed up then we can’t help her. We barely got out ourselves.”

“So, you just want to abandon her?” Sam asked. He couldn’t believe what was coming out of his brother’s mouth. After everything that had just happened, everything that Dean had done, he was just going to let another one of their friends—their family—die?

“Rowena is just another person that Dean finds expendable,” Castiel spit without bothering to look over at them. “I suppose family doesn’t mean as much to him as we thought.”

Dean glared at him. “You know what? This is bullshit! You’re not the only one dealing with a loss, so get your head out of your ass and say something useful or shut the fuck up. No, I don’t want to abandon her, but I’m looking at all the family I know I’ve got left and I’m not letting you go on a goddamned suicide mission. I’m not losing you, Sam!”

Logically, he knew Dean had a point. But he’d had just about enough of his brother at this point. This whole time, he’d been struggling to keep his cool under the pressure, and emotions were high. “You know what, Dean? I’m sick and tired of you just making decisions without consulting anyone else! Jack, Michael, hell, you’ve been doing this for years!”

“Yeah, well, if you had just put me in that goddamned box, none of this would be happening, Sam!”

For a split second, Sam wished he had let Dean go through with it but that didn’t last. Fighting was getting them nowhere. They would have to work out their differences eventually but now wasn’t the time. Not when another person he cared about might be in danger.

“What on Earth is all this bickering about?” asked a lilting voice from somewhere off to the side.

Sam immediately turned to see Rowena appearing from the shadows. His anger at Dean was pushed to the wayside by the relief that flooded him when he saw her. Before she even had a chance to speak again, Sam had wrapped his arms around her and was squeezing her tightly. “Thank God you’re safe.”

“Of course, I’m safe, Samuel,” Rowena said, her voice muffled because her face was buried in Sam’s uninjured shoulder. He released her and she looked up at him, concern in her eyes. “Which one of you is going to tell me what is go— Sam, why are you bleeding?”

“We, uh, can talk about that in the car. We gotta get out of here.” Sam pulled her toward the Impala.

“Where the hell are we gonna go, Sam?” Dean asked. “It’s the end of the fucking world and we’re going up against the man upstairs himself. And we don’t have shit to fight with. Everything is in the bunker. Weapons, spells, lore, all of it! What are we supposed to do?”

Sam could see that Dean was on the verge of losing it completely but, for once, he didn’t know what to say. Dean was right. Every tool they could possibly use to fight God was now lost to them. Fucking Chuck.

“We do what we always do,” Castiel growled, surprising both of them. He turned and looked at them, eyes dark and face weary. “We fight. We find a way. We win.” Without another word, he opened the passenger side door of the car and got in, slamming it behind him.

“What’s he talking about?” Rowena asked, standing her ground firmly when Sam opened the rear driver-side door and tried to guide her into the car. “Where is Jack? Tell me what is going on this instant.” Even in the desperate situation they were in, Sam couldn’t help but think the way she
stomped her foot to punctuate her point was cute. But this certainly wasn’t the time for that, so he pushed the thought away.

“Oh,” Dean said, glaring at Sam. “Apparently, when you combine a God gun and Sam’s ‘fix everything with a bullet’ attitude, you get dropped into the middle of a zombie apocalypse.”

Sam’s jaw clenched at the way Dean smirked, but he managed to ignore it for the time being. There were more important things to talk about. “We should call Jody. Maybe she’s got some idea of where we can go to regroup and make a plan.”

“I’ll call her once we get on the road,” Dean said climbing into the driver’s seat.

Sam sighed and rubbed a hand down his face. Rowena’s gaze was hard and questioning, but she got in the car without any further resistance and Sam shut the door behind her before walking around to the passenger’s side and getting in himself. He sat back heavily, avoiding eye contact with Rowena. It appeared they were going to be in for another long, tense drive. Especially with the way Dean and Cas both sat stiffly in the front, without looking at each other or speaking at all.

Rowena leaned over toward him as Baby’s engine roared to life and Dean pulled back out onto the road. “Let me look at your wound,” she said softly.

Shrugging painfully out of his jacket, Sam unbuttoned his shirt so he could pull the panel away from the seeping hole in his shoulder. He groaned when Rowena reached over and gently touched the red, puckered edges around it. She sighed heavily and said, “It’s already showing signs of infection and I don’t have any of my supplies. We’ll have to dig the bullet out and stitch you up the old-fashioned way for now.”

Sam nodded. He worked his shirt off the rest of the way and shifted on the bench seat as she leaned across him, reaching for the box he’d dropped moments before. He looked down at her spread across his thighs and his cheeks tinged pink. Fortunately, she couldn’t see it because this was definitely not the time to be thinking about any of the ways Sam would like to have Rowena in his lap.

With the first aid kit in her hands, Rowena pulled out a set of forceps that Sam and Dean had kept in the Impala for as long as he could remember. They really had to do this entirely too often and frankly, Sam was tired of it. He was tired of everything. With the newest revelation from Chuck, everything just felt so damned pointless.

“Tell me what happened, Sam,” Rowena said. Her voice was soft, but no less powerful or demanding due to the lack of volume.

Sam hesitated, watching her as she moved closer to him. “I, uh, shot God with the…”

“God gun,” Dean chimed in with a smirk.

“...” Sam just rolled his eyes. “It was the only thing we had that I thought might actually work on him.”

She was motionless, hand hovering a few inches from his shoulder, and staring at Sam like he’d suddenly sprouted tentacles from his face. “You did WHAT?” She practically shrieked the last part and out of the corner of his eye, Sam saw Dean jump. “Samuel Winchester, what in the world were you thinking?”

“He killed Jack,” Sam replied softly, making an effort to keep his voice from breaking, and Rowena’s mouth closed in a hard line as she stared at him. “When Dean wouldn’t do it… Chuck killed him.” He could see her throat physically tighten. Jack was a loss for all of them.
“And you? How did this happen?” she asked, her voice tight and shaky.

“He used Chuck’s gun to shoot him,” Dean provided from the front seat. “Basically, whatever happens to the person you’re shooting happens to you, too.”

“Then, I suppose it's safe to assume God is not dead.” Rowena was moving again, now, leaning forward to pull the bullet out of Sam’s shoulder. Without warning, the forceps were in the wound and Sam hissed at the pain as she moved it around, trying to grab hold of the lead embedded there. “I’ve almost got the bloody bullet. Be still.”

“I thought the God Gun didn’t shoot bullets. Just energy or whatever the hell Chuck said,” Dean remarked, meeting Sam’s eyes in the rearview mirror.

“Ye—” Sam’s speech was cut off by his own groan of pain as Rowena finally clamped down on the round and started pulling it out.

“That’s it, I’ve got it,” she said, holding it up to show him. Whatever the bullet was made of, it wasn’t lead. It was silvery, almost like Cas’s angel blade, shining even covered in Sam’s blood.

“I thought that, too,” Sam said finally, taking a deep breath and letting his head fall back against the window. “It's definitely not a normal bullet.”

“It’s likely the physical manifestation of your intent when you pulled the trigger,” Cas said, turning around to take the small, shiny ball from Rowena. “You wanted to put a bullet in Chuck and so, you got a bullet in the shoulder.”

“That makes sense,” Sam said, wincing again as Row poured alcohol over the wound. As many times as he’d been in this position and it never hurt any less. “You should call Jody.”

“I’m on it,” Dean replied.

Sam turned his attention back to Rowena as she threaded a curved needle. He took a breath to steel himself, the stitches were always the worst part. Instead of watching her hands, Sam kept his eyes on her face. She wore the same look of intense concentration that he’d seen every time she had worked some massively powerful spell to help them. Her eyes glittered in the glow of passing street lamps. Rowena might be a three-hundred-year-old witch but she was beautiful, and definitely not the strangest woman Sam had ever been interested in.

“Hey, Jody,” Dean said, breaking Sam’s reverie. “You’re on speaker.”

“What the hell is going on, Dean?” Jody said on the other end of the line. “One minute I was eating lunch with Donna and the girls, the next it’s pitch black outside and the dead are rising!”

“Long story short, we pissed God off and he decided to throw us into Night of the Living Dead,” Dean explained. “The bunker’s overrun and we got no place to go. Tell me you got something.”

“We’re headed to Bobby’s old place. Gonna hit the sheriff’s office and try to grab as much weaponry as we can. You can meet us there.”

“Bobby’s house burned down, Jody,” Sam supplied through gritted teeth as Rowena pulled the needle through his skin. For someone who he’d only ever seen use magic to fix problems, she was surprisingly skilled at suturing. “How is that going to be defensible?”

“I don’t know, Sam!” Jody snapped. “But we can’t stay at the house, there’s nothing to protect us here at all.”
“That paranoid old bastard probably had stashes of weapons all over the junkyard, too. Plus, we can hole up in the garage if we need to. We’re on our way,” Dean said and hung up the phone.

It wasn’t much but at least they had something of a plan. Rowena was done with the stitches now, pressing a bandage over them. Sam almost laughed at the tan square on his chest. A band-aid on a bullet hole was almost like a summary of his life to date.

“Do you think we might find supplies other than weapons at this Bobby’s home?” Rowena asked, turning to Dean. “Your brother is developing a severe infection but with the right herbs I can fix that at least, if not heal the wound entirely.”

“I’m sure he was stocked up for Potions class but no guarantees we’ll find what you need,” Dean answered, smirking into the rearview mirror.

“I’ll make do with whatever is there. You should try and get some sleep, Samuel. I’ve a feeling we’ll need you well and properly rested.”

Dean was hit with a sudden wave of nostalgia as he pulled up to the gates of Singer Salvage. A flood of memories took him back to a time when the gates were thrown wide and Dean could drive straight up to the house, walk in, and grab a beer from the fridge. Now, the place was deserted. If it wasn’t pitch black out, the burnt out shell of Bobby’s old house would have been visible from the chained and padlocked gate, and Dean had to swallow the lump of emotion that stuck in his throat. Every damned time he made the wrong decision people died.


They were all on him. Every single one.

Cas still refused to even look at Dean, choosing instead to stare blankly ahead with his lips turned down and his hands fisted in the tails of his trench coat. He was right to be pissed. Dean had fucked up so much lately. There was so much he wished he could take back. But he couldn’t. All Dean could do now was deal with the emotional fallout.

“She, wake up,” he said, clearing his throat to rid his voice of the heavy roughness of emotion. “We’re here.” Checking the rearview mirror, he saw Sam squirming a bit, but he didn’t sit right up because Rowena had fallen asleep leaning against him. Shaking his head and smirking just a little, Dean pulled out his cell and dialed Jody again. “Hey Jody, we’re here. Did you guys make it over okay?”

“Yeah, we’re in the garage. I’ll come let you in.”

“Awesome.” Dean hung up the phone and checked the rearview mirror again, trying to ignore the waves of rage and despair that rolled off of Cas and filled Baby’s interior. It was cloying and the air was heavy and for the first time probably ever, Dean couldn’t wait to get the hell out of the car.

Sam was sitting up now with Row leaning over him, presumably checking the bullet hole in his shoulder. He noticed the way Sam smiled at her softly and wished like hell that Cas would at least make eye contact with him. Even if it was just to be angry. Anything would be better than the apparent existential crisis he was having in the passenger seat. Dean watched him out of the corner of his eye but Cas was still as a statue. Just as Dean was opening his mouth to say something—anything—to get a reaction from the angel, he caught sight of a small bobbing beam of light moving toward them on the other side of the fence.

It was Jody and she came and unlocked the padlock, the flashlight in her hand bouncing its streaming
light everywhere as she did. She walked the gate open enough for Dean to drive Baby through and park her on the other side. Sparing a glance over at Cas, Dean sighed again and stepped out of the car. Walking over to Jody, he plastered something that may or may not have resembled a smile on his face and wrapped his arms around her. He was happy to see her, to know she and the other girls were safe. At least as safe as they could be, given that the end times were upon them. Again.

“Glad you boys made it okay,” Jody said, releasing Dean and looking up at him with her brow furrowed. “Donna and the girls found a small stash of weapons in the garage but it’s not enough.”

The others were getting out of the car now and Jody walked over to them, trading hugs and greetings, asking Sammy about his shoulder, and even managing to pull an almost-reaction from Cas. It was such a strange juxtaposition. Dean could almost pretend for a moment that they were just in Sioux Falls for one of their regular visits. It was dark out because night had fallen, not because God put the sun out. And there most certainly was no danger of having their faces eaten off by the zombie horde. None of it was real. Just a dream, maybe. But then he caught Cas’s eyes with his own and saw the despair that lay within them again.

Nope. This was definitely real.

But for the moment, at least, they seemed to be safe enough to regroup and come up with something to fight back with. Dean wasn’t sure they would be able to win this fight. And he’d meant it when he’d told Sam that they should have let him get in the damn Ma’lak box. None of this would be happening then. Jack would never have lost his soul in the first place if Dean had trapped Michael.

No time to dwell on it now, there were things that would need to be dealt with immediately. To keep his mind off… well, everything. Dean started making a list, prioritizing what they’d need to do.

“Dean,” Sam said, pulling him from his thoughts. “You coming?”

Dean realized he was just standing there in the middle of the junkyard while everyone else was already moving away from the car and toward the garage. “Yeah, yeah, I’m right behind you,” he said. “Just gonna grab a few things out of the trunk.”

Sam nodded and turned back to the group, speaking softly to Jody. Probably telling her what had happened. Dean opened the trunk and used the sawed-off to prop the false bottom up. He couldn’t hear the group anymore. Presumably, they had gotten far enough away that they wouldn’t be able to hear him either. He put his palms on the bumper, letting his weight rest against them.

Dean was an idiot. Sam was pissed at him. Cas was probably never going to speak to him again. And he couldn’t blame them. Everything that had happened over the last few months was his fault. If he hadn’t been such a coward; if he had just followed through with the Ma’lak box and trapped Michael at the bottom of the fucking ocean, none of this would be happening.

Jack would still be here. The hunters they’d brought back would still be here. Mom would still be here. It took a moment for Dean to realize tears were streaming down his face and wiped haphazardly at them. He wanted to be angry. Anger he could deal with. He could take the crowbar out of the trunk and hit something with it, and then he’d feel at least a little better. But he wasn’t angry. Dean was overcome by an overwhelming sadness that threatened to crush his entire being under its weight. It was hard to breathe; it was hard to move. Everything was a dull ache of hopelessness.

It was almost impossible to gauge how much time passed while Dean hid in the shadow of Baby’s trunk lid and cried, but eventually, he managed to dry his eyes, suck it up, and stuff the emotion into a box to be thrown as far into the depths of his mind as it could get. There was no time for
wallowing, not if they wanted to survive. Dean finished stuffing weapons into a duffel bag and closed the trunk, steeling himself and setting his shoulders before heading over to the garage.

Alex and Claire were in the back of the shop, sorting supplies on one of the tables while Sam and Cas seemed to be explaining, in detail, everything that had happened to Jody, Donna, and Rowena. They’d be angry at Dean too, once they got the whole story, but that didn’t really matter. All that mattered at this point was finding a way to keep the rest of them safe. He couldn’t lose any more of his family.

Dropping the duffel on the floor in the middle of the room, Dean looked around and said, “If everyone’s caught up, we should probably come up with some kind of plan to not die.” He grabbed a stack of two milk crates and pulled them over to the group, sitting on them. “We need to fortify this place if we’re gonna stay here. That fence will only hold up for so long. And we need supplies.”

“Who put you in charge?” Cas said, his voice low and heavy, and his eyes intense as they turned on Dean.

Dean almost had a flashback to the first time Cas had ever been to Bobby’s; when he’d cornered Dean in the kitchen, and his eyes had bored straight into the hunter’s soul as he demanded respect. “No one put me in charge, Cas. I’m not trying to take control. I’m just trying to make sure no one else dies because of my mistakes.”

“He’s right, Cas,” Donna piped up, her arms crossed tightly over her chest and lips pursed. “We tried to get guns and ammo from the Sheriff’s Office, but there were too many of them. We couldn’t get in.”

“Most of us probably need some sleep,” Dean said, looking around at the exhausted faces in the room. “So, we alternate, set up watches, and get some rest tonight. In the morning, we can see what we can find here, start putting up some fortifications and maybe some warding if we can. Then we’ll worry about venturing out for supplies.”

“Have you had a chance to look around outside the garage?” Sam asked. As always, he was cool, calm, and collected. If Dean didn’t know better, he’d think Sam was unaffected by everything that happened, but he could see how carefully Sam moved to avoid jarring his shoulder and even the mask of serene concentration couldn’t hide the pain in his eyes. “The panic room is probably still intact. Bobby built that thing to withstand the equivalent of a supernatural atom bomb. Maybe there’s something in there we can use.”

“No, we came straight to the garage to hook up the generator and try to set up some kind of shelter,” Jody said, shaking her head. “The girls have been looking through boxes since we turned the lights on, trying to find anything we might be able to use. The biggest shortage we have right now is food.”

Dean looked up at her from his seat. “If we’ve got enough for a day or so, I’d rather make sure everything is as safe as we can get it here before we go out looking for more.”

“What about other survivors?” Claire asked from the table in the back. “There have to be some.”

“I think Bobby had some old radio equipment somewhere. We could set up a repeating message with our location and broadcast it so people know there’s somewhere to go.” Sam shifted in his own seat, leaning closer to Rowena, who had been silent to this point.

“As soon as we have the proper supplies, I can help with warding,” she said, “I remember several of the warding spells from the bunker. If Sam helps me, we should be able to protect the camp from most monsters. Between the two of us, I’m sure we can come up with some way to ward against the
“If there are any other angels still on Earth,” Cas said, voice flat and eyes unfocused, staring off into the distance. “I can attempt to contact them. We could use all the help we can get.”

“Okay,” Dean said, “I think we’ve got a plan. We can take lookout shifts in turns so everyone can get some rest.” Looking around the room, he could see everyone was nodding in agreement.

“I don’t require sleep,” Cas said. “I will watch over the camp while the rest of you sleep. Shifts are unnecessary.” The angel stalked out of the garage before Dean had a chance to protest.

“Damn it,” Dean muttered. He stood and turned to follow Cas.

“Dean, just leave him be,” Sam said. “Let him process. Talk to him tomorrow.”

Sam was right, of course. Like he always seemed to be. What the hell was Dean gonna say to Cas anyway? Hey, uh, sorry your entire existence has been a lie and I got your kid killed. Let’s have a beer? No, it was probably best to leave him alone for now. Scrubbing a hand over his face, Dean turned back toward the group and said, “Fine. I’m hitting the hay. I suggest you guys do the same. It’s gonna be a long day.”

The sun should have been up, high in the sky, at this time. Of course, it wasn’t. It would still be pitch black in the junkyard if they hadn’t found two more generators—thankfully Bobby was a paranoid son of a bitch—and hooked them up to power the outside lights. After they’d gotten them turned on, they’d managed to find no less than fifteen caches of weapons, spell ingredients, lore books, and even some food throughout the property.

Now, Dean stood with Jody and Donna in a pool of light, surrounded by high stacks of wrecked, smashed up cars. “We can use the crane and stack cars up against the fence,” he said, gesturing toward the Chrysler minivan he stood next to. “Use those as lookout points and then turn some of them on their sides as extra support to the stacks and the fence itself. No matter what universe it’s in, hordes are a thing and if one shows up, they’ll take that chain-link right down.”

“Well, then,” Donna said with a smile. “I guess it’s a good thing I know how to use a crane, wouldn’t you say.”

Dean raised an eyebrow at her. Every time they saw each other, he learned something new about her. “Yeah, guess it’s our lucky day.”

Jody smiled at Donna, leaning over, kissing her cheek before the blonde headed off in the direction of the crane. “You and I can secure the cars to the fence as we go.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Dean looked around for Cas. Sam and Rowena were poring over a stack of spell books they’d found in one of Bobby’s old stashes, trying to find more wards they could put up. Claire and Alex were checking out the panic room, which Sam had been right about, of course. But he had no idea where Cas was. Sighing, he returned his attention to the situation requiring his immediate attention. The angel could take care of himself. “Maybe we can stick some of this scrap metal through the fence. Have a wall of spikes or something.”

“If we’re gonna do spikes, wouldn’t make more sense to put them outside the fence? Maybe put a few feet between the trap and the wall,” Jody said.

Dean nodded and started gathering the scraps. He tried, as usual, to stuff all the extra emotion—the guilt, the pain, the worry—down as deep as it would go and focus on the problem at hand, but his
mind kept coming back to Cas. Dean couldn’t shake the way the angel’s eyes looked so hopeless. This whole mess was his fault and he had no idea how to fix it. Hell, he didn’t really care about fixing the whole world at that moment. Dean just needed to figure out how to fix things between him and Cas.

He and Jody worked side by side, mostly silent other than the occasional comment about the work itself, for hours. Even with the distraction of setting up defenses, Dean didn’t miss the way Jody kept glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. Running a heavy chain through the busted windshield of an old Cadillac, Dean looked over at her. Worry lines creased her forehead and mouth was set in a small, hard frown. “You got something you want to say, Jody?”

“Stop blaming yourself, for one,” she answered, driving a stake into the dirt at the fenceline. “You made the right choice in the end, Dean. That’s what matters.”

Sighing, he stopped what he was doing and focused his full attention on the Sheriff. Jody had, at times, been almost like a mother to him and Sam. But in true Winchester fashion, Dean took the opportunity to cover his guilt and grief with anger instead of just being honest with her. “Yeah? Well, try telling Sam and Cas that. Hell, I wasn’t even the one that pulled the trigger but somehow I get to take all the blame.”

Jody looked at him with hard eyes, reminding Dean of Mary for just a split second. That look must just be something every mother was capable of. “They’re angry, Dean. They’re grieving. Can you blame them? Especially Cas. He pretty much lost everything in one fell swoop. He’ll come around eventually, but you’re gonna have to talk to him sooner or later.”

“I think he’s made it pretty clear he doesn’t want anything to do with me.” Dean turned away. It was fortunate that he had so much practice sounding angry when what he really felt was a bone-deep, existential ache. It was exhausting, his life. Their lives. He could never catch a break and he was running out of ways to fix things. “Why does it always have to be like this? Haven’t we done enough? How many times have we sacrificed everything for this world? And this is what we get? Cas deserves better than this—better than me.”

“Look, I get that you’re upset.” Jody walked over to him, her booted feet crunching the leaves and dirt beneath them. “But get your head out of your ass. I promise you Cas doesn’t see it that way.”

“I cost him a son, Jody.” Dean finally met her eyes. Her face blurred in his vision as tears welled up and spilled over. “Jack is dead because of me. I may as well have pulled the trigger myself. Even if Chuck is the one who did the deed, I killed him. So, if Cas never wants to speak to me again, maybe that’s for the best.”

“Oh for Christ sake,” Jody said, annoyance lacing her voice. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself. There is too much at stake for you to wallow in your own self-pity.”

She was right and Dean knew it, but he sure as hell didn’t want to hear it. He pulled his leather work gloves off and threw them unceremoniously into the dirt, stalking off in the direction of the garage. Jody had made him use his words. Now, Dean couldn’t stop the onslaught of emotions, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to cry in front of her. Or any of them, for that matter. They didn’t have time for that kind of weakness.

Thankfully, everyone was off doing their specified tasks. So when Dean collapsed behind the table in the empty garage, there was no one there to see his breakdown.

Castiel preferred to be alone when he was grieving. Walking the edges of the junkyard that had
become their camp, he didn’t have to look into Dean’s face and see the regret and sorrow that lived there. This certainly wasn’t the first time he’d had the rug yanked from beneath his feet. It wasn’t the first time he’d landed painfully on his ass with no idea how to get his legs back under him again. But this was different on so many levels.

Jack was gone and he didn’t even have a body for a hunter’s funeral. Was this how Dean felt when he discovered that Mary was dead? The emptiness sat in Cas’s chest like a ball of lead, cold and heavy. He wanted to be angry—at Dean, at Chuck—but Castiel couldn’t get past the despair. How was he supposed to go on like this? Knowing that everything, his entire existence, had been a lie? The air around him crackled with power and Cas made a concerted effort to reel his grace back in, to get it under control.

His episode the day before had depleted his energy significantly, and his grace didn’t seem to be recharging as quickly as it normally would. It would be negligent to expend more than necessary at this point, especially given the difficulty he’d had with Sam’s wound. Cas pushed the fear that it might not be replenishing at all to the back of his mind.

He’d been trying to send out a message of his own to any remaining earthbound angels for several hours, but something seemed to be interfering. Angel radio was staticky. Castiel was certain that Chuck was responsible for that; he must have somehow scrambled the signals so that any angels that wished to stay behind wouldn’t be able to stay in contact. Some Father he was. For a moment, and not the first one, he seriously considered God’s offer to return to Heaven and move on to other universes. If Chuck wasn’t responsible for Jack’s death, Castiel might listen and return to God’s side with his brethren.

But no, despite his anger and grief, he knew he could never leave Dean. Especially not when the world was ending. The Winchesters would need him more than ever now and as long as he could be useful, Castiel would always be at their sides—at Dean’s side. So, he would conserve his grace and his usefulness for as long as he possibly could.

There was a crunch of leaves from somewhere behind him and Castiel let his angel blade drop from his sleeve into his hand as he turned toward the sound. There was a zombie approaching him, a woman with stringy, bloodstained hair that hung to her waist. A flap of skin from her scalp stuck out from the skull looking oddly like an open book, but instead of ink on pages, there were tiny bits of rotting flesh dotting the skin and bone. Her eyes were glazed white—dead and unseeing—and surprisingly porcelain skin covered her face. Castiel didn’t bother wondering how the girl had died, he just gripped his blade firmly and planted it in her forehead.

Placing a hand against her chest for leverage, he pulled the blade back with a sickening squish and let her now motionless corpse fall to the ground. Movement in the trees beyond caught his eye and he looked up. Someone—no, some thing, leaned against the tall trunk of an oak tree. It watched without approaching, tattered t-shirt hanging from its sickly frame. One of its arms was dangling, bent at an unnatural angle halfway down the forearm and its skin was so rotten that it was peeled back and falling off in places. Dean had made Castiel watch several zombie movies—and apparently, it was among his favorite genres—and he’d never once seen anything like this creature. Its pale blue lips were turned up at the corners in what could only be described as a smirk, and unlike the zombie Castiel had just impaled, its eyes were not glazed and mindless. They were trained on him, following his movements, until the creature eventually turned and ambled awkwardly away.

He considered going after it for a moment but thought it best to remain close to the salvage yard. It was definitely something he would have to share with the others later, but for now, it was more important for him to somehow get in contact with the other angels. He was certain that, at the very
least, Anael would have chosen to stay behind, so rather than try to broadcast a message to anyone who could hear it, Castiel focused on her and prayed.

“I know you heard the message from our Father. If you have chosen to remain on Earth, as I have, we have gathered in Sioux Falls. It’s dangerous for you to remain alone and we could use your help.”

Considering how much he’d been struggling, Cas didn’t really expect an answer. He kept making his way back toward the gate of their makeshift camp, keeping his eyes open for any more of the undead creatures that were plaguing the world now.

Castiel. What is happening? Anael’s voice rang suddenly and clearly in his mind.

“The end,” he replied simply. “Will you join us?”

I’ll be there in a couple of days.

It was a relief, at least, to hear her voice. The two of them may not always see eye-to-eye, but at least Castiel knew he wasn’t the only angel that appreciated this world the way he did. He was pulled from his reverie by the sound of Dean’s broken voice.

“Jack is dead because of me. I may as well have pulled the trigger myself,” he was saying.

The words made Cas’s throat tighten with unfathomable emotion. He didn’t blame Dean. Not really. There were unforgivable words between them, on both sides, but in the end, Dean had made the choice not to use the gun. Castiel placed the blame squarely on his own shoulders. It was him that summoned Chuck back to this world. It was him that ignored the signs that Jack had lost his soul. It seemed every time Castiel tried to help, he only made things worse. Perhaps he shouldn’t be allowed to make decisions on his own. It never turned out well.

He turned the corner just in time to see Dean walking away from Jody, his hands balled into fists at his sides and his shoulders stiff and tight. Castiel was so wrapped up in his own anger and despair that he’d forgotten he wasn’t the only one who lost Jack or the only one that discovered everything they’d ever done was pointless. Frozen in place, Cas watched as the crane swung around to retrieve another car and sighed.

Everything was pointless. But, truth be told, Cas knew they were all too damned stubborn to let go.

They would not allow this to be the end.

“Well,” Rowena said with a tight smile. “It’s a good thing this Bobby person of yours was as much of a nut as the one from the other world.” They’d spent the better part of the morning gathering ingredients as they pored through Bobby’s old spell books for heavy duty warding and protection spells.

“No kidding.” Sam laughed, remembering all the times the old man had saved their asses. He’d been dead for years now, but here they were being rescued by Bobby yet again. “Let’s take this stuff outside and get everything we can up.” He gathered an armful of jars, all filled with the concoctions they’d made for the warding spells.

There were many. Protection against vampires, werewolves, skinwalkers, and a multitude of other creatures. Not to mention angels and demons. Rowena had even managed to find something they might be able to modify to prevent the undead from entering the camp, though as he looked around at the work Dean, Jody, and Donna had been doing, Sam wasn’t sure they would even need it.
The entirety of the fence was lined with cars. In fact, with the exception of a few very small gaps between the rusted out hulls, Sam couldn’t see the chain link at all. The cars were secured with ropes and chains, and weighted with bags of sand. They’d clearly used whatever they could find on the property. The center of the lot was damn near empty now that most of the cars had been moved. Once they had the chance to make a supply run, there would be plenty of space for them to put temporary shelters up.

As they passed the gate, Sam could see a line of jagged, uneven metal spikes sticking up from the ground. The whole place looked like something out of Mad Max and he had to admit he was at least a little impressed but what they’d managed to do in the span of a day. Between that and the spells he and Rowena were going to be doing, maybe they actually stood a chance. It was a glimmer of hope.

“Alright, you write the symbols and I’ll recite the spells.” Rowena was much more tight-lipped than usual and had been all morning. It was a tough situation for all of them and they were handling as best as they could in their own ways. Apparently, Rowena’s way was to spend as much time as possible glaring at Sam from the corner of her eye as she went about the business of their spellwork.

Sighing, he set the jars down in a neat row and picked the first one up, dipped his fingers in the viscous liquid, and started tracing a symbol he’d memorized on the hood of one of the upturned cars. “Are you mad at me, Rowena?”

She laughed derisively. “Angry doesn’t begin to cover it, Samuel.” She chanted an old Cyrillic spell as he finished the first symbol.

With the right dictionary, and time, Sam might actually be able to piece together what the words meant. But it didn’t really matter at this point, he trusted that Rowena knew what she was doing and simply continued to do his part. As they continued through each sigil and spell in relative silence, it really just got to be too much for Sam.

No one was speaking to anyone. Of course, everyone was upset. But things couldn’t go on this way, not if they wanted to survive this. Not if they wanted to beat Chuck. Sam refused to call him God anymore. God was something that people were meant to have faith in. Chuck was just a childish prick. “So, are we just not going to talk about it ever? Because that seems a lot like something Dean would do. But not you.”

Rowena rounded on him, intimidating even with her much smaller stature. So much so that Sam took an involuntary step back. “What is it that you’d like me to say? That I’m angry? That I am terrified?”

He felt sheepish, like a chastised child as she advanced on him. Sam took another step back, and then shook his head and held his ground. Rowena was in the same boat as the rest of them. “If that’s how you feel, then yes! That’s exactly what I want you to say!”

“You absolute imbecile! You shot GOD! What were you thinking?” She yelled, lines of anger carving themselves into her face. She was leaning toward him, poking him in the chest with a finger and he ought to be yelling right back but she had a point. “You took a gun that would do to you whatever it did to God and you shot him. You could have died, Sam!”

Grabbing her gently by the shoulders, Sam shook his head. “Row, there’s no chance Chuck would have given us a gun that could kill him.”

“Are you listening to the drivel coming out of your mouth? You know, you’re thick-skulled for a man so smart.” Rowena’s hands fisted in his shirt and he was sure that, were she physically capable, she’d be shaking him like a baby. “Didn’t you hear a word the angel said? The bullet was the physical manifestation of your intent. What do you think would have happened if you’d shot with the
intent to kill instead of just the to put a bullet in him?"

“I didn’t, okay. Is that what you want to hear?” Sam was done. He pushed forward with his entire body, setting Rowena off balance but not knocking her over and he paced, gesticulating with his hands as he spoke. All the tension he’d been dealing with since the whole thing went down in the graveyard was coming to a head. Jack, Cas, Dean, the bunker, now Row? Sam was a patient, and usually sensitive guy, but everyone had their limits. “Did anyone tell you what Chuck said when Dean refused to shoot Jack?”

Rowena just grimaced and shook her head.

“‘This isn’t how this story is supposed to end.’ Our entire lives have just been some… some five dollar drugstore novel for him. Everything that we’ve ever done; everything we’ve been through. It was all for his entertainment. And then he killed Jack. Right in front of us like it didn’t even matter.” Sam felt like one of the rusted out shells in the junkyard. They used to be something; they used to have meaning. Now, they were just empty, useless things that no longer served a purpose. He slumped against one, fisting his hands at his sides until he could feel the crescent edges of his nails digging into his palms and his knuckles turned white. “So, yeah, I shot him. Maybe it was stupid. Maybe I could have died. What does it matter anymore, anyway?”

Rowena’s face was taut with anger, her brows drawn together and her lips turned down in fury as she stalked gracefully toward him. As soon as she was within reach, she slapped him. It was unexpected and it hurt and his head snapped to the side, hair whipping around after it. “It matters to me, you dolt!”

Staring at her in stunned silence, Sam had no response at all. What was he supposed to say to that? He refused to apologize, so instead, he stood and returned to the task of fingerpainting protection sigils around the camp. “Let’s just get this done, okay?”

Dean was in the garage, tinkering with the old radio equipment he’d fished out of a box. Some of it wasn’t in the best shape but it wasn’t anything he couldn’t work with. When it came down to it, it wasn’t much different than fixing a car. Maybe he couldn’t repair what he’d broken with Cas, or with Sam; maybe he couldn’t bring Jack or mom back; maybe he couldn’t un-end the world. But he could, and would, fix this goddamned radio.

Even though Cas didn’t speak, Dean felt it when the angel walked up behind him. He didn’t look back or acknowledge the man’s presence, he just kept working. He was too tired for this shit. No matter what he said, it wouldn’t change anything; it wouldn’t be good enough. So why bother at all? Dean focused on what he could do.

“I managed to make contact with Anael,” Cas said behind him finally. “She will be joining us soon.” The angel sounded tired. Exhausted, really, in a way that Dean had never heard before. Well, he was exhausted, too.

“Just her?” Dean asked, squinting at a connector inside the casing of the old CB. Even without turning, he could feel Cas’s hesitation.

“I was... unable to reach anyone else.” His coat swished as he shifted nervously. “Unless Anael was able to contact other angels, it will just be her joining us.”

Something was off. Dean could tell in Cas’s tone of voice as he spoke and he turned to look over his shoulder at the angel. The hopelessness Dean had seen in his eyes less than twenty-four hours ago had been replaced by worry. He wasn’t sure it was an improvement. “Everything okay, Cas? I mean,
apart from the obvious.”

“Yes, Dean,” the angel deadpanned. “Everything is wonderful. Perhaps we should go pick daisies.”

“Fine.” Dean turned back to his current project. “Forget I said anything.” The angel still hovered silently over his shoulder and after the last two days and the zero sleep he’d gotten, Dean was running very low on patience. “Was there something else you needed, Cas?”

“I—” The hesitation again.

“Whatever it is you need to say to me, just come out with already,” Dean said, turning to face him again, his long since perfected emotionless mask already in place. “I probably deserve it anyway.”

“I saw a zombie in the trees today. Its behavior was very… odd.” Not what Dean had been expecting, but it certainly caught his attention.

“How do you mean?” he asked, leaning forward in his stool and resting his elbows on his knees. Cas shook his head, brows knitting themselves together. “It watched me like it was observing my behavior. Then it smiled and walked away from the camp.”

That was definitely some shit Dean had never heard of before. Of course, God zombies were probably a little different than your standard Resident Evil fare, so he couldn’t say he was totally surprised. “I really don’t know what to do with that information right now. But I’ll file it away for later use, I guess.”

“I don’t blame you, Dean,” Cas blurted suddenly like he couldn’t hold the words in any longer. “For Jack. I don’t blame you.”

Before Dean even had the chance to respond, Cas was walking stiffly away from him. Sighing, Dean turned back to the radio again but he wasn’t making any headway because he was just too damn tired to exist. He was just giving up for the evening when Claire made her way into the garage, Alex following just behind her.

“I found a TV,” she said. “We don’t have cable or anything, but if we can rig a decent antenna we might be able to pick up some of the local news stations. See if we can get a bead on exactly how bad things are out there.”

It was a smart idea and twenty minutes later, the whole group of them were huddled around the screen while Sam tweaked the rabbit ears Dean had made from whatever wires and scrap metal he could find. It was an old model, the kind with dials to change the channel and the volume and as he turned it, Dean was met with static time and time again. When they finally did encounter a clear picture, it wasn’t news. Not in the traditional sense, anyway, but it did give them an idea of what the world outside of Singer Salvage looked like.

The camera was definitely inside a news studio; Dean could see the bright blue background and part of a large yellow ‘7’ that was part of the logo. But it tilted, the angle of the camera askew, and the lens was partially covered in a thick sheet of dark, probably dried blood. There was movement on the screen but it definitely wasn’t human. Living human, that was. It was too jaunty and awkward. An unearthly groan sounded through the speakers and then the camera toppled over, crashing to the floor noisily enough that even Dean nearly jumped out of his skin.

What could only be a few feet away from the camera was the body of a blonde woman. The news anchor, Dean was pretty certain. He’d seen her before. Leaning gruesomely over her was a moving, half-rotten corpse. Its teeth were buried in the flesh of her neck and even without being able to see
through the discolored lens of the camera, Dean could imagine the blood flowing from the wound there and pooling beneath her on the floor. Her blue eyes were locked open in death, staring fearfully—frighteningly—through the television at them.

Dean turned the TV off.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know about you guys, but I really for TFW and friends to get their shit together!

Let me know what you think so far, or if you have any theories on what happens next in Season Z in the comments!!

Or, come find me on tumblr and yell at me if you like!! @cr-noble-writes
The Muggle Panic

Chapter by Castielslostwings

Chapter Summary

TFW & Co rock a supply run and turn Camp Singer into a little slice of home at the end of the world.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

While their barriers and warding were definitely top notch, the actual living situation at the newly dubbed “Camp Singer” was swiftly becoming a problem. Their merry little band of survivors had set up makeshift beds in Bobby’s garage, mostly made up of spare clothing and emergency car blankets, but workable nonetheless. Jody and Donna had managed to grab a couple of sleeping bags before fleeing Jody’s place but two were hardly enough to go around, even if Claire and Alex were willing to share with Jody and Donna. That left Dean, Sam, and Rowena to hunker down wherever they could, and it was no surprise at all when Dean became the odd man out in that situation. Not that Sam and Rowena were doing anything, per se, but by Dean’s observation, his brother didn’t seem all that put out when Rowena sat him up against a wall and used his thigh as a pillow.

As the second night at the end of the world rolled into the early morning, Dean squirmed restlessly in the back of the Impala. He’d pulled her up alongside the garage for proximity’s sake, but no way was he sleeping by himself on cold hard concrete when Baby’s backseat was an option. He missed the bunker, missed his kitchen and his memory foam mattress. He missed drinking coffee in the morning across from Castiel, and Jack stealing the last of the Cookie Crunch cereal. Baby might have been the first home he’d ever known, but the past couple of years… Dean sighed and turned over, blinking tiredly up at the ceiling of the car. The last few years, he’d really thought they were finally building something, moving forward into a place where maybe they could get a shot at some normalcy, some peace. Chosen family and actually changing the world instead of fighting it for once, all of that hippy dippy bullshit he’d never let himself want before.

He’d sure as fuck blown that idea to shit.

Officially giving up on sleep, Dean scooted from the backseat out into the chilly night air, shivering and pulling his jacket tighter around him. Had he known he wouldn’t be able to go home again back when he’d left to chase down Jack, he might have chosen something heavier. Or at least packed a backup. He stuck his nose inside the collar of his t-shirt to warm it and ended up recoiling with a grimace, gratefully sniffing the fresh night air instead. Some deodorant definitely wouldn’t have hurt, either.

And a bottle of whiskey.

And a fucking toothbrush.

Dean groaned and dropped his head onto his arms over the top of Baby’s frame. So they had a wall and wards, that wasn’t even half the battle. They needed supplies, food, permanent shelter. Sioux Falls wasn’t exactly a tropical location, winter would be setting in sooner rather than later and the
garage wasn’t anything close to warm and cozy. He tilted his head to the side and gazed out across the newly cleared lot. Plenty of space, at least. But what to do with it? If they could get into town maybe they could get ahold of some tents…? Bunk down in them while they rebuilt Bobby’s house into a new base of operations? Not that tents would provide much protection from snow and ice. Shit. Not to mention the food and weapons issue—that one probably needed to be addressed first, considering that their ammunition was severely lacking and they were already down to their last few cans of perilously aged spam and beans, thanks, Bobby.

In all likelihood, Dean would have continued his vain attempts at creating a half-cocked to do list absent of any actual ideas on how to complete each item if it hadn’t been for the quiet crash and thump that sounded unexpectedly from the left side of the perimeter. He perked up and headed in the direction of the noise, following it to the ladder they’d been using to scale the stacked cars and keep an eye out for party crashers from above. He glanced around warily before climbing up but found the lot to be silent and still.

When his head reached the last rung he peeked over the top of the car and scouted for any signs of intruders, but there was no one there. He pulled himself up and over the rest of the way and was just about supported on the roof of an old Buick when a dark figure popped up from the other side, causing him to flail and reach for his gun. In a blink, he had the barrel flush against the interloper’s head, finger tight on the trigger.

“Dean?” Castiel questioned, raising his eyes to where the barrel of Dean’s gun was now pressed to his forehead. “What are you doing?”

Dean blew out a breath and slumped forward, uncocking the gun and shoving it back into his belt. “Son of a bitch, Cas,” he muttered. “I could ask you the same damn thing.” Castiel just squinted back at him, tilting his head to the side as if he didn’t understand.

“I’m keeping watch,” he said carefully as if Dean were a little slow, and yea, maybe he was right. Obviously, that’s what Cas was doing. He knew that. “There was a zombie,” he continued, pointing vaguely out at the tree line. “I killed it and moved the body away from the barrier. I climbed the chain link on the other side to get back up here after I finished.” Dean shook his head and settled down on the top of the car, staring off into the distance and pointedly not at his friend, who clearly had no such qualms about averting his eyes.

“Sit down, Cas,” he finally said, patting the space next to him and thankfully, Castiel did so without complaint. It was silent between them for several long minutes, the breeze ruffling Dean’s hair and snaking cold tendrils down under his collar uncomfortably.

“You should be asleep,” Castiel finally declared, as if this was some sort of novel revelation. Dean let out a snort. “Story of my life,” he replied with a pinched smile. He could feel Castiel watching him, but he wasn’t about to be the first one to budge. He’d caused Castiel a lot of pain and Cas had subsequently made his feelings about that pretty clear over the last two days. It wasn’t as if Dean blamed him, either. Which is why it was a hell of a surprise when Castiel reached down between the stacks of cars and pulled a blanket up from wherever he’d stashed it, shaking it out and settling it around Dean’s shoulders.

“I was cold earlier,” he explained quietly.

Dean finally allowed himself to glance over, but by then Castiel was staring straight ahead. He decided not to poke at the nice moment by pointing out that Castiel didn’t get cold, and instead simply replied, “Thanks, Cas.” Castiel just nodded stoically and Dean pulled the blanket tighter
around his chest. “We’re gonna have to make a run into town today,” he offered, an olive branch, at least as far as conversation went.

“That makes sense,” Castiel replied. “To the precinct for weapons, I’m assuming.”

“And to find a grocery store,” Dean added. “Some of us need more than cosmic energy to sustain these fine fighting machines.” He paused for a moment, letting his legs stretch out in front of him. “You think it’d be reckless to attempt a home improvement store run, too? For building supplies and, hell, I dunno. Maybe a fucking shower. Not that I have any clue how we’ll haul it all back.”

Castiel raised his eyebrows and considered Dean carefully. “You’re asking me?”

“Yea, I’m—” Dean scoffed and huffed a breath. “You and Sam,” he added, his voice intentionally gruff. “You’re pissed that I haven’t been listening to you, and you know, you were right. So I’m askin’,” Dean watched as the corner of Castiel’s lips tugged up into a faint smile. “Don’t make a big thing of it,” he warned, pointing a finger at Castiel’s chest.

Raising his hands in mock supplication, Castiel shook his head. “Of course not, Dean.”

Dean nodded, satisfied, and shifted against where the metal of the car was getting uncomfortably cold on his ass. “So?” He prodded. “You got thoughts or what?”

Castiel turned to him and scratched his chin. “Are you referring to the home improvement store we saw from the highway on our way here from the Bunker?” Dean nodded and waited for him to continue. “Then actually… I do.”

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The watch on Dean’s wrist read an even eight-thirty and though you couldn’t tell from the darkened sky, it was definitely morning. Camp Singer’s poorly-rested tenants were assembled outside the garage and nearly ready, sucking down bitter instant coffee and passing around a dented can of beans. Dean declined with a scrunched face when Claire offered him the tin and gestured at Sam. “I ain’t riding in an unventilated space if Sam’s ass is full of beans,” he announced eloquently, getting a scowl from Sam and a smile hidden behind her mug from Rowena.

“Seriously, Dean?” Sam complained, tossing him an epic bitchface, but Dean just shrugged, secretly pleased at his brother’s reaction. Earlier they’d gone over Cas’ (and they were Cas’) plans for the latter part of the supply run together, and Sam had seemed genuinely happy that Dean wasn’t attempting to shoulder the full responsibility for absolutely everything that lay ahead of them on his own. Obviously, that meant Dean was obligated as the older brother to knock him down a peg or two before they could head out, but overall it was nice to not be completely at each other’s throats for the first time in weeks.

“Boys,” Jody chided, slipping between them and over to her truck, the one emblazoned with the Sheriff’s department logo on three sides. “We have to take two vehicles, anyway. What about teams? Me, Donna and Sam in the truck is my suggestion. Might be a little bumpy but if Sam sits in the back he’ll be in prime position for any head stabbing that’s needed. Otherwise, who knows if we’ll even be able to get out of the car when we get there.”

“I don’t like it,” Dean replied, shaking his head. “What if you get mobbed? Sam won’t stand a chance out in the open like that.”

“I can handle it,” Sam insisted. “Jody’s truck is a beast. Worst comes to worst she’ll just plow through the crowd and drive away. Honestly, you’re probably more at risk in the Impala, especially
since we all know you’d choose to be eaten alive rather than risk denting it. It’s fine.”

“It’s really not,” Dean shot back and Sam sighed, dropping his arms to his sides with a loud slap of skin on denim. He ran a hand through his shaggy hair and pinched his nose.

“I thought you were loosening up, Dean? Letting go of the reins a little? I’ll have the pike pole and a couple of rifles, we’ve tackled way worse with less and you know it. You guys will be right behind me, I trust all of you to have my back.”

“I can ride with Sam,” Castiel volunteered and Dean threw up his hands.

“Why am I not surprised? The self-sacrificing duo,” he sneered, and that was it, the three of them surged forward at the same time, devolving instantly into raised-voice bickering and crowding into each other’s spaces, hands shoving at shoulders and angry spit flying.

“Are you serious, Dean, I—”

“Me? Self-sacrificing? After all the—”

“You know my feelings on this, what about—”

“QUIET!” A wolf whistle closely followed by Donna’s best ‘you better listen, punk’ voice pierced straight through the chaos of the arguing men, all three of their mouths snapping shut reflexively in surprise. And, if Dean was being completely (uncharacteristically) honest with himself, a tiny bit of interest. So sue him, he’d always liked a chick who could take charge.

When he looked up, he found Donna towering over them in the truck bed, one foot on the side and her hands firmly planted on her hips. “That’s more like it,” she declared. “Yous three are going to get us all killed if you don’t knock off the macho posturing,” she warned with a glare. “I’ll decide on the teams. Jody, you drive and Sam and I will take the back of the truck. Claire? You up for this?”

“You know it,” Claire replied, stepping forward and slinging a rifle over her shoulder.

“That’s my girl,” Donna replied with an approving nod before looking towards Alex. “May I assume that you’re staying here?”

“Equally enthusiastic, you know it,” Alex replied. “I found a stash of medical supplies in the garage, I want to try to get them in some sort of usable order before I start inventory for everything else we’ve got.”

“I’ll stay behind as well,” Rowena chimed in. “The warding needs some additional fine tuning and I do believe I’m close to spelling our water source into something passably drinkable.”

“Hey, if it works for holy water then it’s good enough for me.” Sam shrugged, and Rowena smiled up at him.

“Plus home defense,” Donna agreed. “You two should have no problem holding down the fort what with the warding doing most of the work. That leaves yous two,” she added, nodding at Castiel and Dean. “Now, I like my head where it is on my shoulders but I’m still going to say that it might not be the worst idea to let Claire drive. The two of you are more experienced fighters.” Donna looked on with concern at her own words while Claire’s face exploded into a giant grin.

Dean didn’t need a mirror to know that his own had turned sour. “Yeah, that’s not ever gonna happen,” he replied.
“Suit yourself,” Donna demurred, clearly taking a pass on that pointless argument. “The three of you are together, though. Try not to rip each other’s heads off, would you? And here.” She crouched down and came up with an armful of walkie-talkie radios, tossing one each to Sam, Jody, Claire, and Cas in turn before clipping the last one onto her own belt.

“What about me?” Dean protested.

“You’ll just have to stick close, now won’t ya?” Donna’s grin was smug and Dean narrowed his eyes as Jody chuckled and neither Sam nor Cas rushed to come to his defense. See if he kept them from becoming zombie antipasto, the traitors. “Channel three for mission ops, and Alex? There’s a spare in the garage, charging next to the Ham radio with the looped survivor message broadcasting. Doubtful that we’ll be able to hear you on the handhelds all the way in town, but you should still have one, just in case. Everyone set?”

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Dean pointedly told Sam before heading towards his car. He rolled his eyes and hip-checked Claire out of the way as she made a play for the driver’s seat, sliding in behind the wheel as everyone else took their respective places. Castiel ended up in the passenger’s side of Baby’s front seat and Claire resignedly hopped into the back. When Sam and Donna signaled that they were ready, Rowena rolled back the sliding gate and the small caravan headed out, their wheels kicking up dirt and dust in the unused lot.

Forcing himself to press down on the gas, Dean had a hard time swallowing back the unbidden memory of a very different mission, a line of jeeps leaving Camp Chitaqua with no Sam and a very different Castiel at his side. The similarities between that timeline and this one were starting to drift a little too close to home for his liking, and the memories were getting harder and harder to push down and ignore. He shook his head to clear it and hoped that his momentary lapse inside his own head went unnoticed. With both Castiel and Claire focused on looking out their respective windows, he breathed a sigh of relief, confident it had.

As the car moved forward, Dean drove by just in time to catch Rowena blowing Sam a goodbye air kiss. Even from the slight distance behind the truck, he was able to see clearly as Sam’s cheeks pinkened up in response, a stark contrast against the dangerous pike pole in his hand and the several rifles slung across his broad chest.

“Love at the end of the world,” Dean mused out loud as they cleared the gate, Rowena closing and sealing it tight behind them. “Good for Sammy.”

“I suppose it’s not so unusual,” Castiel replied, and Dean had to do a double take, surprised the angel even had an opinion on the subject.

“Yeah?” he asked, and from the backseat, Claire made a stifled noise that sounded suspiciously like swallowed laughter. He glared at her in the rearview mirror and cleared his throat.

“So anyway, Cas, how come you can pass through Rowena’s warding? She forget to revoke angelic invitations or what? No offense, but we should probably have her fix that.” It’s not the smoothest subject change he’s ever attempted, but fuck if he was gonna talk about feelings and relationships with Cas while the teenage tormentor was listening in from the back seat.

“Rowena has figured out how to key individual supernatural beings into the warding,” Castiel answered, his attention still laser-focused out the side window. “I can come and go as I please but a different angel, or any other creature we might deem friendly will require Rowena’s assistance to pass the barrier.”

“Oh,” Dean replied lamely. He cleared his throat. “That’s good,” he said. In the rearview mirror, he
could see Claire rolling her eyes. Not having any interest in whatever it was she wasn’t saying, he shut his mouth and they rode on in silence until Claire apparently decided she’d had enough.

“God, you two are ridiculous,” she complained.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dean asked, automatically defensive, but before Claire could answer their attention was stolen by Jody’s truck slamming on the brakes in front of them as it made the turn onto the main street in town. The stoplights hung grey and lifeless above them, the rows of stores lining the streets dark and foreboding. The whole vibe read abandoned, it screamed ghost town, except for one very important thing.

“Holy shit,” Claire murmured, almost under her breath as she leaned over the front seat to take in the view.

Zombies were everywhere, completely flooding the street and sidewalks, making it impossible for them to pass. Luckily for their mission, the Sheriff’s station was only about a hundred yards away, though with the sea of bodies teeming in front of them it might as well have been a thousand. Dean could see the grocery store situated a little way down the street, tucked between a pet store with broken windows and an auto shop beyond. Once again, he felt torn between the apparent impossibility of the situation and the desire to gear up and reenact the best parts of Zombieland.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” He raised his eyebrows and glanced back at Claire, unstrapping his seatbelt and moving to open the driver’s side door when he was stopped suddenly by Castiel’s hand on his arm.

“Wait,” Castiel said, “Look.” Dean glanced ahead just in time to see Sam and Donna stop smashing in zombie’s heads in favor of crouching down in the truck bed, holding on tight to the sides. Jody’s brake lights flashed before turning off as the truck lurched forward, barreling through the ocean of staggering bodies like a plow truck through fresh snow. The three occupants of the Impala watched, stunned, as she took the truck up onto the sidewalk, sending bodies and parts flying in all directions as she picked them off like bowling pins, careening sideways to flip the vehicle around and come to a smooth stop right in front of the station.

Dean’s mouth dropped open and his eyes went wide as he took in the zombie pieces laying all across the road, some still moving but most of them down for the count. “Awesome,” he breathed. He turned to Castiel with a look of pure delight on his face. “That was the coolest thing I have ever seen.” With a gleeful laugh, he put Baby back into gear and navigated around the felled bodies until he was pulling up nose-to-nose with Jody’s truck. The grill was stained with blood and decaying parts of unknown origin and Dean pointed it out to Cas with a smack to his arm and a wide smile. Ignoring Castiel’s responding glare, he stepped out of the car with his rifle at the ready and promptly smashed in the skull of a zombie trying to claw its way towards him on the sidewalk.

“You,” he declared, pointing his finger at Jody as they walked towards the station. “You are my friggin’ hero. Listen, later, after we get the camp set up, you think we could go out in the truck and —”

He was cut off abruptly by Castiel grabbing his arm and yanking him forward. “Focus, Dean,” he growled, slashing his arm out to the side and stabbing an approaching zombie in the head with the point of his angel blade.

Thanks to Jody’s sweep, the few steps up the walkway to the station were mostly clear but Dean could already see that the dead left standing had taken note of the noise and were swarming their way. Jody saw him looking and raised her eyebrows.
“We need to move quickly,” she said as she unlocked the door and held it open for their group. “Follow me to the weapons lockup. Sam? Claire? You two want to stay and take some of these fuckers out if they get too close?”

“We’re on it,” Sam agreed, stepping back outside. Dean watched as Cas handed over his angel blade to Claire and said something that was too quiet for him to hear before turning to follow Jody further into the building. He could hear the faint sounds of gunfire behind them, presumably Sam attempting to thin the herd so that it couldn’t overwhelm them. He wrestled down the pang of fear and the instinctual drive to go grab Sam and throw him bodily inside the station, to stand up and take his place doing the dangerous dirty work, whatever that might mean.

_Sam doesn’t want that_, he reminded himself. _Loosen the reins._ He somehow managed to follow his own advice, but the physical hurt inside his chest when he forced himself to walk away was very real.

The weapons retrieval went off without incident. Crates of ammunition, shotguns, rifles, pistols, you name it, all pulled from storage and all theirs to take home. Dean had to admit that fortifying their defense system was a _huge_ weight off of his shoulders, and as far as he was concerned, the most major step toward making Camp Singer someplace actually livable. Jody even raided the evidence locker and came back with an armful of various blades and knives, including a machete that she was quick to snag for herself.

“Most of these weren’t used to murder or maim people,” she announced helpfully, dumping her bounty into a crate at Dean’s feet and adding in a few more radios and chargers she’d taken from a bank up against the wall. “I think that’s everything useful. I’m assuming things are still kosher out front since Claire and Sam haven’t come charging in here yelling about having to retreat, but we should probably head out before that happens.”

Dean nodded as Castiel staggered by, laden down with three tall crates of ammo, followed closely behind by Donna and as many guns as she was able to wear and carry. She looked like something out of _Tomb Raider_ as she nodded in Castiel’s direction. “Damn does that superhuman strength come in handy sometimes,” she observed. Dean couldn’t argue with that, so he picked up his own weapons and the crate of sharp things and beelined for the front door.

As suspected, Sam and Claire had done a solid job of holding off the undead, but they were definitely starting to swarm. The rest of the group had to drop their loads in the entryway to the precinct and take them to the truck a few at a time, Dean and Donna ending up joining the fight while Cas and Jody ran back and forth loading up supplies. Claire and Cas ended up climbing into the back of the truck just as Jody hit the gas to move it down the street to the supermarket, leaving Dean to grab Baby and navigate in between (and over) the body parts left in her wake. One thing was for sure, Dean had a whole new level of respect for the Sheriff; Jody was a fucking badass. No question she’d survive in _Zombieland_ , she never forgot a double tap and she always knew the way out.

Between Jody’s truck and their newfound cache of weaponry, they took out the zombies gathering near the grocery store with practiced ease. Pulling up behind them, Dean had the rare chance to watch his family in action—Sam’s brute force took out three in one swing, Claire’s sharp, smooth slashes looked like an intricate dance, and Jody steadily annihilated one after another after another without hesitation or pause. Donna stood bravely on top of the truck’s cab, feet planted and blonde hair blowing in the wind as she picked off body after body with her rifle, and Dean felt a surge of excitement and energy crash over him, all the way down to his toes. They were actually pretty damn good at this. Maybe there was a possibility they _could_ win against Chuck, after all.
As he exited the Impala and took out a few zombies of his own, Dean’s vision caught sight of Cas struggling in the periphery. The angel was the only one of them who didn’t look quite at ease in this fight, and as Dean watched him knock a zombie to the ground and place a hand on its head to smite, the blue light that would normally emerge and burn the thing out into a dead, empty husk fizzled and went out. That momentary lapse gave the zombie the opening it needed and it charged, teeth gnashing angrily inches from Castiel’s skin. It was only Dean’s proximity and the fact that he happened to be looking at that very moment that kept the mission from taking a really horrific turn. Dean dove, sliding like he was stealing home in the bottom of the ninth, game seven of the World Series, smashing his knife into the zombie’s skull just as its rotten mouth skimmed Castiel’s hand.

He knocked the thing back and down onto the ground, snarling as it went permanently still beneath his blade. He wiped his brow with the back of his sleeve and panted, offered Castiel a hand up as he got to his own feet. Their fingers clasped, Dean turned and tugged him towards the doors of the store where the others were waiting.

“It’s barricaded,” Sam called out, clearly confused, but Jody was already on it, offering Donna a hand as she helped her dismount gracefully from the top of the truck before climbing in herself. Once again, Dean doesn’t miss the lingering touch Jody leaves on Donna’s back and dammit, he really is going to end up the only single loser in the Apocalypse. He used to be cool.

While Dean got temporarily lost in thought, Jody was already backing the truck up to aim it towards the front of the store.

“Out of my way!” She yelled out the driver’s window before revving the engine and hurling the truck straight through the glass. Jody took the truck all the way into the store as the glass shattered and rained down around her and Dean tilted his head in approval. Points for style.

The glass crunched under their feet as they stepped through it, the grocery store looking relatively untouched otherwise, save for being dark.

Oh, and one other, major thing.

Huddled in the middle of the aisle right in front of the entrance was a ragtag group of humans, arms wrapped around each other in fear, cringing back from the brightness of the headlights. As soon as they realized Dean’s band of intruders weren’t zombies though, they burst into a chorus of whoops and yells, crashing forward to greet them.

“Are you here to save us?”

“Are you with the Army? The National Guard, right?”

“Can you help me find my family?”

“You’re here to take us to safety, aren’t you?”

“Whoa, whoa, slow down there,” Dean replied, holding up placating hands. “One at a time. Wait, no, actually, me first. What are you all doing here?”

A slightly overweight middle-aged woman with brown hair tied back in a messy ponytail spoke up. “We were all in town when it happened… I think we’re the only ones left. I saw my neighbor eating Mr. Zimmerman, the nice old man who owns the flower store across the way? Anyway, a lot of us took shelter in here, but some of us…” Her gaze darted around the store and Dean was forced to take note of a few piles of bodies stacked up near the walls.

“I get it,” he said, motioning for her to continue as the woman took a stabilizing breath.
“We’ve been here ever since. The store had power until a couple of hours ago, maybe it had its own generator. We were just waiting, watching the TV. We saw that newscaster get eaten alive and then… it all just went out, no warning. Nothing seems to work anymore.”

Dean ran a hand through his hair and glanced at Sam. A few meaningful looks between them and he knew what they had to do. They couldn’t just leave survivors out here to die. “Listen,” he started. “We have a safe place we can take you to for the time being, but it’s pretty rough. That’s sort of why we’re here, trying to stock up. All the same, I wouldn’t recommend attempting to go back to your homes.”

“We couldn’t if we wanted to,” one of the men piped up. “Mine’s overrun. I tried, back when it first happened. My wife is in our house and she—” He cut himself off with a choked sob and turned to one of his friends for comfort.

“Yea, alright,” Dean replied. “Listen, you gotta help us before we can help you. We’re filling this truck and the car outside with as much food as it’ll hold. Bulk rice, beans, nuts, dried foods, canned soups and milk—grab it all. Think long-lasting, people. When we’re stocked we’ll take you all back and you can ask your questions or whatever when we’re not surrounded by the evil undead.”

With seven or eight (Dean didn’t really bother to count) more people to haul, their space in the bed of the truck was reduced but they were also able to make short work of the store. So much so that Dean found himself distracted while wandering the aisles of the supermarket for useful food and items to take with them. Somewhere between the cooking utensils and the toilet paper, a pretty brunette girl with skin-tight jeans, a midriff-baring top, and wide blue eyes appeared in front of him, blocking his path. And hey, Dean’s only human, so when she batted her eyes and drawled about how relieved she was that a big, strong man had come to save her, could he really be blamed for taking one goddamn moment for some harmless flirting?

The chick was really laying it on thick, too. Brushing fingers up his arm and biting at her lip while she listened to him speak. Dean had to remind himself to look up several times during the conversation, though in his defense, this girl was definitely giving him the all-ahead full.

“Hey, Jody,” he said distractedly, as the Sheriff rounded the corner to the aisle they were standing in. Jody did a double-take at the girl and Dean bristled, preparing to get defensive over his right to have a simple conversation with a nice person and why is Dean expected to be the only one left alone at the end of the goddamn world when Jody whipped out the machete she’d tucked into her belt and cleanly severed the pretty brunette girl’s head.

“Whoa!” He yelled, jumping back and away from the blood spray. “Dude, overreaction, much? We were just talking.” Jody looked at him like he’d sprouted three heads and motioned to the severed one now rolling away down the cereal aisle.

“That’s a vampire, you dumbass. Check the teeth.” Furrowing his brow, Dean did and sure enough, second pointy set. Damn, he’s getting too old for this. Both hunting and the singles scene, if this is what it’s like.

“Shit,” he said in disbelief. “Good looking out, thanks for the rescue.”

“No problem,” Jody replied. “But I didn’t do it for you, you horndog. I just don’t have any interest in being bitched out by your husband for letting you get yourself killed.” She turned on her heel and walked away, leaving Dean blinking in confusion.

“My what now?!”
“Your husband,” Jody called out over her shoulder. “Tall, dark, broody? Answers to the name of ‘angel’? That one.” Dean gaped as she grabbed up an armful of pasta and bolted for the truck, leaving him standing in the middle of the aisle flushed and stammering. Looking around to make sure no one else had heard their exchange, Dean busied himself gathering more supplies and vowed to avoid Jody for the rest of the trip and maybe his life.

Working together, the group crammed the Impala’s trunk full before sitting three rescuees in the back and proceeding to cover their legs, feet, and any other open space with more food. Same with the back of the truck; once it started to get full Sam directed the remainder of the survivors to pile in while he and Dean loaded their laps up with more supplies. Even the footwells of Jody’s passenger seat were stuffed full, so much so that Donna had to practically contort herself into a ball to fit in there. Sam managed to stuff his giant body down next to the wheel well in the truck bed, a feat Dean wasn’t in any way sure how he accomplished.

As Jody navigated the truck out from the shattered remains of the storefront, Dean slid behind his own steering wheel and prepared to follow. Cas and Claire were squeezing into the bench seat next to him which would have been fine, except that Claire, that devious little asshole, had somehow managed to “rock, paper, scissors” Cas into giving her the window seat, leaving Castiel pressed up tight against Dean’s thigh between them. Dean might have thought it was an innocent move until he caught her smirking in the side mirror.

_Yuck it up,_ he fumed to himself, working hard to ignore the feeling of Cas’ warmth passively seeping into his leg. _I know where you sleep, Novak._ Between Jody and now Claire, he was starting to feel like this was a coordinated effort.

_Just what I fuckin’ need._ He sighed and followed Jody’s taillights back out of town.

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By the time they’d herded all the rescued townspeople inside Camp Singer and unloaded all the food and weapons, Dean had affectionately dubbed the group of rescuees “the Muggles” and was not at all shy about calling them such to their faces.

“And you call _me_ a nerd,” Sam scoffed, stacking tins of coffee up next to their new, smartly-pilfered coffee maker on the cleared tool bench of the garage. “I suppose you think that makes you Harry Potter?”

“Bitch, I’m Hermione all day,” Dean replied reflexively, clearing his throat and averting his eyes at Sam’s surprised stare when he realized what he’d said. “Whatever. You done playing house, Martha Stewart? We still got another stop to make, so long as Cas is right about what he saw there. If he’s not, I dunno where we’re gonna put all these people but the garage ain’t gonna cut it.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed, looking around worriedly at the strangers now wrapped in blankets and littering the floor. “Dean, aren’t you worried about just letting all these people stay here? We don’t know anything about them.” Dean nodded without hesitation and scratched at his chin for a moment before shrugging.

“Not so much different than the Apocalypse World hunters,” he pointed out, and Sam winced at the still-painful memory.

“That’s another thing,” Sam added. “Look how that turned out. We’re not exactly the best safe haven for innocent people, if that’s what they are. Just being here might make them into targets for Chuck or who knows what else.” Dean raised his hands and pressed his lips into a line.
“I dunno what to tell you, Sammy. They all were able to pass through Rowena’s wards so, at the very least, they’re human. Plus, you saw the town—throwing them out of here would be a death sentence. Muggles aren’t ready to cope with something this big. And at the end of the day, that’s what we’re here for, right? Saving people, hunting things? Just like always.” Sam dragged his eyes over the miserable looking crowd and nodded slowly.

“Yea,” he replied. “I guess you’re right.” Dean slapped him on the back and headed towards the open door of the garage.

“Let’s grab Cas and hit it. We’ll worry about the rest when we’ve all got somewhere to sleep and we’re not in danger of freezing to death during the first cold snap.”

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For the second part of the day’s mission, Jody, Donna, and Claire all stayed behind with Alex and Rowena to answer questions and tend to the Muggles, as Dean still insisted on calling them, as many of them had minor injuries and the rest were just confused. Dean gleefully slipped behind the wheel of Jody’s truck, actually hoping for once that he’d come across some zombies on their way.

The fit on the bench seat was tight with him, Cas, and Sam all squeezed in, but Dean reasoned that the ride back would be better, at least, if all went as planned. It was worse than with Claire in Baby though, since Sam was gigantic and took up more than his allotted third of the seat, resulting in Castiel pressed tight not just against Dean’s thigh, but his entire side from shoulder to knee. Dean resolutely did not think about that, not even a little.

Thankfully, he was provided a distraction by way of the undead cluttering up the street, happily mowing down any that staggered across their path. At one point he went out of his way to take the truck up onto the sidewalk in order to pick one off, but somehow he missed. He blinked and checked the rearview mirror, wondering how that could have happened, as it had almost seemed like the zombie had jumped out of his way at the last second. But that wasn’t possible—zombies weren’t capable of that kind of organized thought. His mind flitted automatically back to Cas telling him about the strange-acting zombie at the edge of the woods and he furrowed his brow, filing both thoughts away for later. In the meantime, his attention was quickly re-captured by another group of undead that definitely didn’t have any higher brain functioning than a bunch of hungry bowling pins.

When they finally arrived at Lowe’s, the parking lot was strangely deserted compared to everywhere else, which made Dean wonder if the inside was teeming or if the store had been closed when Chuck turned out the lights. There was an overgrown hill on the other side of the lot that led up to the highway, and Dean quickly took notice of a few straggling zombies wandering down it, but no cars. He took a moment to marvel at how quickly the whole world had gone to shit, how easily Chuck was able to snap in half and stomp on everything he’d created, everything it took humans millennia to construct. All the people, all the systems that he’d taken for granted only days prior were just…gone.

“It’s still here,” Castiel announced, pointing towards the side of the building. Sure enough, an eighteen wheeler was backed up to one of the loading docks the building offered, its rear end flush with the rubber bumpers and probably open to the inside. Dean whooped and guided Jody’s vehicle to park beside the bigger truck, right next to an access door. He clapped Castiel on the shoulder and squeezed.

“Good work, buddy,” he said warmly, and Castiel looked down at his lap with a small smile on his face. Sam was already out of the truck and grabbing flashlights by the time Castiel had wiggled out from the middle seat but Dean stopped him, taking the lights and tossing them back inside the truck. “You hear that?” He cocked his head towards the building, to where a low, constant hum was
audible. It was easy to pick out after the relative silence of everywhere else. “Generators, baby. Cas, you are a damn genius.”

Dean took the stairs to the access door two at a time and threw it open, fist pumping when it not only opened but when the other side revealed a spill of fluorescent lights out into the darkness. The other two filed in behind him and Dean rubbed his hands together in excitement.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s get to work.”

They did end up finding a dozen or so zombified retail workers as well as a handful of half-eaten customers, but it was nothing they couldn’t handle. The store was too big to fully clear, so Dean warned Sam and Cas repeatedly not to let their guards down, Sam laughing bitterly at the idea that they ever could.

Cas really was a genius, coming up with this plan. Not only did Lowe’s have all the supplies they needed to start rebuilding Bobby’s place, but it also had all sorts of shit to make the cleared out junkyard habitable for humans. The first thing they did was to grab a forklift and load up the empty eighteen-wheeler with several sheds, the log cabin-looking ones that were bigger than some motel rooms Dean’s stayed in. They took every generator in the warehouse, a bunch of portable heaters, plus a crap ton of lumber, drywall, insulation, and all the tools necessary to start work on the house. They stacked everything until the truck was mostly full, almost floor-to-ceiling. Sam eventually had to rein Dean in, reminding him that the store wasn’t going anywhere and that they could always come back for more construction supplies later. Dean reluctantly agreed and settled for grabbing every tarp and extension cord on the premises, along with pallets of toilet paper, cleaning supplies, a toilet, and an actual, full-size shower (and a water heater to go with it). He was pretty proud of that one, and almost a whole seventy-five-percent sure he’d be able to rig it up with the plumbing available in the garage. Twenty-ish people to one bathroom, not a great ratio but hell, they’ve gotta start somewhere.

The last thing they did was raid the camping section, throwing all assortment of portable stoves and cots and propane tanks into the bed of Jody’s truck before agreeing that their haul was plenty for the time being. Cas appeared out of nowhere with a shopping basket full of seeds, and Dean didn’t have the heart to explain to him about planting seasons. Either they’d plant them in the spring or they’d all be dead by then and it wouldn’t matter anyway.

Now there’s a comforting thought. Dean shook it off.

After a brief discussion between him and Sam, Dean drove the forklift itself onto the truck too, because why not, before pulling the rolling back door of the truck down and securing it in place.

“Rock, paper, scissors to drive the big rig?” Dean looked excitedly between his brother and Cas, but Sam shook his head.

Castiel looked intrigued but dubious at the suggestion. “No thank you,” he replied politely, “Though I would not mind riding in the passenger seat. It is very high up.”

“Knock yourself out,” Dean encouraged. Sam just raised his eyebrows and gave them both a lazy salute before closing the access door to the store, popping a rogue zombie in the head as it came around the corner, and getting into the front seat of Jody’s truck. “Drive safe,” he called back, and Dean nodded before hoisting himself up into the driver’s side of the eighteen-wheeler.

“Cas, I should warn you. I have absolutely no clue what I’m doing.” Castiel raised one eyebrow as his gaze roamed freely over the vast panel of gauges and switches in front of Dean.
“I was going to ask how much different this could be compared to driving a car, but the controls appear to far more closely resemble an airplane than the Impala.”

Dean laughed as he turned the key, holding his breath as the engine turned over and the fuel gauge rose, only blowing it out when he was sure that they did, in fact, have fuel. “ Probably should have checked that first,” he muttered under his breath. To Castiel, he said, “ We’re just lucky it’s mostly flat between here and home and that no one else is on the roads. We’ll let Sammy get ahead of us a little and then I’ll, you know, just... step on the brakes really early.” Dean shrugged and the terrified look started to return to Castiel’s face. “ Aw, c’mon, man. I drove a cement truck once, figured that out on my own. This can’t be much worse.”

“If you say so, Dean,” Castiel replied, looking a little green.

Despite his bluster, Dean was slightly nervous, though at least there was no fear of being pulled over or hitting someone (alive). The truck was a manual and despite his initial confidence as he shifted and engaged the clutch, the gears ground together in a painful screech as soon as he started forward, sending Castiel lurching hard into the dashboard and then frantically scrambling for his seatbelt.

“I could call Sam on the radios to come back, he could probably use some company. I’ll just—”

“Come on, Cas! Give a guy a chance.” Dean tried again and this time upshifted a lot more smoothly, and then they were moving. “Woohoo!” He cheered, grinning across the seat at Castiel. He tested the brakes as they rolled across the parking lot and realized quickly that he needed to step on them even sooner than he thought in order to bring the heavy vehicle to a timely stop. By the time they’d made the left out of the lot and onto the road, Sam was long out of sight but Dean was actually doing okay. He shifted again to match the truck’s RPMs to their speed but Castiel’s voice ringing out over the roar of the engine brought him to an abrupt pause.

“Stop! Dean, stop, look!” Dean stepped on the brakes and eased the truck to a halt, following Castiel’s finger to where he was pointing out the window. From where they were parked, the highway was clearly visible just above them and a huge group of zombies was wandering their way. By Dean’s estimate, there must have been at least a hundred, maybe two. But that wasn’t the strangest thing, and he knew as soon as he looked why Castiel seemed freaked.

“Cas… you seein’ what I’m seeing?”

“It’s not possible…” Castiel’s eyes were glued to the slow-moving horde, but Dean could still see from his profile that he was concerned.

“Dude, they’re following that chick at the front. Watch.” Sure enough, the horde sped up and slowed down, the pace set by the zombie at the head of the pack, a half-rotted teenager from what Dean could tell, nothing special about her besides the fact that she was apparently pied-pipering a bunch of reanimated corpses down the street. And then she stopped, and just like that the entire group behind her did too. Dean watched as her head slowly turned, looking down over the side of the highway and straight at them.

“Holy shit,” he murmured. “Is she…?”

“We should go,” Castiel said, his tone urgent and his gaze still locked on the zombie staring them down. “Now, Dean.”

When it came to hordes of zombies, no one had to tell Dean to run away twice. He threw the truck in gear and accelerated away, not failing to take notice that that zombie leader remained perfectly still, watching them intently until they were out of sight.
“Shit,” Dean swore, picking up the pace a little as they skirted the edge of town. “Any idea what this means?”

Castiel just shook his head and went back to staring out the window. “Nothing good.”

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When they pulled up outside Camp Singer, Sam and Rowena were waiting for them. Sam had the Sheriff’s vehicle parked inside the perimeter, already working on getting it unloaded. For his part, Dean was fairly focused on thinking about getting the truck through the narrow gate, a thousand other things he still needed to do and talk about with Sam cycling demandingly through his head. But all of that went flying from his brain like papers in the breeze when he saw who Sam and Rowena were standing with, just outside the warding.

“Crowley?”

Castiel didn’t make any attempt to hide his shock, looking back and forth from Dean to the latest apparently reincarnated member of Team Free Will. What the hell version were they on these days, anyway? 3.0? 3.5? Whatever, doesn’t matter and Dean’s not even sure why anything surprised him anymore, resurrected friends who died in alternate universes included.

“Is it Crowley?” He asked suspiciously, because it was a hell of a lot easier to ask Cas than to try and calculate the odds. Castiel peered out his window as Rowena opened the gate and Dean rolled the truck through, bringing it to rest alongside the border wall of stacked cars. The big rig hissed as the air brakes engaged fully, Dean throwing the emergency brake before shutting it down and turning his attention fully to Castiel.

“As far as I can tell,” Castiel replied, opening his door and jumping down, a rush of cool air blowing into the space he’d vacated. Dean followed, walking swiftly as he stepped outside the warding to come face to face with yet another lost friend (friend? Was Crowley really a friend? Ah, the hell with it, Dean’s too fucking tired to dwell on that one) he thought he’d never see again. It felt fucking surreal (and surprisingly nice, not that he’d ever, under penalty of losing his car, admit it) to see Crowley’s smarmy smile, and Rowena was positively beaming.

“My boy is back,” she trilled, her smile wider and happier than Dean had ever seen it, and hell if the end of the world wasn’t bringing all kinds of people and families together. He blinked and gestured between them.

“Did you do this? How?”

“Hello to you too, Dean.” Crowley scowled, but it was clearly good-natured. “Feathers. And to answer your question, no. My wet towel of a mother doesn’t have that sort of power, as highly as she might think of herself.”

“Shows what you know,” Rowena replied, poking him in the flank. “Things have changed since you’ve been gone. I’m unbound.” Crowley just rolled his eyes and waved his hand dismissively, focusing on Dean.

“Are you lot going to let me in, or what? You’d think throwing myself down on the proverbial sword would have heeded at least a thank you and a cup of tea, but Moose here wanted to wait for your approval. Wouldn’t have pegged him for such a submissive, but here we are.” Crowley looked impatiently between each of them in exaggerated irritation.

Dean exchanged a glance with Sam first and then Castiel, who shrugged, clearly not knowing what to make of this any more than he did. “Uh, yeah,” Dean finally answered. “Same team and all that, right?”
“If you’re asking whether or not I plan to help your merry band of misfits stop the world from ending, the answer is… maybe. But I’m not against you, Squirrel. You of all people should know that by now.”

“Whatever,” Dean replied. “Rowena, do your thing.”

“Already on it, dearie,” Rowena said, grabbing Crowley’s arm and slicing across his wrist, collecting the blood that pooled and dripped into a small bowl. “This will only take a wee moment.” She rounded the corner of the gate and stopped at the first sigil she came to, muttering a low incantation and painting over it with Crowley’s blood.

“So wait, back up, how are you here?” Dean raised his palms expectantly before folding them across his chest. “You know, alive? On this plane? In this universe? Any and all of the above?”

Crowley shrugged, hands in his pockets as he rocked back on his heels. “It’s a long story, but the short version is that no one knows Hell better than me. Apparently, the whole demon blood-ingestion thing works in reverse, and when I died I’d consumed enough of it to qualify as a mortal. To have a soul. Well, enough of a soul to grab a one-way ticket to the Hell in Apocalypse World, at any rate. From there it was a simple matter of finding and accessing that Hell’s door to Purgatory and then finding the portal back to Earth. There’s only one Purgatory, you know. Physics and all that.”

Castiel’s eyes were narrowed when he spoke up. “That portal never should have let you through, human blood inside you or not. Your soul is twisted and demonic, you can’t fool an escape hatch made by God himself.”

“Aww, thank you, Cas. Missed you too,” Crowley replied with a grin and a wink at the angel. “I guess you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?” His cutting remark made Dean cringe a little internally and avert his eyes; seven years and Castiel choosing to stay behind in Purgatory was still a rough subject as far as he was concerned, not that their present company needed to know that. “The way I hear it, there are a lot of things you got wrong about God.”

That one pulled an actual, physical flinch from Castiel, as well as caused Dean to abruptly remember why Crowley had always put the enemy in frenemy. He stepped forward menacingly but Sam blocked his path with an arm across his chest.

“Knock it off, Dean,” he muttered. “He’s just being Crowley. Don’t rise to the bait.”

“You know, we don’t have to let you in,” Dean reminded him, finger pointed.

“Too late,” Rowena chimed in, stepping back outside the warding. “The deed is done. Besides, Fergus has information for you.”

“Yea? Then let’s hear it,” Dean demanded. “This camp isn’t gonna put itself together and I’m not getting any younger here.” For a moment, it looked as if Crowley was going to snark off again but he seemed to decide better of it, working his jaw and visibly relenting.

“The portal to Purgatory is open,” he revealed. “The thing about that ‘escape hatch’ is that when any human enters, it will automatically return them to the world they originated from.” He nodded towards Sam and Dean. “You’ve seen that in action, both of you. But now, Chuck has created a sort of funnel, so to speak. You don’t have to be human to pass through it, and all roads lead to…” He walked his fingers through the air and then spread his hands to gesture around them, cocking his head and setting his lips into a grim smile. “Everything that was locked up in Purgatory is spilling through. There’s quite the bottleneck right now up in Maine, but make no mistake… slowly but surely, they’ll all end up here.”
“Oh,” Dean replied. “Well… shit.”

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They closed up the exterior gate and Crowley left them behind to process his dropped bomb, wandering off with Rowena and snarking on about how the living accommodations were better in Hell. Dean turned to Sam, at a loss about what to do regarding the new development, but before they could really get into a discussion, Jody came jogging up.

“Hey, you three. Nice work with the supplies. Donna’s organizing groups to get everything off of the truck as we speak. Listen, I hate to drop more bad news on you but the Muggles—” She stopped talking and glared at Dean before correcting herself, “The survivors we picked up were right about the TV. It’s completely out. Radio still works though, Alex and Claire are futzing with the one we have. There’s a staticky station still broadcasting they seem to think they can get to tune in a little better.”

Sam nodded and squeezed her shoulder. “Alright, not much we can do if that’s the case. Guess we’re just going to have to accept that we’re really and truly alone in this,” he said.

Dean shook his head. “No use in sitting around crying over it. There’s nothing we can do right now except fight whatever comes our way. In the meantime, I’m gonna go get us a shower.” He looked at Sam pointedly. “Because you reek.” He stomped off without another word, ready to throw himself headfirst into manual labor, into something he could at least control, and forget about the rest.

And then later that night he was going to break out the bottle of whiskey he’d stashed underneath the driver’s seat of the Impala from the grocery store. And no fucking way was he sharing.

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Hours later, Dean found himself sweaty, dirty and starving, but the camp had an actual working bathroom inside the garage that boasted both a functioning toilet and a shower and was surrounded by makeshift plywood walls and a blanket doorway. His plumbing may not have been the prettiest sight in the universe, but combined with Rowena’s spell to make the water potable, it worked, and that was what mattered. He emerged from the bathroom to a round of cheering and Claire offering him a steaming hot bowl of canned soup over rice. She and a couple of the rescued Muggles had managed to turn the long workbench that spanned the length of Bobby’s garage into a hell of a makeshift kitchen, the food they’d retrieved stacked neatly on and next to it. Dean had to admit, he was impressed.

He took the bowl with a grateful word of thanks and headed outside the garage to check on the progress of the yard. Four giant sheds now stood end-to-end in the previously empty space, and as Dean peeked inside each one he noted two cots apiece, a light, and a space heater. Cozy, he thought to himself. A generator sat between each pair of sheds, ready to power the heating elements through the night if necessary. The lumber and other construction supplies had been moved to sit beside Bobby’s house and tarped, the back of the big rig being turned into a large dormitory. More cots lined the sides with more space heaters and lights between them, extension cords running out to another generator on the ground. Toilet paper, cleaning supplies, and other dry goods were stacked high in the back, and Dean spotted Alex making an inventory list, taping it up to the wall so that they could keep track of it all.

Dean couldn’t help but be a little bit proud; they’d come a hell of a long way in under twenty-four hours. Sure, it was no Ritz Carlton, but his people were safe, fed, and sheltered, and the rest could wait for another day.
He searched for a place to sit down but passed on interrupting the two snuggle fests he happened by in the process, continuing on to the Impala and grabbing that whiskey after all. He made his way to the ladder that led to the look-out point he’d sat with Cas at this morning and climbed up, careful not to spill the bowl of hot food. He sighed as he finally relaxed down on the top of the Buick, staring off into the darkness and the shadowy tree line as he inhaled his stew. Canned crap or not, it was the best thing Dean felt like he’d tasted in ages.

A rustling on the ladder clued him in that someone was there, a familiar presence making itself known at his back.

“Hey, Cas,” he said automatically.

“Hello, Dean,” Castiel replied, hovering over him. “May I sit?”

‘Course.” Dean shoved another forkful of stew in his mouth before thinking better of it and holding out the bowl. “You want?” More of a reflex than anything else, he fully expected Castiel to decline but to his surprise, the angel accepted the bowl and took a sizeable bite. “You’re hungry?” He wondered aloud. “You feeling alright?”

Castiel chewed deliberately and swallowed. “I’m fine,” he replied. “I felt like eating.” He looked down at the bowl and back at Dean. “Should I not have?”

Dean laughed. “Nah, man, knock yourself out. Wish there was something better for you to snack on, though. That shit isn’t exactly five-star cuisine.” He thought for a moment and then popped open the whiskey bottle. “This on the other hand…” He took a swig before handing it over and Castiel followed suit. They traded the bottle back and forth for several minutes in comfortable silence.

“Cas?” Dean ventured. “How are you holding up?”

Castiel swallowed the large mouthful of whiskey he had already taken before sighing and putting the bottle down between them and turning the question around on Dean.

“How are you holding up?”

Dean worked his jaw for a moment before answering. “Honestly? Pretty fuckin’ terrible,” he replied, and Castiel nodded.

“Yes,” he agreed. “That about sums it up for me as well.”

They finished the bottle and Dean stayed up on the lookout car until he was shivering so hard he wasn’t sure he’d be able to get back down the ladder safely. And if that gave Cas the opportunity to offer him a blanket and move a little closer in the interest of sharing body heat, well, he wasn’t going to be the one to say anything about it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!! If you're enjoying, drop us a comment!

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Twitter or Tumblr
Chapter Summary

Everyone is adjusting to life in the Camp, Team Free Will take a trip to the Bank, and some things have to break before they can heal...

Chapter Notes

Hello fellow humans, a warning or two before you commence with the reading:

Things get a little grotesque and gore-y, but this is a Zombie Apocalypse, so what'd ya expect? No, I'm kidding, please be safe! There is a depiction of a limb being cut off with a walkthrough of the process (more on the medical side, if I'm honest).

Like I said, please be safe, and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was slow working, but Sam thought it was coming together quite nicely - as much as the end of the world could, anyway. No matter how much Claire bitched when her hair bows snapped, or Dean found time to yell at the generators when they sputtered worryingly, or someone tried to claim the shower at someone else's allotted time… Sam thought that, as far as Zombie Apocalypses go, this wasn't the worst one imaginable.

He'd watched *Dawn Of The Dead* in theaters - Jess had buried her head into his shoulder, but she hadn't been scared, she'd just wanted the excuse to nibble on his ear because she had a mischievous streak a mile wide and loved to see him blush - and he had to admit, in the confined space of his own mind, that they probably had higher chances than any other to survive the sudden end of the world. And not the first one, at that.

The muggles though (and *fuck* Dean for making that stick, honestly) were a different story. They were all nice people, for the most part, but they were a sharp reminder of what Sam and his family weren't. Frayed around the edges and soft, trembling at the distant sounds of hungry groans from far off when his people didn't even bat an eye, and overall a little bit more inept with living in a world where death was almost a certainty. They all had lost things, people, family, and they didn't handle it well; it made Sam think of things he'd lost and how well adjusted he and his family were to carrying on after losing over and over.
There was one though that Sam was more inclined to. Janine. She’d been a school teacher before all this; looked it too, in her floral print skirt and button down top. Except, of course, looks were deceiving, and Janine's late husband was a soldier who'd taught her how to shoot a gun on their honeymoon. She'd explained all this on a supply run when she’d insisted on going, telling them in a no nonsense tone that she was perfectly capable of handling herself. Her and Donna were becoming fast friends. She'd choked up a little talking about the husband she lost, but she shot a gun with frightening accuracy and had no qualms about it. Admirably, in Sam's opinion, she'd taken the rest of the muggles under her wing and ushered them around like a mother hen, listening to their stories and telling some of her own, even as she taught them how to hold a gun.

She was great, really. Pretty and soft, yet merciless and fucking savage, honestly. Dean often leered at her and waggled his eyebrows pointedly, but with one sharp look from Jody, he'd abandon that little endeavor quickly; with cheeks dusted pink and a sudden need to flee, which made Jody Sam's hero. So, Janine was awesome and everyone seemed to really like her. Sam too, for sure.

Except Rowena.

Sam wasn't sure what was going on there, but Rowena genuinely seemed to dislike Janine. He had no idea why. As far as he could tell, they should get along just fine, but Rowena had taken one look at her after she'd stopped pestering Crowley and narrowed her eyes. The rest, as they say, was history. Rowena was cold and sharp, always interrupting whatever conversation Sam and Janine were having to come over and throw out not-so-subtle insults. Sam would be truly alarmed by it all, expect Janine took it in stride and matched her insult for insult, nose wrinkling like Rowena was worse than the dirt beneath her shoe.

Which, that was… not okay. Sam liked Janine, but that was one little niggling problem he had with her. He didn't act on it or say anything though, mostly because he couldn't justify it. Rowena was just as rude as Janine, but Sam wasn't overly bothered by that. Which was favoritism, he knew, but Rowena was family; sue him.

Not sure exactly what to do about the situation, Sam did absolutely nothing besides let it bother him in his shower time, then immediately do everything in his power to forget it once he was out.

It was working out in his favor so far.

Outside of that small drama, everyone seemed to be handling everything well, or pretending to. Claire and Alex regularly bickered, but they were the ones to come up with the idea of scheduling shower times until they could get more installed. Jody, as rough and tumble as she could be, would talk to one man who'd lost his wife and children, her eyes a little foggy and sad, but doing her best to help all the same. Donna was a quick favorite to all the muggles, her chipper demeanor in the face of travesty like a balm to a wound. Dean even helped teach people about guns and knives, the best way
to fight, but it always left him looking as if he was a little haunted by something Sam couldn't understand.

Cas, shockingly, drew people in like a moth to a flame. Maybe it was how blunt he was, just giving straight answers when people were being eaten up with confusion. Maybe it was the fact that he was always walking the perimeter, keeping them all safe like it was his one purpose in life - and maybe, to him, that was all he had now. Whatever it was, people sought Cas out when they were at their wits end, not soothed by anyone else, and they'd leave their encounter with him looking less like they were being swept away in all this mess. Cas didn't seem to even realize that it was happening.

Sam tried to be a sanctuary or helpful, at the very least, but only in the way that he didn't try at all. In all honesty, he didn't want to. He didn't want to get attached to these people and watch them die, didn't want to let them become family and lose them too. Sam still closed his eyes and saw Maggie's own being burned out, the memory scalded into his brain, and he was so tired. He was kind though, listened when people struck up conversation, gave advice when he was sought out, and tried not to remember their names or what they looked like when they smiled.

He did, of course, but.

But.

Nonetheless, Sam had to marvel at how far they'd come after Chuck threw his tantrum and stomped on his sandcastle because it wasn't looking how he it wanted to. And wasn't that a bitch, to be nothing more than a side project for a god he'd used to inherently believe in, to be some character in a story without any idea he was being written a certain way? It made him think (late at night when the dark wasn't such an oddity) that he wasn't even sure if what he thought about himself was true - was any of it? Dean and Cas, even. And Sam wondered just how much of themselves they were, or what parts of them were constructed specifically for Chuck to watch a story play out. It couldn't be all of who they were, because they were at the end of the world yet again, proof this time that they had some pieces of themselves that they refused to let go of. It was a comfort at least, especially amidst existential crisis.

"I can hear you thinking from here, Moose."

Ah, that.

Sam hadn't thought much on the fact that Crowley was back, up and walking around and being the permanent thorn in their sides - especially Cas, who seemed to be in a constant state of annoyance if Crowley so much as breathed. No, he'd been fixated on the information Crowley brought with him.
It wasn't too much to ask that the end of the world just have one level, oh no, it just had to be layered with so many fucking problems that Sam had no idea how to start sorting them out. Maine was a little ways away, so it wasn't exactly a priority just yet, but Sam knew it would be eventually.

"If you don't like it, go away," Sam snipped, leaning on the edge of Bobby's old foundation. Much like shower time, Sam had to make moments for himself to just be alone with his thoughts, but Crowley was, as always, screwing him over.

"While I'd enjoy nothing more than to be out of your presence, I need information," Crowley drawled, moving forward to step up beside him, shoulder to shoulder. "You seem to be the only one out of the tiresome threesome that's in any state to provide."

Sam looked heavenward, then immediately aborted the gesture. Not like anyone was listening, and if they were, it wasn't anyone worth praying for patience to anyway. Sighing, he eyed Crowley with suspicion. Sam wouldn't admit it to save his life, but it was strangely nice to see him.

"Tiresome threesome, really?"

"Well, Dean and Cas are the gruesome twosome, aren't they? And you and Dean are plaid-clad nightmares. I'm sticking to a theme."

"And what have you nicknamed me and Cas?" Sam asked, faintly amused despite himself.

Crowley arched an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware you and Feathers had much of a relationship to mock."

That bothered Sam for a moment, but he quickly remembered that he didn't care. He wasn't going to defend his relationship with Cas to someone who would turn around and mock it. He didn't want it mocked; he and Cas had come a long way, and whatever Crowley could come up with wouldn't even begin to touch on the fact that Cas was his brother, full stop. So, Sam bit back his remark.

"What do you want to know, Crowley?" Sam asked with a sigh, suddenly very exhausted.

Crowley hummed. "Oh, you know, simple things. Such as, what happened after I died? Why is my mother suddenly very chummy with you all? Have Dean and Cas gotten a divorce yet; they sure act
as they have. And why exactly did you *morons* piss off *God*, of all the things to do?"

"Simple, right." Sam twisted his lips bitterly, a hollow feeling in his chest. "Well, it's what it always is. The world went to shit, just like it always does, and we kept trying to clean it up. People died, as always. And our one card up our sleeve, even if it never showed up to help, decided that he didn't like this toy anymore, so he broke it. We are the scattered remains, I guess."

"Ah," Crowley said delicately, "so, it went all tits up then?"

Sam snorted. "You could say that."

"And the rest? With my mother?"

"She helped us out a lot. There's just... a lot. It was a lot like you at first, reluctant but necessary. Rowena, however, is worlds better than you and much easier to like. So, yeah, we're all... uh, *chummy.*"

Crowley made a faint strangled noise that Sam didn't really understand. "Bullocks," he said, with *feeling*, and Sam just stared at him with judgement.

"As for Dean and Cas..." Sam trails off and goes silent, shoving his hands into his pockets and heaving a deep sigh. His shoulder still twinged with the movement, but Rowena and Alex had been keeping a check on it. The wound was healing well enough. "They're how they always are."

"Complicated," Crowley offered in faint amusement, lips curling up in a smirk.

Sam narrowed his eyes at him. "Wrapped up in each other," he shot back a little defensively, "so don't go getting any ideas. Cas could kick your teeth in, angel or not, and I know you value self-preservation."

"I don't know," Crowley mused, suddenly seeming as cruel as he ever was, all sharp points and devious intentions. "They certainly seemed to have drifted apart, haven't they? Surely you've noticed."
Crowley hadn't even been here that long, so the fact that he had picked up on their notable tension was just discouraging, really. And Sam wasn't exactly happy with Dean at the moment, doubted he wouldn't be for as long as he could remember in fine detail how Dean had held a gun to Jack's head with only the slightest tremble, but that didn't mean he wanted Crowley to step in and be the last option Dean had to turn to.

Absolutely fucking not.

Sam shot Crowley a glare. "They're fine. We're all fine. Things are… fine."

"Oh?" Crowley laughed mockingly. "Sure, Moose, whatever you say. I'll just go prod at Dean then, see how fine he is about everything."

"He's fine," Sam snapped, because none of them are and he had picked up Dean's horrible habit of lying to make it through by the tender age of six, so. He stood up straight, stepping back. "Glad you're not still dead, Crowley."

He wasn't sure why he admitted that, but it did the job of freezing Crowley in place, so he didn't question it. Even if his mind was very firmly in the corner of Crowley fucking off, he did find himself thankful for his presence.

With Crowley standing stock-still, face blank, Sam backed away and started back towards the more central part of the grounds. The muggles (seriously, fuck Dean for that) were all gathered in a group, watching in rapt attention as Alex showed them how to do sutures with dental floss. Cas had gotten in a tussle with a zombie that got a little too close and had ended up with a scrape, and since the wound was healing at a sluggish rate, he'd offered to let Alex show them what to do if stitches were needed. Cas was taking it like a champ, blank-faced and seemingly lost in thought.

Sam offered him a small smile as he passed, something warm blooming in his chest when Cas blinked and returned it - a small, crooked thing of his own, tired in its entirety. It made Sam realize that he missed him; they hadn't gotten much time to really talk since all this bizarre shit started. They used to, often. Sam was an early riser at heart, unless dead tired the night before, and Cas didn't usually sleep. They'd sit up in the early corners of the mornings and discuss simple things; what was on the news, how the last case went, what the next case would be, whether they'd need to team up together and get Dean to go out and get milk.

Cas was his best friend, Sam knew that. It was just strange that the morning routine at the Bunker had ever been a distant moment for him - something that he hadn't looked at twice, or thought to appreciate. But here and now, Sam was hit with a bout of nostalgia, wishing he could just turn back.
time and go back to that. And then, Sam realized he wanted to turn back time for all the moments he hadn't stopped to bask in.

But such was life. Such was their lives.

Continuing on, Sam vowed to find a slice of time to talk to Cas too. For now, he had to find Dean. There was an unpleasant slithering under his skin at the thought of what he was about to do, but Crowley certainly provided the boost he needed. He knew exactly where to go, too; Dean was either doing something near Baby, doing something in the garage, or at the top of the car pile.

Halfway to Baby, Rowena stepped in his path.

"Sam," she started, eyes narrowed, "give me one good reason why I shouldn't knock your wee head off your shoulders."

Sam opened his mouth, at a loss. "Uh," he said slowly, not sure what he'd done now.

"If it weren't for the fact that your brain far outweighs that brother of yours, I would. However, you must not have enough brainpower to think about some of your actions," Rowena told him firmly, her hair sweeping off her shoulder as she tipped her chin up.

"Rowena, I really have no idea what you're talking about," Sam admitted with a weary sigh, reaching up to scrub at his eyebrow.

"Of course you don't," Janine said as she walked over, abandoning the rest of the muggles to come and grin at him. "You're a man."

"You can say that again, dear," Rowena agreed, still glaring at Sam.

Janine glanced over at her in surprise. "It's definitely worth repeating. Did he do something stupid?"

"Of course." Rowena huffed, sniffing primly like the royalty she believed herself to be. Sam was inclined to agree with that because Rowena could command a room like a queen. "He is a man, after all. Know about idiot men, do you?"
"Oh, definitely. My husband was the worst. All good intentions, mind you, but still."

"It's always the smartest ones that let me down the most. Samuel, here, has all the equipment to think rationally, yet he seems incapable."

Janine looked amused, which Sam had never seen her be around Rowena. "What did he do?"

"Yeah, I wanna know that too," Sam muttered, snapping his mouth shut when Rowena sent him a withering look.

"What didn't he do, more like," Rowena snipped, crossing her arms and drawing herself to full height. She scowled at Sam, then smiled at Janine like she adored her, which - okay, that wasn't fair. "Samuel was meant to help me with more defense, but instead, he blathered on with Fergus, who - just to add to my ire - is under the impression that I have become a Winchester by association."

Janine nodded like this was indeed all detrimental information. "Ah," she said sympathetically, tossing her hands up. "Men. What can you do?"

Sam blinked. "Okay, first of all, how in the hell did you talk to Crowley that quick? I was literally just there. And second of all, I have all intentions of helping you with more defense; I just need to speak with Dean first. Lastly, I am not to blame for what Crowley does or does not think about things."

Rowena narrowed her eyes, opening her mouth like she was about to go into a full tangent, but Janine stepped up and threaded one arm through hers. Sam gaped as Rowena allowed it to happen.

"Come on, I'll understand everything he doesn't. Plus, I think you'll enjoy all my stories of Daniel being an idiot. God love him, but he was a lot like Sam," Janine said sagely, then her eyes brightened as her lips curled up. "You're a lot like me, you know. I'm sure you and Sam will work it out later. For now, let's despair about the idiocy of all men and let him go talk to Dean."

Rowena shot Sam another annoyed look, but her cheeks were faintly pink as she followed Janine away, bemoaning about the colossal waste that was Sam's intelligence but at least he was pretty - and Sam was pretty sure he wasn't supposed to hear that. He stared after them, eyes kind of boggling out of his head, a weird twitch in his fingers as he stared at the red sweep of Rowena's hair as she walked away. He blinked, shaking himself out of it. Women, no matter the age or experiences, were
completely and utterly confusing.

At least he didn't have to worry about them not liking each other anymore, but he wasn't so sure that was better than the alternative. They'd probably spend the rest of forever having some secret language he'd never follow, one far harder than Latin to learn.

Sighing, Sam continued on his original mission.

He found Dean cursing up a storm by one particularly fickle generator that seemed to have a personal vendetta against him. Sam watched in faint amusement as Dean slid in Baby and tried to jump start the generator. When it didn't work, Dean got out and slammed the door, cursing again.

Sam jumped at the loud slam, his heart abruptly racing in his chest, and he had to take in a deep breath. It happened often, this strange jumpiness. He'd get so easily startled, even when he shouldn't, even when he wasn't in a dangerous situation - sometimes especially when he wasn't. Dean would yell, or a door would slam too loud, or movement he wasn't prepared for would happen in his peripheral; Sam didn't understand why those things seemed so sensitive and overbearing in the moments that they did, but he'd always flinch and wait for the blow, even if there wasn't ever going to be one.

Yet, put him in a fight and he was cool as a cucumber. Sam didn't get it, probably never would, just chalked it up to his own fucked up head in this horribly fucked up world.

"Dean," he called out when things weren't making him feel twelve and afraid again, "maybe don't yell at it and it might work for you."

Dean sent him a sharp look over his shoulder, then bent down in front of the generator and addressed it, very sarcastically saying, "Right, of course, let me be nice to the piece of shit. Oh, I'm sorry, are you having a bad day? Are you tired after working so hard? Do you want me to rub you down with some oil and whisper encouragements until you fucking work!"

Sam huffed a quiet laugh and moved over to Baby, reaching in and turning the key, hoping with everything in his being that the universe liked him enough to spite Dean in this moment. And maybe things weren't all so bad, Sam thought, because the generator kicked to life with a seemingly mocking sputter. Dean scoffed and cursed again as he stood up, tossing Sam a look of betrayal.

"It likes me," Sam said smugly.
Dean scowled and moved over to start removing the jumper cables, muttering, "Well, it hates me, but what else is fucking new?"

At that, Sam sighed and approached the front tire, leaning his hip against Baby and watching Dean gingerly - even in his anger - shut Baby's hood. Sam waited for Dean to go through the process of avoiding his eyes until he could no longer stand it, then arched an eyebrow when Dean finally looked up at him and crossed his arms.

"Dean," Sam said firmly, needing him to hear the severity in the following words, "I do not hate you. Cas does not hate you. No one hates you. We're just- it's been hard on all of us, that's all."

Dean clenched his jaw, meeting his gaze head on for once. "Like it hasn't been hard on me?"

"I'm sure it has. Dean, you're a part of the reason things have been hard." Sam grimaced when Dean reared back like he'd been slapped. "But so am I! So is Cas, even. We're not making this any easier on each other, which is just… fucked right now."

"S'not exactly the time for us all to be singing *why can't we be friends* by a campfire right now, Sam. The world is shit, again. I fucked it up, again. I am the reason it's all hard. Again!"

"Yeah, okay. I mean, what do you want me to say? That you didn't do anything wrong? That you're not partially to blame?"

"Don't expect you to," Dean snapped, averting his eyes and inhaling deeply, wound so tight that it looked like he'd fall apart if he breathed too much.

Sam reached out and hooked a hand on Dean's elbow, squeezing tight enough to hurt. "Stop. Just-stop it, okay? You messed up, but we all have. We all did with this too. And honestly, Chuck's the one who did the deed, so let it go. We don't need that right now; we need to keep going until… until."

"Until what?" Dean reached up to scrub a hand down his face. "Jesus, Sammy, what are we even doing? This isn't- we're not making it out of this. You heard Chuck, you saw- you see what the fuck we're dealing with, and everything is just so… pointless. He could have saved us the time and just killed us right along with Jack!"
"We're surviving," Sam said firmly, squeezing Dean's arm tighter. "What other choice do we have? It's like you said; this is what we do. And it's really hard to do that if we aren't working together. You know that. You've said it yourself, Dean, we're all just… better together."

Dean looked up, an emptiness suddenly in his gaze, and when he spoke, his voice was hoarse with grief and guilt. "That was before I cost Cas a son. Before I held a gun to our kid's head and thought about pulling the trigger. I did that, not you, not Cas, and that's on me."

"Yeah, Dean, you did. It's not okay, what you did, but what matters is that you didn't pull the trigger. After everything, after Mom… you still didn't."

"I wanted to."

"I know." Sam dropped his hand from Dean's arm, feeling his stomach knot with nerves. "I know you wanted to and I know you didn't want to. I know. And, believe it or not, Cas knows too. But I helped you try and lock Jack in that box. Cas summoned God, who, in the end, killed Jack - not you. We all have our own guilt, don't forget that."

Dean stared at him for a long moment, looking old and haggard and tired. "What am I supposed to do? Sam, what do I even- what do I do?" he whispered, dropping his gaze. "I can barely look at him, I don't know what to- to say. I can't fix this."

"I told you to give him space, and you did. And now, I'm telling you to talk to him. Just- just talk. It's not that hard," Sam told him calmly, swallowing thickly, knowing very well how hard it truly was. "You open your mouth and you speak. Say what you have to, say what you mean, and just fucking talk for once in your life. Can you- is that even something you can do? Because Jack? Jack loved you, Dean, and me, and Cas. He wouldn't want us to- he wouldn't want it. So, if not for me, if not for Cas, just make it right for Jack. You owe him that, at least."

Dean swayed a little, looking pale and sick, his eyes sinking shut as he rasped, "Yeah, I guess I do."
Castiel stared down at his wound with a little frown, tracing the neat lines of dental floss on his arm with his gaze. It was curious, almost. The stitching process hadn't been unbearable or without the pinch of pain, but Alex had been incredibly gentle, despite his assurances that it wouldn't matter. She'd told him, voice calm and assessing, that it mattered to her. So, he'd let her treat him as kindly as she liked, even if it didn't matter at all.

He wondered, vaguely, if it would scar.

"Castiel."

Before he could further follow that line of confusion, he was pulled out of his own musings. When he glanced up, Anael stood before him. The sight of her made Castiel wrench to a stop. She looked worse for wear, her clothes ripped in places, her hair in disarray, missing a heel.

"Anael," he greeted, bemused, "what happened?"

"Those- those creatures," Anael spat, hobbling towards him with all the dignity she should not have while looking such a mess. "Mindless brutes! You'd think our father would have more creativity when he made them."

Castiel found himself agreeing with her, even just slightly. For him to make humanity, he didn't seem to put much thought in the… zombies, as Dean - and many of the others - called them. Sighing, he walked over to her and offered his arm without comment, giving her balance as they started towards the camp.

"I see your journey was… perilous," Castiel commented warily, eyeing the knots of her hair and the stain of dirt on her chin.

Anael shot him a blithe look. "You don't know the half of it," she growled. "Please, for my sake, tell me this camp of yours has accommodations."

Castiel nodded. "Yes. You may shower and get cleaned up. As for the state of your clothes, we have generic shirts and pants from the sports section of the multipurpose grocery store we raided."
"Generic?" Anael asked flatly, grimacing.

"Yes, but clean."

"I'll take what I can get."

"As you should," Castiel muttered, frowning when she dug her chipped nails into his arm. "That appears all we are able to do at the moment."

"How have you been faring then?" Anael paused in her hobbling to narrow her eyes at him, shrewd look making him uncomfortable. "Because, let me tell you, I have had the worst few days of my entire existence. Do you even- one of those creatures ate my necklace; it was thirteen carats!"

Castiel arched an eyebrow at her. "Nothing so dreadful as that has happened to me, just the overwhelming realization that my whole existence has been a lie, majorly for the enjoyment of one I had wavering - yet incessant - faith in."

"Not to be that person," Anael said, lips twitching as if she was biting back a smile, "but I did warn you."

"Yes, you did."

"Oh, stop looking so miserable. Take me to this camp of yours. We have much to discuss."

"Such as?" Castiel asked with a sigh, helping her yet again as they picked up the pace.

Anael tsked lightly. "For one, what I will be gaining by joining you."

"Shelter, safety, and social situations, should you want it," Castiel shot back. "Anything else?"

"Someone's testy." Anael sent him an arch look, her eyebrow sweeping up. "Have you told the humans? Are you here with the Winchesters?"
"Would I be anywhere else?"

"Fair point."

"As for the humans… yes, they know. It came as quite a shock to them to learn that God was real and the one to end the world."

"I'd imagine so, especially with them treating the Bible as prophecy. They'd thought it would end in fire and brimstone, but they omit the fact that it, too, would be at His hands."

Castiel hummed quietly. "They are adjusting. They have many questions; they often do not enjoy the answers I give them."

"Who would?" Anael replied with a huff, reaching up with her free hand to push at her wild hair. "Have you contacted any others directly?"

"Who? As you're aware, not many of our brethren have positive feelings towards me."

"Again, fair point."

Anael went silent, so Castiel did too. He didn't have that much to say, though there was a lot going on in his head - most of which consisted of the state of the world, all he's lost, and what to do now. They moved up towards the camp, the place all too familiar after having walked nearly every inch of it. Anael wrinkled her nose at the spikes they had set up, but there was a grudging appreciation to the slope of her lips.

"I will return," Castiel told her, stepping away to go and retrieve Rowena.

It didn't take very long. Her and Sam were standing a few paces down, drawing sigils and talking quietly back and forth. Sam looked calm, his smile casual as Rowena explained something to him distractedly. As Castiel approached them, Sam turned to look at him, smile broadening in delight.
"Hey, man," Sam greeted, "you alright?"

"I'm fine," Castiel replied, which was a lie - a horrid human habit he'd picked up from Dean. "I need to borrow Rowena; Anael seeks refuge."

"Oh, honestly," Rowena grumbled, dropping her hands and huffing, "we need a better system. I can't be off at every new visitor, can I? What of my sleep, of my personal time? I have needs."

"Then have Sam assist you with them," Castiel told her flatly, rolling his eyes. "For now, allow Anael permittance."

"Do this, Rowena; fix this, Rowena; make this happen, Rowena! It's not as if we have our own personal angel or anything, no, not at all." Rowena huffed and brushed past Sam, complaining as she went. "What good's a wee angel in time like this anyway? A world without a God, truly abandoned; this is a witch's time, of course, as magic functions entirely on its own, but even I have my limits."

Castiel looked at Sam as they followed behind her, his eyebrows furrowed. Sam held up his hands, as if he was surrendering.

"I have no idea, man."

"I did not mean to interrupt," Castiel told him quietly, even if he did. But he said it anyway because it would make Sam feel better.

Sam snorted. "It's not a big deal. We were just working on the wards again. Have you, uh, talked to Dean today?"

Castiel frowned. "No."

"He hasn't come by to... talk?"

"No?"
"Have you- I mean, have you seen him at all?"

"No. Should I have?"

Sam immediately adopted an innocent expression, shrugging slightly. "I don't know. Why would I know? I'm just asking."

"I see." Castiel did not see. He narrowed his eyes at Sam. "Have you talked to Dean today?"

"Yeah, I mean, a little," Sam said quickly, eyes averting to the side as he cleared his throat.

"Sam, please just say what you wish to say. I do not have the patience or energy to try and work out what it is," Castiel admitted with a sigh.

"It's nothing, Cas. I guess I just hoped that things were getting… better."

"Perhaps they are."

"You're not a very good liar."

"Neither are you, Sam."

Sam hugged a short laugh. "Right, I just- nothing. Don't worry about it."

Castiel decided that he wouldn't, at least not now. He simply nodded at Sam and trailed along behind a steadily complaining Rowena. Anael was waiting in the same spot that he left her, arms crossed as she kept her bare foot firmly off the ground. Sam made a small sound of shock at the sight of her, but Rowena took one look and tutted disapprovingly.

"Poor dear," Rowena said, shaking her head as she set out to allow Anael entry. "You look dreadful."
Anael's nostrils flared. "I'm well aware. It's those creatures! They ate my jewelry."

Rowena frowned and finished up. "That's horrible. Come along now, you're allowed."

"Cas! Cas, hey, can I-"

Castiel turned to see Dean nearly trip as he came to an abrupt halt. He blinked rapidly in surprise as he caught sight of Anael, his mouth still hanging open. Castiel immediately turned to Sam, arching an eyebrow, because this - specifically this - was enough to let him know that Sam had been up to something. Sam, for his part, just coughed behind a fist and smiled tightly at Anael.

"Oh, hey," Dean said, finally finding his words. "Long time, no see, Jo. Still obsessed with materialistic shit?"

Anael arched an unashamed eyebrow. "Obviously. What about you? Still making stupid decisions and not knowing just how to say no?"

"Yeah, that's on me. But hey, all's well that ends well, if it ever will. Michael's long gone now. You, however, look like shit," Dean told her honestly, frowning in open displeasure. "I take it the zombies weren't really all that keen on caring about your, uh, worldly possessions?"

"No," Anael bit out, "they weren't."

"Yes, they ate your jewelry, we know," Castiel snapped, swinging around to glare at her. "You need to change and get cleaned up. Rowena, would you-"

"We'll do it," Sam blurted out, reaching over and pulling Rowena into his side, not noticing or not caring about how she released an undignified noise at the new change in position. "I mean, we'll- we'll handle it, Cas. Come on, Jo, we'll introduce you to everyone and get you settled in."

Huffing and hobbling, Anael followed after them, her lips tipped down at the corners. Castiel watched her go, feeling the absolute impossible starts of a headache throb at his temples - impossible because he did not get headaches. His gaze shifted to Dean, who looked a little lost all of a sudden. Castiel was truly in no mood to speak with him at this moment.
Castiel found that he missed Dean, even while overwhelmingly angry at him. It was almost hard to be in Dean's vicinity sometimes. But there were moments where Castiel ached because of the distance between them - standing in the middle of the garage with hope burning hot at the back of his throat, walking the perimeter and feeling so utterly alone, sitting with Dean and sharing a moment of peace that barely changed anything.

The world was at an end, yet again, and Castiel feared they were at an end as well. While he knew it wasn't possible, given the circumstances, he could feel the loss like a vice around his heart. He'd lost his father, lost Jack, lost his own grip of his entire existence, and it felt as if he'd lost Dean too. The angry, bitter part of him welcomed the idea, but it was not very loud at this moment.

"Hey," Dean muttered, eyebrows dipping low.

Castiel sighed heavily. "I've already worked out that Sam is making you talk to me. Save it, I certainly don't have time for it."

"Cas, no, wait," Dean blurted out, reaching out to snag his arm. "Wait- just, please?"

Dean was not, by nature, the pleading type. He was very tactile, however, and whether by instinct or on purpose, he was aware of what would get Castiel to stop. He wasn't sure why; Dean had no true strength, not compared to that of an angel, so Castiel could easily carry on moving without him. But he'd always stopped under Dean's hand, always wondering why, always doing it anyway. If not paired with a plea, Castiel liked to think that he'd have kept right on going then, pushing past Dean without looking back. Sam, however, was entirely right; he was not a very good liar, even to himself.

"Yes, Dean?"

"So, I'm gonna talk, and- and I don't have a damn clue what to say, but I'm gonna."

Castiel was suddenly very irrationally furious. Dean wanted to talk, to say things with no direction, and for what? Castiel had wanted to talk plenty before, had asked Dean for the chance, had wanted to stop and just try before things got out of control. But no, Dean hadn't wanted to talk, hadn't been able to look past his own grief, hadn't even given it a chance. And that had ended with Jack's eyes burned away, so Castiel was not inclined to talk.

They'd talked since, of course, even shared moments of calm. But, here and now, Castiel didn't want to. He didn't want to forgive Dean; he wanted to be able to be blinded with his own grief - and why
shouldn't he? He was an angel, but he had cherished humanity for so long now that he'd taken parts of that too. He was angry and hurt, and Dean was not deserving of the forgiveness he would surely give if they talked.

"I don't want to hear it," Castiel said sharply, standing to full height.

Dean bobbed his head. "I know," he croaked, swallowing thickly. "I'm not- I ain't gonna ask you to forgive me, man. I ain't even gonna tell you I'm sorry because you don't care about that. I just want to say that- that I-

Castiel pressed his lips into a thin line, watching Dean struggle for a moment. It was not pity that made him stop it, but simply that he grew irritated with it quickly. "Dean, just say whatever it is so I can continue on my way."

"I miss my mom," Dean blurted out, head ducking for a moment. He looked up through his eyelashes, peering at Castiel like he expected to be mocked for such an admission. "I cry sometimes, when I'm alone and no one's around, and I think about her dying a lot. I think maybe Chuck planned that too. I think about her up in heaven and I wonder if she got there because of me."

"Dean-"

"No, I- I know, okay? I said I didn't want your forgiveness, and I don't, but this isn't about that. This is about- this is me just... missing my mom. And Jack. We had- before he died the first time, we went to this little pond, you know? And I let him drive Baby. I was trying to, I dunno, give him some kind of send off that left him feeling happy. You know what he told me, Cas?"

"No," Castiel murmured, "I was not there."

Dean blinked rapidly, clearing his thick throat and taking a deep breath. "He didn't need Vegas, or the Grand Canyon, or a trip to Disneyland. The kid was just- he was happy to spend time with me. And that's- fuck, that was everything to me."

Castiel felt uneasy, heart seeming mashed the wrong way in his chest. "Dean, why?" His voice was soft, careful, uncertain, hurt. "Why didn't you- why couldn't you just... listen?"

"When I was standing there with the gun, I thought I'd do it. I wanted to, I really did. I thought it was
the right thing, and I couldn't mess that up again, because I'd already messed up too much, and that
cost me my own mother." Dean clenched his jaw and looked down at his boots. "And I couldn't pull
the trigger for the same reason."

"Is this all you wanted to say?" Castiel asked, too many emotions leaving him feeling blank and
numb, shut off from expressing anything.

Dean lifted his head and stared. "The world's not so simple now, not that it ever was, but- but we're
here until we aren't anymore. And that's the one constant that never changes for anybody. But for
me? My constant is you and Sam. I'm not asking for anything, I'm just- I'm trying."

Castiel knew he was, but he didn't know if it mattered. There was a term, a very human term, that
danced across his mind in a taunting fashion. Too little, too late. He wondered if that's all they were,
if that's all they'd be.

Dean didn't look beaten down in this moment; he didn't even appear as if he wanted anything from
this encounter. In fact, Dean didn't look anything but tired, weighed down by his own actions and his
own life.

Castiel understood that achingly well, feeling it himself. He was so tired of being angry or hurt all the
time, so instead of saying so, he said, "I do not want you to die." He frowned at Dean, eyebrows
creasing. "I do not want to lose you, too."

Dean made an aborted movement like he was going to step closer, but he froze in place. They were
already looking at each other, but they abruptly stopped to stare. Dean's eyes were wide and green,
his lips parting, the angles of his face shadowed and worn - he looked like he wanted something,
possibly a drink. Castiel wasn't sure why, but he held his breath; his lungs protested it.

Dean broke the moment by jerking his gaze away, breathing harshly through his nose. "I'm gonna
die, Cas, one day," he told him gruffly, slowly looking up yet again. "But you won't lose me, I
promise."

Castiel was silent for a long moment, then he took a page out of Dean's book and looked away to
avoid the moment. "Is that it?"

"Yeah," Dean whispered, "that's it."
Castiel nodded curtly and walked away.

Dean sighed heavily when Sam cornered him just outside of the garage. He was trying to do something to keep his hands busy, to ignore his own bullshit thoughts. It wasn't usually this hard - he'd gotten great at this particular art of not thinking about what he was thinking about over the years - but there was something about the end of the world that shaped new rules into effect.

(Rule Number One: Dean was a fucking idiot.)

(What else was new?)

Dean watched Jo walk by, now dressed in a Go Coyotes! t-shirt they'd picked up and a pair of unflattering jogging pants. The only nice part of her outfit was the extra pair of boots Donna let her borrow, as they were the same shoe size. But Jo had showered and brushed her hair, so even standing in the last thing he'd ever expect her in, she was heartbreakingly beautiful.

Dean remembered the first time he'd ever met her, right amidst yet another apocalyptic situation. He'd been close to spitting fire at the mere thought of Lucifer, so he hadn't truly spared Jo much of a glance. What he had spared had left him surprised; the last angel he had looked at and been a little stunned by their beauty was... well, Cas didn't exactly count - he had the hair and the eyes, with the messy and the blue, and Dean did not count that. No, the last one had been - ironically enough - Anna.

But Jo? She was beautiful, even standing there in simple clothing, hair a little limp around her face like she had no idea what to do with it. But she was talking to Cas, smiling a little mischievously, and there was just something about her that left him a little stunned by how pretty she was. It was the kind of thing he'd probably look like an idiot over without even meaning to, but he also wouldn't touch that with a ten foot pole. Because - and here's the thing that was stopping him - she was kinda like Cas' sister, and while that hadn't mattered so long ago with Anna... it mattered now. Plus, there was also the one little niggling problem of not actually liking her personality.
Dean realized that he was just standing there by the entrance to the garage, watching Jo talk to Cas like it was the easiest thing in the world. That pissed him off for no genuine reason. She made it look so simple, like talking to Cas was just a regular part of her day, and he hated her for it in that moment. But then again, she wasn't the one who-

And no.

Dean wasn't doing this again, not right now. He'd already fucked this up enough, dwelling on it would just spur him into further action that would make it more of a mess. It was hard with the image of Cas' big blue eyes looking dim with hopelessness as he asked Dean "is that all?" playing in his mind.

Dean hadn't been able to say anything else. He'd wanted to, wanted words that would make Cas look at him less like nothing mattered, not even them. In the end, just like usual, he hadn't said enough, or he'd said too much, and he'd fucked things up worse. Back to regular scheduled programming then.

A shoulder knocked into his, a solid movement that gave Dean all the distraction he needed. Sam was standing next to him, hands stuffed in his pockets, eyebrows raised expectantly. Dean frowned at him, even if he was thankful for his presence.

"Did you talk to him?" Sam muttered, jerking his chin at Cas so Dean couldn't act like he had no idea who he was referencing.

Dean grunted. "Tried to, but I think I talked at him. I dunno, things are just fucked right now."

"Yeah, we're at rock bottom again. But hey, at least the only way from here is up."

"That's what we always think."

Sam huffed a surprised laugh, like he was shocked to find that so funny. "Yeah, I- I guess it is. But we're not zombies, so I'm gonna count that as a win."

"Well, if we're counting wins, Cas said he doesn't want me to die, so there's that," Dean said with a mournful sigh, staring across the space to watch Cas bob his head to whatever Jo was saying.
It was weird being back here on Bobby's land, relying on his paranoia and caches, setting up camp with Jody, having another Jo here - she'd never compare to the first, but there was one. It was like taking a step back in time, except extremely distorted and far too close to the visage of the end of the end of the world that Zachariah had tossed him into.

Dean thought about the way Zachariah had stepped up to him and told him with cold certainty that he'd say yes to Michael, that the hellscape he'd been tossed into would come into fruition otherwise. He thought about Sam's face twisting into true evil as Lucifer dared to use his lips to assure Dean that they'd always end up there. He thought about it and he felt like he was going to be sick. Because they were right, even after being lulled into the false sense of security that was years passing without that result. Yet, here they were, and Dean didn't have one fucking clue how to stop it.

Everything within him wanted to.

Sam knocked his shoulder into Dean's again, a sharp reminder that this was not that, and Dean had a chance at keeping it that way. "Just keep working on it, man. Cas will- he'll come around eventually, okay? He's strong; he'll heal from everything with time. Just… be there for him."

Dean opened his mouth to tell Sam that he was gonna do that anyway, or try to, but the sight of Jo reaching out to touch Cas' arm stopped him. Her hand looked dainty where it stayed, just continuing to touch him, as if she'd claimed that portion of his body for herself. And Cas wasn't stopping her, was just letting her touch him and look at him with sympathy, a small smile meant to comfort on her face. Cas smiled back, which made Dean want to punch something.

Cas hadn't smiled like that, with genuine sincerity, in days. And he certainly hadn't done it for Dean, who was usually one of the few able to draw that gentle smile from him. Seeing it pointed at literally anyone else made Dean's stomach churn; it wasn't fair. Fuck, he wanted a drink.

"Winchesters," Jody called out, stepping out the garage with a stern expression.

Dean found himself so utterly thankful for her in that moment that he could and would, if she wanted, worship the ground she walked on. She flicked her gaze between him and Sam, then looked at Cas pointedly too. That was not a new development among the camp; everyone seemed under the impression that Cas was a Winchester too, especially the muggles, and Dean sure as hell wasn't going to step in and correct them.

"What's up?" Sam asked, already stepping forward to follow her into the garage.
Dean waited for Jo's hand to fall from Cas, a vindictive little curl of heat spiking down his spine at the sight. He cleared his throat and rolled his shoulders, shaking off the feeling as he moved forward to fall into step beside Cas, who was steadily avoiding his gaze - great.

"There's a bank about three blocks from here, not too far from town or here," Jody explained, waving them over to the table and bracing her hands on it. She stared at them seriously. "We think there might be survivors there, the workers at the very least. When the world went to shit, I'd bet that they closed the bank down and stayed in to wait - that's what I'd do, anyway. It's worth checking out."

Dean frowned and crossed his arms. "Anything at the bank worth taking besides more mouths to feed, Jody? Not to be, ah, a dick… but we don't exactly have the best accommodations right now."

"But we're getting there," Jody challenged, lips tipping down into a frown. "Look, those muggles-"

"Heh." Dean coughed to hide his laughter when Jody sent him a sharp look. "Sorry, keep going."

"Those people out there are going to be a big help, believe it or not," Jody said, sighing heavily as she leaned back. "They've got ideas, you know, and it's not all manpower, but they're learning. More people means more hands on deck."

"And more supplies that we need," Dean told her, lips tipping down. "Not that I don't think we shouldn't save them, if they're even there, I just- we have to worry about us and the ones we already have as well."

"Everybody has a mouth to feed, yes, but they've also usually got two hands and a will to survive along with it." Jody arched an eyebrow at him, cocking her head like she dared him to argue with her. "They want to start a garden; one of 'em taught agriculture at the local college, and he says we got some good soil to do it with in certain spots. Do you know how to plant and tend to a garden, Dean?"

"Cas does," Dean replied, gesturing to Cas like they were a package deal. "But I get what you're saying. If you think it's worth checking out, we will."

"Good," Jody told him with a nod of approval, reaching to grab her keys, tossing them to Sam, who caught them instinctively. "You boys can handle it; get in and get out. Don't get yourselves killed in
the process, please. Some of us like your faces around here."

They dispersed after getting directions to the bank, grabbing more guns and ammo as they went. Sam seemed a little attached the pike he’d been using this whole time; Cas, of course, preferred his angel blade over a gun, but carried one anyway. Dean brought his usual range of weapons - it couldn't hurt to be prepared.

Sam ended up driving this time, refusing to relinquish his grip on Jody's keys, but Dean was pretty sure it was because Sam wanted to bowl over any stray zombies - Dean didn't blame him, it was awesome and cathartic as hell. What was not awesome was being pressed up against Cas yet again on the bench of the truck. With Sam being a fucking giant, he and Cas were pressed together much the same as last time - hip to shoulder with their knees pressed together. Cas was warm and solid, as inviting as a weighted blanket, and Dean forced himself to press into the cold, unyielding surface of the door on his other side. Cas didn't seem to notice, and if he did, he just stared stoically ahead.

Somehow, for some reason, there was tension all the way to the bank. Sam drummed his hands on the steering wheel and kept his eyes peeled for any sign of a zombie - there surprisingly weren't any. Cas said nothing and looked resolutely ahead, not even twitching when Dean turned to throw him looks intermittently. It was actually kind of horrible, and Dean wanted to escape it, but he couldn't reach the fucking radio or wrack his brain for anything to talk about; he felt like he was about to burst out of his own skin, his stomach rolling with waves of discomfort, his throat shut nearly too tight.

Yet, as they pulled up to the bank's driveway, the tension broke like it wasn't even there, snapping in the face of the harrowing sight before them.

The bank had a fairly small lot, just a simple bricked building surrounded by cars and the undead. But the driveway was long and gave them perfect view of the horde that seemed to be a wave of a grotesque level of decay writhing in mockery of a dance - it was like someone had stepped on a zombie anthill and this was what spilled out. It could have been the horde from before, maybe larger, and Dean wondered if this was where they were heading. All the zombies were focused on one thing, getting into that bank, and not the rumbling engine of the truck.

They could leave. Could just back away and never look back, save themselves the headache of trying to wade through the dead, and ensure their own wellbeing by just fucking leaving. But.

"They clearly want something in there," Dean commented quietly, lips twisting bitterly.

Sam sighed. "What's the plan?"
"There's the drive-through, right?" Dean leaned forward and scanned the building, watching the uncoordinated movements of the zombies. "Plow right through and get to that window. I can go in and help the people out. We can be on our merry way before the zombies even notice."

"It depends on the number of people," Sam argued, frowning at the horde. "That's a hell of a lot of zombies for only a few."

"The zombie apocalypse couldn't have happened on a Sunday?" Dean griped, reaching out to draw his knife from inside the door. "Okay, so how about this? Let me slip in, Cas gets in the back and picks them off from there, and you circle the building and plow through them until I've got everyone ready to load up at the front door."

"How will I know you're ready?"

"Fuck if I know. I'll just- I'll give, like, a bird call or something."

Sam nearly faceplanted the wheel as he leaned forward to stare at Dean incredulously, but Cas just sighed and said, "You shoot your gun thrice in a row out the door; I will be watching. We will know. Move, Dean, let me out."

Dean hesitated for a moment, but did as he was told. He slid out the truck and watched as Cas followed. He paused at the side of the bed, suddenly frozen in place as Cas moved to the end of the truck bed and hauled himself up and over the tailgate. Cas situated himself against the body of the truck, right behind the bench seat on the inside and planted his feet, blade in one hand and a gun in the other.

There was something utterly fascinating about the sight of it, of Cas standing there like he was about to face down the world and win. It was that feeling again, that pulse of energy that came from the supply run where they'd saved the last survivors. It was thrilling, made him feel a little invincible, and had his eyes locked on an oblivious Cas in such a way that would leave Jody smirking at him.

But then, Dean glanced back over at the horde of zombies and his stomach dropped. There had to be hundreds, far too many for them to pick off with ease. As stupid and fumbling as they were in small groups, they were a force to fear in a large one. And Cas was just out in the open.

"Hey," Dean said quietly, his heart hammering in his chest and echoing in his ears.
Cas looked at him with a small frown. "Yes, Dean?"

"Just... don't get hurt, okay?" Dean mumbled, picking at the peeling paint on the side of the truck.

"If I do, I will heal very quickly," Cas told him, voice hard and cold. "As it stands, I can handle myself. You seem to think otherwise, but I am capable."

Dean's head snapped up. "What? No, Cas, that's not what I- no. I just..." He paused and looked away for a moment, steeling himself. Then, he set his shoulders and looked back up at Cas. "I don't want to lose you either, okay? So, just- just be careful."

"Oh." Cas' face softened minutely, lips curling up just so, and Dean's heart raced for an entirely different reason. "I will be okay, Dean. I'm an angel, remember?"

Dean figured that was more for his benefit than Cas'. Sure, he was an angel, but that rarely meant much anymore, especially after Cas aligned himself with humanity. But Dean clung to the statement all the same, thankful for the reminder that Cas was built out of more than flesh and blood. While an issue for other matters, it was a relief in this one.

Dean grinned at Cas, wide and relieved. "Yeah, Cas, you are. Don't forget to double tap," he said cheerfully, tapping the truck twice before climbing back in and shutting the door.

Sam smirked at him. "Working on it?"

"Shut up." Dean rolled his eyes and turned around to make sure Cas was ready. He had to tilt his head at an awkward angle to see Cas gripping the bar that would keep him from flinging off when they tore their way through zombies. "Alright, he's good. Clear the door first, then circle around and put me at the window."

Sam simply hit the gas. Dean grabbed the oh shit handle and braced himself as they hurtled towards the front of the bank. The truck seemed to growl just before the impact.

Jody's truck was a true beast, cutting right through zombies like it was made specifically for that. The ride became bumpy as they drove over piles of limbs and overturned bodies; Dean grimaced at the
utter unsanitary sight of decayed pieces flying up like mud underneath weighted tires. There was the sound of Cas' gun going off, but Dean forced himself not to look back and check on him.

Sam whipped them through the zombies expertly, eyes wide and focused as he drove them around the corner in a wide arc, hitting zombies and avoiding a mass that seemed to be trying to clamor over themselves and get on top of the truck. There was a grunt and Dean whirled around to see Cas haul a zombie into the truck bed and stab it right through the eye, before tossing it out like it was nothing. Dean had to look away after that.

They circled around to the window quickly, so Dean rolled his down and wriggled in the seat to get into position. The moment they slid to a halt, he busted the small drive through window open. His window was directly beside it, not space for even a finger to slide between the truck and the building. The transfer of his body from the truck to the building didn't go as smoothly as he'd hoped; glass dug into his sides and he fell headfirst into the counter where the bank tellers would be at work if the world hadn't ended so abruptly.

The last thing Dean saw was Sam pulling the truck away, Cas shooting - missing more often than not, which was not soothing Dean's nerves - and zombies stumbling along behind the truck. There were stragglers, ones that shoved their arms into the small opening and swiped at him relentlessly; Dean couldn't do a damn thing about them, so he pushed to his feet and whirled away.

There was a group of people, and seeing them, Dean wondered how he could ever consider not coming to save them. They were huddled together, looking terrified, staring at him with unbridled fear and hope. Amongst them, there was a little girl - she was probably around twelve - and she looked as if she had just seen Captain America burst in.

"Are you getting us out of here?" A man with glasses and wearing a suit stepped forward, looking nervous and ready to cry. "What do we do? How do we-"

"We have a place, a camp," Dean said quickly, eyes scanning the room. "It ain't perfect, but it's better than nothing. I'm gonna get you out of here, you just have to listen to me very closely, okay?"

Multiple nods filled the room; he counted them. Nine, including the child. Just normal looking people, all very terrified, and the child looked a lot worse than the rest. Dean wondered how long it had been since they ate, since they had any water, since they'd slept well enough with zombies outside trying to force their way in.

"Hey," Dean said gently, walking over and carefully kneeling down to look the little girl in the eyes. She blinked at him. "What's your name, honey?"
"Maria," the girl said. Her chin wobbled. "I'm eleven and I don't know where my mom is."

Dean nodded. "Okay, that's- where did you last see her?"

"We were here, but then she went outside, said she'd come back, but she didn't." Tears pooled into Maria's eyes, her arms curling around herself. "Is she dead?"

Dean flicked his gaze up to see multiple of the other adults biting their lips, their own sorrow as much of an answer as his silence. He cleared his throat and met her gaze. "Maria, we are going to get out of here today, and you're going to have a very important job, okay? I'm going to need you to help my brother drive; all he needs is for you to sit next to him and hold onto his arm. Can you do that?"

Maria nodded hesitantly. "Yes," she whispered.

"Okay." Dean popped up to his feet and eyed the rest of the group. "Anyone have any guns?"

Two hands raised; a young guy wearing all camo and an older woman with her purse clutched close to her chest. The guy cleared his throat and stepped away to lean down behind the counter and pull out a hunting rifle, holding it close to his chest when Maria flinched back from it. The older woman simply pulled a small handgun - a cute thing, really - and flashed it before putting it back.

"I- I'm a pretty good shot," the guy said, stammering a little. "Was supposed to go hunting, and after the news, I grabbed my rifle in case. I can- I'll help."

Dean eyed the older woman warily. "And you?"

"Got it after a break in, can't shoot it for shit," she replied, voice layered with a rattle, as if she smoked cigarettes often.

"Great," Dean quipped, dry and flat. "Anyone else know how to shoot?"

"I'm pretty good," a man with a lot of tattoos and long, dark hair spoke up, meeting Dean's gaze
steadily. "I used to go to the range pretty often."

Dean jerked a nod. "Okay. You, lady, give your gun to motorcycle club over here. You, camouflage, keep that thing at the ready. Everyone in a single file line behind me. Motorcycle club, you're at the rear. Maria, you're right behind me, don't let go of my jacket, okay? Do not, under any circumstances, run away because you will not make it. Understood?"

More nods. Maria started crying then, which Dean felt bad about, but it wasn't the time to be gentle. Guns were exchanged, a line was made, and Dean led them to the door. He held up his finger and listened intently, focusing on the sound of a gun popping and the truck's engine growling. He eased the door open just a crack, holding his breath at the sight of zombies moving past. He let his gun poke out the crack in the door and pulled the trigger three times in quick succession, then slammed the door shut.

It didn't take long for the growl of the truck to approach. Sam honked for good measure. Flinging the door open, Dean turned around and scooped Maria into his arms and sprinted the short length between the door and the truck.

"Dean!" Sam leaned over to open the passenger door, helping grab Maria without a word.

"Maria, this is Sam, my brother," Dean introduced as calmly as he could. "Remember what I said, okay? Hold onto his arm to help him drive."

Sam shot him a look, but offered his arm to Maria, who took it and nodded at Dean with wide eyes. Whirling around, Dean ushered the older woman into the truck with them, then had yet another woman squeeze in as well. He slammed the door behind them and marched towards the bed of the truck where Cas was helping people climb up. Motorcycle club and camouflage were shooting at the zombies that drew closer.

Dean could see it, could see that they were about to make it. They had just enough of a window to get in and get the hell out, leaving the decreasing horde - thanks to Sam's excellent driving - in the dust. It almost felt surreal. He pushed forward and threw himself into the fray, carelessly shoving people into the truck bed with no finesse while shooting at whatever zombie he could.

Dean saw where it all fell apart.

The guy in the glasses and stuffy suit squeaked when a gun went off close to his ear; he stumbled
back with wide eyes, shouting out in shock. A zombie zeroed in on him with mindless frenzy, dead eyes swiveling on him instead of the group as a whole, and it launched forward. The shout turned to a scream as the man was yanked to the ground, his suit being ripped at the sleeve. Dean watched in horror, as if in slow motion, as the zombie located the closest piece of flesh and ripped into the guy's recently revealed arm.

Dean didn't even hesitate; he shoved himself forward and shot the zombie right between the eyes. Cas shouted in alarm, a warning, and Dean had just enough time to yank the guy who got bit to his feet and urge him towards the truck. After that, it was complete and utter chaos.

The smell of death diverged on him, cloying limbs scrambling out towards him with one single purpose. Dean fought, swinging his knife out and shooting at the same time, kicking and shoving and trying. But there were far too many and he was taken to the ground almost instantly.

For one moment, a brief one, he wondered who would do the deed of killing him before he turned into a zombie. Because they knew that was what was happening. And one bite would put him much in the same state. He wondered who it would be, a little deliriously, as he stabbed yet another zombie through the temple, gagging at the brain splatter as he yanked his knife back out. Maybe they wouldn't kill him at all, maybe they'd let him be a dried out husk of death with one intention; feed. In that span of a second, Dean considered turning his gun on himself to save someone else from having to make that decision because there was no way he was going to let himself become a fucking zombie.

Sam and Cas apparently agreed with that sentiment because they were suddenly there, shouting his name and whirling through zombies with a ferocity that came with the fear of losing family. A hand wrapped around his wrist and yanked him clear out of the way, helping him narrowly avoid rotted teeth snapping at his neck. Hands yanked him up by the shoulders, planting him straight on his feet, and he blinked at the sight of Cas shoving him back and putting his fist straight through a dead woman's chest cavity, flinging her away with his face twisted in a snarl. Sam was suddenly on his other side, swinging his pike around and giving them space.

"Maria?" Dean blurted out, raising his gun and taking shot after shot.

"One of the others are behind the wheel with her, that guy with tattoos!" Sam yelled back.

Dean risked a look over his shoulder. Miraculously, everyone but them three were settled in the truck. Camouflage was standing in the back of the truck and shooting the zombies that rocked the front. And poor suit guy was clutching at his arm and crying in earnest. Dean almost couldn't believe it… but these people were waiting for them.
When Dean turned back around, he went very still. The sudden silence rang in his ears. Sam and Cas went very still, weapons still at the ready, but the sight before them had put them all on pause for a moment. All the zombies stood immobile, air rasping in and out of their bodies - the sound of it was horrifying, recycled air scraping out of dead lungs. Many of the undead were broken and wounded, but completely unbothered by that. All of their heads were turned to the left, away from the truck, fixated on something in the line of the trees that Dean couldn't even see.

"What the fuck," Dean breathed out in shock.

"Help me! Please, please, help me!"

At that, Dean got whipped back into gear. If the zombies weren't going to kill them, then he wasn't going to complain. Suit guy, however, was complaining very loudly.

Now, Dean knew a lot about zombies. He'd probably seen every zombie movie there ever was. That part of him that thought it was all awesome did not appreciate the zombie apocalypse coming to fruition and revoking his right to enjoy the genre. But it was also that part that took one look at that man's arm and knew what had to be done.

Dean marched forward and snagged the man's wrist, staring at the bite below the bend of his arm. It was red and irritated, but it wasn't deep. There was a chance that whatever infected the zombies hadn't reached his bloodstream yet, so Dean looked at the man and took a deep breath.

"Look, you ain't gonna like this, but you have to lose this arm," Dean told him firmly.

The man reared back, eyes wide. "What? What? No, I- that's not-"

Dean cut him off firmly, dropping his wrist to reach in his pocket and grab his lighter. "Listen to me, there could be seconds between the infection reaching your bloodstream. If it does, you'll turn into one of those things. Know anything about zombies?"

"I- yes." The man sucked in a ragged breath, obviously panicking. "But-"

"It's either the arm or death," Dean spat, wiping the gunk off his knife and running the flame over it to sterilize it. "What's your name?"
"Carl. My name is Carl."

"Okay, Carl, do you want to die?"

Carl lifted his gaze to Dean's, his whole body trembling. "No," he croaked.

"This is going to hurt, but we have medical supplies back at camp that will ensure you'll live. But if I'm doing this, I've gotta do it now," Dean informed him, not breaking his gaze.

"Dean," Cas said firmly, his chest brushing Dean's shoulder as he flung his gaze between Carl and the mass of immobile zombies. "We need to go, now."

"We can't, not yet, not if he's going to live," Dean hissed, watching the blade slowly turn under the flame. "I can't do it clean if we're moving and he won't make it to the camp."

Cas reached out and gripped his shoulder, leaning forward to look at him seriously. "We can't stay. They could attack at any moment!"

Dean snapped his head over to glare at him, his jaw working as his heart raced in his chest. "Tell him that, Cas. Tell him he's gotta die!"

It mattered for reasons that Dean couldn't fathom. He couldn't let this man die; he wouldn't. Dean had messed up so much, but he was going to fix this if it was the last thing he'd do, so fucking help him. Cas didn't break his gaze, looking furious, and Dean figured it was like a slap to the face to see him care about a stranger more than their son.

Dean felt as if his chest was caving in.

"Wait, guys, they're… retreating?" Sam's voice broke the moment and made their heads snap over to watch as the zombies just… left.

Dean blinked as the mass of decayed bodies rumbled and turned towards the woods, stumbling on
broken bodies towards whatever they'd been focused on. They left their source of food behind and *that* did not add up in Dean's knowledge of zombies. The fact that they were just abandoning the chance to spread their disease was almost as worrying as them attacking.

Carl letting out a groan caught Dean's attention, getting him focused on the matter at hand. "Sam, let motorcycle club know to wait a moment while I handle this man's arm. Carl, you need to remove your jacket, ball it up, and bite down on it."

Sam broke free to do as he was told, shooting Carl a sympathetic look as he passed. Despite his earlier anger, Cas reached out to tug the tailgate down and help Carl get out of his jacket and lay back with his arm splayed. Dean wished he had alcohol, both for the blade and for Carl.

"You, uh- you're a doctor, right?" Carl asked nervously, swallowing as he eyed the knife.

Dean grimaced. "No, but I've- I know what I'm doing. Just trust me, okay?"

Dean didn't know how to say that he'd cut limbs off in hell, that he knew the best way to dismember someone, that he'd felt it himself. He didn't know how to tell this man who was about to lose his arm that he'd cut limbs off bodies and enjoyed the screams. Dean was possibly more equipped for this than an actual doctor, but he didn't say any of that. He just offered a tight smile that was more of a grimace as Carl stared up at him in shock.

"I- I don't know what to-"

Cas cut Carl off by stuffing the clean portion of his suit jacket in his mouth. Dean shot a look at the remaining members of the group; some were already looking away, some were watching with rapt attention. Sam was talking quietly to Maria and motorcycle guy, telling them about the camp, where it was and those who were already there.

Dean didn't have time to hesitate. He nodded at Cas, who went solid and held Carl down, then approached the wound without a second thought. He wiped his trepidation from his mind, letting his thoughts go quiet, and he *focused.*

The thing about cutting someone's arm off was that it was not as simple as putting a blade against skin and pressing down. Dean had to slice through muscles and nerves, dragging the blade as he bared down, all the while drowning out Carl's muffled screams. But he'd do it, he would because he wasn't going to crack a beer with this man and shoot him while he smiled - he was *not* the Dean
Winchester from that world.

So, Dean cut off his arm; he ruthlessly broke the bone to press on past it; he did it as quickly and mercifully as possible. He never looked at Cas, never looked at Carl, just focused on the display of muscle and blood and how his fingers went through the motions like he'd never be able to forget. And when the arm was cut just below his elbow, the worst of it wasn't over. Dean made quick work of stemming the blood flow, cutting a long strip off one of his outer flannels and tying it tight just above the stump. Carl screamed and flailed, but Cas held him firm. The last of it was Dean cauterizing the wound with the knife after it had been heated with the flame yet again. By this point, Carl had passed out - and for that, Dean was thankful.

Then, of course, because the world absolutely hated them, the zombies came barreling out of the woods they'd disappeared into. Cas hauled Carl into the back of the truck and slammed the tailgate shut, wrenching his gun up and joining Dean in shooting them. Sam yanked from his conversation and let out a hoarse shout as zombies started pouring from the roof of the bank, hitting the ground with squelches and getting right back up.

There was something different about this, something that made Dean's whole body go cold. The zombies were not moving mindlessly towards them; they were splitting off into groups and seemed to be in perfect sync. And when he looked, a zombie that did not look like the rest followed the horde out of the woods at a pace that was too calm to be normal. Like zombies went out for strolls or some bullshit.

"They have to get Carl back!" Dean shouted, cursing sharply when a long line of zombies slammed past him, Cas, and Sam. They were effectively separated from the truck by a wall of undead.

Sam's back bumped into his and he felt Cas' shoulder brushing his own. Zombies hurdled through the place, coming in from all sides, circling them but never attacking. Dean didn't understand; it literally made no fucking sense. But there was a niggling in the back of his mind, the memory of that zombie seeming to… train the horde when he'd been in the big rig with Cas.

Slowly, dread filling him up, Dean raised his head to stare at the last zombie that had come dragging out of the woods. It wasn't the same teenage girl from before, but it was young and a girl again. Even from so far, amidst the chaos, he could see the spark in her eyes - intelligence. There was a small curl to her lips, as if she was smirking, but it looked grotesque with the muscle of her cheek rotting and on display. She stood and she watched, never moving forward, never acting at all.

"Go!" Sam suddenly bellowed, waving his hand wildly towards the truck. Motorcycle club guy had his head out the window, staring around frantically, and Dean saw the zombies split off as if to block the truck in from all sides. "Get out of here! Go to camp, let them know! Hurry!"
Dean knew exactly why Sam made that decision. There was one path left, however small, and it was right in front of them. If the truck didn't move then, it would never move again. Even still, when motorcycle club stepped on the gas and peeled away, Dean felt dread settle in his stomach.

That was their ride, and now, they were well and truly screwed.

There was no time, nothing else to do but run. They broke past their steadily shrinking opening and rushed away from the zombies at full speed. Dean snagged Cas' elbow as he went, dropping it once he knew he was following. Sam matched him stride for stride, cutting down zombies as he went.

And they still never attacked. Dean didn't give a fuck, just wanted to get the hell away, maybe find a spot they could get to and wait out the horde. In perfect sync, they all took a left around the building and shoved themselves next to the dead ATM.

"What the fuck, what the fuck," Dean gasped as they paused, tucking their bodies in the small dip in the building. They needed a plan, needed something.

Cas leaned his head back and stared blankly at the cobwebs above their heads. "We have maybe two minutes before they locate us. We need to go."

"What the hell is going on?" Sam blurted, looking unnerved and panicked himself. "They- those zombies moved like a unit."

"They have a leader," Dean hissed, shifting in the small space and ignoring the way Cas' knee bumped into his. "It's the stupidest, most impossible fucking thing I ever saw, but they do. I dunno, some kinda elite zombie or some shit."

Cas heaved a grievous sigh. "I believe I've encountered one as well, as I told you. It saw me in the woods, but instead of attacking, it left. I assumed you thought nothing of it at the time."

"I swear to- I swear, if there are sentient zombies out there, or immortal ones, or smart ones, I am going to lose my fucking mind," Dean spat, clenching his fingers around his gun.

"Fucking Chuck," Sam growled, shaking his head to dislodge his hair from his face.
And yeah, that about summed it up.

Again, Cas said, "We need to go."

"We're going to have to run," Dean muttered, jerking his head out to peer around. Zombies were still moving around the corner, but they'd yet to circle to their side of the building. "If we can go away from the camp, then circle back without them noticing, we might make it out of this alive."

Sam huffed and set his shoulders. "Well, let's go."

Sharing a short look between each other, they all broke from their little cubby of safe space and sprinted in the opposite direction from the zombies. As if suddenly on play, the horde formed together and switched gears, following after them.

If Dean hadn't been so focused on getting home, on making it out alive, he might have realized that the horde was not as big as it was before. But he didn't notice, so he was just as flummoxed as Sam when they whirled around one more corner of the building and was met with yet another group of zombies, all of which seemed to be waiting just for them. Dean barely had time to screech to a halt to avoid barreling head first into the undead.

But everything - the lurking zombies, the fact that they were surrounded - stopped being important the moment that Dean heard it. Just a sickening crack and the thud of a body, one from directly behind him, and he whirled around in perfect unison with Sam. Horror and dread nearly rocked him off his feet because Cas was splayed out on the ground, struggling to push himself up.

The sight of all the zombies chasing them coming to a sudden halt made Dean falter for the barest of moments. Macabre and misshapen, the dead eyed undead seemed to breathe as one, forming a wall behind Cas, who couldn't seem to get his footing. As he struggled, Dean felt as if his heart was shattering in his chest, body frozen in place as the realization that Cas was whimpering hit him all at once.

Dean was sure Sam yelled too, but it was his own voice he heard - with crippling conviction and desperation - shout, "Cas!"

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much for reading! Don't hesitate to drop off some kudos and please leave some feedback; we love to hear what you all have to say!

Ta!

-SOBS
Trouble, A Foot

Chapter by jscribbles

Chapter Notes

I've been so excited to post this. All the other authors have had to put up with me squeeing about Cas' foot for weeks now. I'm sure they're ecstatic for that to end.

Hope you enjoy this chapter! I put my heart and sole into it...

Sorry, I couldn't help myself.

Onward, to the foot!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Season Z - Episode 5: Trouble, A Foot by Jscribbles

“Cas!”

There were few sounds on this earth that could immediately call Castiel to attention, and Dean’s desperate cry was one of those things.

Usually.

Castiel had rounded that last corner around the building, breath punching out of his aching lungs—a sensation he found incredibly irritating, considering his lungs had no business needing air from him. He could handle the snarling, growling horde of undead behind him, and he could handle the feeling of thrumming from his erratic pulse in his ears, and he could handle his feet pounding down on pavement in sync with the Winchesters. What he could not handle, apparently, was the quarter-foot deep pothole at the mouth of the alleyway between the bank and the pawn shop.

He felt it as it happened, as if it happened in slow motion; his foot dipped down, tripped up by the narrow space where there should have been cement. His foot got caught, snapping down into the skinny crater, and then, as his stomach shot up and his body catapulted towards the cement, there was a crack.

The cracking sound wasn’t what he immediately noticed; no, it was the hollow, sudden way his body crashed towards the ground. The grungy cement was rushing up toward his face too quickly so his grace flashed in him, trying to stop the lightening-fast trajectory of his fall...

The attempt to use his grace flickered, then faded in a split second. The indignity of the fall struck him first, and then the scent of the alleyway ground that permeated his nostrils; many must have died here already. His hands were scraped and the material of his shirt and tie were ripped against the ground. The gun that had been in his hand before the fall was a few feet away from him; too far.

And still, not paying attention to the cracking sound just yet, before he even registered what it was, there was another sensation; a pop...a small burst in his chest, like the final straw snapping. Castiel’s vision went white and he knew his eyes glowed brightly with grace for just a fleeting moment before they dimmed.
Before they dimmed for the last time.

The last of his grace disappeared in a hollow burst in his chest and then dissolved away, wisping out of his pores and leaving behind the aching, abrupt feeling of absolutely nothing.

There was no warmth and comfort of Heaven’s essence within him. No faint echo of power that he’d always carried with him his entire life. He recognized this hollowness from before, from when he’d gone hungry in the streets and shuddered under the achingly lonely rainfall—homeless, hapless, hopeless.

Of course, how poetic that he’d finally fall entirely from grace flat on his face in a dirty alleyway. He was starting to feel like he belonged face first on the ground, always on the precipice of being eaten alive by the human condition—

With lungs that suddenly ached from lack of air, and eyes that stung and blurred, Castiel inhaled sharply, exhaling in a ratting sob.

He couldn’t lay there and feel sorry for himself, although it was tempting to let the undead catch up, to let them feast on his nothing, nothing, nothing-nothing human flesh. It’s what he was now, after all; flesh and bone, a meal just like pigs and cattle. But he smelt the stink of death and resented the gravel digging into his palms, so he pushed himself to his knees, and pulled one foot up to push himself back into a run—

A pain, sharper and more visceral than even losing his grace shot up from his foot and up his leg like an electrical shock, ending in his chest where it burst like a firework. An undignified whimper escaped his lips and Castiel collapsed again to the ground, hands sliding over the gravel. Skin peeled off his palms and his knees hit the ground hard again.

Air was punched from his lungs as humanity hit him like a train.

Suddenly, where his grace had left an empty, hollow cavity, human pain filled the space, unwelcome as it seeped like poison into every crevice of who he was. It caught up with him like someone had unfrozen time and pressed fast-forward. Against his will, he whimpered again, his body beginning to shake as his foot burned and immediately began to swell. It radiated up his leg, but he tried to move again, too stunned to realise he couldn’t or shouldn’t.

“No,” he moaned, realizing he was immobilized. His fingernails curled into the concrete as he tipped his chin against his chest, gasping in pain. He could smell the stink of the undead catch up with him, their gnashing of teeth and squelching of their movements thunderous behind him as they approached in a horde.

“Cas!”

Right. Dean.

Castiel’s head shot up and he saw a terrifying sight; Sam and Dean turned towards him, their eyes wide, their mouths dropped open. Sam looked panicked, his head turning from one horde of zombies to another. Dean, however, had his eyes locked on Castiel, every line on his face deep even in broad daylight. His hands visibly shook around the gun in his palms. Dean looked like every nightmare he’d ever had was happening right before his eyes.

Despite his body screaming at him not to move, Castiel pulled himself forward, a scream escaping his throat as his foot sent a near-blindly agonizing pain shooting up through his bones. He yanked his foot from the pothole that he’d caught himself in, and he rolled onto his back, panting heavily, his
chest jerking up and down as breath was all but forced from him.

Terror—the kind he hadn’t ever felt, not even when he’d been utterly alone and lost as a homeless human—racked his body, sidling right up to the excruciating, immobilizing pain in his foot. A wall of the undead were stopped behind him, not three feet from where he lay, not only blocking the mouth of the alleyway, but very obviously guarding him. Or rather, holding him hostage. The leader stepped forward, her arm dangling by a mere ligament at her side. Her rotted face squelched as she smiled over Castiel at Dean and Sam. Dark, thick blood that looked like sludge oozed out of her exposed, rotted jaw. She was revolting.

“Get away from him!” Dean snarled at her, raising his gun.

Sam swung around, turning his back to Dean, Castiel, and the unmoving assembly of undead guarding him. He was pointing his gun at the opposite end of the alley, where more zombies slowly closed in on them. Castiel realised, through the haze of pain, that Dean and Sam were being herded like cattle towards the larger mob.

Castiel cried out as the abrupt gun shots from Sam echoed in the alleyway, hurting his human ears and causing him to jump, which only made the radiating pain in his foot worse. He did not look forward to taking off his shoe and assessing the damage done to his pathetically useless foot—if he survived this.

Sam’s bullets landed where intended, through one side of each undead face and out the other. He sent five zombies flying back, their skulls bursting open on impact and splattering their companions in flesh, blood, and brains. Still, more zombies filled the gaps made in the slow moving wall.

“Less staring, more shooting, Dean!” Sam barked as he fumbled to reload. Dean was still staring at Castiel, his eyes only moving away to dart down the barrel of his gun at the young girl who had half of her jaw missing, and yet still managed to smirk at him.

But Sam’s demand for help jerked Dean into action and he spun around, aiming a few strategic shots into the faces of the zombies closest to Sam, just enough for his brother to reload and raise his gun again.

“Cas! Get your ass over here!” Dean barked over the noise.

Despite the fact that the pain in his foot was making him feel instantly like vomiting, Castiel glanced up at the leader of the undead, noticing her fixated on Dean, and rolled onto his stomach, whimpering through his teeth as he tried to lug himself across the cement with his elbows. He needed to get to his gun. He could be useful that way.

The attempt was short lived when he felt an intact foot on his broken one, and then felt that foot step down on his wound, crushing the splintered bone, shifting it and cracking it further.

A scream he’d never heard come from himself erupted from his throat; it sounded like a wounded animal, strangled and mixed with a weeping he’d couldn’t entirely help. His mind went blank as white hot pain shot up his body like electricity and he was sure he’d pass out. As he pressed his forehead to the ground, his breath punched out in panicked keening, he heard a roar of fury and a series of frenzied, erratic gunshots.


“You bitch!”

Click, click, click…click.
Dean’s gun was empty. Castiel raised his face from the ground, feeling hot and numb suddenly. He was probably going to pass out. Or throw up. Either one was equally humiliating. He’d been a human for less than a minute and it was already more undignified than the last time.

Dean was tugging on the trigger, panic widening his eyes as the horde of zombies behind Castiel broke formation. They released one unified roar that shook all three humans, and then there was nothing but the sound of pounding footsteps running around him, stepping all over him, crushing his mangled foot and trampling him like he was nothing but a weak, fleshy rug.

He’d heard once that some angels—behind his back—called him a doormat for the Winchesters, but he hardly had dignified that mockery with acknowledgement. Now, he felt like he should’ve paid more attention. If the angels were watching, they were surely laughing at him. Now he was a literal doormat for the Winchesters; a welcome mat used by the worst of humanity. How poetic. How humiliating.

“CAS!”

Over the snarling and roars, over the gunshots and squelching of sliced flesh, Dean’s voice commanded attention. As usual, despite everything “going to shit” as Dean would eloquently say, Castiel still focused on little else but him. He listened out for Dean’s voice, reaching out to him through the white noise of their lives going to shit.

Although he thought he’d feel nothing else but the trampling of undead feet for the rest of his life, blinded by pain, suddenly he was feeling the support of very-alive hands grasping at him and lugging him to his feet. Dean and Sam hauled his arms around their shoulders, all the while shooting and slicing as rotted bodies continued hurtling towards them. Castiel did what he could, but all he could truly manage to do was use his one good foot to kick one zombie back hard, toppling four others over like a game of grotesque dominos.

“There’s too many!” Sam hollered, his shoulders heaving under Cas’ arm.

“Put me down,” Castiel wheezed, inhaling in a series of shuddering gasps. “Leave me. I c-can’t walk. I’ll drag you— uuugh—d-down. We’ll all die—”

“You’ll—” Dean grunted as he elbowed a zombie in the neck, sending her tumbling back, before he shot her square between the eyes with Castiel’s abandoned gun, which he must’ve picked up at some point. If Castiel had been an angel, he might’ve noticed that happen, but of course, being human and having a limited capacity for attention was a thing he’d have to get used to now. “You’ll die if you keep up with the self— ahhhhhh! Fuck YOU, Granny Z!” Dean paused to kick a snapping, snarling old woman in the teeth, knocking out her dentures and causing her head to entirely spin and roll off her shoulders. “—if you keep up with the self-sacrificing bullshit!”

Castiel wanted to reply, but their jerking movements were knocking his foot around. His vision was darkening around the edges and his stomach revolted. The one foot he was trying to put all his weight on was buckling as he weakened.

“Fuck. Fuck, they just keep coming!” Sam’s nervous yell didn’t do much to want to pull him back to the present as numbness began to tingle up from his foot. For some reason, his cheeks were burning but his skin felt cold, and Castiel found himself wishing for the sweet release of an undignified fainting spell.

But it was not in his nature to have any sort of luck, so Castiel remained conscious, and dread settled
in his stomach as the undead really closed in on them. To make matters worse, Dean ran out of bullets, instead resorting to using the butt of Castiel’s gun to crash into the temples of nearby zombies. Castiel succumbed to the dark thought that he was happy to go down, as long as he was with the Winchesters, when a rumble—louder than the one shuddering up from the depths of the zombie’s throats—caused everyone to come to a halt.

The zombies turned to follow the noise, and then they all screeched, turning their attentions away from the Winchesters, charging at the source of the noise. Headlights flashed and a car horn beeped three times, buying the Winchesters a few moments to lunge off to the side, yanking Castiel along with them.

They just missed certain death as the truck they’d rode into town with bowled down the alleyway, slamming into zombies, ripping through their flesh like they were made of tissue paper, sending arms and legs flying against the walls of the brick buildings. Castiel felt two Winchesters crouch over him, protecting him from the waterfall of limbs and rolling heads, falling from the sky like warm, macabre hail. In particular, he felt stocky arms around his neck and shoulders, and was pulled against the rough material of Dean’s jacket, his face buried into the scent of leather, whiskey, and panic.

“GET IN!”

Castiel and the Winchesters un-huddled to see Motorcycle Guy swinging open his truck door forcefully, taking down a running zombie at the same time. The zombie’s face splattered into the window, painting it in splashes of red and orange before it keeled over.

"Pull forward!" Dean bellowed. His eyes, round like saucers, darted around at the zombies that were getting to their feet. "We gotta get Cas in the back!"

The truck roared again and jolted forward, wobbling over the corpses on the ground, leaving in its wake a symphony of hollow pops and cracks of skulls and limbs giving way under the tires. With the help of a few survivors, Dean and Sam hauled Castiel into the bed of the truck, sliding him quickly in beside Carl, who was shivering and sweating, his face a mess of grey and purple hues. Castiel was feeling like he probably looked the same, suddenly feeling very cold, yet sweaty. His skin felt slick but his teeth chattered. His foot had gone numb, the fire that pulsed from the wound so sharp it almost felt icy.

As the truck pulled out into the main street, breaking all speeding laws back to camp, around them the survivors were watching. Castiel didn’t like the way they were staring at him fearfully. Even Carl, the man with one arm, was finding the strength to stare, though his eyes looked glassy and his eyelids drooped. The audience didn’t help the writhing tangle of thorns that were coiling around his lungs, making him feel breathless. He wanted to hide from them and their judging, concerned eyes. He knew he was sweating, and he knew he was pale; he could feel the blood draining quickly from his face. His slippery palms had issue finding purchase on the dirty base of the truck bed. He was struggling to sit up and he was very, very aware that he looked pathetic.

He felt pathetic.

“Cas!” Dean barked, kneeling in front of him, one hand patting at Castiel’s’ face, the other gripping the top of the tailgate as they picked up speed.

Castiel watched the horde of zombies snarl and shriek as the humans and muggles tore down the main street, leaving the town behind under the mess of rotted corpses and blood. He ignored Dean’s hand incessantly tapping at his face, barely registering it. Instead he focused on breathing through the jostling of the truck and the pull to unconsciousness.
Being ignored, however, was not something Dean dealt with gracefully, and the tapping turned into a gentle slap.

“Get with the healing, Cas! You’re freaking me out!” Dean yelled over the rush of wind that whirled around them as the truck picked up speed. Up near the cabin, Sam had pushed his way through the survivors to yell directions back to camp through the rear window of the cabin.

“I can’t,” Castiel wheezed, his teeth chattering for some stupid reason. “I-I can’t.”

Dean’s eyes were locked on his, burning with something intense, and his teeth bared. “Try harder!”

“I can’t,” Castiel pushed through his teeth, shuddering as a hot wave of pain shot up from his foot. With agonized tears pricking at the corners of his eyes in response, he said hoarsely, “I can heal m-myself just as well as you could heal yourself. I-It’s happened, I-think.”

Dean’s face fell and paled to an uncomfortable white. “What’s happened?”

Castiel’s heart beat hard in his chest.

“Cas, what’s fucking happening?”

Instead of answering Dean with the hard truth that Castiel had fully and entirely fallen from grace, he replied tightly as he grasped for support with a sweaty hand around the edge of the truck, “I think I-I broke my foot.”

The shell-shocked way Dean looked at him, it was as if he had admitted to entirely falling from grace.

Appearing disturbed by something, Dean sat down defeatedly onto his backside, guarding Castiel’s injury from the others, bracketing it with his legs.

It took them ten minutes to get home at the velocity they were barrelling down the route back to camp. Over the course of those ten long, long minutes, Castiel had gone from slightly pained and sick-feeling, to numb and cold again, then back to entirely wracked in agony by the time the trunk turned sharply, the back swinging through a cloud of dust into Singer’s Salvage. The jostling had Cas roll onto his side and gasp sharply, blinking hard as his vision went white for a moment. For a fleeting second he thought it was his grace again, but he realised quickly that a foot that had been shattered nearly in half didn’t appreciate being knocked around, and his pathetic nervous system couldn’t deal effectively with the shock.

He blinked sweat out of his eyes, and quickly registered he may have blacked out for a few minutes because when he woke up next, the car was stopped, and they were on the other side of the gates. The bank muggles were bouncing over his legs and assisting to haul Carl off the truck. A shocked-looking Rowena and Anael herded the muggles and Carl into one of the sheds where they’d no doubt care for him.

"...the kid wouldn't let us leave, she kept saying we were leavin' you behind, that we were leavin' the heros behind," the motorcycle man was saying as he took the suited woman's hand to help her off the truck bed. "I gotta give it to the girl, she was right. Y'all would've been toast. You need help with your friend?"

"I'm fine," Castiel grunted, rolling onto his back again, his neck aching as he leaned it back against the edge of the truck bed. "I-I'm fine."

Sam was rushing back from the shed where they'd deposited Carl into the healing hands of Rowena
and Anael. Jody was jogging closely behind him, her face concerned as she watched Dean hop off the truck and turn to place his hands on Castiel’s arms.

"Come on, Cas," Dean said, leaning forward with a grunt to sling one of Castiel’s arms around his shoulders. “Let’s go. Hang on for like two more minutes. We’ll get some healin’ magic hands on you, and you’ll be fine. You’ll be fine.”

It sounded like Dean was trying to convince himself more than anything.

“What the fuck happened?” Jody exclaimed as she and Sam skidded through the dirt at the end of the truck. She looked around at all the new scared, lost looking muggles who were being herded into camp by Claire and Alex. “Are these all the people who were left behind in town?”

“There’s nine of them,” Dean said at the same time that Sam replied with; “One’s hurt, Ro and Jo have ‘im.”

“Well, shit, what’s wrong with the angel?” Jody pried, watching as Dean got a good grip of Castiel, sliding his arm around his waist. “What the heck happened out there? You’re all covered in blood! For Pete’s sake, it was just supposed to be a routine trip.”

“No such thing as a routine trip anymore,” Sam said somberly.

Jody looked defeated, while Sam pursed his lips and hovered by Dean as Dean pulled Castiel off the back of the truck, half-lifting, half-dragging. Castiel cried out as his feet hit the ground hard and Sam rushed to duck under his other arm, pulling his weight off his foot. Sam looked across Castiel at Dean and snapped, “Dude, careful! He’s fucking injured!”

Castiel was inclined to agree with Sam, but opening his mouth seemed like a dangerous gamble with his revolting stomach. The growing burn and throbbing from his foot was travelling up his body, setting in his stomach and churning it sickly. Castiel found himself vaguely irritated that a pain in his foot was affecting the rest of his body so violently. One thing hardly had to do with another, but he supposed that was another one of God’s stupid tricks. Chuck seemed to have made one stupid decision about humanity after the other.

“Why aren’t you healing?” Jody asked worriedly, following Dean and Sam as they all but hauled Castiel over to the one cabin that Dean, Sam, and Rowena had claimed.

When they’d initially decided on bunking situations, in the same cabin they’d reserved a space for Castiel for “occasional rest”. It was a cot tucked in the very back corner, close to Dean’s bed. It was out of the way. Days ago, as they’d set up the sleeping arrangements, he’d refused the space, claiming he didn’t need it. Now, he was glad that they hadn’t found someone else to house there because he wanted nothing more at this moment than to sit or lie down, and he didn’t want to do it in another cabin where he’d have an audience of strangers.

As they moved towards the cabin, he noticed everyone was staring.

The muggles who, for some reason, found comfort and solace in speaking with him, the ones who sought his advice and counsel, watched nervously from the mouths of their sheds. He saw his name whispered on their lips, and he saw their eyes dart down to the foot he was holding off the ground. They watched him shudder in pain and they watched the way he ground his teeth together to hold back cries of distress. He imagined he was nothing like what they expected him to usually look like. He knew they saw him as some sort of protector—stupid of them, really. He walked the grounds, surveying the perimetres, and he knew that gave them a sense of security. A watchful guardian angel, one had said. But now they watched the sweating, pale face of their guardian angel, and he
wondered if they could see his embarrassment and shame looking back at them. He lowered his eyes to the ground and tried to muffle the humiliating noises—whimpers, gasps, grunts—that escaped him when Dean moved too clumsily or Sam walked too quickly.

“Is he okay? Is the angel okay?” he heard one muggle—Agnes, a middle-aged woman who’d run a grocery in town—inquire from nearby once they’d passed through the threshold to their rooms.

“Take him,” Sam muttered to Dean, sliding out from under Castiel’s arm. Dean’s arm around his waist tightened, and Castiel hissed as the weight shifted and he grasped at Dean tighter, his fingers clenched in the dirty cargo. Sam turned away and doubled back towards the door.

“We need privacy. Go get Rowena,” Sam was saying behind them as Dean navigated them between the beds, towards the back corner where Castiel’s neat, made-up cot was waiting, looking endlessly inviting.

A new voice. “But—”

Jody’s voice appeared next, firm and commanding; “You all need to give them space. Go to your cabins, follow lock-up procedures. You two, come with me. I need eyes on the perimeter. Vince, come. You know how to shoot? Get Janine, she also knows how to...” Jody’s voice trailed off as she herded away the muggles and Sam closed the shed door.

With just the three of them in the cabin alone, Dean finally dropped Castiel down onto his cot and dropped to his knees in front of him.

“It’s broken,” Castiel burst out, finally feeling every emotion rush at him at once now that he didn’t have an audience. His foot hurt so badly his leg felt on fire, his stomach wanted to revolt, and everything felt inherently wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong. He was too hot, too sticky, too sweaty. His chest felt tight, his eyes stung. This was like the last time he was human but so, so much worse. “It’s broken,” he repeated, sounding breathless. He hated himself for it, but his eyes were wet with tears and his voice shook.

Pathetic.

As Dean got to work, rolling up the hem of Castiel’s trousers, his fingers gentle on the ankle that was now swollen too, Sam watched over his shoulder, his eyes on the injury. His brows were knitted together in concern, his eyes a bit wide under the shadow of worry. “Why aren’t you healing? You —”

Castiel was happy Dean answered for him, because the answer got caught in his throat like a pit, rough and painful. He felt his eyes sting worse.

“He’s fucking human,” Dean growled, cutting at the fabric on the sides of Castiel’s boots. “He’s fucking human as shit, and his foot is swollen to all goddamn hell so can you make yourself useful and get that witch in here to get healing!”

Instead of snapping back at his brother as Sam usually did when everyone was being irate and snippy with each other, he paled instead, his eyes snapping up to stare at Castiel’s face through locks of brown hair. Castiel met his gaze, his chin scrunching up a bit in a seemingly natural reaction of holding back panicked tears and feeling straight-up sorry for himself.

“Cas,” Sam started, his tone nothing but sympathetic. “Oh, Cas, I’m… I’m so sor—”

The exchange of sorrow between them was abruptly cut off as Castiel cried out raspily, the sound ripped from him as Dean unceremoniously yanked off the shoe and tossed it side.
The harsh scolding Castiel wanted to give Dean in the form of a poisonous look and a snarl never made it out because Dean and Sam grimaced.

“Oh, shit.”

“Fuck, it’s really fucked up.”

They were absolutely right in every way. Castiel looked down at his injury, and could not agree more.

Oh, shit. And yes, it was indeed really fucked up.

He’d seen some feet in his life, but none of them ever looked like that. There’d never been a sharp splinter of bone jutting out of the bottom of the foot, or the grotesque smears of blood, or the skin so swollen and bruised. His foot was angry, red, and looked on the precipice of infection.

Good news was that it didn’t hurt so bad now that he wasn’t being jostled around like a fleshy rag-doll. He slouched back against the wall his cot was pushed up against. “I feel vaguely ill,” he commented, licking at his lips incessantly, saliva gathering in his mouth. “Perhaps I should sleep.”

“You’re in shock,” Sam pointed out kindly as he reached out and patted the side of Castiel’s face—people kept doing that, he wished they wouldn’t do that.

“No, I’m not in shock,” he argued. Shock was for mortals who didn’t know about the terrors of this world, who didn’t understand the terrible things that were happening to them. Castiel had been an angel; he knew about terror and pain and he’d seen the atrocities that this earth could bring. He was not in *shock* over a bit of bruising, or pain, or blood, or his bone sticking out of his skin—

“You’re really pale and sweaty, dude,” Dean said rudely. “You’re in shock. It’s okay. It’s normal. We just need to get this magic-healed ASAP. It’s not exactly a run of the mill break here...”

Dean trailed off. The boys watched Castiel hastily reach up for his tie, yanking at it clumsily. He needed it off. He needed his coat off. It was too hot and he felt like the very weight of too much clothing on his sticky skin was driving him insane.

“I’ll be fine,” Castiel offered, jerking his tie over his head. “It’ll heal eventually and I’ll be fine.”

The Winchesters exchanged looks, then simultaneously looked over at him. Blood from his foot was dripping onto the ground, and Castiel saw Dean glanced down at it with a wince.

“Rowena is taking care of Carl, but she’ll be over soon. Just hang tight. While we wait for her,” Sam said, turning on his heel and heading towards the door, maneuvering between the cots, “I’ll grab some ice. I think we got some in the garage. I’ll ask Alex—”

Sam swung open the door with intent to exit, but instead jumped out of the way as Anael swept in, her long red hair flapping out at her shoulders like a cape. Her eyes were wide, and her feet made quick work of the cabin. Castiel noticed her hands were already bloody, her wolf shirt speckled in dark fresh droplets and splatters of blood.

“What happened? I heard Castiel is severely injured,” she rushed out, her eyes a bit wide. He saw that she was trying to remain calm, but the pallor of her skin revealed exactly how she felt about seeing a fellow angel down for the count and *not healing*. They weren’t the best of friends, neither on earth nor in Heaven, but he understood, in a world where they were abandoned by their father and family, they only had each other to commiserate with. The two last angels left on earth...
Though he supposed she was the last angel on earth at this point. As they stared at each other, he realised she knew it too. She was searching his face and he knew she was searching for the glow of grace under the translucent skin of his vessel. His heart ached as he realised all she saw was his flesh, his face, stolen from Jimmy Novak. Nothing of his own resided within the space except for his soul.

He stared back, and his heart momentarily ached worse than his injury as he realised he’d never see her glow of grace either. He just saw her vessel, and it made him feel more broken than ever.

“What happened?” she asked again, her voice cracking. He realized she was not inquiring about the destroyed bone.

The shame of admitting his downfall in front of Dean and Sam was strong for a moment, silencing him as he struggled to swallow repeatedly and his eyes grew more wet, the lashes around his eyes bunching and sticking together as he blinked hard.

“It happened,” Castiel rasped, his voice sounding rough, like it’d been dragged over gravel and shards of glass. “I know you’ve been feeling it too. My grace faded, Anael. It’s gone. T-The injury isn’t healing because…” He paused, feeling robbed of air. “Because I chose to stay, and without Heaven’s power, I d-don’t believe we can replenish our grace. Once it’s used up, it will disappear.”

Sam sucked in a breath and Dean made a noise that thankfully no one acknowledged, a small one in his throat that matched the flutter of his eyelashes. Dean sat back against his cot, the one beside Castiel’s, his back pressed against the side. Dean’s eyes looked far away.

“And you’ve used up your grace?” Sam asked in a hopeless breath.

Castiel nodded, sweat winding down his neck. “As Dean dismembered that man, I was holding him, and I tried to bring him comfort. I numbed the worst of the pain as best as I could. And…” I tried to break my own fall. Don’t say that, they already think you’re stupid as it is. “It’s just gone. The moment I fell and tried to push myself back up, it-it was gone.”

Anael slowly tipped down her chin, staring at her hands around Castiel’s leg. Distractedly, she mumbled, “I laid my hands on that man brought in on the truck. I...used my grace to bring him comfort as well. While the witch gathered her ingredients.”

“Don’t use more,” Castiel warned through his teeth, the pain he’d been numb to for a few minutes was returning.

Dean’s head snapped up. “What? What do you mean ‘don’t use more’? Are you out of your fucking mind, Cas? Your bone is sticking outta your fuckin’ skin, you probably got internal bleeding!”

“Dean’s right,” Sam agreed, nodding, looking between the angels. “We don’t have the supplies for this kind of injury. We’ve got first aid supplies that we collected from around the property, from the garage, but this is serious, Cas. This kind of thing needs a hospital, surgery. We don’t have the resources for you to just heal on your own.”

“I should heal you,” Anael said, but her voice sounded faint and her resolve seemed weak. “The witch said… She said she doesn’t have many supplies left. She said she’ll be using most on the man with the amputation. We don’t have enough for both of you, not right now. I...am the only option.”

Castiel’s heart slammed in his chest at the very thought of Anael losing her grace and falling like he had. Even worse if she lost it because of him.

Dean sat up and pointed aggressively at the injury. “Yes, you are the only option, get on it, Jo! Fuck, we don’t got time for this. Look at that goddamn foot. Just fix it. Fix him.”
But the fear in Anael’s eyes was poignant and Castiel reached out, grunting as he sat up, and he reached down to take one of her hands. When her big brown eyes looked up at him, he stared at her intensely. “Do not expend the remnants of your grace on me, Anael. We will have more dire injuries in the future. There will be other people, more important people, who may need your healing more urgently.”

“Horse shit!” Dean yelled abruptly, getting to his feet. “More important people? Who else is more important?”

“Dean, stop yelling!” Sam said, his voice also raised.

“No! I’m done with the self-sacrifice parade! It’s the end of the goddamn world and I won’t have Cas doing his thing where he throws himself down on a blade for nothing!”

“I get it but you gotta fucking chill, you’re not thinking—”

“If Jo won’t do it, then go get Rowena then!” Dean screamed at Sam. “Don’t let her use the last of her stuff on Carl—”

It spoke to Dean’s desperation how he suddenly was willing to sacrifice the muggle he’d been so determined to save, if it saved Castiel. It was loyal, but it was stupid.

“That man deserves to live, Dean!” Sam yelled back.

“And Cas? What? He’s supposed to die of infection because we don’t have medical supplies? There’s a fucking bone sticking out of the bottom of his foot!”

The brothers were facing each other at this point, gesturing angrily. The two angels—well, one angel and Castiel—stared at each other.

“Don’t,” Castiel whispered to her. A bead of sweat trickled down his face, sliding over his temple and cheek.

Anael watched it drip off his jaw and she pursed her lips, looking back down at his injury. “The humans are right. This injury is serious. We don’t have the resources it to treat it.”

“It doesn’t matter. Your powers, they should be reserved, Anael.” He squeezed her hand in his. “You will fall. Your grace will deplete. Use it wisely. S-Stretch it out as long as you can. I used mine recklessly because I was in denial of our disconnection from Heaven. I didn’t want to believe that we were truly barricaded from our source of energy, but it’s true. H-Hold onto your grace, Anael. It is precious.”

Beside the angels, Dean and Sam bickered. Between the angels, understanding passed.

Or so Castiel thought. Anael nodded at him and murmured, “Use it wisely.”

“Yes.” Castiel slumped back, feeling both relieved that she would hold onto her grace a little longer, but fearful about what would happen to him as the infection set in.

“The humans, the ‘muggles’ turn to you,” said Anael reverently, suddenly staring at him with intensity. Her hand slid down his leg towards his inflamed ankle and foot. “Without your grace, you’ll still act as their guardian, their guide. It is not merely your grace that makes you an angel, Castiel.”

His heart jumped and Castiel grasped for her as Anael took back her other hand and placed it on his
“No,” Castiel gasped, breath drawn from his lungs too quickly. His hand wrapped around Anael’s shoulder as she squeezed her eyes shut. From under her lids, a silvery-blue light glowed. She poured grace from her hands, into the very pores of his bruised skin.

The Winchesters went quiet quickly as Castiel cried out in pain. He could feel the bone slide back up into place and the skin knit at the arch of his foot. The shooting, aching pains up his leg numbed into nothing, and the panicked fluttering feeling in his chest dulled but did not entirely disappear.

He gasped for air again when her hands pulled away, the grace fading back into her palms, her eyes losing the brilliant glow of silver. Anael blinked and the brown returned.

“I’ve fixed the worst of it,” she declared, getting to her feet, brushing off the dirt from the knees of the ugly running pants she wore.

Castiel collapsed back against the wall, panting like he’d been running. His foot still ached, but the sharpness was gone, the full-body panic and ‘shock’ had disappeared. His breath picked up out of pure relief and unadulterated guilt. His stupid human heart slammed in his chest.

“I asked you not to,” Castiel whispered brokenly. “Your grace could have been used for something more dire.”

“You’re important here,” Anael replied promptly, her nonchalant facade falling back into place as she moved towards the door. “I am a healer, Castiel. It’s my job to heal those in need. I helped that other man and I helped you as best as I could, considering. His healing is being completed by the witch, and I’ve lessened your injury to a mere sprain. You can heal however you please for the rest of it.”

“Anael—”

“I still have grace, for now. Just take the gift I’ve given you without complaint. You saved me by offering shelter, and now I’ve saved you.” She stared at him from the door, her face softening. “You and I were the only angels that chose to stay behind. I suppose that means we should have each other’s backs sometimes.”

With that, she threw Dean and Sam one last look, and then disappeared out of the door, closing it behind her with a click. In her wake, the cabin was quiet for a moment.

Castiel’s chest grew heavy, filling with dread. Dean’s face when Anael mentioned their choice to stay behind reminded Castiel vividly that he’d never told the Winchesters and their allies about Chuck’s ultimatum, and about his choice. Dean turned slowly to Castiel, his mouth opening to ask—

Then, moving towards the door, Sam said, “If it’s just a sprain now, we can deal with that. Gotta keep your foot bound and levelled. Ice will help, and meds. I’m gonna gather stuff to make a splint. If she’s telling the truth, it could be a while that you’ll have to be off your foot.”

Seemingly dropping his attempt to ask about Anael and Castiel’s choice, Dean lowered himself down beside Cas, his eyes distant, his lips parted as he visibly struggled to vocalize his thoughts. Then, after a shuddering breath; “Two months.” Dean looked up at Castiel and said, looking haunted, “You could be out for two months.”

“I’ll see if we got some pain killers around too,” Sam added, his hand on the door knob. He glanced back. “Think I saw some Codeine in the supplies. It’s some strong stuff, but for an angry looking sprain like th—”
Dean’s head turned quickly, his hands yanking from his pockets. “No! No fucking codeine. Shit, Sam, it’s just a sprain, he’ll be fine.”

Castiel didn’t care what they were talking about. His foot hurt dully now, he was hot, and the sound of their bickering made him want the sweet release of unconsciousness. If he had to be human, he wanted to take advantage of the option to black out. As the boys argued, he slid down the wall until he was laying on his side, head sunk into the thin, uncomfortable pillow at the head of his cot.

“No drugs, Sam! He’s been human for half-an-hour, give his system a break. Go grab ice like you said, and bring back shit for a splint, and I’ll work on getting him cleaned up.”

“It’s codeine, what’s the big deal? It’s the apocalypse, do we really care that Cas gets a little high so he doesn’t have to suffer?”

“No drugs! No one is giving Cas drugs and that’s final.” Dean’s voice was shaking. Castiel just wanted them both to shut up. “It’s not up for debate. We’ll help him handle this another way.”

Castiel wasn’t sure why Dean wanted him to suffer. The start of this apocalypse had been rocky between them, and absolutely nothing was entire fixed, but his interactions with Dean in the past few days had almost given him hope that Dean didn’t entirely blame Castiel for humanity’s downfall. He had been sure Dean didn’t completely blame him for Chuck’s reappearance… But if Dean wanted him to suffer without painkillers, Castiel began to doubt the reparations between them.

Dean hadn’t explicitly said he’d forgiven him. Of course, he hadn’t. That was more than Castiel deserved.

***

“We’re at 27 bodies in this camp.”

The core leadership—though they desperately wished they didn’t have to call themselves that—stood around the table in the garage, their faces shadowed by the dull, flickering light of a battery powered lantern. Dean, Sam, Jody, Rowena, Donna, and now Jo, were gathered, going over the day’s events. Typically Cas would’ve been here but Dean insisted he stayed in their cabin to rest, with a glass of water by his bed, a makeshift crutch, and a pistol, just in case.

“We nabbed nine new people today,” Dean reported, picking at his fingernails. He was exhausted. He was thoroughly, absolutely, 100% spent. Every bone in his body ached with fatigue. Today had been one of the worst days so far since God threw his little hissy fit. Today felt hopeless, with two of their camp members down for the count and injured. Today felt like it would never end, and it didn’t help that when Dean went back to his cabin, he’d have to face Cas again—human, tired, injured, resentful. After Dean helped Cas get cleaned up and they got the splint on him—fashioned with some spare two-by-fours, duct tape, and several layers of folded up, ripped up trenchcoat—the angel hadn’t said much. He was quiet, retreated into himself.

For a six-foot-tall, hundred and seventy pound guy, Cas looked small in a plain black t-shirt and jeans. It was almost too hard to take.

“The first run through town yeh brought nearly ten,” Rowena added quietly, scowling. “It’s too many people. We simply don’t have the room to be bringing in muggles left and right.”

“How many beds we got?” Sam asked, looking around the table, pausing only to gaze down at his linked fingers in front of him. His jaw clenched.

“Well,” Donna signed, raising her brows up her forehead and pinching her lips together, “we got
four cabins at four cots each, and ‘bout eight in the big rig. A couple of us double up, so for now it works out. And we don’t got to worry ‘bout housing for the non-mortals who ain’t sleepin’, like Crowley, Jo, Cas—” She immediately paused, wincing as everyone shuffled in their seats. Jo, who was leaned up against a work bench along one side of the garage, pushed off and started pacing, her face unreadable but definitely not pleased.

“Uh,” Donna said awkwardly. Her eyes darted to Dean, who ducked his head and scrubbed his fingers through his hair. “How’s he doin’ anyway?”

Dean pulled his head up, even though it felt heavy. Flatly, he said, “Peachy. Let’s just say he ain’t hittin’ the ground running anytime soon.”

There was a chorus of sighs and groans.

“Jesus Christ, Dean!” Sam hissed, his eyes narrowed into slits, leaning into the table with his elbows. “Is that really necessary?”

“I agree,” Jo muttered from the corner of her mouth, flashing Dean a look of dislike as she paced past him. “Bad form.”

Dean looked between everyone and tossed his hands up at his shoulders. “What else do you want me to say? You want me to bear all? Tell the nasty truth? He’s mortal, his grace is gone, he’s giving me the silent treatment now, and as for being a soldier? He’s out of fuckin’ commission for like two months, and—”

“Where you getting ‘two months’?” Sam asked, his brows furrowing together. “You keep saying—”

Dean interrupted swiftly, his stomach jolting up, a flutter of panic shuddering through his chest and squeezing around his lungs. He wasn’t ready to talk about Zachariah’s apocalypse universe. He wasn’t ready to tell anyone what he saw.

And he certainly wasn’t ready to tell anyone that stuff was coming true, slowly but surely.

“Educated guess,” Dean snapped, shifting in his seat, his shoulders hunched darkly. He looked around at everyone. “Shit is getting bad fast. We got a dude with no arm, and we’re down one mega resource; down one sleepless angel to patrol the perimeter with superhuman strength and grace to heal and smite.”


Sam’s tone was gentler than Dean’s. His eyes flickered up to her and he smiled tightly. “You heard Cas, Jo. You can’t be using your powers unless it’s an emergency. Life or death, I think. I guess grace isn’t limitless, and soon you’ll be a mortal too. Gotta reserve what we can.”

“Still,” she argued, her arms uncrossing and dropping down to her sides. “Grace or no grace, I am an angel and I can fight. Don’t let the Fendi bracelet and penchant for luxury items fool you—” She raised her arm and flashed them a blue and gold band around her wrist— “these hands have shed blood for thousands of years. I was and am a warrior of Heaven.”

Jody twisted on the bench and reached out, patting Anael on the elbow. She nodded at her and said in a sigh, “We’ll get you some guns. But the main issue here is shelter and bedding. Eventually, you’ll need some. We gotta figure out that situation.”

Donna pointed at Sam and Dean. “We could go back to Lowe’s and grab us some more sheds.”
Sam nodded. Dean immediately recalled Cas playing a hefty part of that super quick set up day, lifting pieces of wood at an inhuman rate, carrying them like it wasn’t an issue.

“Yeah.” Dean nodded, too. “We need to assemble a team tomorrow and head back into town. Grab more supplies. Ask around to see if there are any volunteers to help, and if any of them have experience in construction or the trades. We need all hands on deck if people are gonna keep coming back with us after trips out these walls. At the rate we’re goin’, we can’t keep up. We need more housing, more fuckin’ showers, and—” His forehead ached as his brows furrowed further. Dean caught Jo’s eye and he went on gravely, “—we need more medical supplies. Cas needs a splint, a real one, and crutches. And we’re low on bandages. Both he and Carl are gonna need to change ‘em soon. Rowena, what’s the deal with the spell ingredients?”

The witch shifted in her seat uncomfortably for a moment, a look that was rare on her. But she then gathered herself and tipped her chin up, answering matter of factly, “Bleak. While your Bobby managed to stock a fair variety of rare incantations, the amounts are still limited and many have been damaged by the fire. I’m afraid, with the exception of the wards, which are verbal enchantments, healing spells and anything requiring what we in the magical community call 'specialty' ingredients may be a thing of the past. Unless, of course, we can find more.”

“Any idea where we could get some?” Sam asked, sitting up straighter. “I could go with you if you knew where.”

“Yes,” Jo drawled, pursing her lips. “Take the one and only person who controls the wards out on a supply run. Sounds well thought out.”

Rowena eyed Jo distastefully, but then tittered and turned back to Sam, her lip twitching up in the corner. “I know of a few real magic shops in Sioux Falls. Should we risk a trek into the big city, it would be wise to scour their inventory. If they haven’t already been raided by local covens, then I believe that would be our most promising lead to replenish our own supplies. I suggest we clear out their inventory.”

Donna tugged a notepad from the front pocket of her sheriff jacket and began scribbling. “Sheds, showers, magic bits and bobs, and medical doo-dads.” She tapped at the paper with the tip of her pen and looked around at the group huddled around the table. “Anything else?”

“More ammo,” Dean murmured roughly, dragging his nail through a groove in the table. “More ammo, and more guns. Grenades. Molotovs. AK-47s. And a fucking flamethrower if we can get our hands on one...or two Or twelve..”

“Jeeze. Gearing up for World War Three?” Jody asked, though Dean didn’t miss the twinkle of excitement in her eye.

“More like World War Z,” Dean muttered.

“They’re mobilizing,” admitted Sam, wincing. Everyone went still and more than one pair of confused eyes looked between the brothers.

Sam looked to Dean for help in explaining. Dean struggled for a moment, looking for the right words to not scare them, but then accepted nothing would make the blow of sentient, intelligent zombies any softer.

“They’re, uh, developing intelligence,” Dean explained. He took a moment to sweep the room, absorbing the rapt attention on him, and feeling the burden of being the bearer of terrible news. “Or they’re already intelligent? I don’t know. But they tricked us today. Fooled us and herded us into an
alley, exactly where they wanted us. They clearly planned it. It’s fucked.”

“They broke into groups and doubled back.” Sam picked up where Dean trailed off. “Cas went down and before we knew it, they were using him as bait. Standing not like, three feet from him, using him as a hostage to lure us closer. Then they were surrounding us, and what’s weird is that they didn’t attack until the leader kind of, I dunno, ordered them to?”

“Ordered?” Jody gasped, a hand coming up to her mouth, her eyes round as saucers. “Are you saying these zombies can talk?”

“They can’t talk,” Dean piped up, shaking his head. The groove in the wood was much deeper than it had been a minute earlier. “But there was definitely a leader. She...smiled at me. And she stepped on Cas’ foot when he was already down, to goad us with his screaming.”

“Jesus,” Donna breathed, reaching out and taking Jody’s hand that was outstretched towards her between them. “What the fuck is going on here, boys?”

“Dunno,” Sam shrugged again, reaching up with an air of heavy fatigue, pushing his hair out of his face. “But it’s clear not all of them are like this. There have been a few that seemed smarter than the rest. Dean was saying Cas saw one in the woods, scoping out the camp, and then on our last two missions, there’d been hints... Point is,” Sam rubbed at his lips, “we need more weapons. Bigger ones, better ones. Especially if they’re getting smart. If they find a way to break the wards...”

“We’re dead,” Dean finished for him morosely. “We’re all dead.”

***

When Dean had left Cas behind in the cabin to go to the meeting, the new human had been resting on his side with his back turned to Dean. He hadn’t said a word to him other than the occasional grunt of “yes” and “no” when Dean asked if the splint was too tight, or too loose. Dean wasn’t quite sure what the fuck he’d done wrong this time, considering he thought they’d been making headway with the whole “I don’t want to lose you either” thing.

Cas was so hot and cold half the time, Dean had no idea how to maneuver him. One day Cas was smiling at him and giving him those soft, warm gazes like he had before the bank raid, or sharing a blanket with him under the icy chill of a cold evening. Then another day, he was barely making eye contact when Dean helped clean his wound and slide jeans over his splint, or handed him a glass of water and one measly Advil he’d found in a first aid kit.

He understood that falling from grace was probably pretty traumatizing, but it wasn’t Dean’s fault. Sure, he’d convinced Cas to make a bunch of poor decisions that turned him away from Heaven, and on more than one occasion ordered him to fix things with a snap of his angelic fingers, and he’d been the one to piss off God, but it wasn’t his...

Fuck it. All of it was Dean’s fault. Cas was human and it was all Dean’s fault. All of it. Everyone could tell him this whole zombie apocalypse mess was a shared blame, or no one’s fault at all, but he knew it was bullshit. It was Dean’s fault and Cas had every reason to intensify his cold shoulder and to not speak with him.

Dean would respect his space and leave him alone to wallow, at least for a little bit while Cas adjusted.

That was, until Dean flicked on the light in their cabin that was powered by a generator, and Castiel’s cot was empty. On the bedside table—a bucket they’d turned upside down between their
cots—the glass of water was empty, but the handgun was missing. On the cot was the torn up trenchcoat still, thrown haphazardly in the corner like it’d been flung, and the man that was supposed to be lay on it was missing.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Dean muttered in a panicked mantra, rushing out of the cabin and into the pathway between the cabins. He rushed through the camp, his breath coming out fast, his eyes darting around for a mess of brown hair and a trench—no, fuck. No trenchcoat.

*How the hell am I supposed to find him now?! “Keep a look out for the guy in the plainest clothing ever.” Good job, Dean. Time to start thinking about putting a bell on the dude.*

Thankfully, for the sake of his heart that was pounding so hard it hurt and for the campers who were either in bed or going soon and wouldn’t appreciate Dean yelling after his lost friend, Dean found Castiel quickly. He had been close to yelling for help, close to recruiting every damn soul on the property to find Cas, now human, now injured, now entirely a happy meal for a feisty zombie.

“How the hell am I supposed to find him now?! “Keep a look out for the guy in the plainest clothing ever.” Good job, Dean. Time to start thinking about putting a bell on the dude.”

“Motherfucker,” Dean muttered under his breath, loosening his hand around the handle of his pistol. He snapped the safety off and tucked the weapon into the back of his jeans as he walked over to Cas, who was sitting on a neat stack of two by fours and drywall behind the ruins of Bobby’s house, looking through a gap in the car-wall, watching a few dumb zombies lurch around on the other side. Cas’ hair blew gently in the wind, and he didn’t seem to know Dean was coming, which was kind of unnerving. At this point, with Dean trudging over, angel-Cas would’ve been looking at him by now, scowling in that grumpy-immortal being kinda way.

“You fucking crazy?” Dean barked. His stomach squeezed guiltily when Cas jumped in alarm and then grunted in pain, making a vague aborted motion toward his foot. Dean powered on, even though he felt guilty. “You know that you scared the shit outta me? Just leaving and not telling anyone!? You do fucking understand that it’s pitch black out and the last place you need to be when your foot is fucked is on the perimeter of the property, far away from everyone and, like fifteen feet from zombies who want to eat your goddamn brains?!”

Cas looked over in his direction tiredly, the bags under his eyes worse than Dean had ever seen them. His eyes were red.

“I have a gun,” Cas said vaguely, raising one arm loosely, waggling a handgun he held in his grasp. Dean could see the safety was on. “And it’s ‘brain’. ‘Brains’ is plural.”

“Whatever,” Dean grumbled, dropping down beside him. “Gun or no gun, it still doesn’t mean you being here alone with a bum foot is a good idea. Jeeze, dude, go rest, you lost your whole damn self today and broke a huge bone. You should be sleeping.”

“Sleeping.” Cas huffed and shook his head bitterly, staring out through the gap in the cars, his mouth twisting distastefully. “Yes, I suppose I sleep now.”

Cas went back to staring through the gap in the delipidated bumpers, his eyes pinched as a cool breeze blew by them again. He tugged his blanket—one that Dean had draped over him in his cot—around his shoulders tightly. Dean saw the subtle movement of Cas wince and shudder against the dropping chill in the air. His brown hair, which normally stood up all crazy like he’d been fucked thoroughly—a thought Dean would hardly admit to anyone he had more than once—now looked a bit flatter. With dark amusement, Dean wondered if grace had really been the thing that kept Cas looking so “Cas” all the time. He wondered how much grace it took on a regular basis for Cas to continue to look nonchalantly, accidentally dad-hot. Grace hair gel. Grace laundry. Grace shoe-shine. Grace wrinkle-free fabric softener...
Now human, somehow—though nothing had changed but one bone being split down the middle—Cas’ body looked different. His skin was shinier, his hair floppier, and his face was a bit drained, only coloured at the apple of his cheekbones and nose.

He looked exhausted.

He looked like no amount of sleep would ever make him look rested.

“Human, huh?” Dean asked, shifting on the arrangement of two-by-fours that now doubled as their bench. Perhaps without meaning to, he shifted a bit closer, secretly welcoming the warmth of Cas in the middle of a chilly night.

“Human,” Cas murmured. Cas reached up and scratched at his jaw, nails raking against the short stubble sprouting from his skin.

That would grow out, Dean realised. He wondered if Cas would leave it be, and he wondered what Cas would look like with a beard. Purgatory had been a good sneak-peek, but he smiled to himself, imagining Cas with a full-beard and maybe some plaid. Dean looked over, ready to say as much to Cas, but the urge faded very quickly.

Cas looked miles and miles away, his eyes pinched at the corners, the blue shining a bit too much. He wasn’t seeing zombies at all. He wasn’t worrying about the growing number of zombies around camp—at least not for now. He was somewhere else, somewhere in the past.

Dean’s heart sank and he exhaled heavily, his breath curly in the night, fading away in the breeze. He struggled for something to say to make Cas feel better, but he realised there was so fucking little he could say, so Dean just reached up and grabbed Cas shoulder, giving it a supportive squeeze.

He kinda expected Cas to look over and give him a tight smile, or even to scowl at him and shrug him off, but to speak to the hopelessness of everything that happened over the past few days, Cas’ face crumpled a bit and he took in a few shuddered breaths through his nose. Dean immediately felt the panic in his chest that he usually only got when Sam was upset.

As the tears gathered in Cas’ eyes and his mouth trembled a bit, pressed tight as to not make a sound, Dean shuffled even closer, personal space be damned. He slid his hand off Cas’ shoulder and down his back, pressing firmly between his shoulder blades.

Leaning over to peer at Cas, trying to catch his eye, Dean said rushedly, “Hey, man. Hey, hey, look, it’s not that bad. It’s really not that bad. Being human, it sucks sometimes, but it’s not always broken bones and falling hard, it’s...”

Cas finally opened his mouth, a single tear dripping down from the corner of his eye, sinking into his crow’s feet that Dean normally only saw when he smiled, and slide down his face, over trembling cheeks. A shuddering breath from him had Dean trailing off, feeling entirely lost at the sight of Castiel crying. It was so fucking wrong. It was so god damn fucking wrong. It really was the end of the world, when the one person Dean relied on to be strong was entirely broken with grief.

“I miss Jack,” Cas whispered wetly, his tongue darting out to swipe over his lips.

Dean froze, his wide eyes sweeping Cas’ mournful face as he cried silently and stared out at the zombies with eyes that saw nothing but his own son’s death. Dean could almost see Jack’s eyes burnt out and his body lying in the graveyard, going still under Cas’ hand, reflected in Castiel’s hopeless gaze.

Unsure of what possessed him, Dean reached over and took the edge of the blanket and tugged it up
a bit, using it to wipe away a rogue tear on Cas’ jaw. When the gesture had Cas glance over, Dean smiled, although it felt like his face was cracking in half. “Me too, Cas. I know you hate me for saying it, but me too.”

Cas seemed to hardly listen. He had returned his sight to the zombies lurching in the treelines, visible through two rusty bumpers. In a murmur, Cas confessed, “You told me you grieved your mother alone, that you cry when no one is around. Well,” he sniffed bitterly, his hand emerging from under the blanket to rub under his nose, “I haven’t been able to do that yet. My son is dead and I haven’t cried for him once. Not once.” Cas tugged the blanket up, tightening it around his shoulders. Stuttering clouds puffed and curled out from between Cas’ lips. “Admittedly, I hadn’t thought of doing so until you mentioned how you grieved over Mary. Suddenly the tightness in my chest made sense.”

Dean looked up and around and realised that Cas had been out here alone to have one god damn moment to himself and Dean had crashed it. He probably had wanted to have a solid cry about losing everything he was, and everything he knew, and losing his kid, and Dean had crashed it because he was scared—

Cas wasn’t pausing to mourn his lost moment. He went on, seemingly on auto-pilot, his tone damp and reflective. “I didn’t let myself grieve because I thought I was an angel, I was supposed to be stronger, to be better. I was supposed to have more emotional regulation and the grief I felt about everything seemed like a mistake. I...I’d distracted myself by looking after the camp, and comforting those who lost their families too. They needed a leader, someone who knew of other worlds and other Heavens. They wanted me, an angel, to tell them their family members were in a better place, and I gave that to them.” Cas shook his head, a lock of brown hair falling to his forehead. His mouth scrunched up for a second, his glittering eyes staring off to the side, lost in thought. With his voice thick with emotion, Cas carried on, “I saw these humans suffering but persevering regardless, after losing so much, and I thought about my pain, and my grief that wouldn’t fade. I thought to myself, ‘These humans have lost more than you, and they carry on? Why are you so broken? Why can’t you just move on from this? Why can’t you just let this pain go?’”

“You’re carrying on, Cas,” Dean murmured, feeling entirely shattered at Cas’ obvious torment. It was dripping from every part of him in a way Dean hadn’t ever seen before. It was like Cas’ foot broke, and so did all of his resolve and stoicism. Like an egg, he fell, cracked himself open, and was leaking out everything that had ever made him who he was, dripping in every bad emotion he’d never let himself wallow in before.

Dean, feeling that confidence he didn’t understand, reached over and ran his hand over Cas’ head, ruffling his hair a bit in a way he rationalized to himself was entirely platonic...even when his hand lingered and his thumb brushed Cas’ ear. When Cas looked over, finally holding Dean’s gaze, Dean said, “And those people? They are persevering, sure. But they are lost and broken and ain’t no one movin’ on, Cas. We’re all just floating around, a fuckin’ mess of pain and confusion. You weren’t the only one putting on a show. Hell, if you’re feeling shitty for crying and greiving, then take a fucking number and get in line—” Cas looked blinked abruptly, and Dean snorted. “—’cause for every one breakdown you got, I got four more. I mean, fuck, I feel like I haven’t gone a minute since my mom died where I didn’t feel...I dunno, totally shattered and splintered into a million pieces. I don’t even know where to start pickin’ ‘em up.”

The men stared at each other, faces separated only by enough space occupied by their shoulders pressed together. Dean’s hand seemed to linger on the back of Cas’ neck. Cas’ eyelashes were wet and his eyes were definitely red. The sight made Dean’s eyes sting in sympathy, and maybe a bit of his own heartbreak. While logic tried to tell him it wasn’t his fault, Dean’s very nature consumed him with guilt for what happened to Cas. And Jack. And everyone.
“I miss our son too,” Dean whispered.

He knew he couldn’t ask for forgiveness, or say sorry for what happened with Jack. Even if Cas would forgive him—and knowing Cas, he would—there was no reason at this point to say those words. They were all sorry about Jack, all responsible for everything that’d happened. What Dean could do at this point was give Cas a reason not to suffer alone.

"But Jack wouldn't want us to sit here and wallow," Dean said, laughing a bit, "He'd come out here and ask us something obvious like, 'Your face is leaking. Why is your face leaking?'

The fresh tear that tumbled from Cas’ eyelashes sunk into his crows feet again, but this time he was smiling, laughing a bit into the blanket. The low, raspy chuckle that sounded like it had escaped by accident made Dean laugh, too.

"As for being human," Dean sighed, looking out at the zombies, his hand sliding off Cas' back and tucking between them. "That ain't your fault. Nothing you could do. Chuck, that son of a bitch, took that from you. One more reason he needs a solid punch in the dick."

Beside him, Cas stiffened. Dean could feel it against his arm.

He vaguely recalled Anael's cryptic comment earlier.

It seemed, at the same time, so did Cas.

"Dean… As the dead rose from Hell and the world went dark. When the zombies—" Cas seemed to struggle with the term, seeming to roll it on his tongue for a second. "—began to attack us in the graveyard, Chuck spoke to me. Us. He spoke to us angels who remained on earth."

"What? How?" Dean asked, confused. He hadn't seen or heard Chuck since that fucker had snapped his fingers and fucked off. Then he remembered Cas on his knees, his hands over his ears and it became clear.

Cas was staring at him with guilt etched in his features. "I am sorry, Dean. Sorry I didn’t say anything before. It seemed...irrelevant by the time it occured to me to explain."

Dean sat frozen, waiting for whatever bad news Cas was going to hit him with. What the fuck else was new?

“What did he say to you guys?” Dean asked carefully, the small voice in the back of his head that sounded like Mary telling him to control his temper.

Cas looked down, not at Dean and not at the zombies. He stared at his foot, clean but swollen, wrapped in bandages, forced into the splint by duct tape. “He gave us an ultimatum. We would receive shelter, redemption, and forgiveness; a place in Heaven with Him if we left this earth. He even…” Cas’ Adam's apple bobbed under the stubbly skin of his throat. His eyes, shadowed in guilt, lifted from his injury to Dean’s face and Castiel winced. “He even named me specifically. He said he would forgive me. He told me I’d have a place in Heaven if I went to him."

“But…” There was always a ‘but’.

Cas nodded. “But we had a time frame. He gave us until midnight of The End.”

Dean’s heart sunk. His skin formed thousands of small peaks and the hair on the back of his neck raised in a way that had nothing to do with the temperature outside or the autumn night time breeze. With a thickness to his voice he couldn’t necessarily control, Dean croaked, “You missed the
Cas paused, and again, for the millionth time in their history, Dean and Castiel stared at each other. Dean felt utterly broken at the thought that Cas missed his chance, that he could have escaped this hell, that he had an out to be with his family, to be intact as an angel, to be home, finally. To be with God.

Even if God was a dick.

“Dean,” Castiel said. “I chose to stay.”

He’d chosen to stay.

He’d chosen to stay. Dean’s didn’t know if he should feel ecstatic or completely ripped apart. Selfishly, he felt a strange sensation in his heart, knowing Cas’ had chosen to stay with them when everything he’d ever said he wanted had been offered to him. If Cas had chosen to go and leave them behind, Dean wasn't sure how he'd be able to process those emotions, but just the thought made him nauseous.

At the same time, Cas had chosen to stay. He'd chosen to stay behind in a hopeless world that would eventually fall. There was nothing left here for anyone, not really. It was all pain and devastation and essentially a guarantee of inevitable anguish and loss. Already, after only days, Cas had lost everything he ever knew about himself, lost his grace, became human, and then injured himself. He was already seeming overly more bitter and grumpy than usual. He was already carrying that visible weight of sadness and hopelessness.

The way he sat and stared off, and just generally carried himself in this moment—sitting curled in on himself, grieving alone in the night—reminded Dean of the Castiel from 2009. That one had been so empty, such a shell of the warrior he’d used to be, torn down by a world where he didn’t really fit in and found no hope in. How many mistakes and missteps separated this Cas and that one?

He'd already broken his foot. He was already human. He was too much alcohol and a few prescription drugs away from orgies and too much tension between them to salvage any relationship. That Cas seemed precariously too close to this one.

"Cas," Dean said, his voice low and quiet. "You remember that time you had to save me from Zach? That one time he threw me into another universe?"

Seemingly confused by the sharp change in conversation, Cas nodded, scowling. "Yes, the one where Sam said yes."

That'd been all he shared with Cas. He’d told him Zachariah had dragged him into three days of Lucifer apocalypse, where Sam had said yes, and Dean had said no. He'd selectively left out the part where Castiel had been a shell, where he’d been broken. Where he’d been a depressed human with nothing left except a substance abuse problem, and where the only thing he fought for was the next thing to fill that empty hole inside him.

“I, uh, may have left out some stuff about that universe. I mean, I dunno how much of it was made up by Zach or true.” Dean shrugged, rubbing his hands in between his knees, raising them up to his face, blowing into them for a second, both for warmth and to stall while he figured out what to say. Once his hands dropped back down between his thighs, he looked over at Cas, who was watching him, rapt, drying tears forgotten on his cheeks. Dean explained, “In that universe, you were there too.”
Cas’ eyebrows raised. “I was?”

Dean nodded, thanking his lucky stars for small victories. Cas didn’t seem angry. Dean rode that wave by powering on, reaching up to scratch at his stubble. “You, uh, were different. Hopped up on drugs, and orgies, and you had this hippy thing going on. But what I’m tryin’ to say here is, well, uh, you were...hopeless.” Dean forced himself to stare Cas straight in the eye, his heart aching as he imagined this Cas turning into that other one. With a little more emotion in his voice, Dean blurted out, “I’m sorry you’ve fallen, but I’m glad you’re here, Cas. I’m...glad you didn’t choose to leave. I couldn’t do this, any of this, without you.”

While Cas grunted in pain as he shifted where he sat, he did manage to quirk his lip up a bit in the corner. “You could.”

“True,” Dean conceded, nodding. “But I wouldn’t want to.”

Cas, dare he say it, looked a bit flattered, his eyes looking momentarily happy for a moment before—of course, nothing good lasted—his smile slowly fell and his eyes pinched at the corners.

“What?” Dean asked, concerned. Or partially worried that Cas didn’t appreciate the olive branch Dean was extending.

Cas swallowed. Dean watched his Adam’s apple bob a bit, and he recognized that feeling of wanting to speak but being unsure if he even could if he opened his mouth. Cas looked like he was struggling, then, “I have a confession.”

That never meant anything good. Despite the cold, Dean’s hands felt hot, starting to get clammy. Castiel’s confessions were never light and fluffy.

“I did, for a moment,” Cas murmured, watching Dean’s face carefully, “think about leaving. Leaving all this pain behind, leaving you and Sam… I thought about taking God’s deal. I’d be forgiven and I could move on. It would be easier.”

Well, fuck, he couldn’t blame Cas for that. Hell, Dean was surprised Cas didn’t hightail it right the fuck back to Heaven as soon as he could after what happened between them in that graveyard. Dean had shown, for the millionth time, that he was bad at listening to Cas. If he were Cas? He’d think he wasn’t loyal, and didn’t respect his opinion. He’d think he wasn’t valued.

Dean felt like he was choking on the guilt.

“But ultimately,” Cas whispered, eyes flickering between Dean’s and then resting on his lips, watching them with a strangely distant look in the depths of azure and sapphire, “I chose to stay.”

Through the choking, drowning feeling, Dean rasped, “Why?”

He realised he was tearing up, his eyes stinging as he stared at his best friend, the most loyal and overwhelmingly good person that he’d ever known. Sure, Cas fucked up a lot, had fucked up a lot. He’d made mistakes, but in the end, he always came back. He always had Dean’s back.

_I always come when you call._

“I couldn’t forgive Chuck for what he did to Jack,” Cas confessed, his eyes tearing up again, his lips trembling softly. This time, Cas didn’t gaze out at nothing, rather, Dean got the full force of Cas’ grief. “He took my Jack from me. I tried to heal him as he screamed but nothing was working. I felt his grace pull away and disappear. It dissolved into the air around us and left nothing but an empty, smouldering husk.” Cas paused as his breath caught in his throat. A tear ran down his face. “I
realised God had control of all of my power and he had decided that I could do nothing to save my son."

The night air around them felt devoid. Dean’s chest hurt so much from watching Cas break down
that he couldn’t even remember how to breathe. He didn’t think he could handle anymore of Cas’
pain, but—

“I feel so much shame,” Cas whispered, his hand dropping the blanket to raise to his face, wiping at
his eyes quickly. His chin trembled.

No. Hell no. If there was anyone who deserved to feel no shame, no guilt, it was Cas. Cas had been
right all along. Cas always tried to do good, he always tried to do what was right. He—

Dean reached out and took Cas’ hand, their fingers linking automatically like they’d done it a million
times.

Fuck pretenses. Fuck every emotion screaming at him not to. Something repressed was trying to
claw back up through Dean, but he ignored it and just gave Cas’ hand a squeeze because Cas had
been an angel for years. He didn’t care about “no homo” or acting manly. Cas was Dean’s safe
space, and to hell with anyone if they were to tell Dean he couldn't be Cas’ safe space, too. He’d
been a source of turmoil for Cas for too long, the least he could do was comfort him. Sometimes he
felt like it was too little too late to fix things with Cas, but in this moment, their palms pressed
together, it felt right. Things between them seemed repairable.

“Cas, you did what you could—”

Cas didn’t hear him. He powered on, visibly overwhelmed again, a hiccup on his lips, a strain in his
voice that came from holding back tears. “I feel so much shame because my son was dead and the
world was collapsing in front of us, and everything that I am was stripped from me, and all I could
think about was that I couldn't leave you.”

Cas’ next small, sharp inhaling sob was muffled as Dean leaned over and pulled him in close, being
conscious of his injury as to not jostle him too much. The men embraced in the dark, away from the
rest of the camp, alone on their pile of lumber.

“I’m so sorry about Jack, Cas,” Dean whispered into Cas’ hair, before tilting his own face into Cas’
shoulder, the muscles in his face tensing up as he held back a sob of his own.

“I’m sorry about Mary,” replied Cas in a shuddering breath against Dean’s neck. His hand gripped at
Dean’s jacket. “I’m very sorry, Dean.”

They were making progress. They were making so much progress that Dean felt like laughing
hysterically. After days, weeks—months?—of being angry with each other, the darkness was lifting,
even if it was just a little. He hadn’t expected Cas to forgive him or say sorry for anything, and he
hadn’t expected to forgive either, forgive Cas for things he hadn’t even admitted to himself he was
mad about yet. It felt good though.

Dean gave Cas’ fingers a squeeze and reached up to wipe at his own tears, laughing.

“She’s in Heaven now, right? With my dad.” Dean said as he broke away, pulling back, one hand
patting at Cas’ shoulder, the other one still curled around Cas’ fingers on their thighs. Dean smiled
tightly, “And she doesn’t have to be down here for this shitshow.”

“Small blessings,” Castiel agreed, nodding, his hand coming up to mimic Dean, wiping at his own
tears. After a beat, Cas added grimly, “I don’t think Jack was afforded the same mercy.”
Dean felt the darkness creep back in like Leviathan slime, oozing all around them, draining the space between them of any kind of joy or relief. He clenched his jaw and nodded, pulling his hand away. “We’ll find Jack, Cas. We figure out our shit here first. We get you 100 percent again.”

Cas glanced down at his foot with disdain, clearly thinking he’d never get better, but he didn’t interrupt.

Dean went on, turning now to staring out at the zombies, feeling nothing but hatred for them. “I’m gonna teach you how to shoot, Cas. You’re gonna need to learn how to shoot—and I mean right between the eyes. Kill shots, every time. And we’re gonna get a handle on saving people, and training them. We’ll keep each other safe; you, me, Sam. Everyone. And then?” Dean looked over at Cas. “We find Jack, and we find God, and we fix all of this.”

Cas stared at Dean, his eyes now sparkling from the brightness of moonlight over their heads. Then he nodded. “Thank you, Dean.”

“You’re welcome. We’re gonna work on All This Human,” Dean joked with a snort, waving vaguely at Cas’ body, giving his foot the middle finger. “Welcome to the club.”

And then realising what he just said, Dean froze as the words came out of his mouth.

_I used to belong to a much better club._

Dean stared at Cas, waiting on bated breath for history to repeat itself as it had been lately in horrifying, small increments.

Instead, Cas smiled and nodded. “Thank you, Dean.”

Castiel would never understand what those three words meant to Dean, how they returned air to his lungs and washed him in waves of relief, and hell, even a bit of happiness.

And Cas would never understand how in the next moment, when he shuffled closer and opened the blanket up to Dean so they could share the warmth, how he made Dean realise that grieving together was better than grieving alone.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the **FOOT NOTES, AMIRITE!? HEH. HEH. HEH.**

Leave me a comment to tell me how much you adored this chapter, or hate me for it, whichever suits your fancy. Or just leave me a comment to tell me that you're going to divorce me for all the foot dad jokes I've left in the author's notes. I understand, I deserve it.

Check out my other stuff [here](#)! And chat with me [here](#)!
Fortune Favors The Grave

Chapter by son_of_a_bitch_spn_family

Chapter Summary

Consume. Spread. Control.

That was her purpose. She would achieve it.

Chapter Notes

Hello, lovely people! SOBS back at it again (I wrote chapter 4 too bahaha). This is the world through a different pair of eyes.

Warnings: mentions of biting, eating flesh, getting stabbed, and explosions.

Enjoy ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She didn't remember much from her life before. It was…foggy at best, if she tried to recall at all—she never did, never cared to.

What she did remember was the agony that came after; being on the rack, inhaling smoke and death, thinking deliriously that she wished she never told a lie, or lost her virginity, or ate shrimp—Hell tended to make people question their life choices. She'd been down there for decades, or so it seemed, and she remembered every moment in excruciating detail.

She didn't remember her name. She thought, maybe, that it started with an R, but she wasn't sure. God apparently didn't care to give her an identity before yanking her marred soul from Hell and tossing it right back in her decaying body. She'd been in hell for so long, but her body had only been in the ground for about two months—funny, how time felt different when you were being tortured.

In the end, remembering didn't matter.

In this, only three things mattered.

Consuming was simple. The world was not ready for them; the world had no head start. It was easy to feed, to pick out the flesh that was good for nothing more than nourishment, like picking the sick
and injured from a herd. The ones incapable of pushing their agenda—the weak, the diseased, the ones too old or too young to move properly—were those they sated themselves on. And sometimes, the ones with the scent of fear were far too enticing to resist. They smelled and tasted of the precipice of life and survival; to consume that was to take a meal of indulgence—possibly not the best idea, but too enjoyable to pass up.

Spreading wasn't as easy. With a hunger for flesh, it was hard to stop. It wasn't a waste, however. She enjoyed it most of all; the process of pouring herself into something alive, her own death claiming them—it was gratifying. They were hers anyway, all of them without cognitive function, but the ones that rose from her lips felt especially cherished. She chose those she created carefully, knowing exactly the ones she wanted to pick out of her teeth. To spread wasn't easy, no, but it was certainly worth it.

Control, above all else, was the best part about coming back as what she was. The ones who were nothing more than death reanimated sought her out on instinct; they imprinted. Like brainless soldiers, they fell in line behind her, following her every order without ever having to be told. They were her army, her family, hers. Soon, very soon, she'd have them all.

***

The others were still when she was; a mass of decay and rot that only moved when she did. If so inclined, she could twitch her finger and half of them would go rumbling through the building to her right. It had taken some trials, but they existed within her now, like each one was an extended limb—or, more accurately, a willing puppet on a string.

They were hungry.

They were always hungry. So was she.

Fortunately, there was a crash from inside the building to her left, followed by a small whimper. All their heads swiveled towards the sound, perfectly synched to the movement of her own. It was quiet, too quiet, the kind of quiet that suggested someone was attempting to go unnoticed.

Consume, her mind offered, but she knew it would probably be a chance to spread.

It was.

They were young, she supposed. They were not small enough to get into small places, not like some that she already claimed as her own, but they hadn't reached full growth either. If she cared to, or was capable of it, she'd realize that they were around the same age she was when she died, simple teenagers. Instead, she looked at them and saw numbers, saw opportunities, saw family.

They didn't understand, not at first, not before the first bite. She took one, tilted his chin up and bit out a chunk of flesh. He screamed, but the sound made the ache in her teeth settle. She offered another to one in her family who hadn't bitten anything in so long—she could feel her hunger stronger than the rest, a hollow sludge in her stomach. The third was saved for consumption, a welcome gift to the new additions to her group.

Watching them come back was extremely satisfying. When they could no longer fight the spread of death, the light of life in their eyes glazed over into something dull. As she knew, they were as mindless as the rest, looking to her for instruction as soon as they were reborn into death. The last one cried, tried to flee, screamed out to his old friends, but it was all for naught. The moment she allowed it, the newest ones tore into him without a hint of hesitation. She waited until his screams stopped before she took some flesh for herself, then made the rest share whatever was left—there
was a lot of parts on a human being, they could eat every single one, but there was far too many of them to have much more than a single bite.

The two new additions fell into line behind her, following her through town, every single step in perfect sync with hers.

***

She didn't feel emotions, not exactly. She felt—just that—nothing. There was no anger, or joy, or pain. She simply was and wasn't. Vindictive while pressing down on a broken foot, drawing in bodies she wanted to control. Calculating while she created a strategy to add to her numbers. Hungry, always hungry, but for so many different things.

So, it wasn't emotion that led her to desire revenge; it was simply what had to be done.

The one who'd been bitten, yet survived—she wanted him. He was hers. He'd escaped death, escaped her family, and she had to right that wrong. He belonged in her ranks, so that was where he would be, one way or another.

The others too, the ones more capable than the rest; she almost had them, if it weren't for that truck. If not for that, she'd have three very proficient soldiers. One of them had already torn a part of his body, his foot, and she knew that a bite would absolve all his pain. He'd hardly care about his injury if he was hers. She wanted them all, but these three were coveted the most.

However, this had to be handled strategically.

Humans were pesky in the sense that they needed so much to survive. Food, water, shelter, medicine. Two of them had been severely injured; they'd need the provisions to get through. She thought, with a small smirk curling on her stiffened lips, that this was possibly far too easy.

The plan was simple. With a simple jerk of her chin, her family tore through the pharmacy until it wasn't much more than rubble. It was a long process, but even that could not guarantee that there would not be resources uncovered. Unfortunately for the humans, the pharmacy also carried lighter fluid and a pack of matches; it was more of a chore to walk away from the flames, for she felt just a bit of the warmth—it felt, somehow, good, and something distant and deep within her thought of burning sand between toes and waves lapping over seashells, but that was not important anymore.

Her army followed her dutifully, if not a bit clumsy (endearingly so, if she was capable of feeling such a thing), and she pointed them in the direction of the last place the humans had to turn to. There was no rush, no need for urgency, not when she had everything right where she wanted it.

There was this thing inside her, something she was sure she never had before. Along with single minded efficiency and purpose, there was this cruel aloofness to her tactical processing, like a feature had been installed in her without any proper guidebook to help her navigate it. That was fine, much easier that way. She had her goals, and nothing, not even God—if he were so inclined, but most certainly wasn't—could stop her. It was in her genetic makeup upon being risen up; God had snapped his fingers, filling her with this—this design, never speaking a word, but saying, "You're made, you cannot be unmade, this is my last creation here. I will not destroy you, but you…you will destroy," and it wasn't exactly a request.

Hey, I assembled this, God said, but I don't like it anymore; do you mind dismantling it for me?

I fucked up; it didn't go as planned, God meant, but I don't want to fix it, no, I want a clean slate.

She was more than happy to oblige. She wondered, in the way she didn't wonder at all, if she was
only happy to rip the world apart because He built her that way. In the end, it didn't matter.

Nothing really mattered, not to her.

***

The hospital wasn't very large, but it had that desperate feel to it where it was trying to be more than it was. For such a small town, the hospital seemed to be trying—and failing—to be important. Certainly, before, there weren't that many patients, yet the place was built and expanded on as if it took on frequent traffic of the utmost importance.

There was a fingerprint scanner to get in the front door—which, frankly, was stupid—and was making her contemplate burning this whole place down from sheer irritation alone.

Still, there were alternatives. Always were.

Shifting, she pivoted on the spot and scanned the crowd of her family. Theoretically, there could be someone in her army that came from the hospital; it was certainly a place to spread a disease such as this, ironically enough. And bingo. In her right flank, nearly three rows back, a middle-aged woman in pink and red scrubs—red from blood and flesh—was hunched over with a dead look in her gaze. She was fairly put together, simply missing chunks from her neck and shoulder. With a simple crook of her finger, the recent hospital employee stumbled forward towards her, following mindlessly while the rest all hung back.

It took a few tries. She had to show the incompetent creature how to splay her fingers, how to press them to the pad, how to mimic humanity after she'd lost every scrap of it. They tried each finger until the front door opened with a hiss.

They all filed in, breaking apart to follow her unspoken orders, stumbling like waves of decay down separate hallways. She had one place she wanted to go, one place that she needed to be.

She never knew, not really, how she came about with all this knowledge of humanity—possibly because she was one before Hell, even if she couldn't remember it, or maybe because God had that programmed into her. Either way, she simply understood things about her food and social source that made no sense, like control rooms being in hospitals that let her stand in front of monitors that showed nearly every inch of the hospital. It was certainly a good standpoint, gave her a view of everything, kept her in complete control.

It was going to be too easy, really.

She thought that she understood it all, even if the information came directly from God, and what could there possibly be that He didn't understand?

All-in-all, destruction was much easier to grasp, especially when that was all she was, but survival? The desperate, clawing determination to press on, even when it seemed hopeless? She didn't understand that at all, mostly because she did not survive; she simply was, a force made by yet another force who, surprisingly enough, apparently did not understand survival either. He couldn't have, certainly not, because He definitely hadn't given her the knowledge or prepared her for it.

The thing was, survival and destruction went hand-in-hand—one could not exist without the other. Without a survivor, what was there to destroy; without destruction, what was there to survive?

She didn't know that, God hadn't either, and that was why she didn't see it coming. After all, she was made to destroy, not to survive.
They came in a few hours later, just as she'd expected. The cameras weren't necessary, not at the front door at least. They rode around in that dastardly truck, a vehicular beast she was coming to despise and recognize from sound alone. They came because they needed medical supplies, to restock, and because the fire from the pharmacy hadn't been subtle. She hoped that it would be the other two, the ones who had been there when the man had been injured—she wanted them all, but perhaps he would follow if she claimed them first; humans were so emotional, they did such things as that.

Instead, it was two girls and the man who'd escaped her ranks, just barely. They'd cut away his arm, removing all traces of the bite.

Lips curling up in a smirk, she slipped out of the room on silent feet.

When she found them, the blonde was talking.

"—don't like this, Alex," she said, swinging her head around, lips tipped down at the corners. "Something doesn't feel right."

The blonde one had good instincts, obviously.

With a frown, the one called Alex said, "Yeah, well, it'll be quick. In and out. If Donna and Jody didn't trust us to do this, I'd say we leave, but—"

"I know," the blonde one replied quietly, eyes scanning the room. The gaze had skipped over her twice already—good instincts or not, there was no possible way a human could see her in the dark corner she was waiting in. "Carl, how's that arm?"

Her eyes zeroed in on him. He looked washed out, tired, skittish. His eyes continued to bounce around the room as if he sensed her; perhaps he knew where he belonged as much as she did. Taking a deep breath, Carl waved his severed arm around, the cloth wrapped around the stump stark white besides the patches of blood—she could smell the heady scent of life from it, could sense just how close he'd come to being hers. The fear wafting from him in waves was tempting, nothing more than a delicacy, and he looked good enough to eat. However, he'd come home to her instead.

"Better, I think," Carl said, staring down at the stump with a faint look of confusion, like he still hadn't grasped that a part of him was gone. That wouldn't matter if he hadn't escaped the bite; he wouldn't even register the loss or the pain. "Let's just—Can we get this over with?"

The blonde turned to him with raised eyebrows, her lips twitching. "Scared?"

"Claire," Alex scolded, shaking her head jerkily.

"No, it's good," the blonde—Claire—said, standing tall and eyeing Carl seriously. "You should be. This is fucking terrifying, but don't forget what happened last time you let your fear run the show. You lost an arm because of it."

Tilting her head would reveal her position, either from the movement or the sound of her bones grinding, but she came very close to doing so. This one, the blonde, Claire. She wanted her. Well, she wanted them all, but this one specifically deserved to lose the curse of life to her lips.

Zombies, as it were, did not feel desire; they simply urged themselves to consume. But she was not the regular undead that had become her family. She was emotionless, but she was driven, and this Claire invoked something grandiose within her decaying flesh. Perhaps when she'd claimed Claire,
she'd walk with her husk as a companion.

"Claire!" Alex snapped again, this time much more firm and harsh. "Carl, don't listen to her; she just thinks she's such a hardass."

"No, she's—She has a point," Carl muttered, hanging his head slightly. "I promise not to go flinging myself in front of any zombies."

"Smart thing, that," Claire chirped, winking at him. She softened and walked over to pat his shoulder, smile gentle. "Stay behind us, we'll get you in and out with no problems, I promise."

Ah, she thought in faint amusement, _this Claire makes promises she cannot keep._

Carl released a nervous laugh. "And you're sure I couldn't just stay in the truck?"

"Bad idea. Isolation in the middle of a zombie apocalypse? Yeah, that's a **hard** no. If Dean heard you say that, he'd lose his shit." Claire huffed a quiet laugh, rolling her eyes. "Besides, all hands on deck. We need as many as possible to grab everything."

"Very funny," Carl said flatly, lifting his stump again pointedly. "You have no tact, anyone ever tell you that?"

Claire rolled her eyes again. "You're still capable, so it wasn't a joke. Besides, if not for you, we'd have never got in the hospital; it was _your_ fingerprint that gave us access, remember?"

"On this, she has a point," Alex spoke up, shifting the duffle strap on her shoulder and edging towards the front desk. "Alright, we're going to have to split up."

"Are you crazy?" Claire's head whipped around at breakneck speed. "Has no one learned _anything_ from Dean? You don't split up, you _always_ double tap, and you never go anywhere unarmed. Come on, Alex, don't be stupid."

"I'm not being stupid; I'm being _practical_. We have a lot of ground to cover. It would be smarter if we split up and got out as soon as possible."

"Smart doesn't necessarily mean survival."

Alex shot Claire a flat look. "Look, I know you're the hunteress apprentice or whatever, but this is _my_ domain. Carl was just a board director; I'm the medical student. I know where to go, what to look for, and what we need. It's better if we—"

"No," Claire cut her off sharply, shaking her head firmly. "Absolutely _not_. We're more of a target if we're separated. You're right, _I am_ the experienced hunter here, and this is _my_ domain, so I'm taking point. We go together or we don't make it out alive."

"Uh, if I've got a vote," Carl started, then immediately snapped his mouth shut with an audible click when both girls glared at him. "Okay, nevermind."

"Fine," Alex relented with a deep exhale through her nose. "Whatever, let's start with the medicine, then work our way to blankets and pillows. Hell, if we've got the time, we can load up some gurneys and wheelchairs. Not the most comfortable, but at least it will give some people a few places to sleep or sit besides those shitty cots."

"Sounds like a plan," Claire said.
She watched them sweep off, taking out various weapons—Carl had a gun, Alex had both a gun and a knife, and Claire carried a machete and a sawed off shotgun. They looked grim and attentive, prepared for war, survival making their blood rush; they looked like juicy morsels, ripe for the taking, and oh, how she wanted to. But this was the curse of higher intelligence; it was going to be much smarter to play the waiting game.

So, she waited.

She could feel every member of her army waiting for her command, tucked in corners and darkened rooms, not making a sound. There were others, some undead she had yet to claim, but they had their part to play as well. If the humans breezed through without a few obstacles, they'd be on high alert, far too used to things being hard, so she let those loose. The humans encountered a few as they went, Claire and Alex quietly dispatching of them, working in sync as if they were family as well.

Perhaps they were, perhaps she would take Alex when she took Claire, rather than letting her be a meal.

She shadowed them, following them through the hospital; they were none the wiser. Why would they be? Silly humans, always too reliant on their own senses, believing in such things as gut feelings and strange atmospheres.

They filled their duffles fairly quickly, going room to room efficiently. The few mindless creatures that were not hers were put down ruthlessly, even when Carl recognized one and hesitated; Claire simply swung her machete and stepped over the head without looking back.

"We should do one more trip," Alex said.

Claire yanked a wheelchair out and let her duffle drop into the seat, careful not to break the clinking glasses of medicine in the bags. They'd acquired needles, liquid medicine, pills, bandages, and even IV lines. With a wave of her hand, Claire took Alex and Carl's bags and stacked them in the chair.

"Let's load these, then come back for the rest. I think we should take the backup scrubs and break into the vending machines too."

"That's going to take three trips, Claire. We don't have time for that."

"We might not get to come back here, Alex. We need to make it count. Just trust me?"

"If I can offer my opinion, I think we should—"

"Shut up, Carl," Claire and Alex intoned in unison.

In the end, it was apparently decided that they'd make three trips. The first had, of course, been for the medicine they could gather. The second, by Claire's insistence, was for the food, clothing, and resting accommodations. And according to Alex, the third was for one last sweep and to grab as many bags of blood that they could—she'd said that they'd never know when transfusions would come in handy. All of it was well thought out.

Except, of course, they didn't account for her.

She allowed them the false sense of security, biding her time and watching them slowly relax. She studied them, catalogued every move they made, listened to every word they said, and it was like working through a very simple puzzle. The plan unfolded beautifully.

When they were moving to the truck for the very last time, wheeling a gurney with cases of blood,
she twitched her fingers from her corner. Like a shift within herself, her army did her bidding, coiled like a massive spring, awaiting her command.

Once the humans had passed, she stepped up behind Carl, curled one hand around his throat while yanking him back against her, then stood on her tiptoes to sink her teeth directly into his neck.

*Try and cut that off,* she thought viciously, well aware that this disease could not be cut away.

Carl let out a blood-curdling scream, flailing in her grasp and firing his gun mindlessly. Alex and Claire ducked and shoved themselves behind the gurney while Carl continued to shoot his pistol in no particular direction. He jerked in her arms, trying to tear himself away, but she held firm and bit down hard enough to let the thick cord of muscle slip down her throat like a warm oyster. It was, quite frankly, very satisfying.

"Go!" Claire suddenly sprang up from her crouch and kicked the gun from Carl's hand, simultaneously shoving at the gurney to urge Alex towards the door. "Alex, you've got to go!"

Alex stumbled back from the gurney, eyes wide as the her army started to pour from the opposite hall, all intentions to block the front door very clear. They'd also be going outside to rip that stupid truck apart, but these humans had no way of knowing that. Carl was still screaming, but it was slowly tapering off, and she continued to use him as a shield, waiting for the moment she could attack.

See, humans were very, very predictable. They had these attachments, these made-up rules of morality, things that could forever change them if they ever strayed. Claire could not kill Carl, not while human, not even to save him the pain. Alex would not leave Claire, not to save herself, not even at Claire's insistence. And really, they were stepping willingly into her family without even knowing it.

"Claire, I can't just—"

"You can! You can and you *are!* Go, now! Get the supplies back to camp; I'll be—Just go!"

The world suddenly did not make any sense whatsoever. Alex, against all odds, took one look at Claire, tears brimming her eyes, then had a running start as she jumped on the edge of the gurney and rode a path straight to the door, shooting zombies as she went. Claire watched her go for a moment, her lips curling up, then she swung around to stare at Carl with her throat bobbing.

There was a distant sound of the nightmarish truck as it growled on its exit. She cocked her head and twitched one finger, sending her army in multiple different directions. Half went to spread out on the top three floors, while the other half spread out to block the entrance and make sure Claire wouldn't get anywhere without resistance. She would have Carl, that was guaranteed, and she was prepared to take Claire for her own as well.

"Please," Carl choked out, trying to fling himself forward, unable to move against the hand she had curled around his throat. "Claire, please, I don't—"

"It's okay," Claire whispered, blinking rapidly and taking a deep breath. Her hands shook when she lifted them, sawed-off pointing directly at his face. She took another deep breath. "It's gonna be okay, Carl. Just—just close your eyes, okay?"

She watched as Carl whimpered and took a shaky breath, the fight abruptly leaving him. She could feel him sag back against her, waiting for the death that Claire was promising, but she didn't think that Claire would follow through. Blue eyes, full of life and tears, flickered shut on an exhale, a thin
finger squeezing over the trigger of a sawed-off shotgun like humanity no longer existed within the
same parameters that it used to.

People were not predictable, not anymore.

Fortunately, she learned quickly, or adapted without any issues. Before the loud bang, she shoved
Carl to the ground and whipped out of the way. The rack of pillows behind her exploded into tufts of
white cotton balls, drifting down and sticking to her rotting skin.

Carl groaned from the floor, struggling to crawl to his feet, but she barely granted him a moment of
her attention; Claire didn't either. She watched Claire, still and silent, and Claire watched her intently,
blue eyes fixed unflinchingly on her face.

"You're not like the others, are you?" Claire narrowed her eyes, not daring to shift. "Yeah, we heard
all about you, bitch. Well? What's next?"

She took a step forward, immediately freezing when the shotgun swung up. There wouldn't have
been a problem if she had pointed the gun at her, or even herself, but the issue came with the fact that
she pointed the gun at the row of oxygen tanks directly beside her face. She tilted her head, stopped
by confusion more than anything.

Not knowing how she had the knowledge didn't matter; she simply knew that the oxygen tanks
would not explode from a gunshot. Claire must have thought so, but there was a confidence in her
gaze that suggested she knew exactly what she was doing.

"Yeah, you're so smart, aren't you?" Claire murmured, then pulled the trigger.

There was, as expected, no explosion. However, the tanks let out a hiss and shot from the stand,
slamming into the entire right side of her body and sending her sprawling. The shotgun hit the floor,
empty and useless, but that didn't perturb Claire. Blonde hair flapping, face twisted in a grimace, she
stomped over with her machete raised.

There wasn't much of a tussle. Most zombies were built to bite and rip apart in masses, not much
more. She had much more coordination though, which Claire apparently was not prepared for. It was
almost too simple to shove her decaying hand straight on the blade, letting it impale her palm straight
to the hilt. Claire froze for a moment, her eyes going wide, and it was that split second of hesitation
that cost her the upper hand. Without feeling an ounce of pain, she jerked her hand up and snatched
the machete from Claire, effectively leaving her with no weapon.

Claire was smart, however, and she realized this far quicker than most people would. With a sharp
curse, she turned on her heel and ran.

She jerked the machete from her hand, letting it clang to the floor. Carl was writhing on the floor,
halfway hers already, and certainly in no condition to use it on her. The faint sound of Claire's feet
pounding on the marble floor echoed through the halls, but it was a pointless endeavor—there was
no way out of the front entrance of the hospital, she had made sure of that.

One way or another, Claire would be hers.

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The thing about survival was that it was much like a drug. It drowned out everything else, set up
shop in a human's mind, took over and led the show. It had no use here, not against her.

Yet, Claire clung to it.
In the three minutes that it had taken Claire to sprint down the winding halls, she'd managed to locate a scalpel and a battery-operated drill that still had some juice. She was ruthlessly killing the trickle of zombies that were being sent her way—which, to be completely honest, was a bit annoying.

So, with a frown, she called off her troops and went after Claire herself. It was how she wanted it to be anyway. She wanted to take a bite out of her flesh, wanted to sip the feisty life from her veins, wanted to watch it drain from her gaze. Those blue eyes would look pretty if they were dull and hollow; then again, everything was prettier that way, in the sense that she had no grasp on beauty, and simply wanted to claim Claire as her own.

Another thing about survival—it was a very resilient thing to have.

She didn't expect it, simply because it shouldn't have happened. By human standards, it was what most would call insane. Normal people did not jerk to a sudden stop, think for a split second, then jump down an elevator shaft. Claire, apparently, was not a normal person at all.

It wasn't as insane as she originally thought. The elevator doors had been bent and cracked open, possibly from zombies that had demanded their way in to steal a meal, but they'd left enough space for someone to hop through and fall to their death, should they so desire. It seemed that was what Claire had wanted.

She almost walked back to Carl, dismissing Claire with internal disappointment, but she heard it. Just a small groan. It made her stop in her tracks, then whip around and look down the elevator shaft. The elevator, of course, had broken and fallen as far as it would go. That wouldn't mean much, except that the very floor she stood on was the *first*. Which meant that Claire had just jumped approximately six feet and landed on the top of the metal of the elevator. It most likely hurt, but it hadn't ended in death, which meant that Claire could still be hers.

Without hesitation, she jumped down as well.

"Fuck," Claire snapped, rolling away and standing to her feet with a wince.

She simply stood up as well, her heel dragging.

Claire took a deep breath and held up her drill. The scalpel was buried in the meat of her thigh; she must have fallen on it. "Alright, zombie queen, let's fucking do this."

*Zombie queen? That has a nice ring to it,* she thought.

Claire suddenly took another deep breath and held her arms out, as if she was offering herself up. It was too good of an opportunity to pass up; she flung herself forward with all thoughts of getting to ease Claire into her family. She should have known that it wasn't going to work. Claire yanked the scalpel out of her thigh with a hiss and stabbed her in the neck hard enough to divert her route. She stumbled, leaving Claire to hobble to the side.

She was going to simply turn around and try again, avoiding the drill this time, but Claire smirked at her and took a step back.

Claire disappeared.

Rather, she fell. Her hair wafted up as she sailed down, another grunt sounding when she landed seconds later. Following, she saw that Claire had fallen down *into* the elevator and was currently wriggling herself out to the basement level.
This was quickly turning into a chore. Most humans did not react this way. Generally, they were too stupid or too weak to keep trying to escape. Even with a stab wound and a drill as her only weapon, Claire was still going. It was...admirable.

With another step, she slipped down into the elevator just as Claire slipped out.

Her other heel dragged.

That was a problem.

Chasing after Claire was a bit of a challenge when her limbs were working against her. As she shoved herself through the space Claire had disappeared through, she slammed her feet into the side, listening to sickening crack with satisfaction as they straightened back out. When she stood, she was able to sprint after Claire with no problem.

They ended up in a bay of some sort. There were rows of ambulances and at least three between her and Claire. Without much effort, she called her army to her, listening to the rumble of the building as the entire mass of them made their way to her. Claire heard it too; her head whipped around to see her, making her groan and pick up the pace, but she was half-running, half-hobbling, and it wouldn't take much for her to be caught.

Claire cursed yet again—a thing that she would miss when the bite took over, but a necessary evil all the same—and abruptly stopped. Before that could fully register, Claire dived to ambulance closest to her and scrambled inside, locking the doors.

Of course, she could possibly find her own way in, but it would be far simpler to wait for her family to get here and rip the metal apart to reveal her prize. So, with all intentions of doing that, she settled at the back of the truck and felt her army drawing closer.

The thing about survival, she supposed, was that—much like destruction—it did not die out, not even when met with the opposition, not even on the last breath, but simply the exact moment after.

Claire was not dead, not yet, and she apparently had absolutely no intention of becoming so.

The back door to the ambulance busted open with no warning, kicked wide by Claire's boots, and her eyes blazed with life when she shouted, "Hey, Ghoulia Yelps, take a bite outta this!"

Quite suddenly, she was hit in the face with a gurney as Claire shoved it out forcefully. It collided with her body, sending her sprawling, and she was fairly positive that she swallowed some of her own teeth.

There were the faint sounds of the ambulance's sirens clicking on and off, drawn out wails that did nothing to silence the sounds of her family pouring into the room at different spots. The doors were still wide open as she shifted the gurney off of her body and sat up slowly. Claire was fiddling with wires, her eyes wide as she glanced back repeatedly.

Then, the ambulance came to life, and she was scrambling to her feet.

It was pointless, of course.

Failure tasted of blood and gravel, but the latter could have had to do with the ambulance tires tearing into the ground as Claire fled to safety.

She stood on steady feet, jaw clenched, watching the ambulance burst through a metal bay door and swerving out into the pavement. Just like that, Claire was gone.
She'd have her chance, eventually.

But for now, she was satisfied when she turned her head to greet her family yet again and was met with the sight of Carl's lifeless eyes.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you not in Claire's age group or simply unaware, Ghoulia Helps is the zombie teenager off of Monster High--if you ever go into the you section of a Wal-Mart, you'll find her little doll. No, we are not anfd never will be sponsored by the creators of Monster High, nor Wal-Mart. :D

As always, thank you so much for reading. Don't hesitate to drop off some kudos and please leave a comment; we do so love to see them!

Ta!

-SOBS
Goodness Graceless, y'all!

Chapter by jscribbles

Chapter Notes

HELLO! Me again. Hope you enjoyed son_of_a_bitch_spn_family's AMAAAZING zombie POV chapter. I know I sure did.

This week we're back with Dean, Cas and friends in Camp Singer about a month after the Foot Tragedy. Hope you enjoy!

Thank you to EllenofOz and son_of_a_bitch_spn_family for the beta'ing. <3

(Sorry not sorry about the pun in the title...)

My references for gun and bow info for this chapter, because I am a Canadian and know nothing about guns. xD
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCVIU2Q9KT8

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Season Z - Episode 7

Back in a time she can’t quite remember, Anael kneels in the desert, her thick thighs dusted in wiry hair pressed to her calf as she crouches and bows her head in reverence. She is in a different vessel than Jo, she is in one of her first. In a male vessel perhaps--she can’t quite recall. But the silk on her body flutters in the wind and her long curly hair--brown, smells like cloves--flaps across her chin.

Beside her are her siblings--there are thousands of them, all with their wings tucked in and low to their backs, the tips dragging across the billowing sand. Before them is the glow of her father, their father, and the circle of seven. The seven sons and daughters closest to their Lord. She feels their presence, both as one and as individuals, and feels her grace hum pleasantly, her body filled with love and worship. She loves them more than anything. They are her brothers and sisters, but they are the closest to God that she is normally allowed, and so they are more to her than the others. She smiles to herself, her human lips curling, and she nearly shakes with excitement as she feels the seven walk through them, sandals cascading warm sand as they walk, murmuring words of adoration and encouragement. They are conduits of God’s love, and are responsible for dispersing it among the Host.

A shadow crosses in front of her and she knows it is her turn. Eyes still on the ground, she reaches up and holds out her hand. Two heavy ones--calloused on their human skin, but soft with grace--curl around hers, protecting and adoring. They care for her in equal lengths as she cares for them.

“Brother.”

“Sister.”

The two hands give hers a squeeze and she sees the archangel kneel before her. Anael sighs
contently as lips press to her forehead—

Her eyes shot open, the glow of grace faded from them. Quickly, Anael realised she’d been dreaming. Dreaming of an old time, so old she wasn’t even sure how she remembered. She didn’t know she even had the capability to recall that far back, even as an angel.

Even quicker, she realized she’d fallen asleep.

“Fuck,” she hissed under her breath, sitting up straight, grasping up at her hair and straightening the long sweater that’d slid off her shoulder at some point during her stumble into unconsciousness. She felt the brief flare of panic and embarrassment, but no one was around.

She’d fallen asleep against the railing of the steps she sat on. Steps of their newly constructed main cabin—their first actual completed structure in the camp. It was no garden shed from Home Depot, or a tent from Lowe’s. It was a real, full-fledged building. It’d taken four weeks to make, but it was finally somewhere people could gather. It watched over the gates to Camp Singer, and housed an assortment of things; a table at which the main administrative circle planned their supply runs, guns, spare clothing, perishable food. It was the first place they took new muggles to get them prepared for their stay.

Anael used its front steps and porch as a lookout spot. She had a good view of the gates, and the cars, if any needed entry. It was dead center to the rows of cabins behind her, all of them lined on either side of the main road through Singer Salvage. Everyone was nearby, and the only part of their car-wall that was open was in her vantage point.

This time, though, she didn’t see the danger. She felt it. It had woken her from her dream quiet jarringly.

Her grace hummed disquietly, shuddering in her and waking up from a slumber. She’d hardly used it since healing Castiel’s foot, too frightened she’d lose it all. It almost felt rusty and bleary, but the alarm bells of discontent shook it from its sleep. Dean would say her “spidey senses were tingling”.

Dean was a real idiot sometimes.

But Anael followed her senses and got to her feet, the long sweater swishing around her knees, the skin on her legs pulling up into peaks as the cool night air swept over her. She pushed into a run. Her skirt flowed out behind her and her hair—slightly lanky now and losing its curl—flopped over her shoulder. Her vantage point of the main gates meant nothing because the commotion wasn’t coming from the front, it was coming from the side.

She was about to open her mouth and ask what the fuss was to whoever was listening, when a scream echoed through the night and growls of rage and hunger followed.

"HELP!" someone shrieked at a distance too far for a typical mortal to hear. “Oh, God, please help!”

Terrible word choice. God was exactly the wrong entity to want be evoking— and quite frankly, this was all his fault—but the sheer terror quaking in the voice that echoed through the night only made Anael push into a sprint and forgive the poor word choice.

Camp Singer wasn’t by any means small, but it was small enough that a tiny push of grace could have her cross it in nearly a minute. Castiel would scold her for it, but she did use some grace. It flared in her and carried her towards the noise of terror.

Near the back of the camp, away from the cabins, Anael skidded to a stop, dirt spraying out to her side. She swung her arms out to catch herself and her eyes went wide at the sight she saw on the
other side of the wall they’d built.

Her heart hammering, her palms sweating, Anael squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated, reaching out to the leaders of camp, slipping into their minds, extending her voice into their dreams.

_Wake up. Come to the north-eastern part of camp, behind the ruins of Bobby Singer’s home. This is not a drill. Bring first aid. Bring weapons. Muggles are dead and wounded._

_The undead are attacking._

***

_“The undead,”_ Anael declared, her voice wispy and echoing, _“are attacking.”_

"Damn it, Anael," Castiel growled to absolutely no one. From his position, laid on his back, he curled up into a seated position, his legs swinging off the picnic table he'd been attempting to sleep on. The blanket he'd taken out with him was thrown aside as he hopped off the table. "Don't use your grace for messages, sister. Use the blasted walkies!"

She couldn't hear him, but it still made him feel better to respond, like old times.

Dean, Sam, Jody, Rowena, and Donna all burst out from their cabins. Claire was already out, snoozing in a sleeping bag beside Castiel's perch. They'd been "keeping watch" together—a poor attempt considering one half of their team was no longer immortal and so falling asleep did both of them no good.

Claire sat up from the ground, shoving her sleeping bag aside and groping around for her gun while she gasped, "Did you—"

“Did you hear Jo?” Dean burst out, growling as he yanked his jacket over a thin t-shirt, swinging a gun up into both hands as he led the group towards Anael’s location.

“Yup,” Jody replied with a nod, her face completely alert despite the pattern of pillow folds indented into her face from sleep. “You all got weapons? Here, Cas. Take this.”

Castiel caught the handgun Jody tossed at him, and shut his mouth as he nearly told her he already had a weapon; the angel blade strapped to his thigh. But before he could reply, everyone was off, jogging over to the back of camp. He noticed, as they ran past the humans’ cabins, that none of them were awake. Anael must’ve concealed the message from them.

By the time they reached Anael, the sound of the “attack” was audible and Castiel’s foot was aching. It still had a week to be somewhat healed, but he could use it now without needing that humiliating cane that Claire had stolen from the hospital for him.

When they reached Anael, she was climbing over the hood of a rusted car, towards the shimmering wards—activated now as the undead drew too close.

“Hurry up!” she yelled back as the group of humans neared her, her face pinched as she looked over her shoulder, her trudge jolting red hair around her face as she crossed the warding. “We need all hands on—_augh_!”

Anael ducked as a zombie lurched at her, rotting fingers grasping for her head, its teeth snapping. All around him, Castiel heard guns raise and a series of clicks as all the safeties went off. Rowena raised her hand, her eyes glowing, and under her breath, she whispered words to reseal the hole in the wards left behind by Anael.
On the other side of the magic force field, a group of teenagers they’d only saved just a week ago, all fought for their lives as a group of zombies had circled around them, growling and snapping teeth. Castiel had no idea why the children were on the other side of the warding, but he didn’t have time to ponder for long as he watched the other teenagers dodge and fight—poorly—for their lives.

One teenager—Sarah, fourteen-years-old—lay dead at their feet.

Castiel had come to him several times over the last week. He’d shared a meal with her on her second day at camp, and offered her comfort when she bent forward and wept into her knees. Only yesterday, he’d sat beside her on the same picnic bench he’d just risen from, and listened to her talk about everything and nothing. She’d seemed so calmed by him, so less burdened when he’d smiled at her. She’d made him feel like he could still heal people, like he still had the capability to do good.

Sarah’d had ambitions to become a teacher. She’d skipped a grade when she was thirteen and started high school early. She’d told him she feared she wouldn’t be welcomed by the other children, though it hardly mattered now. She liked a band called “One Direction”, and fancied herself slightly in love with one of them. She used to collect vintage cosmetics compacts and had pictures of her twin baby sisters in her wallet. Maggie and Vivi. They’d been only three when the undead came to her home and ended their young lives.

Now she wasn’t Sarah anymore. She was a corpse. Her jaw was disconnected from her face, her clothing torn and bloody, and her eyes wide and dull. She looked like she’d died in terror.

“Mother...fuckers!”

Claire.

Castiel was jogged out of his grief, his hand—which had come up to his mouth at some point—dropped down to his side and then shot out just in time to stop Claire from launching into battle too.

“No!” he bellowed, his voice ragged as he turned on Claire. While she looked affronted, Castiel grabbed her by her jacket and pushed her back towards the camp. “You are not going in there!”

Castiel growled, gesturing behind him at Dean, Donna and Jody as they hacked and swiped at the zombies, while Sam and Anael herded the four alive teenagers through the wards. Rowena reset the wards and reinforced them, a sheen of sweat gathering above her brow.

Claire jerked her gun at the commotion, looking furious. “Why the hell not?!”

Castiel gritted his teeth and snarled, “Because I said so!”

“Well, you’re not my dad!”

“Well, you’re not my daughter!” Castiel yelled back, side-stepping as Claire tried to move past him. “I certainly don’t deserve to call you my daughter, but you are my friend, and I am in charge of protecting you, so you’re going to stay put and go ensure Alex is ready to tend to these hurt children, do you understand?”

Claire gritted her teeth right back, Jimmy Novak’s face reflected in every one of her stubborn features. “I won’t get hurt, and you’re not in charge of protecting me—”

Cas raised a finger. He was overcome with anger and fear, the finger trembled, as did his chest. “If
you think I’m going to let you end up like Sarah a-and Jack, if you think—”

Claire seemed to relax at the mention of Jack. If Castiel’s voice cracked when he said Jack’s name, she was kind enough not to mention it. Claire growled and rolled her eyes, but made no other attempt to run past him. “I’m not gonna get hurt, I just know how to fight and I can—JODY!”

Castiel twisted around, his foot pulsing from the running, and he saw that a zombie had Jody on her back, pinned. In panic, he saw Dean grappling with one, his elbows locked to keep its snapping jaw away from his face. Sam was running back to the crowd, towards one last teenager who was swiping an old pipe at a zombie and weeping. Anael was engaged in swift hand-to-hand combat, even going so far as to grab a zombie and twist its head clean around, pushing it over with a grunt and a curl of her lip. Donna kicked a zombie in the stomach, knocking it over before running, swinging her leg back to reel up, and kicking the zombie on top of Jody so hard it split in half, showing Jody in rotted innards.

“Thanks, baby!” Jody said, gagging, but accepting the hand held out to help her up.

“Don’cha mention it, Jodes. Here, let’s getcha up!”

The zombies had been growing in number for weeks, but they’d been worse around the camp, coming in droves to almost...patrol their perimeter. They would drag their feet around the treeline just outside of Camp Singer, which was one thing, but when they left suddenly, as if someone had rung a dinner bell, that was when they were most frightening.

Tonight had been one of those nights; they hadn’t seen a zombie outside their walls for nearly a day. Not one. Now, there were at least seven. And they were overpowering the humans.

“All right,” Castiel rasped, pushing himself into a walk, gesturing for Claire to follow. “If you want to fight, you stay behind the warding. Follow my lead.”

Castiel and Claire raised their guns, the muzzles tickling the wards, and they began firing.

A few zombies went down immediately, and Castiel was momentarily impressed with himself for such precise aim, when he realised those were Claire’s well-aimed shots. His ricocheted off trees and empty, rusted barrels rolled onto their sides just outside camp. With a growl, noticing Dean stumble back and struggling to reload, and Anael get hit in the face with a swinging, half-separated zombie arm, Castiel raised his gun again and closed an eye, trying to aim.

He pulled the trigger, trying to buy Dean some time—

“AHH!”

Anael’s body was jerked to the side, her shoulder guiding the abrupt movement and she stumbled back, falling onto the blood-stained dirt. In surprise, she reached up to her shoulder and shrieked, “You shot me!”

Oh no. Castiel’s hands went still and he raised his head, a chill running down his spine as the zombie Anael’d been fighting roared, black saliva blasting out of its mouth in rage.

Thankfully, as soon as the zombie looked like it even so much as thought about throwing itself down onto a shocked Anael, Dean ran forward and tackled the thing to the ground. Dean straddled the hissing, snarling beast and fired a few rounds into its head, but Castiel’s eyes were on his sister.

She looked up at Castiel, after staring at her blood covered hand that had been pressed to her shoulder. “Castiel, you fucking shot me! Damn it!”
And then he saw it, her fingertips glowing, her eyes flaring up, the wound pooling silver-y light. She pressed her hand down to her gushing wound, using grace to heal herself.

“NO!” Castiel cried out, his bellow ripped from his lungs, vibrating his chest. He lunged towards the warding. “ANAEL, DON’T!”

But Castiel’s roar of panic did nothing to stop her as she healed herself.

Claire was suddenly in front of him, pushing him, even going so far as to wrap her arms around him and pull him back.

“Cas, stop, don’t!” Claire whispered frantically, her eyes uncharacteristically wide and scared. “You can’t! Y...Your foot.”

He didn’t care about his foot. He could do nothing else but stare at his sister, her grace stopping her bleeding, easing her pain… He wasn’t sure how he knew, but he did; that grace was the last bit of Heaven on earth, and it…

“No,” Anael rasped as her eyes went dull, and then suddenly glistening in a way only human horror could manifest. She looked up at him, her eyes round as saucers. She rolled onto her side and panted, looking pained. Through her teeth, she said, “It’s gone.”

That was it; by Castiel’s very human failure, the last of Heaven disappeared from this universe.

They were finally, and truly, alone.

***

“I can’t believe you shot me,” Anael slurred again, her forehead shining and her lips pursing before she brought an entire bottle of half-empty whiskey to her lips and took a long, pinched swig with her head tilted back.

Dean, who sat beside her on a cot, scowled at Anael’s bare, bloody shoulder. “That’s enough, princess,” Dean grumbled, grunting as he tugged a stitch through her skin. “That whiskey is for the bullet wound, not your empty stomach. And I think Cas’ got it, you know. He doesn’t need to hear you repeat the same thing at him eight times. It was a mistake.”

Castiel, sitting on the cot across from her, felt—and probably looked—entirely miserable. He stared at her, his legs extended in front of him, his grasped fingers together on his thighs.

“I’m so sorry, Anael,” Castiel rasped, his heart sunk somewhere near his stomach. “I didn’t—”

Anael yelped and hissed at Dean, “Be a little gentler! This is my first human wound and it freakin’ hurts, so have more finesse, princess! I swear, if you mess up and I’m left with a scar--”

Dean yanked a bit too forcefully on the stitch and snarked, “On second thought, down the rest of that bottle and go the fuck to sleep.”

Anael glared at Dean, but rolled her eyes, taking another swig of whiskey and shuddering. “Ugh, this stuff is vile. I’ve smelled gasoline more appealing.”

On the other side of the room, Sam, Jody, Donna, and Rowena were bent over Sarah’s corpse, looking grave and somber. Rowena was sweating, the strain of her spell draining her, but it was necessary. They couldn’t risk she’d become a zombie, they had to restrain Sarah from reanimating before the funeral occurred.
It took a few muggle deaths over the past few weeks to realise that in this universe, nothing stayed
dead. It had taken one of their own rising from the dead in camp...and then rising again after being
killed, for everyone to realise that with Hell and Purgatory open, even if one was buried in the
ground, it would not be for long. Crowley, after everyone had panicked about the discovery that
death was a temporary state in this world now, had explained that Purgatory was filled with those
freshly dead (and then dead again) from Earth, ready to funnel back to the land of the living.

They’d discovered, only a week ago, that burning the bodies guaranteed their permanent death. They
burned all of the remains save for one item—their last earth possession—and then took that possession
to the bunker. If souls wouldn’t stay put in Hell and couldn’t ascend to Heaven, then those ghosts
needed to come back inside their temporary demon, monster, and ghost lock-up; the bunker.

“Sarah had a locket around her neck,” Sam said gravely.

Jody sniffed sharply and nodded, reaching her hand out to take it. Everyone was quiet as Jody
opened the locket and no one mentioned it when her chin trembled.

“She has pictures of her baby sisters in this... If this isn’t a physical possession that means something
to her, then nothing is,” Jody explained, snapping the locket closed. She raised her watery eyes up to
everyone. “I’ll take this to the bunker. Donna, you wanna grab Claire and Alex? Start building the
pyre. Some of the muggles can help.”

Donna nodded morosely and kissed Jody on the cheek, her hand sliding off her back as Jody ducked
her head and left the cabin, her boots clunking hard, her gait stiff. The door slammed behind her.

“We gotta talk about how Sarah died,” Sam said.

Anael snorted and rolled her eyes, taking another swig of whiskey and shuddering. “You sure
Castiel didn’t shoot her by accident?”

Castiel’s jaw dropped and Dean growled, reaching across her and yanking the bottle from her hand.

“Enough of that for you!” Dean growled. “If you say one more thing about Cas shooting you by
mistake, I’m gonna shoot you on purpose.”

Castiel’s stomach sank, watching his sister’s face. She was glaring at him, and to her credit, the anger
seemed shallow. She was annoyed with the bullet wound, but otherwise, she seemed like herself. He
would even doubt that she’d fallen entirely from grace except she was sweating, a bit drunk, and still
bleeding around Dean’s gloved hands as he stitched her up.

“I’m sorry, sister,” Castiel repeated, quieter.

Anael sighed and waved him off, slouching back against the wall, ignoring Dean’s look of
annoyance at her constant fidgetting. “Stop fretting about the grace, Castiel,” she murmured. “It
would’ve happened eventually. I didn’t have enough grace left to even remove the bullet. If it didn’t
happen today, it would’ve happened tomorrow for something probably substantially more stupid.”

Dean snorted, patting at the wound with a cotton pad soaked in alcohol. “I did notice your hair has
gotten substantially less curly in the last hour.”

“You were not using your grace to keep your hair curly,” Castiel breathed, unable to believe the
stupidity of that notion.

Anael looked offended, glancing at each person in the room. Then, she scoffed and barked, “Oh,
leave a girl alone, would you? It’s the end of the world, let me have my thing.”
Everyone groaned, even Rowena, who was mid-way through her spell and was also the one who had insisted they buy a bag of silly foam curling-sticks from the grocery store a few weeks back. She hardly was in a position to judge, but it was Rowena, so she’d judge anyway.

“Can we focus?” Sam snapped, as he struggled to yank latex gloves from his hands and tossed them aside into a bucket, a scowl on his face as he paced over to Dean, Anael, and Castiel in the corner. He shifted his weight onto his hip and pointed back at Sarah. “She didn’t die from a zombie bite. She died from blood loss...from being stabbed.”

Castiel turned a bit on the bed, pulling his knee up onto the mattress. He looked up at Sam, confused. “But her jaw had been ripped from her face. That brutality—”

“The zombies did that afterward,” Sam explained, grimacing. He pushed greasy hair back from his forehead and scratched at his thick stubble. “Aiden--the tall kid, wears a beanie all the time--he told me that they’d gone out there to, uh, ‘smoke up’—”

“Of course they did,” Dean grumbled bitterly, shaking his head, narrowing his eyes at Anael’s wound.

“--they thought they’d be fine because we hadn’t seen a zombie near camp for over a day. Anyway, they said they got surrounded and that the leader, that girl, the ‘queen’ had a knife. He said she stabbed at Sarah first, downed her. I think...I think she expected them to try to save her, but they ran.”

“How did Sarah end up back with them then?” Castiel asked, his throat dry, his eyes doing that irritating thing when they welled up and his nose felt all tight in tandem with his chest. He couldn’t quite believe the other muggles had just left Sarah behind. “She was with them when we reached the warding.”

“Jasvir said Sarah managed to get up, even though she’d been stabbed several times. Said her innards were hanging from her stomach,” Anael said, her tongue decidedly fat in her mouth as she began to obviously feel the effects of a quarter bottle of whiskey in a stomach that hadn’t consumed food in years. Castiel reached over and patted her knee. Anael had gone from pissed and sassy to tired and drunk in “zero-to-a-hundred”, as Dean would say.

“Her tongue had been cut out too,” Anael added, making a sour face, her tongue hanging out. “Vile undead. Jas said the queen gave the tongue to one of her young.”

Rowena, who took a deep breath and lowered her hands, seemingly done with her spell, began walking over. She explained tiredly, “The tongue is a delicacy. She graced her wee undead with the best part.”

“That’s gross,” Dean barked, looking up at Rowena and furrowing his brows at her. “You’re being fuckin’ gross.”

“You pulled a bullet from a lady’s arm with a pair of tweezers and are knitting together her flesh with thread... But a zombie eating a tongue is disturbing for you?” Rowena mocked, raising a skeptical, arched brow up at Dean. “Gore is gore is gore, Deany-weeny.”

“Anyway,” Sam said, resting his hand on Rowena’s shoulder as she dropped down beside Castiel on the edge of the bed. Sam paused, his lip twitching up in the corner when Rowena sighed with fatigue and leaned over, resting the side of her head against his hip as he spoke. “Um, anyway, they said they turned back to help her run towards the wards, and that’s when the zombies caught up. We got there just as they started to fight, just after one of the zombies attacked Sarah with the...uh, the jaw
thing."

Dean finally leaned away from Anael, wiping his hands on a rag. He stared at Sam with his mouth open. He pointed vaguely at his brother, then asked, “Wait a sec. So you’re tryna tell me that the zombies are using *weapons* now?”

“Is that so far-fetched?” Castiel asked, watching Dean, noticing he was still sitting very, very close to Anael, despite the fact that he seemed done stitching her up. “They have a leader who can communicate. Claire and Alex’s interactions with the hordes at the hospital only proves they’re become intelligent, that they’re evolving.”

“Yeah, but *weapons*?” Dean countered, scowling. “Come on.”

“Jas and Aiden said so,” Anael slurred, narrowing her already narrow eyes, her lashes casting her eyes into dark slits. “They *said* so.”

Ignoring her drunkenness, the group exchanged looks but nodded. Dean still refused to concede. “Yeah, but can we really trust these high teenagers? They snuck out to smoke pot; that whole stabby-knifey thing coulda been a bad trip. I mean, zombie with weapons? We supposed to believe that?”

Rowena rolled her eyes, shifting her head against Sam’s hip. “You mean like zombies that can smirk and cause strategic pain, oh, like stepping on the foot of their prey’s weakest link?”

Castiel winced, and turned his head down, staring at the floor, glaring at his sub-par foot.

Still over by Sarah’s corpse, Donna pitched in, shaking her head. “Zombies who double back, separate, and use bait?”

Rowena laughed bitterly. “Zombies *with an army*… It seems, in these savage times, that notion is *not* so farfetched.”

Everyone shared another moment on silence.

Then, Anael hiccuped.

Castiel smiled at her sadly, his stomach in knots at the look on her face; she looked suddenly miserable.

“I’m hungry,” she moped. “And I’m...thirsty, I suppose. Who do I have to kill to get a glass of water and one of those disgusting cans of beans everyone consumes around here?”

“Oh, dear,” Rowena tittered, sighing and getting to her feet. Sam’s hand slid off her shoulder, and the witch reached forward with both hands to flex them at Anael. “Come with me, fallen angel. Let’s get something in your belly before all that painkiller comes back up the way it went down, shall we?”

Cas and Sam hovered behind the girls until Donna stepped forward to help, following them to ensure the red-heads wouldn’t topple down the two steps outside due to Anael’s unsteady gait.

Dean put away the bloody bandages and cotton pads. Castiel avoided looking at Sarah’s mangled face, his heart aching as he searched the room for a spare blanket, or rag...something to cover her eyes.

Sam went out to let the muggles know the funeral would start in a few hours, leaving Dean and Castiel alone in the main cabin, the new and only building on the camp. Once Sarah’s face had been
hidden with a hand towel, Castiel turned to find Dean sitting where Anael had been, his back against the wall, his hands rubbing at his face.

“Zombies with weapons,” Castiel said, sitting beside Dean on the cot, his back hitting the wall. The small space pressed their arms together, their thighs warming each other through their jeans.

Dean lowered his hands down to his legs with a clap and groaned, looking up at the ceiling, his green eyes looking golden in the lantern light. “Zombies with friggin’ weapons. Knives, specifically.” Dean turned his head against the wood, watching Castiel’s face. “Fuck, you don’t think they’ll learn how to use guns, right? I mean…their hand-eye coordination can’t be any good.”

Castiel slumped against the wall, feeling miserable. He glanced over at Dean and grumbled, “I hope dearly that they do not learn how to use firearms. It wouldn’t look good if they were better equipped to handle a gun than I.”

“HAH!” To his surprise, Dean burst into laughter, snapping a hand up to his mouth as if he was surprised the sound had come from him.

Castiel rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest. “Yes. Laugh at me. That makes me feel better,” Castiel muttered, glaring through his lashes as Dean’s shoulders shook, jolting them both. “Zombies are evolving as humans faster than I am. Sooner they’ll be able to wield an angel blade better, or perhaps take me down with hand-to-hand combat. Which,” Castiel’s brows shot up on his forehead and his eyes went wide, “is quite a feat, considering a large majority of them don’t have hands.”

Dean kicked out, laughing so hard he was holding his stomach and tears escaped the corners of his eyes. Castiel thought, with a dead girl in the cabin and a funeral due to happen in a few hours, laughter was in bad taste.

But Dean looked momentarily carefree, so he allowed it.

Into his hand, Dean wheezed, “You shot your own fuckin’ sister!”

“I recall you injuring Sam by accident several times in your life, thank you. It would do well for you to remember that,” Castiel said back. For some ridiculous reason, a smile was trying to creep on this lips, too, despite how unbelievably sad he’d felt only minutes before. Human emotions were bizarre.

“Dude,” Dean leaned to the side, bumping his shoulder against Cas’, his eyes glittering happily. “You’re such a bad shot.”

Castiel turned his head away and smirked so Dean couldn’t see it. “Not funny.”

“Aw, come on!”

“It’s not funny, Dean. I’ve been human for a month and I can’t shoot a gun.”

“I mean, you can shoot it, you just can’t hit anything except your sister…” Dean dissolved into indulgent chuckles. “Sorry.”

Unaware of what possessed him, Castiel turned his head back quickly and reached forward, pinching Dean in the ribs. “Stop it.”

“Ow!” Dean pushed him away, but the two of them laughed and came back together, their shoulders bumping. “Okay, fine. Not funny. Don’t sweat it, Cas. It was a flesh wound, she’ll be fine. I mean, it was a pretty freakin’ jarring introduction to humanity, but yours wasn’t so smooth either. She better
just thank her lucky damn stars that she didn’t fall from grace and land on her foot wrong—”

Castiel reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose with two rough fingertips. He shook his head. “I can’t believe you.”

Dean grinned, his pointy teeth glittering in even the dull light. “Hey, hey, listen. I told you I’d help you human. Guess we should start with teachin’ you how to shoot and hit things that aren’t your only sister?”

“Dean.”

“After the funeral, we’ll practice,” Dean murmured, his eyes flickering across Castiel’s face. “I’ll help you, like I promised.”

“You certainly have your work cut out for you. Can’t shoot, can’t cook, can’t walk for long periods of time…” Cas trailed off, staring at the floor bitterly.

Quietly in the dark, Dean reached over and took Cas’ hand, their fingers flexing around each other’s, and then linking.

“Cut it out. You were a warrior, remember?” Dean squeezed at Cas’ hand. “If you can dodge a wrench, you can dodge a ball, and all the jazz.”

Castiel looked up from their joined hands, his heart doing somersaults and slamming against his chest. He felt a bit numb in the face, yet warm. What were his emotions doing?

“What?” he asked instead, rather bluntly.

Dean grinned, his nose so close it almost touched Castiel’s. Castiel found himself wondering when personal space stopped being an issue between them, and decided that it had been essentially obliterated off the earth when God left them all behind and Castiel began using a cane to get around. Dean’s preoccupation with personal space hadn’t been brought up once ever since.

“It’s from Dodgeball. I made you watch that like two years ago, remember?” Dean raised his brows, eyes alight. His thumb ran over the soft fleshy bit of Castiel’s palm, making his stomach clench nervously. But...a good nervous. “Anyway,” Dean continued, shrugging, “it means if you could fight way-back-when with all the weapons I’m sure you knew how to use as a bad-ass angel, then you can get good at using a gun as a bad-ass human. We just gotta practice. We, uh, gotta take it slow.”

Castiel nodded, feeling robbed of breath as Dean trailed off and stared at him. His tongue swept out over his lips. Dean’s fingers had slipped from between his but not lost contact. They were dragging trails over Castiel’s hand, and one singular finger was rubbing a circle over his wrist. “We should take...it slow.”

Dean nodded, swallowing. “Yeah. Baby steps. Baby steps with, uh, the human stuff.”

“When do we start?” Castiel asked, his throat dry.

Dean pulled his hand back and cleared his throat, pushing away from the wall and scooching off the edge of the bed. He looked over his shoulder and quirked the corner of his lips.

“Tomorrow.”
“Okay. Shoot. Show me what you got.”

Castiel felt stupid.

While others cleaned up from the funeral and the breakfast that had followed, he and Dean were at the back of camp, behind the remains of Bobby’s house. Everyone knew what they were up to; Anael had complained about her shoulder to anyone who would listen. By the time the body was burned and everyone had finished eating, there wasn’t a soul in the camp that didn’t know Castiel was a terrible shot. And now, with them away from the rest, shooting at tin cans atop a rusted car, he was sure they knew exactly what they were doing.

“Aim for that Pepsi can,” Dean said, standing beside him, watching but staying back enough that he wouldn’t be hit with a recoiling bullet shell.

Castiel stepped up to the line Dean had drawn in the dirt with a stick and raised the gun in his hand. He shut an eye and aimed like he’d used to when he’d wielded a bow in the centuries following Christ’s death. His fingers flexed around the handle of the gun and his finger slid in around the trigger, tugging back.

His upper body jerked back a bit as the weapon fired, and it jumped a bit in his hand, the muzzle pointing at the sky by the time the bullet had exited the chamber. The shell flew over his shoulder, past him and Dean. The bullet itself zipped towards the Pepsi can…

It shattered a car window several feet to the left.

Castiel lowered the weapon and raised his face to the sky, shutting his eyes.

Dean patted him on the shoulder. “It’s cool. It’s fine. This is fine. It’ll..uh, be fine.”

Castiel brought his chin back down and glared at the glass sprayed across the ground. “Nothing about that was fine. I feel like a failure.”

Behind him, Dean sighed, and in the crisp cold mid-morning, Castiel abruptly felt warmer as Dean moved into his personal space. Castiel looked over his shoulder at Dean when he felt warm hands on his hip.

Dean raised his brows at Castiel and asked, “May I?”

“Of course.”

Relax, he told himself as Dean’s hands slid over his body, accidentally grazing bare skin on his hip when his shirt rode up. Dean coaxed Castiel’s arms back up.

“‘Kay, first of all, why is one leg back?” Dean’s palm clapped Castiel’s hip. “Move it forward. Face your target head-on and keep your feet shoulder-width apart—”

His hands were in between Castiel’s thighs, tapping them until he was satisfied with the way they were spread. With his face feeling warm, Castiel cleared his throat and he murmured, “Okay, what now?”

One of Dean’s hands rested back on Castiel’s hip and another one splayed between his shoulder blades. Castiel could feel his breath against the back of his neck.

“Try shooting again, I wanna see something.”
Castiel raised his gun and flexed his fingers around the handle before he squeezed the trigger and delivered another round at the Pepsi.

Of course, it fired just under the broken window, leaving a concave dent and a hole in the door.

“I did it wrong again,” Castiel growled, annoyed with himself as he had been for the last month. “I’m unsure what I’m doing wrong.”

Dean chuckled. “Well, first of all, you’re being all tense, dude. Relax. You’re leaning away from the gun when you’re preparing to fire and you’re goin’ all tense under my hands. Just chill, breathe, and lean forward—” Dean’s hand on his hip tightened and he pushed Cas forward a bit, bending him just the slightest.

Castiel was not stupid or naive. He knew the movement was slightly erotic and he wondered how Dean expected him to loosen up and focus when he was bending him forward, even if just a bit.

“Got it,” he said anyway.

“And relax your legs. Bend your knees just a bit. Your elbows should be straight but not locked… Yeah, just like that. Wait--No, not too straight. Here.”

The morning cold didn’t stand a chance against the warmth of Dean’s body pressed almost entirely to the back of Castiel’s, his hands sliding over his biceps, elbows, then forearms, and resting on his wrists. As Dean spoke, his breath puffed against Castiel’s neck.

“Good. Feels good. Now I noticed you’re closing one eye. Don’t do that. Open both of ‘em and focus.” Dean reached forward a bit, grunting as he almost didn’t reach. His finger pointed towards a raised notch on the front of the handgun. “You’re using a handgun, so you’re gonna wanna focus on the front sight right here, okay? The back one is gonna be out of focus, just ignore it.”

Castiel exhaled slowly through his lips, and nodded. Closing his one eye while using a bow had reduced variables in his vision, narrowed his focus, but clearly, if he trusted Dean, he needed to adjust his habits. And he did. He did trust Dean.

Dean moved away and Castiel felt himself able to take a fuller breath. Dean patted at his hip and explained matter of factly, “Now, keep your finger on the frame up here—”

Dean moved around him, wafting the scent of leather from his jacket and the smell of alcohol from Anael’s first aid, and stopped beside him, pulling at his finger and guiding it so that it sat on the smooth, flat part of the gun above the trigger. Dean looked from the weapon to Castiel, his face breaking out into a grin.

“When you’re not using the gun? Finger on the frame, Cas. Otherwise, all of our sisters are in danger.”

While Dean chuckled at his own mockery, Castiel scowled. “You’re in danger if you make that joke again.”

Dean yanked his hands back and held them palm forward on either side of his body in surrender. “Hey, don’t need to tell me twice, gun-wielding-grumpy-angel.”

“I’m not… Nevermind,” Castiel murmured, returning his focus to the gun. “Can I shoot now?”

“Go for it, and when you pull the trigger, don’t lift your finger, just keep it squeezed there until it resets. That way you can fire quicker.”
With that, Dean was back in his spot behind Castiel, watching at a safe range.

*Pepsi. Hit the Pepsi.*

“...It’s the blue one.”

“I know it’s the blue one, Dean!”

“Jee, sorry. I just wasn’t sure if you’d ever had one before.”

“It says *Pepsi* on it, Dean.”

Dean’s chuckle made Castiel realise he was being teased mercilessly. But strangely, since their chat on the woodpile a month ago, none of Dean’s mockery had bite. The jokes lacked the spiteful, hurtful agenda that they used to hold, and had been replaced with warmth. Perhaps it took the end of the world for Dean to realise it didn’t pay to push away friends. Or, rather, judging by his lack of hesitance to hold Castiel’s hand in the dark, or when they were in private, that it took the end of the world for Dean Winchester to let go of societal ideas of masculinity and sexual ori—

“You gonna shoot or just stare at it all day? I wasn’t being an ass; It really is the blue one—”

*Bang. Bang. BANG.*

Unfortunately, the blue Pepsi can was left intact. However, whatever the red one beside it was had been blown to smithereens, blasted back and away. The other cans on the car shook and rattled as his two other shots landed a foot away from the Pepsi can, in the window frame.

“Eeeeyy!” Dean hollered, clapping and cheering. “Not bad, Cas! Not bad at all. I mean, you didn’t hit the Pepsi, you hit the Coke, but hell, it’s fine. No one else knows the difference between them either.”

For some reason, that made Dean chuckle, and while Castiel didn’t understand the reference, he found himself smiling.

“I was closer,” Castiel said, his rough voice tinged with pride. “I think I did much better.”

“Hell yeah, you did,” Dean agreed. When Castiel looked over his shoulder, Dean was staring at him, smiling freely, a dimple in his cheek sinking in a way that Castiel could only categorize as...cute. Dean nodded, winking. “Nailed it buddy. Try again.”

Before they could break eye contact, Dean clapped Castiel on the ass and turned, walking away.

“I’m grabbing us a couple beers. Keep practicing. Imagine the things you fear, get your focus, aim, and pull that trigger with purpose so you only gotta pull it once.”

With an eruption of butterflies in his stomach that had nothing to do with learning a new weapon, and had everything to do with the warmth in his back and the pleasant ache of the muscles on one side of his ass, Castiel turned back around.

With his eyes open, his hands firmly around the gun, his knees spread shoulder-width apart, and leaned forward slightly, he focused, breathed, and imagined Zombie Queen. He imagined Dick Roman. He imagined Bartholomew, Zachariah, Lucifer, and Naomi. He imagined the Empty, and remembered his deal with it.

He imagined Chuck.
Bang.

The Pepsi can didn’t stand a chance.

***

Kill him.

I cannot. I cannot shed his blood… It’s not right. This is wrong, please—

You heathen. You have no faith, no loyalty. You blaspheme and rebel against your father! Are you not grateful for my love? Do you not hold my love in your heart?

Father, please, I love you. My heart is full of light and love for you and your kingdom, but it also shines for hi—

Follow orders and shed blood in my name! Or I shall purify him myself. FULFILL YOUR DESTINY! THIS WAS NOT HOW YOUR STORY WAS SUPPOSED TO GO! DO IT OR I WILL HURL YOU INTO THE FIRE—

Castiel shot up in bed, trembling so hard he thought the earth was quaking. In the partial darkness of the cabin—lit only by the daylight shining under the door and through a cracked open window—Castiel saw a glass of water, a singular pill, and a bucket by his bed.

Quickly, he grabbed it and held it under his face. His dream felt so vivid, so entirely engrossing and real that he felt like he hadn’t yet left it. His body shook and sweat gathered on his skin, cold droplets dribbling down his face from his hairline. His stomach clenched and sloshed. Immediately, he recognized the tickle in the back of his throat and the excessive pool of saliva under his tongue as nausea.

His skin burned like hot fire was being held against it, and his throat constricted like a scream was bubbling at the back of his tongue. His wings—or rather, where they used to be—ached like someone was ripping them out, the ligaments connecting the base of his wings to his back stretching and snapping, the ends crunching where a fist was grabbing and pulling.

Anael walked in just as he was sick into the bucket.

“Same,” she sighed, walking over loftily, her long skirt swaying around her ankles. She was scraping at the bottom of a can of...something with a plastic spoon, scowling down at it. “I’ve decided alcohol is not a human thing that I wish to partake in again, bullet wound or not,” she commented lightly, brows jumping up a bit. “Nausea and a hangover, it turns out, is a horrible experience and made me feel, in all honesty, very ugly.”

Castiel retched one more time into the bucket, then coughed wetly and cleared his throat, avoiding looking down at the mess lest it made him vomit again.

“I apologize,” he rasped. “That was...disgusting.”

“It’s all right,” Anael said, pulling a blackbean off the end of her fork with her teeth. “It’s just...so undignified, isn’t it? Your own body rejects the sustenance you gave it by squeezing it into a mush and then forcefully ejecting it from—”

Castiel pressed a hot palm to his mouth, shaking his head. “Anael, please.”

She closed one eye, peering at the bottom of her can and scraping at it to get to the dregs. “You shot
me, Castiel. You hardly have the luxury of insinuating that I be silent. Besides,” she straightened up and opened her eyes, smirking, “I’m older than you by four thousand years, so I’ll be the one giving the orders here. If you want peace and quiet to nurse the hangover you and Dean gave yourselves this morning by shooting at cans and drinking your way through eighteen cans of beer, then you do it in your own cabin.”

Castiel blinked, looking around at the cabin, confused. “I beg your pardon?”

Then he realized...

“This is your bed,” Castiel said, feeling his face heat up. “This is your cabin.”

“Absolutely. That bucket was there because of my own hangover this morning… Oh, stop looking at it like that, I didn’t get sick in it. Although, well, it was certainly tempting. I now know that not only will I never drink again, but I especially won’t be drinking ever again on a stomach that hasn’t eaten food since 2013.”

“Why am I in your cabin?” Castiel asked, feeling his skin chill as the dream’s effects on him subsided and his sweat cooled.

Anael wiped her lips with her sleeve and leaned forward to put down her fork and can, trading them for the glass of water and pill on her bedside. To his surprise, she turned to him and handed him the items.

As he swallowed the pill and drank slowly—then greedily—she said casually, “I suppose you must’ve taken a wrong turn after the bro-fest this morning. Dean’s in a similar way over in your actual cabin. Although he’s awake now and busy grunting at everyone about being quiet around his headache. I returned from lunch to find you asleep on my bed. You trying to make your boyfriend jealous?”

Rubbing at his forehead and trying not to acknowledge the burn of embarrassment in his cheeks, Castiel groaned, “That’s humiliating. Although I suppose a hangover is a better excuse to be sick than a nightmare. I—I’m sorry, Anael. I’ll be out of your way—”

Anael blinked, and a peculiar look crossed her face. “Nightmares?”

He stood shakily, reaching a hand out in a fumble for the wall, his head throbbing suddenly. He recalled Dean saying he was going to grab a “couple” beers...but now that Anael mentioned it, after the rounds of ammunition ended and Dean showed him a few more guns he could learn about, Castiel did have the vaguest recollection of Dean wrenching open the hood of a car nearby, and drunkenly insisting he teach Castiel the ins-and-outs of a car engine. Carburetor-something-something, transmission-something-something…

“Yes, nightmares.” Castiel rasped, ashamed with how hoarse his voice sounded. He rubbed at his face and leaned against the wall, using his nightmare as an excuse to stall and fight off the dizziness that threatened to overpower him if he tried to leave. “I have...been struggling to sleep as of late. Nightmares plague me.”

“What of?” Anael asked, tilting her head.

“Fire. Wrath. Shame. Loneliness. There is a strong sense of loneliness.” Castiel rubbed his clammy palm over his jeans--wrinkled from being slept in. “The nightmares. They feel...vaguely—”

“Familiar? Like memories, not dreams?”

Her tone was odd, and Castiel found himself holding a stare with his sister. He tilted his head as well
and replied slowly, “Yes. Familiar like that. But they are more distant, more unreachable. I can’t identify who is speaking or if these dreams even ever happened. The voices belong to beings I don’t recognize.” At the way Anael looked down, her face pinched and confused, he asked, “Have you been having nightmares as well?”

Anael shook her head, flicking hair over her shoulder. With a heavy, long sigh, she looked up, the bags under her eyes pronounced in the strange lighting. “No,” she said flatly. “Not nightmares, although I have only slept a handful of times, and often not long enough to dwell on dreams. When I do have them, however, I suppose I do wake feeling unsettled, but I don’t feel fire or wrath. Nor do I feel shame or loneliness. I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize.” Castiel nodded. “It is probably a fluke. A... ‘glitch in the Matrix’.”

Anael blinked. “What?”

“It’s... from a movie. A film, Anael.”

Her brown eyes rolled and Anael waved at him vaguely. “I know it’s from a film, little brother. I’m confused as to why for years, up in Heaven, we heard of the great and dangerous things the feared and powerful Castiel was doing on earth, and now I’m realising you’d just been drinking beers and watching movies with Dean Winchester the entire time.”

“I...” Castiel fumbled for words. “…didn’t just drink ‘beers’ with Dean Winchester. Not often.”

“I don’t see you denying the movies.”

Castiel nodded, and smiled a bit, despite himself. “Yes. Dean wishes that I know more about pop culture. He likes... liked to show me movies and television when there was minimal threat of immediate danger in our lives.”

Anael’s face softened and she smiled back. “Cute.” Her shoulders shrugged. “Those are cute dates.”

“They weren’t dates.”

Anael rolled her eyes and stood, reaching over to grab the bucket by the handle gingerly. “Sure they weren’t. Now, get out of my cabin and take this with you.” She patted his arm and snorted when he took the bucket from her with a shudder. “And Castiel?”

He paused in his movement to leave, peering at her. Her hand gave his elbow a squeeze.

“I much prefer ‘Jo’,” she said softly.

Immediately, he understood. She forgave him for shooting her. She wanted him to use her chosen name, the one she gave to friends. The one she’d kept for her very own human life.

“I much prefer ‘Cas’,” he murmured, smiling.

They nodded at each other, accepting the new names they’d chosen for themselves in this new world.

“Go to shower, Cas,” Jo said, turning from him. Her hand slid off his arm. “You stink like a hangover.”

***

It wasn’t his time slot for the showers, but Vince took pity on him and switched.
While everyone usually complained about the water never being hot enough, Castiel welcomed the cool water hitting his face and body. It woke him up and slowly washed away the shame of accidentally getting drunk first thing in the morning and then vomiting in a bed that he’d accidentally stumbled onto and actually wasn’t his.

He scrubbed at his teeth with his toothbrush and ran his hands over his face, wishing he could shave. He missed feeling the skin on his jaw, upper lip, and neck. Dean said he ‘dug the beard’, but Castiel would have to see if he could convince Maria to give him a razor or two from the supplies that she kept inventory of. Eventually though, push came to shove, the beard would go by method of the sharp edge of an angel blade.

However, Dean did spent a lot of time admiring the beard. Perhaps it could stay for a bit longer. If Castiel having facial hair made his closest friend happy, who was he to deny him something so simple in a world where everything else was miserable?

Admittedly, feeling clean and wearing fresh clothing made the hangover feel significantly better. Odd, how that worked. Humanity… He would never get used to it.

As he was approaching his own cabin—he double checked that he was right this time—Dean was leaving, looking like he’d also only a short time ago been out of the shower, too, his dark blonde hair looking nearly brown as the tips dried but the roots were still damp. He was still sporting his own beard too, and Castiel had to admit to himself… He kind of ‘dug it’ as well.

“Oh, look, he’s awake,” Dean snorted, rubbing at his hair and stretching, pausing to block the sun with his hand, and wince. “And actually heading towards the right cabin this time. How was your time in Jo’s bed?”

Castiel chose to ignore the sarcastic tone aimed at him in that last sentence. “Not particular better than being in mine,” Castiel retorted. “Although I managed to vomit in that one and not my own, which is a small victory, I suppose.”

Dean laughed, his eyes lighting up. “You puked in Jo’s bed?”

“I vomited while I was on her bed. If that’s the same thing, then yes. There was a bucket involved, but I can’t imagine that was any less disgusting for her.”

They fell into step with each other, and only when they were half-way to the garage did Castiel realise he had no idea where he was going, but he was following Dean anyway.

Story of his life.

“Plans for the rest of the day?” Castiel asked, raising a brow. “I understand that the muggles are uneasy with the magic forcefield—I imagine seeing nothing but cars and the occasional shimmer of magic doesn’t put them at ease. Sam was saying the other day you’d spend today putting up physical fortifications. Considering the rambunctious nature of our target practice this morning, I assume those plans are postponed?”

Dean snorted, opening the door into the garage for Castiel, gesturing inside and shaking his head. “No dice, Cas. We were the ones who decided to drink our faces off. Now, I’ve had good ol’ hair of the dog, and a shower, and choked down a can of beans, and I’m gonna get fortifying.”

A group of muggles huddled around a table in the corner all waved at Castiel, their eyes lighting up. He waved back and smiled softly, knowing his presence brought them comfort for some reason. When they turned back and reformed their group, chatting and playing cards, Castiel followed Dean...
over to the other back corner where Bobby’s tools were stored in a messy pile.

“Do you require assistance?”

Ever since his grace left and took all his usefulness with it--he could no longer hear long distances and sense a disturbance--he was clamouring at the bit to find something to do to make himself important at the camp. It was a jarring realization that Castiel had to make peace with as of late; he did have the very basic human desire to be wanted, and needed. It scared him, but… Well, it made a lot of sense.

As an angel, values and aspirations of importance were frowned upon, considered blasphemous, even. But he couldn’t quite help it now, could he? Just like he couldn’t help breathing or eating or vomiting after nine cans of beer. It was very human.

“Hell yes, I need assistance,” Dean snorted, throwing a large, dusty mask at Castiel, who barely caught it against his chest. “Once I find us some gloves in this fuckin’ mess of a room, I’m gonna teach you how to do some welding. The car-wall is just...a mess. No wonder the muggles are freaked out.”

“It does leave something to be desired,” Castiel conceded, turning the mask in his hands, scrunching his nose at the fine black powder left on his fingers from it. “What are your plans?”

Dean turned to him, waving a dirty pair of large gloves. “We’re changin’ the walls of cars to a wall made out of cars. You know what a butt weld is?”

Castiel scowled. “An excuse for you to say ‘butt’ in a sentence?”

With a grin, Dean laughed. The noise made Castiel subconsciously smile back, shaking his head as the heaviness that typically followed him around lifted slightly and he felt lighter. Dean waved him off with a lofty wave of the gloves and walked past him, leaving a waft of citrus body wash and that unmistakable leathery smell of Dean.

“Come on, funny guy, let’s do some practice welds outside. I ain’t no Bobby, so I can’t promise I’ll be a good teacher, but we’re not exactly aiming for perfection here. I wanna show you around a MIG welder before we start fortifying this bitch.” Dean paused as he rolled out a cart with odd machinery piled on top. He looked over his shoulder and winked. “For this lesson, we’re gonna skip the beers. Cool with you?”

Castiel dipped his head and smiled at the floor, tugging on the gloves and stepping up beside Dean, their bare arms brushing as he helped push the cart.

“Cool with me, Dean.”

***

Since he’d had his one shower of the day already, and with the evening rush before bed, there was already a line of muggles waiting and no chance he’d be able to sneak one in until much later at night.

Welding, as one would imagine, turned out to be a very hot and dirty task. Dean had taught Castiel the basics, and at first it had been a struggle, but eventually, he’d managed to not burn a hole through every practice piece he was given. Actually, Castiel noticed with pride, he’d caught on rather quickly and was soon helping Dean weld together scrap pieces of metal they found around the yard; some pieces left lying about the yard, while others were full doors and hoods of cars.
Four hours, a lot of sweat, some very close guidance—often very, very close—from Dean, they had a wall that was about ten feet wide and rose about six feet above the ground. Tall enough to see over, but sturdy enough to reassure the muggles that there was some physical barrier between them and the zombies. Ten feet was hardly anything, considering the length around the entire property. It would take them weeks, if not months to do that rest, but it was a start.

Of course, the leadership team of Camp Singer knew perfectly well that if the magic barrier broke down for any reason, they’d all be dead. No measly metal wall would protect anyone. It might buy them seconds at most, but the muggles required a morale boost. While Dean, Sam, Castiel and friends were used to the apocalypse—they had, of course, had several run-ins with it before—the muggles were certainly broken down by end times. Their hope came in bursts, but crashed hard when something miniscule went wrong at camp. Two weeks ago, the generators had failed for a mere twenty minutes, and despair had been palpable in the air for days as a result.

Knowing he’d be willing to wait until everyone went to bed to have another shower—Castiel hated being sticky or dirty, it was another vain human trait he disliked himself for, but would need to expect—he offered to patrol tonight.

So once dinner was eaten and put away, and Claire and Alex’s nightly card game happened with other young muggles (and Crowley, who seemed eager to wager anything if it meant it would spice up the game) in the new main building, the camp was sleeping and quiet. Anael was gracious enough to take over his patrol as he bathed.

Once he was out into the night again, he inhaled deeply. The night smelled fresh and the darkness was almost peaceful. The world was deceptively quiet, which was equally welcome and unnerving, considering the atrocities he knew were happening outside their walls. Quiet never meant good in the apocalypse.

With that in mind, he stopped by the garage and armed himself with a gun. A handgun; 44mm, like the one Dean had used to train him this morning. He checked the chamber, loaded the gun, equipped himself with more ammunition, and then turned on the safety before exiting the building.

To his surprise, as he made his way around the perimeter, he was greeted by a familiar figure walking the opposite way towards him.

“Jo,” Castiel greeted once she was in hearing range. “You can retire to bed now. Thank you for covering my patrol, I—”

As they met in the middle, Jo smirked and looped her arm with his, turning him as to carry on in the direction she’d been headed. She pointed ahead of them.

“The demon Crowley is patrolling the other side with Sam. I’ve checked the east side already, we’re all clear. Care to keep me company? I’m not very sleepy,” she admitted, humming bitterly. She jerked her head a bit to throw a piece of limp red hair over her shoulder. “Several millenias of not sleeping is a hard habit to abandon.”

“I understand.”

He looked over at Anael...no, Jo. He looked over at Jo and felt his stomach drop a bit at the lost look on her face. As smarmy as she pretended to be, her hopelessness and loss were not lost on him; they were etched on her face sometimes when she allowed her mask to slip. As an angel who had worn a mask for too long, he knew how it felt now; human emotions were stronger than he ever knew they could be, and they had a way of showing even though all he wanted to do was hide them. They even showed up in his voice if he wasn’t too careful, especially in those tormented moments when he
thought about Jack.

They walked in silence, Castiel’s cold hands in his pockets, and Jo warming his side. Their eyes were sharp, watching the treeline on the other side of the shimmering wards, over the hoods and broken windows of unloved and abandoned cars.

“How do you manage all of it?” Anael asked suddenly, her voice quiet and low. She sounded pensive, but when he looked over and they locked eyes, he saw a sparkle of unease.

In the distance, there was a dull thumping noise.

He frowned at her. “What do you mean?”

She didn’t answer immediately, her eyes returning out to the trees. He noticed even in the darkness that her skin was pale, and her hair was greasy at the roots.

“Jo…”

“Everything. The chaos, the uncertainty. I fell to Earth and wanted to be human, and I chose to heal others and enjoy material items to create an identity that I thought was me. I wanted to enjoy things I hadn’t been able to as an angel, take pride in my things and my actions like humans did. You know how it used to be… Follow orders, be humble, be virtuous and self-less. I thought to enjoy humanity was to indulge in all the opposite of that; I gave into selfish feelings of wanting to make an impact. It was…very indulgent. But this? This primitive need to keep this body functioning, it’s just as indulgent, but it’s chaotic. So much more chaotic.”

He knew the feeling. Doing things for themselves had been blasphemous. Angels lived to serve. God, humanity, the host, the common order. Living for themselves and having things, and feeling proud and self-interested was cause for exile. Now, eating and drinking and fighting to survive felt indulgent, almost too much.

He supposed that was Chuck’s intention; to create humans with built-in selfishness. Function solely on selfishness; eat, consume, breathe, protect, survive.

They had stopped walking. Jo’s arm slid out from Castiel’s and she tugged her shawl--a car blanket from the wholesale outlet--around her shoulders and she shrugged. He felt a bit broken at the sheen in her eyes.

“It’s unsettling,” she admitted softly. “And you’ve been doing this since before the fall. You allowed yourself indulgence in human things; emotions, choices, freedom. How have you been doing it for so long in the face of several potential apocalypses and not gone entirely insane?”

Freedom is like a length of rope… and God wants you to hang yourself with it.

Castiel’s lip quirked up, and he felt the familiar creep of bitterness come from his chest. “You mean, as humanity manifests itself inside, how do I deal with the suffocating fear?”

That was the real question underneath her existential questions. Anael conceded, nodding, blowing out through her pouty lips. “Yeah, I suppose. How do you deal with the fear of all this? How do any of them deal with it?”

Instead of answering, Castiel decided to show her. Stepping close, he leaned down the five inches of height difference between them, pressed a kiss to her forehead, and wrapped his arms around Anael’s shoulders. At first, she huffed against his shoulder, but as he relaxed--he was still unsure of how to hug as well as Dean or Sam did, but he was certainly trying--he felt her arms come up around
his ribs. The two angels with no wings and no home held each other, and quickly they gave into their human desires to feel needed and wanted, and they were soon gripping so tightly neither seemed to know how to let go.

“Like this,” Castiel murmured, eventually. “I think I deal with it like this. With family, and friendship, and—”

His heart stopped as the thumping they’d heard periodically grew louder and suddenly, even without his angelic powers, he felt a numbness shoot down his spine. Something was wrong. Danger. There was snarling and growling so feral that he suddenly felt sick with fear. It was too loud, and too close.

Anael felt it too, because they broke their hug and exchanged looks. They both fell into warrior mode, their faces suspicious and determined but focused. Anael pulled out her angel blade from her waistband and Castiel clicked off the safety of his gun, holding it like Dean had taught him; tightly, hands high up on the handle, and pointed towards the ground.

They moved quickly together, their footsteps quiet over the dirt.

It didn’t take long before they found the source of the thumping and snarling.

A man—or rather, what used to be a man—was standing not an inch away from the warding. His tongue was hanging from what used to be a face, one eye dangling out of its socket. The suit he’d been buried in was shredded and splotched with blood, and his skin was molted, blistered and greying. He was revolting. Even through the wards, they could smell him.

Castiel held out a hand for Anael to stay back, but she ignored him, tailing in closely at his back, her blade out, her stance ready.

The zombie took a jolted step back, then he snarled and jumped forward. His forehead crashed against the warding as he headbutted the magic, sending the enchantments shooting up and out like a crack in a windshield. The former angels watched together as the zombie repeated the movement, smashing his soft, rotting skull against the warding. In his hand, the zombie held a machete.

_Thump._

_Thump._

_Thump._

It sounded like a bird colliding into a window. It was muffled, almost dull like the warding distorted the sound.

Unknowing what possessed him, Castiel lowered his weapon and swallowed the lump in his throat. He remembered the horde of zombies that towered over him in the alleyway and the leader, who stepped towards him and smirked with her slimy, vile lips as she stepped on his wound and caused him the worst agony he’d felt as a mortal. Despite knowing he was likely safe, he felt fear slide down his throat and pool in his stomach like ice. He felt frozen for a moment.

Then, the human voice in his head that sounded like Dean told him to step forward. Fight. Survive. Dominate.

“You asked how to deal with fear in this life, in these bodies that are ours now,” Castiel murmured, walking slowly towards the zombie. Despite the stench, he stopped inches away from it, his hands shaking, his breath shallow, and the warmth of the ward’s magic tickled the tip of his nose. Castiel summoned the courage in him placed there by friends and family he needed to protect, by people in
camp who looked up to him, by Anael who was his sister, and by Dean, who taught him to fire a gun and hold hands like he meant it.

The zombie stopped, frozen, just like Castiel had, and he sniffed.

“He can smell you,” Anael whispered. “The citrus…”

The zombie’s eye—the one inside its socket—widened. It sniffed again, this time more desperately, more hungrily. The zombie then inhaled deeply and roared, reeling back and crashing into the warding. Once, twice, over and over, faster and faster—

Blood was sliding down the warding like the magic was made of glass.

“You asked how to deal with fear,” Castiel repeated, his voice a growl. He stepped back.

And with his feet shoulder-width apart, his upper body leaned forward like he wasn’t scared of the recoil, he raised his gun, and pointing it in between the eyes of this walking nightmare.

He, once again, imagined Chuck.

“You aim, focus,” Castiel croaked, “and you pull the trigger.”

Bang.

Chapter End Notes

Eyyyyy! Me again, your favourite neighbourhood jscribbles, here makin' puns and stealing hearts.

Leave me a comment to tell me how much you adored this chapter, or hate me for it, whichever suits your fancy. Or just leave me a comment to tell me that you're going to divorce me for all the times I gave Cas a boner in this and didn't let anyone help him with it. Orrrrrr leave me a comment to let me know how you enjoyed Dean feelin' up Cas' guns. ;)

Also drop a kudos if you noticed the subtle ass-slap I left there for y'all. Never tell me I don't do anything for you guys.

Check out my other stuff here! And chat with me here!
Old Friend Back in Town

Chapter by fangirlingtodeath513, heylittleangel

Chapter Summary

The Winchesters reunite with an old friend; the monster situation is more grave than any of them could possibly have imagined.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! This chapter was authored by myself and the lovely Gii. It was super fun to write and we’re both really excited for you all to see where this fic is going :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Brownville, ME

Sarah inched down the sidewalk, shivering through the evening temperatures of mid-January. She was already tired of Maine’s brutal winter and they were only halfway through, not to mention that ever since the dead rose, they hadn’t had any kind of heat. Frowning and tucking her thick jacket tighter around herself, she dug through her bag to find her keys. It took a few minutes, far longer than she’d like, but eventually, she dragged them from the depths of her purse and got her house key into the door despite her shaking fingers.

She was wrenched away from the door before she had a chance to unlock it, tossed carelessly onto the sidewalk that led up to her house. She slipped around on a strip of ice as she scrambled to right herself, trying to find the zombie that was attacking her. She couldn’t find anything in the darkness as she pushed herself to her feet and silently cursed at herself for forgetting to grab her gun before leaving. She heard a crunch of icy snow behind her, standing up as she dug around for the pocket knife she kept in her bag and spun toward the noise, kneeling on the sidewalk.

“Who’s there?” she shouted irrationally, pleased when her voice didn’t waver and betray the terror she was really feeling. “I’ve got a knife!”

No one answered, but she hadn’t really expected them to. She glanced back at the front door of her house and frowned. She had two options, at least the way she saw it. She could sprint for the door and hope she could get it open and get inside before whoever the hell was out here could get to her, or she could make a break for it the other way and get as far from her house as possible. Houses
were few and far between in Brownville, and it wasn’t as if she could just call 911.

So that left one option—she steeled herself, gripping her pocket knife tightly in her left hand as she made for the front door. She didn’t hear anything behind her, so she risked it and turned the key. Once again, she was slammed back onto the pavement of her sidewalk, gasping for breath. She could hear her knife clatter somewhere off to her left, and this time she had the distinct feeling of someone kneeling over her. The clouds shifted away from the moon and Sarah caught a flash of white, pointy teeth before the person on top of her went straight for her throat.

Another glint, and then the clouds were covering the moon again, bathing Brownville in complete darkness. There was a dull thud to her right, something that sounds like dripping, and then the weight on top of her was gone. She took a few deep, shaky breaths before a bright light blinded her and made her fling an arm over her face. A flashlight.

“Y’alright? C’mon, I’ll help ya up.”

The man standing above her holding the flashlight offered her a hand and Sarah finally realized what had just happened. On the ground to her right was the very headless dead body of the guy who’d been attacking her. Sure enough, when she risked a closer look, she noticed something she hadn’t noticed before; this guy had a set of sharp, bright white teeth covering his normal teeth.

She turned her attention to the other man standing above her and regarded his outstretched hand for a moment before she took it and let him haul her to her feet. He saved her life, so he couldn’t be that bad, could he? He was tall, nearly a foot taller than she was, and he had well-kept scruff on his face, as well as some weird kind of flat cap covering most of his forehead. He was probably a decade older than she was, but he was objectively attractive. In another life, maybe she’d go for it, but her heart was just starting to calm down and she was not in any mood to flirt. She caught a glimpse of a machete in his other hand, which was all kinds of weird and only added to how done she is with this whole situation.

“Thank you for…” she trailed off, glancing down at the now headless man laying on her sidewalk.

“Ain’t a problem. You gonna be okay?” He cleaned the machete off with a rag and slid it into a sheath hanging from his hip. The motion made her uneasy, but if he wanted to hurt her then he would’ve done so by now.

“I think so, yeah. Thank you again. I’m just gonna…” She motioned toward her house, collecting her things off the sidewalk and heading up the steps to the front door. She was not sure what made her, but she turned around and found the man who had saved her already beginning to remove the
She wasn’t sure if she should be scared of this guy. He had beheaded her attacker like it was nothing, but he seemed to know what he was doing. If he’d wanted her dead, he could’ve just let the other guy kill her. Besides, ever since the dead had vacated their graves, hardly anything could scare her anymore. Shaking her head, she closed the front door and turned the lock on the knob and deadbolt.

That’ll teach me to walk home in the dark, she thought to herself, shaking her head as she walked deeper into her house.

Benny hauled the vamp’s dead body into the bed of his truck, one he’d stolen from an auto shop nearby. It was old and the cab didn’t really have heating, but it would do for now. He wiped the blood off his hands, climbed into the cab and headed away from town.

Purgatory had spat him out four months ago and he had been hunting down the monsters that came out with him ever since. Because of his time in Purgatory, and even more so due to his time with Dean, he was terrifyingly aware of what a problem those monsters from Purgatory could be on Earth, especially with the rate that Purgatory spit them out. He had been trying to make a dent in the astronomical numbers since then, but it always felt like he was twelve steps behind.

The vamp’s body got burned in a clearing in the woods a few hours later, in the light of early dawn. Benny stayed until the embers burned out and then climbed back in his truck and headed on to the next town. He only had two bags of blood left and he had already cleaned out the nearby hospital.

He managed to find twelve bags of blood, which would last him through the rest of the week. With that settled, he moved on to the next hunt he had found in Auburn, New York. It was a long drive, so he downed one of the older blood bags and then got on the road.

“Dean. Cas. You guys busy?”

Dean jerked his hands away from Castiel’s, motioning for Cas to set the gun down. “Nah, Sam, Cas is just practicing his shooting. What’s up?”
Sam turned the corner and practically shoved a scrap of paper in their faces. “I’ve got a case.”

Dean frowned. “Send someone else, Cas isn’t ready.”

Cas tilted his head, staring at Dean. “How am I not ready? I managed to hit almost all the targets.”

Dean pressed his lips together, bumping his eyebrows together. “Exactly. Almost all of them, which means you ain’t ready. I’m not in the mood to die because you missed your shot at a zombie.”

Cas squinted at Dean. “I am not going to miss my shot, Dean. We’ll be three there, so, if I do miss, one of you can hit it. Or do you think you won’t be able to hit it either?”

Sam sighed, rolling his eyes. “Guys, please, can we focus? Cas is right, we can handle it. We always do.”

Dean took a deep breath, rolling his eyes. “Fine.” He took the paper from Sam’s hand and read what he wrote on it. “You thinkin’ vamps?”

Sam nodded. “It seems like it. The hunter that sent it said that he can’t handle it right now, so he asked for someone to go and check it out.”

Cas crosses his arms and nodded. “Let’s go, then. What are we waiting for?”

Dean nodded as well, handing the paper back to Sam. “Where to?”

“Auburn, New York.”

Dean rolled his eyes, sighing. “Alright, I’m gonna get my stuff and I’ll meet you guys in the car in ten. No time to waste, apparently.”

Sam made a face at his brother, but Dean was already walking away, leaving Sam and Cas behind, muttering to himself about how they should wait for Cas to be ready to go out on hunts.
It was a hike to New York and they didn’t exactly have a place to stay, so they ended up pulling the car over when they needed to sleep and getting as much of it as they could that way. It didn’t turn out to be much sleep considering the size of the three of them and the size of the Impala. Cas offered to drive, trying to give Sam and Dean a break, but he got a quick glare from Dean, who shook his head with squinted eyes.

“You haven’t slept enough, I’m not having you fall asleep behind the wheel and kill us all. Get some rest, I’ll wake you when we get to Pennsylvania and you can drive the rest of the way.”

Cas stayed quiet after that, head resting against the window and eyes closing so as not to bother Dean and push the hunter into an even worse mood.

Dean did let Cas drive when they got to Pennsylvania with the excuse that he needed some rest, but Cas saw Dean keep looking at him every few minutes instead of sleeping. He decided not to say anything, knowing it was only because Dean was worried about Cas crashing the car, but he couldn’t deny that it was irritating and that he wanted Dean to just trust him.

Sam was in the backseat, asleep like he had been since well before Dean and Cas changed places. They both had agreed to let him sleep, knowing that he had been going crazy trying to keep the peace in Camp Singer. He deserved a few hours of uninterrupted sleep.

When they got to Auburn, the city was nearly deserted, cars scattered around the streets without care and most of the houses boarded with wooden planks on the windows and doors. Dean couldn’t really blame the people—civilians did need as much protection as they could get and at least they were doing their best to get it.

Dean made Cas switch seats with him (even though he barely got any sleep) and Cas woke Sam up. “We’re at the city, Sam.”

Sam sat up, yawning and rubbing his eyes. “Already? Thought the trip would be longer.”

Dean looked at his brother through the rearview mirror. “You slept the whole way. How would you know that we haven’t taken a long time?”
Sam sighed, rolling his eyes. “And you’re still in a horrible mood. So, what are we doing now?”

Cas glanced around them, frowning. “We should go to the places where the deaths occurred. See if there are any leads there.”

Dean agreed. “That’ll probably be the easiest way to find these vamps. Then we’ll still have to take them back to the bunker. Yay.”

Sam nodded. “Let’s just hope there aren’t a lot of them or we’ll have to steal a car to get them back to the bunker.”

The other two agreed and Dean stepped harder on the gas pedal. The faster they got there and figured this out, the faster they could get back to Camp Singer. They drove around the city, Dean avoiding the cars scattered around the streets, until they got to the bar where the murders happened.

There wasn’t a lot of people in the bar, only a car and a motorcycle in the parking lot and a few lights on inside. Dean parked Baby while Sam went through the glove compartment, taking a badge for each of them.

Dean looked at the badges, raising an eyebrow. “You think they’ll buy that we’re feds, after everything that’s happened?”

Sam shrugged, putting his badge on one of his pockets. “I don’t know. We could always say that the FBI is keeping things between them after everything that has happened, that they’re trying to find a way to get things to normal.”

Cas scoffed, putting his badge back into the glove compartment. “Or we could just be ourselves. It’ll probably easier for them to talk to us like that.”

Dean nodded, cocking his head. “Cas has a point.”

Sam sighed. “Fine.” He threw the badges back in the glove compartment. “Let’s hope they’ll talk to us.”
They got out of the car, tightening their jackets around them against the cold wind, and walked to the entrance of the bar. They opened the door, hoping for some warmth to come through it, but the air inside was barely warmer than the air outside.

Dean frowned, whispering, “Shouldn’t it be hotter inside?”

“It’s not like we have enough gas to keep the generator running, but we try to keep it as warm as we can.”

Dean looked up, staring at the bartender behind the bar. He motioned toward a makeshift fireplace in the corner of the room with three people huddled around it. “Come on in, guys. We may not have as much booze as we had before, but we’re managing.”

Dean smiled. “We humans always do.”

The three of them stepped inside, closing the door behind them. Dean took a seat at the bar with a heavy sigh. Sam and Cas walked a little behind, sharing some words between them, far too low for anyone else to hear.

The bartender filled a glass with beer and put it in front of Dean. “So, what brings you guys to this area?”

Dean took the beer, taking a sip while Sam and Cas sat beside him, one on each side. “Well, we heard about some weird deaths around here and decided to see if there’s any way we can help. Or if you could help us.”

The guy raised an eyebrow, throwing a cloth on his shoulder. “Why would anyone want to look into those? Don’t you think there’s enough to worry about with everything else going on?”

Sam shrugged. “Well, we do like to complicate our lives. Have you heard anything?”

The bartender sighed. “Look, the deaths happened when there wasn’t anyone here. I only found out about them when I came to open the bar the next day. And it’s not like we have cops to investigate, so I called a friend who worked for the FBI, and he said he would put someone on it. But that’s about it.”
Cas nodded. “Can you show us where you found the bodies?”

The bartender sighed, waving his hand to a door behind him. “There, near the dumpsters. I tried to clean up the blood but you can probably still find some there.”

Sam was already vacating his seat and heading for the door. “Do you mind if we go and take a look?”

The man shrugged. “No, feel free if you think you can do something about it. But I have to tell you, it’s been a couple weeks since the last body.”

Dean squinted his eyes. “Really? Do you have any idea why?”

“Not really, the deaths just stopped.”

Cas hummed, following Sam outside. “Thank you anyway.”

Dean drank the rest of the beer in the glass, giving it back to the bartender and taking some money from his pocket. “Do you still use it?”

The man shook his head. “If you make sure there won’t be any more deaths, that’s good enough for me.”

Dean put the money back in his pocket. “We’ll make sure of it, don’t worry.”

The man nodded, going back to his business. Dean followed the other two outside, fingers brushing the machete on his hip. They searched the area near the dumpsters for anything they could use, but Sam and Dean both came up empty.

Cas found a motel card on the ground with a few stains that looked a lot like blood. “I think I found something.” He handed the card to Dean, who showed it to Sam.
“Do you think this is where the vampires are?” Sam asked, examining the card with a frown.

Dean shrugged. “Could be. It’s not like the motels are still operating, so they could’ve been using it as a hide out.”

Cas took the card back, tapping the name of the motel. “We should still check it out. If they’re there, it’s easier for us.”

Dean nodded, tilting his head toward Baby. “All right. Let’s go then. The sooner we’re finished here, the sooner we can go home.”

The three of them walked to the car, Sam climbing into the back as Dean and Cas took the front. Dean drove in the direction of the motel, which was not far from the bar they were in. When they saw the hotel, Dean circled it a few times, trying to see if there was anything that would scream ‘vampire’ to them.

Nothing.

Dean parked the car on the opposite side of the street as Cas squinted out the window. “It doesn’t seem like there is anyone living there. Everything seems dark and quiet.”

Dean shrugged, opening the driver’s door. “Maybe they’re having a little siesta.”

Sam opened his door and stepped out of the car. “That never stopped us before, so let’s go.”

The other two got out of the car and Dean opened the trunk, getting a machete for each of them. “All right, plan is: we go in quietly, check every room and we stay together. Be ready for vamps and zombies—who knows what could be inside.”

Sam and Cas nodded, getting a firmer grip on their machetes, and the three walk towards the motel, each taking a flashlight from their pockets and turning them on. They check each room one by one, brandishing their machetes in front of them.

They didn’t find anyone. They found pools of blood in almost every room, but no bodies.
“This has to be vamp blood, right? No way they’d waste that much blood, especially when it’s harder to come by, now.” Dean frowned, poking around in the closet, half expecting for a body to fall out.

“You’re right,” Cas answered with a matching frown, sliding his machete back into its sheath. “This is odd. Perhaps a lone hunter arrived before we did?”

“Maybe,” Sam chimed in with a shrug. “They must be dead. We should have a quick look around for a burn site, but I think someone got to the problem before we did. Makes sense, considering the bartender told us the deaths stopped a couple of weeks ago.”

Dean nodded his agreement, leading the way out of the motel. Sure enough, a few hundred yards into the woods that surround the motel, they found a huge burn pit filled with ash. “Well, you were right, Sammy, someone got to them before we did.”

Cas crouched down, poking the ashes with a stick. “Do you think these vampires will stay dead?”

Sam shrugged, pointing his flashlight to the burn pit. “Not sure. Maybe the hunter that killed them burned them to try and delay their come back.”

“At least they know the monsters keep coming back, but I don’t think burning them will help.” Dean slid his machete into its sheath and looked around. “We should go, there’s nothing else for us to do here.”

Sam took a deep breath, rubbing his hand on his face. “Fine, let’s go.” Sam walked ahead of Dean and Cas towards Baby.

Dean extended his hand to Cas, who took it and stood up. “You were worried about nothing, Dean. We didn’t even run into zombies.”

Dean scoffed. “Yeah, but we could’ve. At least we can get you more training before really going out on hunts and taking any chances.”

“Hey,” Sam yelled from the car, his head out the window, “can we please just leave or do you two
want to stay here and end up killed?”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Someone’s grumpy,” he mumbled. “Let’s go.”

Dean and Cas walked back to the car, getting inside, and Dean drove off, following the route to the camp.

They were a quarter of the way back to the camp when Jody’s voice came through their radio. Dean fumbled for it under the seat, trying to get it before Sam or Cas could wake up. He finally found it under Cas’s legs and clicked it. “Hey, Jody. How’s things over there?”

“Hey, Dean. Things are goin’ good, no worries. How was the hunt?”

“Well,” Dean cleared his throat, looking at Cas and Sam to make sure they were still sleeping, “there was no hunt. Someone got to the vamps before we did.”

“Really?” Her voice came worried through the radio, and she stayed silent for a while. “Are you boys coming back already?”

“Yep, we’re on the road. Cas and Sam have been asleep for a while.”

“Then you’re probably not gonna like what I’m about to say.”

Dean squinted his eyes, pressing the button on the radio a little too hard. “What is it, Jody?”

“We heard about some other vamps in Bennington, Vermont, thought you boys should check it out as you’re the closest to it.”

“There’s not even enough humans in the world anymore, how the hell are they finding so much to feed like that?”
“Gets me, Dean.” She stayed quiet again, only the static of the radio filling the silence.

Dean sighed and clicked on the radio again, “We’ll go check it out, Jody. I’ll let you know once we get there.”

“Thanks, kid. Send a message if you need help.”

“Will do.”

He put the radio back under the seat and turned Baby’s wheel, going the opposite way he was before. He drove in silence, only paying attention on the road and following the path to Vermont.

After a few more hours of driving, Dean’s eyes started to close without his permission, his driving wandering too close to the edge of the road, but always startling before he could veer off. After he almost wasn’t able to get the Impala back on the road in time, he felt a hand on his shoulder and looked back, seeing Sam awake. “What are you doing awake?”

“I slept a lot already, Dean. You should get some sleep before you kill us.”

“I’m not killing anyone, I’m fine.”

Sam scoffed. “Yeah, right. Come on, Dean, let me drive. Get some sleep or you’ll be useless.”

Dean sighed, turning the wheel to park. “Fine. But we’re not going back to the camp, all right?”

Sam’s brows furrowed. “Why not?”

“Jody radioed, said there are some more vamps in Vermont and asked us to check it.”

Sam got out of the car after Dean parks. “More vamps? We haven’t seen one in I don’t know how long and suddenly there’s so many of them.”
“It’s what I said, man.” Dean got out of the car, entering the backseat as Sam walked to the front. “Let’s see if we can catch those bastards this time.”

“Hope so.”

It didn’t take Dean too long to fall asleep, practically dead to the rest of the world after a few minutes. Sam gave half a smile when he saw his brother with his mouth open and snoring softly.

Cas woke up not long after, rubbing his eyes and yawning. “Where are we?” He looked through the window.

“70 miles from Bennington, Vermont.”

Cas turned his head to face Sam, forehead puckered. “Vermont? I thought we were going back to camp.”

“We were, but Jody asked us to check some vamps in Vermont before going back. Maybe there were some that got away in Auburn.”

Cas rubbed his eyes again and looked at Dean in the backseat. “How long has he been sleeping?”

“A few hours, not much. I’ll let him sleep until we get there. He’s been awake for too long.”

Cas nodded. “You’re right.” He gave one more look at Dean. “He’s been pushing himself too hard.”

“Probably trying to compensate for something like he usually does.”

Cas only hummed and went back to staring out the window. “Do you want me to drive for a while, Sam?” He asked after a while.

“I’m fine, Cas. Probably got more sleep than you and Dean together on the drive here. Try and get
some more sleep. I’ll wake you two up when we get there.”

Cas tilted his head. “Are you sure?” Sam nodded, focusing on the road again. “Okay.” Cas fluffed his coat under his head, resting it on the window.

Sam sighed, resting his head on the seat. He turned the radio on, loud enough to only fill the silence in the Impala but not enough to wake Cas or Dean up. He tapped the wheel with his thumbs to the rhythm of the song, humming.

He shook Cas up when they’re ten miles away from Vermont and Cas woke Dean up, tapping his shoulder. “We’re here, Dean.”

Dean sat, rubbing his eyes and yawning. “Already?”

Sam snorted. “You’ve been asleep for a few hours, Dean.”

Dean groaned. “I feel like crap.”

Cas stared at him with a deadpan expression. “You look worse than that.”

“Thanks,” Dean rolled his eyes and slid forward on the seat, poking his head between Sam and Cas. “How far out are we?”

“Ten miles,” Sam grabbed a bottle of water and handed it to Dean. “Any ideas where the murders were, here?”

Dean took a few gulps of water before answering, “Jody didn’t say, don’t know if she knows either. Maybe drive around the city, see if we can find anyone that knows about the murders?”

Sam raised a brow, waving at the empty road in front of them. “Ask who? I don’t know if you noticed, but there’s not a lot of people around.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realise we were in the middle of a zombie apocalypse,” Dean sneered. He
exhaled. “Look, we found a freaking bar in the other city. What makes you think we won’t find even a person here?”

“Fine, we can try. But try to talk to Jody too. It’ll probably easier if we can just go to the place without having to go after people. We’ll just lose time.”

“Fine, hand me the radio. It’s under the passenger seat.”

Cas fumbled under his seat until he got the radio and handed it to Dean. He checked to make sure it was on the right frequency before clicking on it. “Hey, Jody? Or anyone, really. Do you copy?”

There was static on the radio for a few moments, some incoherent sounds from other frequencies coming through it until they heard Alex’s voice. “Hey, guys. What do you need?”

“Hey, Alex. Is Jody around?”

“I think she’s doing some rounds, teaching people how to use guns and stuff like that. Can I help?”

Cas took the radio from Dean’s hand, ignoring Dean’s complaints. “Hello, Alex. We need to know where the murders in Vermont happened.”

There were a few moments of silence before Alex spoke again, “They happened on the northeast of the city, near a hotel. What used to be a five star hotel, anyway.”

“Thank you, Alex. We are on our way to get there.”

“No problem, Cas. Let us know when you finish there so we know you’re safe.”

“We will.” Cas put the radio under his seat again.

They found the same thing in Bennington that they found in Auburn—a pile of ashes and the several bloody hotel rooms the vamps were obviously using as their base. Discouraged and more than a little annoyed, they radioed Alex to let her know the vamps were already taken care of and they were on
their way back to camp.

They were passing through Athens, Pennsylvania when Cas spotted a beheaded body on the side of the road, which was a decidedly odd thing for a zombie to do—even more odd than the odd things they were already doing. Dean pulled the car over to the sidewalk and the three of them climbed out of the car cautiously, their hands gripping their machete’s tightly.

“Is it a vamp?” Dean muttered, eyes scanning the length of the road in front of them, with Sam watching the way they had just come. Cas stooped to check the body’s teeth and sure enough, he found a set of fangs.

“It’s freshly dead,” Cas murmured, confusion evident in his voice. “The body’s still warm.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” a voice behind them said, startling the three of them out of their conversation.

Dean froze with his fingers on his machete—he knew that voice.

Sure enough, he turned to find Benny standing on the other side of the Impala with a smirk on his face and a bloody machete resting on his shoulder like a baseball bat.

“Benny?” Dean asked incredulously, sliding his machete back in its sheath. “What the hell are you doin’ here, man?”

Benny raised an eyebrow, pointedly glancing at the body Castiel was still squatting next to before returning his gaze to Dean. “Ain’t it obvious?”

Dean rolled his eyes. “I meant how are you back on Earth?”

“There’s a hole in Purgatory, brother. It’s small and there’s a bottleneck, but it’s spittin’ out monsters pretty consistently. I got out ‘bout a month ago and I’ve been huntin’ ever since.”

“Why didn’t you try to find us?”
Benny snorted, waving his machete around. “There ain’t exactly a way to contact people, Dean. Tried callin’ ya, but the towers must be out. Kinda seems like the middle of an apocalypse, don’t it? You three wouldn’t have anything to do with that, wouldja?”

“For once, no, this isn’t directly our fault.” Castiel answered, tucking his machete away as he stands. “God decided he was done with this universe and this is his way of ending it. I don’t quite think he expected us to be so resilient, but he’s proven himself oblivious to humanity’s will to live in the last several millennia, so I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Benny raised his hands, blinking at the three of them, “God did what now? And God is actually real?”

Dean scoffed, walking up to Benny and patting his shoulder. “Welcome to the team, pal. God is very real and he’s a freakin’ douchebag.”

“Okay, wow, I don’t even know what to do with that information. And how did ya three managed to meet God and get this apocalypse on us?”

“That’s kinda a long story, Benny.” Sam put his machete away and gestured to the body. “So, let’s burn this body and then we can tell you everything on the way.”

Benny arched one of his brows. “On the way to where?”

“We have a camp in South Dakota. It’s warded and we have some muggles—” Cas cut himself, squinting his eyes at Dean, and correcting himself, “And we have a few people there, helping take care of things.”

“You’re more than welcome to come with us, Benny.”

Benny smiled at Dean, putting his hand on Dean’s shoulder and squeezing it. “Thanks, chief, but you really think that’s a good idea? I’m not exactly, you know, human.”

“That doesn’t matter to us, believe me. Let’s burn this body and I’ll tell you everything on the way.”
They gathered some gasoline from Baby’s trunk and burned the vamp’s body, staring at it until there’s nothing but smoking ashes on the spot. They put the gasoline and their machetes back in the trunk.

“So, me and Benny take his truck and you and Cas go in Baby, okay?”

Sam furrowed his brows, staring at his brother with a confused face. “You’re fine on not going in the Impala?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Besides, somebody’s gotta tell him everything, so I will.”

Cas squinted his eyes at Dean, his face muscles stiffened and jaw locked. “Fine by me.” He opened the passenger’s door and entered the car without another word, closing the door a little too hard.

“Hey, be careful with her! You don’t hit her or I’ll hit you.” Dean rolled his eyes and went back at looking at his brother. "Anyway, we meet back in the camp, alright, Sammy?"

“Yeah, sure. Be careful, you two.”

“You guys too. We’ll see you later. C’mon, Benny.”

Dean and Benny walked in the opposite direction of the Impala while Sam entered it and turned the engine on, leaving and heading for the camp.

Benny and Dean walked in silence for a while, Dean kicking some rocks with his foot, trying to think what he could say to Benny after seven years without seeing him. Hell, the last time Dean saw him was shortly before decapitating Benny once more, which made things a little awkward.

Benny stole some glances towards Dean, fighting against a smile every time he saw the hunter open and close his mouth and then murmur to himself after, calling himself stupid most of the time. Benny could also hear how fast Dean’s heart was beating, which meant he was nervous, and Benny knew that was never good.
He put his hand on Dean’s shoulder, pulling him to a stop. “Brother, there’s no reason for you to be nervous. I don’t even know why your heart’s beatin’ so fast.”

Dean took a deep breath, rubbing a hand over his face. “I just don’t know what to say to you, Benny. We haven’t seen each other in seven years and I—you know what I did back then. What I asked of you, it was so much, but you did it. I can never thank you enough or pay you back. I sent you back to Purgatory, alone.”

Benny’s expression softened and he huffed a small laugh. “You do know I did that by choice, right? I could’ve said ‘no’ and I could have gotten back with Sam. It was my choice not to, you ain’t the one who forced me into doin’ those things, brother. Ya know, not everything that happens is your fault.”

Dean snorted, shaking his head. “Sure feels like that sometimes. Well, most of the time things are my fault. I do have a tendency of screwing things up, y’know that.”

Benny raised his eyebrows. “Why do I get the feelin’ there’s somethin’ about all this that you think is your fault, so now you’re punishin’ yourself for it?”

“Well, you know me.”

“Yeah, but the angel there said y’all didn’t have anything to do with it, it was all God.”

Dean rolled his eyes, starting to walk again. “Oh, believe me, I’m the guilty one when it comes to gettin’ God pissed off at us, and I’m pretty sure Cas and Sam think that too, they just don’t wanna say it.”

“I highly doubt that because I do know you and I think I wanna hear from Sam and the angel what happened. Get a more neutral view of things,” Benny protested while starting to walk behind Dean.

“But not sure you’ll get a neutral view, but go ahead. You’ll see I’m right.”

Benny’s truck appeared in their view, hidden in the middle of some trees. They grew quiet again, the silence around them almost deafening with no crickets, birds, or frogs making their own sounds.
There was barely even the sound of their boots crunching the snow, as if the sound got consumed by the silence around them. They were a few yards from the truck when Benny grabbed Dean’s arm and raised a finger to his lips, signaling for Dean to be quiet.

Dean nodded slowly, stopping in his tracks and looking around him. He silently took his machete from the sheath on his hip and looked at Benny, who was holding his machete tightly in his hand. Benny gestures to the left and raised four fingers. Dean nodded and they started to walk very slowly in that direction, Dean keeping an eye out behind them.

They walked around the trees, not daring to get in the middle of them and lose the little light they have. Dean looked at Benny and murmured, “Where are they?”

Benny shrugged and pointed ahead of them, whispering, “I think there.”

“I’m going,” Dean whispered and took one step before Benny grabbed him, shaking his head frantically.

“You can’t, you’ll die.”

“Then let’s get to the truck and get the hell out of here.”

They started to speak in hushed tones, getting louder, which hid the sound of a group of zombies sneaking behind them until it was too late and the group practically jumped on top of Dean and Benny.

One threw Dean aside, making his machete fly away from his hand as his back hit a tree. He lost the air in his lungs, dark spots showing up on his vision. He heard Benny groan somewhere on his right and he felt around him, trying to find something to defend himself. He found a stick and he brought his hand back to him just in time to stab it through the zombie’s head.

He blinked the black spots out of his vision, yanking the stick free. He looked around and saw three zombies making their towards Benny, who was passed out with a line of blood going down his temple. Dean tried to find his machete, looking on the ground around him.

He stood up, trying to make a run towards Benny, but before he could give his first step, another zombie threw itself on top of him, making him lose his balance and fall flat on his back.
He yet again lost his air but managed to keep its gross teeth away from his neck. He used all of his strength to throw it away from him, getting a firmer grip on the stick and stabbing the zombie with it.

He stood up again, finally finding his machete a few yards from him and making a move for it. He looked at Benny’s direction when he had his machete safely on his hands and saw that Benny was still passed out. He started running towards him, swinging at the zombie closest to Benny, who woke up at the wet sound of the machete meeting brain and bone.

Benny sat up, looking around him with a confused expression. “Benny, come on!” Dean yelled at him, kicking the second machete towards him.

Benny grabbed the machete and cut a zombie’s head while Dean got the last one. They looked around them after, panting and trying to see if there are any more threats. They look at each other, wide-eyed.

Dean was the first to talk, “So, talk about an adrenaline rush, huh?” He walked up to Benny, offering him his hand.

Benny took it and hauled himself up. “It really was. I’m missin’ just killing off other vamps, ya know?”

Dean huffed a laugh. “Tell me about it. I was happy when I only needed to hunt some Wendigos, salt n’ burn a few spirits and go through a night with a bunch of bugs trying to kill me.”

Benny clapped a hand on Dean’s shoulder. “C’mon, chief, we should get outta here before any others come our way.”

“Yeah.”

They walked towards the truck, Benny cleaning the blood off his face. He threw Dean his keys, crossing to the passenger side. Dean caught the keys with a confused expression. “Brother, I’m seein’, like, two of ya. Better if you drive.”

Dean laughed, nodding. “Alright, then. Let’s go.” Dean turned the engine on but kept staring out of
Benny raised his eyebrows at him. "Chief? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, just thinking about how much I missed you, man. Made me miss Purgatory a little."

Benny laughed, shaking his head and staring incredulous at Dean. "I think you hit your head too hard back there, brother. Just shut up and drive."

Benny had only been in the camp a week before he declared that he was heading out again.

“Heading out? Where?” Dean asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I heard about a coven over in Minnesota. Sounds like it might be my old coven.”

Dean smirked. “Your vampirates?”

Benny rolled his eyes, though there was a hint of a smile on his lips. “Sure. I’m gonna go take care of ‘em, I’ll be back in about a week.”

Dean shook his head. “No way am I letting you go alone. I’ll come with, Sam and Cas can handle the rest for a little while.”

“You sure? I can handle ‘em.”

Dean raised his eyebrows, already grabbing his bag. “Right, like you handled them last time around? If it wasn’t for me, you’d have gotten yourself killed back then.”

Benny scoffed. “It was just a few minor scratches. Nothin’ I couldn’t handle.”

Dean rolled his eyes, tossing a couple of machetes into his bag. “Then it should be real easy for the
Benny chuckled quietly but didn't fight it, leading the way to his truck. Dean stopped at Sam's table, chatting with him and Cas for a moment. They both agreed to hold down the fort while Dean's gone, Cas with his jaw muscles tightened as he avoided Dean's eyes.

Dean didn't notice, so he followed Benny to his truck and tossed his bag in the back seat. He climbed up into the passenger's seat of the truck as Benny slid behind the wheel.

The drive was silent, for the most part. Radio stations were nonexistent now, and the truck Benny stole didn't have a tape deck, so Dean's music collection was effectively useless. Still, it was nice to have Benny around again, and it assuaged some of the guilt Dean had been carrying since he sent Benny back to Purgatory in a half-assed attempt at getting Sam home. It had worked in the end but Benny had chosen to stay behind in Purgatory, much to Dean's dismay. Still, despite the entire world going to hell and almost all remnants of society collapsing, it was nice to at least have Benny back on their side, fighting the good fight for however long they had left.

They made it to Minnesota just as night fell, which was pretty poor timing on their part. They found an abandoned house to hunker down in for the night, blocking off the doors and windows with whatever they could find around the house. Once they were both satisfied, Dean found one of the bedrooms upstairs and settled in for a long, cold night.

Despite the four blankets he had fallen asleep under, Dean woke up several hours later absolutely freezing. He shuffled around a bit, tucking the blankets around his feet and pulling them up to his chin, shivering against the cold winter air permeating the house. Eventually, he forced himself out of the bed, keeping all four blankets wrapped tightly around himself as he headed downstairs. He found Benny in front of the fireplace in the living room with a small fire burning away, throwing off enough heat to warm Dean to his core in only a few minutes.

“Can't sleep?” Benny murmured, moving over so Dean could sit in front of the fire as well.

“Too cold,” Dean answered, pulling the blankets tighter around himself to ward off the chill of the Minnesota air, Benny’s body heat warming his side. “So what’s our plan here, exactly?”

Benny hummed. “They sleep durin’ the day, and I’m pretty sure I know where they’re holed up. If we can sneak in tomorrow mornin’, we should be able to surprise ‘em and get a few of them silently. Not sure how many of them are actually back but at least Quentin and Sorento are. Maybe Andrea.”
Dean raised an eyebrow. “Andrea? You think she’s back?”

Benny shrugged. “That’s my guess, yeah. She was one of the few women the Old Man ever turned, and Jody said the lady who almost got attacked saw a dark-haired gal with two guys. Guess they coulda formed alliances in Purgatory, but I doubt it.”

“And you’re gonna kill her if she is back?”

Benny glanced at Dean, chuckling. “I won’t let her get ya, if that’s what you’re askin’.”

“That ain’t what I’m asking, man. I know last time you didn’t want to kill her, and I don’t blame you. I just need to know if you’re gonna freeze so I can be prepared.”

Benny hummed. “I don’t think so. Far as I’m concerned, my Andrea died when the Old Man turned her.”

Dean nodded, his blinking slowing as the warmth of the fire lulled him to sleep.

The next time he woke up, it was to Benny’s foot nudging him in the back.

“C’mon, brother. We should get goin’ if we’re gonna do this.”

Dean nodded his agreement, pushing the mound of blankets off himself and pushing himself to his feet, stretching out the kinks in his spine. He was far too old to be sleeping on the floor like this. He hastily attacheds his machete to his belt, following Benny outside.

The sun was just starting to rise, but there was a thick fog rolling over the ground making it hard to see. He followed Benny to the truck, sticking close enough to have each other’s backs if they needed to. Benny drove the remaining few miles to the place they thought the coven was, an abandoned warehouse near the beach. The fog was worse there, which only made Dean antsy. They parked down the road so the noise from the truck didn’t give them away. They had planned to split up and hit them from both sides, but with the fog that would have been more dangerous than anything. They went for the back door, Dean’s fingers anxiously gripping his machete tighter and tighter as they headed into the building.
“Watch where ya swing that thing, brother,” Benny said with a smirk, inclining his head toward a room on the left. A glance around Benny showed four vampires sound asleep on what looked to be hammocks. It would be easy enough to take them all down without much of a fight, so with a nod at each other, they headed into the room as silently as they could.

The joke was on them, though. Before they could even reach the hammocks, a vampire stepped out of the shadows nearby and tossed Benny across the room before lunging straight for Dean’s throat. Dean dived out of the way, but the combined noise of both him and Benny hitting the floor woke the other four vampires up, which was so far from ideal it wasn't even funny. Dean put an arm up to keep the vampire—a young brunette guy with dull blue eyes—off his throat, feeling around the floor beside himself for his machete. Of course it wasn’t there, so Dean shuffled just enough to get his legs positioned, bringing his knee up as hard as he could into the vamp’s stomach. The guy groaned and rolled off him so Dean took the opportunity to scramble to his knees and grab his machete.

Before he got a chance to swing, another one of the vampires latched onto his back, sinking her teeth into the meat of Dean’s shoulder. He knocked her off with a well-placed elbow straight to her nose, immediately swinging around to knock her out. Andrea. Dean winced in sympathy, yanking Benny up off the floor as another vampire lunged for them. Benny swung his machete, knocking the guy out with a well-placed hit to his temple.

“Next room, I saw ‘em go that way. Keep your eyes open,” Dean grunted, rolling his shoulder in an attempt to abate some of the stinging pain. He followed Benny to the next room, wiping his bloody hand on his jeans so he can grab his machete more securely.

The minute they crossed the threshold, they were met with three vampires staring back at them. Dean didn’t recognize any of them, but Benny must have recognized all three based on the way his fingers tightened around the machete and the twitch in his jaw as he clenched his teeth.

“Quentin. Sorento. Old Man. Take it Purgatory didn’t treat ya well?”

The youngest of the bunch, the one Benny had referred to as ‘Old Man’, smirked and stepped in front of the other two. “Purgatory was refreshing. Always on the hunt, plenty of monsters to rip into. A distinct lack of human blood, though. And while we didn’t need it in Purgatory, I came to enjoy the taste in my several hundred years on Earth.”

Dean glanced between the three vampires, raising an eyebrow. “Well, the way I see it, you’ve got two options. Either you surrender and we let you live, or you fight us and we send you straight back to Purgatory.” Dean smirks. “Can’t imagine it was much fun to fight your way out the first time, sure you wanna try it again?”
The Old Man chuckled, crossing his arms. “If we surrender, you’ll just kill us.”

“We won’t kill you. Doesn’t do either of us any favors,” Dean answered, motioning between himself and Benny.

The Old Man hummed, circling the other two vampires. “Well, I don’t really believe surrendering is in our nature. Isn’t that right, boys?”

Quentin and Sorento both smirked, baring their teeth to show their fangs. Dean rolled his eyes, wincing as a bolt of pain shot down his spine from the bite on his shoulder. The minute the Old Man’s eyes left him, Dean lashed out and smacked him on the back of the head, raising an eyebrow at the other two as his body crumpled to the floor. “Change your minds?”

“Brought a human to protect you, Benny? Didn’t realize you were so useless these days,” Sorento sneered.

Benny grinned, all feral and sharp teeth. It sent a shiver down Dean’s spine and he barely contained a groan as the movement pulls at the bite. “I don’t need a human to protect me, brother. He ain’t here for protection. He’s spent his life chasing monsters like us, I’d be an idiot to not bring him along.”

“What’re you gonna do with us if we surrender?” Quentin piped up, eyes flickering between Dean and Benny.

Dean smirked. “We’re keeping all the monsters we trap in an underground bunker. Anything we kill just comes back from Purgatory, doesn’t make any sense to kill anything.”

Sorento scoffed. “So basically just Purgatory, but on Earth.”

Dean shrugged. “Your choice. We can send you back to Purgatory and you can fight your way back out or we can lock you in the bunker.”

Sorento and Quentin glanced at each other and seemed to have a silent conversation before they both sighed.
“Bunker it is,” Quentin said with a frown.

Dean dug a handful of zip ties from his bag, handing some to Benny before heading back into the other room. He quickly zip-tied the two unconscious vampires in the other room, helping Benny carry them to the truck along with the Old Man. Quentin and Sorento climbed in of their own accord, though Dean tied them all down with a mixture of ropes and chains anyway.

The drive back took so much longer than Dean would like. They stopped every couple of hours because Dean’s paranoid ass had to keep checking the ropes to make sure they were holding, especially once Andrea and the Old Man woke up. It was a long ride but once they dropped the vampires at the bunker, he and Benny were able to relax on their way back to Sioux Falls. He filled Benny in on everything that had happened since he stayed behind in Purgatory—the Mark, Amara, and everything else that transpired. Benny was silent for the most part, though Dean could see him rolling his eyes at a few points.

“Can’t believe the world’s in your hands,” Benny muttered, turning off the highway toward Camp Singer. “Can’t believe it’s survived this long, honestly.”

Dean scoffed. “Hey, we did a pretty damn good job. Until now, at least.”

Benny pulled the truck up to the front gate and Dean hopped out to unlock it and open it, waving Benny through. They emptied their gear out of the truck and headed straight for the garage, leaving their gear with the collection along one wall. Dean turned to find Sam and Cas, but stopped short as he came face-to-face with Billie instead.

“Dean. We need to have a chat.”

Chapter End Notes

You can find me here on Tumblr, and you can find Gii here on Tumblr. Feel free to come yell at us about this fic and how amazing all these writers are :D
Chapter Summary

It should be noted that Death can't be avoided forever, but people certainly can try. Arguments are had, Benny has an agenda, hugs are returned, and the best way to flirt with an ex-angel is to have faith - if only flirting was flirting when both parties aren't aware of it.

Chapter Notes

Hello! SOBS (son_of_a_bitch_spn_family) is back at it again! Yet another fun chapter that I hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean really, really wanted a nap.

Stupid thing to want in the midst of the end of the world, he knew, but he was so exhausted that the thought of at least two hours was making his mouth water like it was actual substance. Actually, as far as substance went, he could go for a burger too; one that sent juices flowing down his chin before he even managed a full bite.

Great, now his mouth was genuinely watering.

So yeah, a burger and a shower, then a nap - that's all he wanted right now. What he didn't want was currently standing in front of him with big, dark eyes and a small smirk at the corner of her lips.

It wasn't that Dean didn't like Billie - well, actually, that was part of it - but the main problem was the fact that he one hundred percent did not trust her. With good reason, he thought. Going from a reaper who was hellbent on tossing any and all Winchesters (and those affiliated with them) into a great pit of nothingness to the new Death who knew more than she was willing to share was enough to be cause for suspicion in Dean's book. That wasn't even including that she was the one who suggested he throw himself into the ocean for all eternity because it was the only way to get rid of Michael, which turned out not to be true.
And here she was, wanting to chat.

Yeah, Dean wanted a nap.

"Dean," Cas greeted him calmly, his hip cocked against the table in a way that should not be appealing to anyone ever, but was anyway because Dean was a total miscreant. Blue eyes turned to Benny, warmth seeping out. "Vampire."

Dean scrubbed a hand over his forehead, dropping the duffle of supplies they'd traveled with. "Cas, please, can you just—not now, okay?"

Cas tilted his chin up and crossed his arms, lips briefly pressing into a thin line. "Of course, Dean. You look tired. How was the…trip?"

"Successful," Benny answered for him, mouth twisting into a saucy grin that made Cas narrow his eyes. "Went as smooth as we expected. It was real nice, sure wish ya coulda been there, angel."

Cas' nostrils flared.

"Okay, pissing match over," Dean snapped, whirling around to look at Benny in disapproval. He had to keep from rolling his eyes fondly when Benny's face instantly pulled into mischief. "You, go restock with Claire and Alex; you need the blood."

Benny gave him a two-fingered salute. "Sure thing, brother. Have fun with your chat."

"And you," Dean said firmly, twisting back around to point at Cas as Benny headed out the room. Cas arched an eyebrow and most of the wind left Dean's sails for reasons he couldn't decipher. "Look, I know he's not your favorite person, for whatever reason, but can you please at least be a little—"

Cas' eyebrow hiked higher. "A little, what?"

"I don't know, just stop staring at him like you wanna punch him, okay?" Dean shook his head and looked to Sam for some kind of support. Sam, the absolute traitor, was idly looking at the ceiling like
it was the most interesting thing he'd ever seen. Well, it seemed Dean would handle this on his own. "He's my friend, you're my…"

Sam chose this moment to look at him, and because he was the worst brother ever, he joined Cas in arching his eyebrow. Figures.

Cas waved his hand in a go on gesture. "Make your point, Dean."

"Whatever." Dean grimaced and shot Sam the middle finger. "We're all friends now, so just...tolerate him, I guess. Your foot may be healed, but that does not mean you should toss yourself into every fight that you come across or can create."

"Hypocrite," Sam coughed into his fist.

Dean pointed at him. "You're on thin fucking ice."

"As much fun as this isn't," Billie spoke up, voice so dry that the Sahara would be jealous, "I actually came here for a reason. One I would like to get to at some point today?"

Carefully, Dean walked over and leaned on the open spot beside Cas at the table, crossing his arms as he regarded their not-so-welcome guest. Sam was slumped against the desk holding the radio, mirroring Dean's position with less finesse - he was too long-limbed to perch against the furniture with ease, so he ended up looking like a newborn horse who didn't know how to arrange himself. Cas, who'd been human once before (against his will and not exactly so successfully), was still struggling to find the ways his body was supposed to work without grace and ended up leaning his hip against the table with his hands shoved into the pockets of Dean's old worn jeans they found in the trunk of Baby - it really shouldn't have been as attractive as it was, but Dean was going a little insane at the sight.

Overall, they did not look as threatening as he'd hoped, considering the circumstances.

Dean sighed. "Look, I hate to break it to ya, Billie, but we're a little in over our head lately, as I'm sure you've noticed, and as much as I would love to do this dance with you today, I can't. Right about now, I've got a small window for a shower, which I really need after hunting in a Zombie Apocalypse for - go figure - vampires. So, if it's really important, you're gonna have to stick around for at least another hour and wait. Otherwise, you can go back to doing whatever Death does when no one's staying dead."
With that, Dean clapped Cas on the shoulder and left the room to go shower. No one used it at this time because Crowley had the slot before it and somehow used every scrap of the hot water they had - which wasn't much - and it needed at least thirty minutes before it was back to being lukewarm. Dean would take advantage of it at this point, even while he inwardly cursed out Crowley for making the excuse that a King of Hell liked things hot. Ice cold water or no, he desperately wanted to scrub away the day. So, he left with only one look around the room.

Billie's offended expression might have added a skip to his step, but no one would never know.

"Looks like you're going to have to wait," Sam said, clearing his throat. Billie stared at him. "You can, um, stay here. Or, if you want, you can go and come back in an hour. I mean, it's up to you."

Billie's eyebrows slowly crawled up her forehead, her hand tightening around her scythe. "I don't like waiting. This matter shouldn't have to wait."

Sam looked to Cas for help because he wasn't exactly sure what the parameters for this world were anymore. God had abandoned it; did that include Death? Evidence would suggest so, considering Purgatory and literal Zombies were major problems right now. It honestly wouldn't surprise him if Chuck fucked off and left Billie to her fate as well. Or was she a separate entity? Dean had mentioned something about the old Death, the one who'd liked pizza and let Dean take his job for a day to prove a point. Maybe a requirement for those who became Death had to have a flare for the dramatics on their resume before they got the job.

Sam wondered if he was losing his mind.

Cas pushed away from the table and left the room without a word, apparently deciding he didn't want to deal with this just yet. Sam envied him.

"Quick question," Sam muttered, looking Billie straight in the eyes, "do you still have a job? I mean, how does that work? If people aren't staying dead, where does that leave you?"

Billie's lips twisted. "People continue to die. What comes after isn't really in my job description."
"So, what, you're still having people reaped over and over? Isn't that...counterproductive?"

"If you think there was ever supposed to be an end, possibly, but there wasn't. This job has existed as long as God himself has and will continue for long after he's gone. Think of it like this, there was never going to be the last person on the list because everyone continued to reproduce; people die, people are born, and it's one loop after another. This isn't much different than that."

Sam pursed his lips. "Except it is," he insisted. "There will be a last person this time. If Chuck had any say, and he definitely does, then everyone would be a zombie in the end. Where does that leave you then?"

"Humans are not the only things that reach an end. Given time, everything will." Billie didn't blink, simply stared at him with one corner of her lips curled up. "I was never a period at the end of a sentence; I'm simply a semicolon."

"Death isn't final," Sam murmured, more to himself than her, and took a deep breath.

Billie leaned her head from side to side, lips tugging down at the corners as she made a considering expression. "Finality is a facade; nothing really ends, an echo will always remain, but stopping points must be reached along the way."

"And you're a stopping point?"

"You could say that."

The room dipped into uncomfortable silence. Well, it was uncomfortable for Sam; Billie just seemed faintly annoyed at being put on hold.

Sam's mind started working into overdrive - considering the merits of life after death, reincarnation into other worlds, and the existential crisis that none of this was real at all. Maybe there was something to that little joke that said Earth and humans were nothing more than a science project for an alien and what felt like forever to them was really just an hour for the alien. Actually, that hit a little too close to home for him to consider in depth, not without spiralling into a deep need to pull on that thread until there was nothing left.

It was almost a relief when Rowena walked in. She was talking before she even made it in the room,
which was normal for her, and Sam felt fondness fill him up so abruptly that it made him blink in surprise. It was like a balloon filled with pure warmth had expanded in his chest, just at her little quirk of walking into a room and demanding its attention. Sam realized that the feeling was familiar, but he couldn't figure out why.

"Samuel, are you listening to me?"

Rowena was using her scolding voice, though it was tinged with amusement. Sam cleared his throat and looked over to Billie, only to find her gone. Right, well, that solved one issue.

"Yes. No, I mean… No, I wasn't." Sam shook his head, trying to dislodge the feeling that his head was under water. "Sorry, what were you saying?"

Rowena opened her mouth, then snapped it shut as she flicked her gaze over him carefully. Her eyes softened. "Are you alright, Sam?"

Sam meant to tell her that he was, that he had to be, but what came out was, "No, not really."

He wasn't sure why he told her that. It just...slipped out, just like that, like she had all rights to know the inner workings of his mind and feelings when he didn't know them himself. His mouth was a dirty, rotten traitor. Still, when her hand reached out and lightly touched his arm, he found himself not regretting the admission.

"Well, I admit that was a wee bit of a stupid question, considering everything." Rowena offered him a smile that made her nose crinkle rather cutely. "What's on your mind?"

"Do you think I'm going to kill you?" Sam asked, his mouth apparently no longer his own. It was all Billie's fault, showing up with her domineering presence and sardonic eyebrows, reminding him without even bringing it up that his name was in all of Rowena's books. Fuck, he didn't need this.

Rowena blinked. "That's a bit morbid to be thinking about, isn't it, dear?"

"My name is in all your books," Sam reminded her, because he was a glutton for punishment. He swallowed. "Do you think they still...count?"
"Maybe," Rowena replied, eyebrows furrowing as she stared up at him. "Do you think it matters now? Maybe you do kill me, maybe I will never die."

Sam sucked in a sharp breath. "Wait, do you—are you using that knowledge to be... reckless? Rowena, you can't take risks if—"

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I've done it for a long time, far before you were even thought of." Rowena pulled her hand away, lips tightening at the corners in open annoyance. "I'm simply saying that what happens will happen, no matter what we do."

"I don't want to," Sam whispered, shuffling forward without much thought. His palms itched. "I don't know if I ever did, even back when—even before we became...friends. You have to know that, Rowena. I don't want to be the reason you die."

Rowena's hand found home on his arm again, which was better in Sam's opinion. "Those books aren't published for a reason, you know; perhaps they can be rewritten."

Sam wanted to cringe at her casual teasing, but the words felt too impactful to brush off. He swallowed again, his throat terribly dry. The room felt unreasonably hot; he could feel sweat gathering on the back of his neck, making his skin prickle. The swooping in his stomach had to be from the fact that he hadn't eaten since yesterday, couldn't be anything else. Rowena's hand smoothed up his arm slowly, her touch gentle, and Sam couldn't think of one damn reason for the way his heart fluttered.

"I'm not gonna kill you," Sam promised, holding that vow close to his heart and refusing to let it go.

Rowena quirked a smile, her eyes bright with some kind of knowledge he wasn't privy to. They were greenish-hazel and seemed smaller without her makeup, but no less magnetizing. Whereas Jo had lost her curls without her grace, Rowena had natural curls and waves that framed her face; Sam wondered if Jo envied it. And fuck, Rowena was so tiny, but not in a demure way; she had lean muscles under what was probably soft skin, but she was also thin and so, so short. Sam had probably worn backpacks heavier than her in college, but there wasn't a bag in this world that could draw gazes like she could when she so desired.

She had… What was it? Oh, right. She had poise.

"Sam, there may come a time when you have to kill me," she said bluntly, drawing him out of his
own dazed thoughts. She squeezed his arm hard when he opened his mouth to protest. "Should that
day come, I want you to know that I forgive you. I don't want you to be guilty and woe-is-me; my
death will be about me and the mega impact I left on this world and all your lives. Don't be selfish
and make it about yourself. I know what could happen, yet I find myself not worried at all."

"I am," Sam replied simply, the words scraping their way out of his throat. "Shit, I'm worried about
everything. I'm worried about Dean and Cas, the world, zombies and Purgatory, and if this is my last
life. But I stopped and thought about it, and you wanna know something really fucked up? I'm more
worried about you dying because of me than I am anything else, and that's just—it's messed up."

Rowena heaved a sigh. "You Winchesters, always so fueled by your own self-hatred. It's more
daunting for you to think that you'll kill me than it is for you to face the end of the world."

"We cling to the good we do to try and make up for the bad," Sam agreed with a sigh. "Killing you
would be the worst; I'd never make up for that."

"You could," Rowena protested, rolling her eyes.

Sam reached out and gripped her shoulder, dipping his head to stare into her eyes. "I really couldn't,"
he said hoarsely. "You're—you are family. I'm not going to be responsible for any more loss in my
life."

"What will you do?" Rowena eyed him curiously, not flinching when his hand dragged down from
her shoulder to her elbow. "You'll stop it, then? All powerful Sam Winchester, refusing to kill me
when you don't even know why you'd have to. Is it a kindness to let me live if I'm suffering?"

"I won't let you suffer," Sam answered, like it was that simple. For him, it was.

"Say I get bitten and—"

"No."

"Alright, what if—"
“No.”

Rowena looked at him in exasperation. "Samuel, listen to what I'm telling you. Don't you think others have this wee talk? That's what this world unearths, the need for this discussion. If I'm going to go, I'm selfish enough to want it to be by your hands." She stepped closer, her tattered gown sweeping across his shoes when she moved. "I'm lucky enough to be certain that I'll go as I want to, should I go at all."

"Why? Why me? That's not—it isn't fair."

"Did you know that long ago back in villages, when disease would sweep through the countryside and there was no medicine to help, it was fairly common for entire families to get wiped out at once? Not at the same exact time, you understand, but they'd all be horrifically sick together. There wasn't much anyone could do, so do you know what was prescribed for them?"

Sam felt like he was drunk. His free hand had found Rowena's waist and seemed to like it there; he was helpless to move it. She didn't seem to mind, didn't even seem to notice. Her eyes were locked onto his, drawing him into the past with her story, and he couldn't dream of coming back to the present.

"What?" he croaked, blinking slow.

Rowena leaned into him, both hands braced on his arms. "They'd tell them to get comfortable and die with their loved ones, to lock themselves away and find solace in each other's arms. Mothers with their children, husbands with their wives, siblings all together. Because, in the end, if it is the end, there's no greater gift than leaving life with those you wished to spend it with. If I reach my end, you won't be the disease, you'll be the gift."

"Fuck," Sam choked out, then tried valiantly not to cry. When he failed at that, he drew her all the way into the hug they'd inched their way towards and buried his head into her hair.

Rowena held him.

Sam let her.
Castiel was shooting targets again.

They'd started a good pile of cans and random bottles for him to shoot after Dean let everyone know he needed them. Over time, people started to stock up the pile and stop by to shoot with him when Dean was tinkering and giving him space. He enjoyed those moments immensely, the way people came by to give him encouragement or try and learn with him. It'd be lying if he considered them his favorite moments out of the training process.

His favorite moments were reserved for - unsurprisingly and as always - Dean's involvement. Out here in the open field, away from prying eyes, Dean would be much more gentle than usual. His touches would linger, his tone would dip with the sweetest drawl like he was savoring every breath he took, and his smiles were brighter than they'd ever been since Jack's death. Castiel would be a fool to think anything else could beat that.

Perhaps Dean would be right to say he was not ready. Yes, he'd gotten much better over time as his foot fully healed and he adjusted to being human - if he'd adjusted at all, if that was possible. But standing here now, he was missing every single target without fail for seemingly no reason.

There was no ping to indicate that he'd managed to hit his target and each can stood unharmed. Castiel growled and forced himself not to chuck the gun clear across the field.

"You're too tense."

Dean's calm words were accompanied by a hand sliding over his right hip, cupping there lightly, and his other hand easing across Castiel's shoulders. It was simultaneously the most infuriating thing in the world and also the most calming. That left the result of Castiel relaxing into Dean's grip, even as he huffed in blatant annoyance.

"I thought you were showering."

Dean hummed, amused. "I did. Made it quick. What, do I not smell good?"

"You smell fine," Castiel replied shortly, refusing to inhale to check and make sure he was right. Dean probably smelled like the lavender body wash they'd stole from a convenience store a few weeks back. It was unfairly distracting. "Aren't you going to seek out Billie?"
"Still have some time before I actually have to. I was going to take a short nap."

"Why didn't you?"

"Couldn't find you, so I came here. You looked like you were struggling. Need some help?"

Castiel probably did, so he said, "No, thank you," and waited for Dean's hands to fall away.

Dean chuckled. "Try again," he said, left hand falling from Castiel's shoulder to grip his other hip, almost seeming to hold him in place.

"Fine," Castiel replied sharply, jerking his arms yet again. He made to aim and fire, but abruptly forgot how to do that when Dean's chin hooked on his shoulder and his chest pressed into Castiel's back.

When Dean hummed again, Castiel felt it vibrate through his back to his chest. "You gonna shoot, Cas? Or do you need help?"

"Dean," Castiel murmured, suddenly apprehensive as hands squeezed his hips curiously.

"Well?" Dean challenged quietly, his breath hot and unbearably close to Castiel's ear.

Castiel blinked twice and tried to focus on the can farthest to the left. It allowed him to hide his face as he turned it away, which was probably for the best. Dean, apparently the pinnacle of patience all of a sudden, held loosely still and didn't say a word. Castiel took a deep breath, let it out slow, and pulled the trigger.

He missed.

"I could do this if I had room," Castiel snapped.
Dean snorted. "Tell that to Zombies, man. They're going to be clamoring over themselves to get to you. There will be people bumping into you, standing at your back, pushing you around. There will be distractions everywhere; you have to be able to focus and shoot with them."

"Is that what you call yourself doing? Distracting me?" Castiel asked, jerking his head around to glare at Dean. He instantly regretted it because their faces were very close together and Dean looked endlessly fond. He quickly looked away.

Dean clicked his tongue. "Depends. Is it working?"

Yes. "No."

"I could try harder."

Castiel rolled his eyes. "If you think that your presence in any way hinders me, then you're—"

Castiel very nearly dropped the gun. Dean had started humming in his ear, cutting him off like he hadn't been listening at all. It was Led Zeppelin, that Castiel was sure of. That wasn't what made him falter; it was the fact that the cool tip of Dean's nose had started to run a route over the supple skin of Castiel's neck.

"Hindered yet?" Dean asked innocently.

Asshole, Castiel realized belatedly. He's an asshole.

"You've made your point," Castiel gritted out.

"Sure," Dean said lightly, "but that doesn't mean you're any closer to making it through this lesson. Want some help yet?"

"Asshole," Castiel repeated, this time out loud.

"Yeah," Dean agreed with a fond sigh, like he was as proud of being a little shit as he was for
owning Baby. It was a...troubling attribute. "Anyway, the problem is that you're too tense. Your emotions are heightened, throwing your focus off. You gotta be able to lock that shit up or you'll miss every time."

Slowly, Castiel ventured, "That's what you do. Even when you're not shooting a gun."

Dean's nose stopped passing over skin as he went stiff and tightened his hands on Castiel's hips. He cleared his throat and lifted his head, resting his chin on Castiel's shoulder yet again. The air around them suddenly seemed stifling.

"Yeah," Dean murmured, "guess I do."

Castiel suddenly recalled how he'd felt when he'd lost his grace. Most of it was too hard to look back on, but the feeling of being defenseless had haunted him since. It was getting better over time, especially as he adjusted to being without it, but it was never better than when he'd managed to lift a gun and put a bullet where he told it to go. It wasn't like a blade, wasn't an extension of himself; it was holding something capable and being the reason it worked.

Castiel took a deep breath, aimed, and fired five shots in quick succession.

*Ping. Ping. Ping. Ping. Ping.*

"Perhaps it's not about locking it away, but controlling when it surfaces," Castiel suggested softly, staring out at all the empty spaces the cans used to wait. He'd hit every single one.

"Well, I'll be damned." Dean released a soft laugh and dropped his hands as he stepped away. "Either you've been holding out on me, or you've been waiting for the perfect moment to show off."

Castiel clicked the safety back on and turned towards Dean with a small, pleased smile. "You always underestimate me, Dean."

Dean blanched. "What? *What*, no! Cas, I do *not* underestimate you. There isn't a damn thing you can't do if you put your mind to it, I know that without a doubt. I just… I like helping you figure it out, I guess. But I *never*—"
"Dean, Dean, it's your turn to relax," Castiel interrupted, lips tugging up without his permission. He didn't mind. "I was being funny again."

"I'm serious." Dean suddenly stepped forward, so close that Castiel blinked in surprise. Dean stared at him earnestly, eyes wide with sincerity. It was like he was telling a secret when he whispered, "You can do anything."

Castiel swallowed. "I cannot fly."

"Yes, you can," Dean replied instantly. "Close your eyes, imagine it, and you're soaring."

"It's not the same."

"And no flight is the same, so what's your point? Anything, Cas, anything at all."

"I can't heal," Castiel insisted, because no imagining could make up for that.

Dean huffed a quiet laugh. "Dude, you still do. You can't say you don't heal when you've helped so many people, even as a human, especially as a human."

"You truly believe that."

"I believe in you."

"For a man of little faith—"

"Don't finish that sentence. I've always had faith in you, Cas. Always will."

There was heat surfacing in Castiel's cheeks, but he could not control that. "Oh," he said weakly.

Dean grinned at him. "Oh man, you really liked that, didn't you? That's—okay, that's pretty funny,
I'll give you that. Look at you, you're blushing. If I still prayed to you, would you giggle?"

Castiel narrowed his eyes, even as his cheeks heated up even more. "Don't you dare."

"Oh, Castiel," Dean started, closing his eyes and pressing his hands together under his chin in a mockery of prayer, "I'm praying to you to say that—"

Dean absolutely deserved the thump to the forehead that he earned. Castiel huffed and said, "Stop it."

"You didn't let me finish," Dean grumbled, rubbing at his forehead. Green eyes flicked over Castiel's red cheeks in amusement. "I can't believe you. That was like—it's the equivalent to me giving you some flowers, isn't it? You're charmed."

"I do not like you," Castiel said very firmly, willing his blush to please leave. He tried to avoid Dean's eyes but failed miserably, mostly because Dean seemed insistent on catching his own. "No, it wasn't like flowers, Dean. It was… It's like painstakingly writing someone a poem."

Dean's eyebrows jumped. "Oh damn, so I'm a poet now? Roses are red, violets are blue—"

"I will shoot you," Castiel cut him off.

"Heh, that rhymed." Dean smirked in amusement when Castiel rolled his eyes. "Alright, I'll leave you alone. Wouldn't want you to burn up from all that fire in your cheeks and all."

Castiel clicked the safety off.

Dean laughed.
Dean wasn't going to examine the fact that he wasn't a hundred percent sure that he wasn't floating. *Walking on air* was such a stupid saying, but fuck, he could relate to it. He was so glad he skipped his nap.

Cas' shoulder brushed his with every step they took in the direction of the garage. People were smiling and waving at them as they passed, which wasn't unusual, but it was the first time that Dean ever felt the urge to beam at them and wave back with possibly too much enthusiasm. Whatever, he'd chalk it up to a problem easily resolved.

Cas had been a bit cold towards him ever since they found Benny, but things seemed to be looking up. And *maybe* Dean exploited the fact that Cas seemed to soften whenever Dean put his hands on him, but it wasn't like anyone actually knew that. It was probably an unconscious gesture, a simple reaction to drawing comfort from touch. Whatever it was, Dean liked it plenty; he absolutely was *not* going to look into that at all, thank you very much.

"Well, this is worryingly domestic."

Alarm bells went off in Dean's head.

Castiel went stiff so fast that Dean wanted to flop on the ground and smack his head to it until he passed out. It wasn't that Dean didn't want to see Benny or hang out with him, it was just that he had the *worst* timing in the world. Dean was ecstatic that Benny was back, even with the guilt that spiked within him every time he looked at him, but he'd really like it if he didn't have to play referee between his friend and his…

*What*, Dean's mind supplied in confusion. *My, what? What the fuck, I used to know this answer.*

"Can we help you?" Cas asked sharply.

Benny smiled at him faintly. "You can't, but Dean can. Ya got a second, brother?"

Dean suddenly understood what a rabbit felt when it was caught between a wolf's jaw, just before that bite that would end it all. Ironically enough, the analogy didn't have shit to do with Benny and everything to do with how Cas' head swung over to him with an accusing gaze. All Dean could think about was how it would feel if Cas bit him, and *okay*, he needed to breathe and get some oxygen to his brain if he was thinking crazy shit like that.
Dean took a deep breath. "Everything okay?" he asked, just to bide his time.

Big mistake.

Benny's smile sharpened. "Sure, but it'd be better if I could steal you away from the angel." He winked to punctuate his words, because Dean apparently didn't have reason enough to want to sink into the ground and never resurface. "You okay with that?"

Under normal circumstances, Dean would be totally cool with that. Benny probably wanted to talk about his next plans, keep Dean updated. It would probably take a few minutes, they'd probably crack jokes for most of it, and there wasn't any reason to say no. In fact, the only reason Dean would have to protest is that he didn't want to be stolen from the ex-angel, and that would only succeed in opening a can of worms that Dean wasn't desperate enough to eat yet. Dean vowed to save any and every rabbit he came across.

"Uh," he said eloquently.

Cas exhaled sharply through his nose, jaw clenched tight and jumping. After a tense moment that Dean severely wanted to escape, Cas said, "Well, don't let me stop you. Go, if you want to."

The alarm bells rang louder in his head, chanting, traptraptrap. "Uh," he said again, blinking slowly, waiting for something clever to come to mind. Nothing did, so he spat out the very first thing that passed his tongue, which turned out to be, "Why don't we all talk about it now?"

Benny looked appalled. "This is more of a 'me and you' kinda thing."

Dean was suddenly very, very aware of the fact that Benny was fucking with him. His lips parted in shock as he came to the sudden realization that Benny was straight up causing chaos for something to do. It was something Dean would do, but it wasn't something that happened to Dean. This was the end of the fucking world; this shouldn't be happening.

"You know what," Dean snapped, narrowing his eyes at Benny, "we should talk. Cas, can you—"

Cas left without another word, which Dean expected, but it still grated his nerves. Exhaling harshly, Dean turned to Benny and found him with the biggest shit-eating grin on his face. Dean wondered how long it would take Benny to heal if he clocked him in the face.
"That never gets old," Benny said with a happy sigh, looking pleased as pie.

Dean reached out and cuffed him over the head, glaring at him. "What the fuck are you doing? Can you not sabotage me while I'm trying to—"

"What?" Benny blinked at him patiently. "What are ya tryin' to do?"

"We had a falling out a while back, okay?" Dean crossed his arms and cleared his throat. "I told you most of everything, but I never said how bad it was. Me and him? We just got to a good spot, so can you please stop making this harder for me?"

Benny waved a hand. "Oh, you love a challenge."

Grudgingly, Dean agreed. "Okay, yeah, but this is different. It's not always easy with him, but it was never that hard, and I want it to be easy again."

"And how am I stopping that?" Benny stepped forward and smiled like Dean was the biggest idiot alive. "I'm just your friend, brother. What he feels doesn't have nothing to do with me."

Dean opened his mouth to argue, then snapped it shut when a lightbulb went off in his head. Cas is jealous, he realized, blinking rapidly in surprise. He was strangely delighted by that, just a little. It was a far cry from Cas not even being able to look at him, that was for sure. At least Cas cared enough to be jealous. Hell, Dean would take what he could get.

"This is the end of the world; there should not be this much drama," Dean declared.

Benny snorted. "The root of drama is not communicatin', didn't ya know?"

"You tellin' me I should just tie you two together and have you talk it out?"

"As much as you'd enjoy tying me and your angel down, I'm gonna haveta pass on that."
Dean sighed. "Whatever, just tell me what you've got to tell me so I can go smooth this over with Cas. Here he is, worried you're replacing him as my best friend, and I don't even like your ugly mug."

"Yeah, that's what he's worried about," Benny said, words dirt dry. "Was just gonna tell ya that I was gonna head out again for a few days. Another hit on the radar. Wanted to see if you'd come, but I think you've got enough problems here."

"You're telling me," Dean agreed, rolling his eyes as he sighed yet again. "Ask around, see if anyone could stretch their legs. Janine knows her way around a gun. The older woman, Margaret, can drive like a bat outta hell, so she's good for a quick getaway. Don't ask Claire; she'll say yes and we're trying to keep her from doing crazy shit - it makes Jody and Cas stress too much. Uh...let's see. You could always—"

"I'll be fine," Benny cut him off quickly, reaching out to clap his shoulder. "It's supposed to be quick anyway. Maybe I'll take that Crowley fella."

Dean stared at him. "Good luck."

Benny didn't sense his sarcasm. "Alright, good luck to you too with your fella. He's a looker, but he ain't no doll; I don't know what you see in him."

"You don't know him like I do," Dean replied automatically, by rote. He blinked when Benny grinned and started jogging away. Dean raised his hand and shoved it out in frustration as he scowled and yelled, "And he ain't mine!"

Multiple heads turned to stare at him with different levels of incredulity; Dean groaned and pivoted on the spot, heading towards Cas.

He found Cas waiting by the entrance to the garage, arms folded tight over his chest, eyes narrowed and trying to glare a hole through the ground. As soon as Dean started towards him, Cas jerked up from the building and started to head inside, probably with all plans not to say a word the whole time. Dean sped up and nearly tripped over himself to catch Cas' arm and tug him to a halt.

"Woah, woah, wait a sec," Dean blurted out, trying on a smile when Cas glared at him. "Jeez, you got somewhere to be?"
"Inside," Cas answered, tone clipped and stiff.

Dean couldn't help it, he softened. "Hey, don't do that. You think I put my faith in just anybody? That's pretty hard earned."

To Dean's utter delight, Cas' cheeks slowly bloomed red with a blush, even if he looked angry about it and snipped, "I'm sure he'll work very hard for it."

"Nah, he's lazy." Dean wasn't entirely sure what they were talking about anymore, but he knew what he wanted to say. "That's not the point. Look, you don't have to be so, uh, annoyed by him. He's my friend and I care about him, but he's not—he isn't—"

"What?" Cas stopped leaning away and leaned in, blue eyes steady as he searched Dean's face. "What isn't he?"

Dean swallowed. "You. He's not you." Cas blinked and Dean cleared his throat. "Or Sam. He's not—there are people that I- I shouldn't, but I put 'em higher than the rest, and it's fucked up, but I—"

"It's not," Cas said quickly, all anger drained from where it used to exist. "Fucked up, I mean. It's actually instinctual. Your brain automatically puts value to a life as it compares to you; scientifically, it has to do with the primal urge to have your bloodline present in the world."

"Right," Dean agreed slowly, amused by Cas' simple explanation. He should have left it alone, shouldn't have poked the bear. He did anyway. "But you're not actually my blood, not technically."

Another mistake. Dean was going for broke today.

Cas blinked as if he just realized this. "Yes, I know that. There are...other explanations."

"Such as?"

"They do not apply to me."
"Why? 'Cause you used to be an angel?"

"Because I am not your type."

Dean's mind went blank. It took him next to no time to grasp what Cas was saying. "Oh, you think I —"

"No, no," Cas cut him off quickly, his eyes going a little wide, "I did not say a word. There are many other explanations as well. The complexities of humans are incomparable. I was simply giving you an example, that's all."

Dean continued on as if Cas never spoke. "You think my brain automatically processes you as some kind of possible partner. Is that even possible with two men?"

"It's the way attraction works. The brain has a preset of attributes that it finds more appealing than others, generally set in from environmental experiences as you grow and adapt. It's perfectly normal for a man to look upon another man and process him as a possible partner."

"Yeah, but isn't there, like, this thing we do where we're automatically attracted to what can provide for us? Like back in caveman times, women wanted men strong enough to protect and hunt and all that shit. I think I learned this in ninth grade."

"You're not entirely wrong, but what you're missing is that it isn't a blanket experience. It's entirely unique to the person, which is why some people find something attractive that you do not. There is, of course, those who do not experience attraction at all, yet they find certain features pleasant to look at and can be with someone without feeling attraction. It has less to do with compatibility and more to do with your brain going through a checklist of things you've accumulated. Some people have long lists, some have short, some have none, some don't check the list until they know the person."

"Huh. So, it's not about what a person can do for you, just your brain basically skim reading a person's body to let you know if you'll want them or not?"

Castiel cleared his throat, gaze flicking down to Dean's hand hooked on his elbow. "In summary, yes. Anyway, I was simply saying that it's completely natural for you to value certain people more."

"You also said I value you because I like your face," Dean pointed out, watching Cas' eyes go wide
as true dismay crossed his face.

"No, I wasn't—"

"Cas, chill out. I'm fucking with you, man. It's not your face that makes you important; trust me, if it was, Sam wouldn't be important at all."

"You're not a nice person," Cas mumbled, frowning at him in disapproval. "I thought I'd offended you."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Nah, can't be mad at you for having good self-esteem. I said it once, I'll say it again, you're devastatingly handsome. Embrace it."

"People do find me aesthetically pleasing."

"Alright, pull back a little."

Cas huffed a small laugh, just as Dean hoped he would. He shook his head, then looked up through his lashes to smile softly. It truly was devastating; Dean wanted to cry. Jesus Christ.

"Thank you, Dean," Cas said seriously. "Things have been trying and I suppose I may have overreacted about Benny. He's your friend, which is a very good thing, and I was just…"

Castiel couldn't seem to find the right word and Dean sure as hell wasn't going to tell him. Instead, he eased his hand down Cas' arm and smiled at him before suggesting, "Stressed?"

Cas instantly looked relieved. "Yes, that."

"Well, unclench, man." Winking, Dean threw his arm over Cas' shoulder and led him towards the garage entrance. "You're my priority, I promise, and I have complete faith in you that you'll be at ease soon."

Cas' answering blush was a damn treat.
Sam was trying to figure out the best way to hunch down against the desk so he wouldn't get a crick in his neck as he looked down at Rowena when Dean and Cas came into the room. They seemed to be in higher spirits than before and didn't even bat an eye at the symbols Rowena was currently drawing on the floor with some old chalk they'd found in a hidden cache on the property - there were more that people continuously tripped up on and, not for the first time, Sam found himself thankful for Bobby.

"Hello, boys," Rowena greeted from the floor, perched expertly on the balls of her feet like she was some kind of ballerina. Knowing her, she probably was. "Have a good shower, Dean?"

"Not really," Dean answered, throwing her a brief look of annoyance. "Your son made sure of that."

"Peeping Tom?" Rowena asked innocently, looking up to smirk at Dean. Sam had to cough to hide his own laughter, adopting an innocent expression of his own when Dean tossed him a glare. "Should hope not, or Castiel will have someone else to be jealous over besides your vampire friend."

Cas' smile slipped off his face, abruptly looking as if he'd been hit in the head. "That's not—"

"Anyway," Dean cut in quickly, "what are you drawing on the floor and why is it pink?"

Rowena tsked. "It seems your Bobby had a sense of humor as well. I'm showing Sam some protective runes for later."

"Well, we have a meeting with Death. You staying or going?" Dean asked, arching an eyebrow.

Rowena looked at Sam.

"You don't have to," Sam murmured, "but if you—"
"Staying," Rowena answered, dropping the chalk and standing up without any joints popping. She smiled at Dean and Cas as she absentmindedly wiped the chalk off her fingers on Sam's shirt.

Sam sighed.

"Billie," Dean called out.

"You took your time," Billie answered, abruptly in the room with them.

Dean rolled his eyes. "I had priorities. Anyway, what did you need to talk about?"

Billie hummed. "There are two things you should all be aware of. First, Jack is in the Empty."

Sam sucked in a sharp breath, the words like a blunt object to the chest. Dean's arm fell away from Cas, his open expression shuttering almost immediately. Cas looked carved out of stone, his body so solid and still that it looked painful.

That wasn't fair.

"But," Sam choked out. Then, "No."

Billie's eyes flicked to him. "Yes. He's fine. That's all I can tell you right now. There are other matters of importance to discuss."

As expected, Dean snapped. "Other matters? Are you fucking kidding me? There ain't nothing more important than our damn kid in the Empty!"

"I think you'll disagree," Billie replied calmly, nodding her head towards the table.

They all swiveled to look at the same time. It had been bare before, but there was a manifesto sitting there now. It wasn't how Dean described the books in Billie's office; this seemed ancient. It was large
and worn, yellowed slightly, and there was a language written on it that Sam couldn't even identify. The more he stared at it, the more he wanted to walk over and touch it.

"What is that?" Cas asked carefully, his eyebrows furrowing as he stared at it.

Billie said, "A manifesto."

"Yes, I know that," Cas snapped, sending her a sharp look. "It looks...familiar."

"I was hoping you would say that," Billie admitted, watching Cas closely. "I can't read it. I found this in my predecessor's library with strict instructions to pass it off to either Gabriel, Balthazar, a Winchester, or you, but only if the End came."

Sam shared a look with Dean and Cas, his gaze slowly turning to Rowena. "Does that language look familiar to you at all?"

Rowena was staring at the manifesto with a small frown of confusion. "I'm sorry, no. I don't recognize anything about it, but it looks..."

"Important," Cas murmured. Slowly, as if in a trance, he edged closer to the table. He stared down at it, blinking as his lips tipped down. "I can't read it either. That doesn't make sense; I feel like I've seen this before."

"Maybe it's an angel thing," Sam suggested hesitantly. "Maybe it's just—"

Sam cut himself off when Cas reached out and fingered one corner of it. The moment his skin made contact, he gasped and his eyes rolled back in his head. Before Sam could so much as move, Dean was there, catching Cas as he slumped back and snatching his hand away from the paper.

"Cas? Cas!" Dean reached up and tried to open Cas' eyes to no avail. When that didn't work, Dean slumped down to the ground with Cas splayed out against him, back to his chest, head lolling on Dean's shoulder. Dean lightly smacked his cheek. "Cas, hey, can you hear me? Cas, come on, man, don't you fucking do this to me. You know you don't touch shit like this, wake the fuck up! Cas!"
It had all happened so fast, but Sam was right next to them, checking for a pulse, checking for breathing, confusion spreading when he found both. Cas seemed perfectly fine, yet it appeared as if he'd just had a seizure. There was a purple glow as Rowena examined the manifesto, her chanting a calm contrast to Dean's increasing panic.

"Dean, he's—he's breathing," Sam said, holding one of Cas' wrists as he watched his face for any change or twitch.

"What the fuck is that thing?!" Dean bellowed, head slinging back to look at Billie with a dangerous glint in his eyes. Sam hoped for her sake that Cas was okay, or Dean would be killing Death twice. "If he doesn't wake up, I swear I will—"

Dean didn't get to finish his threat because Cas suddenly surged up with a gasp, his hands scrambling for purchase against Sam's. He was saying a word over and over, lips moving strangely and producing sounds that didn't seem to fit any language in the world. Dean reached out and grasped Cas' cheeks, staring at him.

"Cas," Sam said softly, pressing gentle fingers to the inside of his wrists. "Hey, can you hear me?"

Cas blinked at Dean, then turned to look at Sam with surprisingly bright eyes. "Kassiel."

"What?" Dean barked, looking spooked and emotionally drained after that short amount of time.

"Kassiel," Cas repeated. "It's—I had a memory, not unlike a dream. I recognized a word on there - Kassiel. I remembered writing it. I think..." He licked his lips and looked between Sam and Dean with surprise. "I think I wrote the manifesto."

"You think?" Dean echoed incredulously.

Cas blinked rapidly, seemingly a little out of it. He pulled one hand from Sam's grip and reached back to touch Dean's jaw, just a fleeting touch, barely even connecting. Sam watched in faint surprise, taking in his brother's sudden mystified look. Dean didn't seem to realize how utterly stunned he looked by Cas simply touching his face like this, which it was intimate, to be fair, but Sam wasn't sure it warranted that kind of reaction. Then, he glanced up to find Rowena standing at his shoulder, worry pinched on her face, and he found himself understanding why Dean looked like he did.
"Kassiel," Cas repeated, sounding frustrated now, his fingers dropping from Dean's face. "Help me up; I need to look and see if I can read the rest."

Dean hesitated. "That's fine, Cas, but I don't want you to touch it again, okay? Even if that's how you can read it, just...don't."

"It's very tempting," Cas admitted, nose wrinkling as he swept his gaze towards the table. "I feel drawn to it, but that might not be a good thing."

"Right," Dean agreed in approval. "So, that means we're not going to touch it. Deal?"

Cas sighed. "Deal."

Still, despite that deal, Cas' hand automatically reached out for the paper when Sam and Dean helped him stand up. Sam went to smack his hand away, a simple reflex, but Dean caught Cas' fingers first and threaded his own through them, holding them between their bodies as he led them over the table. No one said anything, but Sam shared a quick look with Rowena, their smiles small but very there. Now wasn't the time, but Sam was pretty sure Dean was going to hold hands with Cas for as long as he could possibly get away with.

Sam admired his opportunism, envied it, wondered if he'd pass up his own next opportunity or simply take the plunge despite every reason not to.

This definitely wasn't the time.

"Alright, can you read anything?" Sam asked Cas carefully, snatching his gaze from Rowena's.

Cas frowned and leaned into Dean's side with a huff, even though Sam was pretty sure he was capable of standing on his own. "No, I can't decipher anything here. Kassiel does jump out at me, but not much else. Maybe if I just—"

"No," Dean insisted firmly, gripping Cas' hands tighter and avoiding Sam's eyes. "I'm not letting you do that again."
"Letting me?" Cas repeated sharply, his eyebrows rising in blatant disdain.

Dean scowled. "You heard me."

"What, you assume you have some sort of control over me because I'm human now?"

"Don't be stupid, Cas, you know it's not that."

"Oh, so I'm too stupid to make the proper decisions for myself," Cas noted in faux understanding, eyes blazing under his sarcasm.

"No, that's not— no."

Dean made a frustrated sound and visibly took a deep breath. "I just don't want you to get hurt, that's all."

"You seem to be under the impression that what you want dictates what I do; it does not. While you continue to underestimate me, I'm fairly certain that I can handle it," Cas snapped harshly.

"Look, asshole, I'm trying to keep you from risking your fucking life, but excuse the fuck outta me for—"

"Oh, don't you turn this around. You're the one who lied. I thought you had faith in—"

"I do, but you could have died! What would have happened if you touched it and never woke the fuck up? What would I have done then?"

"Dean, if I was going to die or be chained in eternal rest, it would have happened from the first touch. As it did not, and it granted me what very much felt like a memory, I think I'm safe."

Dean's nostrils flared. "Well, I can't fucking be sure of that, so I'd really prefer it if you wouldn't do it."

"And I would prefer you to accept my decisions and support me through them," Cas ground out through clenched teeth, eyes so narrow that they weren't much more than slits now.
"This isn't about that!" Dean blurted, shaking Cas' hands like Sam expected he wanted to shake his whole body. "This isn't deciding to go on a fucking diet, this is possibly dying. I am not supporting that!"

"I was fine!"

"You were not fine."

Cas huffed and rolled his eyes. "I was perfectly fine and you overreacted, that is all."

"You scared me! You fucking scared me, Cas." Dean's shoulders hunched and he released a long breath, suddenly seeming a lot more tired and weary than he'd let on. "It just...scared me, okay?"

"I apologize," Cas said gently, then went on to ruin that with, "but I really feel that I should do this."

"Oh my fucking—you know what?" Dean shook his head and laughed bitterly. "Sure, Cas, if you want to risk your life, be my fucking guest. Wanna toy with Death? Well, it's a good thing Billie is here, isn't it? Go the fuck ahead, who am I to stop you?"

Cas arched an eyebrow at Dean's ranting and unapologetically murmured, "I would, but you've yet to let my hands go."

"Because I don't want you to touch the fucking paper!" Dean jerked his and Cas' hands around wildly, getting a little splotchy around his jaw in his anger, so wound up that he didn't seem to realize just how close he'd drawn Cas to him. "Why can't you stop trying to give me a heart attack and fucking not die for once? I've really reached my limit!"

"Dean," Cas said, staring at Dean with infinite patience and genuine amusement.

"No, fuck you. Fuck you for deciding that something on this—this thing is more important than—" Dean went silent, his head whipping back towards the manifesto a second time after taking a moment to gesture and glare at it while he ranted. All of the anger seemed to leave him at once.
Cas frowned. "Dean?"

"I... I can read it," Dean muttered, dropping Cas' hands to stare at the manifesto. "I can actually read this thing."

Billie stepped closer, looking up at Dean with a frown. Her eyes cut to Cas. "How is that possible?"

Sam shared another look with Rowena, this time with apprehension. It was a bit like whiplash, the way Dean and Cas went from arguing to focusing on something else. In Sam's opinion, Dean got a little carried away, but he'd probably be the same way if he was in the situation. Which, that made him wonder why he couldn't read the manifesto but Dean could. That could be a problem.

"What does it say?" Cas asked quietly.

Dean stared down at it. Slowly, he said, "It's written like a Shakespearean letter or some shit. Lotsa talk about how this was written on the tallest cliff overlooking the clearest ocean. Some kind of utopian shit, I guess."

Sam watched Cas' eyes flutter shut, his lips parting as he nodded. "I see it," he whispered.

"It says that you don't know your own history, I think? Yeah, I'm just gonna read the rest and let you translate it." Dean cleared his throat and read: "Brothers Gabriel and Balthazar holp with a faileth safe. Thee knoweth not thy owneth hist'ry; thou hast lost a most wondrous deale to the almighty for simply loving one that gent'd scorned. Thou needeth to remember, for if it be true thee cannot, each end shall cometh to pass until the final one."

"What the fuck?" Sam muttered.

"Right," Dean agreed.

Cas still had his eyes closed, his breathing measured as he mouthed the words to himself. After a moment, he opened his eyes and declared, "There's something I'm missing."

Dean looked wary when he said, "Yeah, I think so. And there's a helpful little list to help you find
out what it is. I think it's...witchcraft?"

"Oh?" Rowena asked delicately, visibly perking up.

"I'll help," Sam said quickly, his heart doing that stupid fluttering thing again when her eyes snapped over to connect with his.

Rowena smiled. "Well, if you insist."

Castiel, by nature, was not someone who paced. He rarely showed his own anxiety, not for anyone, but poor Jo had no choice but to see it now.

"And you're certain?" he asked yet again.

Jo sighed and eyed her nails, lips pursed slightly in distaste. "Quite so. I never had an interaction with any angel named Kassiel. May I go now?"

"What of your dreams?" Castiel pressed, whirling around to stare at her.

"No names were exchanged," Jo told him, dropping her hand and watching him. "Cas, maybe you're—"

Castiel snapped his fingers at her, causing her to shut her mouth with an audible click. "Yes, that. Don't you find it odd that you're having dreams just as I am having nightmares? It doesn't startle you that they're indistinguishable and hold nothing identifiable within them besides the feeling you garner from them now?"

"Alright, that's it," Jo said decisively, jerking to her feet with a stern nod, "I'm going to get your boyfriend."
Castiel waved her off, far too caught up within his own head to care what she was teasing him for this time. He was grasping at the faint images that his mind had managed to grant him, images from a different time, a different life. A chisel dipped in mashed berries, digging artfully into worn leather as a tanned hand moved in the motion to write Kassiel. A breeze through long waves of hair, curdling through the air around the cliff that had been handcrafted by God himself that oversaw an ocean that humans had yet to soil. These images felt like his own, like they came from his own mind, but he couldn't remember if he'd ever been there or not.

"Cas…"

Blinking, Castiel snapped his head up to watch Jo and Dean duck into the room. "Hello, Dean," Castiel said, a habitual greeting more than anything.

Dean offered him a smile. "Hey, you alright? Not-so-Malibu Barbie mentioned that you're getting a little...uh…"

Jo crossed her arms. "Obsessed, insane, fixated. Take your pick; they're all true."

"Shut up," Castiel said maturely, cutting her an arch look of betrayal. "I expected you to be interested, considering that this involves you as well."

"How so?" Jo shrugged her shoulders and worked her hands into her hair, braiding her way down as she watched Cas expectantly. "Because look, the way I see it, this has to do with angels and memories, two things that I have no affiliation with. The past is the past, brother; perhaps we should leave it there."

Castiel frowned at her. "If you'd learned that memories had been taken from you, what would you have wanted to do?"

"You're right, I'd want to get them back," Jo agreed easily, shaking out her braid and sighing as she shot Dean a quick look. "But I also wouldn't let that be my focus, especially not in the world we live in now. You'll get your memories back; you have an idea how to start doing that. So, you shouldn't let it eat away at you until it consumes you."

"That's," Castiel searched for the word and finally managed to settle on, "insightful."
"I can be, on occasion." Jo winked, then started towards the door. "Alright, I'll leave you to get all introspective with him; don't come out until you're able to fixate on literally anything else."

Castiel had the insane urge to tell her that he loved her; he refrained and called out, "Watch out for the railing this time," which was basically the same thing in the end because she always managed to clock her head on the way out.

Her answering, "Do something about that already," was as much of an *I love you too* as he was going to get. He found that he liked it better that way.

"You wanna know how she got me?" Dean asked. Castiel waited patiently. "She came out where we were all hanging out and yelled, *'Hey, Cas' boyfriend, can I borrow you?'* and then waited."

Castiel blinked. "What did you do?"

Dean was the one to blush this time. "I looked up."

Castiel laughed. It was probably rude, but the mere thought of it playing out like that amused him. He could imagine Dean's head snapping up on instinct without hesitation, not even processing the action before it was done, and oh, that was a truly uplifting thing to ponder. He tried to bite his bottom lip to stifle his chuckles, but it was clear by Dean's flat look that he failed miserably. For all his posturing, Dean obviously was amused too.

"And so you simply followed her?"

"What choice did I have?"

Castiel snorted; it was inelegant and utterly human, but oh so enjoyable. "You could have simply waited for her to address you properly."

"I don't know," Dean said, dry and snarky as ever as he quirked an eyebrow. "After a title like that, I think a simple *Dean* is a little bland."

"You're the farthest thing from bland that I have ever encountered," Castiel assured him, voice
softening of its own accord. "And I have encountered many things."

"Ah," Dean murmured delicately, clearing his throat and nearly tripping over a chair as he tried to scoot closer to the door, "right, you're a, uh, and I'm just—which is—okay, I'm gonna—"

"Stay," Castiel cut in quickly, blinking up with a calm smile that didn't seem to put Dean at ease. "I could use the company and the distraction, especially while things start to move forward."

Dean's swallow was loud in the quiet. "Move forward," he repeated carefully, "with the...manifesto, right?"

Castiel hummed. "Sure."

"Right. Right, okay." Dean shook out his hands and blew out a deep breath, bouncing on the balls of his feet as if was psyching himself up for something. "So, how do you want me to, uh, accompany and distract you while things...move forward?"

Castiel considered this, tilting his head as he scanned Dean's face. "Did you ever get your nap?"

Dean blinked, lips parting. "Uh, no. But I didn't really expect to anyway."

"Take one now." Castiel plucked the book about moths he'd been reading on and sat in the chair Dean had nearly fell over, gesturing calmly to the bed while Dean gaped at him. "Go on, I'll read to you until you fall asleep, possibly after. But you can rest peacefully knowing I'm watching over you."

"Cas," Dean said carefully, stepping forward to hold his gaze, "if you help me manage at least two hours, I will gladly upgrade my title to whatever in the fuck you want it to be. Cas' husband? You got it. Cas' bitch? You betcha. Just please let me have two hours of blissful fucking sleep."

Cas opened his book. "What could I get if I managed to let you get three hours?"

Dean faceplanted the bed and went boneless immediately. When he spoke, his words were muffled into the pillow. "God, whatever you want."
"I'll hold you to that," Cas told him, biting back a smile as Dean's snores started up.

Castiel started the clock.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Don't hesitate to drop off some kudos and please leave a comment; we all really love the feedback! Have a fantastic week and we'll see y'all on Monday ;)

Ta!

-SOBS
Dude, Where's My Car

Chapter by CR Noble (erudite12)

Chapter Summary

Sam and Rowena figure out how to retrieve Cas's memories. But they'll have to make a supply run first.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys!! CR Noble back again (I wrote chapter 2, too). Sorry for the late update with this chapter. I had some unfortunate family business last week.

I hope you guys are enjoying reading the story as much as I've enjoyed working with the other creators to write it!

Hope you're ready for the Samwitch goodness :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Season Z-Episode 10: Dude, Where's My Car

Rowena’s green eyes sparkled brightly in the lamplight as she excitedly and reverently placed the Black Grimoire on the table in the main cabin. Camp Singer’s core leadership—minus Donna, who had taken a couple of the more capable muggles out to track down a pack of those freakishly hard to kill monsters Eve created, Jefferson Starships—were staring at her with intense interest. Especially Dean and Cas.

Sam hadn’t missed the way their dynamic had shifted over the last few days. The way it became Dean invading Cas’s personal space instead of the other way around. The incidental brushing of Dean’s fingers on Cas’s forearm. The fact that Dean took advantage of every possible chance to hold Cas’s hand.

It put Sam in a weird limbo state between "it’s about time" and "will you two just get a room already" but Dean looked happier than he had in a very long time, so Sam kept his comments to himself. It wasn’t as if he really had any room to talk, he thought as he turned his attention back to Rowena.

She was always beautiful, but never more so than in moments like this. Her eyes glittered and her tiny frame practically vibrated with exhilaration, long curls falling over one shoulder like a waterfall. “So, I couldn’t find a spell for this situation specifically,” she said, opening the book and flipping through the pages. The reverent way her delicate fingers caressed the paper was decidedly distracting. “But, do you remember Gideon Loughlin’s memory curse?”

“Yeah,” Dean said, nodding. Cas, for his part, just looked confused, but the ex-angel hadn’t been there for that, and, apparently, no one had thought to tell him about it in the relative insanity that was
the Winchester’s natural state of existence. Looking apologetically at Cas, Dean brushed his arm against Cas’s and explained, “I forgot about everything and everyone, including myself. Ro reversed it with a spell from the grimoire.”

“Aye,” Rowena agreed, pointing to the diagram of a sigil in the book. She glanced over at Sam and he smiled, encouraging her to continue. “I believe that with some modification, the same spell can be used to retrieve Castiel’s memories. Most of the ingredients are common and we already have them here. Unfortunately, there are a few more specialized items. They’re extremely rare. A dragon’s claw, the incus of a djinn, and the dust of opalized wood.”

Jody’s hand rested casually on the butt of her pistol, secure in its holster, which hung from the utility belt that was the only sign—other than the truck with “Sioux Falls, South Dakota Sheriff” printed across the tailgate—of her life before the End. “So, we need to do another supply run.”

“Yeah.” Sam nodded as he spoke. “But we cleaned out all the local occult stores, and none of them had anything this rare.”

“There is a shop in Champaign that deals specifically in uncommon magical items,” Rowena said. “That’s the closest one I know that will be likely to have what we need. I can go and find it, and when I return, we can begin the ritual.”

Sam’s arm wrapped protectively around her waist almost automatically. “I’ll go with you.” He sure as hell wasn’t going to let her go alone. Not that he felt Rowena couldn’t take care of herself, but he’d seen what it was like. He’d been there when they almost lost Cas. Someone had to watch her back, and there was almost no one else Sam would trust to do it.

If it meant he got some time with Ro to himself? Well, that was just an added bonus.

Dean opened his mouth as though he was about to argue—and he would probably make some good points that Sam would completely ignore if he did—but Cas elbowed him in the ribs and it seemed to make him rethink his decision.

The streets of Champaign, Illinois were deserted.

All of the humans were long gone, either becoming his children—as he had come to think of them, regarding them with some base imitation of affection—or dying between their teeth. He leaned against the brick front of the apartment building he had nested his family in for the time being. The body he occupied was not as broken and decayed as the others; it had spent far less time in the ground, and whatever killed it had not damaged its structure. He had used this to his advantage on multiple occasions, the humans believing he was one of them until he was too close for them to stop him.

Consumption wasn’t necessary for survival—he had no instinct to survive, anyway—but his children were restless. They were driven by only two things: his command and their hunger. Though they might be mindless, the instinct to eat, to pursue living flesh, was strong enough that he knew they would need to move on soon.

But not yet. His instincts told him something was coming.

The ten-hour drive would have been much more comfortable in the Impala than the rusty piece of ’80s model Pontiac bullshit Sam was driving. Of course, he’d known there was no way Dean would let him take Baby, but he was pretty sure this car was his punishment for asking anyway. The vinyl
seats were torn and missing at least half the stuffing, which meant the metal supports were mostly uncushioned and digging painfully into Sam’s ass. On top of that, he was practically eating his knees because the bucket seat could no longer be manually adjusted to give him more legroom. The rails it was supposed to slide on were so rusted, the thing refused to budge.

The passenger side of the car wasn’t in much better shape, and Rowena made it known—vehemently and repeatedly—that she was uncomfortable and displeased with the arrangement.

“—after all this, I’m going to die of tetanus from this bloody car,” Rowena complained, gesticulating her disgust with both hands.

“Ro, can you just…not?” Sam asked, exasperated. Piled on top of the general pain of being in the car, an ache was building behind his eyes and making him that much more irritable. The last thing he wanted to do was snap at her.

Rowena’s face was caught between expressions of surprise and offense. “Well, I am just so very sorry that my hardship is inconveniencing you.”

“You know that’s not what I meant.” Sam’s grip on the old, flaking steering wheel tightened incrementally. He sighed. “Look, I know you’re uncomfortable. So am I. The amount of metal digging into my ass right now cannot possibly be healthy. But no amount of complaining is going to make this car less of a piece of shit.”

Rowena grimaced and looked away, staring out the window for a long moment before speaking again. “No, you’re right. Besides, it was foolish to believe I might be afforded any unnecessary comforts during times like these.”

The sadness in her voice made Sam’s heart ache but she wasn’t wrong, and there was nothing he could say that would make things better. So, he said nothing at all, turning his attention back to the road.

Despite their mutual irritability, the silence between them wasn’t awkward. It was the kind of quiet that Sam could settle into; the comfort of existing in the same space as someone he cared about. Mutually unspoken feelings didn’t hang heavily between him and Rowena as they often did with Dean and Cas. There was nothing odd or weird about it when Sam reached over the center console and took Ro’s hand in his, lacing their fingers together.

“You know I am not typically prone to showing weakness,” Ro said, still staring out the window at the passing trees as she broke the silence. “But since this all started, everyone else has allowed themselves their moments, their mental breakdowns.”

Sam swallowed harshly. It was worst amongst the muggles. Civilians that, up until that point, had never dealt with anything like this. But even those at Camp Singer with experience—Dean, Cas, Jody, and the rest of the hunters—had shown evidence of the stress and despair they all felt but didn’t talk about. Sam, for his part, had nearly given up on sleeping. The nightmares were too much. There had been more than one night that he’d walked past the shed that Jody and Donna shared with Claire and Alex, only to hear them crying. But in the daylight? They always pretended they were okay.

Rowena turned to look at Sam then, her eyes shining with unshed tears and her mouth pulled into a tight line. “I am afraid, Sam. I’ve never been so frightened. With Lucifer, I could at least run, but now? We’re trapped. There’s no escape from this. Even if we manage to retrieve the angel’s memories, what then?”
“I don’t know,” Sam said, squeezing her hand a little tighter. “But we’re people of action. We need a way to move forward, something to do. We need… hope.”

Swiping at the tears that slid down her cheeks, Rowena just nodded and leaned against Sam’s arm. He offered what little comfort he could. Even when his arm started to tingle, the fact that Rowena trusted him enough to be so vulnerable kept him from moving it. He drove on in silence as she fell asleep, her breathing growing deep and even as she clung to his arm.

Sam wished that Dean had at least had the decency to give him the keys to a car with a working tape deck. After another hour of hearing nothing but the sound of the car engine and his and Rowena’s breathing, his eyelids were drooping heavily. They were still a half-hour outside of Champaign, though, and it wasn’t like there was anywhere for them to stop safely and take a nap, so Sam did his best to push through it. It was almost a relief when he saw the ‘Welcome to Champaign: population 87,432’ sign on the side of the road.

Almost.

The streets were completely deserted. Not that Sam had been expecting to see a lot of people, but something about it put him on edge. There were no bodies littering the sidewalks like there had been in most of the other towns they’d ventured out to. There were no restless undead abominations tripping over themselves as they ambled awkwardly through the ghost town. There was nothing, beyond the lack of actual human life, to indicate that Champaign had been affected by the zombie apocalypse in any way.

“Ro, wake up.” Sam shook her gently, eyes darting around the eerily empty city. “We’re here.”

She blinked and her eyes darted around, taking in their surroundings as much as she could in the darkness. The dim, shitty headlights only cut through it so much. “Up ahead there, on the right.”

Sam pulled slowly up to the curb and put the car in park. He cut the engine but left the key in the ignition, thinking it would be better not to have to fumble with it if they needed to make a quick getaway. Despite the fact that he had yet to see a single zombie, his gut told him that when it came time to go, they’d have to get out of there fast. He glanced over at Rowena and smiled. She still looked exhausted and he was dead on his feet. Opening the door and stepping out, he said, “Let’s get inside, put the wards up, and get a couple hours of sleep before we clean the place out and head back to camp.”

“We should get back on the road as quickly as possible, Sam,” Rowena protested, following him out of the car. “I can drive if you’re too tired.”

Sam shook his head. “No, I’ll bring the radio in so we can check in with Dean, but we both need sleep.” Rowena opened her mouth as if to argue again, but Sam raised a hand to stop her. “We can stay here for a couple of hours. Cas’s memories will wait.” He popped the trunk of the car, reaching in to pull out a short-barreled shotgun and the black duffel bag they’d brought to collect whatever they could.

Rowena’s lips pressed into a hard line as she watched Sam, and then she rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

Sam closed the trunk as she turned on her heel and stalked toward the door of the shop. She waved a hand and said something that sounded like Latin under her breath. The deadbolt on the door turned, clicking audibly as it unlocked. With one last look around, Sam pulled the handle and followed Rowena in.

The store was already warded against all manner of monsters, so all they had to do was put up the
zombie wards. It went quickly, and soon enough Sam was turning on the radio.

“Dean, you there?” Sam asked, holding down the button to speak.

There was a moment of static as he waited for a reply. “Use the damn codenames,” Dean said on the other end.

Sam pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed before depressing the button once more. “Bullwinkle to Rocky.”

“See, that wasn’t so bad. You make it okay?” Dean was clearly still in a good mood, and Sam didn’t miss the smirk that pulled at one corner of Rowena’s mouth.

“Yeah. We’re gonna sleep for a few hours and then we’ll head home with the stuff for the spell.”

“Ten-four. Be safe.”

With that, Sam turned the radio off to conserve the battery and found a spot in a corner where he could ball his jacket up to use as a pillow and laid down. Rowena eyed him a bit suspiciously, and he beckoned her over. She hesitated but eventually joined him, nestling against him and resting her head against his chest.

The last time he’d heard the rumble of a car engine was right after God brought him back to this world. This time it roused him from his almost-slumber. It was less sleep and more dormancy and only happened because there was nothing left in this city to be consumed. But still he’d felt he couldn’t leave yet, and the sound of the car rolling into town confirmed his instinct. He ambled awkwardly out onto the sidewalk; the lack of broken bones and missing limbs only did so much for his coordination. His body was dead, after all, and movement was stiff.

As he rounded the corner of a café, he saw the taillights of the car moving slowly toward the university. He pursued them, staying close to the brick storefronts and out of sight. The car stopped, but he kept making his way toward it. He was almost on top of it now and he stillled, head tilting to one side as the doors creaked open. The scent of fresh, living flesh wafted over to him on the breeze, and he took an involuntary step toward it.

“—inside, put the wards up, and get a couple hours of sleep before we clean the place out and head back to camp,” said a tall man with long, shaggy hair.

He saw this man with a familiarity that was not his own, but rather came from some part of his mind that was beyond his limited understanding. The compulsion was no longer to consume but to possess. This memory that didn’t belong to him told him that the man must belong to them; the man must become one of his children. The woman with him was unfamiliar, inconsequential. His head twitched and he could feel his family respond, but the humans were faster than he was. They were disappearing into the building already.

It didn’t matter. He could wait.

He watched for them to come back outside, but they did not. They were not planning on staying based on what he’d heard the man say. His eyes flicked back to the car, a plan formulating. A small group of his family was already on the street making their way toward him. He ignored them and walked over to the car.
He grasped at the handle, his fingers slow to respond, and finally pulled it, the door grinding as he yanked it open. He looked up at the door the humans had disappeared through and waited a moment to see if they’d heard the loud noise. No one rushed out to investigate. Rigidly, he climbed into the driver’s seat, reaching for the ignition automatically. The key was there.

Without pondering how or why he knew what he was doing, he gripped the small piece of metal and turned it. The engine rumbled back to life and he shut the door, then jerkily moved the shifter. He missed the "D" a few times and had to move the thing back and forth until it finally landed where he needed it to be. Resting his hands on the steering wheel, he pressed the gas pedal and pulled the car away from the curb.

Rowena’s head was resting in the crook of Sam’s shoulder when he woke up. It was the first time in weeks he hadn’t dreamt. He checked his watch; only a few hours had passed since their arrival, but they needed to get on the road back to Camp Singer as soon as possible. Sitting up, he shook Rowena lightly to wake her and rubbed a hand across his face in an attempt to wipe away what was left of the sleep.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get what we came for and get out of here.”

Rowena nodded, then stood and started searching. They were planning on cleaning the place out, but the ingredients for the memory spell were paramount. Sam watched Rowena for a moment as her delicate fingers ran across boxes and jars full of… well, Sam didn’t really want to know. Her lips moved as she read labels to herself and her hips swayed with each step. The dress—she still insisted on wearing the beautiful dresses she wore before the End came—swished with her movement, and it was altogether very enticing.

But this was not the time to be thinking about that.

Shaking the thought from his mind, Sam stood and picked the black duffel bag up off the floor. He set it on a nearby counter and started putting jars in, reading the labels as he went. Most of the names were thrown to the back of his mind as soon as he read them; they weren’t important. “Got Opalized Wood Dust here,” he told Rowena as he turned a jar full of powder that almost sparkled in his hand before putting it in the bag with the rest of them. Sam would have to be careful not to jostle it too much when he carried it out to the car. The last thing they needed was for an important part of the spell to be ruined because he carelessly broke a jar.

“I’ve found the other two,” Rowena said with a smile, placing them in the bag. The fear she’d expressed on the way there was replaced now by excitement, probably at the prospect of using some powerful, new magic.

The bag was almost full of bottles of all shapes and sizes. Sam grabbed as many more as he could fit and zipped the bag closed. It felt like a win. “You ready?” he asked Rowena, carefully shouldering the duffel and leaning down to grab the shotgun.

She nodded. Sam took a deep breath and headed for the door. He cracked it open and peeked outside, sticking the barrel of the gun out just in case. The sidewalk was as empty as it had been when they arrived. Pushing the door open, he stepped out the rest of the way. He took two steps forward and—

“Where is the car, Sam?” Rowena asked behind him.

“I… don’t know. I parked it right here.”
Any further discussion was cut off by a loud, collective groaning that seemed to come from every direction. Sam had known the lack of undead assholes trying to eat their faces off was too good to be true. He still didn’t understand how the hell the car had disappeared, but it didn’t matter at the moment. “Get back inside!”

Rowena made for the door as Sam raised his shotgun, blasting the heads off the zombies closest to them. He locked the door behind him and turned toward her. Arms, heads, and any other moving body parts were being used to hit the thick glass of the windows, flashes of light visible through the dark curtains as they were deflected by the warding.

“Ro, is there some kind of spell you can do that will give us mobile protection?” Sam asked, turning the problem over in his mind as he pulled the thick fabric back enough to look outside at the way-too-many zombies for them to take on by themselves.

“I can come up with something, of course,” she replied, pacing behind him. “I’ve no idea what good it will do. We can’t walk back to Sioux Falls.”

Sam let the curtain fall back into place and turned to face her. “There are other cars all along this main road. We just need something that will last long enough for me to get us into one of those.”

Rowena stopped pacing and walked over to Sam. The fear he’d seen in her eyes in the car had returned, but she took a deep breath and raised her hands, chanting softly. The two of them were enveloped in a purple glow, almost a bubble of protective light. As Rowena finished her spell, the light disappeared, but the air around them crackled with power and Sam knew that the shield remained in place. “We’ll have to move quickly. I don’t know how long I’ll be able to keep this in place.”

Sam nodded, looking down into her eyes. He admired her strength. There was a good chance they weren’t going to make it out of Champaign alive, but no matter how bad the odds or how terrifying the circumstances, Rowena never gave up. Sam was overtaken by the now-familiar urge to kiss her, but for once, he didn’t resist it. He might never get another chance. Pulling her close, he bent his head and pressed his lips to hers softly. It was short and chaste and he was releasing her long before he wanted to.

“Let’s go,” he said, turning toward the door. Rowena kept her hands raised, all of her concentration on keeping their shield in place. Sam threw open the door and there were immediate purple flashes as zombies were deflected by the spell. They crowded in around Sam, and he did his best to push through, firing the shotgun into the space directly in front of him, trying to clear a path through the thickening sea of monsters. There was an older model car a few feet away; they could make it.

Rowena was sweating, the effort of holding up the wards with so many of the creatures trying to break through it was wearing her down quickly. When they reached the car, Sam didn’t bother jimmying the door open. He smashed the window with the butt of the shotgun and reached in to pull it open.

Sam grabbed Rowena by the elbow, shoving her toward the car. “Get in.”

She climbed over the driver’s seat to get to the other side, and Sam followed her, slamming the driver’s side door shut behind him. The purple flashes of light were getting brighter, and Sam swore he saw a hand push through the barrier before he turned his attention to pulling the plastic panel off under the steering column so he could hotwire the car.

“The wards are failing!” Rowena shouted. “I can’t hold them much longer, Sam. Work faster.”
He was stripping the wires when he felt a cold touch on his shoulder.

“Samuel! I can’t keep this up!” Rowena’s voice was tinged with terror, and Sam imagined she might be trying to avoid the reach of dead, grasping hands.

Jerking away from the zombies, he touched the wires together once... “Come on—” twice... “—come on, dammit—” three times and the car finally rumbled to life. Before he had even sat up enough to see out the windshield, the car was in drive and his foot was on the gas.

Even with the pedal depressed all the way to the floor, it was slow going. The crowd of zombies was too much for the car to push through. Rowena shouted a single word in a language Sam didn’t have the spare brainpower to recognize at that moment, and, with a burst of energy, bodies were thrown away from the car and they were moving forward. Sam glanced out the driver’s side window, and standing there between two storefronts, he saw a single zombie watching them.

If it hadn’t been completely surrounded by mindless, flesh-eating monstrosities, Sam might have thought it was human. There wasn’t much decay on it at all, and its eyes followed the car. Even in the darkness, it was clear to see the thing was pissed. Or whatever the zombie equivalent of angry was.

It didn’t matter. Sam turned his attention back to the road ahead of them. “We made it.” He pulled the strap of the duffel bag over his head and passed the whole thing to Rowena, hoping that nothing important had been ruined. It wasn’t like he’d had the option of caution. “Check these.”

Rowena pulled the zipper back, and after a few moments of listening to the clinking of glass, she said, “It’s all intact.”

Sam breathed a sigh of relief and reached across the center console to take Rowena’s hand in his. Her face was still covered in a sheen of sweat from the effort of keeping the wards up for as long as she had, but Rowena managed a small smile and squeezed Sam’s hand tightly. Somehow, even after almost dying again, things still felt like they were getting better. They had what they needed to retrieve Cas’s memories, and he’d managed to steal a car with a full tank of gas.

It had to be a sign. There was still hope.

When they finally pulled through the gates of Camp Singer, Sam was exhausted. Dean didn’t seem to notice, pestering him with questions and insisting that Rowena start the memory spell.

“Dean,” Sam said, rubbing his face. “I know you want to get this done, but we almost didn’t make it back and Rowena is dead on her feet. We need to sleep. The spell can wait until tomorrow.”

Dean opened his mouth to say something else, but Cas stopped him with a gentle hand on his forearm. “Sam’s right. Let them rest. My memories aren’t going anywhere.”

“Fine.” Dean rolled his eyes. “You get the cabin to yourself. Cas and I are on watch tonight.”

Sam nodded and left, walking toward the shower. Dean had, at least, been nice enough to give up his time, even if it was right after Crowley’s. The water was lukewarm at best, but Sam didn’t care. He just wanted to wash away the stench of death. Normally, he was in and out in ten minutes, but he lingered for a while after he was clean. After all these years, Sam didn’t think a brush with death could affect him so much. But it wasn’t the prospect of his own death he found disturbing.

He thought back to the conversation he and Rowena had. She was still so certain that Sam would be the one to kill her, but there had to be some way around that. This was Team Free Will. 2.5 or
whatever they were at now. They didn’t subscribe to fate. They could— Sam could change it.

Sighing, Sam turned the water off and dried off enough to throw on the clean clothes. His hair was still dripping when he stepped out, leaving wet splotches on the shoulders of his shirt. He didn’t care; he just wanted to sleep.

He laid down on his cot and was nearly asleep when he heard the door open again. He opened his eyes to see Rowena walking in, shoulders wrapped in a gray emergency blanket. She stood there for a moment, clasping the blanket tightly at her chest. Her hair was still a little damp, her curls were untamed, and she was barefoot.

“Sam?” she asked softly. “Are you awake?”

He sat up on the edge of the cot. “Yeah,” he replied with a tired sigh. “I’m up.”

Rowena crossed the room to him, letting the door shut behind her. Sam could barely see her as she reached to caress his cheek with soft fingertips. “We are not your brother and his angel. I don’t believe it’s necessary for us to dance around it.”

“I don’t think either of us has been dancing around anything, Ro,” Sam replied, knowing she meant the attraction—the feelings—between them. And he meant it. He had never been unclear about how he felt toward Rowena, even when it wasn’t good. “But this isn’t really the time.”

She sat on the cot next to him, leaning in so her warm body was pressed against him and she was close enough for Sam to actually see her face. “It’s the end of the world, Samuel. This is the only time.”

He didn’t have the chance to respond because Ro pulled Sam into a kiss. She smelled like the cheap soap they’d gotten on one of the raids, and her lips were soft against his. She was right. It was why he kissed her in the store before they’d faced the murderous horde outside. He might not get another chance.

Pulling her up into his lap, Sam threaded his fingers into her curls. Draped across his legs, Rowena was somehow soft and yielding, and hard and demanding all at once. Her hands roamed freely across his bare chest, fingers leaving trails of goosebumps in their wake. Sam pushed the blanket off her shoulders, and underneath it, she wore a loose nightgown that rode up to her hips when she moved to straddle him.

They were tangled up in each other when their lips met again. Rowena tugged Sam’s hair, tilting his head to deepen the kiss, and he let her take control. It felt good to have her in his arms, pressed against him so intimately. His hands were on her thighs, slowly pushing the thin nightgown up to expose more skin. She rolled her hips against him and he groaned softly, fingers digging into her lower back as his grip tightened on her sides.

Breaking apart for a moment, Rowena lifted her arms so Sam could push the fabric up further and then pulled it off the rest of the way. There was no hint of shyness or modesty in her as she watched Sam take in her naked form. She was beautiful, all taut muscle under soft, milky skin. The curves of her small breasts and hips contrasted the sharp angles of her face.

Sam leaned in, lips brushing against the warm flesh of Rowena’s neck and leaving a wet trail of kisses down to her clavicle. She gasped and clutched him more tightly as he sucked little red marks against the pale white of her skin. Sam carefully maneuvered them so he could lay Rowena back against the cot. He wondered if the tiny excuse for a bed was really the best place for sex, and Rowena laughed when he voiced the question.
“I suppose it’s better than the floor,” she said. “But we can try that, too, if you prefer.”

Sam laughed. “I think this will do just fine.” He kissed her again, then his lips and tongue slowly made their way down her throat and chest, tasting the salty sheen of sweat that was already building on her skin. She arched against him as he flicked his tongue across her nipple before sucking it gently into his mouth. His fingers trailed down her sides as kissed her stomach, and Sam felt her hands tangle in his hair.

He travelled lower, drawing a moan from Rowena when he nipped at her hip bones. Then Sam was burying his face between her legs, fingers tightly gripping her thighs as he tasted her. She cried out for him, hips bucking and legs shaking as Sam brought her closer and closer to the edge. Calling out his name, Rowena tugged at his hair, urging him on. As if he needed the encouragement. Sam wanted her like a drowning man wanted air, and he was pretty sure he could live a while off the sounds she made alone.

When Rowena came, it was with a throaty groan. Her back arched off the bed and her entire body shook with it. He moaned as he worked her through her orgasm with his tongue, her fingers tightly fisted in his hair and making his scalp tingle. Rowena tugged Sam up over her by the hair until they were face to face again. She looked delicate, vulnerable in a way that was completely unfamiliar. There was a softness in her eyes that Sam instinctively knew was for him, and only him.

As he fumbled one-handed at the button of his jeans, Sam pushed away the intrusive thought that he might have to kill Rowena one day. He didn’t want to think about that now, or ever. It was too much and he wouldn’t let it spoil this moment. The button finally came undone and he haphazardly pushed the waistband down over his hips until he had to sit up to take them off.

Rowena took advantage of his changing position and straddled him again as his jeans dropped to pool around his ankles. Sam let his senses become full of her; the silkiness of her skin beneath his hands, the taste of her that still lingered on his lips as he leaned in to kiss her, the needy sounds she made. If he could be forever frozen in a single moment of time, this was the one he wanted.

Red curls fell down her back like a waterfall as Rowena threw her head back to give his lips access to her throat. She was absolutely shameless in her desire, not that Sam ever expected anything else, but it made her all the more captivating. Even as she lowered herself slowly onto the hard length of him—the tight, wet heat of her leaving Sam breathless—he couldn’t look away from her.

Their bodies moved in unison, driven by a combination of physical need and emotional desperation. They devoured each other, nothing but warm air and slick sweat between them. Sam’s hands roamed across flesh, tangling in hair, gripping tightly, trying to pull Rowena impossibly closer. If their souls hadn’t been hopelessly entangled before, they certainly were now, and Sam couldn’t think of any other way he would want it at that moment.

He reached up, cupping Rowena’s face in one hand as their lips and tongues met once more, and swallowed every sigh and moan she made as she came again, clutching him tightly. Sam followed her over the edge, cradling Rowena like he was afraid she might disappear if he let her go.

Even in the fuzzy afterglow, Sam’s mind provided him with an unfortunate reminder of Billie’s books and how they all said Rowena would die at his hand. He just held her close, kissed her tenderly, and hoped that time would never come.

“‘We should sleep,’” Rowena said softly, her voice a little hoarse. “‘We need to be at our best to get Castiel’s memories back.’”

Sam nodded but didn’t let her go when she tried to pull away. “Don’t go.”
Rowena just smiled. “I’m not going anywhere, Samuel. But it might be a touch awkward for us to sleep like this.” She gestured at them.

Sam bit his lip and smiled in spite of himself; she wasn’t wrong. They were still at the edge of the cot, Rowena in his lap. Reluctantly, he let her go and she stood. He reached for a t-shirt and used it to clean both of them up, at least enough to sleep, and then tossed it back on the floor. He laid down on his cot, his back almost against the wall behind him, and pulled Rowena back down onto the mattress with him.

Somehow, they both fit on the tiny thing. Rowena’s back was pressed tightly against his chest as he pulled a blanket up over them and wrapped his arm around her waist. Sam stared at the back of her head, feeling like there was something more to be said but unable to find the words to say anything else.

They settled into each other and Sam fell asleep, easier than he had in a very long time.

Chapter End Notes

So, what did you guys think? Let me know in the comments.

You can also come yell at me on Tumblr if you like! @cr-noble-writes

Are you guys as excited as I am to see what happens next?
Chapter Notes

EYYYYYYY, YOUR JSCRIBBLES IS BAAAACK. *club horns* BACK AT IT AGAIN WITH THE ANGST, AND THE DRAMA, AND THE BOYS BEING SO IN LOVE THEY CAN'T HANDLE IT?!

Strap in tonight, kiddies. Cas is about to recover some lost memories, the boys will cry, Sam will snuggle Rowena, Claire puts Crowley in his demony place, and many other shenanigans ensue.

Hit me up in the comments later to yell at me about how this epic author's note did not prepare you adequately for all the ugly-crying you're gonna do several times in this chapter.

It's okay, I won't be mad.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 11: Seven Deadly Kins

NOW

“Someone fucking help him!” Dean cried, launching towards the cot where Cas convulsed, his own eyes wide and shining, his heart pounding in his chest.

“Hold your brother back!” Rowena screeched, her hands shook, hovering over Cas’ form, veins bulging in her forehead as she strained to contain the spell she’d cast. “Hold him back, Samuel, or Castiel may die! It-it can’t be interrupted—”

Sam’s arms were around Dean, thumping around his chest as he hauled him back and away.

“Stop it!” Dean wheezed, his struggle against Sam knocking the air out of his lungs. “Stop this, right now!”

Everyone looked terrified. Jo’s shocked face was white as Cas started to pant, and even Jody looked frightened.

No one knew what to do.

Cas moaned, his body shaking with tremors in a horrible seizure. His skin was coated in sweat, and his limbs twisted in horrific angles. Dean just wanted it to stop. Something was wrong, it was fucking wrong and no one was helping Cas.

“We shouldn’t have pried,” Jo choked out. “We shouldn’t have—”

It had started out so calm; Cas had been lying on his back, eyes closing slowly as Rowena quietly chanted. He’d drank a potion from a cup and seemed to drift off. He’d just been supposed to go to
sleep and then wake up with some memories.

“I-I don’t know what’s happening,” Rowena panted. “T-The memories are too powerful—”

That’s when this horror show took a turn for the worse.

Rowena burst into tears, her arms shaking, her head tipping forward, her tightly-shut eyes glowing purple. Simultaneously, Cas seemed to stop, falling limp onto the cot.

Then, they both screamed; Rowena and Castiel in time, the room filling with light. Cas arched up and his eyes snapped open, a bright white light shining from them and all Dean could think of was Jack. This was how Jack had died. He couldn’t think of anything else, and Dean fought harder against Sam. Around the dark cabin, everyone backed away from Cas, frightened, and their backs thumped against the walls.

Cas was screaming, rising from the cot, his hair sticking to his temples, and the light grew stronger, almost impossible to look at.

“God is killing him!” Jo was yelling. “We shouldn’t have pried—”

Dean threw an elbow into Sam’s ribs, knocking the air out of his lungs as he shoved his brother back and launched forward, not knowing what the hell he could do, but he wasn’t going to let Cas die there on a bed with his eyes burnt out. Not alone, at least.

“No one breathed, no one moved. Not at first.

Sam was staring between Rowena’s prone form and Cas’ body with wide eyes, panting as he held his ribs. Jody had her hand pressed to her mouth, eyes squeezing as she lowered herself down beside Rowena, and Jo was turned away, hands splayed against the wall, her forehead pressed against it.

With the air sucked from his lungs like the room was a vacuum, Dean fell to his knees beside the bed. Pitifully, he shook Cas’ hand, wanting a reaction and getting nothing. Blinking away wetness from his eyes, Dean’s hand slipped off of Cas’ jaw, and he pressed his fingers to Cas’ neck, sinking into his pulse point.

Cold.

Still.

Nothing.
Dean watched Sam and Rowena talk, walking everyone through the spell and its ingredients. They explained how they’d gotten their car stolen by a zombie last night. It was all very concerning, yes, but Dean’s face was burning from embarrassment and his back was killing him.

Accidentally walking in on his brother and Crowley’s mom having sex in their cabin had been cause for some serious eye-bleach and a restless sleep in the back of the Impala with Cas.

Well, Cas had been in the front seat. Dean had been in the back, cramped up and staring at the ceiling, trying to forget an expression on Sam’s face as he… No.

Luckily, Sam had been completely oblivious, his face buried between—

Dean gagged a bit, pressing his fist to his hand.

“Are you alright?” Cas whispered, leaning over towards Dean, his elbows on the table, arms crossed. He looked concerned. “Are you imagining Sam going ‘downtown’ on Rowena aga—”

“Shut the fuck up, Cas, I swear to God—” Dean whispered back fiercely. This was the last time he tried to share a goddamn secret with Cas. He’d been hoping to spare his friend from the same embarrassing fate of walking into their cabin and seeing enough of Sam (and Rowena, for that matter) to last him a lifetime. Instead of being thankful, Cas was bringing it up at every possible opportunity. Dean wasn’t sure if it was Cas’ usual obliviousness or if he just liked saying “going downtown” over and over again, now that he knew what it meant.

“…the potion itself is relatively easy, of course,” Rowena was saying when Dean turned his attention back to the meeting.

Jody nodded, half-listening, half tending to a cut on Donna’s arm that had been inflicted by a particularly wily Jefferson Starship on her hunt. Jo was doing her typical pacing, though she was nibbling on a granola bar, a weird sight Dean would never get used to. Sam was listening raptly, sitting closely beside Rowena—something that just embarrassed Dean now… And pissed Crowley off, if the vein jumping in the demon’s forehead was any indication of his feelings about his mother going to poundtown with Moose.

Rowena went on, completely oblivious to the fact that at least three people in the room were aware of her raunchy escapades with Sam. She was going over the list Dean had written out for her of the ingredients listed in the manifesto. “Castiel will drink this, and I’ll begin the spell. If it is successful, he should fall into a deep sleep, and when he wakes, he will have his memories back. Well, at least any that are hidden, if there are any.”

“And if it’s not successful?” Jo asked, pausing in her pacing, her brow arching up, and her eyes narrowing at Rowena accusingly.

Sam lowered his eyes to the table and Rowena shifted on the bench. Her hooded eyes lifted from the page and met with Cas’.

“Any manner of regretful things,” she said slowly. “If there’s been a wall erected in your mind to block memories, there may have been a reason as to why. If we tear it down…who knows what could happen? Little birdie could go mad, go catatonic. He may never be the same again, or he could be just fine. Or...he could die.”

Dean felt his face go cold. Pressed against his arm, the skin of Cas’ exposed bicep tightened into goosebumps. Still, Cas said calmly, “Sam and I are familiar with what happens when a wall is
broken.”

He and Sam exchanged looks, and Dean felt a flare of anger. “Hey, that’s enough of that,” he barked, looking between them. “That shit’s in the past. Bury it.”

Sam scrubbed his hand over his overgrown stubble and shrugged. “It’s buried, Dean. But maybe those memories are behind a wall for a reason; maybe it’s there to protect Cas.”

“I can handle it,” Cas said firmly, looking between everyone, his eyes flashing in determination. “I’ve done it before.”

“And you went crazy,” Dean argued, his heart giving a squeeze. “You were an angel at the time, too.”

Ro nodded, her eyes softening. “Aye, birdie. If you couldn’t handle it as an angel, you may not be able to handle it as a mortal. The world is different now, and we have limited resources. We may not be able to fix you after.”

Cas looked aghast, a look Dean rarely saw on his face. His brows were up and his eyes wide, and surprisingly, he seemed lost for words, his mouth gaping around at everyone.

“Death left this book for me. Billie’s instructions were to deliver the book to me for a reason, and I wrote it, lest you all forget.” He gestured to the manifesto in question, which lay on the table between them all. “It’s mine. I wrote it and I clearly wanted it to fall into my hands again. Perhaps if I can retrieve my memories, I can understand why I wrote it, and why it’s important that I understand its contents—”

“Or,” Dean interrupted fervently, waving his hand at Castiel, “it’s all bullshit that isn’t relevant anymore in 2019 and ye olde Kassiel can just chill the fuck out and let me read the entire thing. You don’t need to go rooting around in your fuckin’ head and potentially killing yourself for something you don’t even know is important enough yet!”

Cas looked like he was about to blow a gasket, and everyone seemed on edge, waiting for the explosion. That is, except for Crowley, who’d dragged his eyes away from Sam and Rowena long enough to roll his eyes at Castiel and Dean.

“Careful, pigeon,” Crowley drawled. “You’ve lost your wings, and if humpty-dumpty falls off the wall and can’t be put together again, we’ll all have to put up with your boyfriend angisting around after your drooling vessel for the foreseeable future. Spare us all the b-list drama—”

“Shut up, Crowley!”

The demon piped down as nearly everyone in the room ordered him to be quiet. He propped his chin in his hand and stared at the ceiling bitterly.

Jo stepped up behind Cas and put her hand on his shoulder. “Brother,” she asked gently. “Are these memories worth it? Can we not simply have Dean read the book?”

“They’re important. They connect to this manifesto, and they mean something,” Cas insisted, looking up at her, his hand sliding over hers. “I just know it. I have to try.”

This was bullshit. If Dean lost Cas because Cas wanted to go on another suicide mission egged on by a feeling in his gut, he didn’t know what he’d do. He couldn’t live in this world without him. He couldn’t lose him, not after all the progress they’d made. Not after Dean finally was building up the courage to…
“How soon can we do this?” Cas asked, jerking Dean violently from the dark thoughts spiraling in his brain.

Rowena and Sam exchanged looks, and Sam answered, “Within the hour, right?”

“How can we help?” Donna asked, grunting as Jody jerked a stitch back to tighten the wound. “Jodes and I ain’t no witchies, but we can do our part.”

“Keep watch, double down on patrolling,” Rowena instructed. “This is one spell that cannot be interrupted; I won’t be able to stop once I’ve started, Castiel won’t wake until I’m done, and I suspect the boyfriends will want to be with us.”

Sam’s lip twitched and his eyes glittered for a moment, while Dean felt the tug in his stomach that happened every time someone called him Cas’ boyfriend. The Dean inside him raised by John Winchester wanted to say, ‘Hey! I’m not gay!’ while the part of him now—thankfully, much louder and more confident—recalled every moment since Chuck’s apocalypse where he’d gotten to hold Cas’ hand and brush his skin with his own as he taught him how to shoot.

Dean chose not to comment.

“...however, it would be a help if one of you could stay and guard us all while the spell is casting, just in case. No one should come into the cabin, we can’t risk a disruption or anything going wrong.”

Jody looked up from the wound she was stitching and said, “I’ll be there. Locked and loaded with a gun and a sharp tongue in case stuff needs shooting, or someone tries to get in.”

Crowley got up, snorting. “I’ll be in the mess hall, drinking Bobby Singer’s disgusting whiskey and beating the Novak girl at twelve-step rummy. This—” he gestured around at everyone, “—is going to be a dumpster fire. As much as I enjoy a good old fashioned brain-melting spell-gone-wrong situation, I’ve watched this episode and the man-tears get old. It was nice knowing you, pigeon.”

Well, it was settled. Everyone had seemingly decided that this garbage crusade of Cas’ was worthwhile. Crowley had left, Rowena and Sam were on their way out with linked hands and a duffel between them, and Jody was taping a bandage over the stitches, exchanging quiet whispers with Donna.

“Meet you in your cabin in forty minutes, Cas?” Jo asked from behind them.

Cas nodded, eyes looking distant as he stared at the manifesto.

“Alright,” Jo murmured grimly. She moved to leave too, pausing only to ruffle Cas’ hair before she disappeared out of the main door.

Dean and Cas sat in silence while Jody and Donna finished up. Dean watched as Cas pulled his eyes up from the manifesto to stare at the couple across the table. Dean followed his gaze to see the women smiling at each other, their eyes twinkling as their gazes met occasionally. Jody placed a chaste kiss to Donna’s shoulder when she was done gathering the first aid supplies. Donna grinned as Jody murmured, “All fixed, baby. Good as new.”

They got up and left, leaving Cas and Dean alone in the room. Cas seemed fine to just say nothing, his focus back on the book, and Dean could see his hand itching to reach for the pages.
“This is bullshit,” Dean blurted out.

Cas sighed, and leaned hard on his elbows, pulling his hands up to bury in his hair. Quietly, he rumbled, “It’s not.”

“You’re killing yourself,” Dean whispered fiercely, leaning towards Cas, his head ducked to catch his gaze.

“I’m not. The spell will work.”

Heat rose in Dean’s chest, the familiar bubble of rage from his stomach, and he pounded his hand down on the table, startling Cas a bit, though the angel recovered quickly and exhaled heavily through his nose, his eyes sliding shut.

“You don’t fuckin’ know that!” Dean hissed. He pointed at the book. “You don’t know if uncovering those memories will reveal squat! You touched the book and had a revelation or whatever, but maybe this book is bad mojo, Cas! Billie just dropped in and plunked it down in front of us out of nowhere, and told us it was important. It even had a fuckin’ note in the margins about how to recover lost memories. But how do we know Billie’s not playing for the wrong team? How do we know God didn’t just give her the book to sabotage us? Maybe the fucker is still watching and knows we’re doin’ all right? Maybe he wants to take you down and planting this fuckin’ land mine here for you to step on as another one of his goddamn fuckin’ plot devices!”

“I had thought of that already,” Cas said stiffly, his jaw jumping. His fingers tightened in his hair. “But this is important enough to risk that reality.”

Dean surged up to his feet and jerked his finger at the book again, his voice rising. “WHY!? Why the fuck—”

Before Dean could carry on, Cas surged up, too, and bellowed in Dean’s face, “BECAUSE IT COULD SAVE JACK!”

Dean stepped back, blinking. Cas was livid, his face red, his eyes sparkling in tumultuous anger. It was righteous fury straight from the times where Cas led a garrison and fought in wars Dean didn’t have the brain power to understand. The warrior from the barn in 2009 was standing in front of him, energy crackling from him like he was still stock-full of grace and celestial intent.

“I’m doing this with or without you, Dean,” Cas said, calming down—or rather, at least lowering his voice, because there was no less conviction in his tone. “You’re with me or you’re not, do you understand? I get that you want to protect me, but if you try to stop me, I have no qualms about rendering you unconscious and locking you in a room until this spell is done. I will get my son back whether you condone my efforts or not.”

They’d been here before.

Bobby’s. The two of them in the dark, illuminated by mere moonlight, and Cas saying, “Stand by me...the one time I ask.”

Angel fire and a cabin in the middle of nowhere. “I’m doing this to protect you.”

And Dean had chosen not to help, not to have faith in his friend. He’d chosen to let Cas rot in the angel fire because he hadn’t trusted his plans, hadn’t supported his mission. He hadn’t wanted to understand. He hadn’t been around to support him, to help.

Maybe things could’ve turned out differently if he’d just trusted Cas’ decisions.
The swallow in Dean’s throat was loud in the quiet room. But the tension between them dissolved when Dean nodded, dropping his gaze from Cas’ face.

“You’re right,” Dean croaked. And then, “I’m sorry.”

He saw Cas’ feet shuffle.

“You’re sorry?” Cas asked. Of course, he seldom heard Dean apologize for anything; Dean didn’t blame Cas for the confusion in his voice.

Dean raised his gaze, watching the features of Cas’ face melt a bit into a look of hope. With a jerky nod, Dean repeated, “I’m sorry. You’re right. Jack is important, and… Hell, if you think this is worth it, then I’ll stand by you.”

“You will?”

The lil of surprise in Cas’ voice was almost endearing.

“Yeah,” Dean conceded. “Yeah, I gotta let you do what you gotta do. But you’re fucked in the head if you think I’m gonna let you do it alone. I’mma sit right by you and I ain’t leaving your side until you’re walkin’ upright and tellin’ me all about these new memories you have. Basically,” Dean paused, then joked, “humpty-dumpty better get put together again, or I’m going to kick your ass.”

Cas actually laughed, the rumbly, raspy sound landing like a punch right in Dean’s stomach. Despite the feeling of impending, unstoppable terror, Dean smiled back.

“We’ve come very far, haven’t we? You and I,” Cas murmured, his eyes searching Dean’s face with a hopeful twinkle that gave Dean all kinds of conflicting feelings.

Their hands met between them, and Dean wasn’t sure who reached out first.

“Hopin’ to go even farther,” Dean whispered, “so don’t freakin’ die today, okay?”

Cas smile faded a bit, but he nodded, brown fringe falling against his forehead.

“I’ll try.”

***

Despite Castiel’s bravado in front of Dean, he felt nothing but apprehension and what others described as anxiety. As Jody, Sam, Dean, and Jo watched Rowena pass him a red plastic cup—not the most elegant chalice he’d ever drank from—filled with potion, his hands admittedly did shake. And he did take pause for a moment as he raised the cup to his lips, pausing to glance over the rim at Dean, who watched him like a hawk, eyes unblinking, his face pale, his hand rubbing over his lips as he paced the end of the cot.

“Don’t freakin’ die,” Dean reminded him, pulling his hands away from his mouth for a moment. “Or I’ll kill you.”

Jody snorted from her post by the cabin door, and Jo rolled her eyes. Rowena scowled and said, “Are you ready? Lay back, birdie. You’ll go to sleep soon, and I won’t have yeh falling over onto the ground. Your husband won’t like it.”

“Ro,” Sam said in warning, but his lip twitched when she winked at him.

“Just shut up and do the spell,” Dean grumbled, moving around the bed to stand by Sam at Cas’
“Watch your tongue, Winchester, or I’ll take a spare moment to cast a spell that’ll make it disappear,” Rowena warned, clicking her tongue at Dean.

Castiel felt a spike of annoyance at their bickering, especially when he was moments from uncovering his memories and potentially finding a way to save Jack. Every moment he had to waste listening to Rowena and Dean get at each other’s throats was a moment wasted.

To shut them up, he pressed the plastic to his lips and tipped his head back, downing the potion in one go. It tasted familiar; he could, for the first time since falling from grace, taste every ingredient like he knew each one intimately. He did, he supposed, since he’d written the potion’s recipe at some point in his distant past. Sage, wormwood, powdered dragon’s claw, the incus of a djinn, and the dust of opalized wood. There were a few ingredients Rowena had added from the grimoire, but the ones Dean had read out from the manifesto—a note left from Kassiel—were the main ingredients.

The cup was taken from him by cool hands, and he was pushed down onto the cot by warmer ones; Jo, then Dean. Their scents mingled and Castiel felt immediately at ease as the potion rumbled through him, sliding through his veins, washing his body in numbness. He felt himself relax into the otherwise uncomfortable cot, and he heard Rowena begin to chant as his eyes slid shut. Through his lids, the last thing he remembered was the purple glow from Rowena’s hands, held out over him, palms down.

At his side, he smelt leather and whiskey. Fingertips pressed to his forearm were rough and calloused…

After the initial blackness, memories came faster than he thought they would. They rushed at him, most of them familiar. He remembered Amara and God, Lucifer controlling him like a puppet, the Empty, then Leviathans, and working with Crowley. Farther back, he recalled saving the world with Dean and Sam Winchester. He banished Zachariah with a sigil drawn in Jimmy’s blood, and the recalled pulling the righteous man from Hell…

He remembered the feeling of pulling that soul from Hell, and how right and familiar that soul had been. He had been able to rebuild it effortlessly like he had the blueprints to it engraved somewhere in the recesses of his mind. Dean Winchester was an extension of himself, and he remembered thinking their profound bond was due to the exertion and commitment he’d given into the mission. He’d been sent there to save him, that had been his mission, but…

That’s when the new memories—the ones they were all trying to help him retrieve—began to rush forward like he was tied to the front of a train, and was speeding through an endless tunnel. He was falling from Heaven and crashing through the earth, speeding down into nothingness. Memories rushed past him in a flurry and Castiel felt like he was drowning.

Marilyn Thatcher. Twenty-three. Auburn hair, freckles, green eyes as brilliant as the most exquisite emerald on earth. She was full of joy, full of life. She danced with no restraint in the servants quarters of the Titanic, where she was a maid. Castiel had been sent there to hide among the humans, to ensure the ship sank. There were souls with particular destinies on there, and they had to die in order to trigger a chain of events… But Marilyn was a passenger. And Castiel hadn’t foreseen falling in love with her. He simply could not imagine what destinies were so important that it meant ending her brilliant life. Well, ending any of their lives was dreadful, but especially hers.

He’d saved the ship. People had lived. Marilyn tugged him off the boat in New York after it docked, pulling him through crowds and baggage handlers. She jumped on his back as soon as their feet touched American soil, laughing and she sang...
It was the happiest moment he could remember. At least, until God had heard of his actions.

Castiel was not to re-write that ending. He was not to alter that plotline. That was not how the story was supposed to go.

In 1912, off of the coast of Newfoundland, Marilyn Thatcher died, locked in her quarters. She’d drowned as the water of the Atlantic ocean rose in her rooms, her last gasping breath between two pipes, and Castiel had been made to watch, with God’s hand on his shoulder and tears streaming down his face.


Jonathan Casey. Tall, thin. He was a farmer, a widower of thirty years old. His skin was tanned from the sun, dusted with freckles and he had a laugh that sounded like how warm sunlight felt. Castiel was stationed on earth in Salem, Massachusetts. He was supposed to ensure the witch trials happened. Cast the miracles that would create suspicion. Kill crops, mutilate livestock, make it look like Satan’s handiwork. It was part of this story’s plotline. God had a plan for this tragic tale…

But Castiel, playing his part as a fellow farmer, saved the man. He loved him. Jonathan’s soul shone brighter than the stars. As a matter of fact, Castiel put a star in the sky in his memory, after God found out he had changed the story, after he found out Castiel had saved the townsfolk. No one would burn, no one would become martyrs or mere names in the history books. Jonathan would live, he would continue to laugh and joke and sing. However, that was not God’s plan.

And so God came down from the Heavens, and again, he amended the story. He cast the miracles that would later be blamed as witchcraft, and God stood with Castiel in the crowds as they watched Jonathan burn. He was made to watch as his love’s skin bubbled off and he shrieked his way to a slow death.

Back. More.

In every century, sometimes twice a century, Castiel rebelled. He changed the story and altered the plotlines. He always saved the soul that would one day be Dean Winchester.

And every time, God would rectify it. He would threaten, “This is the last time, Castiel. This is the last time.”

The memories were unbearable. One undeserved death after another, all mere stepping stones for the next act, then the next. All that would one day lead to the righteous man being risen from Perdition.

And finally, the one memory that Castiel had come for stopped the rushing of all other tragic memories; Cain.

He saw, as if outside of his own body; Cain and Abel… except, they were not Cain and Abel that he and the rest of Heaven and the world knew from the Bible. He saw them; brothers. Brothers that he knew all too well now. Those souls, they were souls he knew better than any others on this earth; Sam and Dean.

Castiel stood, watching them, the farmer and the shepherd, and he felt beside him a powerful entity that could only be God.

“The brother, he will not kill his kin for me. Kassiel, go forth and eliminate that earthly sinner.”

But God did not know…or perhaps he did. Perhaps he knew the intensity of the feelings Kassiel had for Cain. Watching him, guiding him, loving him as he did… He could not kill him.
And when he told God... Oh, such wrath was rained down on him. God crushed Cain’s physical body; he broke his bones and burst his flesh in a fist made of fire and terror and lightning. He ripped him apart in front of Kassiel, limb from limb, and he crushed his brother too, just because he could.

This wasn’t the story God had written, Kassiel had thwarted his ending. God had plotted everything out so closely and Kassiel had destroyed his story, his grand, dramatic masterpiece. He’d wanted an angel to come down and execute. Punish. He wanted dramatics in his tale, and he wanted a tragic, bloody ending. That’d been his plan. He hadn’t expected an angel to love a man. It hadn’t been in the story outline.

So, God rewrote the story; he changed the characters completely.

The new version did not include the souls that would one day become Dean and Sam. They were new players, new characters. They were simply Cain and Abel...and afterward, Kassiel had been punished.

Oh, he had been punished.

“You were one of my cherished seven. You were supposed to listen to me, be a shepherd, an agent of these stories. That was your role. Now I see you are unworthy.”

A long, golden blade was brandished.

And Kassiel ran. He ran and hid as long as he could. But this was no mere titan, this was the almighty God, the father, the judge, jury, and executioner of the divine storyline. There was only so much time Kassiel could spend running, only so many hiding spots he could go where God could not find him. And so, in his short time, he wrote his manifesto.

He told his story, left himself a message for the day when the final storyline would play out, when their last chance to thwart God would come. He explained that God would make him forget who he was, that God would make everyone forget who he was.

He would remove any memories of his role, of his once infamous place at God’s side among his six other favoured siblings. He would remove all memory of his transgressions. And worse, he would remove all memories from the other angels. No one would remember his love, his loyalty. No one would remember who he was or what he’d done.

He left himself instructions, for he knew God’s intentions. If this story did not end the way God intended, if enough of his children turned on him, he would tear it all down. He would tear it all down once all seven of his chosen ones left him.

And he would blame it on them. The End would come and they would all be abandoned.

Luckily, Kassiel had left instructions on how to fix the end. On how to save the world by removing its controlling puppeteer.

He’d left instructions on how to kill God.

***

NOW

His awakening was not dramatic. He did not shoot up in his cot or gasp for air.

Castiel’s eyes slid open and he took a soft breath. Around him everyone was staring and looking,
frankly, quite alarmed and distressed. Dean was beside himself with grief, Sam’s face was all tight and red, and was holding a pale, sickly-looking Rowena. Jo had her hand to her own mouth, and Jody was rubbing at Dean’s back, crouched beside the cot.

“Oh, fuck, he’s breathing,” Sam said in a rush of breath.

In front of him, Dean seemed to collapse in on himself, curling forward to press his forehead to the edge of Castiel’s cot. There was a dull ache in Castiel’s knuckles and he realised Dean was squeezing his hand.

“Don’t do that!” Dean growled, lifting his head quickly. His face was shining, lashes clumped together, his eyes green and brilliant like the most exquisite emerald on earth—

_Marilyn. Jonathan. Cain._

“I used to be an archangel,” Castiel breathed, his throat closing as he remembered Marilyn’s long shining auburn hair, and Jonathan’s laugh.

“What?” Jo asked, stepping forward, her skirt swishing around the ankles of her boots.

Castiel lifted his eyes, one side of his face still pressed down into the pillow. Quietly, in a whisper, Castiel repeated, “I used to be an archangel. Kassiel. One of the seven.”

A tear dribbled over the bridge of his nose, falling with a small thump against the fabric under his head. Dean was watching it with his own red-rimmed eyes and Castiel wondered why he was crying. Dean didn’t have any idea that they’d been in love since the beginning of time. He had no idea.

“So you remember stuff?” Dean asked, swallowing loudly. “You remember important stuff?”

Castiel nodded, too exhausted to move otherwise. His entire body felt like it’d been hit with a truck, and his head was aching like someone had taken a mallet to it. He imagined this was what a migraine felt like. It was endlessly unpleasant, and to his chagrin, it seemed to be getting worse.

The way Dean was gazing at him, like he was some kind of miracle, didn’t help.

“Tell us everything,” Jo demanded, her eyes alight. The bags under her eyes were sunken and her face was pale. “How can you have been an archangel? There are only four known to us.”

“God altered all of our memories,” Castiel explained hoarsely. “Removed those who rebelled. Kassiel, Ramiel, Gabriel, Lucifer, Michael, Raphael, and Hanniael.” He swallowed, feeling sick at the new memories he had, his brain spinning so fast around the names and faces and tragedies he felt like sinking back into unconsciousness. “First it was Lucifer, whose story we all know. Then Ramiel. God rewrote his story entirely, he cast him down into Hell and rewrote him as Lucifer’s second demon ever created. He wanted to demean him for questioning his authority. After he saw how merely casting Lucifer into Hell only bolstered Lucifer’s importance, he could not continue writing Ramiel as an angel. No one knew what had happened to him except the remaining inner circle; God wanted to use Lucifer and Ramiel as examples to us all, as warnings as to what would happen to us if we rebelled as well. But then it was me; I attempted to alter his first masterpiece, his first grand storyline—Cain and Abel. In exchange, he rewrote the story entirely…”

Castiel paused, and he watched Dean’s face, now filled with wonder, with wide-eyed fascination, and he realised he could not tell him the truth about Cain and Abel. Dean wouldn’t ever hold his hand again if he knew. Dean would feel responsible for Kassiel’s fate, even if he hadn’t really done anything, even if it had only been one of the first manifestations of his soul.
“...and he erased me from the minds of all angels, and from my own mind. He changed my name, called me Castiel. He demoted me in the ranks and assigned Naomi to my re-education. I was known to myself and all other angels as nothing more than a leader of a garrison. I think he thought that would control my rebellion, that it would “knock me down a few pegs”, as you would say,” Castiel said to Dean, licking his dry lips. His throat hurt like he’d been screaming. “But I continued to rebel. I had to be fixed several times. I think I’ve lost count of how many times Naomi stripped me of memories.”

“Fuck,” Dean breathed, looking shattered.

With heaviness in his heart, and another tear dripped over the bridge of his nose, Castiel whispered, “I think...I may be the reason God disappeared for so long. I think he grew weary of having to rewrite my stories, to fix my mistakes. The last time I ever saw him was in 1912.”

Jody walked out of sight.

“Do you have any memories of writing the manifesto?” Jo urged, crouching down beside Dean. Her fingers reached out and brushed the hair from Castiel’s clammy forehead, her lips twitching up in the corner in an encouraging smile.

Gratefulness rushed through him as Jody reappeared, holding out a bottle of water. “Help him up,” she instructed firmly, nudging Dean on the shoulder. “Poor guy’s talking himself hoarse.”

Quickly, Dean fumbled to his feet like a clumsy newborn deer, and he helped Castiel sit up, sliding behind him on the cot and sliding an arm around his shoulders. He took the bottle from Jody and handed it to Castiel as Jody crossed the room to sit beside Rowena. Another plastic water bottle was handed to Rowena from Jody.

Castiel noted that the witch looked slightly better, and was resting her head against Sam’s chest. Sam helped her hold the water up to her lips.

Castiel lifted a tired hand and drank his own water quickly. After a few gulps, he lowered the bottle, feeling sick from the sloshing of water in his empty stomach.

Reaching up to rub at his temples, Castiel murmured, “Yes, I do have memories of writing the manifesto. I wrote it as I hid from God. I knew what he planned to do to me, as I had witnessed him do the same to Ramiel. God had told me of universes, of worlds he’d grown weary of. He’s abandoned millions of them. He told me it was very important that all stories in this universe were told. This one was his masterpiece. But...I became aware that he had limits. His tolerance of change in these plotlines was thin, and I knew one day he’d leave this world like he left all his others if it did not go his way. God, I realised, was fickle.”

“I coulda told you that,” Dean snorted at his side.

“Ignore him,” Jody ordered, tilting her chin at Castiel and smiling. “Go on.”

Castiel drank again, wanting to stall for a moment. He was mortal, after all. His emotions could only handle so much. Weakly, he swallowed, and lowered the bottle to his lap. With a heavy inhale, he continued, “I knew the only way to save this earth and the humans on it that I loved—” he paused, glancing at Dean and feeling undeserving of the rapt reverence he saw there, “—was to destroy God.”

“Oh, boy,” Rowena groaned against Sam’s chest, her eyes rolling up to the ceiling tiredly. “Don’t even say it.”
Sam looked up from Rowena and stared at Castiel, his eyes sparkling as he came to the same realization everyone else in the room came to at the same time. “You...wrote about how to destroy God? You know how to kill God?”

“He said it,” Rowena grumbled.

“Yes,” Castiel said, surprising even himself. “I...wrote about it in the book. I knew once he was finished with this world, he would leave it to self-destruct, and I couldn’t have that. There were things in this world that I loved more than him.” He raised his eyes from the water bottle in his lap and looked around at everyone. “In order to kill God, and save this earth, we would have to kill Amara as well. Light and darkness together, for if we eliminate only one, we’ll all perish.”

Sam nodded, his brows knitting together worriedly. “He said that if he ‘bites it, all of existence bites it’. He, uh, said that in the bunker when he gave us the gun. So...can we really go about killing God?”

Dean’s arm squeezed around his shoulders and Castiel looked over at him, though it hurt to do so now. He had Marilyn’s eyes and Jonathan’s smile, and the same freckles that had dotted the skin of all the versions of Dean through history. To know this was the last one before Earth potentially perished forever... If it didn’t work out this time, then he’d never get another chance...

And did Dean love him like that? Surely, the hand holding and longing looks were an indication, but what if he was wrong...

“Tell us how to save the world, Cas,” Dean said gravely, his eyes unblinking as he searched Castiel’s face.

“Keys,” Castiel breathed, eyes locked with Dean's, his own gaze reflected intensely in extraordinary green. “Two of them. One for Hell and one for Heaven. Each were forged eons ago by Amara and God respectively. God and Amara had placed his key in the archangels’ care as they busied themselves with creation and humanity, with expanding Heaven and Hell, and forming new universes. While God was preoccupied with his stories,” Castiel said bitterly.

“Where are these keys?” Jo asked, her eyes wide when he looked over. “I've never heard of them.”

“Of course not,” Castiel replied grimly. “Because you were never made to know of them, and before God could destroy them, I stole them.”

Everyone in the room gasped.

“You fuckin’ stole them?” Dean asked, a hint of laughter in his voice. “You stole God and Amara’s keys? And... And, like... How does having the keys kill Amara and God?”

Castiel’s head pounded, and as he gritted his teeth and pressed his fingertips into his temples, he realised his memories only stretched so far. Perhaps his mortal brain didn’t have the capacity to understand such grand celestial plans...

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I remember breaking them into pieces and scattering them across Earth, and...I think I remember having help? But I’m sorry,” he said in earnest, looking up and around at disappointed faces. “I’m very sorry, I don’t remember. I know we have to get the pieces and repair them. I believe they’ll reopen Heaven and Hell. From there...I can’t recall much else.”

The silence that followed was heavy. Jody smiled tightly at him and patted his leg. “You need anything? You’re lookin’ peaky, Cas.”
“Tired. I have a headache,” he admitted, rubbing at his head, scratching his fingernails over his scalp.

“Getcha some Advils, then,” Jody said, getting to her feet and leaving the room.

Sam was helping Rowena up and out of the room. Jo stood her ground, arms at her side, her hands curled into fists.

“What of Hanniael?” Jo asked, her eyes shining. “What of the fifth rebellious archangel? Who were they? Did we ever know them?”

“Anna,” Castiel replied, remembering his sister with an ache in his heart. He’d done her so wrong. “She rebelled against our ways and ripped out her own grace. At one time, we did know of her as an archangel, but God wiped her from our memories, too. When she chose to fall, he demoted her in all our minds to a mere seraph. I imagine he saw her choice to become human as a grand betrayal on the role he’d bestowed upon her.”

With that, Anael nodded. He noticed her eyes shining before she lowered her gaze and turned on her heel, sweeping out of the room in a flutter of cotton skirt and woolen shawl.

That left Dean. The silence was stifling for a moment, and Castiel’s revelations about what Dean meant to him made it difficult to be in the same room. The emotions were entirely conflicting, and Castiel was too exhausted and nauseous to deal with them.

Still, Dean surprised him by giving his shoulders a squeeze, and turning his face towards him with a gentle knuckle on his chin.

“Hey,” Dean smiled. “Cut out the self-pity parade that’s happening in that noggin’. You’re alive and that’s all that matters. You, uh, really had me worried there. Stopped breathing, just went all still and stuff. Sam even thought you didn’t have a pulse for a second. I, uh…” Dean lowered his eyes, staring at Castiel’s lips. “I just… My heart kinda stopped for a second, you know? Thought I’d lost you, and that…that ripped me apart.”

“I’m alive,” Castiel said simply, mimicking the gesture and staring at Dean’s lips. “I feel like death, but I am alive.”

“I thought I asked real nice for you not to do that again,” Dean murmured, his lips twitching with amusement. “First, you let yourself get stabbed by a reaper, then you go all angelic exorcist on me. Not a nice way to scare your—”

Dean seemed to catch himself and Castiel couldn’t help but smile, even though every muscle in his face felt fatigued. “I apologize. Next time I’ll try harder to not die. It was worth it, though, Dean. I’ve remembered who I used to be, I’ve brought us closer to finding Jack, and to dragging God down to Earth and inflicting every imaginable revenge upon him.”

Dean nodded, huffing a bit. “This has gotta be the craziest trip for you, then. Finding out you’re an archangel—”

“Was an archangel,” Castiel corrected, feeling a pang of sadness in his heart.

But Dean was stubborn. He reached up and brushed his fingers over Castiel’s jaw, once again bringing his face closer. His eyes were big and his brows were raised as he repeated, “Finding out you are an archangel—grace or no grace—and that you’ve been a badass rebel since the start. That’s…” Dean chuckled. “That’s kickass, Cas. What else did you remember?”

Marilyn, rosy-cheeked, challenging him to a drink-off in the basement of the service quarters, her
deep, rust-coloured hair in her face, fallen from a long plait. Her green eyes flashed and she grinned at him, her sharp canine teeth twinkling as people danced around them. She raised a pint of dark beer to her lips and Castiel did the same.

Jonathan smacked him with a stalk of corn, mocking him for working too slowly, for staring too much. Castiel chased him through the field, and they tumbled over the dirt, staining their clothing but otherwise having not a care in the world.

And there were others.

Thomas Riley, a blacksmith from the 17th century, who had dark skin and curly hair, and a sharp, witty tongue. He helped build the first railroads, and never left Castiel’s side as they worked. He spoke of friendship and camaraderie being the spice of life, and he never had a bad word to say about anyone, including the people who deserved it most times.

Maggie La Pue, the incarnation directly before Thomas. A French girl of noble blood with a taste for rebellion. She turned her back on her tyrannous family, and fought alongside Castiel as he watched the French Revolution, hidden within the ranks of the rebels, stationed there by God to ensure it all went according to plan. She’d been written to die, a side character in one of Chuck’s sub-plots. Initially, Castiel had saved her from a cannon right to the chest, but of course, Chuck made him watch from the other side, after his rewrite. Castiel had lit the cannon that killed her, his hand shaking as he did so, Chuck’s hand heavy on his shoulder.

There were so many, and he could see them all in Dean’s face, in the face he was entirely, and utterly in love with. He’d been denying it before today, attributing their connection to their bond, to their camaraderie, to a growing something he couldn’t acknowledge just yet. But now it was undeniable.

Dean’s lips were right there. Overcome with memories of capturing those lips hundreds of times before, Castiel leaned in, holding his breath. Dean, too, stopped breathing and his wide green eyes darted across Castiel’s face, but he didn’t move away as inches reduced between them.

Before Castiel could do whatever it was that he was doing, or bother to answer the heart-wrenching question Dean had asked, Sam returned, shutting the door behind him with a click.

Castiel turned his head away from Dean’s quickly, staring down at the water bottle in his lap. Dean’s arm fell away from his shoulders.

“My head aches and...and I feel sick,” Castiel rasped quietly, sliding his legs off the side of the cot. “I just need some air.”

Sam and Dean blinked at each other, and Sam shook a small bottle in the air. “Jody sent me with pills. You want one? It could help your—”

“No,” Castiel said quickly, walking past them, his shoulders stiff. “I just need a moment alone. A...short walk. Please. I’ll be fine.”

He pushed past Sam, and ignored the green eyes that bored into the back of his head. He’d been gazing into those eyes for thousands upon thousands of years.

Today, however, he felt entirely unworthy of them.

***

On the other side of camp, in the newly built mess-hall-slash-watch-post near the front gates, Claire,
Crowley, Alex, and Janine were playing a mean game of rummy when Jo entered with an abrupt slamming of the door.

Claire looked up and scowled, eyes darting at everyone else as Jo snatched a bottle of terrible whiskey (according to Crowley) from a shelf and sat down at the table with them. She spun off the cap with a flick of her finger and took a swing, hissing as it no doubt burnt her throat.

“What are you humans doing?” she asked snappily.

Claire noticed the little smudge of mascara and red rimmed around Jo’s eyes. “Uh, you okay?”

“Rough night,” Jo murmured.

“Oh,” Crowley said, momentarily widening his eyes at his hand of cards as he shuffled them around. “We couldn’t tell. It only looks like your prom date left you for your hotter sister.”

“Shut it, Crowley,” Alex warned. “It’s your turn.”

The demon sighed, but laid down a slew of cards in his hands. “All right, all right. Panties; untwist them. Watch carefully, ladies, because daddy’s got three of a kind and eight of a run.”

Three hearts. Then a run of cards numbered three-to-ten.

“If you could never call yourself ‘daddy’ again, that’d be great,” Claire snorted. “And you’re on level six, not seven. It’s four of a kind and four of a run. You lose, cheater, pick up your cards.”

“You want to play, Jo?” Alex asked kindly, gesturing to a pile of cards in the middle of the table.

Janine nodded, clinking her glass with the bottom of Jo’s bottle. “We can deal you in.”

“I…” Jo lowered the whiskey bottle from her lips after taking a pitiful sip. “I don’t know how to play.”

“We’ll teach you,” Claire announced, sweeping her hand across the table to collect all of the playing cards, although Crowley looked like he’d been punched in the gut.

“Teach her!” he snapped, his eyes darting around the table. “Teach her? That was a two-hour game we’d been workin’ on there, Kid-stiel! That was a twelve-step rummy, you brat! We had five levels left and I was winning.”

“Call me Kid-stiel one more time and I’ll kick-stiel you right in your teeth,” Claire said sweetly, snapping two piles of cards together.

“You were cheating anyway,” Janine accused with a grumble, tapping a bunch of cards against the table to straighten them before she shuffled. “Saw cards up your sleeve from a mile away… And you were on the wrong goddamn level.”

“I don’t want to intrude,” Jo muttered into the bottle, trying to drink away the pain of what God had done to his archangels. Some father he’d turned out to be… “It’s all right. I’ll just watch.”

Claire, Alex, and Janine stopped rearranging the cards and Crowley looked like he was about to blow a gasket.

“We’ve already gathered the cards,” Claire pointed out, gesturing to the table where their two-hour game had been taking place.
A roar that sounded like rolling thunder sounded behind them, just beyond the gates of camp.

Crowley grit his teeth and pointed at the table. “I had three razors, shaving cream, and a bottle of gin bet on that game you just sabotaged, feathers! So you’d better put down that bottle and pick up your hand...or you owe me!”

Janine rolled her eyes. “Owe you what? What could she even owe you, Crowley?”

“Oh,” Crowley smirked. “I have some ideas.”

All the girls groaned. Claire gagged, Alex stuck out her tongue, and Janine did a good impression of vomiting over the arm of her chair.

“Harsh,” Crowley muttered, but accepted the new hand of cards that was dealt to him. “You three would only be so lucky. You too, feathers. Ever had a taste of devil’s food cake?”

Again, the girls groaned, and Janine dissolved into fake-hacking onto the ground, gripping the edge of the table for dramatic effect.

Jo scowled and picked up her cards, holding them with poise although she didn’t know what in the world she was looking for in them. Turning up her nose, she said, “I’d rather not, demon. After Naomi’s romp with you—don’t think we didn’t all know about that—it reeked of sulphur every time she walked by. If I wanted to degrade myself and smell like rot, I’d fornicate with a zombie.”

“Gross, dude,” Claire muttered, nudging Jo with her elbow. “Uh, you wanna learn how to play or not?”

“Yes,” Crowley taunted, raising a brow at her from across the table. “Teach her the rules so I can knock her on her ass—what the—”

All of their heads snapped up and around, following the chorus of monstrous, inhuman roars that erupted from the front gates like a terrible, spine-chilling symphony. Crowley stood sharply, eyes on the door, while the girls all pushed away from the table and launched themselves towards their weapons; guns, loaded and ready, and baseball bats with nails. Jo reached down and drew her angel blade from the holster around her calf, following Claire as she led the way in a flurry of righteous anger and a blowing mane of curls and braids.

But as they descended down the steps, the girls and Crowley skidded to a stop, collectively gasping and grasping for each other.

Fifty. Seventy… Maybe a hundred zombies were emerging from the trees, grunting and snarling in sync, their jerking movements sending a shockwave of terror down Anael’s middle. She felt cold with terror, despite gripping onto her sword and taking the lead, pulling the gang back into action as they approached the gates.

They were coming. They were moving in sync. And at the head of the army was one particular zombie.

He walked straighter and stood taller. He seemed to see her, and he walked towards them with a calm demeanor. He almost...strutted.

“Shoot him, Claire,” Jo commanded, pointing at him with her blade.

Beside her, she heard Claire load and cock the shotgun, taking aim.
“What the fuck are they doing?” Claire asked, before she shot the gun. It had most of the humans raising their hands to their ears as the sound nearly deafened them, but they all gasped together once again when the zombie calmly leaned to the side, avoiding the shot. Behind him, one of his fellow undead lost their head in a well-aimed shot from Claire.

“I don’t...know…” Anael admitted. “I don’t understand what they’re—-”

“GET DOWN!” Janine suddenly shrieked. “He has a fuckin’ grenade in his hand!”

Jo didn’t have much of a chance to react as Janine tackled her to the ground. She saw Crowley do the same to Claire, and Alex dropped without preamble. They all just barely hit the dirt when the zombie leader threw the explosive at Camp Singer.

Last thing Anael remembered before the heat blew past them, and the ringing in her ears grew impossibly loud was the purple sparks, the deafening crack, and the wards...breaking over their heads like glass.

The zombies.

They were in.

Chapter End Notes

Here yee, here yee. Gather here, at the end of SZ Chapter 11, to yell at jscribbles about how awesome she is and how you absolutely love cliffhanger endings that make you wait a week for resolution.

Everyone...loves that, right? Right? RIGHT!?!?!

On a serious note, go follow me on the tumblr I never check, go read my other garbage, click that kudos button, smash that subscribe button, leave me a comment in the commenty-box below, and SUBSCRIBE TO MY CHANNEL. PROMO CODE: JSCRIBBLESISDESTIELTRASH will get you absolutely nothing, but it's funny anyway, right?

Go leave my needy ass a comment, why doncha?

Until next time!

(Stay tuned until next week for Chapter 12, where MalMuses will fuck up all your feelings in the best way possible.)
Dean watched Castiel go. He walked straight out through the door, for air or space or alone-time or whatever the hell he was choosing to call it. Dean’s fingers twitched and balled at his sides, and he’d have run straight after him if it hadn’t been for Sam standing in the middle of the floor with a bottle of pills, looking bewildered as Castiel pushed past him.

“Hey, Dean,” Sam said uncertainly. After a long moment he nodded after Cas, moving over to Dean where he still stood near the cot Castiel had almost died on. “What was that about?”

Dean gave Sam a warning look and shook his head slowly. “Nothing.”

“No dice, Dean,” Sam said, more solemnly than Dean anticipated. “We write our own stories now, and we’re not doing that anymore.”

Dean raised an eyebrow, but still didn’t answer. Sam shoved the pill bottle into his pocket and folded his arms for a moment, before jerking his head toward the door. “Come on. I gotta switch out with the back of camp watch in thirty minutes. Walk there with me.”

Something in Dean deflated and he nodded, following Sam through the door.
Out in the fresh air it seemed easier. “I don’t know what that was about, not really. Something to do with the memories, I guess, something he remembered,” Dean said quietly, watching the toes of his boots swing forward as he walked, pointed slightly outward as ever. “I should go and see if he’s okay, make sure that he—”

“Dean,” Sam interrupted softly. “I’m not trying to get in your business, but maybe just give him some space. That spell stuff… that looked intense.”

Dean exhaled heavily, letting the air hiss out between his lips as he walked. “Yeah. It did.”

“You alright?” Sam asked as they strolled over toward the fence, though he kept his eyes ahead rather than looking at Dean.

For a moment, Dean actually thought about it. “Yeah. I mean—Cas is okay. So, it’s fine.”

“He is okay, but we all thought he wasn’t for a minute there,” Sam coaxed, guiding them off to the side.

Dean followed. They had a bit of time before Sam was supposed to take over watch, he figured. Once Sam had to leave, he’d head off and shower or something, if Crowley had left any hot water. Try and leave Cas be for a bit, as Sam suggested. Dean leaned back against a rusty Camaro, one of the ones that had been too flimsy even to use as a makeshift barrier, and looked out across what had once been the road leading past Bobby’s house and into the fields.

“You were pretty upset,” Sam continued, blunt but kind. He came to rest next to Dean, leaning back onto the car and causing it to lurch a little with his giant Moose frame.

Dean pursed his lips. “You sayin’ you weren’t? We all weren’t? It’s Cas, dude.”

“You know what I’m saying, jerk,” Sam fired back, shooting a glance sideways at his brother, exasperated.

“Yeah, well.” Dean let out a sigh, raising one hand to rub it over his face. “I don’t know what to say. Or how to say it, or something. I just… I thought I lost him. That’s all. And I did that already.”

“Too often,” Sam noted with a tiny dip of his chin. “I’m not trying to get up all up in your stuff, okay? I just wanna make sure you’re good. Things have been changing, with you and Cas.”

Dean felt an old, wary prickle at his spine, felt it tighten defensively, felt his shoulders bunch in. He breathed. Loosened.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “We’re kinda off the old rule book now. Trying to—well, maybe do things our way.”

“Whose rulebook were you following before?” Sam questioned, his brow skeptical.

“Honestly?” Dean said, shrugging hard. “I haven’t got a fucking clue. For a long time, I just…” He trailed off, rubbing the knuckles of his right hand across the palm of his left, feeling like he wanted to punch something but knowing that was nothing more than an old, pointless habit.

Sam seemed set to wait him out, quietly observing Dean’s hands as they fidgeted.

“I don’t know what changed,” Dean continued when he could. “I mean, the world ended, and I’m not scared anymore like I was, but…I dunno, that’s not all of it, even. It was just never right before.
The timing never matched up.”

Humming slightly in agreement, Sam’s eyes rested very neutrally on the skyline as he asked, “Not scared of…?”

“Oh, come on, Sam. Don’t make me say it.”

“You gotta say it, Dean. You need to sometime, okay? Some things are actually truer when you speak them, you know. And they are definitely truer when the right people hear them.”

Dean nudged Sam with his shoulder, grinning. “When did you stop being an overgrown fourteen-year-old and start being this wise leader, huh?”

“Around the time you finally stepped back and let me be,” Sam said pointedly. He smiled, turning his head to look properly at Dean, but he continued doggedly on. “So… Cas. You got anything to say, or no?”

With a strange sense of finality, like something that had been approaching for over a decade, since a barn in September that now seemed like a lifetime ago, Dean nodded. “I do have something to say. But I’m not gonna say it to you, Sam. Not because I can’t say it, or because I don’t wanna care and share with my baby brother, okay? I’m not gonna say it to you because those words belong to Cas. And the first time he hears them, they’re gonna be just for him.”

From the corner of his eye, Dean saw Sam smile down at the dirt beneath their feet. He didn’t say anything—which, honestly, was the best response Dean could have hoped for. When he did speak, it was warm and fond in a way that, with all the chaos and pain and zombies and apocalyptic nonsense, Dean had missed.

“Well, as long as you weren’t ever holding back because of what I, or anybody else thought. That’s all. And I don’t think you were, not really.”

Dean shook his head, scuffing the dirt. “Nah. I mean, yeah, sure that’s kind of a worry sometimes. But it wasn’t really ever about that. It was about me, and the place I was in, and him, and the place he was in. That’s all.”

“I know,” Sam said, smiling.

“You know?” Dean turned his head, taking in his brother’s smirking profile.

“I was there, Dean. Right there. The whole damn time, through every fucking stare, for over a decade. Present and involved for every stupid fuck up and every epic mistake that either of you made.”

Dean snorted. “Oh, like we were the only two who royally messed shit up, blood boy.”

Sam opened his mouth to protest the nickname, but Dean carried on before he could even begin to get his panties in a twist.

“Relax, Sammy. It was forever ago. And I almost feel like it’s easier to forgive all the dumb shit we did—we both did, at times, and Cas too—now, thanks to Chuck. He’s been manipulating us our whole lives so… feels easier to let it go now, y’know?”

As Sam nodded his agreement. “That’s true. Since the End, a lot of stuff just seems insignificant, anyway.”
Dean settled back, folding his arms on his chest, thoughtful as he continued. “Have you wondered, since Chuck did his knock-off Thanos bullshit, how much of that was ever our choice? Were any of the decisions we made actually our own?”

Sam looked considering. “I’ve thought about it. I think everyone has, since we found out this was all just Chuck’s soap opera. But especially us. It was always us, for him.”

“Yup. He’s a pretty big fanboy,” Dean quipped. “That guy sure stanned himself some Winchester brothers.”

Wrinkling his nose sharply, Sam made a disgusted noise. “You realize that means it was all on him. Even all that gross stuff Becky would write about us—”

Dean couldn’t help but laugh, his shoulders shuddering as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Wow, as if I didn’t hate him enough already. Dude had a pretty messed up relationship with his sister though, shoulda been a clue.”

“I wonder how it works,” Sam mused idly, once Dean had stopped chuckling. “The rewriting, I mean. Like, with Cas. If Cas was an archangel—which the more I think about that, the more it makes sense, honestly—then what happened when Chuck rewrote him? Did it just change all the timelines?”

Dean tilted his head in thought, though he quickly straightened up, wondering where the hell he’d got that habit from. “I think it’s more like when a writer has to change the name of a character, or something, or tweak a plot point. The whole story doesn’t fall apart, but some stuff might not be exactly the same as it was. Maybe if someone knew the original character was different, they might be able to spot it—like maybe that part would feel a bit out of character for whoever ended up doing it, but it’d still happen, just differently.”


In the distance there was a low, perilous rumble, causing Dean to cock his head to the side again. “Is that thunder?”

Sam frowned. “Maybe—no. I can still hear it. What is that?” He turned, hoisting his gargantuan-self up off of the protesting old car they’d been leaning on.

Dean automatically followed Sam’s attention as it moved over to the other side of the camp. “Something going on over there?” he asked, already beginning to make his way around the vehicle. “On the other side of camp?”

**BOOM!**

Neither of them wasted another word wondering what the explosion that sounded from the other end of the camp could be. By the time the second booming sound hit, seconds later, they were both already in a full sprint.

The barrier was falling.
The view that greeted Sam as he and Dean sprinted across to the other side of the compound was unbelievable. The magical wall, the precious spellwork that had kept them all alive this long, was breaking like glass, showering vicious violet sparks down in a chillingly beautiful shower across the bodies beneath.

Moving bodies. Seventy, eighty, Sam wasn’t stopping to count. The zombies clawed at each other, piling overtop of one another, growling, howling, squeezing through the growing, glowing, gaping cracks that were threatening the entire camp.

“Holy shit,” Dean burst out next to Sam, and there was nothing Sam could add.

In front of them, a large black burn mark had cleared the ground of everything it touched, still sizzling at the edges, indented. A grenade, Sam guessed. The booming sounds they’d heard—the zombies were weaponized, he realized, his stomach sinking.

Everyone was in motion. Jo slashed wildly but efficiently, her angel blade making quick work of the creatures heading toward her. Donna and Jody, always together somehow, stood in the back of a parked truck. One foot up on the cab, Donna blasted off shotgun shot after shotgun shot, tossing her spent weapon down to Jody even as the Sheriff raised up a ready-loaded replacement, perfectly in sync.

Claire was in the thick of it, like always. Her shots were accurate, her feet planted firmly. She was far from the kid she’d been when Sam first saw her. A grown woman, she was older in ways than some people twice her age, and as she obliterated zombie after zombie in the wave, it showed.

Beside her stood Crowley. Sam was hit with a strange wave of memory as he observed the demon—weaker now perhaps, much as the angels were, but still a demon—summon up his powers. His eyes shone red as he stood firmly in front of Claire, his gaze resting defiantly on the wave of undead that approached. Blood red smoke billowed softly around them, as if he’d teleported in front of her, like a shield. Distantly, in the back of his mind, Sam took note. That demon was much fonder of that kid that he let on.

As Sam and Dean reached the barrier, guns already in hand, the distant rumbling—the one that had definitely not been thunder—grew louder.

“Oh my fucking god,” came a voice from the front. Janine. She let out another bullet before turning, scrambling away from the approaching hoard, falling back. “They’ve got a truck! A whole fucking truck! We need help!”

She wasn’t wrong. A huge, rumbling military transport vehicle had come into view around the bend.  

Well, thought Sam dryly. We did know they could drive.

Help, thank goodness, seemed to be coming.

The noise from the sheer number of attackers and the sparking, screeching, shattering spell overhead had drawn practically the whole camp. Castiel approached at a sprint, followed by a team of muggles and hunters alike. All hands on deck. He shouted out orders, directing people this way and that to obtain weapons and form groups—naturally falling back into commanding, even if these days it was rag-tag team of survivors rather than a garrison of angels.

Sam got a good shot on one of the zombies, managing to blast it right between the eyes and knock it back. The zombie had once been a police officer, judging by the filthy uniform clinging to its malnourished frame. Somehow the creature had managed to keep the hat of its dress uniform all this
time, and it flew off into the face of another zombie, causing momentary chaos as the second turned on his already-slumping assailant. Another shot from Sam and they both stumbled, falling back into their friends and causing a momentary pile up in front of the closest crack in the barrier.

Taking advantage of the short-lived gridlock, Sam took a brief second to look around, cataloging automatically. Dean—check, fighting to his right. Rowena—back behind Castiel, the ex-angel clearing a path for her, trying to help her get to the barrier. Jody and the girls—all holding their own, making Sam momentarily proud.

The zombies were moving again, so Sam raised his gun, aimed, and fired. “Dean!” he shouted, not even turning his head. “There are way too many of these guys!”

“I’m aware of that, Sam!—Son of a bitch get outta my face!—We need Rowena to get that barrier back up!”

“Cas is already on it!” Sam shouted back. He saw Dean come around to his right, one slow, struggling, dumb-breath zombie held in front of him, used as a shield against more of its own kind. “All good?” Sam yelled, scanning around, taking in everyone he could while still shooting.

“Bullets,” Dean shouted, his gun waving, useless.

“Dean!” Castiel’s voice came from further to their left, accompanied by a large machete from the camp stores, thrown straight through the air and into Dean’s hand like they’d done it a hundred times before. Which, Sam supposed, they probably had.

Dean swung the blade in a deadly arc, beheading the creature in front of him. “Thanks!”

Castiel dove straight back toward the barrier. He had his angel blade in one hand and his favorite gun in the other—God knows he’d spent long enough “training” with Dean to have a favorite—and he was doing a good job of keeping the zombies away from Rowena while she worked, much to Sam’s relief.

The tiny, red-headed witch was on her knees, arms raised, entirely ignoring the fight around her. Not for the first time, Sam considered that knowing her fate as she did was making her far too careless. But if Sam trusted anyone to look after Rowena outside of him and Dean, it would always be Castiel. So, satisfied, he turned his attention back to the middle-aged housewife in her Sunday best that was trying to eat his face.

There was a piercing scream to Sam’s far right, as one of the women they’d picked up at the grocery store on their first supply-run was barely saved from a slow, devouring death by Claire’s quick shotgun.

“Sam!” Dean called again. “We gotta get some of these people outta here! They wanna help but they’re just gonna get themselves killed.” Clearly Dean had seen the near-miss too, or one of the many others that was happening around them as they fought.

“Got it!” Sam hollered back, beginning to push his way away from Dean, toward the teams that had followed Castiel from within the compound, terrified but stubbornly determined to live.

They fought on for a minute more, until the rumbling of the truck drew Sam’s attention again. Looking up, he saw that the vehicle which had been further up the road, pouring out zombie troops, was moving once more.

It was picking up speed, and with horrifying clarity, Sam realized that the cold-eyed, intelligent-looking zombie driver had no intention of stopping.
“Dean!” he called once more, trying to keep the panic out of his voice as he began desperately shoving, herding, pushing people back toward the compound, lashing out at any zombie that got too close. “The truck!”

He heard his brother cuss somewhere behind him, and a particularly loud howling sound cut off by a grotesque SNAP.

“Go!” Dean yelled. “I’m gonna head toward the watchtower and try and see how many more are comin’. Birds eye view!”

“Gotch’a!” Sam didn’t stop to turn, frantic. “Move!” he was screaming, practically throwing people aside. The truck had lined itself up at the top of the road beyond the camp and was currently steaming toward the barrier. “Cas!”

Castiel didn’t respond, but within seconds he was running on Sam’s left, using the trust (and simple adoration, in some cases) that so many of the muggles had in him to try and herd them toward the camp. The zombies milled around, but at least the slower, stupider variety were struggling to find any victims in the chaos, shoved and buffeted along with everyone else.

Sam looked back to the barrier, where Rowena was still working. Both of the arms she had raised overhead streamed with blood, deep cuts and glowing wounds lighting up violet and shimmering oddly in the clouded daylight. Sam pushed down panic that he didn’t have time for, worrying, as always, exactly how much of herself his tiny firecracker was giving. He wanted to call out to her, check she was okay—but he knew better than to disturb her right then, when she was in the zone, when she was the only one who could help them. Janine was there, he realized, covering for Castiel while they ushered the muggles back further into the camp, abandoning their front line. Janine would protect her, he told himself sternly. *Rowena is not fragile. Janine will make sure she’s okay.*

The truck horn blasted out, the sound breaking through the growling, slashing, and gunshots and cutting the air down to silence for just one second, before it hit the barrier.

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The space in front of the truck where the magical barrier shimmered seemed to bend. There was an almost stretching sensation, as if the air around the barrier was a taut, vibrating elastic band that was just waiting to…

SNAP.

Rowena screamed, long and loud and unnatural.

Castiel was running as fast as his burning, human thigh muscles would allow him to, and then faster. He and Sam had shoved as many of the camp residents out of the way as they could, and Sam was leading them to fall back to the makeshift buildings, where at least there were supplies, bullets, blades. They’d have an advantage if the zombies had to come through doors or windows or narrow alleys between shipping-crate buildings, as opposed to standing in the open like cattle for cull.

Everything had changed in the space of five minutes.

Not unusual, Castiel realized, for Team Free Will’s lives.
The camp filled with horrific sound and the ground rumbled as the truck smashed through the barrier and swung sideways, maximizing its damage. The vehicle was huge, and sturdy—a large military transport truck, tons of metal and reinforced sidings, screeching and sliding into the buildings close to the edge of the barrier. The watchtower fell in slow motion, with a dreadful sound of twisting metal and ripping concrete. Scaffolds tumbled, cars fell like they weighed nothing, and the truck slowly ground to a halt.

All of that was horrific, but Castiel had his eyes on Rowena, their only hope, watching as Janine valiantly protected her from the few zombies that the truck hadn’t swept away. Her red hair fell down her back, concrete dust drifting over her from head to toe as her face was upturned to the sky…but she didn’t move, not an inch, never breaking her furious chanting.

It was admirable. Castiel might not have been Rowena’s biggest fan, but she had fire where it counted.

And then Sam changed everything, with one shout.

“Cas!” he yelled, kicking a zombie in the solar plexus and ripping open the door it was attempting to obstruct. “Where’s Dean?!”

Immediately, all of Castiel’s attention was diverted. Dean had been near Sam, Castiel knew—he’d run past him on the way to protect Rowena, he’d even given him a weapon. He’d been right there. But now, Dean was missing.

“I can’t see him!” Castiel called back to Sam, frantic.

Sam was organizing a decent resistance, given what they had. Castiel should help, he should get back to Rowena, he should protect her, protect the camp…

“Go, Cas. Find him, I got this—he was headed to the watchtower.”

He was weak, and he didn’t even argue. Because to Castiel, one man would always outweigh the many. It was part of his strength, and also his biggest flaw. He knew that now more than ever.

His attention pulled back to the barrier by an overwhelming smell of sulfur, Castiel saw Crowley, red-eyed, holding a zombie up in one hand like he weighed nothing, air beneath his filthy, rotting feet. Crowley threw the creature, broken-necked, out beyond the barrier.

Castiel watched as the zombie rose, coming back for more—then stopped, bumping against the barrier. It was thin, and it fizzled every time he bashed into it. After a few tries he came through, only to die at the end of Crowley’s silver gun, but still, it was hope. It meant it was working—Rowena was doing it.

He didn’t take the time to rejoice, still frantically scanning the thinning crowds for Dean.

“Dean!” he shouted, trying to contain his fear. It was so much harder, as a human, to be calm, to be level headed. Sam was pretty good at it. Castiel didn’t know how. Not yet. He ran on, toward the watchtower. One of the zombies had got a decent swipe on him with a makeshift blade—it looked eerily like a metal prong from a fence, causing Castiel to think back to the first zombie’s they’d killed, back in the graveyard in Kansas—and the side of his face sluggishly dripped blood from the cut on his cheekbone. He ignored it and pushed on, headed for the watchtower.

Or what was left of it.

The scaffold they’d used for one of the towers along the walls of Camp Singer had been entirely
toppled, either blasted by one of the grenades or by the sheer force of the military truck smashing into the barrier. It was twisted, broken, laying on its side. Cas remembered the structure feeling a little rickety when he’d first climbed it, not long after the birth of the camp. But over time they’d reinforced it, secured it, added rebars and metal and concreted it deep into the ground, until it became a sizeable, sturdy watchtower. Just one of many jobs that the teams of muggles and hunters alike had undertaken to protect themselves.

Castiel felt his heartbeat increasing as he ran toward it. If this was the last place Sam had seen Dean, then…

He sucked in a shaking breath, trying to concentrate through the noise. The numbers of zombies were slowly reducing thanks to the camp-members efforts, though they weren’t without casualty, Castiel could already tell. But the zombies that were left, the slow, baser kind, still swarmed at the barrier and didn’t seem to know when they were beaten. Sam was leading Jody, Donna, and the others as they chased them all off and tried to retrieve injured muggles, and the sound of gunshots echoed around the camp.

“Dean?!” Cas called desperately, running along the edge of the tower and around to the other side.

He couldn’t explain the feeling—he wasn’t an angel, or an archangel, anymore. There was nothing supernatural about it. But he knew. He knew that something was wrong, he knew that Dean needed him, as sure as he knew anything.

“Dean!” he shouted again, panting from running across the camp, hurdling his way over the debris of the fallen tower.

He saw the plaid first. Bright red even through the dirt, it caught his eye and immediately drew him to the twisted bars of metal where the center of the structure had been. Concrete dust filled the air, swirling around Castiel as he panicked, feeling bile in his throat.

“Dean!” he screamed, diving into the wreckage.

There was no response, not a sound, and Castiel had never, in his long existence, been so terrified of silence.

“Dean! Are you okay? Say something!” he babbled, frantic, pushing aside lumps of stray concrete and fallen planks to get closer.

Finally there, he pressed his weight up against the heavy metal column, originally one of the main supports of the tower, that was blocking him from Dean. He pushed, heaved, forcing his aching, torn muscles to give just a little more.

But it wouldn’t budge. Beyond it, Dean lay.

Cas could see him then, in the mud, covered in concrete dust. A long, vicious metal rebar speared its way through Dean’s thigh, pinning him to the ground. Rubble was all around him, on him, cuts and abrasions all over his eerily calm face as he lay in a horrifyingly large crimson pool of his own making.

Throwing everything he had at the wreckage, desperate to shift it even an inch, Cas screamed out.

“HELP! I FOUND DEAN—HELP!”

The wreckage didn’t shift, ignorant of his pain.
He couldn’t move it, not in the slightest. He was too tired, too weak, too human to get to Dean.

It hit him like a burning fist between the ribs. He couldn’t help, he couldn’t save Dean. He was powerless, and useless to protect the people he loved. The person he loved.

The realization had hot tears burning tracks through the dust on his cheeks.

Cas couldn’t give up. He kept on pushing, beating at the wreckage with his fists, sobbing.

“SOMEBODY! ANYBODY! HELP…PLEASE…”

The truck was moving again. Sam was amazed that the thing had survived all the damage it had caused to the camp, though given the haste that some of their base had been constructed in, he supposed, it made sense. What made less sense to him was what the hell the zombie driving it was doing.

Sam was in the doorway of the mess hall, Jo by his side, protecting a crowd of scared muggles within. The zombies were slowly picking themselves up, as many of them had been scattered like bowling pins when the truck hit, and they were beginning to jerkily make their way toward the humans, broken limbs and all. As they reached the doorway, one by one, Sam picked them off with bullets, leaving the few who made it closer to Jo’s blade. Sam and Jo were silent, and tense, and both watching the same thing, he knew.

The zombie truck driver just sat. He—a dark-eyed, fairly whole specimen—was just observing the goings on around the truck. He made no effort to get out, only studied the buildings, the bodies, the lurching zombies that remained.

“He’s watching,” Jo pointed out, the low horror in her voice not quite disguised. “He’s just sitting there observing us and getting the lay of the camp.”

Sam agreed. “Yeah. I don’t like it.”

Jo made a small noise of agreement, turning her attention to a lanky, long haired zombie that had escaped Sam’s bullets. So, Sam raised his gun, pointing it at the cabin of the truck. He was almost certain that the window was bullet proof glass, thick and military grade, but even so he let out a carefully aimed shot, right at the zombie’s face.

It was a familiar face. But Sam couldn’t quite put his finger on it. He’d known that person, years ago, when that face was fresh and not sagging from its bones. He was sure of it.

The bullet embedded itself in the window with a sharp crack and a tiny spiderweb of glass, but hung there, not penetrating. The zombie didn’t so much as flinch. Instead it turned its head, eyeing Sam coldly.

They watched each other, eye to eye, for a long moment.

The intelligence that Sam could see in its dead eyes was terrifying.

He knew that person. He knew them; he knew them.
After considering Sam for a long minute, the zombie reached into its tattered shirt—a military jacket, Sam realized—and pulled out a whistle. With a sharp, loud blast, he gave a signal… and the zombies stopped.

Sam and Jo both froze.

As one, the zombies began to lurch back toward the truck. The back was lowering, and they were climbing inside.

“Sam?” Jo’s voice was low and confused.

“I… I have no idea what’s happening,” he answered truthfully.

It was like the zombies had been sent here specifically for…something. But he didn’t know what, or who they were reporting back to.

Behind the truck that was quickly filling with zombie troops, Claire, Crowley, and several of the combat-muggles were near the barrier, stemming the flow of zombies that had begun to gush into the camp behind the truck. As the zombies stopped, so did they, looking just as confused as Sam felt. He saw Claire say something, too far to hear, and Crowley responded to her, both frowning.

Suddenly, Crowley’s head snapped up, tilted to the side as if he’d heard something. With no more than a couple of words to Claire, he raised his hand, clicked…and poof. He teleported. Sam hadn’t seen him use that much power since they’d admitted him to the camp—concerned, Sam was sure, that his demonic powers would eventually go the same way that the angels’ grace had, and far too selfish to waste it.

The truck filled on up, and Sam could do nothing but watch, confused by almost everything that was happening around him.

x

Castiel had started to grow used to feelings of helplessness as a human, but this was a new low. He crouched on the floor, his arm pressed through a tiny gap in the metal wreckage, snaking it through toward Dean. He grabbed desperately at his shoulder, the only part of him his fingers could reach.

Well aware of the tears that were streaming down his face and entirely uncaring, Castiel tugged determinedly at Dean’s shirt, using every bit of strength he had to try and drag him closer, close enough to check for a pulse.

*Please be alive, please be alive, we’ve got to have more time, Dean, we’ve got—*

A puff of sulfur. “Trouble, pigeon?”

“Crowley!” Cas let go of Dean’s shoulder, scraping his arm on the concrete as he tugged it back, scrambling to his feet.

“Well, well,” the demon said, dusting off his shoulders with a disapproving glare at the concrete dust settling there. “Interesting hidey-hole you’ve picked here. Is this what wingless birds do when they’re afraid, hide in little nests while the rest of us do the work?”
“Shut up!” Castiel snapped desperately. “Dean’s hurt and I can’t get to him, I can’t—”

“Alright, Cassie, slow down,” Crowley drawled, stepping up to the fallen metal plinth that obstructed the only way forward. He peered through the same gap Castiel had first seen, noting Dean beyond, unconscious, bloodied. “Dear oh dear, he has got himself into a pickle, hasn’t he,” Crowley began.

“Less talking, more helping,” Castiel interrupted, already furious.

He’d take help, any help, that he could get. But why, oh why, did it have to be Crowley? Was Chuck still fucking with him somehow?

To Castiel’s surprise, Crowley was solemn, pushing up his sleeves and frowning. “Looks bad,” he said, reaching out to experimentally push against the heavy metal column.

“Don’t you think I’ve tried that?” Castiel hissed, hating the audible panic in his own voice. “He’s not responding at all, I can’t get him to say anything, I don’t even know if he’s breathing…”

“Alright, flappy bird. Calm your tits.”

Castiel prickled immediately. What a ridiculous—

“He’s bleeding out,” Crowley said. His voice was clinical, studying Dean with the practiced air of one who could measure death and torture from a distance, an old habit.

“No, no—he can’t, I—”

“No,” Crowley said decisively, stepping back and studying the fallen support with a calculating eye. “Whatever would we do for gossip if we separated the star-crossed lovers? The whole camp is waiting for you two to hurry up and get it on. There are betting pools. Not that, of course, any of them are anything to do with me. But, in case you want in, there are several shower slots and the last case of Pringles riding on which one of you goes for it first.”

“Crowley,” Castiel growled. “If you don’t—”

“For crying out loud, you giraffe, I’m saving your husband, alright? Stop spitting feathers. It’s not like you’ve got many to waste.”

Castiel exhaled slowly. “I should go and fetch Sam,” he said, conscious of every second the stupid demon was wasting.

“No need, sweetie,” Crowley purred. “Uncle Crowley has it. Not going to let my cash cow bleed out on the floor, am I?”

“Your…what?”

“I’m betting on you, you know. After all, I know exactly how our feisty squirrel likes it, I’ve already smuggled in that tunnel—” Crowley was saved from Castiel’s angry fist only by the reddening of his demonic eyes and the way smoke began to curl around his hands. “Step back, Castiel.”

It was almost a physical pain to step back and let the demon work. But, gritting his teeth, Castiel moved away from the gap he’d crouched near, where he had been closest to Dean.

Crowley raised his hands in front of himself, all his focus on the detritus blocking the room and pinning Dean to the floor. His fists clenched and his brow furrowed. Slowly, with an awful screeching noise, the metal blocking the door began to tremble. Crowley’s forehead prickled with
sweat.

He’s almost out of power too, Castiel realized.

Even so, with a grotesque shudder, the metal column which had once been a main part of the watchtower before it came crashing down on Dean lifted. Just a little, a mere foot, every inch paid for in sweat on Crowley’s brow.

“Get in there, Castiel! Get him out!” the demon strained out through gritted teeth.

Castiel dived down to his knees, squeezing through the gap that Crowley was creating as he still worked. He slipped into the space beyond, stirring up clouds of concrete dust that billowed up and out, temporarily obscuring his vision and making him cough. “Dean?” he called again, crawling forward and grasping at Dean’s body just from blind feel alone.

He was cool to the touch, too still, far too quiet for his Dean. His Dean should be making snarky comments. His Dean should have been complaining at the fuss, making fun of Castiel for being so emotional. Instead, this Dean was silent.

As the dust settled, Castiel grappled his way across Dean and jammed his fingers into the side of his throat, searching desperately for a pulse.

“Come on, Dean, please—please, you promised, you said you wanted to go further, you and me, you can’t do this to me now, you can’t—”

“A LITTLE LESS MELODRAMA PLEASE!” Crowley bellowed hoarsely from the other side of the wall of wreckage, the strain showing in his voice. “I’m not holding this open for fun, angel!”

Beneath Castiel’s fingers, there was a tiny beat.

His own heart leapt to attention, thundering in his chest at thrice the speed of the rhythm under the pads of his fingers.

“Thank you, thank you,” Castiel muttered desperately, with no idea anymore who he was even thanking.

He moved down Dean’s body to where a long, sharp spear of metal impaled his thigh, pinning him down. It was one of the metal rebars that several of the muggle camp-members had encased in concrete to reinforce the watchtower. They’d been construction workers before the End, and they’d been a huge help around the base, but even their well-constructed columns couldn’t withstand the impact of direct hit from a two-and-a-half-ton truck. Castiel frowned down at the bar. In ideal circumstances, he’d have left the bar in Dean’s thigh, to be removed at the infirmary, especially as he’d already lost so much blood. But with the unstable wreckage creaking around them and Crowley’s increasingly labored breathing on the other side of the wall of debris, Castiel did the only thing he could—he grabbed under Dean’s shoulders, hauling him up, and lifted Dean up off of the metal.

Thank god he’s unconscious, he thought, watching another river of fresh blood begin to ooze from the deep, goring wound.

Trying desperately to ignore the wet, bloody cling of Dean’s body as it molded to his own, Castiel hauled Dean’s immobile form into his side. He was a dead weight, but the space in the ruins of the tower was too low for Castiel to be able to straighten up and carry him.

With some pulling, pushing, and shoving, Castiel got Dean through the gap.
Crowley gasped out a heavy breath, wheezing as he dropped his hands. The weight of metal and concrete crashed down as he unclenched his fists, sending a rumbling shudder through the rest of the watchtower, such as it still was.

“We need to get out of here, Dean needs—” Castiel began.

“We need to get out of here,” Crowley agreed, interrupting, weak. “Because it’s gonna all come down any moment.”

Moving across to Castiel, he reached for one of Dean’s arms, pulling it up over his shoulders. Between the two of them, they hauled him out, dodging debris as they headed for safe ground.

“Thank you,” Castiel said quietly, shooting Crowley a quick look.

Crowley shot Castiel an exasperated glare. “It might shock you to know, hot wings, that you aren’t the only one who gives a shit about this bloody Winchester, alright?”

Castiel set his jaw. “This is really not the time for more references to your summer of love, thank you.”

“Bloody hell,” Castiel muttered, rolling his eyes. “That is not what I meant. Look, I’m a demon. But I was human once. And sometimes part of being human is sucking it up and realizing that other no matter how much you feel things,” Crowley practically hissed, a shudder in his voice, “you aren’t the bloody center of the world, okay? Other people are allowed to care. Get your jealousy in check—we all saw you with the vampire, alright—because Squirrel sure ain’t gonna stand for it.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Castiel growled, taking more of Dean’s weight and pushing forward.

Crowley didn’t argue. Crowley had been an expert killer in his time, and Castiel had taken apart as many bodies as he’d put together. They both knew what they were seeing; Dean’s pale skin, his weak heartbeat, the open wound through his thigh, skirting the bone at just the right angle to sever the femoral artery.

_Exsanguination_, Castiel’s mind unhelpfully provided. _Death, not from the severity of injury, but from volume of blood lost—_

“I can practically hear you thinking, feathers, and I really wish you’d stop it,” Crowley grumbled as they moved toward the infirmary building.

The compound seemed quiet—where was the roaring, the slashing, the gunshots? What had happened? They didn’t have time to question it, more concerned with the crimson trail Dean steadily leaked as they dragged him toward Alex’s domain.

“Help!” Cas shouted out when they were half way. “We need help!”

Sam stood off to the side of the infirmary, helpless.

The zombies, with their oh-so-familiar leader, had loaded up…and simply left. His stomach heavy and cold, he’d already discussed his fears with Claire and Jo, and they agreed. The zombies had been
testing their defenses and getting the lay of the camp. Once done, they’d retreated. He knew who that zombie was—had been?—but he had no idea who they were reporting back to. As much as it seemed wrong to credit them with the level of intelligence required for a recon mission, Sam was resolutely certain that was what had just happened. And that was terrifying.

And now Dean.

Sam had been helping Janine into the makeshift hospital. She’d taken a stray bullet to the chest while protecting Rowena, shielding her from the zombies that invaded and getting hit by a panicking muggle, instead. Sam had been shot more than once in his life—though luckily never in the chest—so he had at least some idea how much pain she was in, but even so she merely gritted her teeth and insisted he make sure someone else covered Rowena before she agreed to leave her post. He was relieved that she seemed fine and that it appeared the bullet hadn’t hit anything vital, and was carrying her (to wild protests, but also several giggles) across the wrecked camp when he’d heard Castiel shouting.

“Help! We need help!”

The ex-angel had sounded honestly terrified, and as he’d lowered Janine down and sprinted over to assist, he could see why.

Dean was in bad shape. Sam wasn’t a medic but he had eyes, and he could see the skittish way even Alex had reacted when he’d burst through the infirmary doors with Dean, Crowley and Castiel in close pursuit.

They had a few muggles helping out with medical stuff on the base; several had been carers of various kinds and one had worked at a blood bank. They weren’t nurses, but they worked under Alex’s supervision and for most of the wounds from their hunts and zombie encounters, they did just fine. But this… fuck, Dean needed a hospital, and there was no such thing.

Alex was ruthlessly efficient. The infirmary was already full to overflowing after the battle outside, but she had no qualms about ordering aside those who could wait. A muggle with a twisted ankle got unceremoniously turfed out of his cot, and she fired orders back and forth at her little team as she desperately tried to stabilize Sam’s pale, silent brother.

Sam didn’t know what to do. And he hated it. He paced, until he was firmly told to get out of the way. So he went and stood off to the side, taking calming breaths.

Sam had to do something. He couldn’t just watch while Alex cut away Dean’s clothes, determined and focused as she ignored everything and everyone else, her entire attention on trying to stop the flow of blood.

Taking a breath, Sam moved over to the next bed, where Janine sat up, already bandaged by one of Alex’s helpers.

“Hey, Janine,” he said quietly. “How’re you feeling?”

“ ’I’ll live,” she said, grimacing. “Breathing is hard, and I’m kinda dizzy. Is Rowena okay? The wards?”

He nodded. “She’s fine, thanks to you taking over from Cas. She’s going to be worn out from the spell, but nothing more. Jo is out there with her now.”

Janine nodded. “Good. That’s what matters. She can get the wards back up over the next few hours and we can take stock. Work this shit out. Talking of Cas,” she added, tilting her head over to toward
the wall near Dean’s bed, “is he doing okay?”

Sam looked. Castiel was leaning against the wall, his shoulders hunched, his arms folded over his chest. His eyes were fixed on Dean as Alex worked, wide but somehow unseeing. He was pale, and his fingers flexed against his arms. He looked to be panting shallowly, as if…

“I think he might need you more than I do right now,” Janine pointed out quietly. “In fact, I think—”

“Yeah,” Sam said, low. “That…that isn’t good.” He stood, stepping toward Castiel, finding himself briefly relieved that at least this time, Castiel didn’t have enough grace left to trip the power for several blocks—but then immediately felt guilty for even thinking it.

Castiel didn’t look away from Dean as Sam moved over to stand next to him.

“Cas?” Sam asked after a minute, before realizing he had nothing to follow up with. He wasn’t about to reassure Castiel that Dean was going to be fine when he knew no such thing.

Something about his presence alone seemed to be slightly unhinging Castiel though, as he saw his shoulders begin to shake beneath his dirty, dust-stained shirt. He took a rough breath before he looked over to Sam, finally meeting his eyes. “Sam,” he said, quiet and hollow.

“Hey, come on,” Sam said gently, pressing one hand to Castiel’s shoulder and guiding him away from the bed. “Let’s get some fresh air, okay? You don’t need to watch this. I don’t either. Alex will let us know when there’s any news.”

Castiel stumbled as he stepped across the threshold and out into the approaching evening, and Sam could feel the growing tremble in Castiel’s shoulder beneath his palm.

Sam opened his mouth, turning them to the side of the building, but he had no idea where to start. It was awful to think, but he knew the truth of it—he was used to this. He’d be torn apart inside if they lost Dean, but he was a hundred times better equipped for it than Castiel was.

His thoughts were proved right as Castiel’s head lolled forward, his shoulders hunching in, his voice small. “How do you do this, Sam?”

“Me? Do what?” Sam said, unsure, but already reaching out.

“This,” Castiel choked out. “Living like this, feeling this—how do you live every day, knowing you could lose the people you love, and feeling it so much, every minute, every—’

“Hey, hey—” Sam reached out roughly, pulling Castiel into his shoulder as the ex-angel began to sob, his chest heaving uncontrollably. “Fuck, Cas, I don’t know what to tell you. This is… this is just it, dude. This is what it feels like. And I’m so sorry.”

Sam stood still, just being there, letting Castiel get through it. He shook and sobbed, his face red, his jaw clenched, tears and snot and dirt forming a heartbreaking mosaic across his tanned cheeks. His rough stubble made *shushing* noises against the shoulder of Sam’s khaki jacket. Sam squeezed him around the shoulders, roughly, trying not to feel angry that this is what their lives were. That his friend had been brought to this, had to experience this. “Alright,” he said quietly, just patting firmly at Castiel’s shoulder, quietly speaking useless platitudes, “It’s okay. Let it out. Whatever you gotta do.”

Castiel was far from fragile, even as a human; he was tall and muscled, not bulky, but coiled tight like a spring, usually. It felt like he was falling apart in Sam’s arms, though, getting smaller and looser every moment, his voice shaking and losing coherency. “I’m sorry Sam, I don’t know what’s
wrong with me—"

Despite everything, Sam gave out a low chuckle. “I think you’re just being human, Cas.”

“I feel like I can’t breathe, like my lungs don’t fit in my ribcage anymore even though I know that’s a biological impossibility, and my hands are sweating and I feel like my stomach is shriveling up, and my mind just keeps going in circles about all the things I haven’t even said, and…” Castiel trailed off, rubbing a hand roughly across his eyes.

“Yeah,” said Sam sympathetically, pulling back but leaving his hand firmly on Castiel’s shoulder. “That’s fear. And grief. And possibly a mild panic attack.”

“Angels don’t get panic attacks,” Castiel grumbled, sniffing quietly.

“Cas,” Sam said as softly as he could, “everything you went through as an angel, all of those memories, all of that…well, I mean, all of that trauma. Somehow you’ve got all that condensed down into a pretty much human body and mind, now, and honestly dude…I don’t know how you’re even standing. Don’t think this makes you weak because it doesn’t. It just makes you human.”

“But Dean doesn’t end up like this, shaking and—”

“Woah, woah, Cas,” Sam interrupted firmly. “First of all, don’t use Dean as an emotional marker for anything, okay? He’s my brother and I love him but he’s a mess. Secondly, if you’d seen what Dean was like after you died before, when Lucifer got you… you would not be saying that.”

For a minute they faced each other, breathing, calming. Sam gave Castiel’s shoulder a final firm squeeze before letting his arm fall down to his side.

“Thank you, Sam,” Castiel croaked after a minute, his voice rough with tears and exhaustion.

“It’s cool. Next time I fall apart, I’m coming to you, you owe me. It’ll be good, because Dean always makes comments about braiding my hair.”

Castiel squinted, his eyes red and puffy. “I don’t know how to braid hair.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll teach you.”

To their right, Maria came out of the infirmary. The skinny eleven-year-old had been helping out Alex for a while with minor camp and hunting injuries, and she was well-liked among the other muggles for her gentle care and determination to help, despite her age. She’d blossomed surprisingly well in the camp since they’d rescued her from the bank she’d been hiding in, several months back. She wasn’t old enough to be involved in any of this, they all agreed, but a zombie apocalypse didn’t discriminate.

“Sam, Castiel,” she said softly, approaching. “Alex wants you both.”

“Is Dean—” Sam started, fear clamping his heart like he’d sprung a bear trap.

“No, not Dean,” she said, gesturing for them to head for the door. Her eyes were wide, and glossy with unshed tears. “It’s Janine.”
Before the attack, Castiel had been walking, breathing, taking a minute to himself outside in the air after completing the memory spell. He should have been overwhelmed by everything he learned, he knew—he was an archangel. He’d broken the keys to heaven and hell. He’d known how to kill God. But those things just seemed…distant. Information that he could access which was slowly settling into his mind, slowly becoming part of him. It was strange, but not as overwhelming as the rest.

Not as overwhelming as Marilyn Thatcher. Jonathan Casey. Thomas Riley. Maggie La Pue. Cain… Dean. Always Dean. They were always Dean, and every time they came together, Castiel’s world fell apart.

It was never a profound bond, not in that sense, though calling it that would always feel right. It was Castiel’s own hidden memories, trying to remind him who Dean was. What Dean was… what he was to him.

He’d looked at Dean, and in that instant, he’d immediately felt that he couldn’t possibly begin to explain that to Dean. Knowing him, he’d rebel against it. Push Castiel away. Find some way to be angry. And Castiel couldn’t do that, not now. They were so close… he could feel it, in both of them, how close they were to finally accepting what they were.

But they weren’t there yet, and if Dean thought even for a moment that this, that they, were a part of something that was beyond their control…then they never would be.

It had sat heavily in Castiel’s chest, burning and poisoning every breath he tried to take.

It burned now, even as Castiel sat beside Dean's cot. He didn’t know how long he'd been sitting there. There was a lot to do—he should be helping Rowena. He should be rebuilding the physical barrier. He should be aiding Alex, who was overwhelmed with cuts and concussions and twisted ankles. But everyone who came told him to stay. Told him to sit, that someone had to watch Dean. Monitor his vitals, wait for him to wake up. So Castiel did. He was needed there, they said.

He felt selfish. But grateful.

Donna and Jody had rounded everyone up to see to Janine’s burial. Despite Sam and Jody both telling him that he was being ridiculous in the circumstances, Castiel still felt responsible—he thought she’d be okay, guarding Rowena. He was needed elsewhere. He didn’t think… he didn’t think she’d get shot. That she’d seem okay, and then seize horrifically later, dead of a blood clot in her lung that they simply didn’t have the equipment to see coming.

They’d all been so worried about Dean, and Janine had seemed fine. Sam had spoken with her, he said, right before she died; she was breathless, dizzy…but alive.

Everything could change in an instant, Castiel was finally learning. He didn’t have eons, anymore. Perhaps he never had.

Sam had finally left the infirmary to help organize the rebuilding efforts, during the mid-evening when Alex had eventually been able to fully convince him that Dean wasn’t going anywhere right then. She’d packed Dean’s wound, and tightly bound it. “The wound itself will heal pretty well,” she said. “He didn’t even break a bone. As long as he pulls through, he could be walking again in a couple of days.”

Dean had lost so much blood, though. Far too much. That was the problem—he was dying from the simple lack of it.
Alex had used the camp’s meager drug supplies to keep Dean under, saying that it was for the best. The less his body tried to wake up, the longer he’d last.

But, she had explained to Castiel and the gathered crowd softly, they didn’t have a lot of blood bags left, every hospital and blood bank nearby cleared out.

Castiel had almost cried again when Claire had stepped forward, asking Alex what Dean’s blood type was. It turned out that Castiel had no idea what his was, he’d just never thought about it, but they’d both been able to help. Sam, of course, had immediately begun assisting Alex set up a shoddy blood bank in the lean-to at the side of the infirmary. Between Sam, Claire, Castiel and all the muggles who stepped forward to volunteer, they had enough pints of blood to make up for the terrifying amount that Dean had lost.

Drained and emotional, Castiel lightly fingered the band-aid at his arm as he looked up, regarding the bag that hung on a hook beside Dean’s bed. That was Sam’s blood. Slowly drip-dripping its way into Dean’s veins, slowly bringing him back to them.

Night was falling when Dean finally shifted, his eyes blinking heavily as if he’d merely been asleep. “Cas?” he croaked, immediately trying to sit up, slumping back weakly after less than an inch. “Dean!” Castiel exclaimed, reaching forward to grab at Dean’s hands, his whole body sagging with relief. “You’re awake… I’m so glad you’re awake—are you okay? How are you feeling?”

Dean took a minute to answer, slowly looking around as if he was cataloging everything, but he squeezed Castiel’s hand in return, and that was enough until he finally spoke. “Real tired. Woozy. I feel crazy weak… what the hell happened?”

Castiel’s relief came out in a loud, shaking exhale when Dean seemed to be able to speak coherently, even if it was quiet and croaky. “Zombies rammed a military truck into the watchtower,” Castiel explained, unable to help smiling despite it being at odds with his words. “You were in the wrong place at the wrong time, I think. It collapsed, with you in it.”

Dean studied Castiel’s face, still blinking slowly. “I’m sorry,” he croaked softly.

Unsure what Dean was apologizing for, Castiel frowned lightly, tilting his head. “I scared you, didn’t I?” Dean said in explanation, his voice shaky. He reached out, and Castiel wasn’t sure what was happening as Dean’s thumb trailed so-softly across Castiel’s cheekbone, but he couldn’t help leaning into the small touch. When Dean drew his hand back, his thumb was damp. “I’m sorry I upset you, buddy,” Dean finished weakly, attempting a smile.

Castiel gave a small laugh. “It’s okay. Not your fault. I’m just really glad you’re going to be okay.”

His expression drugged and woozy, Dean brought his hand back to Castiel’s face, smiling almost drunkenly as he slid his thumb under the ex-angel’s eye. “Pretty,” he slurred quietly. “Your eyes are so pretty when you cry, all shimmery an’ blue and shiny-shiny…”

Castiel bit down on his lip, stifling his amused reaction. “Thank you, Dean,” he responded solemnly, determinedly pushing away anything thoughts of what else he could get Dean to say under the influence of the hefty dose of animal tranquilizers Alex had resorted to. That wouldn’t be right, he knew, no matter how tempting it was.

They looked at each other for a minute, their long gaze turning into a soft stare, one of Castiel’s hands still resting on Dean’s chest, gently entwined with his fingers. Eventually Dean looked down,
regarding the blood-filled IV tube that was taped into the back of his hand.

“Looks like Alex has been busy,” he said. “Is everyone okay? What happened to the zombies?”

“That’s a story for later. I should get Alex now, though,” Castiel replied. “You might need more
drugs, or something…”

Castiel rose, stumbling away from the bed, moving to find Alex as quickly as he could. From the
corner of his eye as he stood, he saw Dean frowning softly, no doubt wondering why he wanted to
get away so fast.

Castiel didn’t want to get away at all—he didn’t want to be more than an arm’s length away from
Dean ever again. But he didn’t know what to say. There were so many things in his head.

He’d been so overwhelmed by all the memories of them together. So afraid of what Dean would
think of them. But it didn’t matter, he’d realized through all this—that was then, and this was now.
He wasn’t an angel, anymore, he wasn’t on an angel’s timescale. He was on a very human one, and
he needed to focus on the Dean he had now.

Or almost had. He hoped he had Dean. But now just wasn’t the time for those conversations.

He’d keep his lips closed as tight as he could about those memories until he thought that Dean was
ready to hear them. When he was fully healed, and when he knew—when Castiel had finally found
the courage to tell him—that he was loved now. Exactly as he was, outside of Chucks story. Off-
rulebook, just them.

Alex came swiftly. She smiled widely, genuinely happy to see Dean awake, despite how drawn and
tense she looked, her jaw tight and her brow pinched. She checked his IVs, and gave him some more
drugs. “They’ll make you loopy, but at least you won’t feel the hole in your leg anymore,” she said.

Castiel sat to the side as she worked. When she left to go tell Sam that Dean was awake, Castiel
shifted, thinking that there were plenty of others who would like to know that Dean was conscious.

“Hey,” Dean said quietly, reaching out a shaking hand and managing to catch the loose, ratty hem of
Castiel’s shirt. He still hadn’t changed, hadn’t eaten, hadn’t done anything since he’d brought Dean
in.

“Yes, Dean?”

“Don’t go,” Dean croaked. “Please.”

Slowly, Castiel lowered himself to the upturned-crate seat beside the bed once more. They had a
make-shift curtain around the infirmary bed, and within its attempt at privacy, Castiel reached out to
hold Dean’s hand again. “Alright,” he said. “I’ll stay here. I was just going to tell everyone you were
awake, but I’m sure Alex can do that.”

Dean nodded slowly against his flat pillow. “Just…wanna rest for a bit. Then I’ll move out to the
lean-to. Other people need—”

“Dean, absolutely not,” Castiel protested. “You almost died, you’re going to stay in here until Alex
discharges you.”

“So, you’re telling me no one else is injured?” Dean said pointedly.

Castiel sighed, already knowing he wasn’t going to win this one, but trying. “You are important too,
“Dean. You should stay here until all your blood transfusions are done.”

“No, Cas.”

“Yes, Dean.”

“No!” Dean glared. “Look, I’m sleepy and weak but I’m fine. I can drag this blood-bag around with me anywhere. Once everyone else has been treated…sure, I’ll sit on my ass in the infirmary. But Alex looked like she was about to pop a blood vessel, so she’s stressed. And that means—”

“Oh!” Castiel interrupted, sighing. “We can tell her when she comes back. Move you for a while, get more injuries treated.”

Dean’s eyebrows didn’t shoot up, more wandered up lazily under the influence of the tranquilizers, but they made it up. “You’re not fighting me on it?”

“I don’t agree with you. But I’m supporting your decision,” Castiel said quietly, his eyes on the blanket. Dean had stood by him when he’d asked, even though he hadn’t wanted Castiel to do the memory spell. He could do the same for Dean’s idiotic decisions on occasion, he decided.

Dean gave another wonky grin. “Because that’s what we do now, huh?”

“Yes, Dean. That’s what we do now.”

“And you’re gonna stay here?”

“Suppose I have to,” Castiel said, looking back across at Dean, trying to ignore all the scratches scattered over his face from the falling rubble. “I lose track of you for a couple of minutes, you almost die.” He tried to sound flippant, but knew he failed.

“I’m sorry,” Dean said again. “We talked about this. Before the spell. You aren’t gonna go anywhere, and neither am I.”

“Promise?” Castiel asked, squeezing tight between the fingers of Dean’s good hand.

“Yeah, I’m stayin’,” Dean slurred again, his smile uneven. “Until your dying day, bitch.”

Castiel opened his mouth, about to protest being called that even when Dean was clearly loopy… but he stopped, taken by the fond, open way that Dean was gazing up at him. “Alright,” he said. “Me too.”

x

It was getting late when Sam took a break from the barrier. Dean was awake, the walls were going back up, and people were beginning to settle. The infirmary was still full to bursting, and Alex had reluctantly agreed to move Dean into the lean-to where they stored hardware and extra supplies. It wasn’t set up for care, but Sam thought that Alex just knew—as he did—that if she hadn’t agreed to move Dean so that more people could be brought into the infirmary, he’d have just gotten up and walked.

Sam had been keeping busy—they had a lot to do to make Camp Singer safe again, not to mention the horror of taking stock of their losses. Janine had been the worst. Sam had liked her. They all
knew, an unspoken agreement, that they had to move quickly and get her body burned on a pyre like every other they found. And so they did. But it hurt.

Rowena was still working magic, reinforcing the barrier every way she knew how. Jo hovered and helped, and Sam had begged her to take a break. She hadn’t even responded. He wasn’t sure how much of her determination to mend the barrier came from wanting to protect those within it, and how much was her own very well-developed self-preservation instinct, but either way, she had it in hand. He just needed to trust her and let her work.

So, when Sam moved away from the barrier, leaving a shift of muggles repairing boards and restacking cars, Donna operating the same crane they’d used to put them up in piles when they’d first arrived, he headed over to the lean-to at the side of the infirmary to check on Dean.

Castiel and Dean, as always, appeared to be squabbling.

“It’s just medicine, Dean,” Cas said, exasperated. He was perched on an upturned ten-gallon bucket beside the rough cot Dean rested on, surrounded by boxes of supplies, tools, and extra medical hardware. “If Alex says you need it, I’m going to make sure you have it.

Dean pouted against the makeshift pillow, giving Castiel a firm sideways glare. “Well, you need to learn to hold a needle straight, shaky-mcgee. You’re giving me the bad kind of medicine.”

Before Castiel could even return the glare, Dean’s expression melted into a distinctly-medicated giggle. “Ha! Bad medicine. That’s a song.”

Putting the cap back on the needle slowly, Castiel shouted back over his shoulder, directing his voice into the main infirmary room, “Dean’s fine, Alex. I don’t think he needs any more.”

Alex bustled into the lean-to, pushing past Sam. Her hair was pulled back and she had dark circles under her eyes. Like almost everyone in camp did, by that point. Wordless, she retrieved the unused needle from Castiel, giving Dean a quick once over.

“I’m trying to get him to rest,” Castiel said, almost sheepishly.

“I appreciate that, Cas,” Alex said tiredly. “Because he is the worst at looking after himself. I need to go back in there and stitch a cut on Claire’s eyebrow and then I’ll come in to change the packing in Dean’s wound and swap the blood bag. Try and keep your boy under control until then, will you?”

“Yes, Alex,” Castiel responded, even as Dean began tapping out a drum beat on the raised side of his hospital cot with a blood-pressure monitor.

“Gimme that,” Castiel said, wrestling it out of Dean’s hands as Alex pushed past Sam once more, offering him a small smile.

“Your brother is the worst patient in the world,” she half-whispered.

“I know,” Sam said with a wink, before stepping over the threshold. “Hey, Cas. How’re you doing, Dean?”

Dean made a grumbling noise, then started humming Bon Jovi.

Castiel stood, his back cracking all-too-humanly as he rose. “It’ll be a few more hours, at least, until Alex and her helpers have managed to treat everyone who was injured, so she asked me to keep an eye on him in here, to make sure his blood pressure keeps heading back up toward normal, that kind of thing. I believe that the medicine is helping him feel much better,” he noted dryly. “How is the
barrier coming along?"

“Ro’s still working on it,” Sam said, moving over toward Castiel. “Can’t get her to stop.”

“I’m sure she’s fine,” Castiel said insightfully, a small smile perking up one corner of his lips. “She’ll let you know if she needs you, Sam. You can relax.”

“I don’t like feeling like I’m helpless,” Sam said.

Castiel stared at Sam flatly, blinking slowly.

“Alright. I’m a jerk, I get it,” Sam said, laughing. “Though for the record, you’re not helpless either. You saved Dean, right?”

Castiel went quiet for a moment, looking down at the bed, where Dean lay with his eyes closed, humming. “Actually,” he said after a moment, “Crowley did.” His shoulders tightened noticeably.

Sam let out a huffing breath, crossing his arms across his chest. “Honestly, Cas, I’m not touching that one with a ten-foot-stick. You and Crowley have always had issues, even when you betrayed us with him.”

Castiel winced. “That’s something I’d rather not dwell on.”

“Then don’t,” said Sam. “Thank Crowley, and be grateful you’ve got Dean here, now. Honestly, Cas, we’re overrun with zombies and God abandoned Earth. Be grateful for every damn day.”

Castiel’s smile was slow and, to Sam, unexpected. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m getting that.”

Sam gestured to the door with a tilt of his head. “Got a second?”

Nodding, Castiel moved with him across to the uneven collection of wood boards that constituted the door of the lean-to. “Of course, what is it?”

“So get this,” Sam began, moving out into the crisp, dark air. “We think it was a recon mission. The zombies.”

Castiel frowned, stopping just outside the door to lean on the wall, his arms crossed. “Reconnaissance? Of what?”

“Of us,” Sam said, raising his hands in a tired, clueless gesture. “Of the camp. I know it’s crazy, but after you ran off to find Dean, the zombie that was driving the truck gave a signal and they all just piled into the back, like trained dogs. They got what they wanted, saw something, whatever, and left.”

Castiel’s lips pursed, thoughtful and worried, but Sam spoke again before he could say anything. “There’s something else, too.”

The look Castiel gave him in return was almost disbelieving, but he shrugged. “Isn’t there always?”

Sam gave a low, humorless chuckle, and reached up to push his hair from his face. “Yeah. Yeah, there is. Do you remember Cole Trenton, Cas?”

Castiel frowned. “The man who hunted you and Dean down because you killed his father? I never met him. I recall that you said he thanked you in the end, understood.”
“Yeah,” said Sam, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. “Well, there was a zombie in a military uniform driving that truck today. And he looked straight at me, stared like anything. Then blew the whistle, and they were gone.”

“And you think…”

“I’m pretty sure, Cas. I mean, he looked a bit different, sure. Rotting and all. But I really think it was him.”

For a moment they just looked at each other, confused, frowning, until Sam shook his head, and spoke again.

“I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about it all evening. He was smart. He had military connections—that truck, the grenades. He’d already been tracking Dean for years, I’m sure he knew where Bobby’s house was. What if he… I dunno man. What would you do if you woke up as a zombie one day, then realized that the same two guys that you thought ruined your life before, ruined your afterlife too?”

Castiel squinted firmly at Sam. “You can’t ruin a zombie’s life, Sam. They’re dead. Also, I’m not sure ‘waking up’ is an accurate term when—”

“You know what, this is definitely a Dean conversation,” Sam butted in, settling his features. He could tell from the way that Castiel was eyeing him that he was wearing one of what Dean would call his “bitchfaces”. He huffed and relaxed his face patiently. “I just mean, language aside, that Cole might remember us. If he found out it was us that caused all this…” Sam paused, letting out a long sigh. “I just wish I knew who he was doing recon for. If he was gathering information, he’s giving it to somebody. Cole is a stain, but I’m more concerned about the bigger implications.”

Castiel nodded slowly. “As if the zombies aren’t problematic enough already.”

Sam sighed, and leaned back on the wall next to Castiel. They looked out over the darkening camp, lumpy building shapes and stacked cars silhouetted against inky sky. Down near the barrier, there was a glow of violet. “We can’t do anything about those zombies until we know more about how they work,” Sam said. “We need to think about some kind of recon mission of our own. Observation, or capture.”

Castiel nodded beside him. “Yes. We’re lacking on the research front, here.”

“I miss the bunker,” Sam admitted. “It was useful, sure, but…it was home, too.”

Surprisingly, Castiel agreed. “I do too. I never thought I’d have a home on Earth, but my years there with you and Dean…despite everything, they were some of my best memories.”

Sam didn’t say anything, only nodding and pushing up from the wall. He wanted—and knew they needed—the bunker back. They needed information on the zombies. They needed to work out where the keys to heaven and hell were scattered. They had so many questions and things they needed, but no answers and no progress. In the lean-to, he could hear Dean singing.

“All right,” Sam said after another minute. “I came to check on Dean, but uh—” he jerked his head back toward the makeshift infirmary extension, where Dean warbled off-key, “—it sounds like he’s fine.”

“He will be,” Cas agreed with a small smile. “I’m going to stay with him, regardless. He asked me to.”
Sam knew exactly how much a little request like that from Dean would have meant to Castiel, so he gave the ex-angel a small, knowing smile. “Good. I’m glad. Well, I’ll be back to see how he’s doing later. I’m going to see if I can persuade Ro to eat something.” He began to step away, inclining his head to Castiel.

“YOUR LOVE! IS LIKE BAAAAAD MEDICINE!”

Castiel sighed, biting down a smirk as he raised a hand to wave to Sam. “Alright, Dean, I’m coming,” he called as he moved back inside.

x

Castiel closed the door—such as it was—of the makeshift hospital room, sealing them inside with only the low light of the emergency lamp. It was yellowish and flickering, and between that and the heavy canvas walls and dirt floor, the room might have felt like they were cozily camping together—if it hadn’t been for the eternally looming fact that Dean had almost died, and the smell of bleach, at least.

Looking down, Castiel realized that the floor had been scuffed up further by Sam and Alex coming and going. He frowned. That was hardly sanitary. “I wish you’d let them move you back into the infirmary, Dean,” Cas said quietly.

“I know,” Dean said, his voice low. He was beginning to sound pained again, despite his Bon Jovi and bravado, and Castiel didn’t like it. “There’s other people though, Cas. People who need more care than me. More important people.”

There’s no one more important than you. Cas didn’t say anything, but his face must have betrayed him, as Dean softened visibly.

“You disagree. And I’m not gonna fight you on that, because, well…” Dean gave an awkward, one-shouldered shrug. “Same. You know that. But I can’t put myself first like that, Cas.”

And that’s part of why I love you, Cas didn’t say. Instead he nodded, making his way over to the side of the cot. Dean shifted uncomfortably as he approached.

“I hate seeing you in pain,” Cas blurted out suddenly, unable to help himself, his hands wringing together. “I can’t—I can’t fix it anymore, and it’s killing me.”

“Hey…” Dean said softly, reaching out his free hand, the one not attached to the makeshift-IV. “Come ‘ere.”

Castiel crouched down beside the rough bed. He regarded the edge of it. “Hopefully, in an hour or two, Alex and the muggles will have been able to fix up some more of the injured people, and there will be space for you in a real bed again,” he said quietly. But he did take Dean’s hand, feeling his squeeze through his fingers.

“Exactly,” Dean said through a wince. “It’s only a couple hours. I’ll be fine.”
Unable to help himself from frowning again, Castiel trailed his eyes up and down Dean’s body. It was a body he generally found to be beautiful, strong, and immensely pleasurable to behold. Right then it only looked fragile, battered and bandaged. “What hurts the most?” Castiel asked quietly.

Dismissive as always, Dean shrugged. “This is the most annoying thing, actually,” he admitted, lifting his hand slightly to indicate the IV needle plunging into his bruised hand. “It keeps pulling and tugging—I tried putting the blood bag up on a box, but it doesn’t work as well. They have those little hook things in the infirmary to hang the bag from, but they’re all in use. It feels better if I hold it up, but my arm gets tired after a while and I can’t sleep like that.”

Well, that was something, finally, that Castiel could do. He reached out, taking the bag of blood that was slowly replenishing all that Dean had lost, and lifting it up off the floor so that it didn’t pull at Dean’s hand anymore. Dean relaxed a little. Castiel understood now, as a human, how oddly stressful such minor irritations could be—if Dean would let him do this, at least, he wouldn’t be entirely useless.

“I could…” Castiel indicated the bag he was holding, before letting his eyes drift down to the bed. Without a word, Dean shifted over to the other side of the cot, leaving just enough space for Castiel to lay down.

There wasn’t much room, barely enough for Castiel to slot his body in beside Dean’s worryingly hot one. He didn’t care about the heat, or the bandages, or the slightly itchy blanket. Being allowed to do something so simple and yet so intimate made his heart thud so loudly that he thought Dean must have been able to hear it.

“I can just hold it up until you sleep,” Castiel offered in a whisper, cautiously laying his head on the end of Dean’s pillow.

“Your arm’s gonna get stiff,” Dean protested, though it was weak and tired.

“I don’t care.”

They looked at each other across the pillow for a moment, far closer than Dean would ever have allowed only months ago. And then Dean reached out, pulling Castiel closer, rolling him so that he could curl up into his side, his head on Castiel’s chest, his hair tickling at Castiel’s face, his shallow exhalations soft at Castiel’s neck.

For just a moment, there was a hesitation in the rhythm of Dean’s breaths. “Will you…”

Reaching out, Castiel wrapped himself around Dean, pulling him further in, snuggling him up as if he belonged there. Because he did. He arranged himself so that he could hold the precious, life-giving IV up in the air, knowing that soon his arm would protest and his muscles would get stiff, but not caring at all as long as he could give Dean some small comfort. Castiel buried his nose down into the top of Dean’s hair and allowed himself to breathe.

“Go to sleep, Dean. I’ll wake you up when we can move you.”

“Talk to me, until I sleep,” Dean murmured against his collarbone.

“Oh what?”

“Anything. Tell me a story, make fun of me in a language I don’t get. Whatever. Just your voice, man. It’s…” Soothing, the unsaid word hung in the air. “I know you’re here, then, even with my eyes closed.”
Castiel couldn’t help but smile at the slightly childish request. But none of the stories in his mind, the stories he wanted to tell, were what Dean needed to hear right then. Though perhaps… maybe he could…

Smiling slightly to himself, Castiel slid his empty hand slowly up and down Dean’s back, stroking idly as he began to whisper.

“Da a acroodzi, c capimao, da as ah congamplgh ar olpirt, ar turbs, ar nomig Ascha trian ge dorpha nalvage…”

Chapter End Notes

Translation (because I know you're all dying for it...) -- “Once upon a time, there was a soul so bright, so beautiful, that even God knew it would be special…”

And that is all she wrote this week, folks!

Did ya like it? Do you desperately want to make Dean and Cas kiss? Because dang, I do. Come on guys, sort it out!

Let me know what you thought, guys! Comments are wonderful, and if you're enjoying the fic, please consider sharing it with a friend! (Or enemy. You do you.)

We'll be back next week, with a chapter from the lovely Gii (heylittleangel).

- Mal <3
Running and walking had always been a great way for Sam to free himself of his thoughts, focusing only on the feeling of the ground beneath his feet and on his breathing. It was no wonder that he used to go out in the morning to run for at least an hour, coming back with an awesomely blank mind, and legs burning from the exercise. After the End started, he hadn’t had enough time to run just for the sake of it, too worried about Camp Singer, Castiel, Dean, Rowena, and the muggles. Now, the only time that he ran was when he was running away from the zombies, which wasn’t exactly what he would call a nice exercise.

So, when he was able to walk around the camp’s perimeter, making sure that the fortifications Dean and Castiel had built were still secure, and that Rowena’s spells were still in place, keeping the zombies away from them, he enjoyed the light exercise as much as he could. He forced himself to walk slowly, not wanting to finish the walk too soon, and focusing on that was always a good way to keep dark thoughts at bay. He would walk steadily, stopping to look at the other side of the camp, trying to spot any zombies within its range.

There weren’t too many of them around most days. Except for a week ago when a bunch of them had attacked, throwing grenades at camp and trying to destroy the wards with a military truck—Sam still couldn’t believe what he had seen, if it wasn’t for all the destruction and losses they’d had.

But, most of the time, there were only a couple of zombies watching from the trees a few feet from where Rowena’s magic started. They would just stare at Sam, unblinking dead eyes on him, always sending a shiver down his spine. He was sure that there was a reason for them to keep looking at the camp like that. Probably still gathering information about the camp and its residents.
Sam stared at a zombie girl by the trees, partially hidden by the shadows there, making her face look phantasmagoric in the low light coming from the camp. She seemed to smirk at him when he frowned at her unusual behavior, his skin crawling at the rotten lips and teeth, dry blood on her chin.

Not wanting to keep staring anymore—too creeped out—he turned to restart his walk around the perimeter when he heard someone calling out his name, making him stop.

Rowena walked towards him, her brows furrowed as she stared at him with concerned eyes. Her unusual expression stopped Sam from giving her a bright smile, his feet making their way towards her absent-mindedly. They met halfway, Rowena’s lips tightened into a thin line as she crossed her arms over her chest.

Sam arched a brow at her, his hand finding her arm as if it belonged there. “Is everything okay, Ro? You seem worried.”

She scoffed at him, squinting her eyes. “You don’t say, Samuel. We need to talk, it’s important.”

“She is nothing like that? Is it?”

She just shook her head softly, turning on her heels and walking away from him, not giving a glance back to see if he was following. Sam sighed and rubbed a hand over his forehead before trailing behind her, his stride big enough to catch up with her in seconds. He stared at her while she kept her gaze locked on her path. “Ro, this isn’t one of those times that you say ‘we need to talk’ and make it sound like something extremely important, worrying me, just so we can sneak off and do it, right?”

She huffed a breath through her mouth, staring at him with incredulously. “Samuel, I have never done anything like that. How could you think that about me?”

Sam arched a brow at her, blinking slowly until she sighed and started walking again. “Alright, alright... But it’s nothing like that this time, it really is important. I think you’re going to need to call Castiel and Dean as well.”

“So, what is so important that you ha—” Sam stopped talking when he turned to face Rowena but found a very familiar figure standing in the middle of the garage instead.

“Hey, Sam. We need to talk.” Billie smirked at him, her arms crossed on her chest.

“Oh, c’mon, seriously?”

She raised an eyebrow at him, the smirk disappearing from her lips. “I thought your brother was the one who didn’t like to see me.”
“Yeah, well, I’m not thrilled that you’re here either. What is it this time? Another manifesto?”

“No, but it has to do with that. I heard you were able to get your angel his memories back.” She turned her gaze to Rowena, the right side of her lips turned up. “Good job, Rowena. Very good spellwork.”

Rowena smiled at her, waving her off. “Thank you, dear. It is a very simple spell when you hav—”

“—Okay, guys, can we talk about this later? Now is really not the time,” Sam intervened. “What do you have for us, Billie?”

“I think you should get your brother and the angel—they’ll probably want to hear about it.”

Sam sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Fine, I’ll go get ‘em. Oh, man. Dean’s gonna be pissed.”

Rowena rubbed a hand on his forearm and smiled at him. “He’ll be angry no matter what, Samuel. Best to just get it over with.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. I’ll be right back.”

He gave Rowena one last smile before walking out of the garage, making his way towards the cabin. He kicked some pebbles on his way, hands stuffed in the front pockets of his jeans. He was not looking forward to having another talk with Billie. Sure, she gave them the manifesto, which prompted them to get Castiel’s memories back and all, but she normally only appeared when something bad was about to happen, or to give them another hard task, or to threaten them with staying dead forever. Okay, maybe he still held a grudge against her for when she was a reaper, but it wasn’t like she wouldn’t want to keep them dead if she could, so it wasn’t such a strange thought to have.

Sam dreaded every step he took closer to the cabin, trying his best to take as much time as he possibly could. He knew nothing good could come from telling Dean that Billie was there, and his brother would probably complain about it the whole time again.

The cabin was dark when he opened the door, making him raise a brow. Maybe they’re ‘practicing’ shooting again. Pff, as if all that touching is required for teaching someone how to shoot.

He was almost turning to go check the shooting ranges when he saw the light on in the back corner. He made his way towards them, seeing Dean and Castiel on the small bed, their sides touching. Castiel looked at the floor with his head down and Dean seemed to be thinking, brows furrowed with worry. Sam cleared his throat, dragging their attention to him. “Billie’s here.”

Dean sighed, his shoulders slumping. “Really? Doesn’t she have anything else to do? Like, I don’t know, her job?”

Castiel turned to face Dean, his head tilted. “You do know that no one is staying dead right now, right, Dean?”

Dean squinted at him, opening his mouth, probably to give Castiel a sarcastic answer, but Sam cut him off. “Can you please just come? The faster we go, the faster we can know what’s up and get it over with.”

“Yeah, yeah, fine.” Dean stood up, offering his hand to Castiel, who took it, lowering their hands between them. Sam could see that they kept their fingers intertwined but decided against saying anything.
Dean and Castiel kept their gazes locked, neither making a move to start walking. Sam cleared his throat angrily, squinting his eyes at them. “Are we going, or are you two gonna keep staring at each other forever?”

Castiel had the decency to blush while Dean just scoffed at Sam, muttering something under his breath. Sam didn’t wait to hear anything before turning and walking away, letting the two catch up with him as he made his way out of the cabin.

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Castiel dragged Dean from the room they were in—ignoring Dean’s complaints about Billie and how she always brought them horrible news or dropped more responsibilities on them—though he was careful, so as not to make Dean’s leg any worse. He managed to get them beside Sam with only a quick run, Sam barely glancing at them.

Castiel looked at Dean with a raised brow, sighing before saying, “Dean, Billie helped us with the manifesto, maybe she’ll be able to help more now.”

Dean scoffed, adjusting his grip on Castiel’s hand. “Yeah, and since when do people actually come to us with good news?”

“Maybe, if you were a little more optimistic, we wouldn’t attract so many bad things, Dean,” Sam said.

Dean squinted at his brother while Castiel agreed, “Sam is right, Dean. You are a pessimist most of the time.”

“You’re taking his side?”

“I am not taking sides, Dean. I am simply stating facts.”

Dean scoffed. “Yeah, right.”

Sam sighed, making the turn towards the garage. “You two fight like an old couple, for God’s sake.”

Dean turned to his brother with squinted eyes. “Shut up, Sam.”

They finished their walk in silence, Castiel thanking anyone-but-Chuck that the two stopped bickering like little children. He really believed that Sam and Dean arguing managed to be worse than when he and Dean did it, but he didn’t want to start another discussion—especially with whatever Billie was going to say to them this time. They had only just seen her and she was already back? That couldn’t be good. Maybe Dean’s pessimism is getting to me. Billie could actually have some good news. As she didn’t bring anything too horrible to us last time, I should keep a positive mind. Maybe whatever she has to say will help us get closer to saving Jack.

Sam opened the door for them, holding it until Dean and Castiel crossed the threshold. Castiel saw Billie and Rowena in the middle of the room talking, Rowena with her back to them, but turning when she heard the door open and close. “Finally. What took you so long? Had to put some clothes on?” She smirked at them, arms crossed.

Castiel saw Dean roll his eyes as Dean answered, “C’mon, Rowena, don’t start. Can we just get on with this whole thing? What do you have, Billie?”

Billie arched an eyebrow at Dean but seemed to decide against bickering back. “I have some news, some whispers I heard amongst the reapers.”
Castiel walked closer to Billie, stopping by Rowena’s side, tilting his head at her. “What news?”

“Well, apparently, when God decided to pull all those souls from Hell, He closed it after, making it impossible for the zombies to stay dead for too long.”

Sam pinched the bridge of his nose, voice flat. “Yeah, so? We already knew that.”

“He also closed Heaven, which is why He sent that message and why you, angels” she turned to Cas with bored eyes, ”don’t have any grace left.”

Castiel’s eyes widened as he stared at her. “How do you know about that?”

She frowned, staring confusedly at Castiel. “I’m Death? It’s kinda my job to know everything that happens.”

Castiel made an "oh" sound, nodding, as Dean huffed a breath through his nose. “That’s not new either, Billie. What else?”

“I’m not sure what your manifesto said, but there’s a way for you to open the gates again, without needing God.”

“I remembered that,” Castiel said, “stealing and breaking the keys before God could wipe my memories again. I just don’t know what they are or how to retrieve them, or who helped me.” Billie nodded at him. “So how can we find them again?”

“You’re the one who hid them, Castiel. You’re the one who will have to remember. I only discovered their existence recently and there aren’t many people who will know how to find them or find out what they are. There’s nothing I can do to help.”

Dean frowned, pressing two fingers on his forehead. “Wait, wait. We can probably find out where those keys are, but how the hell would we know what they are? I mean, it’s not like they’ll have a neon sign indicating they’re a key to Heaven or Hell.”

“Of course they won’t, but it won’t be that hard to find out what they are. I did some digging and I found some reapers that were alive when the keys were broken. The pieces have some big history behind them, and some will have been attracted to you over the years.”

Dean threw his hands in the air, exasperated. “Great, just freaking awesome. How will we find out what they are?” Dean turned to Castiel. “Do you have any idea where or what they could be?”

Castiel shook his head slowly, worrying his lower lip between his teeth. “I only remember breaking and scattering them across the Earth. I know someone helped me while doing it, helping me hide them, but I don’t remember who. I’m sorry.” Castiel lowered his head, not wanting to look around their disappointed faces. He felt a hand on his shoulder, looking through the corner of his eyes to see Dean beside him, a comforting smile on his lips.

Billie shrugged. “I can’t help you find out what or where they are. It was above my paygrade back then, and I can’t read the manifesto. Maybe Dean can find something in there, perhaps a clue of where to start looking for them.”

Dean groaned, throwing his head back. “Great, ’cause I just love reading. Was this how Kevin felt when I wanted him to read the tablets fast?”

“Probably, Dean.”
Dean stared at Castiel. “Thanks. Anyways, guess we’ll have to do some more digging now. Anything else that may help us, Billie?”

“Yes,” she said. “There are six keys, three pieces for each gate, that together will make one. They’ll have something to do with the gate they’re related to. And, you’ll need to forge them back into whole keys—they won’t just magically glue themselves together.”

Dean sighed, his hand running down Castiel’s spine until it rested on his lower back. “Of course they won’t, because why would they?”

Castiel ignored him—and the tingling sensation that came with Dean’s hand—and kept his gaze focused on Billie. “Is there any way for you to help us find them?”

“No, that’s up to you. You’re the only one alive that knows exactly where they are.”

Sam squinted at her, eyes filled with suspicion. “And what do you get from all of this? I’m sure you’re not telling us all of this out of the goodness of your heart.”

Billie shrugged, trying to keep an innocent expression. “It couldn’t be out of the goodness of my heart because, technically, I don’t have one, but I do get something out of it. I’m sure you all know I like things to follow a certain script—”

“That’s an understatement,” Dean muttered under his breath, rolling his eyes.

“And with what God did, there’s no script anymore. There are thousands of souls wandering around Earth, when they should be in Heaven or Hell, and countless monsters roaming the Earth when they should be in Purgatory. I can’t undo all of that alone, so I’m counting on you four to do it, and restore the planet’s balance.”

“And your help only includes talking about the keys, not where or what they are? That’s not very helpful,” Sam chimed in.

Billie turned to Sam, eyes cold as she stared at him with anger. “You should already be thankful that you have someone as powerful as me on your side. I could do the same thing as God did—leave this planet and universe, and use my time in a better one—but, instead, I’m here, helping you four take your heads out of the sand because, apparently, you can’t do it by yourselves.”

Sam lowered his eyes, Billie’s stare weighing on him. The silence stretched between them, tension stopping any of them from opening their mouths. Castiel looked at Dean, their eyes meeting, a silent conversation passing through them, both trying to force the other to speak and break the silence first.

Castiel won, making Dean sigh and turn to Billie, clearing his throat before he spoke, “Your old boss once said to me that he would reap God himself. Was he lying?”

Billie finally freed Sam from her stare, turning her gaze to Dean. “No, he wasn’t. I have the power to do it.”

Rowena squinted at her, arms crossed on her chest. “Then why don’t you just do it?”

Castiel shook his head, scratching his stubble. “Because she can’t, just as she can’t just reap one of us; it’s not her job to kill, only to take the person’s soul or whatever is close to it.”

Billie hummed in agreement. “The angel’s right. Just because I’m Death doesn’t mean I’m the one who kills. I’m not even the one who reaps anymore.”
Dean narrowed his eyes. “Then what do you do?”

“I guarantee that the balance is right, and that there aren’t souls here that shouldn’t be, and that all of the souls are taken where they’re supposed to go.”

Sam twisted his lips, voice weak as he spoke, “Is there anything else you can do to help us? I mean, if Cas had help, we could try to find out who was there when Cas broke the keys, and see if we can find them.”

Billie sighed, shoulders slumped. “If you four manage to find out who was there, I can try to help. Can’t do anything more right now.”

Dean started to open his mouth but she disappeared before he could say anything more to her. “Oh, c’mon!”

Sam sighed as his shoulders slumped slightly. “Well, at least she’s helping us. I would count that as a win.”

Dean glared at Sam. “Thank you, Captain Optimistic.”

Sam made a bitchface, turning to stare at Dean with squinted eyes. “Better than Captain Pessimist.”

Castiel took a deep breath, throwing his head back. “Can you two please stop acting like children? We have more important things to worry about right now: we need to start thinking about the keys, where they are and how to retrieve them. You two arguing won’t help anyone.”

“They said at the same time, lowering their gazes to the floor.

Castiel put his hands on his head, rubbing circles on the sides of it, where a headache starting to form. “We should give the manifesto another look, see if there’s anything else about the keys in it. Or see if it could help me recall something more, help me remember who helped me.”

“We should probably get everything copied onto paper so that we don’t have to go back to the manifesto every time we need something, and it’ll be easier for us to keep track of everything we have so far.” Sam nodded towards Rowena. “And maybe Ro can help with your memory again.”

Rowena nodded. “I can do the spell once again if you need. Maybe the memories will be clearer the second time.”

Dean ran his hand through his hair. “No. We are not doing that friggin’ spell again, one time was more than enough. We can work on the manifesto and get everything we need from it.”

Castiel sighed. “Dean, the spell could help more, and we already know it’s not going to kill me. We need to know who helped and whatever else we can about the keys. Now is not the time for arguing.”

“No, Cas, I won’t let you go through it again... You could have died and I’m not taking that chance again, not when we can do something else that won’t put your life at risk!”

“This is my choice to make, Dean, not yours. If we need to do it, we have to do it, no matter the consequences. I thought you were going to let me do what I have to do.”

Sam and Rowena walked slowly towards the door to the garage, doing their best not to interrupt Castiel and Dean. Castiel saw them leaving but decided against saying anything, keeping his gaze on Dean’s face. He still looked like he wanted to argue, his jaw tightened as he stared in anger at Castiel.
—no, not anger... it was fear. Dean was afraid and Castiel knew it wasn’t his fault. The silence stretched between them, a new kind of tension weighing on them.

Castiel sighed, shoulders slumping as he walked closer to Dean. “You have to let me do this, Dean. I didn’t die before, and you have to trust me not to die now. I don’t want to go through it again, it’s not a good feeling, and I would very much rather not have to go through it ever again. But if this is our only chance of finding out about the keys, we have to do it.”

Dean looked down, shaking his head slowly. “I can’t, Cas, not after seeing you like that. I’ve lost you too many damn times already, I can’t do it again.”

Castiel closed the few steps that separated him from Dean, putting his arms around Dean’s back and hugging him tightly. “You’re not gonna lose me, Dean, I promise. I survived it once, I can do it again.”

There wasn’t an answer from Dean for a few minutes. The only thing he did was put his arms around Castiel, burying his face in his shoulder. Castiel ran his hand up and down Dean’s back, resting his head on top of Dean’s, the citrus smell from the camp’s current supply of soap being the only thing Castiel focused on. He almost startled when Dean spoke again.

“Just let me read the manifesto first. If we can’t find anything about the keys, what they are, or who helped you, then we do the spell again. Just, please, please give me a chance of trying to find another way.”

Castiel nodded against Dean’s head, sighing. “Okay, Dean. Let’s read the manifesto first.” He felt how the tension in Dean’s shoulders melted when he spoke, Dean’s breathing coming out easier.

They let go of each other. Dean kept his gaze on the ground, and started to walk out of the room. They walked with their hands touching slightly, making their way towards the main building.

While Castiel retrieved some papers and pens, Dean took the manifesto from one of the drawers. They sat at the table, Castiel with the notes they already had—most of them being the ones that Sam had been keeping since they got the manifesto—and Dean with the book in front of him. They worked mostly in silence. Sometimes Dean asked Castiel to help him with a translated word he didn’t know, and that was the only time the quiet between them broke.

Castiel had gone through the notes Sam had made many times, and knew most of them by heart. His head started to pound as he looked at the words. He rubbed his hand across his eyes, deciding to take a short break. He turned to look at Dean and saw him with his eyes glossy and unblinking, glued to the page he was reading.

Castiel frowned. “Dean?”

There wasn’t a response. Dean didn’t even startle or make a movement to let Castiel know that he heard him. He tried a few more times, saying Dean’s name until he snapped his fingers repeatedly in front of Dean. Finally, Dean jumped, turning to look at Castiel.

“Dean, are you okay?”

Dean blinked fast, repeatedly, before focusing his gaze on Castiel’s eyes. “What?”

Castiel raised an eyebrow, putting a hand on Dean’s arm. “Are you okay? I’ve been calling your name but you weren’t responding.”

Dean shook his head and rubbed his hand over his face. “I’m good, just got distracted, sorry.” He
looked around the room, frowning as he did. “Where are Sam and Rowena?”

“I think they went to gather the ingredients for the spell, just in case we needed them, so they’ll take a while longer to get here.”

Dean scoffed. “Huh, ‘gather some ingredients’. Is that what the kids are calling it these days?” He sighed and put his head on his hands. “Have you got anything?”

Castiel sighed. “Not yet. I was trying to see if you found anything but I assume you haven’t.” He looked at the blank white paper in front of Dean with a raised brow.

“Hey, don’t judge me. This thing is very hard to read, okay?”

“Are you going to concentrate on it enough for us to find anything on the keys?”

Dean stared at Castiel, annoyed. “You’re being really sassy today, you know that, right?”

“At least I’m doing something, not just staring at what I should be doing while thinking about other things.”

Dean took a deep breath, shaking his head. “Seriously, man, I already said it’s hard to concentrate on this for a long time, okay? Jeez, are you on your period or something?”

Castiel sighed and let his body slump on the chair. “I’m sorry, Dean. I’m just tired and letting my frustration fall onto you. I know you’re doing the best you can.”

Dean put a hand on Castiel’s shoulder, squeezing it lightly. “It’s okay, buddy, I get it. Let’s work on this and figure where all those keys are, okay?”

Castiel smiled sadly. “Okay. Thank you, Dean.”

Dean smiled back at him, squeezing Castiel’s arm one last time, and then turned back to the manifesto, grabbing his pen. Castiel sighed and turned to the notes on the table in front of him. They went back to sharing their thoughts, writing on another sheet of paper what they knew of Cas’ memories, and what Dean understood from the writings.

Sam and Rowena joined them not so long after with the ingredients that they had gathered, sitting on the other side of the table as Dean finished his notes.

“Alright, I have something,” Dean tapped his finger on the manifesto. Cas turned his gaze to Dean. “What is it?”

Dean looked over the notes they had, squinting his eyes as he read. “So, we need to know what the key pieces are, where we can find them, and who helped you. I haven’t found much on the keys but...” Dean raised his eyes to stare at Castiel, eyes filled with apprehension.

Castiel frowned at Dean’s hesitation. “What is it, Dean?”

Dean opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, every time seeming to give up on what he was about to say.

Sam sighed, tapping his fingers on the table. “C’mon, Dean, just say it.”

Dean raised his hands to rub his eyes, taking a deep breath before he spoke, “Uh, apparently, uh Gabriel and...” Dean lowered his eyes to the table. “Gabriel and Balthazar helped you break and
scatter them.”

Castiel’s breath hitched as the information sank in. Sam let a slow breath come out through his mouth as he looked at Cas.

Rowena frowned at the three of them, placing her hands on her hips. “What is the matter? Balthazar is an angel, right?” None of them answered or looked at her, Castiel keeping his gaze on the table as Dean pretended to be reading something and Sam kept his gaze focused on a random spot on the wall. Rowena sighed. “What’s the matter, boys? No one is getting any younger here.”

Sam moved his gaze to look at her. “Well, uh, Balthazar’s dead. Cas actually, uh... Cas kinda stabbed him in the back. Like—” Sam raised his right hand as if he was holding a weapon and did an awkward stabbing movement.

“Dude, seriously?” Dean raised his eyes to Sam, lips thin as he stared at his brother in disapproval.

Castiel closed his eyes, a pain emerging in the back of his head. “No, he’s right, Dean. I did stab Balthazar in the back.” Dean placed a reassuring hand on Castiel’s arm. “But I think I remember that. Us breaking the keys, I mean. We broke them and decided each of us would hide three, and we didn’t tell each other where we hid them.”

Sam grabbed the notes from Dean, pulling them to him. “Of course you didn’t. That’ll make our job harder then. There’s nothing about the keys there, Dean?”

“Nope, not that I’ve found yet anyway. But if Cas remembered about them breaking the keys, maybe if I keep reading and finding out more, we can help Cas remember more.” Dean turned with half-smile to look at Cas. “We don’t need to do the spell again, we can simply use the manifesto and see if it can trigger any more memories.”

Castiel nodded, pressing his temples. “That will probably be better than going through the spell again.”

“Alright then, we have a lot of stuff to read.”

Castiel, Sam and Rowena stayed in silence while Dean read and wrote the translation on another piece of paper, handing it to them whenever he was finished with a new page. While Dean translated, Castiel worked with Sam and Rowena to make sense out of the words, writing it on another paper, highlighting everything they thought was important and that could help them find out more about the keys. They spent a couple of hours reading, translating, and highlighting excerpts, until Dean sighed and placed his pen on top of the manifesto, burying his head in his hands.

"I can't even look at this thing anymore. Please tell me that we have enough to go on."

Castiel read through the notes they had, guiding himself through the highlighted parts. "I think we do, Dean. I don't think I can find out where Balthazar hid his keys but I think I can remember what all the keys are—it’s so close, somehow—and hopefully which ones I hid and where."

Sam let out a heavy breath, back resting against the chair. "That's good news, at least. We'll be one step closer to opening Heaven and Hell."

Dean nodded, closing the manifesto and turning to look at Cas. "How are you gonna remember things?"

Castiel shrugged. "Reread our notes, see if anything comes at me. I wasn't paying too much attention to what has been said, only trying to make it easier to read."
"Okay, give it a try, then. It's worth a shot."

Castiel took a deep breath, getting all of their papers together, putting them in order. He tuned out Sam, Dean and Rowena in front of him, keeping his focus solely on the sheets. He started to read, ignoring the small throb on the back of his head.

Castiel lost track of the time as he read, more memories coming back to him, thankfully less painfully and with less intensity than when he was under the spell.

He remembered stealing the keys from Chuck and Amara, going to Balthazar and Gabriel to break each of them in three pieces. He saw Gabriel enchanting the keys, putting an illusion trick on them, so others would struggle to know what they were. Castiel kept three, while Balthazar kept the other three, both of them agreeing to hide them in separate places and not tell anyone—not even each other,—where they would be.

When he finally opened his eyes—when did he close them?—the first thing he saw was a set of green eyes filled with concern staring down at him. He blinked a few times, Dean's voice starting to come to him.

"Cas, hey, are you okay? Talk to me, man."

Dean shook Castiel a few times, until Castiel nodded weakly and started to sit up. "I-I think so. What happened?"

Dean kept his hands on Castiel's shoulder, his eyes roaming his body as he tried to find if there was something wrong. "You passed out. One second you were reading the paper and in the next you were falling down off the chair. What the hell happened?"

Castiel smiled softly, running his gaze between the three of them. "I remembered. I remembered what the keys are, which ones I hid, and where." Castiel closed his eyes, rubbing his forehead. "The Hell keys are the First Blade, the Colt and Alastair’s Razor. The amulet Sam gave to you when you two were kids, the Horn of Gabriel and the Staff of Moses are Heaven keys. The First Blade and the Colt are hidden in the bunker and the amulet was given to Dean. The other keys were hidden by Balthazar."

Sam exhaled a breath. "Well, those will probably be hard for us to find, but at least we know what they are. And Billie was right, almost all of the pieces were in our lives once, and most of them kept coming back to us, no matter what."

Dean nodded his agreement. "Let’s just hope that will be enough for us to find them." Castiel shivered and lost his hold on Dean’s hand. Dean knelt just in time to stop Castiel from falling on the floor. "Cas? Hey, are you okay? Say something."

Castiel slowly opened his eyes, focusing them on Dean. "Yes, I am. But that was unpleasant. Very unpleasant."

"You can get some rest now, don't worry. We have a lot to work with now. We're closer to solving everything, Cas."

Castiel gave Dean a small smile, nodding weakly.

Sam turned to Rowena. "Do you think you can track the keys? At least the ones Balthazar hid?"

Rowena scoffed, shaking her head. "I doubt it will work. These items are extremely powerful and a simple tracking spell won't work."
Sam squinted his eyes at her. “But you’re not a simple witch. You could cast a powerful one?”

Rowena gave him a half-smile. “I am not, but it’s not that easy, Samuel. I don’t know if I have enough power to track them. Maybe I can find an area where they might be, basing the spell on the power they emanate, like I once did with the Book of the Damned. But I assume Castiel and the other two angels took measures for the keys not to be easily tracked, or it would be very easy for God to find them. They probably took precautions to avoid powerful witches from finding the keys.”

Dean tilted his head, nodding. “She has a point. They went through all that trouble just to let the keys be found so easily by a tracking spell? I don’t think so.”

“From what I remembered and what we know from the manifesto, they are probably right, Sam. Gabriel wouldn’t allow them to be tracked easily, nor would Balthazar. And I don’t think I would either. Gabriel put an illusion trick on them, specifically for that reason.”

Sam sighed, closing his eyes. “Things need to be hard for us, huh?”

Dean thinned his lips. “And you wonder why I’m a pessimist.”

Sam rolled his eyes at Dean. “You’re more pessimistic than you should be. Anyway, we know where half of the keys are now. That’s already better than before.” Sam sighed, putting his papers on the table. “We just need to find out where the amulet is and we’ll have all of the pieces that Cas hid.”

Dean sighed, scratching his neck.

Sam stared at him with his eyes squinted. “What is it?”

Castiel frowned at Dean as he took one of his hands from Castiel’s shoulder and slid it into his pocket, taking the Samulet out of it. The four of them stared at Dean with their mouths open. “Why didn’t you say before that you had the amulet?”

Dean shrugged. “I didn’t think it was necessary.”

Sam sighed. “When did you get that, by the way?”

“When we were having all the Amara’s problems and Chuck showed himself for the first time, we found the Samulet in your pocket and I kept it after.” Everyone stared at Dean. “What? I already made the mistake of throwing it out once, I wasn’t going to do it again. Guess I made the right call, huh?”

Dean shrugged. “I didn’t think it was necessary.”

Sam sighed. “When did you get that, by the way?”

“When we were having all the Amara’s problems and Chuck showed himself for the first time, we found the Samulet in your pocket and I kept it after.” Everyone stared at Dean. “What? I already made the mistake of throwing it out once, I wasn’t going to do it again. Guess I made the right call, huh?”

Castiel rested his elbows on the table, putting his head on his hands with his eyes closed. “At least we have the amulet, then. I know where the First Blade is as I was the one who hid it and we know where the Colt is too. We only need Alastair’s Razor to open Hell again, which will already be very helpful.”

“Yeah, about that,” Dean scratched his head. “What do you mean the First Blade is in the bunker?”

Castiel’s shoulders tensed a little bit. “I, uh, I may have hid it under the floorboards of my room?” Castiel raised his head enough to stare at Dean.

Dean opened and closed his mouth like a goldfish for a few seconds, confusion puckering his forehead. “You hid it there when I gave it to you?”

Castiel scratched his neck, avoiding Dean’s eyes. “Maybe.”
“Wait.” Sam raised his hand, looking at Castiel. “Why did you hide it there?”

“I thought that no one would think I would put it somewhere so obvious, and that it would be harder for Dean to find it, because he would never think to look there. You would probably think I would’ve hid it like Cain did, in the bottom of the ocean or on the highest mountain, or anything like it.”

Dean shrugged. “Well, you’re not wrong. I would never have thought it was in the bunker.” He sighed, his hand running up and down Castiel’s arm, making Castiel relax. “Well, at least we can go to one place and get two keys in one trip, that will be easier.”

Sam nodded. “At least there’s that. We just need to figure out where the other Heaven keys are now. And those will probably be harder for us to find, which is great.”

Castiel raised his head, staring at the two brothers. “Maybe Billie can help us. She once talked to the Empty, maybe she can again. At least talk to Balthazar and ask him where he hid the keys.”

Dean scoffed. “Yeah, and what guarantee do we have that Billie will actually try to help us?”

As soon as Dean finished speaking, there was a sudden change in the temperature, the pressure of the room, and there was a popping sound in their ears. The lights flickered and a tall figure appeared in the middle of the room, her arms crossed on her chest. “Sup?”

The four of them turned to look at her. Dean sighed, rolling his eyes. “Did you really need to make such a dramatic entrance?”

Billie shrugged. “You were talking about me. I think it was pretty well-timed.”

Dean rolled his eyes, crossing his arms. “Yeah, super necessary too. So, have you found anything?”

“Have you found anything about the keys?”

“We know what the keys are, and where the Hell keys are, we just need to go after them,” Sam added before Dean could give a snarky reply.

Billie smiled sarcastically. “At least you were able to do something on your own, congratulations.”

Dean rolled his eyes again—which Castiel was pretty sure wasn’t good for him. “Have you found anything to help us or did you come here just to make a big entrance?”

“I have, and I think you’re going to be very happy with what I found on my little trip to the Empty.” She sat on one of the chairs while Castiel adjusted himself uneasily on his, Dean placing a steady hand on his shoulder. Rowena sat on the table near Sam.

Dean rested his back against the wall behind Castiel’s chair and looked at Billie. “What did you find out? And why did you go to the Empty?”

“Well, I heard you three talking about Balthazar and Gabriel, and, as you know, Jack is in the Empty, but I can’t take him out of there. But the Empty at least let me talk to him. Jack’s fine, he knows what is happening here, and he wanted to come and help you.”

Dean sighed, shoulders slumping as he closed his eyes softly. Castiel put his chair a little closer to Dean, turned it until he could reach Dean’s arm with his hand, trying to comfort him. Dean only gave him a half a smile, opening his eyes. Castiel turned to look at Billie again. “Go on, Billie.”
“Well, I talked to It, asked if It would be willing to help us with everything that is happening. I explained everything, even though I’m pretty sure It already knew. I asked if It could really help us to set the balance in the world again, because It does need us. The Empty can’t fix everything on its own though. It needs at least everyone here in the camp. Especially the four of you.” She waved at them. “So, I used all of my power and charm to get it to help us, to at least let me talk to the two other angels so we could find out what we needed.”

Billie stopped talking, making Rowena wave her hand. “So, what did It say? There’s no need for suspense.”

Billie smiled. “Well, I’ve got great news for you.” She snapped her fingers and the door of the room opened, letting two men in—a slim one with blond hair and a permanent smirk on his lips, and another one, a shorter guy with a messy hair and a trickster expression on his face.

Everyone looked at the two men with their chins on the floor. Castiel looked at Balthazar, fear and regret replacing the surprise in his eyes quickly. Balthazar’s eyes softened as he smiled at his fellow brother. “Hey, little brother. How are you?”

Castiel lowered his head, looking at the floor, his face starting to get warm in shame. “Hello, Balthazar.”

Gabriel snorted. “Thank you for not noticing me. I did come back from the dead as well, you know?”

Sam shrugged. “And it’s not the first time, Gabriel. It kinda loses some of the impact after a while. And you are short, so it’s hard to see you sometimes.”

Gabriel squinted his eyes, chuckling. “Oh, Samsquatch, I stay dead for a year and you’re already wanting to take my place? Nice.”

Sam laughed and stood up to slap Gabriel on the shoulder. “Welcome back, Trickster.”

Gabriel winked, turning the brief shoulder slap into a hug, seemingly only to hear Sam’s irritated huff.

Dean stood up as well. “I’m not hugging you.”

Balthazar kept staring at Castiel, shaking his head lightly. “Cassie, Cassie, Cassie. Is this any way to treat the friend you killed? Not even a hug?”

Castiel’s shoulders slumped even more as he stood up, walking slowly towards Balthazar. The angel put his arms around Castiel, hugging him tightly. Castiel fought back the tears that started to well up in his eyes. “I am so sorry, Balthazar. I swear I di—”

“Hey, calm down, breathe, Cassie. I know you must have had a good reason to do what you did. Obviously, I’m pissed at you and you can expect some payback sometime, but I know you had a reason, one that you’ll tell me about soon.” Balthazar spread his fingers out on his chest dramatically, his heart between them. “It was a cold move and I have to say, it really hurt my feelings, but I understand.”

Castiel let go of Balthazar and tilted his head. “Are you sure? I regret it, I assure you, I regret all of the things I did during that time.”

Balthazar smiled, clapping Castiel’s arm. “I’m sure, don’t worry. And we have bigger problems to deal with right now. I can make you feel really guilty about it later.”
Castiel sighed. “We do.”

Balthazar turned to look at Sam and Dean. “I see you’re still with the two monkeys here. Thought they would have gotten you killed already. Oh, right, they did..”

Dean crossed his arms over his chest, thinning his lips. “Hey, not cool, all right.” He moved his gaze to Billie. “How did you bring them back?”

“Well, I didn’t, because I don’t have any power in the Empty, but I had a long talk with It, explained the situation and... here we are.”

Sam raised his eyebrows. “Really? That easy?”

She nodded. “Yeah, that easy.” Everyone stared at her in disbelief until she sighed. “Okay, okay, it wasn’t that easy. I had to do a lot of convincing and explain how all of this could affect It, too, and not only the people in this world.”

Castiel tilted his head. “And then it decided to help us? I thought it was going to be a little harder.”

“I think it wants everything to go back to normal just as much as we do. It does like balance.”

Dean shrugged. “Well, it’s good to know that at least we have one more thing to help us. We need all the help we can get.”

Sam ran his hand through his hair. “Okay, so we can find out the rest of the things we need to know about the keys.” He turned at Balthazar. “You still remember where you hid them?”

Balthazar furrowed his brows. “What keys?”

Dean sighed, rubbing a hand on his face. “Right, if God erased Castiel’s memory, why wouldn’t he erase yours? Or Gabriel’s?” He turned to Rowena. “Do you still have ingredients for the spell?”

“Yes, I do.”

Sam stood up, intertwining his fingers with Rowena’s. “Okay, so we can get their memories back, find out where the other keys are and then go after them. Sounds good?” Everyone nodded. “We all have things to do—me and Ro are going to get the spell ready again, and you two are gonna tell them everything that’s happened since they died. Let’s go.”

Sam and Rowena left the room while Castiel and Dean stayed back with Gabriel and Balthazar. Castiel sat back at the table, Dean placing a hand on his shoulder. They smiled softly at each other, Castiel unaware of Balthazar and Gabriel as they stared at the two with raised brows.

“Well,” Billie stood up, smoothing the imaginary wrinkles from her clothes, “I still have stuff to do, so I’ll leave you guys to figure things out. Call me if you need any help.”

She disappeared before anyone could have a chance to say something. Dean exhaled through his mouth. “Ain’t she a peach?”

Gabriel turned to Dean, arching one eyebrow at him. “So, what’s the deal between Samsquatch and the witch?”

“Huh?” Dean turned to look at Sam and Rowena leaving the room, then back at Gabriel. “Oh, probably something. Didn’t bother trying to figure out what, to be honest.”

Balthazar stared at Castiel. “So, what happened after I died? I mean, before God decided to end the
world.”

Castiel took a deep breath as he ran his hand through his hair, trying to remember. “After I got all those souls from Purgatory, I spent some time thinking I was God—”

“—a terrible god, I may add.”

Castiel stared at Dean with an annoyed face, lips thinned. “Definitely not the point, Dean.”

Dean only raised his hands in surrender.

Dean and Castiel continued recapping what had happened since then—the Leviathans, Purgatory, the tablets and the Trials to close Hell, Metatron, the Fall, Abbadon and Cain, Amara and Lucifer, Jack, and then, finally, God Himself.

Some of the stories Gabriel already knew, so he just nodded and gave unhelpful interjections every now and then.

Balthazar stared at the two, his mouth hanging open as he processed everything he heard. Balthazar and Gabriel looked at each other, then at Dean and Castiel a few times before Balthazar spoke, “You did all of that?” Dean and Castiel nodded. “Man, you guys are crazy. How did you even manage to live through all of that?”

Castiel tilted his head. “Well, technically, we died. We just came back to life.”

Gabriel shook his head, astonished. “Man, you ever managed to piss off Dad? Oof, you guys really are a piece of work. I thought you were like, His favorites.”

Dean cocked his head with pursed lips. “We thought so too but, apparently, He only liked us when we did what He wanted us to.”

Gabriel huffed a laugh. “You three really do manage to be the worst at following instructions, don’t you?”

Castiel shrugged. “Apparently, I never was, and Sam and Dean never were either, so we shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Well, the only person that I took orders from was my dad, and no one else after that,” Dean added.

Balthazar shook his head, still not over what Dean and Castiel had just told them. “I can’t even think of anything to say to you. I’m just—I don’t know, really. I mean, I knew that for God to decide to end the world you clearly did something horrible but I didn’t know it would be so many things. Really, no idea how you all managed to do all that.”

“Guys, come here,” Sam’s voice came from the other room.

Dean and Castiel walked out first, while Gabriel and Balthazar were still a little surprised and so they followed after. Castiel listened as they discussed between them everything that’d been recapped.

Sam and Rowena both had a cup in front of them. Dean and Castiel walked to the two cots in the room, waving at them for Balthazar and Gabriel to lay down.

They both stared at each other, turning to look at Castiel, Gabriel speaking first, “How does this spell work?”

Castiel sighed softly. “Well, God wiped all of the angels’ memories a long time ago because He
wanted to rewrite the story without any interference. So, we need to get your memories back from the first time He did it, and, hopefully, you’ll remember where the other three keys are.”

Balthazar frowned as he sat on the cot. “What keys, again?”

“The keys to Heaven and Hell. God closed both of them, which is the reason why no one stays dead for long. We need to open them again so we can have a shot at undoing everything God did.”

Gabriel opened his mouth to speak, but Castiel cut him off, “It’ll be easier to understand when you get your memories back and it’ll definitely make more sense then. This spell isn’t pleasant so you should be ready for it. It’ll bring almost all of your memories back at once…and could also drive you crazy. You may not survive. You don’t have to do it, if you don’t want, but we really need you to in order to save the world.”

Gabriel nodded, sitting on the cot as he stared at Castiel. “We want to help and if we were there with you back then, the least we need to do is be with you now. We’ll be fine.”

Balthazar agreed as he watched Rowena finish brewing. “I’m with Gabe. We rebelled once with you, we’ll do it again, no matter what.”

Castiel’s heart filled with love and appreciation, tears almost prickling his eyes. He gave each of his brothers’ arms a squeeze, a grateful smile on his lips. Balthazar and Gabriel gave him a smile back, and Castiel walked towards Dean.

Rowena finished pouring the contents into the cups, raising her eyes to the two. “Are you ready, boys?” Gabriel and Balthazar looked at each other, then at Rowena and nodded. “Let’s get started then.”

They laid down on the cot, Dean and Castiel staying a little farther away. Rowena gave each a cup, standing between them to perform the spell. Gabriel looked at Castiel, Dean, and Sam, cocking his eyebrow. “Why are they so far away?”

“I can’t be interrupted while I perform the spell and neither can you, so they need to stay back until we finish. Don’t worry though, I know what I’m doing.”

Balthazar shook his head. “I’m not liking how this spell seems to work.”

Rowena huffed a laugh. “Oh, you won’t. Castiel was right about it—it’s not pleasant at all.”

Gabriel just stared at Balthazar. “We don’t really have a choice, Balthazar. Better just to do as they say.”

Balthazar sighed and nodded. They took the cups from Rowena’s hands and drank all of its contents. Rowena gave the cups to Sam, turning first to Balthazar and starting her enchantment, a purple light glowing from her hands. They lay down, following Rowena’s advice, and closed their eyes. Sam, Dean and Castiel watched them.

Castiel watched as they both relaxed on the hard cots, their eyelids closing. Castiel knew the moment their memories started to come back—they started to convulse, bodies shaking, almost falling off the small cot as Rowena kept up her chanting, her voice growing weaker as she spoke, knees shaking with the effort of keeping her up. Sam gave one step towards her, stopping when Dean held his arm. Sam turned, watching Rowena rather than the angels, his hands closed in fists.

Dean’s other hand found Castiel’s, intertwining their fingers. He could see a look on Castiel’s face, and his own reacted accordingly—Castiel didn’t know what he looked like, but it certainly didn’t seem good from Dean’s expression.
He had to swallow the urge to go to his brothers and stop what Rowena was doing to them. Their eyes snapped open and a bright light started to shine from them, Rowena’s own shining too with a bright, purple light, even as she shut them. Castiel gulped as he thought of how Dean must have felt when he was the one having his memories brought back—no wonder he seemed so panicked when Castiel suggested repeating it.

Rowena crumbled, her knees hitting the floor with terrible force as she, Balthazar and Gabriel screamed. Sam got out of Dean’s hold, closing the distance between him and Rowena in two steps, embracing her, her screams lowering to merely whimpers. Castiel ran to Balthazar’s side while Dean went to Gabriel, their bodies limp on the cot. Castiel shook Balthazar, his heart beating in his throat, fear being the only thing in his veins as he stared down at his brother with wide eyes. He couldn’t get a response from Balthazar, and saw that Dean couldn’t get anything from Gabriel either, his shake attempts useless. Sam was still holding Rowena in his arms, face buried in her hair as he whispered something too low for Castiel’s human ears to hear.

Castiel kneeled beside the cot, putting his hands on Balthazar’s face. “Come on, brother, please don’t do this to me, wake up.”

He looked for a pulse on his neck, sighing in relief when he felt a very slow and weak pulse. His shoulders slumped as he stared at Balthazar, waiting for him to wake up. It wasn’t long before Balthazar sucked in a breath and his eyes started to slowly open. Castiel saw Gabriel do the same from the corner of his eye, and he would have cried of relief, if he’d had the time.

Balthazar groaned, blinking a few times before looking at Castiel. “You were right, you know? That spell is awful.”

Gabriel nodded, groaning with the movement. “That sucked. Can we please never repeat it?”

Dean stared at Gabriel. "Do you remember anything?” Gabriel nodded, Balthazar following suit. “Okay, that’s good.” He turned to Sam, kneeling in front of him and Rowena. “Are you okay, Ro?”

She sniffled and nodded weakly against Sam’s chest. “I’ll be fine. Just need to rest a little.”

Dean half-smiled, patting her shoulder before standing up. “What did you two remember?” He walked to the table, grabbing two bottles of water, handing one to Balthazar and one to Gabriel.

Balthazar rubbed one of his hands on his head, holding the bottle with the other. "Well, I remembered where I hid Gabriel's horn and the Staff of Moses."

Sam raised one brow. "What about Alastair's razor?"

"Well, I did hide that, originally, but Alastair found it. That's sorta how it became his razor instead of just a nice, normal instrument of hellish torture, really."

Gabriel gulped some of the water, drinking almost half of it before continuing, “So, we’ll only need to discover where that one is since we already know where the others are. It’ll be easier because I remember which tricks I used on them.”

“And we’ll actually have a shot at opening Heaven and Hell gates again. That will make our lives so much easier.” Dean clapped his hand on Gabriel’s shoulder, smiling. “Turns out you’re actually going to be useful, huh.”

Gabriel turned his head enough to stare at Dean. “You’re lucky I’m too tired and that my head hurts too much to argue with you.”
Balthazar sat, pressing his temples. “So, Gabriel’s Horn is in Atlantis, and the Staff of Moses is in London.”

Dean frowned. “Wait, you said Atlantis? Like, real Atlantis?”

Balthazar crossed his arms, staring at Dean. “No, I meant Atlantic City. Of course it’s the real Atlantis, why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because it sunk and no one knows where it is? No one even knew it existed.”

Balthazar stared at Sam. “Merde. Does this mean the key won’t be there?”

“Samuel said that no one knows where it is,” Rowena intervenes, turning her head to face them, “which probably means no one could have gone there and stolen the key, at least.”

Balthazar nodded. “Maybe. We’ll have to go there, anyway. Check the other places and if we can find all of them. If not…”

The sentence hung in the air, no one daring to finish it. The silence stretched, the tension starting to get unbearable on them. Gabriel finally clapped his hands together, startling the other five. “So, should we start thinking about how we’re going to get these keys? Who’s going to get what, and all of that.”

Sam nodded, standing up while helping Rowena walk with him. “The sooner we decide what to do, the sooner we’ll be able to get the world back to normal.”

Sam walked to one of the chairs, pulling Rowena down to sit on his lap, his arms around her in a protective way. Dean handed her a bottle of water, getting a small smile from her and thankful look from Sam. Balthazar and Gabriel stayed on the cots, legs crossed, while Castiel sat on the chair next to Balthazar, and Dean sat on the other side of the table, elbows resting in front of him. Sam reached for the paper with their notes, dragging it closer to him. “So, should we split up to go get the keys so it will be faster?”

They all started discussing how they should split to go after the keys, who would go with who and which key each pair would retrieve. Balthazar and Gabriel pitched in with suggestions, Rowena saying what she could do to make their search easier.

Castiel only realized how silent Dean had been when Dean got up suddenly, stumbling on the chair when he started to run for the door, saying something that sounded like, “I need some air.”

The five of them stared at the door for a few seconds, not knowing what had happened. Castiel turned his face to stare at the others, shaking his head slowly. “I should go get him. And wait until he’s back to make our plans.”

Sam nodded, placing the papers back on the table. “We’ll wait until you two are back. Or do you want me to go?”

Castiel shook his head, standing up. “No need, I’ll go. He’s probably just stressed, I’ll talk to him.”

“Okay.”

Castiel walked out of the room, shivering when the cold air from the outside passed through him. He started to walk, trying to think of where Dean could have gone.

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Dean’s brain had stopped listening to everything that was been said around him, his eyes glued on Sam and Rowena—on how they were so relaxed around each other, and on how they shared little gestures that showed how much they meant to each other. And even though they both knew that Sam literally held Rowena’s life in his hands, they were not letting it stop them from having what they wanted.

Dean moved his eyes to Castiel, who was concentrating on the paper Sam had given to him, talking to him about something Dean wasn’t listening to his mind mile away from there. He started thinking about his talk with Sam a few days ago, before all those zombies attacked.

Dean’s leg still hurt from the metal rebar that had pierced through his leg. He ran his hand across the still-healing wound absently, gaze still glued at Castiel. His mind started to wander to how he practically confessed-not-confessed his love for Castiel to Sam. Dean still didn’t know how he managed to say it to Sam so coolly as he had. He was pretty sure it wasn’t going to be that easy when he had to tell Castiel.

Dean’s heart started to race, like it wanted to break free from his chest, ripping everything in its way.He started to panic, all the feelings he had been keeping hidden for ten years suddenly coming together, making Dean forget how to breathe when the wave came over him.

He stood up quickly, almost knocking the chair down, and ran towards the door, saying something that was supposed to be “I need some air”. He ran until he was a fair distance from the building and he was sure no one would hear or see him. He stopped and tried to get his breath back to normal, doing his best to calm himself down. His leg started to throb softly, only enough to make him stay still for a couple of minutes.

After what felt like hours, Dean’s breathing calmed and his panic settled. He stared at the sky, just a pitch black sheet without a single star in it, not giving any hints if it was day or night. He kept staring at it while his brain tried to show him every possible bad outcome of his feelings towards Castiel, the last traces of panic still running through his veins.

He started to realize that he was being stupid and shouldn’t react like that. Dean started to remember how much he’d wanted to stay with Cassie or Lisa, how he was happier whenever he was around them—the same thing he felt whenever he was around Castiel, even if it was just seeing him in the distance, doing something completely mundane. It wasn’t like it would be the end of the world if he did feel something more for Castiel—the end of the world had already started and it wasn’t because of any feelings he or Castiel had—so why should he deprive himself of something he wanted, something he had wanted for so long, if there were no possible worse consequences than what they were already living, only good ones?

Dean ran his hand through his hair, sighing. Maybe this feelings thing wasn’t so bad. Sam and Rowena, and Jody and Donna… They all had someone—even some of the muggles did—so why couldn’t Dean have someone too? Or Castiel? They sure deserved it, especially after everything they had been through.

Dean had spent a long time in denial, always saying that he didn’t deserve anything like that, or rationalizing that it would never work because it didn’t with Cassie or with Lisa, how would it work with someone else? But no one had ever done what Castiel had, and Dean had never felt for the two women the same way he did for Castiel—shouldn’t he at least give it a shot?

He chuckled softly, shaking his head. “I’m being stupid. It’s not like this is a bad thing. It’s actually a great thing.” Dean started to pace slowly, kicking pebbles with his foot. “Cas has already told me he loves me, using the exact words and just showing with little gestures. Hell, I’ve done the same.”
Dean stopped in front of a car, staring at his reflection. “I can do this, I can say ‘I love you’ to him, right? It’s not that hard.” He looked at the car’s window, his face serious, trying to pretend Castiel was in front of him. “I love—, uh, I lov—” Dean sighed, letting his head fall. “Damn it, what the hell is wrong with me? It’s only three words.” He took a deep breath before trying again, speaking slowly, “I love you.” He smiled at himself, nodding in approval. “See? Not that hard.”

Dean was so immersed in his thoughts that he didn’t hear the footsteps, startling when Castiel’s voice came from behind him, making him turn at full speed, almost losing his balance.

“Dean? Are you okay?”

Dean shook his head to get rid of his thoughts and smiled nervously at him, scratching his neck. “Yeah, I’m fine, just have too much on my mind, and it’s bad timing for all of it. Sorry for running out like that. Uh, have you guys decided what you’re going to do about the keys?”

Castiel tilted his head, staring at Dean for a few seconds before answering, “A little, yes, but we decided to wait for you to make the whole plan.”

“Thanks, Cas. I’m good to go back now.”

Castiel smiled back at him, making the wrinkles around his eyes deepen. Dean’s heart softened as he stared at Castiel, his thoughts about things going wrong shutting off under the wave of emotion. Castiel squinted at Dean, tilting his head. Dean only shook his head, starting to walk until he was beside him.

They headed back to the main building, Dean’s hand finding Castiel’s with ease, as he’d got used to it and certainly wasn’t going to question it now. Castiel smiled at him, a soft blush coming up his neck, making Dean chuckle. The front door of the building came into view, with some people gathered in front of it.

Dean saw Sam, Rowena, Gabriel, and Balthazar, the four of them staring at someone in front of them. Dean squinted his eyes until he recognized Crowley.

Dean and Castiel stopped near them, Crowley smirking when he saw their hands intertwined. “You and Feathers busy back there, Squirrel?”

Dean only rolled his eyes. “You only got snarky things to say, or is there a reason for you to be here?”

Crowley sighed, shaking his head in disappointment. “You’re no fun anymore, Squirrel. I do know something that can be useful for you, actually. I heard you talking about Alastair’s razor and how you didn’t know where to find it. I can help; demons are kind of my thing.”

Everyone stared at him until Rowena put her hands on her hips with her lips in a thin line. “Well, Fergus? What is it?”

Crowley took a deep breath, looking at each of them in the eye before speaking, “Well, the last time I heard, a demon had it. And, if he still does, you are not going to like it. That demon? One of the worst I’ve ever seen and that is saying something.”
Sooo, everyone happy with Gabe and Balthazar back?? Because I sure as hell am! I saw all of you talking about them in the comments and how badly you wanted them to come back. Hope I got to your expectations.

And Dean, huh? Just wanted to make him and Cas get all over each other in the end, but, sadly, I can't (yet MUAHAHAHAH).

This demon Crowley's talking about, though? Damn, I wanna know him.

Next week we will be back with a chapter from the amazing EllenOfOz ;)

Don't Walk, Run Like an Egyptian

Chapter by EllenOfOz

Chapter Summary

The Team make plans, then Sam and Rowena head off for a Night at the Museum.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! I've been nervously waiting my turn to post a chapter, because holy crap, hasn't this story been freaking amazing so far?

This chapter has been a team effort to put together, and I wanted to thank my co-authors for the absolute delight it is to work together <3 We really hope you're going to love the next few chapters. Things are really starting to heat up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dean followed Sam and Rowena back into the space they used as the unofficial planning room, trying not to limp on his aching leg. Cas walked behind him, putting a supportive hand on his shoulder, and he hoped once again that Cas hadn’t heard what he’d been muttering in the junkyard just now.

He sat heavily in one of the chairs around the table. "So, where is this demon?"

Crowley walked in with Balthazar and Gabriel trailing behind him, and they also took chairs around the room. Crowley shrugged. "Said I had a fair idea where he might be, not exactly where. We might need to make a few...enquiries first."

Great, Dean thought. How were they going to find demons while the camp was still surrounded by zombies? They’d been quiet during the week since the attack, but that didn’t mean they weren’t lurking, planning their next attempt.

Sam spoke up, just as Dean noticed Jody and Claire enter and stand to one side. "Okay, so let's go back and review the list." He pulled a sheet of paper on the table towards him and read the first item. “The Atlantis key. Gabriel, you know what you’re looking for there?”

Gabriel shrugged. “I know what it looks like, but Balthazar's the one who hid it.”

“I remember where it is,” Balthazar added, “or at least where I put it. The island sank a long time ago, I really have no idea what we’ll find there. There’s a good chance we’ll be swimming.”

Sam nodded. "I guess that’s an angel-only mission then, huh?" When murmurs of assent came from around the table, he glanced back at the list. “Balthazar, you said you remembered the Staff of Moses as well? Wasn’t it in Heaven when you stole it the last time?”

As Dean watched in disgust, Balthazar put one boot up on the table, then crossed the other one over
it, leaning back. "Yeah, it was," he began, then dropped his feet to the floor again when he caught Dean’s glare. “Look, that part I stole from Heaven’s arsenal was just the wooden bit. Back before Moses’ day, the staff was longer, with a long, metal tip. Like a spear, I guess. The tip was actually the part of Heaven’s key.”

Castiel broke in from where he stood behind Dean’s chair, sounding confused. “But the staff stored in Heaven didn’t have any tip on it.”

“No, Cassie, let me explain. The staff Moses carried didn’t have the tip. After the keys were broken, I gave part of it to people I knew in Egypt that would hide it. They fashioned it into a spear tip and attached it to a spear, and since Ancient Egyptian times were all about who could make the Pharaoh the happiest, the staff eventually made its way into the hands of whoever was on the throne at the time. You following?” He glanced around waiting for a nod or two before continuing. “You know the story of Moses? How he was brought up in the Egyptian royal household but escaped to the desert to avoid a death penalty?”

Dean had never been able to get into any Bible story, despite it being pretty much a history book. The language was difficult and the facts unreliable, so he usually left it up to Sam to do any biblical research. Besides, it didn’t mention Castiel at all, and that annoyed the crap out of him, although now, perhaps, they knew why that was the case.

Dean spoke up, turning to Cas, “Is that the one with the colorful dreamcoat thing?”

“No, that was Joseph, in Genesis, Dean,” Cas said quietly. “Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, parted the Red Sea, God sent the plagues—”

“Oh, okay, I got it,” Dean interrupted, turning back to Balthazar. “So, what—he took the staff with him?”

Balthazar hesitated. “He left with the staff, yes, but it seems the spearhead was left behind. I may have had something to do with that, I seem to remember not wanting to send the key piece off into the desert, but my memory must have zapped around that time—things are hazy. In any case, afterwards, the Pharaohs were always venerated, even considered ‘divine’ by their people. I was sent on a mission to Alexandria just before Jesus came into the picture, to warn their ruler of the approach of the Roman army. The Pharaoh at the time was Cleopatra.”

The people around the table murmured their surprise. Dean glanced at Sam to see if he was buying this, and the kid was staring at Balthazar, rapt. Dean rolled his eyes.

Balthazar continued. “When I met with her, she was holding a ceremonial crook that absolutely reeked with power. Even at the time, I knew it was divine, but I hadn’t been commanded to take it, so I didn’t. Cleopatra was the last true Pharaoh of Egypt. Rather than letting herself be captured and paraded through Rome, she allowed herself to be bitten by a snake, committing suicide. And, incidentally, turning into a snake is something the Staff of Moses is said to be able to do. Someone in the royal armory must have realized the spearhead’s power, and reforged it into a rod for the Pharaohs to use. The crook would have gone into her tomb, I’d lay money on that.”

“What the hell’s a crook, anyway?” Dean asked.

Balthazar sighed. “Haven’t you seen any pictures of Tutankhamun, or any other Egyptian royalties? They’re always holding a crook and flail—it’s like a bent-over staff, like the ones shepherds have to hook their sheep?”

“So we need to get to Egypt?” Claire asked, her forehead creased in confusion.
Sam spoke up, "No, most of the royal tombs in Egypt have been excavated."

"You said London, right?" Dean asked, his tone blunt. There was only so much Balthazar bullshit he was willing to sit through.

"Yes, the British Museum. Finest collection of stolen objects in the world," Balthazar said, sitting back in his chair.

Dean sat forward, leaning his elbow on the table in front of him. "How d'you even know it's there? You only just remembered it existed."

Balthazar’s cocky grin dropped slightly. "Well, as it turns out, I'm not actually one hundred percent sure. But Cleopatra and Mark Antony’s tomb was located a hundred years ago. Her stuff would have been pulled out by someone or other."

Sam huffed, his annoyance clear. “So it could be in literally any museum in the world, then. That’s really helpful, Balthazar.”

Castiel stepped in before Balthazar could reply. “Come, let’s not fight about it. We can go check the British Museum, and move on if it’s not there. Hopefully you’ll have enough grace remaining to get us there and back again.”

“And if he doesn’t?" Sam asked, still sounding unconvinced. “It’ll be impossible to get home from there.”

“I can cast teleportation magic, in a jam," Rowena said from her seat beside him, putting one hand on his arm reassuringly. “It’s not always particularly precise, but it can get us back across the pond, if necessary.”

“Okay, So how about this? We all still split up to get this done.” Sam pointed to the angels. “Gabriel and Balthazar could take Ro and I to London, then head on to Atlantis. What about the demon with the razor?"

“Me ’n Cas’ll find him, once Crowley does his asking around,” Dean said, glancing up at Cas. He hoped Cas was okay with that, but he really didn’t want to let the ex-angel out of his sight right now, even with his aim improving every day.

Sam nodded, although he still didn’t look completely at peace with the plan. “Just one problem left—who’s gonna look after the camp if we’re all gone?”

Jody spoke up from where she was leaning against the wall. “Don’t worry about that. We’ve got it covered. And if we’re really stuck, we’ll send up a prayer, I guess.”

“Does prayer even still work these days?” asked Sam, his gaze firmly on Gabriel.

Gabriel’s eyes jumped to Sam’s. “I hear you, Sam. Seems the channels are still open for now.”

Sam nodded, then looked back towards Dean and Castiel. “Then after that, we’ll all need to go for the bunker. We’ll need everyone.”

“Agreed,” Castiel said, nodding.

Dean sighed, worried. He wasn’t looking forward to seeing what the monsters had done to their home. He cleared his throat, trying not to worry about that for now. “Let’s head out and relax, anyway. Worry about this crap in the morning.” Dean got to his feet, hissing a little at the weight on
his leg. Castiel instinctively reached forward to steady him, but Dean brushed Castiel’s hand away. “M’fine, Cas.”

“Head out to the campfire,” Cas said quietly as the others filed out of the room. “I’ll join you in a moment.”

The wound in Dean’s leg hadn’t taken long to stop bleeding, and thankfully he’d avoided infection thanks to Alex’s help, but he still had an ugly red scab on his leg that he was keeping covered, and it ached like hell. Cas had been helping him out with keeping it strapped, but his caregiving skills as a human…still needed some practice. The guy always wrapped it so tight that Dean usually had to redo it afterwards to get the circulation back in his foot, but Dean didn’t have the heart to tell him since he was so keen to help.

Dean headed out to where several of the muggles sat around a roaring campfire in the chilly evening, rugged up in the warmest gear they’d been able to scavenge. They’d been here for months now—he hadn’t really been keeping track that closely, but he guessed they were sometime in November now. They should really start building up their supplies for winter, in case they made it that far.

He hobbled over to a large fallen log that someone had dragged into camp, perching at one end of it and listening to the song someone was playing on a guitar. They had nights like this now and then when the zombies were quiet and the camp wasn’t too exhausted from whatever project they’d been working on—they had to, or they’d all go mad with waiting around for the next attack. A bottle of something nasty was passed around the circle and Dean took a swig, wincing at the burn.

A crunch on the gravel behind him made him flinch, but it was just Cas, coming to perch on the other side of the log. The ex-angel held up a fresh bandage. “Put your leg up?” he said, shifting back to give Dean room to swing his leg over to lie along the wood. He shimmied the leg of his jeans up to uncover the bandage, now only loosely covering the wound.

Dean watched Cas as he unwrapped the old bandage, wondering again how he was going to find the courage to tell him how much Cas meant to him, or if he even could. What did he have to lose? But lately, ever since Cas had remembered his archangel past, he’d been staring oddly at Dean. Like he wasn’t really seeing him, like he was looking through him. And whatever he saw was breaking his heart.

“Cas?” he asked, hesitating, not really sure how to put his worries into words.

“Mm?” Cas rumbled, intent on his unwrapping.

Dean reached down to put his hand on Cas’, stilling his movements. Cas looked up at him, surprised. Dean took a deep breath.

“You’ve seemed worried, more since your memory came back. Was there something else you’ve remembered that you’re not telling me? Because, y’know, if there’s something bothering you, and if I can help…” He trailed off, not sure if he was even making any sense.

Castiel hesitated, then looked away, into the fire. “Yes, there are many things. Millenia of memories, more than you could comprehend. It’s…overwhelming.”

“But sometimes you look at me, and my heart breaks, man,” Dean tried to chuckle to keep things light, but it came out strained instead. “Did I do something?”

Cas huffed a short laugh. “No, Dean. Never. It’s just…” he hesitated again, looking down at Dean’s hand, still resting on top of his own. “Your soul,” he said quietly, “has been on this Earth many times
before now.” Dean was hardly able to breathe as Cas’ eyes found his again, and he said, “We have
met before, Dean.”

And Dean found he already knew that, somehow. The weight of Castiel’s words sank down on him,
comforting and warm. He had known, from the very first time they’d met, when Cas had walked into
that barn with sparks flying, that he had recognized the angel. They’d known each other, in other
lives? The idea blew his mind, and made complete sense, all at once.

But why, why did that make Cas so sad?

Dean was just about to open his mouth to ask when Gabriel approached, perching on the log on the
other side of Cas.

“Whatcha up to, fellas? I’m not interrupting any grown-up time, am I?” he said as he looked between
them.

Dean kept his gaze on Cas for a few more moments. They were going to have to talk about this
again at some point. “No,” he answered shortly, as he looked away.

Cas cleared his throat before replying, probably sensing his hostility. “Dean took an injury to his leg
during the latest zombie attack. I’m just replacing the bandage—we don’t have anyone left who is
able to heal in camp, so we’ve had to deal with injuries the slow way.”

“Jeez, Louise!” Gabriel said, wrinkling his nose at the mess that was Dean’s uncovered leg. “I take a
nap for a year and now you’re all just strolling around with extra holes? I don’t know when that came
back in fashion, but you chuckleheads don’t strike me as the type to keep up with passing fads. More
the posterboys for Lumberjack Monthly.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Thanks, Gabe. Very helpful, as usual.”

“Hey, I help. Come here,” Gabriel said, leaning over Cas to touch his fingers to Dean’s knee. Dean
felt the cool rush of grace flooding through him. It had been so long since he had felt the sensation
that he couldn’t hold in a gasp as the wound on his leg shrank, then disappeared, leaving a faint pink
scar behind.

He and Cas both lifted their eyes to stare at Gabriel, but Dean spoke first. “What the hell, Gabe? Don’t do that!”

Gabriel shifted back in surprise. “What? Don’t all thank me at once, sheesh.”

Cas put a hand on Gabriel’s arm to reassure him. “We’re cut off from Heaven now, remember?
Thank you for healing Dean, but you should save your grace for when it’s really needed. We could
have used you a week ago, in fact.” He sighed.

Dean glanced up at Cas, then muttered, “Yeah, thanks.”

Gabriel eyed them both like they were crazy, then said just as Sam joined them, “You’re welcome, I
guess?” He turned to Sam. “Hey, Sammy! Put it there, bud.” He held up his hand, and Sam high-
fived him warily.

“What’s that for?” he asked, glancing at Cas and Dean in turn.

Gabriel grinned broadly. “Welcome to the three-hundred-year-old witch club, kiddo!”

Dean huffed a laugh despite himself, as Sam said, horrified, “Gabriel!”
Gabriel went on, “Can’t say I really blame you, she’s a little firecracker. That thing she does with her tongue—”

And that was Dean’s cue to get out of there. “Okay, okay, stop,” he interrupted. “I’m gonna turn in. Big day of planning tomorrow.” He was also looking forward to sleeping better now that his leg wouldn’t ache all night long, but they didn’t need to know that. He’d been sleeping badly ever since the attack, but at least his nightmares were easier to deal with for the most part once Sam and Ro had moved out of their shared cabin for some privacy, into an old cube van that they’d converted into a bedroom. If he fell back asleep more easily with Cas running his fingers through his hair, or telling him stories while lying next to him on his cot, no one needed to know.

He stood up, testing his weight on his leg. The pain was completely gone. “Y’know, I never thought I’d say this, but I’m glad you’re back, Gabe.” With angels around again, things were suddenly looking a helluva lot brighter.

Gabriel nodded to him. “Glad to be back, Dean-o.”

As he headed away towards the cabin, Sam caught up with him. “Hey Dean, hold up.”

“What’s up, Sam?”

Sam glanced back towards the fire, where Rowena and Jo had just come out of the main building and taken a seat. “We’re planning to head off real early in the morning, get to London as soon as we can.”

“You’re gonna go right away?” Dean asked, frowning.

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t we?” Sam asked, shifting on his feet. He looked closely at Dean’s face for a moment, then said, “You don’t like the plan.”

Dean shrugged. “I dunno, it all makes sense, I guess. I just...don’t like the idea of splitting up.”

Sam looked at him, no doubt taking in the tension in his shoulders, the worry he was sure was written all over his face. “Dean, we need to do this. If we want a chance at taking Chuck out, then we’ve gotta try.”

Dean nodded. “I know, I know. If there’s anyone I trust to know how to take him down, it’s Cas and his damn book. Just...don’t get dead, okay? We need you around here.”

Sam nodded. “You too. Take care of each other.” Sam clapped his hand on Dean’s shoulder, then turned to head back to the fire.

Dean looked over to where Cas still sat on the log, talking quietly with Gabriel. He’d hoped Cas would follow him back to the cabin so he could ask him about this past lives thing, but it could wait. Just knowing it had happened lit a warm glow in his chest as he turned and headed away from the firelight.

***

Sam and Rowena left camp with Gabriel and Balthazar before the sun had risen, before Dean or Cas had made an appearance. Sam only had time to pack the bare essentials, only bringing his gun and pocketful of spare bullets. Balthazar had put his hands on Gabe’s and Rowena’s shoulders, and Sam had grabbed Rowena’s hand and been dragged through the ether...or however angel-teleportation worked. However it happened, a few seconds later they were all standing in a dim, musty room, containing a few desks and bookshelves around the walls.
“Best of luck,” Balthazar said, then he and Gabriel disappeared from sight.

Rowena turned to Sam. “Here we are, then,” she said, her smile warming him down to his toes. He’d love the opportunity to kiss that mouth, but right now, they had work to do.

“Here we are. But, uh—” he looked around, curiously, “—where exactly is here?” He moved over towards a window, drawing the blind up to look out over a huge, empty courtyard of sorts, round, with what looked like another building in the centre. A dome stood high above, geometric patterns criss-crossing the space. “Have you been here before?” he asked, turning back to Rowena.

“No, I never had an opportunity,” she replied, peering out of the window from beside him. “It’s a shame we’re here for work and not play—I’d have liked to have taken a look around. I hear they’ve got quite the collection of powerful antiquities.”

“Maybe one day,” he said wistfully, but stopped when he realised how ridiculous that sounded. The chances of them actually getting out of this whole crapfest alive were next to none. He turned away to hide his dismay and moved across the room to a door, cracking it open slightly.

The hallway beyond was also deserted, the museum deathly quiet. “Come on,” he said, “let’s see if we can find some kind of map to the Egyptian stuff.”

***

Izzy yawned as she sat back, pulling her hands inside the sleeves of her hoodie against the chill in the room. She cast her eyes over the external camera feeds for maybe the fiftieth time tonight. It was a shitty job, monitoring the security cameras, but there were enough zombies trying to get into the museum lately that it made sense for someone to watch the doors twenty-four-seven. Plus, it beat being part of the crews out there, scavenging for supplies. Certainly not what she'd spent four years at Cambridge intending to do, but...end of the world, and all that jazz.

Today, though, she was only halfway through her shift and there had been next to no signs of any undead out in the street. She turned back to the book in her hands. The others made fun of her for reading paranormal stories when they lived in the middle of one, but she'd been a big reader before all this shit went down, and screw them if she was giving up now.

She'd just started to get back into the story when Ryan wandered in. “Hey Iz,” he said, taking the seat next to her. “What’cha doing?”

Izzy tried to contain her annoyance as she channeled a “What does it look fucking like I’m doing you raging numpty?” into the look she leveled at him. His gaze darted away as he fiddled with the keyboard in front of the second set of monitors. Poor kid. He was maybe two years younger than her, and she was pretty sure he fancied her, but she wasn’t really interested in a relationship when the world was ending. And certainly not with a pain in her arse like Ryan.

“Could you not mess with that, please? I only just got them in the right bloody places an hour ago,” Izzy said, swatting his hands away from the keys.

She had opened her book again, determined to ignore him, when he said, his voice quavering, “Uh, Iz?”

She turned back to him, really irritated now. “What is it, Ryan?”

He pointed a shaky finger at one of the monitors. It showed an internal feed—he must have changed something when he was fiddling with it. The upper galleries showed, dim and grainy in the emergency lighting. Two figures walked through the Mesopotamian collection—either one was
extremely tall or the other was very short, it was hard to tell—maybe both?

“Zombies are inside? Is this live?” she asked, tapping at the keyboard to check the timestamp. She murmured, “It’s live.”

“I don’t think they’re zombies. Look how they’re walking,” Ryan said. “How did they get in?”

Izzy frowned. “I dunno. I didn't get any door alarms.” She watched them as they entered the Egyptian galleries. "Whoever they are, they’re about to get a nasty surprise.”

***

Sam's eyes roved over the items in the glass cabinet. Burial urns, canopic jars, bright beads of gold and lapis lazuli…but nothing belonging to the tomb of Antony and Cleopatra.

At the end of the cabinet, the door to the next room lay in shadow. The natural light seemed to be fading now and the emergency lights did very little to illuminate the space, but Sam and Ro were making do with flashlights to read the descriptive signs. Sam shone his through the doorway and was met with the stoic face of an upright funerary mask staring back at him, making him nearly jump out of his skin.

As he swung the torch around some more, though, he saw long, horizontal shapes laid out in cases, creepy painted stones lying over where their eyes should be. Gasping excitedly, he moved into the room. "Hey Ro, get this! Mummies!" His grin widened when Rowena looked over at him, rolling her eyes.

"Samuel, we're not actually here to sight-see."

"Come on, I loved Ancient Egypt stuff as a kid! Didn't you ever see—"

He stopped as he heard a scuffling noise somewhere in front of him. He shone the torch around, but didn't catch any movement. There wouldn't be zombies hiding up here, would there? As they'd walked up here, the whole museum had seemed completely deserted, only the occasional dark patch of dried blood indicating there had been violence here at all. The galleries were untouched, a thin layer of dust across everything.

They'd seen no sign of anything, living or dead, but he guessed there could be mice or something in here, still.

"Sam? Come see," Rowena called, sounding excited.

He shone the flashlight once more over the mummies, disappointed to miss out on checking them out more closely. Perhaps there'd be time for a quick look once they were done.

Rowena was pointing at something in a cabinet a few rows over, and as Sam hurried over he saw the explanatory signs describing Cleopatra and her life. The cabinet contained a variety of objects, pictures of the Pharaoh and items from the tomb she had shared with Mark Antony, including three small statues, paint still bright and inlaid with gold. In the center of it all, a long crook and flail were propped up, symbols of the rulers of Egypt.

"There! That's what Balthazar described, isn't it? The ceremonial crook.” Rowena said, her palms against the glass.

"Yep, that's the one. How should we—?" He trailed off when a purple glow appeared under Rowena’s palms. She was chanting something under her breath, and as he quickly took a step back, a
high-pitched whine rapidly grew. He put his hands over his ears as best he could with the flashlight in one, but then all the glass in the room shattered with a deafening crash.

Sam took his hands away from his head and looked around, shocked. Glass shards lay all over the room, and Rowena stood in the middle of it, holding the crook aloft, her hands and forearms streaked with blood.

"Jesus, Ro, what did you do?!" Sam rushed forward, taking the crook from her and turning her hands over to inspect her cut palms, oozing blood.

"I'm fine, don't fuss. Just make sure that thing contains what we need and let's get out of here," she said, nodding towards the crook where Sam had put it back down on the shelf inside the shattered cabinet.

He picked it up again, turning it over. About two feet long, it was surprisingly light. He grabbed his flashlight from where he'd stashed it in his pocket to take a closer look. For an ancient artifact, it looked a lot like an elementary school art project, made of something that didn’t feel like metal and... and gold paint that was coming off on his fingers.

His eyes narrowed as he squeezed the end of the crook—it crumbled away in his hand, powdery and useless. "Either the Egyptians were cheap as hell, or this isn't the original," he said, grimacing.

"Shh!"

Sam looked up at Rowena. She was holding one red-stained hand out towards him, looking the other direction into the dim gallery along the row.

A shuffling sound came.

A crunching, rustling noise, like dry paper or crinkling fabric. Sam shone the torch into the gallery housing the mummies. An icy sensation spread in his gut as he clearly saw one of the wrapped bodies move, rocking in place on its shelf.

"What in the…?" Sam murmured. Rowena clutched at his arm with one hand and covered her mouth with the other.

As they watched in the dim flashlight beam, another mummified corpse managed to tear itself completely out of its dry wrappings with a loud ripping sound, and sit up. It turned a fleshless face towards Sam and Rowena, dessicated skin stretched tight over bone, painted stones in the eye sockets glinting in the light.

“Sam?” Rowena’s voice was tight with terror. “Let’s—” She cut off with an undignified squeak as the mummy shoved its legs to the side and awkwardly tried to stand up, like it was trying to remember how to work its body.

Sam watched, frozen to the spot, as the mummy found its feet and stepped out of its now-empty shroud, crunching on the broken glass underfoot. As it turned to them, they got a good look at the dry husk of a body—its dried skin shredded, dangling off limbs and ribs, a purely vacant look in its stone-eyes.

Rowena was the first to move. She grabbed her shoulder bag in one hand and Sam’s hand in the other, and yanked him off in the direction they’d come from. Sam caught a glimpse of other forms moving behind the first mummy, now lurching after them much like the grunt zombies they’d encountered back home, but his vision was soon obscured by the unbroken cabinets in the next gallery.
He stopped Rowena behind a large statue at a doorway, motioning for her to stay quiet, and pulled his gun from the back of his jeans.

Rowena shook her head urgently and pulled him down by the sleeve to hiss in his ear, “There’s no point shooting at them, they’ve got no brains, remember? A head shot isn’t going to work!”

Dammit, she had a point. He turned to her, asking, “Well, what can we do, then?”

Rowena had that look on her face, the look of utter determination that Sam couldn’t help but find inexplicably hot. She leapt back around the corner, threw out her hands and shouted “Cremo!”

The mummy stopped in its tracks as flames sprouted from the dessicated flesh, and it collapsed to the floor, burning merrily.

“Well, that did it,” Sam said, slightly flustered. Nice, Captain Obvious, he added to himself.

With a satisfied smirk, Rowena lifted her hands again, ready for the next shuffling mummy to appear, when behind them, a voice hissed, “Hey! Hey, you two!”

The both turned around, incredulously. A real, actual person was hanging out of an open doorway, waving them over urgently. “Hurry up!” she called.

Sam exchanged a look with Rowena, then back at the advancing mummies, silently shuffling their way through the galleries behind them. They both took off at a run for the open door, and the woman pulled them through and slammed it behind them.

The three of them stood in a corridor lit from some distance away by an emergency exit sign. Sam checked on Rowena and saw her holding her cut hands away from her body gingerly. She seemed otherwise okay, so he kept his gun pointed low and turned his full attention to their mysterious new friend. He knew Ro could hold her own, even though a voice in the back of his mind screamed out to put himself in front of her.

She was tall, perhaps almost as tall as Dean or Cas, and maybe early twenties—although the older Sam got, the worse he was at estimating other's ages. She looked well enough for someone after the End; clean and fed, at least. And wearing a scowl as she checked Sam and then Rowena out in return.

Hands on hips, she spat out, "Listen, I don't know how you two got in, or how you exploded all the glass like that, but you've just set a priceless ancient artifact on fire and I'd thank you to stop it!"

Sam exchanged another raised eyebrow look with Rowena, then they both spoke at the same time.

"Oh indeed? Would you rather we'd let it rip us to pieces?"

"Your precious artifact just tried to kill us!"

"Okay, enough!" the girl said, holding up her hands. "We’ve seen them move inside their cabinets, but thanks to you, they’re free of their glass containers. Fuck knows what we’re going to do with them now.” She spun around and stalked off down the corridor. "I should take you back to the street, but unfortunately we have an asylum policy."

Rowena caught Sam's eye as he tucked his gun away in his pants, a question in her expression. Sam spread his hands and shrugged. What else could they do but play along?

The door at the end of the corridor led to some kind of fire escape, but leading down further than
ground level in neverending rectangles. They trudged downwards in flickering flashlight beams, silent other than their footfalls.

Sam nearly ran into Rowena when they reached the bottom of the stairs, and the scowling girl opened another white door to reveal a cool, slightly musty corridor. Was this whole area under the museum full of passages and corridors? Emergency lights shone even down here, and Sam wondered if they had a stash of batteries to keep them all running without power.

The girl reached another door and stopped to face Sam and Rowena, who pointed their flashlights at the floor to create an eerie reflected glow.

“Okay, look,” the girl said, her hands up, palm-out. “I’m sorry if I was short with you up there, but I’ve been trying to keep the antiquities in one piece ever since the zombies arrived, and I get a little… territorial.”

“That’s okay,” Sam replied, trying to sound friendlier than he was feeling. “I’m Sam, this is Rowena. We’re, uh...new in town.”

The girl nodded, shaking Sam’s hand. “I’m Izzy. You’re Americans?”

“He is,” Rowena said, glancing up at Sam. “I’m originally from Scotland. Long ago,” she added, moving to shake Izzy’s hand then withdrawing when she realised her hand was still covered in blood.

Izzy gasped, "Oh, you're hurt! Come on, let's go in. We'll get you fixed up, then you can tell me what you're doing running around my museum breaking my stuff.”

Sam winced, looking down at the crumbling crook he still clutched in his fist, but his embarrassment disappeared as Izzy opened the door, revealing a large laboratory space. The room was empty and silent, but looked lived in by more than just one person, and Sam took a deep breath before he stepped forward with Rowena.

“What is this place?” he asked, following her across the room.

Izzy spared him a glance. “It’s home, for now at least. There’s a group of about thirty of us living here—we’re all staff or were nearby when the zombies came. A lot of people were turned that day…” she said, shuddering. “The zombies all left the museum right after that, but there are still a few around, trying to get in now and then. Anyway, the others are all out scavenging for supplies right now. We have underground access to the tunnels to trade with other survivor groups.”

“Tunnels?” Rowena asked, sounding as lost as Sam felt.

“Yeah, the tube—isn’t that where you’ve come from?” She looked around at them as they approached the other side of the room, where another small room contained a wall of screens showing what Sam assumed were feeds from the security cameras. He could see the mummies in a couple of different locations, standing in place.

“Not exactly,” Sam said, noticing a young guy sitting at a desk in the corner of the room, wary of the newcomers.

"Who are they, Iz?" he said, standing up.

Ignoring him, Rowena asked Izzy, “How do you have power down here?”

Izzy scanned the screens as she replied, "We're not completely sure, but under the museum is one of
the few areas of the city that still has power. We can't find any generator down here, so it's connected
to some of of subgrid, we think."

She turned abruptly around and moved to stand beside the man, crossing her arms over her chest.
"Ryan," she said, "this is Rowena and Sam. They haven't told me their story, but I think it's time they
did. Come sit here and show me your hands." She beckoned to Rowena, then pulled a small first aid
kit out from under the desk.

Sam looked at Rowena, who merely shrugged one shoulder at him. He huffed, and leaned back
against the desk behind him. How much of the truth could he leave out before their story sounded
plausible? In the corner, Ryan sat back on his chair, frowning.

“We’re...on the trail of some artifacts that we think could help with ending this...this zombie
apocalypse or whatever.”

Rowena sat on a chair opposite Izzy, her hands upturned on her knees. Izzy brandished a pair of
tweezers and started to pull something from the cuts in Rowena’s hands—slivers of glass, Sam
supposed.

“Do you know what caused it in the first place?” Izzy asked, as Rowena winced slightly.

Sam huffed. “Yeah, we do. But it really doesn’t matter how it happened, we’re just trying to make
sure it doesn’t get any worse. We were looking for an, uh—” he held up the crook, still in his hand,
“—a metal spearhead or a long shaft, possibly, supposed to be encased in this, but it seems that this
isn’t the real deal.”

“Nope. What, you think they’d put the actual valuables on display for any old thief to steal?
Especially back when security systems weren’t quite so advanced.” She gestured down, towards the
floor. “The real valuable stuff is stored in the vaults. It’s all climate controlled for preservation.” She
went back to rubbing an antiseptic wipe over Rowena’s palm.

Sam breathed a sigh of relief, smiling. “Great. We’ll just, uh, grab it and be on our way.”

Ryan sat forward on his chair. “We can’t let you just walk out of here with—”

“It’s no less than what your precious archeologists have been doing to antiquities all over the world
for centuries!” Rowena snapped.

Sam spoke up before things really kicked off. “Look, it’s not like there’s anything else we could do
with it. We can’t exactly sell it.”

“Who are you guys anyway? How’d you even get into the building?” Izzy asked, putting the first aid
kit aside.

“Thank you, dear,” Rowena said, rubbing at her palm gently with her opposite thumb. “He’s a
hunter. I’m a witch.” She demonstrated her point by clicking her fingers and conjuring an open
flame, but she shook it away quickly with a wince. “Oof, that stings with the antiseptic on it.”

Ryan and Izzy stared at her for a moment, then shared a glance. Izzy said, “I’m gonna take them
down there.”

“What?” Ryan hissed at her. “You can’t just—”

“The collection’s no use to us lying around down there! And if these guys have got a chance of
stopping all this zombie bullshit, we should help them!” Izzy glared at him until he dropped his eyes,
looking deeply unhappy.

“Fine, do it, but you’d better get it done before the scavengers get back or there’ll be people more opposed to this than I am.”

“Great. Let’s go.” Izzy pushed past Ryan and walked out of the room. Sam and Rowena followed, Sam handing Ryan the fake crook with what he hoped wasn’t too much of a cheeky smile as he passed him. Damn, Dean was really rubbing off on him lately.

Izzy led them to another staircase—she said she wasn’t game to use the lifts. Down another long couple of flights, a door opened to a long corridor with doors opening off to either side. On their left was a tiny office, and Izzy headed in to wake up the computer on the desk.

“I have no idea if this still even works—it’s been months since I’ve been down here.” She logged into the system and opened up some kind of search page. “Crook, Cleopatra. Yup, it’s here. Room twelve-C, drawer two-two-five.”

“Thank you, Izzy,” Rowena said, and headed off down the long corridor, eventually opening the door marked “12C”.

Steel cabinets were lined up in rows down the length of the room, with a corridor along one side. As Rowena led Sam to the location Izzy had told them, she shook her head. “There are a lot of powerful objects down here. I can sense them.”

“No really the time for actual treasure hunting, Ro,” Sam said, eyeing her.

Rowena just huffed and turned sharply into the narrow space between two cabinets. She ran her fingers along the label strip carefully, then opened a drawer to reveal the real crook of Cleopatra, lying on a foam pillow. The colors were brighter, the gold gleamed—and when Sam picked it up, it was definitely heavier than the fake had been.

Rowena let out a heavy breath. “This...this is definitely it, Sam.”

“How can you tell?” Sam asked, turning the crook over in his hands. A slight fizzing sensation spread from where the crook touched his palms.

“You can’t feel the power coming out of it?”

“Maybe a little.” He used his fingernail to flake off a little of the gold paint on the outside, and the metal underneath gleamed. He breathed out a relieved breath. “We did it.”

Rowena pulled some fabric from her shoulder bag, taking the crook to reverently wrap it and stash it safely away. She smiled up at Sam. “We did. Well done, Samuel.” She grabbed the front of his jacket, pulling him down until their lips could meet, and he melted into her kiss as he always did.

His hand moved to her waist, his thumb rubbing circles in the soft flesh there as she slid her fingers into his hair and pulled lightly. Their kiss deepened and Sam found himself wishing they were anywhere but in the basement levels of a museum right now.

The sound of a throat clearing pulled Sam from his spiralling thoughts, and he pulled away from Rowena, both of them turning to see Izzy standing at the door.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said dryly, glancing between them, "but we need to get back upstairs."
Sam stared at the monitor, not sure what he was seeing. "Where is this?"

"The top of the stairs down to the Great Court," Ryan said, worry clear in his voice. "They were all just standing still, then all at once they looked up and started moving in the same direction, towards the stairs."

He switched the view until they were looking at a wide angle view of the Great Court. What looked like a broken pile of bandages was attempting to crawl across the marble floor. "This guy fell down the stairs, and since then the rest of them haven't tried to go down, but they're trying to work out a way."

"Almost like something is compelling them to leave," Sam murmured, thinking of the few zombies that had seemed to command the others. He watched the one mummy with fascination as it tried to pull itself along with its one working arm, the dull, now-empty sockets of its eyes glaring off to one side.

"I don't see what all the fuss is about," Rowena said from where she sat across the room. "Just set fire to them," she said with a shrug. "We already know that works."

Both Ryan and Izzy turned looks of horror on her, Ryan saying, "Those mummies are over two thousand years old! Delicate and priceless artifacts—we can't just—just burn them!"

Rowena huffed. "Well, what do you suggest? We can't exactly herd them up like sheep!"

Sam watched the mummies as they lurched back and forth at the top of the stairs, only five of them left intact. "Actually, why can't we?"

Three sets of eyes turned to him. "Why can't we what?" Rowena asked.

Sam turned to Izzy and Ryan. "Is there an exit from the end of the gallery? Like where the mummies used to be?"

"Well, yeah, the galleries are a circuit," Izzy said. "There are two doors."

Sam nodded. "We'll lure them back in there, then move the display cases across the doors. Are they bolted down?"

"I don't think so, but..." Ryan trailed off.

"But what?" Sam pulled Rowena up from her chair by the hand, murmuring, "Sorry Ro, we'll need you in case things go wrong."

As they moved back through the still-empty lab room towards the door Izzy had brought them through in the first place, Sam heard Ryan mutter, "This is a terrible plan."

"You got something better? I'm all ears," Sam said over his shoulder, heading for the staircase.

They took a quick breather at the top, before heading back into the public galleries, keeping well away from the mummies.

Izzy took one look at their shuffling gait and shuddered, turning away. She spoke quietly, "So what, Ryan and I will lead them off, and you come around the other way to shift the furniture?"

"We'll follow and shut them off from this side," Sam said, pointing down the row of galleries nearest to them. "Then we'll loop around and help you guys shut off the other side."
Ryan gave him a look of disbelief, but turned to follow Izzy as she moved over to the door of the galleries.

"Oi, you lot!" Izzy called, her eyes widening as the mummies turned, as one, to look at her. She turned and ran into the dim shadows of the galleries.

Sam and Rowena followed the mummies as they stumbled after Izzy—at an alarmingly faster rate than they had a few hours ago.

The idea that they'd been relearning to walk was oddly terrifying, but when he and Rowena reached the first narrow door and made sure all the mummies had gone through, they started shoving the cabinets across with a murmured spell from Rowena to assist. Unless the zombies learned to climb, the barrier should keep them in.

They ran back around to the other end of the gallery and heard Ryan shout "Sam?" before they rounded the corner to see the two of them trying to shift the heavy cabinets across the floor. Rowena started to cast to help with the shifting, but the mummies were already at the doorway. Izzy dropped back, grabbing Ryan. “Fall back!” she gasped, darting around cabinets to the door Rowena and Sam had just come through. They all started to shift the cabinets again, the contents shuddering and falling over inside.

A crash and shout brought them up short, and Sam looked around the end of the row to see Ryan had tripped over, and was now trapped with his back against a cabinet with a mummy right in his face. The shredded corpse reached out an arm before they could do anything to help, and Ryan tried to grab it before it touched him. He put his hand around the mummy’s wrist and the whole arm came away with a dry tearing sound.

“Fucking...what?!” He dropped the dismembered arm with a cry, shoving the mummy in the chest so that it stumbled backwards, giving himself time to dart away through the gap. But the other mummies were already through, and heading for the gap Rowena and Sam were trying to close.

Sam saw them coming and wondered what was controlling them. Then he glanced at the bag that Rowena was carrying. "Ro, give me the crook."

"What?" she nearly shrieked at him.

"Just give it to me, I wanna try something."

Rowena fumbled in her bag and brought out the wrapped bundle, holding it out to him. Sam grabbed the crook and planted his feet in place, trying to force himself to feel authoritative.

“Stop.”

The mummies paused, each of them turning their eerie eyeless faces towards him.

“Move,” he added, feeling the odd coolness prickling over his skin again.

The mummies turned away from Ryan, and obediently shuffled back through the gap. Ryan hurriedly shoved the cabinet across the opening and stumbled back to where Izzy was standing, staring at Sam with wide eyes.

Sam shivered, a light-headed floating sensation coming over him. “Rowena?” he began, his voice cracking.

"Samuel!” She stepped closer to him, all business all of a sudden. “You of all people should know
better than to play with ancient power!” She held out the fabric again and Sam dropped the crook back into it.

The shivering sensation faded away, and he slumped, feeling its loss like a wave of fatigue.

“Can’t believe that actually worked,” Izzy said quietly, now watching the mummies standing still behind the barrier of cabinets.

Ryan performed a full-body shudder. “I’m gonna have to find some kind of scourer to use in the shower tonight. Fuck, I thought I was done then. Ugh!”

The rest of them huffed out relieved laughter.

***

Izzy followed Sam and Rowena back down the main stairs into the Great Court, wondering what on earth this pair of wildcards planned to do next.

When they reached ground level, Rowena said, “As much as I’d love to stay and celebrate with you folk, we really do have to be getting on, now we’ve got what we came for.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed, “thanks for your help.”

Izzy nodded. “I’d say you’re welcome, but all you’ve done is cause us a shedload of trouble.” She grinned. “It was nice to meet you, though.”

“You too,” Sam agreed. “Uh, you can leave us here, we’ll find our way out.”

Izzy shook her head, “Nah, I need to make sure you close the door properly after you leave. Don’t want zombies finding their way in here.”

“Oh. Well actually, that’s not really how we intended to leave,” Sam said, glancing at Rowena.

She shrugged. “They’ve seen most of what we do already. No use keeping it a secret.” She turned to Izzy and Ryan, saying, “We’re going to call our friends to us now. They’re angels.”

Izzy shared a glance with Ryan, then checked with Sam. “Is she serious?”

Sam just closed his eyes and bowed his head. “Balthazar? Balthazar, we have the staff—we’re ready to come back now.”

He looked around them, just as Rowena was doing, but the Great Court was distinctly empty of angels. “Gabriel? Please, come get us. We’re done here.”

“Maybe they’re having trouble hearing us from underwater,” Rowena suggested.

“Or worse,” Sam added, frowning. “You brought the stuff for the spell, right?”

Rowena held up her bag and, muttering something about unreliable angels, got to work unpacking a pile of packets and bottles.

Izzy looked up at Sam as he came over to where she and Ryan stood.

“Underwater?” Ryan asked him.

“Probably best not to ask,” Sam said, grimacing. “I hope they’re all right.”
Izzy watched the witch prepare her spell, as she painted a complex sigil onto the side of the staircase. She tried not to speculate as to what any of the substances Rowena had pulled out of her satchel were, but by the smell as she mixed them together in the small bowl, they weren’t anything pleasant.

As she worked, Rowena said, “Teleportation over such a long distance isn’t as precise as I would like, but since our angel friends have gone and left us in this pickle, we’ll have to make do.”

Izzy asked Sam, “She’s not going to take you to somewhere mid-air or like, inside a rock or something, is she?”

Sam rubbed the back of his neck nervously. “I really hope not.”

Izzy grinned. “Well, thanks for… y’know, not destroying the rest of our collection.”

“I’m glad to help. You guys stay safe. You never know, maybe things’ll be safe enough one day...” He trailed off, perhaps as aware as she was that the chances of them ever meeting again were slim to none.

More soberly, she replied, “You too. Good luck with whatever it is you’re gonna do with the crook.” Izzy frowned. She didn’t suppose they’d ever get to find out if they were successful with their plan.

Sam said another quick goodbye to Ryan, then Rowena began her chant. She reached out as Sam joined her, taking his hand, and the sigil on the wall began to glow with an odd, purple light. Rowena’s chant reached a crescendo, and then they were gone with a flash and a lingering ozone smell.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I’d love to hear what you thought of the Adventures of Samwena :)

Small disclaimer: I have taken a few liberties with the layout and contents of the British Museum, although I hope those who have been there might recognise it. Also, the tomb of Cleopatra and Mark Antony has not, in fact, yet been discovered by anyone (but the suicide via snake was too good to pass up).

Stay tuned! Next week, Jscribbles will be bringing you the tale of Dean and Castiel on the trail of the Dastardly Demon with the Razor.
Happy Knife, Happy Life

Chapter by jscribbles

Chapter Notes

Listen...I heard y’all came here for some Destiel, so Imma give you some Destiel so you can Destiel while you Destiel all your Destiel, y’feel?

Holla to MalMuses for beta’ing this chapter.

Many apologies for the late chapter, everyone. Let it be known, that when the ‘e’ key on your laptop stops working late at night before a stat holiday, writing becomes SUPER difficult. Turns out, a LOT of words need the letter ‘e’. Who knew?

Technical difficulties aside, here is this week’s chapter. Please enjoy, I hope it was worth the wait!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hand it to Crowley to get them the location of the demon they needed. A little bit of voodoo courtesy of his mother, a little bit of what little demon powers he had, and the next thing they knew, Dean and Castiel had a map with the demon’s location burned into the eastern portion of America. Crowley said it was marked with the smudge of witchcraft, but Dean kinda figured it looked like a cigarette burn.

“There,” Crowley had said. “You’ll find one of his demon lackeys there. They’ll tell you where to go, where to find him.”

Dean and Cas had stood behind the former King of Hell, and exchanged scowls. Looking peeved, Cas had asked in a gruff murmur, “How do we even know the demon will reveal its master’s location?”

“Just got a flirt a bit,” Crowley chuckled, looking over his shoulder and up at Dean with a twitch of his lip and a twerk of his brow. “The leather and flogger type of flirting.”

Dean shifted his feet and ignored the heavy lead that filled his stomach. “Torture.”

“Bingo,” Crowley had said, rising to his feet and brushing dirt of his dirty jacket. “But make it good, Squirrel. His master is crafty and you know the demon didn’t swear allegiance because he’s a loyal, lion-hearted lad. He’s been tortured into subservience, and he won’t buckle to a couple light licks of a blade.” Crowley’s eyes flickered up from their casual drift up Dean’s body. “Better brush the dust off those old skills of yours, Dean.”

With a map in their hands, gas in the tank of a mean-looking jeep, and each other as company, Cas and Dean had set off in search of this demon. They rode together with ease, despite the heavy conversation lurking over their shoulders. The bomb that Cas had dropped about the journey of their souls, together through existence, was kind of a big deal.

But the weather was actually comfortable for early November, and the side roads were easy to maneuver in an off-roading vehicle that could barrel over zombies and corpses without a hitch.
They’d left early enough that they spent nearly the entire drive to Georgia in daylight. Cas had let Dean retract the cover on the vehicle, so they’d driven with the wind rushing past their faces. Cas even put his boots up on the dash while he read and re-read the map, and Dean couldn’t help but look over at him once in a while to admire the floppy brown hair whipping this way and that across Cas’ forehead and around his ears.

The heavy talk could wait until Cas didn’t look so damn relaxed, and so fucking pretty in the sunlight.

Of course, the night fell, the air cooled, and after a good hacking and slashing to make their way into an abandoned mall, Dean and Castiel found the demon they were looking for. It’d been dragging a muzzled zombie down an old ‘Employees Only’ service hallway. The demon who Crowley had identified as Tryton hadn’t seen the blow coming. He’d nearly flipped onto his ass, stunned for long enough that Dean and Cas could bind him in iron that sizzled against his skin, and drag him into a boiler room.

“Tell me,” Dean growled not half-an-hour later, “where your boss is.”

The demon puked all down the front of his dirty, torn shirt, his stomach forcibly squeezing out the salt and holy water concoction that Dean had whipped up as a last minute-idea. As the last of it hung off his lip in a string of saliva and plopped down onto his heaving chest, the demon rasped, “He’s up the street. Just hang a left at Fuck You, Cunt Street. If you’ve hit Kill Yourself corner, you’ve gone too far.”

From a table beside him, Dean grabbed a tire iron he’d found in Bobby’s garage, and he swung it hard, getting the demon hard in the jaw. The bone snapped and the demon stomped his feet on the ground, screaming through his teeth.

Behind the demon, Cas winced, but didn’t interject. He continued to pace, looking a bit pale.

Wagging the tire iron, Dean asked, “My bad for not making myself more clear, hell bitch. Where...is your boss?” Dean leaned down, and put his hands on his knees, watching the demon closely, their faces barely a foot apart. Smiling slowly, Dean whispered, “I’m countin’ to three, and if you don’t have an exact location by the end of my countdown, I’m gonna start yanking off toes with the really, really blunt edge of this fancy iron doo-dad I got here, and I’m gonna feed ‘em to you. One.”

The demon snorted and shook his head, his long black hair dripping sweat into his eyes and into his unruly, curly beard.

“Eat my dick, Winchester. You don’t scare me. You haven’t scared any of us for years—”

Dean smiled and raised his hand, flicking up a peace-sign. “Two.”

The demon yanked at his restraints and hissed when they sizzled and smoked against his skin. Blood dripped down onto the grimy cement floor, trickling down the legs of the chair into sticky, dark red puddles. With his eyes snapping to black, the demon snarled, “The mention of your very name used to inspire terror within our ranks, especially after you joined us at Alastair’s side, but we’ve heard you’ve gone soft.”

Dean twisted the tire iron through the air and rolled his neck. “Three.”

Cas bowed his head as he paced, grimacing as the demon shrieked and writhed in it’s chair. Dean had driven the forked end of the iron through its middle and was sawing it in and out like a blade.

“You want fear?” Dean snarled as he backhanded the demon and stepped back, leaving the weapon
protruding from its mangled torso. With a fire in his chest, and his vision blurring in anger, he spun on his heel, picked up the bottle of holy water they’d brought, and shoved the mouth of it onto the demon’s lips. “Drink it up.”

He squeezed the bottle, shooting holy water down the demon’s throat, and in response, the demon’s eyes widened into bulges and its face turned red as its blood boiled. Dean’s nails dug into the demon’s dirty beard as he held his jaw closed, and within him, he felt a sick sort of pleasure as the demon drowned, choking and sputtering pink water.

“Stop!”

Dean gripped harder and smiled.

“STOP!” Cas’ hands were on Dean’s wrists, pulling his hands away from the demon’s jaw. “He’s drowning, Dean! He can’t answer you if he’s drowning. Use your head.”

Of course. Dean blinked hard and stepped back, shaking his head to clear his mind. At the sound of Cas’ voice, he immediately feeling the surge of sick pleasure freeze and then melt into shame.

The demon coughed and gagged, shuddering as bloody water came back up again.

While it shamed him to do so, Dean looked over at Cas, who was watching him under furrowed brows, his face shadowed in doubt.

“He is no use dead, Dean,” Cas said slowly, much more quiet than before when his voice had taken on a disturbed, panicked tone. He’d been perturbed; of course he was. Dean had forgotten himself for a minute. Shame roiled in his stomach and coiled around his lungs, making it hard to breathe. He’d too easily fallen into his old ways. It had been almost fun to come up with different ways to hurt the demon, to get different screams from him… It had been a welcome challenge.

Dean walked away with a curt nod and leaned against the table with his weapons, feeling Castiel’s eyes on him. At his hips, Dean’s fingers curled back against the edge of the table and he lowered his gaze, feeling too disgusting look up and make eye contact.

“Where is your commander?” Castiel asked quietly, his authoritative rasp filling the room, even though it was barely above a whisper.

The demon spit at Castiel’s feet, and Dean felt an immediate hot surge of defensive rage, but Cas didn’t flinch. Instead, Cas shook the nearly-empty bottle of holy water and he said, “Don’t misinterpret my intervention there, demon. I was not protecting you, I was merely preventing Dean from wasting you too soon. If you continue to fail in giving us answers, I see no need in prolonging your sticky end.”

The demon glared somewhere around Cas’ knee, and remained silent.

Cas sighed and turned to Dean, offering him the bottle. “Dean? Resume your activities.”

“NO!” the demon croaked, jerking its head up, long dark tendrils of hair falling into its eyes and tangling at his temples. “Vine City. He’s in Vine City.”

“Vine City?” Castiel parroted, frowning in confusion. His blue eyes glanced at Dean in question.

“I-It’s a subway station. Next one up the l-line,” the demon choked out, jutting his chin towards the door. “If you go back out into the mall, there’s a movie theatre in the north end. Just underneath, you take the big stairs into the subway stations, and follow the tracks until you get to Vine City Station.
You’ll find ‘em there. Northbound-Southbound platform.”

“What’s his name?”

“Don’t know his real name. We just call him Frankenstein.”

Again, Dean and Cas exchanged looks.”Sounds like a heap of steaming bullshit,” Dean groused. “Sounds like you’re tryna lead us into the subway lines where there’s no fuckin’ power, it’s pitch black, and I’m sure is crawling with every zombie who died on the commute to work when the fuckin’ end times came. No-fucking-thanks.”

The demon shrugged and the iron chains clinked and banged against the chair. “Take the subway tracks, walk the streets, I don’t fuckin’ care how you get there. You want Dr. Frankenstein, you’re gonna descend into Vine City. It’s where he lives. He never leaves, never does anything but cut and carve. ‘Round those parts, you don’t gotta worry about zombies.”

Dean looked away from the demon and caught Cas’ eye. He could tell from the slight turn of Cas’ head and the deepening lines around his mouth that Cas was trying not to give away his confusion. To anyone else, he looked like he was concentrating, but Dean knew those expressions.

“Why would we not worry about zombies?” Dean asked.

The bleeding, burnt demon grinned, his teeth red and pink, and he lifted his head, gazing at Dean with eyes twinkling. “‘Cause they’re scared of ‘im.”

“Scared?” The divot between Cas’ eyes deepened.

“He pulls them apart and cuts them into pieces. They’re experiments, you see.” The demon’s gurgles and coughs morphed into wet laughter, and his head lolled back in the chair. “He pokes and prods to see how they work. Sometimes he leaves ‘em like a stump, while other times he patches them together like conjoined twins. Or, he simply hangs them to see what happens when they starve.”

Even though he was talking about zombies, Dean felt sick to his stomach, and Cas looked it, his lips going pale. Experimenting on the undead… Experimenting on anything like that was cruel. Dean and the camp killed the zombies to survive. They didn’t torture them, they didn’t mock. To do so would be monstrous.

“What?” Dean demanded, shaking his head a tad.

Damp chuckles rose up into wheezing laughter again. “Because the razor demands it. It wants new blood, it wants to breed a new fear.”

Bingo.

Cas and Dean exchanged brief glances, and while the demon may not have noticed anything, there was triumph in the look.

“What razor?” Castiel played dumb, crossing his arms over his chest. He tapped the bottle of holy water against his ribs, and the demon’s eyes darkened as it watched the water slosh about in the plastic.

“Frankenstein’s blade,” Tryton replied with a proud grin. “My master’s blade. It used to belong to the esteemed and twisted majesty that was Alastair; he brought it to Hell to from Earth. They used to say the metal that formed the razor was forged from the blood of his victims and the shards of his soul that he splintered every time he murdered. Alastair was a killer, you see. In life, before Hell. He
took the lives of hundreds, of thousands. It was rumored he made clothing from their skins, and wove baskets from their hair. He picked his teeth with their bones and ate anything that was left behind.”

“Get to the point,” Dean growled, snapping his fingers. “We don't got all day to hear you sing the praises of fuckin’ Alastair. Sick fuck.”

Dean turned away and paced, crossing his arms over his chest, hoping he looked all right. Inside, his stomach was shriveled and heaving, recognizing the admiration in the demon’s voice; when he’d been in Hell, he’d shared the sentiment. He remembered, after years of torturing, how he would have kissed the ground Alastair walked on if it was asked of him. No...he’d have begged for the opportunity.

It would have been a high honour.

“My master, Frankenstein, he wields Alastair’s power now. He carries on his legacy, as Hell is now on Earth.” Tryton sighed, his eyes sliding closed, head lolling to and fro on the back of the rickety chair. “He has bred a new fear among the new generation of Earth’s occupants. The undead avoid his lair, they can smell the destruction. They can smell the agony of their kin. No where in Vine City will you find an undead who voluntarily ventures there.”

“It’s why you were here,” Castiel spoke up, his grim voice loud in the boiler room. A pipe dripping behind him was the only other competing sound. Cas’s crossed arms dropped to his side and he reached behind him to point at the door, out to the mall. “You were fetching new meat for his experiments.”

With a twinkle of madness in his eyes, Tryton peered at them from under heavy lids. “Yes,” he murmured. “The ones he currently have are used, they’re spent. Starved, weak, limbless. They’re already scared of him. What use are they to him now?”

Having heard enough, Dean nodded at Cas, and the two men took leave of the room, leaving Tryton to rot.

There was no point to killing him now.

He’d just come back.

***

Dean and Cas sat outside of Vine City Station, the jeep running to warm them up as the otherwise nice day turned frigid. The sun sunk beyond the horizon, reflecting off the windows of high-rises and abandoned, broken cars. The rays of sun-down creating a deceptively beautiful kaleidoscope of oranges and purples all the way down the main big city streets.

Cas adjusted his seated position, leaning one foot up against the dashboard, his other leg folded in front of him, balancing a bottle of water. They were taking a rest; if Cas had to run, his shitty ankle had to take it easy, and if Dean had to fight, he didn’t want to be starved. They watched the station sign above the stairway that led down into the subway from the street, Cas looking like his mind was thousands of miles away, and Dean eating his way through a bag of beef jerky and trying to pretend like he didn’t hate himself for the way he’d behaved with that demon.

It had to be done, of course, but it didn’t fuck him up any less that the monster he’d been in Hell nearly a decade ago still lurked within him whenever someone handed him a blade and told him to carve.
It scared him, especially since they were hunting down Alastair’s blade. What Cas didn’t know was that Dean had used the blade before; he’d wielded it and felt it’s power. He was scared to feel that again…

“We’ve known each other for a thousand years, huh?” Dean asked, staring unblinking into the cityscape, chewing slowly.

Cas turned the bottle onto it’s head, then after a beat, turned it back onto it’s flat side. “Yes.”

“Yes? That’s it?”

“Well, no. A thousand years are a mere drop in the metaphorical bucket.”

Dean swallowed and reached over, plucking the bottle away from Cas. When the angel scowled at him, Dean grinned as he rolled down the window, and tossed the bottle out the window.

Watching Dean roll up the window again, Cas shook his head and said, “You could have just said ‘I need attention’.”

Ignoring him, Dean shimmied down the seat, resting his head against the headrest and propping up his feet beside Cas’ bad one. “You know,” Dean murmured quietly, “this is the first time we’ve really got to be alone since the end of the world.”

Cas rolled his tongue around in his mouth and the tops of his cheeks coloured, but he shrugged and casually said, “I was unaware you were chomping at the bit to get me alone.” He turned his head on the seat, their faces close. “Although there have been plenty of opportunities for a private conversation.”

“Sure,” Dean nodded, his eyes scanning Cas’ facial features. The freckles and the blue eyes—looking magnificently bright in the majesty of sundown—pulled the oxygen from the cabin and made Dean momentarily forget about the depths of his fucked-up psyche. “But since you got your memories back, we’ve been alone, sure, but...around other people. And like I told you before, you’ve been weird, and it kinda breaks my heart, dude.”

“I…” Cas’ mouth stayed parted for a moment, and Dean caught Cas in a rare moment of struggling to say something. Then; “I told you. You and I’ve met before, and reliving the memories of that in a matter of minutes was...overwhelming to say the least.”

“You woke up and instantly started crying,” Dean pointed out with a teasing chuckle. He nudged Cas in the ribs with his elbow.

Cas shot him an exasperated look. The sun had shifted since they’d started speaking, and it was slowly casting half of Cas face in shadow. When he lifted his head, they lost the closeness, and Dean felt strangely alone. Cas’ jaw jumped, and his t-shirt strained over his shoulders as Cas wrapped his arms around his folded knee. Under his arm was a small hole in the t-shirt. Dean felt a silly impulse to stick his finger in it.

“It was emotional. To...realise we hadn’t just met once. We met hundreds of times. We became friends, and protected each other more times than I can count, more times than I think I even remember. We even fell in…”

The silence was telling in the cabin. Dean took a deep breath and reached forward, placing a hand over Cas’ thigh and he gave it a supportive squeeze. Cas moved his head towards Dean ever so slightly, peering down at him with a strange shining in his eyes.
“If I told you we’d fallen in love hundreds of times before, would you be angry?”

Dean abruptly lifted his head and immediately looked away, his eyes unblinking and wide as they stared out the windshield.

In his chest, his heart pounded fast and hard, but steady. His palms began to sweat and his face got hot, entirely overwhelmed by those three words that Cas had *spoken out loud, for fuck’s sake.*

They’d fallen in love before.

Hundreds of times.

His heart in his throat, and blood rushing in his ears, Dean looked over at Cas, who looked resigned.

Sad.

Worried.

How could Dean have ever wondered if Cas didn’t feel the same way? How could he have worried that he’d be mad? It was so clear, so fuckin’ obvious that Cas felt the same way.

“Fallen in love, huh?” Dean asked slowly, a bead of hope swelling to the size of a balloon in his chest. His lip twitching up in the corner, flashing Cas a peek of teeth. Dean chuckled. “Fancy that.”

“Fancy that?” Cas repeated, stunned. He looked so offended that he turned his entire torso to face Dean and his brows knitted together. He licked his lips more than once to buy time, which only served to somehow *tickle* Dean a bit too much, considering the gravity of their conversation. “Our souls wrote hundreds of love stories that Chuck discovered and re-wrote to end in tragedy, Dean. He made me kill you each time, and then ripped the memory away. Over and over, I had to murder you, or stand by while you died when I could have saved you. It was a torment. All we wanted was to be in love, and God destroyed it. And now? Now I remember… I…”

Dean remained silent, and licked his lips. He remained frozen, overcome with the absolute unfairness of that reality. God, as he always suspected, was a monster.

Cas went on, a bit upset, his eyes shining, his hand clapping down on his thigh as he spoke rushedly, his voice thick. “My soul and yours have traversed through century-after-century, finding each other each time, our stories interwoven like prophecy and all you have to say is ‘fancy that?”

“I mean,” Dean chuckled, raising his hands helplessly, “makes sense, don’t it?”

Cas’ jaw dropped. “You’re mocking me.”

Laughter—quiet, as to not alert any zombies—rumbled in the cabin, originating in Dean and then migrating over to Cas. Poor guy; his blue eyes were watery with tears but twinkling with shocked amusement.

“No,” Dean chuckled. “I’m not mocking you, Cas. I’m just...relieved. I mean—” Dean raised his hand to his forehead, pushing back hair and scratching at his scalp. “—if you’d’a told me that a year ago? I might’ve freaked out. But, fuck, Cas. It’s the end of the goddamn world. I’m sure you or Kassiel or whoever you are...were… I’m sure you knew what you were doing back then, but this keys thing is a long shot. It’s a fifty-fifty fuckin’ shot that we resolve this shit-show, and whether it’s the good fifty or the bad fifty, I’m gonna live like it’s the end of the world.”

Cas stared at him, and Dean stared back, smiling helplessly.
“So,” Dean finished quietly, “no, it don’t make me angry. Take those love stories, those bajillon-million versions of us, and add one more story on top of ‘em. The last one.” Dean reached out between them, curling his fingers around Cas’ hot, damp ones. “The best one.”

Oprah would’ve been proud. Sam, if he was here with his big dumb feelings and it’s-okay-if-you’re-gay attitude, would have been crying his eyes out.

Dad might’ve been pissed, but...fuck him.

Cas looked down at their hands and he smiled. The sun disappeared under the horizon, down past the cars piled on the sidewalks. It reflected on the skyscrapers, the sky turning a dark periwinkle.

Cas and Dean stared at each other silently.

The hand in his had always felt familiar. Cas, beside him, for ten years, had always felt familiar. There’d been a reason he trusted him even through hard times, through times when maybe Cas hadn’t earned that trust. And there’d been a reason that Cas had stayed by his side, even through times when Dean certainly hadn’t done a single thing to deserve it.

When Dean grew a pair of balls and one day said what he wanted to say, they’d make another love story. They’d write the best story, because this time they were writing it on their own, and no one would be there to rewrite the ending.

Cas pulled his hand away quickly and nodded up through the windshield. “Vine City,” he said, his tone strange. “We’d...better get to the razor before it gets truly dark out. I suspect we have about thirty minutes.”

Blinking from the emotional whiplash, Dean watched Cas lower his foot, roll up the map on the seat beside him, and shove it into the duffel that laid in a lump on the cabin floor.

“Uh,” Dean said, lowering his feet, too, looking around for his backpack like this was his first day, “yeah, uh, sure. Let’s get to it, then.”

Before Dean had even reached for the door knob, Cas was jumping out, slinging the duffel around his shoulder, and stalking towards the top of the subway station steps with his shoulders looking tight. Feeling a bit like he was missing something, Dean followed him and tried to push down doubt as he put his game face, and got ready to face a little Hell.

***

Vine City subway station was straight out of every zombie or post-apocalyptic destruction flick Dean had ever watched. As they walked down the dirty steps, speckled with blood and covered in gum, guts, and litter, and descended into the underground station, Dean couldn’t help but feel intensely cool. Sure, the station was terrifying with its seemingly endless darkness and emptiness, and was disgusting because of the graffiti, blood splatters, abandoned briefcases and baby strollers, but it gave off 28 Days Later vibes. Dean loved that movie.

If he ever got the opportunity to watch a movie again, he’d make Cas binge every zombie movie they had on Netflix. He’d say it was for research. Cas loved research, even if he hated zombies.

The feeling of nervous excitement died as soon as they helped each other climb over the turnstiles, trying to avoid the creaky levers in case Tryton had been lying and zombies really did still lurk around the station. Once they passed the pay barriers and found themselves at the top of a tall, steep
set of stairs and escalators, all Dean wanted to do was run away.

On either side of the stairs, except for a center walkway, body parts lined the steps. They were piled atop each other; some limbs in fresher states than others. A fair amount of the carnage was rotted, one person’s flesh melting into another’s in a stomach-turning fashion. Cas led the way down the center of the staircase, stepping cautiously as to not slip on any putrid zombie skin left on the cement.

What was even more fucked up was that in the more aged, decomposed trunk of what used to be a zombie torso, there were candles burning, melting into the corpse so that one wax could hardly be distinguished from liquefied flesh.

Dean saw Cas raise his hand to his mouth, pressing the back of his wrist under his nose and swallowing hard.

When they reached the bottom, stepping under the sign above their head that read ‘Northbound | Southbound Platforms’, it only got worse.

The long, narrow platform with subway tunnels and pillars on either side, was a butcher shop; zombie body parts were all over the floor in piles. There was a crate full of shoes, and a bottle of eyeballs spilled and forgotten on the floor by their feet. In the distance, he heard snapping and snarling, but it was weak. Blood; black and green and red, in various states of oxidation painted the floor and pillars. Maps that once had helped commuters find their way were now painted in hand prints and dotted in a textured goop that Dean didn’t want to admit he knew the origin of.

Dean had to stop for a moment, visions of Hell flashing behind his eyelids.

The stench was so, so familiar. It was what fear smelled like, what agony smelled like. In his chest he felt a spark—a dark, shameful spark, ignited by the memory of what it felt like to love the smell.

Dean reached back and snatched up his gun, while Cas brandished his angel sword in front of him in response to a growl and the sound of feet shuffling.

In the distance, maybe twenty, thirty feet ahead, they found their demon.

Or rather, they found Frankenstein.

Under the light of a swinging lantern, a singular table was illuminated in flickering orange light. On the table, being operated on, was a zombie. It was moaning and snapping, it’s feet kicking out and it’s fingers stretching out at disgusting angles at its sides, held down by restraints.

Elbows deep in the zombie, their torture master pulled out a handful of intestines, staring at them like they held Hell’s darkest secrets, before he swiped at the innards with a long, curved razor. Black goo poured over the demon’s hands from the guts, and he dropped the gore back into the open science experiment.

Mid-step, Cas’ foot hit the jar of eyes, and it rolled across the grimy tiles.

Frankenstein looked up, turning his head towards them, the knobs of his spine sliding under taut yellow flesh. He zeroed in on Cas with one white eye and slowly wiped his shining, bloody hand on his leathery, soiled butcher’s apron.

Cas froze, his flashlight locked on the demon. Knowing the dangerous glint in the demon’s eye, Dean moved forward and stepped in front of Cas, his gun held tightly in his hand under the beam of his own flashlight.
Dean and Cas held their breath as the demon growled—a horrible clicking, animalistic noise that they had never heard from a demon before. Dean, however, had heard the noise before...from himself, from the depths of Hell when he’d been elbows deep in innards and someone’s chest cavity too.

The demon continued to stare at them from above his dissection, and then grinned, blood dripping off his chin back into the open torso.

Then, Frankenstein ran.

Dean jumped backwards into Cas, and he felt Cas immediately grab onto his jacket.

The demon dove away into the pitch black shadows, behind a pillar that said ‘Vine City Station’ and down onto the southbound tracks. With a panicked jolt, Cas shone his flashlight in that direction, but with a row of pillars blocking either side of the station, the rays just created a maze of shadows. Regardless, the demon wasn’t there; they simply saw a rusted, unused subway rail.

The two men panted as panic filled the air around them. They could hear the demon running around them, but couldn’t find him with their light. Dean held his gun tighter, and he knew for certain that Cas had his angel blade squeezed in his hand, ready to fight.

“Where is it?” Cas breathed, twisting behind Dean. Their flashlight rays swirled around, illuminating more horrors; dissected, open carcasses of zombies and, Dean suspected, humans.

“SHOW YOURSELF, COWARD!” Dean bellowed, his voice echoing around them.

The zombie who was mid-vivisection snarled, then moaned as its intestines slid out, splashing down onto the floor beside the metal operating table with a splat.

The demon cackled somewhere to their left, but by the time Dean spun on his heel and pointed his flashlight, he saw a mere shadow of the demon running out of range.

Blood pounded in Dean’s ears. His palm was sweaty, and out of impulsive panic, he raised his gun and shot it in the direction of the footsteps. For a brief moment, the subway station was illuminated by the muzzle flash, the horrors flashing in and out of view.

Dean stepped forward towards the zombie strapped to the table, his eyes darting around, his stomach churning as he saw two more zombies tied to subway pillars, snapping and snarling at him. They were thin and malnourished; starved. Their eyes were white, their movements slow and weak.

“What the—”

A thud; a crack like someone had been punched.

“Dean!”

The footsteps were quicker, louder behind him—

“No!” Dean roared when he looked back, just in time to hear the clinking of metal and then Cas’s eyes widen as a thick chain wrapped around his neck and yanked him backwards, off of his feet. Cas hit the ground hard, and his feet kicked out, his flashlight dropping to the ground with a flier as he gasped and wheezed, yanking at the chain that dragged him back across the grimy, blood-slick subway tiles.

Cas was hauled away into the shadows, out from the range of the flashlights rays, and Dean
launched himself towards him, away from the horror show that was the dissected zombie.

“CAS!” Dean screamed, aiming his flashlight ahead and charging into the darkness.

In the beams of his bobbing flashlight, he saw the demon clearly as he hauled Cas backwards.

He was sickening.

Covered in blood, old, tall, and hunched over with a cataract in one eye, the demon grinned as he grunted and yanked on the chain that hung from rafters Dean and Cas hadn’t noticed before.

Cas was lifted into the air, the chain around his neck dangling from the ceiling, hanging him.

The demon cackled as Cas swung out his feet and gasped, his eyes widening, his face turning red.

“Caught me a fresh one,” the demon simpered, his eyes wide, his yellow, rotting teeth bared in a grin. The eye not blind was pitch black and gleeful. “It’s been so long since I heard the sound of life—”

A long, curved blade was held in the demon’s shaking hand, the metal speckled with brown and red.

With a quick, jarring shudder, Dean reacted violently. Images of that blade in his hand as he carved, slashed, and tore at souls flashed behind his eyes.

Frankenstein turned it in his hand and reeled back to bury the razor into Castiel’s back, but Dean launched himself at the demon, knocking it off its feet. As they crashed to the floor and grappled, the demon released the chains in his hand in favour of clawing at Dean.

Behind him, Castiel cried out hoarsely. There was the sound of metal clinking and then the heavy thud of Cas hitting the ground. Under Dean, the demon shrieked and laughed, torn between panic and glee in its madness. It flailed madly, swiping the blade at Dean, whose clothing tore, and whose skin at his shoulders and chest sliced cleanly under the blade’s sharp edge.

They fought, and when Dean finally grabbed the demon’s wrist, straining to keep it away from his neck as the tip shook near his jugular, the demon gasped—a hollow, horrible sound. Dean’s nostrils filled with the scent of rot and he nearly gagged.

“It knows you,” the demon breathed, the loose skin of its face trembling, its eyes wide. “I can feel it pulling away from me. It wants you. You,” the demon wheezed, “are home. You are where it starts —”

Rotted, yellow and brown teeth sprayed across the floor as Dean landed one—two—three punches to its face.

As the demon gasped for breath, Dean swung his free arm again and brought the palm of his hand hard into the forearm of the creature. Under his hand, he felt the bone break, and the demon shrieked, flailing in between Dean’s legs.

One quick moment later, and Dean had the blade in his hand; the handle fit into his palm like an extension of himself. The metal shone in the flashlight he’d tossed aside, and he felt a surge of confidence. Twirling it in his hand, Dean sneered, “I am not the start. I am the end.”

And with a snarl of anger, Dean raised the blade over his head and brought it down swiftly, plunging it into the demon’s neck. As the demon gasped hollowly, wide eyes fluttering, Dean lifted himself up just enough, and then grabbed the demon by the shoulder. With a grin, Dean pulled the blade back,
cutting the demon open from the base of his neck to the top of his navel. As the demon breathed it’s final breaths, Dean watched dark, thick blood ooze from its chest cavity, and its heart beat its last. With a definitive sense of pleasure, he watched it’s diaphragm expand and extract, the blood shimmer over its squirming intestines—

“Dean.”

The wet sound of Cas speaking had Dean tear his attention from the dying demon and he looked over his shoulder. Cas was rubbing at his neck and jaw, where a series of angry bruising was blossoming generously.

“You okay?” Dean rasped, sounding wrecked. The blade felt hot in his hand.

Shoulders lifting and falling gently as he panted, Cas nodded, pulling his eyes up from the dead, maimed demon. “Fine.” His voice was destroyed. “He hit me to stun me before the noose went around my neck. Is he dead?”

Dean looked back at the corpse between his knees. The eyes were lifeless, and blood pouring from the open chest cavity was slowing.

“He’s dead,” Dean replied darkly. He pulled himself to his feet and turned back to Cas, his stomach churning like he was going to be sick. What’d gotten into him?

Cas struggled to his feet after picking up his blade and flashlight. With a loose gesture towards Dean, Castiel rasped, “Is that the razor?”

Of course. He’d been so wrapped up in the act of murder that he’d forgotten entirely why they were here. Dean looked down at his shaking hand and nodded. ‘Yeah. I can feel it. I’ve...used it before.’

There was a heavy moment of silence where they both stared. Or rather, Castiel stared at Dean while Dean gazed heavily at the weapon.

Then, Cas outstretched a hand and said, “Give it to me.”

Why he hesitated, Dean didn’t know, but he didn’t move, and it took Cas to move towards him slowly and take it from him. Behind them, the zombie on the table lost it’s battle with it’s undead life and released a rattling final breath.

Didn’t matter. It would be back.

Watching the blade leave his hand, Dean choked out hoarsely, “After all these years, after everything...I’m still called back to who I used to be in the pit.”

Expecting disgust, Dean almost didn’t look up, but he forced himself to. He found Cas shaking his head. “Don’t listen to the razor, Dean. It will whisper all manner of falsehoods into your ear.”

Very suddenly, with the blade out of his hand, Dean felt hysterically overwhelmed by the feeling of missing it, and then terror at what he’d done to the demon. It had been overkill, it had been...monstrous. Dean’s chin trembled as he watched Cas’ eyes search his face, and his chest felt tight, a flutter of guilt and self-loathing settling in his stomach.

Unsurprisingly, because Castiel was a better person than Dean ever could be, reached forward, slid his hand around Dean’s neck, and pulled him close. Their foreheads pressed together and Dean found himself naturally chasing Cas’ warmth. They breathed together in the dark.
“Please trust me, Dean.” Castiel whispered, their faces close, sweat mingling on their foreheads. “I have known your soul for eternity, and it never stops shining brightly. Try as you may to think of yourself as broken, you are merely bruised. As am I.”

“Dunno about that, Cas.” Dean’s breath caught in his throat.

“I do.” Cas tilted his head and their cheeks brushed.

Cas clicked off his flashlight. Dean felt himself do the same. The darkness seemed to quiet the zombies behind them, seemed to trick them into thinking no one was there to snap or snarl at.

Around them, the subway station was silent.

They were entirely swallowed by shadow and in the safety of the pitch black darkness, the men breathed together. Alone, finally, together; aware of the darkness around them and inside them, and entirely accepting of it.

Their foreheads still together, their noses bumping, Castiel leaned forward and pressed his lips to Dean’s.

The subway station was quiet except for the soft, wet sounds of kissing. Slow, gentle, unrushed.

Clothing rustled as Cas gripped Dean’s arm and carded his fingers through the hair at the base of Dean’s neck, nails digging in when Dean moved into his space, wrapping an arm around his ribs. Dean’s hand found Cas’ face and led their kiss, brushing the bottom of his lip with his thumb, guiding Cas to let him in. Obliging, Cas opened his mouth and their tongues brushed gently.

Dean felt the evil of the blade immediately leave him and he, for the first time in forever, felt okay. He felt warm and he felt like home. He knew, in that moment, that he had known Castiel since the beginning of time, and they had been in love since before they met in this life. This kiss was a kiss he’d felt before. With Cas, he’d done this a hundred times, and yet it still filled him with a brand new sense of home, of belonging, like he hadn’t felt in this lifetime yet.

There was no fear in him about being in love with Cas any more. The idea that they’d been in love over and over, that his soul and Castiel’s had traveled through existence concurrently since the beginning of time, was no longer scary. It made sense. It brought Dean comfort.

The kiss ended softly, their breathing mingling, and their lips brushing like whispers.

Dean clicked on his flashlight. Castiel did the same and the men opened their eyes, gazing at each other, faces illuminated.

Finger still brushing Cas’ wet, plump bottom lip, Dean swallowed hard and breathed, “I… Cas, I…”

But a flash of fear crossed over Cas’ features and he stepped back, a flash of something passing over his eyes.

“Not here. I… Me too, Dean. Forever, for as long as I’ve lived. But…don’t say it. Not here. This place is…” Cas looked around, “…undeserving of it.”

Behind them, the zombies snapped and snarled again, woken up. Cas leaned down and grabbed a torn piece of clothing that once belonged to one of the demon’s lab experiments, wrapping it around the blade. “We shouldn’t touch it with our bare hands. It’s…dark. It’s cursed.” Blue eyes swept Dean’s face and with the fist holding his angel blade, Cas brushed his knuckle over Dean’s chin.

“You should not touch it, Dean. You’re strong, and you are better than what it makes you, but you
shouldn’t hold it. Let me carry it.”

Dean understood what Cas was saying; *it turns you into a monster.*

“Like a horcrux,” Dean murmured, recalling their Harry Potter marathon years back. It made him feel better to joke around, and Cas’ little smile at the reference made him feel a flutter in his stomach that had nothing to do with the stupid fuckin’ blade.

Cas nodded, his lip twitching. “Yes, Dean. Like a horcrux.” He turned, headed back up towards the broken escalators that would take them out of the subway station. “Come, we should head back.”

Dean took a moment to look behind him, shining his flashlight around at the once subway-station-turned-torture-lab. The tied up zombies snapped at him, their eyes reflecting in the flashlight rays.

“This whole place is dark and cursed, let’s scram.”

Sliding Alastair’s blade into his coat pocket beside his angel blade, Cas nodded, and to the delight of the butterflies in Dean’s stomach, Cas took his hand, pulling him towards the stairs. “We should leave this place. There are too few exit routes for me to be entirely comfortable, especially as I suspect the sound of gunshots alerted the undead. With Frankenstein dead, I don’t think we’re safe from zombies down here anymore.”

Hand in hand, their flashlight beams leading them out of the darkness, the men headed home with more than one triumph under their belts.

***

There was a celebration at Camp Singer.

Sam and Rowena had returned within the day with a relic—a long staff that looked like it could crumble in their hands, and days later, Dean and Castiel had returned with a knife wrapped in fabric.

Maria didn’t quite know what the big deal was about, but the old crap made the adults pretty happy and made the leadership team walk around with weird smiles on their faces. They looked at each other like they were exchanging an exciting secret, but as far as Maria was concerned, unless they were bringing back a Nintendo DS wrapped in fabric and a few packets of sour gummies from town, she didn't find their stuff exciting.

Still, when the leaders were happy, they made a fire, and brought out the cases of beer reserved for funerals and birthdays—or shooting lessons, if you were Dean and Castiel. And fires meant hot dogs and marshmallows, which, frankly, was all an eleven year old girl really cared about.

That, and her guardians got a little silly from the drink. When Vince and Agnes drank too much, their supervision petered down to the bare minimum effort that it took to say, “Don’t go too far! We need to be able to see you!”

Of course, they drank one more beer and forgot about those instructions. That meant Maria got to wander the camp, with a bag of stolen marshmallows and two sodas, and a mission.

Her mission? Break into the main building and find Claire’s hidden stash of candies. More than once, she’d seen the blonde girl sitting on the porch during her watch, nibbling on a string of Twizzlers. The stash had to be in there somewhere...trouble was, Claire always seem to hang out there and she didn’t much like sharing that kinda stuff. The angel Jo had said she suffered from ‘single child syndrome’, but Maria had suspicions about that; she figured Castiel was Claire’s dad—even at eleven years old, Maria could see they were the spitting image of each other—and sometimes she
heard him talking about his son.

Maria crept around the side of the main building, determined to steal herself some Twizzlers...and some Snickers, if she was lucky. With a tiny grunt, the girl lifted herself up over the side of the front porch after throwing her bag of marshmallows up first. She was short and little for her age, but she was crafty. Once she'd hauled herself up, Maria snatched up her shmallows and tiptoed towards the front door.

Pressing her hand to her mouth to stifle a shocked yelp, Maria froze in front of the door, her hand on the knob.

She hadn’t expected anyone to be up front. She’d seen Jo and Jody head off together to patrol the perimeters of camp while everyone else drank and talked by the fire, and she’d seen Donna check the gates not five minutes ago. The bonfires were usually at the center of camp, in the middle of the sleeping cabins, and by the old Singer Garage.

But of course, adults had to ruin everything. And what’s worse, these two adults, sitting on the steps together, were leaders. If Agnes found out that Maria had been caught sneaking into the main building by Dean and Castiel, Maria was going to be so grounded.

Sitting on the steps facing the gates, their backs to the porch and the door, Dean and Castiel didn’t turn to look at her. Quickly, she realised they had no idea she was behind them.

“Will you tell me about ‘em?”

The angel Castiel leaned back, resting his elbows on the step behind him. “We’ll be here all night.”

Dean, sitting close to Castiel, leaned in and nudged him with his shoulder. “Ain’t the first time we stayed up all night, with you tellin’ me stories,” said Dean, hovering a beer near his face. There was a slurping sound as he drank a bit.

Then, between them she saw Dean hand Castiel the beer as well, and their fingers brushed over the can.

For some dumb reason, they stayed like that, and they continued to stare at each other. It was weird, but they seemed to be all right with it. The men smiled at each other, and Dean pushed himself up a bit on one elbow, rising up a few inches to meet Castiel in the middle when the angel leaned down.

Maria’s mouth dropped as she saw Dean and Castiel kiss.

They were kissing. Like, with tongue.

It was all slow and soft, like in the movies. And when they broke apart, Castiel looked away, but Dean kept staring at the side of his face, and smiling all dopey.

In his usual low, rough voice, Castiel said, “I would much prefer to continue to do this, Dean.”

Dean settled back on his elbows. “We got all night for that.”

Humming, Castiel arched his back a bit and stretched out his foot down the steps. Maria heard his bones crack a bit, and Dean hissed in sympathy. Behind Castiel’s back, Dean raised a hand and began tracing soft patterns into Castiel’s t-shirt. Maria followed the finger, and she could have sworn that he drew a heart into Cas back before his palm went flat and he rubbed up his friend’s spine.

Entirely forgetting about candy, Maria stared at them in awe. Everyone always talked about how
Dean and Cas were...well, together. Together-together. The demon Crowley was taking bets for when they’d they’d kiss first, and when they’d tell their friends they were together first, and he even had a pool for when they’d…

That last one, Maria would rather not know. Ew. *Gross.*

Crowley would be happy to win his bet, and she knew others at camp would be happy to win their bets too, but as she watched them, Maria felt a flutter of happiness.

Dean had saved her, as had Castiel. She certainly looked up to them, but sometimes...well, most times, they looked sad. They were troubled. Stressed, as Agnes often said. “That bunch, they have the weight of the world on their shoulders”, is what she said specifically.

Sitting on the steps now, they didn’t seem sad or troubled. Dean nor Cas looked as if they had the world on their shoulders.

Actually, they looked really happy.

“Tell me a story, come on.” Dean laughed, poking one of the knobs of Castiel’s spine. “You’ve built them up to be so epic, Cas. Don’t you think I deserve to know about them too...especially if we’re gonna re-write them better?”

Cas drank some beer, and then held out the can for Dean. “Very well.”

The angel leaned back on the steps, too, just like Dean. Between them, Maria saw their fingers tangle; pinkies first, then the other fingers. Castiel even turned over his hand, and Dean dragged his finger over the skin there, too. This time, Maria swore she saw a heart.

The two men stared again, and this time, Maria didn’t find it so weird.

They leaned in towards each other, and they kissed, their eyes closed, their faces moving slowly.

When they broke apart and looked back out at the gates, Dean took a drink and passed it over to Castiel.

“Very well.” Cas said again, hovering the can near his lips. ‘I will recount backwards, because I remember recent events the most. In 1914, there was Margaret.”

Maria tiptoed back to the side of the house, throwing her bag of marshmallows onto the ground before she lowered herself into the dirt and made her way back to the bonfire.

Candy could wait. After all, once she told Crowley all about the kissing and helped him win his bet, he’d help her sneak all the candy she wanted.

Chapter End Notes

WELL?

WAS THE BUILD UP WORTH IT?!

Let me know in the comments. This bitch loves comments.
Chapter Summary

Crowley and Claire's Epic Adventure

Chapter by MalMuses

Camp Singer receives a call for help all the way from New Mexico. With Team Free Will and their newly-resurrected angel buddies away retrieving pieces of the keys, someone has to go save the day.

Crowley and Claire make their way to the Cuevas ranch, but things don't quite go to plan.

Chapter Notes

Guess who's back, back, back, back again...Oh, it's me, Mal.

For all you folks who are invested in the zombie plot, we've got a big chapter for you this week!

We're beginning to head into that final stretch of the season where our plotlines will all diverge and come together, and we still have SO MUCH for y'all to look forward to! Thank you so much for reading along so far. We've loved talking with you in the comments and reading all your theories!

So, without further ado...back to Camp Singer!

- Mal <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Camp was oddly quiet. It was nice, but Crowley wasn’t sure he trusted it.

Everyone was still on tenterhooks, waiting for another zombie attack or for Death to show up unannounced, or some other supernatural event that was, by then, just another part of their stressful, apocalyptic lives. But even so, it was mid-afternoon, the weather was pretty good, and the camp was peaceful. At least for now.

“Gentlemen,” Donna announced cheerfully, laying out her poker hand on the table in front of her. “It has been a pleasure.”

With a low grumble, Crowley and the two muggles they’d been playing with in the makeshift rec center all assessed her cards.
“Bloody hell, woman,” Crowley said, shaking his head in disapproval. “Whoever taught you to play cards was a fiend.”

“Says you,” noted Jo from where she perched next to the table on a chair by herself, her feet up, surveying the road that passed by outside the barrier. She filed her nails idly, having declined cards but been too weak to pass up gossip.

“You just don’t like being beaten, angel,” Crowley purred darkly. “Strange, given your nature.”

“Oh, enough, you two,” Donna chastised, pulling the small pool of mints they’d been using as betting chips over toward her. She unwrapped one, throwing it into her mouth before she spoke around it. “My grampy Merle taught me how to play, y’know. He used to take me up to his fishin’ cabin. He’d gimme some pop, and play with me while we waited for a bite on the lake. Thought I’d be easy pickin’s, didja?”

Crowley squinted at Donna, unsure if he’d quite understood what she’d said—American, he was very used to, but whatever the heck she spoke was something else, he’d swear. Luckily, he was spared asking for a translation by the sound of Jody’s heavy boots thumping their way up the steps. She was followed shortly by Claire, who was (hopefully) coming back from her turn on watch, given the large machete swinging idly from her hand.

“There’s a situation down south,” Claire announced, moving straight up to the table next to Donna and sitting down on it, sliding up so that she could swing her feet. She reached across and stole one of Donna’s winning mints with a wink.

Everyone sat quietly, tension stiffening their tongues along with their bodies. "A situation", given their current existence, couldn’t possibly be a good thing.

“I just got off the radio with Cesar, an old hunter friend of Sam and Dean’s. He has a problem down in New Mexico, and he really needs our help,” Jody explained.

The old phone lines that ran to the burnt shell of Bobby Singer’s once-loved home hadn’t been difficult to repair, but they turned out to be of little use once the phone companies went down. Nevertheless, ever resourceful, the remaining hunters had quickly found a way to communicate, using a series of relayed truck radios across the country. Sometimes passing messages was like Chinese whispers, but they managed. Even though they were busy, protecting their own and trying to save their towns, hunters across the country had kept in touch for the first few months after the End. Jesse, Cesar, Garth, even old friends of John Winchester’s had crawled out of the woodwork, desperate to establish a network and find out if they were alone in this hell. But as the months dragged on the calls dropped off.

No one wanted to think too hard about why.

“What’s the problem?” Donna asked, straightening up.

“Djinn,” Jody said grimly. “Apparently, it’s a pretty ballsy one, and it’s had free run of their town over in New Mexico—Cesar and Jesse hadn’t had time to hunt it down, dealing with zombies, just like us.”

“And now?” Donna asked carefully.

“He thinks it got Jesse.”

The tense silence around the table increased, and the muggles exchanged a look. One of them, a balding construction worker who’d been a great help around camp—though not always good for
morale—shook his head slowly. “Look, Jody, I don’t wanna be an asshole, but we don’t know these people, and—”

“They are Sam and Dean’s friends,” Jody interrupted sharply, her voice all authority. “And those boys lost enough already.”

Donna, and even Claire, nodded solemnly along with her.

“You and Donna are some of the best we’ve got right now. You can’t go.” Crowley spoke up, surprisingly diplomatically. “But djinn aren’t easy to take down. It needs to be someone experienced.”

“Claire has already volunteered to go, but I don’t want her going alone,” Jody interrupted, folding her arms across her chest. “Dean and Cas won’t be back from Georgia for another day or two I’m sure, following your lead on the razor. Sam and Ro aren’t back from London yet, and even the angels are off being heroic, so we’re running out of options.”

Crowley sighed, long and loud, and began to slowly stand, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Needs must as the devil drives, and all that—and I am an expert when it comes to devils.” He looked over at Claire, tilting his head toward the main gate. “How about it, firecracker? Feel like a day trip—you and me, Turner-and-Hooch it?”

Nodding, she slid the machete through her belt and hopped down off the table. “I’ll get supplies, you grab a vehicle. Let’s do this.”


“Really, Jo?” Crowley said. “Buddy comedies? Aren’t they a little above your comprehension level?”

Suddenly, Claire’s machete slapped down on the table next to Crowley, the blade flat and harmless but producing an awful ringing sound. “If you’re both quite done,” she said, smiling sweetly, “Old English and I have a djinn to catch.”

“Yes, dear,” Crowley muttered sarcastically beneath his breath.

“Just for that, I’m driving,” Claire added, jabbing a finger in Crowley’s direction, before she turned and walked out the door.

“Oh, bloody hell.” Crowley stood and pushed past Jody. “ Didn’t realize this was a suicide mission.”

x

It was over nine hundred miles to New Mexico from Sioux Falls, so Claire’s determination to drive the whole way herself didn’t last all that long.

(“We can stop for the night,” Crowley had tried.

“Shut up and drive,” she’d said. “You don’t need sleep!”

“Yes,” he’d whined, “but I sure do like it.”)

So, fourteen hours later—it should have been sixteen hours, but apparently Claire attended the Winchester School of Driving—Claire pulled up the heavy truck they’d borrowed outside a picturesque ranch just north of Wagon Mound, New Mexico.

The ranch, Jesse and Cesar’s pride and joy, was beautiful in a barren, wild kind of way that Claire found herself surprisingly relaxed by. Even the barbed wire and makeshift fence, almost ten feet high, that surrounded the main ranch house wasn’t terribly off-putting, given the state of the world.

“Nice here,” she noted.

“Lovely,” Crowley agreed dryly, in a way that indicated it certainly was not.

“Not a fan of the desert?” Claire asked, swinging open the door of the truck and jumping to the ground.

“Scotsmen are fair,” Crowley said with a sniff. “I don’t want to freckle.”

Claire laughed as she pulled her heavy duffle out from the back seat, Crowley doing the same.

“You’re a demon,” she reminded him. “I don’t think the sun will do much to you, or whoever you’re wearing.”

“Even so.” Crowley bristled visibly, dusting down the long black coat that had somehow survived death, Purgatory, and repeated zombie molestation. “No one likes to squint. I prefer cloud cover.”

Shaking her head, Claire shouldered her favorite machete, checked her hand-gun in her belt, and made toward the ranch. She’d only gone a few steps before a loud, booming voice crackled out of a loudspeaker on top of the cobbled-together fencing.

“Identify yourselves!”

Claire and Crowley exchanged a look.

“She’s Claire Novak, I’m Crowley. We’re here to see Cesar Cuevas. Little birdie chirped his way into our radio and told us his husband’s missing.”

There was a clunk, and a creak, and a small door in the fence swung aside. A stocky, bearded man waited on the other side, a shotgun on his shoulder. “Dean and Sam’s friends,” he said, still sounding suspicious. “They couldn’t come?”

“They weren’t at camp when your message came in,” Claire replied, eyeing the shotgun levelly. “Didn’t want to leave any friend of the Winchesters’ hanging.”

“You’re the Novak kid,” Cesar said, nodding. “I’ve heard about you. You did some good work on some of those nests near Sioux Falls last year. But you…” Cesar’s attention turned heavily to Crowley, his brow furrowed. “You better give me a pretty good reason to invite you in, King of Hell.”

“Firstly,” Crowley said, pushing his way casually past Claire and over the threshold, “I’m not a damn vampire and this isn’t 2011, so you don’t have to invite me in. Secondly, we’re all on the same team now, so stand down and smooth out your plaid, cowboy.”

“Same side, huh?” Cesar said, eyebrow raised, as he stood aside to admit Claire.

“I suppose, really, it turns out we always were. How does that song go?”—Crowley hummed a couple of bars—“God was never on your side?”
Cesar raised both his eyebrows, nodding in reluctant agreement. “Well, come on in the house then, I guess, and I’ll give you all the information I have.”

Claire followed, keeping an eye on Crowley. She gave him a subtle kick in the shin when he trailed a longing finger along a ceremonial Navajo tomahawk that was on display in the hallway, but otherwise he behaved. The ranch was open-concept and airy, a pleasant relief from the New Mexico sun.

“Nice place,” Claire said politely. Her mother would have been proud.

“Thank you,” Cesar said, taking them through to the kitchen.

“Things aren’t looking too bad around here,” Claire said, jerking her thumb back down toward the front door as she sat down at the breakfast table, kicking her duffle beneath. “We drove through Wagon Mound while we were trying to find you, and the streets were pretty clear, looked like?”

Cesar nodded, pulling a jug of lemonade from the refrigerator, and assembling some glasses on the table. “People around here are pretty self-sufficient for the most part. I think they probably did better when the End came than some of the folks in bigger cities. Jesse and I did everything we could, of course. We’ve been looking after the town and so far we haven’t had many casualties. At least not until the djinn moved in.”

“How do you know it’s a djinn?” Crowley said, politely raising his glass to his lips, though he declined to take a sip.

“Saw it once, from the back of our truck. We were dealing with a bunch of undead that had re-risen from back behind Santa Clara Church, and we saw its eyes flash blue as it picked off the Gonzalezs’ kid. By the time we’d got the zombies shot and burned, she was long gone. Her body was dumped in town a week later.”

Claire nodded slowly. “So, what happened to Jesse?”

Cesar looked down, talking to his untouched lemonade. “A couple of days back, we knew we had to turn our efforts to finding the thing; no point saving the townsfolk from God’s undead if we were just going to lose them to something else. We were talking about it down in town—the farmers around here all banded together, they bring food from their farms to the center of town once a week and everyone just trades off and gets what they need to survive—and I guess the thing must have overheard us somehow. Jesse said he was going to take a couple of sacks of flour back to the truck, but when I went to meet him, he wasn’t there. Found the flour in an alleyway beside the market barn.”

“How’d you know it wasn’t a zombie?” Crowley asked bluntly. “We don’t have time to waste looking for a dead man.”

Cesar paled.

“What he means is,” Claire said, jabbing Crowley in the ribs, “are you sure—”

“I get it,” Cesar interrupted, waving a hand. “Resources and time are short. And you don’t know me, or him. But he and I protect this town. I can’t do it as well on my own. If we lose Jesse, more people will die here.”

Claire reached across the table, putting on her best Sam-face and giving Cesar’s forearm a squeeze. “Well find him. I promise.”
“One way or another,” Crowley muttered.

A buzzer sounding interrupted them. Cesar rose immediately, picking up his shotgun from where he’d casually left it on the kitchen counter. “Perimeter alarm,” he said. “Someone’s here.”

Claire and Crowley stood and followed, heading back out into the bright sunlight. It was very different from November back at Camp Singer in South Dakota, though significantly less hot than it would have been when the End first came.

“Cesar,” a voice came through the buzzy speaker by the door. “We’ve got a problem out on Highway 25. Huge bunch of biters, looks like they came all the way down from Springer.”

Claire could tell immediately from Cesar’s torn look that he wanted to go with them but needed to protect the town he’d sworn to defend. She looked across to Crowley, communicating silently. He nodded.

“Go,” Crowley said. “You get the zombies; we’ll get your husband. Should be an easy one; back here in time for afternoon tea, I should think.”

The sun was high in the sky, but Claire declined Crowley’s offer to stop for lunch.

“Humans need to eat,” he pointed out, pulling over to squint down at the roadmap of the region that they’d taken from an abandoned Conco gas station on the west side of town.

“It’s fine, old man. I’ll eat while we keep searching,” she said, reaching into the back seat to dig out a bag of jerky from their supplies. “The longer we take to find him, the less likely he is to still be alive.”

They’d driven around for two hours already, checking out all the likely spots that a djinn would be found; ruins, warehouses, barns, abandoned buildings—of which the town had plenty, just like every other in the country now. But so far, they’d had no luck.

“I get that,” Crowley said, frowning as he flicked the map, spreading it further across the wheel, “but I’m not sure what we’re missing.”

“Maybe we’re not missing something,” Claire said thoughtfully. “Maybe the map is. How long ago was it made?”

Crowley searched the edges of the map until he found the small label with all the printing details. “Could be right,” he admitted. “It’s eight years old. We could see if we can find someone in town who’s willing to talk, might have some ideas?”

Claire agreed, and Crowley pulled the truck back into the road and turned to head back to the main stretch through the town. They drove along several side streets, looking for signs of life. After an increasingly tense few minutes in the car, it was the sound of the door slamming that betrayed the whereabouts of the townsfolk. Wagon Mound High School. "Home of the Mighty Trojans", the sign proclaimed. It didn’t look like they were so mighty anymore, but there were vehicles parked outside and faces at the windows as Crowley parked the truck near the main door.
“We’re not zombies,” Claire pointed out somewhat redundantly, hands in the air, as two men in security uniforms emerged through the glass frontage to stare them down, armed to the teeth.

“I’ll buy that,” said the first man, “but what do you want?”

Crowley looked over at Claire, then shrugged. “Word has it that zombies aren’t the only supernatural problem you’ve had here of late. We’re hunters, trying to help you clean up.”

Slowly, suspiciously, the guns were lowered. “Help how?”

“Well,” Claire picked up, “if you can tell us if there are any isolated or abandoned buildings around that we might’ve missed on our map,” she said, “then we’ll take ourselves out of your way and go investigate them.”

“Andrews’ goat farm, up near the Mesa,” the second man called across to them. “That’s my bet.”

The first guy nodded. “Mine too. He was the first to disappear, but people still hear noises up there when they drive past.”

Bingo, Crowley thought. “Excellent, gentlemen. We’ll be out of your hair.”

They didn’t give the understandably edgy townsfolk time to say any more, hopping back in the truck. Tiny villages like Wagon Mound weren’t always accepting of strangers even before “strangers” became “folks that might eat your face.”

“Goat farm,” Claire said as she eased herself into the driver’s seat, shoving the map at Crowley and relegating him to navigating. “Sounds cozy.”

“Sure,” Crowley scoffed, smoothing out the paper and trailing his finger across it toward the nearby mesa, looking for the likely location of the building. “If you like animal excrement and offensive noises.”

“Well,” Claire said, peeling back onto the empty highway with a lurch, “I doubt any of the goats made it. If they did, maybe we’ll get you a pet.”

Crowley scowled, but dropped the banter to point out a square building set amidst the scrubland not too far from the town. “Gotta be that one.”

Claire leaned over, one hand still on the wheel, foot still on the accelerator, and peered at where he indicated.

“Bloody hell kid, will you keep your eyes on the road!” Crowley barked, grabbing ahold of the dash as Claire swerved wildly.

She grimaced guiltily but said nothing else as they made their way out of town.

The farm turned out to be pretty easy to find; there was a wild-looking, incredibly skinny herd of goats eyeing them from the roof as they parked. It was a sprawling, flat-topped building and it appeared that the surviving animals had decided that fleeing up high when they heard noises was the key to remaining alive.

“Huh,” said Crowley. “Smart.”

“See?” mocked Claire, grinning in amusement as she dug into the duffle bag to pull out the knife that they’d deliberately brought from Camp Singer. “We should get you one.”
“Oh, be quiet,” Crowley grumbled, reaching down near his feet and straightening back up with a jar of lambs’ blood in hand. Unscrewing the lid, he held it out for Claire to dip the blade in. “Don’t spill any, now,” he cautioned. “We haven’t got anywhere near as much of this stuff left as we used to.”

“Would goat blood work?” Claire asked thoughtfully, letting the drips from the blade fall back into the mason jar.

“We’re not killing a goat,” Crowley said.

“See,” Claire threw back, reaching for the door handle. “I knew you’d like them.”

“They’re unnatural,” Crowley huffed beneath his breath, stepping down out of the truck. “Look at those eyes—that’s not normal.”

They approached the building slowly, being good hunters, taking in their surroundings carefully. The main living area of the farm joined straight onto the flat-topped outbuilding they’d parked near; somewhere for young animals, they assumed, close to the owners, day or night. Now it was empty, the windows smashed and the door swinging open. Signaling to Claire, Crowley indicated that they should split up and move around the outside of the building on opposite sides, then reconvene together near the living area.

It only took Crowley a couple of minutes to walk the length of his side of the silent building. There was no movement inside, and the thick dust gave no hints at life. The only motion was one of the goats jumping down from the roof and persisting in following him up to the end of the structure, as if he might somehow have food. It was brown and white and bony, and it didn’t smell very pleasant.

“Shoo!” Crowley hissed, pushing on toward the living area.

He only waited there a moment for Claire, standing on the shaky porch front. There was a long-forgotten wreath on the door, dustily wishing him a Happy 4th of July, and dried up, empty planters of flowers lined the edges.

“Making a friend, there?” Claire whispered, appearing at the other end of the porch. She hopped agilely over the hip-high fencing and strolled toward Crowley, indicating his coat with the knife they’d prepared for the djinn.

Looking down, Crowley saw the damn goat trying to nibble on the edge of his black trench. “Back off!” he hissed, kicking out at it with his closest foot.

It merely squinted at him, tilting its head, before letting out a horrific bleating noise.

“That’s enough from you,” Crowley chastised the animal before turning back to Claire. “Plan?”

“There’s a second outbuilding back there, and the dirt near the door has been disturbed, so that’s my bet. Together?”

“Alright, let’s go. Zombies or djinn, what’s your bet?”

“I hope djinn,” Claire said. “I’ve had enough of this Thelma and Louise shit.”

“Not Thelma and Louise,” Crowley corrected calmly. “Far too many homosexual overtones, I’m not the holding hands type. We’re at least Starsky and Hutch.”

“Showing your age. 22 Jump Street?”
“I do have Tatum-worthy cheekbones,” Crowley preened.

The pair made their way across to the second building. The goat stayed up on the porch, eyeing them disapprovingly. Once they reached the door, Claire raised her knife and made a little circle with it.

“Quick exterior pass?” she whispered.

Crowley nodded, and they parted ways. Three quarters of the way down the first side, movement within the sheet-metal building caught his eye. Standing at the side of a dirty, but still whole window, he carefully peeked around. Inside, hanging from a rusted chain that attached to the center beam of the roof and hung down, there was a man. In torn red plaid and combat boots, with a short grey beard and shaved head, it simply had to be Jesse, Crowley decided. He couldn’t see the man’s face fully, but there had been pictures of the couple back at Cesar’s ranch, and he was fairly certain it was the rancher in question just from his frame and dress. He appeared to be alone in the building—at first.

There was a shudder in the metal wall, and Crowley quickly ducked to the side so he wouldn’t be seen. When he peeked back, he froze.

“Bloody hell,” he hissed beneath his breath.

It was definitely a djinn. The thing was huge—and likely ancient, built like a hulking MMA fighter and dressed surprisingly similarly, in shorts and sneakers and forgoing a shirt entirely. He made no effort to hide the swirling tattoos that covered his skin. His eyes glowed a soft, dormant blue as he strode into the barn-like structure, some kind of warehouse Crowley would have wagered.

The djinn dragged his next victim along the floor, silent and unmoving, pulling her through the dirt by her long blonde hair.

*Oh, bollocks,* Crowley thought.

The first problem was that Claire had the knife.

Crowley tried to think strategically; to save her and Cesar’s husband he was going to need to take out the djinn alone, and somehow wake up the two snoozing hunters before the poison killed them both. He headed back to the truck. He’d search through all their supplies—Claire might have their fancy silver knife, but there had to be something else around that was silver and that he could dip in lambs’ blood.

Damn it, Claire was his friend. Of a sort. And friends were something that Crowley had surprisingly few of, given how charming and useful he was. He’d punch the djinn to death with a dead man’s tacky signet ring if that was the only silver he could find; he was damned well saving Claire. And the other guy too, because Claire would whine if he didn’t.

The truck was a bust. Claire had an angel blade stashed in the bottom of her duffle—Castiel probably gave it to her at some point, Crowley thought—but he wasn’t actually certain that a heavenly weapon counted as silver. Hell knows what it was actually made of. Even so, it was his only option, so he grabbed it roughly in his offhand. He was slamming the back door of the truck in anger when he heard the noise.
Up the street—if the windy path to the farm could even be called that—an open-top jeep crested the hill, roaring noisily.

The ones driving it and standing in the back, stock still, were definitely not human. Crowley could tell from a distance—he may not be as powerful as he had been, but he still had a demon’s sense of smell.

Growling curses under his breath, Crowley tightened his grip around the angel blade and took off.

Crowley hated running. But teleporting these days was a waste of power, so, hustling his stocky form back toward the djinn’s hideout was his only option.

He didn’t have a plan, as such. But stuck between a djinn and a pack of zombies, he needed to come up with one.

Slipping into the warehouse on silent feet, Crowley hid behind some huge reels of cabling wire and snuck around the edge of the room, trying to get eyes on Claire and Jesse. They hung next to each other, strung up on the same chain. The djinn was nowhere in sight.

Trying to keep himself as covered as possible, Crowley moved around until he was behind Jesse. He reached out, straining from behind a stack of crates. All he needed was to touch him once…

The sun was setting beyond the red rock formations that wrinkled the skyline, the whole horizon glowing orange. Dusty fields stretched from the foreground until the distance ate them up, interspersed with green, hardy grasses and the odd desert willow or New Mexico olive tree. Horses roamed.

Crowley spotted Jesse over by a suitably perfect-looking picket fence. He wore an honest-to-goodness cowboy hat and had a beer in hand.

This, Crowley hoped, wouldn’t be too difficult. He approached quietly, clearing his throat politely a few feet away.

“Jesse Cuevas?”

He turned, squinting thoughtfully at Crowley, bringing his beer bottle up to his lips again before he spoke. “Do I know you?”

“Not personally. I’m Crowley. You’d know me as the King of Hell, I suppose, though that’s no longer relevant.”

“And you’re here chatting to me like an old friend because…”

Crowley could see the twitch in Jesse’s fingers as they moved to his belt, beelining for the gun that was no doubt tucked into the back of his jeans. “You’re retired, right?” Crowley tried. “This is your dream. On your ranch, with your horses, no doubt your handsome husband is back in the kitchen.”

Jesse frowned. “What do you want?”

“But you remember, don’t you,” Crowley coaxed. “The world went to shit, didn’t it. This isn’t right.”
Jesse paused, wetting his lips. “What are you saying?”

“There was a djinn.”

Turning, Jesse looked back out over the ranch, his eyes resting on the horses that slowly walked across the rocky landscape. A minute passed before he spoke. “Part of me knew,” he confessed to the desert. “It’s too perfect, y’know?”

Crowley nodded, at least familiar with the concept. “It often is. Doesn’t stand up to scrutiny around the edges.”

“Me and Cesar, we don’t even argue anymore. Its idyllic. Relationships shouldn’t really be like that…not healthy. When the foals were born—” Jesse raised his hand as he spoke, indicating the field, “—every single one of them was strong and hearty, and birthed entirely without complications. Even the mail man smiles at us, chats.”

“He have blue eyes, that mail man? Bit too blue to be natural?”

“Yeah,” Jesse confessed. Slowly, he turned back to Crowley. “What’s it like out there?”

“Hell on Earth, very literally,” Crowley said honestly. “But it’s real. And your husband is losing his mind without you.”

The hand that Jesse had moved to his gun previously drifted back there again, drawing out the small handgun that Crowley was certain he kept with him even at night; the legacy of a lifetime hunting.

Jesse turned it over in his hands, and sighed. “Alright.”

Crowley jerked his hand back just in time. The warehouse erupted with noise; the familiar groan and screech of hungry zombies layered over the shaking rattle of them throwing themselves against the sheet metal door. Crowley looked over at Jesse—his eyes moved beneath his eyelids, and that was enough. Crowley had to get to Claire.

He darted out from his cover, heading for the young, limp blonde that swung from the thick chain next to Jesse. All Crowley could hope for was that he could wake her up quickly, and that she still had the knife on her somewhere.

The sound of a fight erupted behind Crowley as the doors flew open; zombie versus djinn, he realized. He wasn’t even sure who he was rooting for in that one.

Taking the distraction for what it was, he slammed his palm onto Claire’s forehead, his eyes flaring red…

Immediately, Crowley felt his spine tingle unpleasantly, his shoulders bunching up at the middle-class, suburban bliss he was shoved into. Ugh. He hated this stuff; it was always so fake. He was in a hallway, carpeted stairs leading up ahead, graduation pictures and family photos decorating the walls. With no one in sight, Crowley walked on in. He found them in the dining room, around a fully laid table.
Claire’s hair was loose, and she sat with her back to him. Next to her, hands clasped on the tablecloth, there was a wild-haired, beautiful girl with dark eyes that Crowley had never seen before. But from the way she looked at Claire, he knew immediately who she was; Kaia. Jody had mentioned her once in a whisper to Donna, back when Camp Singer was forming. Crowley heard more than people thought he did.

But what was this now? They sat for a meal, well-cooked beef brisket being sliced onto plates by—well, wasn’t that an odd sight.

Jimmy Novak, Crowley knew, was definitely not Castiel. It was totally obvious at that moment; the stiff navy suit, neatly tightened tie and calm, let’s-not-rock-the-boat smile of the ad salesman sat in front of him a total contrast to the stubble, snark, and serious expressions of the human angel back at Camp Singer. They didn’t even look the same, not really, Crowley realized; there was something different in Castiel’s eyes, a world of experience that this man just didn’t have. This man was small in his six-foot frame. Even human, Castiel was infinite.

The woman beside him, his wife, was blonde and blue eyed just like her daughter, but with none of her spunk and wildness; the traits Claire had that Crowley actually quite liked. This woman seemed simpering, soft, not tainted by things that this world, this fake dream, had not thrown at her.

“So, Kaia,” Jimmy was asking, warm and kind, “what are your plans for after graduation?”

“I’m going to open my own studio,” the dark-haired girl responded softly. “I don’t know where yet—I’ll go wherever Claire does. She applied for that job in Springfield—”

Crowley cleared his throat. He didn’t have time for this.

They all turned, shocked, and looked at him blankly.

“What are you doing in my house?” Jimmy demanded, standing immediately and throwing down his napkin. “And who are you?”

“I’m not here for you,” Crowley said simply. “I need to speak to Claire.”

Claire turned. Crowley prepared for a fight, but none came. She simply rose out of her seat, indicating with a wave that Jimmy should sit down, and walked on past Crowley and on into the wide hall he’d entered through.

“You need to go,” she said, as soon as the dining room door clicked shut.

“I—” Crowley frowned, confused.

“I know this isn’t real,” Claire said solemnly, surprising Crowley. “But I don’t want to leave.”

“Claire,” he said quietly, “you have to.”

“No.”

“This isn’t—”

“I know it isn’t. What are you? A hunter, an angel? I don’t remember you, but I know you’re here to take me back.”

Crowley cleared his throat, thrown. He didn’t know how to begin to answer that question. “A friend,” he settled on.
“Djinn,” Crowley provided. “It’s a djinn.”

She nodded. “Well, alright then. But look,” she said, gesturing to the glass panes of the dining room door, where a perfect domestic vignette played out within; her mother serving Kaia peas, her father laughing at something she had said.

“Do you really think,” Claire asked lowly, “that could ever be real? That my family—oh, maybe not my dad, but the rest of them—would have accepted Kaia like that? Accepted me? That they’d still love me if they knew?”

Crowley’s jaw flapped. He wasn’t bloody equipped for this. “You’d rather live with something that isn’t really true, and slowly die at the djinn’s hands, than just come back to your real life?”

“And what, exactly, is there out there in ‘real life’ worth going back for?” Claire hissed, surprisingly venomously. “There is not one single thing in my life that I haven’t somehow LOST!”

Angrily, she shoved at Crowley’s chest, forcing him to stumble back.

“Oh, Claire,” he said, not sure what else to say. They stared at each other for a long moment. “I know you said you don’t remember me,” Crowley began again slowly, “but there are a lot of people out there who rely on you. Who need you to come back. People that care about you. If I go back without you, the Sheriff will skin me and knit a sweater from my back hair, and Donna would probably wear it. I don’t want to piss off Alex—that kid is way too good with a scalpel—and you’ve made so many other friends in the camp. Dean and Castiel, especially, would blame me.”

“Is this you trying to guilt me into a leaving a place where I’m happy, just to save your own ass?” Claire asked distastefully.

A distant scream and the sound of growling made the hallway around them shake oddly. They both looked up and back at each other.

“What’s happening?” Claire asked, wary.

“The djinn that poisoned you and constructed this dream is under attack, I think. I don’t know what happens if we’re both in here and it dies.” Crowley said calmly. “So, I suggest you move your bloody arse and wake up, kid.”

“Why, so you don’t have to feel guilty?”

“So I don’t have to miss you, you bloody idiot! We’re friends, Claire, you may not remember it but I do. And I don’t have a lot of friends, and I don’t want to lose the one I have. So here,” Crowley said, shoving the angel blade that he still held forward and into Claire’s hand, and angling the blade toward her helpfully. “Come. Back. Please,” he said, quieter.

For a long moment, Claire visibly wavered. Her eyes flicked from the door, and Kaia and her family beyond it, and then back to Crowley.

“Your friends need you, firecracker,” Crowley tried, seeing her on the verge.

Claire’s chin trembled, but she nodded, blinking hard. In a breath, she joked flatly, “Alright, Rainbow Dash, dial it down.”

Crowley rolled his eyes, and the hallway began to dissolve.
Chaos.

The warehouse was bloody, filthy, wild chaos.

Reaching up, Crowley used what unnatural strength he still possessed to yank the rusty chain down hard from the beam above, pulling out the loop and bringing a shower of dust and wood splinters with it.

Jesse was alert by then, and as the chain fell he immediately untangled himself, reaching back behind him to bring a gun from his waistband. He looked over to Crowley, who was already hoisting Claire from the floor, her eyelashes fluttering as he carried her quickly back behind the crates he’d initially used for cover.

“Crowley?” Jesse questioned, scurrying behind with him.

Crowley nodded. “Yup. Not really the time for twenty questions, though.”

Jesse seemed to agree. As Crowley lowered Claire to the floor behind their flimsy cover, he peeked over the top, and Crowley joined him a moment later.

The djinn had made short work of most of the zombies, it seemed. Crowley didn’t want to do the limb math to work out how many of them were scattered in pieces around the floor, but most of them, surely. The djinn was bleeding badly, staggering as three zombies came at him simultaneously. One clung onto his back, snapping and snarling at his neck, the other two at the front, clawing at his arms, trying to push toward his face. His tattoos glowed and swirled, his eyes bright and blue as he let out a long, angry howl of frustration.

There was an audible CRACK as the djinn’s neck snapped back unnaturally, and he crumpled down, his knees folding in the wrong direction.

“Ugh,” Jesse muttered at the awful noise.

Crowley could only agree with a grimace. Beside him, Claire stirred, climbing up to her knees, and he turned, pulling his attention from the monster versus monster melee for just a moment.

“You good?” he asked her calmly.

She regarded him a little longer than necessary before giving a sharp nod.

“Oh, god,” Jesse said, bringing his hand up to his mouth. “That’s… I didn’t realize they ate monsters, too.”
Claire had her wrist pressed across her mouth under her nose. “Clearly they’re equal-opportunity snackers.”

Jesse gave a shudder. “Alright, well that’s enough of that,” he said, raising his gun to take aim at the nearest zombie’s head.

“Wait!” Crowley said suddenly, reaching out for Jesse’s trigger arm. He wasn’t sure what he was seeing…but he was seeing something.

The three slow, lumbering, dumb-grade zombies that had been chowing down on the djinn were reacting somehow. They made strange howling, screaming noises, their necks snapping back and forth like they were doing stunts for The Exorcist.

Their eyes began to glow, soft but noticeable in the dim warehouse light.

“What’s happening?” Claire whispered, pushing forward to see over the crates they all still hid behind.

They all stared, entranced. The zombies were…

The one that had been at the djinn’s back, a skinny man in a suit, threw his head back and ROARED, keening out an awful noise that the other two picked up and echoed. When his head snapped back to the front, he looked at his two companions.

He looked at them.

“Holy shit,” Jesse breathed. “They’re…”

Stronger, faster, smarter. Once dumb, base zombies, but now more, Crowley realized. Is this how elite zombies were formed? Hopped up on monster blood, gaining powers like humans could if they sipped on certain creatures? Did this give them the capacity to learn, to become what they’d all thought of as a separate breed, as ‘elite’ zombies? Or were they —

Crowley didn’t have time to finish his train of thought, let alone voice any of it.

With a speed none of the zombies had possessed before, all three of them turned in unison and leaped toward the crates.

x

Crowley cut the engine of the truck outside the Cuevas ranch. Claire was in the passenger seat next to him, and Jesse sat in the back among their duffle bags. They all rested for a second, just breathing.

“I haven’t run that fast in years,” Jesse confessed.

“I have,” said Claire dryly. “Unfortunately.”

Crowley merely gave a grunt and shoved open the driver side door. “Come on. Let’s get the sickeningly heartwarming reunion out of the way. Then I suppose we move onto the necessary powwow scene about what the hell just happened.”

Nodding in unison, they all stumbled toward the entrance to the ranch, and with a quick buzz they
were admitted by Cesar, who practically bowled over his husband the moment he came through the gate. Jesse just smiled, squeezing him back while Claire and Crowley pointedly studied the late-evening cloud formations overhead.

Once the hunting husbands had parted, Cesar ushered them all inside, clapping them both on the shoulder gratefully. He didn’t seem to be an overly emotional man, so Crowley took his thanks for what it was.

“How about we put off the serious talk until after I’ve made some dinner,” Cesar suggested.

Crowley shrugged, but Claire nodded emphatically. “If it ain’t jerky or beans, I’m in.”

Cesar gave a low chuckle, dropping a six pack of beer on the table. “Can’t promise no beans, we can’t exactly pop down to the Kroger these days. But, we do alright, growing our own stuff and raiding the bigger cities. Why don’t you two take some beers and go explore the ranch a bit, while me and Jesse cook?”

Crowley and Claire knew a thinly veiled “get outta my kitchen and let me spend some time with my husband” when they heard one, so they exchanged a grin, grabbed the six pack, and headed out of the back door.

The ranch must have been beautiful back in the day, Crowley thought. There were no horses now, Claire noted as they made their way out to the white-painted back fence that looked out over the dusty red fields. They leaned on the top of it and cracked open a beer each.

“Fenced in horses would have been easy targets for zombies,” Crowley said, “if they wanted a snack to tide them over until something human shaped came along. Maybe Cesar and Jesse turned them loose. Gave them a fighting chance.”

Claire merely grunted. The thought was better than the alternative, at least.

The silence between the pair wasn’t heavy, and they let it be for a while as they watched distant tumbleweeds gather under bushy desert willows, only to be tugged free again by the next breeze and roll off across the sandy soil.

Crowley placed his empty beer next to him on the flat fence top, turning to look at Claire. He wasn’t sure if she’d want to talk about her djinn dream, even less so that he’d be the right person to talk about it with, but he figured they had time to kill.

“So, Novak. Got anything to say?”

“Thanks,” she murmured, looking askance at him but keeping her head forward. “That’s about all the discussing I wanna do.”

Crowley nodded. Fair enough.

Claire brought her beer bottle up to her mouth before she spoke again, the glass resting on her bottom lip. “You know, it’ll be my twenty-second birthday in eight weeks or so.”

Crowley raised a brow. “Well, good for you. Birthdays lose a little of their sparkle after the three hundredth, I have to say.”

Despite herself, Claire gave the demon a small grin. “Nah, I mean—not that I’m not looking forward to it or anything, I just never figured I’d live this long.”
Crowley turned then, facing her more fully. “Sounds a bit fatalistic.”

“I didn’t have the smoothest life. Not since Castiel turned up, anyway.”

Crowley was silent.

“I don’t blame him for it though. He was trying to do the right thing, and when it came down to it, my choices were my own. I just never…” She trailed off for a moment, her eyes determinedly on the horizon. “I should have been the perfect Christian college kid by now, you know. Graduating. Probably engaged, or maybe even knocked up already by some dude with a Psalms bumper sticker and an overbearing mother.”

A snort erupted from Crowley. “Sounds even lonelier than where you are now.”

Laughing between mouthfuls, Claire drained her beer and reached to pull another from the six pack at her feet, grabbing a second for Crowley while she was there. Uncapping it, she bumped his shoulder as she handed it over. “Now isn’t so bad. And it could be lonelier.”

The demon allowed a tiny smirk before he nodded, taking the beer with a grateful tilt of the bottle. “That it could, blondie. That it could.”

They were spared the indignity of a buddy-moment by Cesar’s call from the kitchen door, and they headed back inside to sit down to a big pot of chili and rice. Crowley ate a little, tired from his recent exertions, and Claire was smart enough not to mention it.

Food done, they pushed their plates to the center of the table and all regarded one another.

“Jesse told me what you saw,” Cesar said. “We’ve observed the same around here—some of the zombies being smarter than others. We’ve also found out the hard way that they can kill things they shouldn’t be able to—just like that djinn today. Their bite seems to override everything.”

Crowley took that news with a raised eyebrow.

“What about the monsters they kill?” Claire asked, frowning. “Do they rise?”

Jesse nodded. “Sure do. Mindless, just like the normal zombies. It’s like Chuck was trying to reduce everything on Earth to the same thing…senseless and crawling.”

Crowley hummed in agreement. “Yes, I thought about that,” he said.

“’bout what?” Claire asked, pouring herself a glass of Cesar’s lemonade from the pitcher in the middle of the table.

“The reason behind the zombies,” Crowley clarifies. “Seems to me that they’re like the biblical plagues of old. He’s using them to cleanse the Earth. My bet is that when they’ve reduced every creature on Earth to a mindless biter, just like them, Chuck is gonna pop back in and click his fingers again. Send them back into the ground.”

Wide blue eyes puzzled, Claire tilted her head, and for just a second she looked exactly like Castiel. It was disconcerting. “Why?”

“Clean slate,” Crowley said, spreading his hands. “Brand new, unoccupied page.”

“A new story,” Claire breathed, her eyes widening. “But he said he was done with Earth—”

Crowley snorted. “Sure. You know what writers do? They lie.”
Jesse and Cesar were nodding along as Crowley spoke. “That makes an uncomfortable amount of sense,” Jesse admitted. “He didn’t want to waste his own time cleaning up, so he left the zombies to do it. Once they’ve taken over—click—he can move on with yet another version, another try. Or a whole new story all together.”

“Wow,” Claire said. “Wait until we tell Dean, Sam, and Cas that. They’re gonna be so pissed.”

“Oh, no,” Crowley groaned. “We’re going to have to tell Dean that when the zombies feed on monsters, they get stronger and faster. I really don’t want to.”

“Why don’t you want to?” Jesse asked, puzzled. “The more information the better, right?”

“He’s going to call them zoombies,” Crowley announced. “I just know it.”


Shaking her head and leaning back in her chair, Claire folded her arms over her chest to get them back on track. “Alright, that’s all well and good. You guys have seen the elite zombies too—have you seen them leading the others, like we have?”

Cesar raised a concerned eyebrow at that. “Can’t say we have. The lesser undead follow them?”

“Seems so,” Crowley picked up. “The zombies are all over the country now, but there’s definitely a concentration of them in Kansas and South Dakota. Though I don’t know if that’s the location, or just because that’s where the Winchesters are. But, a couple of weeks back, they actually organized enough to attack our camp on some kind of recon mission.”

Jesse whistled beneath his breath. “Well, damn,” he said. He placed his elbows on the table, pushing up his plaid sleeves. “So, there’s some kind of hierarchy, then.”

“Definitely.” Claire nodded, before looking across at Crowley. “And I don’t know about you, but I think it’s about time we found out who they answer to.”

“I agree,” Crowley said. “Sam mentioned that he thought it was time we tried to capture one, find out if there’s any way to get info out of one of them. We’ve just not had time, what with bits of keys and Death popping up, and Squirrel and Pigeon mooning around each other like medieval maidens.”


“Never mind that,” Claire answered, waving dismissively. “Let’s stick to one thing at a time. Zombies. Do you think we could track one of those animals from the barn earlier, the ones that chowed down and evolved?”

They all exchanged looks and nodded.

“Excellent,” Crowley purred. “I sure hope you fellows have some tools around here… because this isn’t going to be a PETA-approved catch and release.”

x

The legs of the metal chair in Cesar and Jesse’s basement scraped across the floor with an awful
sounding screech as the zombie struggled against his bindings. He was chained on every limb, however, and he wasn’t going anywhere. Claire watched carefully nonetheless, her hunter instincts too ingrained by then to let her eyes off him even a moment.

“Let’s get down to business,” Crowley announced, pulling off his coat.

It hadn’t taken them all that long to track down one of the zombies from the goat farm. Two of the biters had received shotgun bullets to the brain in swift order, and against four humans (and a rather invested brown and white goat that charged and headbutted it in its rotting stomach, much to Crowley’s amusement), the remaining zombie didn’t stand a chance. Barely an hour later, they were assembled in the basement.

The fact that the goat had somehow ended up in the back of their truck hadn’t been mentioned.

They knew the zombie couldn’t talk. Luckily, they had another way to work out what he knew.

Crowley folded his coat and hung it over a nearby pipe, before starting to roll up his sleeves.

Claire rolled her eyes from where she sat on a stool behind the zombie’s chair. “You can stop with the drama, you know. Just jump in his head and stir his brains up a bit, see if anything is going on in there.”

Crowley fixed her with a dark, acid stare. “Kids these days—no sense of ceremony.”

Jesse used the butt of his shotgun to make a clanging noise on one of the exposed pipes. “Alright, enough, we’re here for information not a Blues Brothers rerun. Will you be able to get anything out of him, demon?”

Stepping up to the chair, Crowley gave a thoughtful hum. “Depends how sentient he is. The answer to that seems to be, ‘more brains than his lesser counterparts, but far from human’, so I don’t know how this is going to go.”

“Well,” Claire said, opening her arms out wide in a gesture of welcome. “Please, do try. And hurry up, because the smell in here is something else.”

The zombie watched Crowley far too intelligently as he approached. It was unnerving and went against every bad zombie movie that Claire had loved, and that she’d once upon a time tried to scare Alex and Patience with back at Jody’s house, leaving them quivering behind their popcorn bowls while she laughed. It was a bittersweet memory these days.

Crowley stood in front of the creature while it snapped and snarled, rolling up his sleeves almost brattily. Once he was done, he stared hard, as if trying to get a fix on any kind of humanity within the rotting flesh.

Jesse and Cesar watched nervously. They’d been great about having Crowley in their home overall, Claire considered. They were on the same side now, and Crowley had saved both Jesse’s life and hers. But they were still understandably on edge seeing the ex-King of Hell use his powers, even such a minor amount as he was about to do.

Suddenly, as if Crowley had latched on to some unseen spark, his eyes glazed red and puffs of crimson smoke began to billow around him. He slammed his hand forward onto the beast’s forehead, pulling a shriek from the creature as he held it in a helpless vice grip. Crowley’s head went back, his mouth open, his body perfectly still.

Cesar was wide-eyed, Jesse very deliberately calm.
Claire, however, knew Crowley well enough by then that her attention was drawn by the droplets of sweat beading at his temples, and the small tremble in his arm. Whatever he was doing, he was struggling. She stood up slowly, moving cautiously around the screeching, thrashing zombie. Its fingers clawed at its skin, taking strips from his own thighs through the ripped fabric of his pants. The flesh curled and dropped to the floor next to the chair, rotting, grotesque.

“Crowley?” Claire asked carefully, watching the trembling in his arm move up to his shoulders.

With a sudden shriek from them both, Crowley and the zombie went silent and still.

Did that mean Crowley was in, had found what he needed? Or was it a sign of something worse? Claire had no idea. They waited.

x

The sun set. Jesse, Cesar, and Claire waited.

x

With a shuddering gasp, Crowley fell.

Claire dove forward as if catching Crowley would be easy, and not like he currently occupied the body of a rather thick guy in his late forties. She managed to grab him before he hit the floor, but it was more like someone claiming the last base at a baseball game than any kind of impressive swoon.

“Shit!” she hissed as Jesse and Cesar started forward. “What do we do?” Crowley was out cold, but she slapped him just in case.

Jesse and Cesar shrugged, clueless.

“Wake up, asshole!” Claire complained, dragging the demon vaguely upright. “I don’t wanna drive back to camp sixteen hours by myself.”

Thank god, after another few seconds, Crowley heaved in a shaking breath.

“Bollocks,” he muttered as he came around.

Claire punched him in the arm.

“What was that for!” Crowley complained, sitting up and rubbing his bicep.

“Scaring me, dick bag!”

“Like you know anything about dick—”

“Enough!” Jesse yelled. “What did you find out, Crowley?”

Clambering to his feet with Claire’s help, Crowley shook his head. “Nothing good. It was…like
swimming through scrambled eggs. There’s snatches of intelligence there, but their base drives are just screaming.”

“To eat?” Claire asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Partly,” said Crowley, taking shaking breaths. “It’s like we thought—they’re reporting to someone. They can hear her. They’ve been able to hear her ever since she came out of Purgatory.”

“When?” Claire prompted, dragging over a chair with one foot and helping Crowley down, her actions softer than her voice and her insults. “Her? The zombie queen?”

“Not a zombie queen,” Crowley said. “Well, I suppose that’s what she is now. I don’t know if it was Chuck, or if she got bit, or what, but—” He paused sharply, heaving an uneven breath as he struggled to straighten up, “—whatever she is, she’s fully in control. Their urge to find her and follow her is second only to their urge to eat.”

“You’re not making any sense,” Jesse pointed out.

“The zombie queen,” Crowley explained, slowly calming. “She’s the Mother of All.”

“She’s their mom?” Claire asked, confused. “But if she got bit or came from Purgatory then she wasn’t here when—”

“Not mother of them all,” Crowley corrected weakly. “Mother. Of. All. Title, and not honorary.”

It was Cesar’s eyes that widened first. “You mean—Eve. It’s Eve.”

Crowley nodded slowly, taking an offered rag from Jesse to wipe his brow. “And she’s calling them to her. The zombies aren’t amassing near Camp Singer because the Winchesters are there—they’re amassing there because she is.”

The journey back to Camp Singer was quick. They drove in shifts. They shared tales of previous hunts, Crowley told Claire stories of gross Crossroads deals he’d had to make back before he was King, and they squabbled over music—the truck had a box of old CDs in the back, they’d discovered. Claire made Crowley listen to Panic! At the Disco for six straight hours, and Crowley knew all the words. He did complain when she found a Stone Temple Pilots disc and sang her way across the final state line. They avoided talking about zombies, or the world ending. Or about djinn. Or dreams. Or Kaia.

When the truck shuddered into the old Singer lot, both breathed a sigh of relief. Claire cut the engine. They both sat for a moment, and Crowley wondered if he should leave—but finally, she spoke.

“Look,” she said, quiet and lost. “I know you saw—”

“I didn’t see anything,” Crowley said with a shrug. “Unless you want me to.”

“Really?” Claire raised her head, her blond curls bouncing unbound around her shoulders. “It’s not like it’s a secret, or anything. That—that I miss her. That I’m not… happy, most of the time. But…”

“But that doesn’t mean you want to talk about it,” Crowley filled in when she trailed off.
She returned her eyes to the steering wheel and nodded.

“Like I said.” Crowley reached into the back to grab their duffel bags, squeezing them between the seats. “I saw nothing. In fact, you were never roofied. Just knocked out.”

“Thanks,” Claire said quietly.

Crowley paused with his hand on the door handle. “You know…” he cleared his throat, directing his gaze to some vague spot on the windscreen. “What you said before, at the ranch—it’s still true, even back here. Life doesn’t have to be as lonely as it has been. We all need friends.”

“Says you.”

Crowley gave a half-smile. “Maybe I’m learning.”

“And who taught the ex-King of Hell something as soft as that, huh?” Claire teased.

Out beyond the window, Dean emerged from the medical building, walking with Sam and Rowena. Rowena appeared to have some bandages on her hands and up her arms, but otherwise, they all looked well. Crowley gave a small smile, his eyes resting on Dean.

“Just because we’re friends now,” he said, “doesn’t mean I’m sharing everything up front. Gotta save some things for our next road trip.”

Claire grinned, and it was wide and evil and terrifying. “Road trip? Oh, no. Slumber party next. I’ve seen your skin—you’re a face mask kinda man.”

Crowley snorted, but didn’t argue.

Slamming the truck doors, they made their way across to the various figures that were emerging from different doors around the camp, attracted by the sound of the truck parking close to the buildings.

“Let us grab showers,” Claire announced, loudly, “then we all need to get together. We’ve got some news.”

Dean raised an eyebrow as he reached out to take her duffle bag from her. “Jody said you went to help Cesar with a djinn.”

“We sure did,” she answered, grim. “But it turned into a little more, and you’re going to want to hear all about it.”

Dean and Sam exchanged a look. “Alright. You guys clean up, we’ll get everyone together around the table.”

Crowley was heading for the shower block already when he heard Dean’s puzzled exclamation.

“Is that a goat?”

Crowley had always appreciated hot water. Even when he could zap himself clean willy-nilly without worrying about draining his powers, there was just something nice about the feeling of hot...
water beating at his back, and clean-scented suds softening his skin. So what, he was the King of Hell. Didn’t mean he couldn’t hit up Bath and Body Works once in a while. Their cherry blossom scent was really unparalleled. Now, at the end of the world, he made do with whatever cheap blue gunge their latest supply run had unearthed, and was momentarily grateful that at least here, at Camp Singer, they had a shower at all. His time in purgatory had been entirely bubble-free and had smelled mostly of entrails.

Scrubbing over his skin with someone else’s towel, Crowley left it in a wet pile on the floor and quickly dressed.

He wasn’t looking forward to telling the Winchesters about the zombie queen—he knew they’d had dealings with Eve before. Hell, that was probably why she was here. Hadn’t they killed her, or something? Or at least sent her back to Purgatory? With those two it was hard to tell, people around them tended to live and die (not always in the right order) entirely by luck and chance; it was rather difficult to keep track of who they’d beheaded of late. Or which one of them was currently recovering from the grave. He really was the only one in Hell who’d never underestimated those denim-wrapped nightmares.

It seemed like Chuck underestimated them too, though, and that gave Crowley a surprisingly strong sense of glee.

He walked toward the simple wooden building near the gates of the camp that they used as a sort-of HQ, where most of their “meetings” were held and information was shared. It was there that they’d studied the manifesto, and heard the news Billie had brought them, more than once. Damn that jumped-up reaper.

Sam and Rowena were outside, being unfortunately coupley in Crowley’s view. They weren’t even good to tease, sadly—Sam seemed like he was practically an expert at heartfelt emotions, unlike his constipated brother. If only someone would give Dean enough ex-lax for him to loosen up and jump on Castiel already.

Crowley walked through the door to the meeting room—which was empty apart from Castiel, in a chair at the head of the table, and Dean...who was in Castiel’s lap.

“What the bloody hell!” Crowley bellowed.

They both jumped apart and froze, looking guilty, though kissing was hardly a crime. Attracted by the shrieking, Sam and Rowena rushed in from outside, only to hide their smirks behind their hands.

“What?” Dean said defensively, slinking into a chair next to the bloody angel as if nothing had happened.

“I leave for two days! Two!” Crowley complained. “You couldn’t keep it in your pants until I got back? I’ve got important bets riding on this!”

“Technically, it’s still in both of our—”

“Cas,” Dean cautioned. “Maybe not now, okay?”

Crowley shot them both a frustrated look. “Alright, which of you did it?”

“Did what?” Dean said far too innocently.

“It!” Crowley grumbled, moving to sit in the chair opposite but still pointing an accusing finger at Dean. “Which one of you dove in for a snog first? Who started the tonsil hockey? Which one of you
smacked the pash on the other?”

Dean smiled beatifically. “Not sure I remember, Cas, do you?”

Castiel looked like he hadn’t understood a thing that came out of Crowley’s mouth. He parted his lips, looking curious, but immediately closed them again at Dean’s look.

“Oh, come on,” Crowley grumbled. He turned, looking over to where Sam and Rowena were joining the table. “Do you know?”

Sam grinned wolfishly. “They were already all coupley when they got back from Georgia last night. I’ve got a hunch, but I’m not saying.”

“Oh, come on, Samuel,” Rowena purred. “We all know you were one of the founding members of that betting pool, and twice as invested as half the others.”

“Hey!” exclaimed Dean.

Sam shrugged nonchalantly. “Rumors won’t stand in a court of law,” he said calmly.

Castiel turned his attention to Crowley as Claire, Jody, and the rest of the girls began to file in. “So, Crowley,” he asked with an excess of faux innocence. “What exactly would the winner get if it was —”

“Cas,” Dean cautioned.

“A case of Pringles, six shower slots, and various and sundry candies and treats,” Crowley offered hopefully.

“I enjoy Pringles, Dean,” Castiel said, frowning. “They were the first chips to taste less like molecules.”

“That’s because they taste like air,” Dean complained.

At the head of the table, Jody cleared her throat. “Maybe we could save the cute couple topics for later, and get on with the serious things?”

Dean nodded. “Right, right. Everyone here?”

Castiel looked around, taking everyone in. “Gabriel and Balthazar aren’t here,” he said. “Should we wait?”

“I wanted to bring that up before we heard what Romy and Michelle’s High School Reunion entailed,” Jody said, indicating Crowley and Claire.

Everyone quietened, looking worriedly around before their attention came back to Jody, her jovial authority edged with something...concerned.

“The angels went to Atlantis a week ago. They were fully powered, as far as we know,” she announced solemnly. “They haven’t returned.”
Chapter End Notes

There we have it!

...I kinda wanna run a competition in the comments to name the goat. Can I do that? Is that a thing I can do? I'm the only one writing this chapter notes right now, so I guess no one can stop me.

Most inventive goat name gets imaginary cookies!

Thanks so much for reading. If you're enjoying Season Z, maybe give it a share on tumblr? We'd love it if you did :) 

Next week we have an amazing chapter from cutelittlekitty!

- Mal <3
How to Get Hornie Without Getting Porny

Chapter by cutelittlekitty

Chapter Summary

Gabriel and Balthazar embark on an underwater journey to the fabled city of Atlantis to retrieve Gabriel’s Horn. Adventure ensues :D

Chapter Notes

Season Z episode 17 - How to Get Hornie Without Getting Porny
Fandom: Supernatural
Rating: T
Warnings: Canon-Typical Violence
Pairings: None for this chapter :D
Characters: Gabriel (Supernatural), Balthazar (Supernatural)
Tags: Atlantis, ghosts, riddles, Indiana Jones-type traps, steam-punk-style submersible, snarky fun, humor
Word Count: just under 10k

Notes:
Hello, cutelittlekitty here :D So excited to get to do a chapter for this amazing series!

I know everyone’s been dying to find out why Gabriel and Balthazar didn’t pick up Sam and Ro, and why they were gone so long. Hopefully, this chapter will provide those answers along with a bit of excitement and enjoyment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gabriel released Balth’s hand and spun in a circle, his hair drifting around his head in the thick, salty water. There was no sign of anything that might be Atlantis, ruins or otherwise. The civilization had been advanced for the time, and though he’d never visited, Gabe had heard rumors, whispers of heathens attempting to best the Tower of Babel. Whether they’d managed or not, he doubted their tall buildings would be completely buried, even after so much time. Besides, there were currents here that kept silt from building up on the ocean floor. Most of the ground below them was smooth bedrock.

“Nice driving,” he said to Balth over angel radio.

Balthazar looked at him questioningly then pointed upward.

Nodding, Gabriel flapped his wings and appeared a second later, standing on the ocean’s surface.

“Did you say something?” Balthazar asked. “I heard static but couldn’t make heads nor tails of it.”
“Yeah, I said next time, I’m driving. You obviously don’t know where you’re going.”

“Ah. Yes, well, we are, in fact, at the exact location of where Cleito, the capital city at the center of Atlantis, was when the island sank. If you look that way,” Balthazar pointed due east, “you can just make out the Strait of Gibraltar.”

Gabriel looked, squinting at the distance. Even with his angel vision he could barely make out the land flanking the passageway into the Mediterranean. “Then why isn’t it here?”

“My guess would be, old father dearest hid the island continent after he sank it, probably to keep humans from finding it.” Balthazar shrugged nonchalantly.

“Wait, Dad sank it? Why?”

“Failed subplot. Quite a shame, too. I rather liked the Atlantean monkeys. Way ahead of their time. Well, after I gave Critias the idea of steam power. On Dad’s orders, of course. Apparently, he’d decided his story was moving too slowly and wondered what would happen if he introduced better technology. The answer, of course, was that the Atlanteans used their new technical advances to try and conquer the whole bloody Mediterranean area. God scrapped the subplot and sank the island rather than rewriting. I think he meant it to be some sort of lesson about too much power or some such, but whatever. The point is, since he didn’t erase the knowledge of the place, he probably moved the whole damn island after he sank it, so if any humans went looking they’d not find it. Wouldn’t be good if the technology they’d hoarded was recovered.”

“Great. By that logic, it could be anywhere: the moon, Jupiter, Alpha Centauri. The sky ain’t the limit ’cause there is no limit,” Gabriel complained.

“True, but why sink it rather than just blow it off the map? Maybe he kept it around in case he wanted to revisit it, use it in a new subplot? Regardless, you actually will be doing the driving this time. You’ve a link with the horn. After all, it’s your symbol carved into the bloody thing. Just sus out a direction and fly us that way.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes before closing them, then mentally reached out for the key fragment. Feeling a faint tug, he turned west and pointed. “That-a-way. Not sure how far, though. C’mom, let’s get going.” He grabbed Balthazar’s arm and they disappeared with a woosh.

A hop, flap, and a few jumps later, they were close enough that Gabriel could definitely sense his horn somewhere below the waves. Unfortunately, he couldn’t pinpoint exactly where below the waves. “Whelp, it’s here somewhere, but I’m only sensing a general area. Whaddaya say we go down and have a look around?”

Raising an eyebrow at Gabe, Balthazar shrugged. “You’re the one driving.”

“Right. In that case, hold on to your feathers,” Gabriel replied with a playful grin. He grabbed Balth’s wrist and flew them up a hundred feet or so before doing a flip and rocketing toward the ocean floor. In the extradimensional space through which their wings flew them, Gabe could feel Balthazar’s grace, trembling and tense beside him as his own pulsed with wild abandon. It had been far too long since he’d been able to stretch his wings properly. With a rush of pure joy—the first he’d truly felt since returning to an unexpected zombieland—he flared his wings, pulling out of the dive at the last second and popping back into normal space just in time to send a cloud of dust into the air. Wait...dust? Air? That should have been silt into the water, but no, it was definitely dust and air. Huh.

“Well. It would appear I’m not the only one who’s directionally challenged.” The corner of Balth’s
“I’m not lost,” Gabriel assured, turning in a slow circle again. “We’re definitely on the ocean floor, and the horn is definitely that way,” he said, pointing south toward a mountain rising up from what looked to be a palace, the focus of the city they were at the edge of.

Gabriel could see the water surrounding the massive city and mountain, but there seemed to be a huge dome of air holding it at bay. Question was, what was holding the air? There was no physical barrier; they were too deep for any type of glass or known clear substance to handle the pressure. Besides, whatever was keeping the bubble of air around the city felt magical, or possibly Enochian, in nature. Not only that, but the whole area was lit like mid afternoon, even though they were so far below the water’s surface that the sun didn’t reach them.

“It’s a horn, not a ring. I did not drop the bloody thing into a volcano,” Balthazar protested.

With a chuckle, Gabe shook his head. “Never said you did. I only said that’s where it is now. Maybe the Atlanteans stumbled across it and put it inside the mountain for some reason?”

“Possibly. I seem to recall having hidden it within a secret chamber in the temple. Some priest may have stumbled upon the room just as I did.”

“Do I wanna know how you ‘stumbled upon’ it?” Gabriel asked, rolling his eyes.

“Probably not.” Balthazar looked around at the city, and Gabriel followed his lead, taking in the wide, paved streets and tall, round, tapered buildings, all surrounded by a high wall. They were stood on a wide street near what must once have been a harbor, judging by the plethora of grounded boats and other vehicles that appeared to be meant for water travel, resting at the bottom of a deep canyon. Stairs and lifts provided access to halfway down the sheer walls where stone jutted out, probably once used as docks. They and the docks were outside the wall surrounding the city, and the street continued to the north, across a wide, cracked stone bridge and through mountain foothills. If it didn’t collapse when the island sank, the huge, dark opening halfway between the bridge and the base of the canyon was a tunnel that once lead north to the Atlantic, passable by ships both steam and sail powered. There were two equally large tunnels on this side, right and left of the docks, leading under the city. Everything was unnaturally still, aside from the sound of some type of creatures calling to one another in the distance, possibly near the edge of the bubble.

Turning back around, Balthazar gave the rocky mountain a weary look and sighed. “Regardless of how the horn got there, if we wish to get there too, it might behoove us to start moving. He who would move to a mountain must start with a single step and all that.”

“Bit of a mixed metaphor there, but yeah, we should get going.” Gabriel moved to the wall’s iron portcullis, which had far less rust than expected considering they were under the ocean. With a snap of his fingers, the gate rose, giving a loud squeal in protest, and Gabe continued down the road. Pausing at one of the buildings, he ran a hand over the smooth, bronze-veined black stone, searching for seams. They were there, but barely perceptible. “Interesting architecture, by the way. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite like it.”

“Yes, well, they were ahead of their time in metalworking and had steam power to help with the heavy lifting. Add in a few creative, intelligent minds along with city-wide cooperation and a growing slave force as they began forays into the Mediterranean, and voila; unique architecture.”

“How did they get the stone to stay together stacked that high? And why is it black and gold?” Gabriel wondered, reluctantly pulling away from his examination of the building to move off down the wide street toward the mountain.
“I am neither an architect nor geologist. While I’m certain there was pillow talk that involved both professions, I’m equally sure that I tuned most of it out. I do know that the black colour was somehow naturally occurring, along with red and white stone dug out from the other two channels encircling the city. All three types have that coppery-gold veining, caused by orichalcum inherent in the rock. I’ve no idea how they’d the patience to—Did you see that?” Balthazar asked, quickly looking to his right to stare at…nothing. They’d continued walking while talking and were currently about halfway through the outer, widest ring of the city.

“See what?” Gabe asked, following his gaze.

“I’m not certain. I thought I saw movement but when I looked, there was nothing there.”

“You don’t think there could be zombies down here, do you?” Gabriel asked, attention sharpening, ears straining for sound. There shouldn’t be much in the way of noise, since there was no source of food for any animals to have survived the eleven or twelve thousand years since the island sank. At least, not beyond the perimeter where air met water. But the calls of whatever creatures they’d heard after arriving had faded with distance.

“unlikely. The island cremated their dead, believing the souls rose up with the smoke to join their deities. As such, there would be no bodies to be reanimated. Even if there were bodies unburned when the place sank, they would be nothing but bones by now,” Balthazar assured, then jumped, spinning to the left when he caught movement from the corner of his eye. Once again, there was nothing there.

“Dammit, Balthazar, stop doing that. You’re making me all jittery,” Gabriel complained.

“Perhaps we should be. I saw something move again.” Balthazar drew his weapon, Gabriel producing his archangel blade too, as the two stepped closer together.

“Come on. The faster we move, the sooner we can find the damn horn and get out of here,” Gabriel said, resuming their walk at a swifter pace. Ahead, beyond an open portcullis, was a huge stone bridge spanning the second moat around another walled section of the city. Well, half of a bridge, at least. The center had crumbled and fallen, probably during the quakes when Atlantis sank. “What now?”

“There are five more bridges over this channel. At least one must still be standing. Let’s try this way, shall we?” Balthazar turned right, following another wide street, though smaller than the one they’d been on, that ran along the canyon, just outside the southern wall of the exterior city sector. The next bridge they came to was mostly intact, though parts of the road had crumbled away and fallen. Even so, much of the support was still there, so they decided to chance it.

“Age before beauty,” Balthazar said, stepping aside so Gabriel could go first. As he turned, his gaze shot to the closed portcullis behind them, but once again, there was nothing there.

“You mean age and beauty before brats?” Gabriel corrected, staring dubiously at the crumbling bridge. “Can’t we just fly across?”

“Only if we have to. We’re supposed to be conserving our grace, remember? With Heaven closed, it won’t recharge.”

“I still have plenty of grace,” Gabe protested.

“You do now, but we should avoid expending it needlessly. If we run ourselves empty, who will recharge Heaven once we have it open?” Balthazar asked.
Gabriel sighed and stepped onto the bridge, which seemed willing to support his weight. So far.
“You make a good point. But does that mean I’m going to be stuck in Heaven forever? There aren’t any other angels who still have their grace, are there?”

“We’ll just have to figure that out later. Perhaps a few others can be brought back from the empty, just as we were,” Balthazar replied, waiting until Gabriel was approaching the middle of the bridge before stepping onto it himself.

“At least it was only a short hop. Did you see what happened?”

Balthazar licked his lips nervously and shrugged. “Wont’ know unless I try. If it doesn’t work, I’ll just have to fly.” Backing up carefully, he took a sinuous running start, careful not to put pressure down on the bridge, only propel himself forward. Just as he reached the crumbling area he leaped, legs running in air as his vessel sped in an arc over the gap. As he landed on the other side, knees bending to absorb the impact, he paused, arms outstretched for balance. The ancient stone held and he breathed a sigh of relief. Thankfully, the lack of wind and rain over the centuries meant most of the structures were solidly intact. The only damage was that which stemmed from the original earthquakes.

Just as he lifted a foot to continue across the bridge, there was a loud thunk behind him. Spinning, Balthazar saw a very large paving stone on top of the part he had just bypassed. It hadn’t been there before his jump, and there was no indication of where it came from. But there wasn’t time to wonder as the road cracked around the heavy stone, then began crumbling away, detritus falling into the canyon and crashing into the few ships residing on its floor.

When the ground beneath him disappeared, so did Balthazar. With a flap of his wings he appeared beside Gabriel. “At least it was only a short hop. Did you see what happened?”

Shaking his head, Gabriel replied, “Nope. The stone just seemed to appear in mid-air and dropped onto the bridge.” He whipped around, staring at an empty spot beyond the closed portcullis with a frown. “Come on, let’s get going,” he said, raising a hand to snap his fingers.

Clamping a hand over Gabriel’s, Balthazar shook his head. “Conserving grace, remember? The portcullis on the main road is open. We should head back that way.”

“Maybe it would be better to go around the city,” Gabriel mused as they began walking.

“The walls go over the waterways. Or what used to be waterways. There are no doors or gates to allow passage from the sides. The only other way would be to try to rappel down into the shipping tunnels, but there’s no guarantee those haven’t collapsed.”

Gabriel shuddered. “No tunnels, thank you. After seven years of being confined in a small, dark place, I’ve come down with a mild case of claustrophobia. And by mild I mean severe.”

“What do you mean?” Balthazar asked, confused.

He’d forgotten he hadn’t told anyone but Sam and Cassie about his imprisonment and torture by Asmodeus. Though Gabriel was reluctant to revisit those years, he found it got easier with each
retelling, so he confided in Balthazar. There were still parts he avoided voicing, but he found it easier telling the tale to someone he wasn’t as close with. Besides, it gave them both something to focus on besides the growing frequency of movements caught from the corners of their eyes and the unease that swelled within them both.

They were back on the main street and halfway through the middle section of the city before Gabriel’s tale finally ended, concluding with his death at the hands of Apocalypse World’s Michael.

“Gabriel, that’s… I’m unsure what to say. That was a lot to go through.” Balthazar seemed at a loss for words and they walked in silence for a few minutes, Gabriel lost in thought. An arm across his chest stopped Gabe, who looked up to see the road ahead broken and sunken in, the buildings on either side half-toppled into the deep crater. “The tunnel below must’ve collapsed. We’ll have to go around,” Balthazar said.

With a heavy sigh as he caught another flicker of movement that wasn’t there, Gabriel turned right and started down a narrower side street, Balthazar following. “There’s definitely something here, watching us, right?” Gabe asked. “I mean, we’re not just imagining things?”

“Absolute—” Balth broke off as he dove for Gabriel, tackling him forward several feet where they both landed in a heap. “—ly,” he finished. Behind them, rubble from the part of the building that hadn’t collapsed when the street caved in lay strewn across the paving stones in the exact spot Gabriel had been standing. “And more than one. I’ve no idea what kind of creature can be there and gone so quickly, but whatever they are, they’re multiplying. Or converging from all corners of the city.”

“Yeah, it feels like we’re surrounded. And they don’t seem to want us here.” As he and Balth stood, Gabriel shouted into the empty street, “Hey! Who and what are you? Come out and talk to us!”

“I don’t think that’s the best idea,” Balthazar said, looking around quickly. There was no response to Gabriel’s challenge. “Come on. We should keep moving.”

“There!” Gabe exclaimed, pointing to the shadows of an alley. There was a person, dressed in simple but unfamiliar clothing that was reminiscent of a multi-colored toga cinched at the waist with a woven belt of some kind boasting a gold-bronze buckle. Said person was also translucent, the muddy glow of a tarnished soul pulsing from the center of the image.

“Is that a ghost?” Balthazar asked as the person disappeared.

“Yeah, I think so. Got any iron or salt?”

Balthazar rolled his eyes. “Why would I have either of those things?”

Shrugging, Gabriel conjured up a couple of iron crow bars and shotguns with salt rounds. “You wouldn’t. Here. Know how to shoot?” he asked. When Balthazar shook his head, Gabe showed him how to load and cock the gun, then explained how to fire.

“Not to be overly pessimistic, but I think we’re a bit outnumbered,” Balthazar commented as they resumed moving down the street.

“No shit, Sherlock. But we have to get the horn and it’s not like we can just send the ghosts off to the afterlife, seeing as there isn’t one right now,” Gabriel pointed out.

“Then what are we going to do?”

“Run, and hope they keep their distance.” Gabriel broke into a swift jog, and Balthazar followed.
They made it to the next cross street and turned left, only to be brought up short by a wall of ephemeral bodies. Too close to shoot or stop, Gabriel swung his crowbar, dissipating the forms directly in front of him. Taking his cue, Balthazar did the same and they barrelled through, only to be halted by a pile of rubble blocking the street.

“Got any other bright ideas?” Balthazar asked sardonically.

Frowning, Gabe grabbed his sometimes-friend by the wrist and sprinted left through the foundations of the building that was now a heap of metal bars and broken red and black stone littering the street. Swinging his iron at any ghosts appearing in their path, Gabriel tried to keep them in a generally southern direction, though they had to go north several times simply because their way was blocked by collapsed roads or fallen buildings.

He wasn’t thinking about much, other than getting out of the sector, but Gabriel couldn’t help noticing that while most of the ghosts wore clothing similar to the spirit they’d seen in the alley, a number of them looked decidedly different. Quite a few were in military uniforms from various times and countries over the last several hundred years. He also spotted some in suits and dresses, again from different time periods. There was even one ghost he swore was wearing a bomber jacket zipped tight over her chest and pilot’s goggles.

Taking a moment to pinpoint his bearings on a global scale, Gabe realized that the deep Atlantic ocean floor where Atlantis rested overlapped the Bermuda Triangle. Interesting. Not particularly relevant to their current dilemma, but noteworthy nonetheless.

“Gabriel, have you any idea where we’re going? What we’re doing? This endless running is getting a mite tiresome,” Balthazar complained a bit breathlessly.

“I don’t hear you suggesting anything. If you have any ideas, I’m all ears.”

“I haven’t, but then, I’m not the one who spent millenia on Earth pretending to be a pagan trickster god. Can’t your devious little mind think of some trick to turn the tables?”

Not wasting breath on an answer, Gabriel kept running southwest down the street they were on. The ghosts had started trying to drop large paving stones on their heads, forcing him and Balthazar to keep moving, zigzagging randomly so their path stayed unpredictable. Finally he spotted a closed portcullis up ahead and flew them past it, collapsing onto the ground in a panting heap.

“What are you doing? We have to keep moving,” Balthazar said, eyeing the pursuing ghosts with mounting fear.

“The gate’s iron. They can’t pass through it.”

“True, they can’t pass through the gate,” Balthazar agreed, grabbing Gabriel by the shoulder and yanking him out from under a falling paving stone, “but that doesn’t mean they can’t send objects over it. Or that they can’t go through the stone walls.” The last was added as he started onto the bridge leading to the innermost sector of the city, where the palace stood. Ghosts were already drifting through the red and black wall.

Remembering the last bridge they crossed, Gabriel stopped, pulling Balthazar back. He snapped his fingers and they were encased in an iron box with barred windows to see out. That done, he collapsed onto the floor, eyes closing. “Wake me in a couple decades,” he groaned.

Balthazar joined him on the metal floor, elbows resting on his bent knees as he leaned back against the side of their box. “At least we’ve time to catch our breaths. But unless your horn is up your ass or
something, we aren’t going to find it trapped in a box.”

“It isn’t, but maybe when we find the damn thing we can shove it up yours?”

“Well, not quite sure how that would work, but I’ll generally try anything once. How’s your grace doing?”

“Tank’s about three quarters full. You?” Gabriel replied.

“Almost full. I’ve only flapped my wings a few times. That doesn’t require much.”

“Good. We may need it if I ever come up with a plan.” Lying on his back, Gabriel looked through the windows on all sides of the box where the ghosts were gathering, moaning in their frustration at their quarry being kept from them. “Why do you think the ghosts are coming after us? I mean, it’s not like we’ve done anything to them personally, right?”

“I suspect they attack anyone who finds their way here. Father likely trapped them in this city to make sure no one who finds Atlantis lives to tell the tale.”

“That would account for the anachronus ghosts mixed among the Atlanteans.” Gabriel agreed.

Balthazar nodded. “I also noticed a number of craft crashed into parts of the city as we were running around. But I am surprised so many just happened to crash here.”

“I’m not. We’re in the Bermuda Triangle. Maybe something here is what causes navigational equipment to malfunction. That would explain why crafts have gone missing in the area.”

“It would certainly explain the planes; equipment goes wonky and they crash into the ocean, then sink to the bottom, too deep to be discovered. However, the boats were floating on top of the water. They’d have no reason to sink, even without navigational aids.”

Rubbing his chin, Gabriel thought about that, pulling a raspberry tootsie-pop from the pocket of his green jacket, unwrapping it, and popping the sucker into his mouth. After a few minutes, he snapped his fingers. “Got it! Something is keeping air around Atlantis, right?”

“Yes, seems that way. Why?”

“There’s oxygen in the air.”

“There is. And?” Balthazar wasn’t sure where Gabe was going with this.

“There shouldn’t be. We heard some type of critters inside the dome of air, near the edges, right? All animals breathe oxygen. This being a sealed bubble, there wouldn’t be any left unless it was being replenished somehow. So what if whatever’s keeping air around the city cycles fresh air in from the surface every now and then? Maybe forms a whirlpool or water funnel to pull it down or something?” Gabriel suggested. “That could account for ships crashing. And whatever forms the funnel messes up the navigation. And the size of the animal population would determine when more air was needed, so that would make the occurrences sporadic and unpredictable.”

“I suppose that all makes sense. But is any of that helpful for getting us to the horn?”

Chuckling, Gabriel shook his head, rolling it against the iron floor as he stared through the barred window in the top of the box. “No, but working it out helps get my thoughts flowing. If I’m focused on why ships crash here, my subconscious can work on the ghost problem. From what I remember reading in Dad’s Supernatural books, the only permanent ways to stop ghosts are either burn the
bones or whatever is tethering them, or convince them to move on to their allotted afterlife. Neither of which works with Heaven and Hell closed. We might be able to convince the Empty to take them in, but I’d hate to do that to all these souls. That kind of limbo existence is worse than total destruction. Not that I wanna destroy the ghosts either. What we need is some way to keep them contained until we’ve found the horn. Or maybe ‘til we get the gates opened again. Then we can send them all into the light or whatevs.”

“Great. Have you a proton pack and containment unit?” Balthazar asked with a roll of his eyes.

“Such pessimism, but kudos on the reference,” Gabriel replied, sitting up and pulling the sucker from his mouth to bite into the chewy chocolate center. “I was thinkin’ more along the lines of something like the box we’re in now. We need a larger space to make one though, it’d have to be big enough to hold all the ghosts. Then they can at least keep each other company until we’re able to come back and help them. And the floor of the cage would have to be underground so they aren’t standing right on the iron.”

“The palace courtyard should be big enough. But we’re surrounded.”

“Yeah, we’ll have to fly. And if we want the ghosts to gather there, we’ll have to sit in this box until they all converge, then construct the cage around them and fly out.” Gabriel stood and stretched.

“If we’re wasting all this energy flying and building traps, why don’t we just fly to the horn and be done with all this?” Balthazar got to his feet too but skipped the stretching. Their box wasn’t all that big.

“Gee, why didn’t I think of that already? Oh, wait. I did. The whole mountain’s warded.”

“Against angels?”

“Angels, demons, monsters, you name it. Maybe whoever put the horn there knew what it was?”

“Or maybe they just didn’t want it taken.”

“Either way, there’s only one passageway open to us, and it starts under the palace.”

“Wait, you’re saying someone warded the whole mountain up the yazoo, but left one tunnel open? Why the bloody hell would they do that?” Balthazar wondered.

Gabriel shrugged. “Damned if I know. Do I look like an ancient Atlantean to you? You’re the one who was sleeping with half the city, you’d know better than me.”

Balthazar chuckled. “You underestimate me. But only in numbers. In regards to my understanding of Atlanteans, it doesn’t extend much beyond sexual proclivities.”

“Well, either way, we have a plan we should get started on. Trap the ghosts, then head into the palace and look for the passageway. Let’s get going. Can you get us to the courtyard?”

Nodding, Balthazar took Gabriel’s wrist and flew them southwest where they appeared in the middle of a huge open space paved in red, black, and white stone. Beside them was a defunct fountain with a statue in the middle depicting two men and a woman, naked and posed suggestively, each holding a pitcher from which water would have flowed, were it working.

With a snap of his fingers, Gabriel called the iron box to them and they flew inside it. That was easier than remaking the box. Constructing it had taken quite a bit out of him. And now they were planning on making one much, much larger. “We should give it an hour or so to give the ghosts time to get
here, then drop the cage. The bars have to be close enough together that none of the ghosts can get through the gaps, though."

“Agreed. Can we construct it now, then move it over the courtyard? Maybe in the ocean above us?”

“Yeah, I think we’re gonna have to. Not above us though, if we did that we’d have to expend grace keeping it floating. Maybe if you stay here to keep the ghosts gathering, I can fly over to a clear spot on the ocean floor and make it, then you can bring it in when we’re ready?”

Pursing his lips, Balthazar gave Gabriel a speculative look. “If you do that, you’ll be too far away for me to help build the cage, though. Do you think you have enough grace to do that without burning yourself out?”

Gabriel gave an indignant huff. “Helloooo, archangel? Hells yeah, I can do it. Not sure how much I’ll be able to do after that. But as long as I don’t have to use much more while we’re here, I should be okay.”

“Maybe we should go build it together, then come back once it’s done.”

“We’ve already been here half the day. If we do that, it’ll take twice as long. I told you, I’ve got this. You just stay here and look pretty for the ghosts.”

“Well, I suppose I am better suited to that than you.” Balthazar smirked.

“More like half the ghosts here already wanted to kill you before they died,” Gabriel teased before disappearing with a flap of wings.

Less than an hour later, Gabriel flew back to the iron box, cage complete and ready. He slowed as he neared the plaza, popping back into real space, though remaining invisible. The courtyard he approached was teeming with ghosts, moaning and crying just beyond a foot-wide perimeter around the box, afraid to get any closer. There was no hint of movement anywhere else in the city. Satisfied, Gabriel finished his flight, landing just behind Balthazar. “BOO!” he shouted, grabbing his friend’s waist.

Jumping high enough to hit his head against the top of the box, Balthazar spun and glared at Gabriel. “What the bloody hell? Not funny!” he shouted, rubbing his crown with a frown.

Holding his sides as he rocked with laughter, Gabriel shook his head, tears of mirth pooling at the corners of his eyes. “Not funny my ass!” he gasped between bouts of laughter. “That was hilarious!”

Rolling his eyes, Balthazar sighed. “Are we ready to cage these guys or do you prefer guffawing like an imbecile all day?”

Still chuckling, Gabe straightened up, catching his breath. “Okay, okay. I checked on my way back. It looks like they’re all here. The cage is that way,” he said, pointing. “Can you sense it?”

Balthazar closed his eyes, focusing. A few minutes later, a loud clang rang through the courtyard, easily heard over the din of the ghosts. “Done. Let’s get out of here,” he said, grabbing Gabe’s wrist and flying them to the entrance of the palace.

Turning to look back, Gabriel saw the thousands of translucent, astonished and angry faces looking
at the bars of their prison. He made a silent vow to come back for them once the gates were open, to help them move on. “You’re familiar with this place, right? Think you can find the way to wherever the tunnel starts? It’s somewhere below us.”

“Yes, I can sense the warding now. There’s a temple chamber below the palace, the back wall of which is the mountain itself. It feels like the entrance may be there.” Balthazar led the way through the maze of corridors, easily finding the stairs down. He paused at a pair of pillars, slipping behind the one on the right and leaning against the wall, which slid away to reveal a small room containing only a stone table and bench.

“Why would they hide the temple room behind a pillar?” Gabriel asked, poking his head inside and smirking down at Balthazar sprawled on the floor.

“They wouldn’t. This is where I hid the horn originally. Just wanted to peek in. Relive fond memories. Though the first time I sprawled here there was a warm body cushioning my fall.”

“Okee dokes, did not need to know that. C’mon, we’re supposed to be finding a temple or tunnel or horn or something. Let’s go.”

Continuing further down the underground hallway, they passed several small, sparse rooms. Priests' quarters, Balthazar supplied. Eventually the hall opened up into a large room, bare except for a stone table at the far end with sconces on the wall behind it to either side. Between the sconces, carved into the mountain wall, was something written in a language Balthazar proclaimed to be Atlantean.

Gabriel was surprised to find he couldn’t read it. As God’s messenger, he knew every language known to man. Or at least, he thought he did. This was unlike anything he’d ever seen. “I don’t recognize the writing,” he said, brows furrowed.

“Oh, well, you wouldn’t. I doubt it has a relation to any known written language. After all, back then, there was no other culture that had a written language. Except maybe China? Not sure, never had much occasion to head that way. As for Atlantean, I may have given them a nudge or two toward writing, but they developed the alphabet themselves. This particular passage says ‘one who would seek the right to bask in the light of the holy relic is left to prove one’s worth’. A play on words, I think.”

“Do right and left have the same double meanings in Atlantean as in English?” Gabriel asked.

“Of course. Both languages did, after all, have an early influence in common.” Balthazar grinned cheekily.

“So if we seek the right, left to prove our worth. Does that mean we can take the right passage if we don’t want to bother proving our worth?”

“Knowing the Atlanteans, I’d say going right would lead to death. They wouldn’t allow anyone but the priests to reach some mystic-holy-whatever-place without proving themselves. And the priests’ entrance would only be discernible if you already knew where to look.”

“Ah, speaking of discernible entrances…” Gabriel pointed out, waving toward the bare, entranceless walls.

“That’s easy enough,” Balthazar quipped, walking purposefully to the left sconce and tugging it this way and that until there was a subtle click and part of the wall slid open. “See, nothing to it.”

“Balth, wait!” Gabriel called, dashing after Balthazar who strolled into the corridor. “It’s probably —” The stone wall slammed back into place behind them as a series of needles shot from the wall,
going right through Balth and into correlating holes on the opposite wall. “—trapped.”

“Well, bugger all. That was unpleasant,” Balth complained as he swayed on his feet. “Good thing I’m an angel. If I were human, those needles might’ve done some actual…” Trailing off, his eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed to the floor, twitching.

“Dammit, Balth!” Gabe exclaimed, dragging the other angel out of range of the needle holes. With a frustrated sigh, he pushed his grace into Balthazar, burning off the poison. He managed to clear the toxin before collapsing back against the wall, panting. Unless he wanted to go human, he couldn’t expend a drop more grace. “Wake up and heal yourself, muttonhead,” he grumbled, kicking Balth listlessly but repeatedly until he stirred.

It took a few moments for Balthazar to realize he was leaking blood from hundreds of holes, and a few moments longer to remember what had happened and come to the conclusion that he should really do something besides watching fluids drip from him like water through a sieve.

Of course, that happened to be when Sam’s prayers came through. Gabe was grounded and Balth was temporarily out of commission. And he doubted either of them could get out to pick up Sam and Ro anyway. The wall was sealed shut and the warding leeched extra grace any time they tried to use it, as Gabriel had just learned. They’d have to find their own way home. That or hope Balth had enough grace left when they got the horn to make several trips. Sorry, kiddo. You’re on your own. he thought to Sam, though he knew prayers didn’t go both ways. He just hoped they would manage okay.

“Why do I feel like I just flew to the next solar system and back?” Balthazar asked, frowning.

“Angel warding. Your grace will burn out twice as fast in here if you use it.”

“Then how the bloody hell are we supposed to get through this death trap?”

Gabriel rolled his eyes, still leaning against the wall and waiting for the corridor to stop spinning. Or maybe that was just his head. He didn’t like running on empty, not at all. “This place is meant to test humans. Time to Indiana Jones it. We should be able to get through with brains and brawn, no angel tricks necessary.”

“Not for me, at least,” Balthazar mumbled back with a slight smirk.

“Says the guy who can’t read the writing on the wall,” Gabriel rejoined, pointing to the literal writing on the wall across from him.

“Smart-ass,” Balth grumbled as he got to his feet and read aloud. “One and two are friends to you and three is also fine. Five and seven are both Heaven. Eleven is divine. Next thirteen, then seventeen, will never lead you wrong. From nineteen jump to twenty-three, thereafter carry on. What the hell?” Balthazar looked down the hallway. Twenty-three wasn’t even halfway through the numbers.

“Don’t like riddles?” Gabe quipped.

“What riddle? It’s just a bunch of random numbers that gets us less than halfway down the hall.”

“There must be a pattern that we can use to go the rest of the way. We just have to figure out what the numbers have in common. Read off the list again, just the numbers,” Gabriel instructed, pulling his crowbar from the belt loop he’d tucked it in.

“One, two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen, seventeen, nineteen, twenty-three.” As Balthazar read
them off, Gabriel scratched the digits into the wall to see them better. “They’re all odd numbers. Is that the answer? Only walk on odd?”

“Except two is even, and we skip nine, fifteen, and twenty-one. Oh, that’s too easy.” Gabriel used the crowbar to help push himself to his feet.

“Easy?”

“Yeah, it’s just prime numbers. Easy peasy like a breezy.”

“Show-off,” Balthazar muttered.

“Okay, so which of these shapes is one? The line?”

“Yes. The V is two, the triangle is three, square is four, pentagon is five.” Balthazar looked down the hall, three bricks per row, each with a number symbol.

“So one, two, three, four, five, then the pentagon with a line is six? And pentagon V is seven?” Gabriel asked, pointing to each brick in turn.

“Correct. And the two pentagons on top of each other is ten. Then it starts adding to the ten. V double pentagon is twenty, triangle double pentagon is thirty, square—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get the idea. Okee dokes, let’s do this. Wait, stand back a second,” Gabriel warned, then leaned back also, using his crowbar to push down the five tile. Nothing happened.

“What was that for?” Balthazar asked.

“To see if we had to step on each in order or if we just need to not step on a number that isn’t prime. Looks like it doesn’t have to be in order, just step on whichever correct number is a comfortable distance. So, five, seven, eleven…” Gabriel called out the safe numbers as Balthazar went first, Gabe following a number or two behind. As they got past twenty three, they moved slower, Gabe taking time to make sure they were moving correctly. “Twenty-nine… thirty-one… thirty-seven… thirty-nine—no, wait! Sorry, that’s divisible by three and thirteen. The next one is forty-one.”

“Are you certain?” Balthazar turned back to raise an eyebrow.

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Yes. Forty-one, then forty-three. Forty-seven… fifty-three… fifty-nine… sixty-one… sixty…seven?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“Hey, you wanna do the calculations in your head, be my guest.”

“I just don’t want to be perforated again. So is it sixty-seven or no?”

“It’s sixty-seven. Gimme a minute for the next one… …Seventy-one… seventy-three… …seventy-nine… …eighty-three… …eighty-seven—no, that’s divisible by three… … Eighty-nine… … … ninety-seven…”

“That’s the last one,” Balth said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Good. They get harder the higher you go. Any more writing?” They both looked down the hall which was void of writing for a while. “Super-dupes. Let’s go.”

“I wonder why we’ve not needed torches down here,” Balth mused as they walked.
“Probably the same reason we didn’t need them in the city when there’s no sunlight at the bottom of the ocean. Whatever’s maintaining the bubble of air keeps everything lit.”

“But there’s no source for the light, it’s just there.”

“Yeah, it’s not logical, but I’m just calling it a gift horse and not checkin’ the teeth.” Gabriel shrugged his shoulders with a heavy sigh.

“That sounds like something Dean would say.” Balthazar chuckled.

“Probably. Anywho, as long as it gets us through this stupid hallway, we don’t need to know where it comes from. Hey, is that more writing up there?”

It was. They walked cautiously up to the inscribed section of wall, looking for the next trap. There was no sign of one. Not until they got within reading distance, at which point the corridor was cut off behind and in front of them with stone slabs that slammed down. Exchanging a worried look as small holes opened in the walls and a hole the size of a manhole cover opened in the center of the corridor, they both focused on the words and Balthazar read them aloud.

“Beware, and know, that spikes below, will pierce you to your crown. Yet take too long to solve this one, and surely you will drown. Take you the plunge, though shallow lunge, not too deep may you fall. Then straight ahead, no darkness dread; it leads you ‘neath the wall. Lovely. Another riddle. I suppose you find this one easy as well?” Balthazar asked, looking to his left only to find Gabriel gone.

“Hey, come over here and hold my feet,” Gabe said, laying down on the other side of the pit’s opening and inching forward.

“What are you doing? You’ll fall to your death.”

“Not if you hold my feet, I won’t. Hurry up. I wanna check somethin’.” Gabriel was leaning further over the hole and Balthazar rushed to do as he was told, grasping the archangel around the ankles. “Good, now let me move forward, but hold steady once I can bend in at the waist.”

“What?”

“Nevermind, just let me slide forward until I say ‘stop’.” Gabriel continued inching forward until his torso was dangling into the pit. “Okay, stop. Yep, spikes at the bottom, just like the riddle said, but there’s a hole leading the same way as the hallway. It probably comes up on the other side of the closed wall. Help me back up.”

Balthazar dragged Gabriel back out of the pit. “Can we reach that hole from here?”

Shaking his head, Gabe stood and examined the smaller holes that had opened in the walls. “It said if we took too long we’d drown. I think these holes were meant to flood the room. Once the pit had enough water in it, we could drop down into it then swim through the tunnel. But it looks like whatever mechanism released the water isn’t working.”

“Oh, to hell with all this nonsense.” Balthazar grabbed Gabriel’s wrist and flew them past the wall. Landing on the other side, he collapsed onto his knees, wheezing and gasping. “Bloody. Fucking. Hell! I hate this place!”

“Dammit, Balth, I told you, the warding drains your grace twice as much when you use it. We have to think our way through this.”
“I’m bloody tired of thinking and I’m bloody tired of this place, and I bloody well want to get your sodding horn and get the bloody hell out of here!”

“Relax. Most hero tales have three trials, right? There’s probably only one more trap or test or whatever and then we’re there.” Gabriel smiled, pulling Balth to his feet.

Groaning, Balthazar shook his head. “Atlantean tales had five trials. Base five number system and all.”

“Okay then, three more to go and you can fly our feathery asses outta here. Soon as we’re outside the warding, of course.”

“Please tell me we don’t have to come back through all these bloody traps.”

Grabbing Balthazar’s wrist, Gabriel just led the way forward.

“Finally,” Balthazar gasped three traps later as the hall opened into a round chamber. The golden instrument sat atop a pedestal in the middle of the room.

“How’s your grace doing after that last trick you pulled?” Gabriel asked.

“Not good. Very not good. I’m not so sure I’ve enough left to fly us home.”

“That’s why I told you not to use it in here. Ah, well. No use crying over spilled mocha latte. We’ll figure out how to get topside after we get outta this mountain. Wow, I forgot what my horn even looked like. She’s a beauty, isn’t she?” Gabe reached out and gently lifted the instrument from its perch.

“Yes, quite lovely and all that, but now what do we do?”

Gabriel lifted the instrument lovingly, licking his lips and taking a breath.

“No you don’t!” Balth shouted, blocking the thing before it could touch Gabriel’s lips.

“Aww, what was that for? I just wanted to see if she sounds as beautiful as she looks.”

“Gabriel, think. Your symbol is emblazoned on it. What does your symbol do?”

“Calls angels. No worries there though, you and I are the only powered angels left on earth.”

“But not the only ones left in existence. And where are the other surviving angels?”

Gabriel shrugged. “I don’t know. Didn’t Cassie say they went off with Dad somewh—Oh. Yeah, maybe I shouldn’t play her.” He tucked the instrument away into the inside pocket of his jacket, zipping it closed.

“Good plan,” Balthazar said, rolling his eyes. “I still don’t get why you made your ‘horn’ a kazoo.”

“Hey, kazoos are cool. Like bowties.”

“If you say so.” Balthazar wandered around the room, hoping for more writing.
“Hey, what’s this say? Some Atlantean words of wisdom at the end of the quest?” Gabriel asked, and Balthazar moved over to join him.

“It says ‘exit’,” he replied, grinning. Below the word was a protruding stone. Balthazar pressed it.

“Wa—” Gabriel’s warning cut off as the floor slid away beneath them. He had a second of weightlessness to wonder what this new trap was before landing on smooth stone. Balthazar was ahead of him, whooping with delight as they slid down, down, down, endlessly down, twisting and turning until they slid right out onto the stone floor of the temple room they’d started in.

“Well, that was certainly much easier and faster than the way in,” Balth said, laughing as he picked himself up off the ground, dusting off his black jacket, grey v-necked shirt, and jeans.

“At least we’re both in one piece. And still angels.” Gabriel stood too, feeling over his pocket to make sure the kazoo was still there and whole. It was.

“Yes, but we’ve still to find a way back to the surface. At this depth and as low as we are on grace, the pressure would crush us even if we could make it that far without air.”

“Maybe we could float up in a ship? Turn it upside down to trap air inside?” Gabriel suggested.

“A wooden vessel would be crushed before we’d risen more than a few feet. And we’d have to get it outside the air bubble to even attempt it,” Balth pointed out. “Oh, but maybe...Come on, I have an idea.”

“What idea?” Gabe asked, trotting after Balthazar, who was making long, swift strides up the stairs, through the palace, and out a side door. “Hey, wait up. Is it me, or does the air bubble look smaller?”

Pausing, Balthazar looked out over the city below. The edge of air barely covered the near half of the second ring of the city. “It’s not just you. The bubble is shrinking, and apparently quite swiftly at that. Hurry, it should be just beyond the stables.”

“What’s beyond the stables?”

“As I recall, an acquaintance of mine, Eucridicles, was working on a metal submersible not long before the island sank. He may have used it himself to escape, but if he was killed during the quakes and no one else knew about it...” Balthazar threw open the door to a large building. “Yes! It’s here!”

Following into a large workshop that was open on either end, metal roof protecting the interior, Gabriel stared at the machine resting on a wheeled cart and whistled. “Wow. Looks like something straight outta Jules Verne. Also doesn’t look like it could handle the pressure at this depth.”

“I’m not sure, but it has a better chance than a wooden ship. Eucridicles said something about creating counter pressure by circulating water through the hull’s lining. Or some such. I’d not really been paying attention to his words at the time. Such a lovely, toned chest. And those toga-like outfits he wore, so convenient for... Anyway, he also had some way of filtering oxygen and drinking water from the sea during the process. I’ve no idea if it works or if he even tested it, but it’s better than dying down here. Come on,” Balthazar opened a portal on the vehicle’s side just big enough for a man to fit through and squirmed in. Gabriel followed dubiously, closing the hatch behind him.

“Cozy,” he commented, forcing himself to take slow deep breaths to stave off the claustrophobia.

“It isn’t that small. We’ve room to walk around, grab a drink from the tap, recline in our seats to rest. It’ll do.”
“Sure,” Gabe squeaked, sitting in one of the two chairs. He turned to examine the controls, then looked down as his feet hit something. “What’s with the pedals?”

“Oh, right. Did I forget to mention that? Burning fuel to make steam would have used up the oxygen too quickly. It’s man-powered. Or rather, angel powered in our case.” Balthazar sat in the other seat and began looking over the controls, nodding as though he knew what each one was, though Gabriel would bet all the chocolate in the Hershey’s factory that Balth didn’t have a clue.

Wondering if Pennsylvania was on the way back to Camp Singer, Gabriel rolled his eyes at Balth again. Was it possible for them to roll right out of his head? He really needed a break from Balthazar after this. “So what now? We get out and drag this thing to the edge of the bubble? Unless he had steam-powered metal horses to pull the cart?”

“Mules, not horses. Something about height and equilibrium. But I don’t think he ever got them working.”

“Wow, I was kidding. Aaanywho, let’s get out and—does it look darker out there?” Gabe asked, peering through the tiny round window in front of him. Sitting in the other seat, Balthazar looked out his identical window.

“It does. Is the light going out, just like the bubble, or—” Balthazar broke off as water flooded into the workshop, lifting the vessel off the cart and straight up through the thin metal roof.

Gabriel squeaked beside him as his hands flew over his eyes and the ocean came crashing down on them, air bubble completely gone.

“This is no time for hysterics! Start pedaling!” Balth ordered, working his own pedals as he began fiddling with dials and pulling levers.

“Do you even know what you’re doing?” Gabriel shouted over the thunderous water, feet pedaling frantically.

“Let’s hope so!” Balth replied as the submarine began to slowly rise.

“Balthazar, wake up. It’s your turn.” Gabriel pushed tiredly on Balth’s shoulder.

“That can’t have been more than twenty minutes,” Balthazar groaned, rubbing his eyes.

“It’s been two hours and I need sleep. And a drink. Probably not in that order. Get pedaling.”

“Fine, fine,” Balthazar grumbled. “Just let me grab a quick drink first.”

“I still can’t believe your friend managed all this technology back in pre-history. Even if his power source sucks.”

Chuckling, Balth drank a few gulps from the tap, making sure to leave enough for Gabe. It took time to filter the salt out, so they couldn’t drink too much at once. “That I do, and quite well I’ve been told. How much longer until we hit land?”

“Depends on how fast you pedal. Shouldn’t be too long now. Not more than another day, I’d think. I never realized how much my geographical sense is tied to my grace. But we should be coming up to
the eastern coast of North America any time now.” Gabriel groaned in relief as Balthazar took over pedaling. He stood and stretched as much as he could in the cramped space, then went and got his drink.

“Good. I’m not familiar with the sensation, but I think I’m famished. How does Cassie manage? I’m only nearly human and can barely stand it.”

“I have a few more lemon drops. Want one?” Gabe asked, pulling one of the treats from the bag in his pocket and tossing it into his own mouth.

“I think I’ll pass. Last time, it just made me more hungry.”

“Suit yourself,” Gabe said, settling back into his chair. It had taken a day for them to slowly pedal their way to the surface, heading approximately northwest as they went. Balth had said something about air bubbles and blood streams and blah blah blah, but Gabriel hadn’t been paying much attention at the time. He was too busy trying to convince himself that the darkness was only temporary and they would be out in the open air soon. When they had finally emerged from the depths, both had climbed out through a hatch above the cockpit and stood in the salty wind, looking around and breathing fresh air. But there’d been no land in sight, so they’d climbed back in and dove under again, running just below the surface so that the craft could continue its water filtration whatever. They’d been pedaling northwest ever since, a day or two, and were both desperate to make landfall.

Closing his eyes, Gabriel mused over how he’d managed to get past his claustrophobia. Sharing the cramped space with Balthazar wasn’t too bad. Sure, they both teased each other, but they got along well enough. Still, woulda been nicer sharing the space with someone else. Rowena, maybe. At least they could have found better ways to pass the time. He could pedal with Rowena on his lap. But no, she was with Sam now. He shouldn’t be thinking about her that way. Sam, though, sure the moose would take up more space, but he could pedal with Sam on his lap too. That’d be nice. Instead, he was stuck here with Balthazar, snarking back and forth. Although...he could pedal just as easily with Balth on his lap too...Maybe? Nah... but... hmm...

“—be. Gabriel! Wake up!”

“Wha—? That can’t have been two hours, I just managed to fall asleep,” Gabriel complained.

“No, not that. Look!” Balthazar pointed to Gabe’s window.

Looking out, Gabe realized they’d surfaced again. And he thought he saw something glinting in the darkness ahead. He leaned forward eagerly, squinting. “Is that a building?”

“I think it’s a lighthouse. The light isn’t on, of course, but that’s glass at the top, isn’t it?”

“I think it’s a lighthouse. The light isn’t on, of course, but that’s glass at the top, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think you’re right!” Gabriel said excitedly. His feet hit the pedals and they both worked as fast as they could. The craft sped up a bit and the structure loomed closer. It was definitely a lighthouse. They steered around it, looking for and finally spotting a pier to the west. Not bothering to secure the sub, they scrambled out and hopped onto the pier gratefully, clasping each other’s shoulders and jumping around excitedly.

“Now we’ve just to traverse half of America and we’ll be back at Camp Singer,” Balth said cheerfully, only half sarcastic.

“And avoid the walking dead now that we’re back on land,” Gabriel cautioned. “Come on, let’s
check out that lighthouse. There should be a shop or museum there that’ll tell us where we are. Might wanna get your blade out though, just in case.”

After days on the sea, walking on stationary land took some getting used to, but by the time they’d made it to their destination they were both steadier. Other than a shifting curtain inside a house they passed, the seaside seemed deserted. Wind blew with the scent of salt and a hint of fish rather than rotting bodies, which was a positive sign.

The lighthouse was only a few blocks over, and its sign proclaimed it to be St. Simons Island Lighthouse. There were maps in the gift shop, the windows of which had been broken already, and they eagerly found their bearings.

They were in Georgia.

As long as the bridges were passable, they could get to the main land and take any number of roads to get home. Finding a motorcycle dealership, they ‘borrowed’ a couple bikes and headed west.

As soon as they found a remote, unlooted grocery store they stopped for food, candy, and other necessary supplies, then hit the road. Next stop—not counting breaks for eating and sleeping, which, as angels, was a bit annoying to have to do—Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Chapter End Notes

Coming next week, a trip to the bunker with jscribbles. There's sure to be lots of rainbows, unicorns, and puppies for all, right? :D

I hope everyone enjoyed the happy romp through Atlantis!

Just a bit of spoilery random reference info, in case anyone was interested:

According to Wikipedia, “In Plato's metaphorical tale [of Atlantis], Poseidon fell in love with Cleito,” which is why I called the unnamed capital city of Atlantis Cleito.

Critias—the guy Balth gave the idea for steam power—was the name of one of Plato’s dialogues that detailed Atlantis.

Eucridicles was just a name I made up, though it’s inspired by Euclid, the Father of Modern Geometry.

There were also a number of movie/tv references because, hey, it’s Supernatural! But if you missed any, no worries. Just remember, bowties—and kazoos—are cool!
I'll Be In My Bunk(er)

Chapter by jscribbles

Chapter Summary

TFW and friends take on the Monster Vault (less commonly known as their former home of six years, the Bunker!) Dean and Castiel share a monumental (and tragic, obviously) moment between them in the midst of chaos, Sam gets a boner seeing Rowena wielding a gun, and key pieces are retrieved.

Chapter Notes

WELL, WELL, WELL, WHAT DO WE HAVE HERE? ANOTHER JSRIBBLES CHAPTER? You should have known from the punny title, you silly little muffins. Welcome back to chaos and hilarity, I'm back to bring you some lulz and heartache, as per usually scheduled programming.

This chapter is full of monsters, ghouls, zombies, and references galore! Hope you like Harry Potter and the Shining because in this chapter, Dean sure doesn't.

Go forth and enjoy the next chapter! Bring tissues for the jokes I'm going to tell to make you laugh-cry, and for the snotty-tears I'll make you shed over Destiel angst. (I am very humble, can you tell?)

ENJOY!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The rest of camp was still asleep. The sun had yet to set, but the sky was already a periwinkle colour, hinting that soon light would wash over their camp and daylight would rejoin them.

Dean, Cas, Sam, and the rest of the leadership team was already up. Them, Jo, the angels—who’d arrived yesterday on a pair of definitely-stolen motorcycles—and Crowley were meeting to discuss the mission. Whether they wanted to admit it or not, Crowley had finagled his way into the leadership team, having helped them out with Alastair’s blade and apparently on some hunt with Claire that had put him on Jody’s good side.

Everyone stood around a table, Dean at the head. Every pair of eyes were on the key shards spread in front of them.

Dean tapped at the table, gesturing to a curved and bloody razor. Its handle was wood and etched with a series of intricate sigils that probably meant all types of gruesome shit. While his soul tugged him towards it, Dean didn’t touch the blade. Cas was right; that thing contained nasty, horcrux-level magic.

“Alastair’s blade,” he said. ”That’s one Hell shard.”
Beside him, Balthazar jutted his chin at the artifact that he’d retrieved from Atlantis with Gabe.
“Gabriel’s big horn.”

“Pervert.” Gabriel smirked, then winked.

Castiel’s face twisted in disgust. “You’re brothers.”

“You’re judgey.”

Balthazar bumped his hip against Castiel’s arm. “Don’t be jealous, little brother. You’re still my
favourite. Besides, we’re only joking. It’s quite fun to disgust you now that you’re so emotive.”

While Cas scowled, Dean groaned, snapping his fingers to regain their attention. “If we could put the
angelcest jokes aside for a sec and focus, that would be fuckin’ swell.”

Sam rested his chin in his hands and piped up, gesturing to the other artifacts they had splayed out on
the table. “We’ve got Dean’s amulet, and the Staff of Moses. That’s four out of six. All of the
Heaven shards and only one Hell shard.”

“We have established that the remainder of them are in the bunker,” Cas said, staring at the items.
“The first blade is under my bed, and the colt is…”

“Armoury,” Sam murmured. “I tried to fix it there, but couldn’t figure out how.”

“So we storm the place?” Donna asked, narrowing her eyes. “Y’know, that kinda sounds like a ten-
outta-ten guarantee of death with all those beasties and bodies we’ve been tossin’ down there and
lockin’ up.”

Jo, doing her usual pacing, stopped behind Donna and nodded, dragging a narrow-eyed glare across
Dean, Sam, Cas, and the angels. “I agree with Donna. Surely there’s a summoning spell the witch
can cast to retrieve the artifacts.”

Rowena sniffed sharply and gestured at the key shards. “The witch certainly could, but, my dearie,
there are wards and sigils up to our eyeballs in that bunker that prevent the exit of anything
unsavoury. Considering those items are straight from Hell, a summoning of such items would be
impossible. The retrieval will certainly have to be manual.”

“Sounds like suicide. Count me out,” Jo grumbled, resuming her pacing after a moody hair flick.

Gabriel grinned at her and tugged on her shawl as she passed. “Aw, come on, sis. Hang out with
Balthie and me outside. We’ll be there as insurance, just in case the Scooby gang can’t get
themselves out.”

“It’s not wise to be using your grace,” Castiel cautioned, tilting his head in warning. “You are the last
angels on earth, and eventually, we’ll need someone to unlock Heaven. Only celestial entities can do
so. You know that. Humans can’t walk in, they—” Cas’ face scrunched up for a second, then he
corrected himself. “—we would be destroyed.”

“Well, there’s two of us and only one gate to Heaven, so take one of us inside as insurance,”
Balthazar offered. He and Gabe exchanged looks, and he added, “I know we’re both required in
order to power Heaven back up, but that can’t happen without the pieces, so one of us will go with
you. Hopefully we don’t have to use much, if any, of our grace.”

The angels—current and former—all nodded at each other gravely.
“Well, how did you all escape in the first place?” Rowena asked, looking between Sam, Dean, and Cas. “I remember you telling me you’d gone down there when The End first began, but I can’t recall how you escaped.”

“Manual override,” Dean admitted. “Those baddies won’t be able to escape unless they’ve got a grenade launcher.”

“You have a grenade launcher?” Gabriel asked with excitement, looking between everyone. “That settles it, I’m going in, too.”

“Gabe,” Sam warned, peeved, his bitch face number twelve worn snugly on his features, “you can’t be using the grenade launcher. We’re going in, grabbing the weapons, and getting out.”

Gabriel scowled at Sam, then turned to Rowena and asked, “Are you sure you want this one? He’s no fun.”

Rowena smirked and leaned her head on Sam’s shoulder. “He’s got another rocket launcher that keeps me rather entertained.”

Gabriel and Balthazar looked at each other and broke into pervy giggles, Castiel turned red, Dean narrowed his eyes, and Crowley looked like he was going to have an aneurysm from the corner of the room.

“Okay,” Jody interrupted, rolling her eyes. Beside her, Donna smacked on gum and winked cartoonishly at Rowena, who was grinning like she was rather proud of herself. “So, Jo and Balthazar stay outside—”

“Open line of communication. Gabriel and I can angel radio to each other for help,” Balthazar pointed out.

Jody tapped her nose at him and carried on, delegating. “Sam, Dean, Castiel and Rowena go in together; Ro, you can use protective spells to keep them safe.”

Donna smiled and asked, “You all need back up?”

Dean shook his head. “Nah, Donna. The fewer people go in there, the more likely we are to make it out. Too many cooks in the kitchen and all the jazz. Besides, if things go bad, you and Jody are needed here to run the camp and keep everyone safe.”

Jody and Donna shared a meaningful stare, then turned to the boys. “All right,” Jody agreed. “But don’t make us do that. Get back safe.”

“We’ll be locked and loaded with weapons,” Dean said, gesturing at the door with his thumb. “Got Claire and some kids making salt rounds as we speak.”

Jo smirked as she walked by, shaking her head. “Making good use of the children, I see?”

“Claire is no child,” Castiel corrected, but Dean grinned and said at the same time, “It’s craft time. What’s camp without crafts?”

“You never went to camp,” Sam huffed. “What do you know about camp?”

“Bring as many weapons as you can; no telling what’s in there with all those curse boxes you boys had in storage. There’s certainly no shortage of iron around these parts,” Rowena said, ignoring them and getting to her feet, stretching her arms. “I’ll see what I have in terms of hex bag ingredients.
Perhaps I can whip some up before we depart.”

“Never something I thought I’d say, but—” Jo followed Rowena as she headed towards the door.”— I’ll help the witch with the voodoo.”

Ro raised a brow at the former angel, but did offer an arm to her. The red-heads walked out together, their hair and loose clothing fluttering behind them out the door.

The rest of the group turned back towards the key shards. Gabriel crossed his arms on the table. His eyes flickered up to his brother as he asked, “You got any idea how to put these bad boys back together, there, Cassie? ‘Cause,” he peered over his shoulder at Balthazar, “Balthie and I were talkin’ and we don’t remember either.”

“We’ll likely have to use the memory ritual again,” Castiel said darkly, staring at the Hell razor. “That, and perhaps spend some time with the manifesto.”

“Or,” Dean offered, shrugging, “we could just try welding them together? Try a little Blacksmithing 101 and see what happens?”

“Dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” Gabe said immediately.

Balthazar rolled his eyes. “Just weld them together. What a genius.”

But Cas turned to Dean and under the table, his hand slid into his, squeezing his fingers. “I don’t think that’s a stupid suggestion, Dean. I think...perhaps that might work? I know who I used to be, and I know how I used to see the angels. I think I would’ve ensured the process would’ve been so simple that no angel nor demon would have thought of it. They’d have tried to use something more mystical, something too complicated that couldn’t’ve worked.”

Gabe and Balthazar glanced at each other, and Dean turned to them with a grin. “See? Simplicity, assholes. Now who’s the dumb genius?”

Cas exchanged looks with Jody which Dean caught, but didn’t point out. It was a very ‘how are we stuck with these idiots?’ look.

“And once the keys are welded together?” Crowley asked, stepping forward from the shadows, sliding onto one of the benches with his fingers knitted together on the table. A raised brow questioned them all. “Then what? We wave the keys at God and ask him to kindly repair the world and bugger off?”

“No,” Dean said impatiently. “We kill his ass; that’s what we do next.”

“Yes, moron, but how?” Crowley asked, his other brow curling up to meet the other.

Everyone looked at Cas, who swallowed loudly and then shrugged his shoulders. “Not sure.”

“Another adventure of Ro’s glowy hands and an angel-memory seizure, huh?” Dean asked unhappily, his thumb brushing over the back of Cas’ hand under the table.

Castiel’s blue eyes softened and he nodded, moving a few inches towards Dean, the skin of their arms brushing. “Unfortunately, yes, Dean. But you’ll be there with me, so I’m confident that I’ll be fine.”

Warmth blossomed in Dean’s chest. Hell yes, he’d protect Cas. He felt himself lean in for a kiss as he murmured, “You bet, angel—”
“Ugh,” Crowley groaned, rolling his eyes as he left the room.

Balthazar and Gabriel were grinning at them, Gabe even going so far as to plant his chin in his hand and look playfully enamoured. “Please,” the trickster said, waving at hand at them, “don’t stop the lovey dovey smooches on account of the room full of people watching you. Carry on.”

Cas blinked. “We...didn’t…”

Dean let go of Cas’ hand and threw his own up in the air before they clapped down on the table. He rose to his feet. “All right, all right. Fine. Let’s get the cars fueled, the weapons together, and blow this popsicle stand.”

***

The sun was rising by the time the trucks were fuelled up and running just behind the front gates. Rowena was at the wheel of one with Jo and Sam, while Dean and Cas were to take another. The angels waited on motorcycles between the trucks.

Dean threw a duffle into the trunk, his old back protesting the one-too-many of each kind of weapon they had shoved into the camo bag. Cas slid his own weapons in next to Dean’s, before zipping up his worn blue jacket, and tugging fingerless gloves from the pockets.

Dean eyed him, enjoying the tightness of the jacket around Cas’ shoulders and arms. His eyes flickered from Cas’ boots, to his ripped black jeans, and then back to the coat. He gazed fondly at the messy long hair that was starting to curl under Cas’ ears and fall onto his forehead.

Cas raised a brow at him. “What?”

Smirking as he closed the tailgate with a thump, Dean shrugged as he and Cas walked towards the cabin. “Nothin’. You just… You’re just lookin’ hot, that’s all.”

“I’m cold, Dean. That’s the point of a jacket.”

Dean opened the door to the truck but paused to grin, his hand gripping the frame of the driver side. He was one foot in when he stopped to say, “Dude, I’m trying to tell you you’re looking good. Like…” As Cas stared at him, Dean began to lose his nerve. “Uh, you know, like...sexy.”

Cas’ mouth opened and closed a bit. He raised his brows as he replied, “Um, you too.”

‘You too’. And they say romance is dead.

Still, it was unequivocally Cas, and so Dean reached out to take his hand, pulling the man towards him. Cas stepped into Dean’s space and released a little huffy laugh, followed by one of his rare crooked smiles that spread over his dry lips and lit up Dean’s day.

“I apologize. I’m still trying to learn the nuances of flirting.”

“Yeah,” Dean chuckled, sliding a hand up the front of Cas’ jacket to grip it at the collar. “I’m starting to learn you’re a grand romantic gesture kinda dude.”

“I’m very dramatic,” Castiel whispered as Dean leaned in and warmed up those cold lips with his own.

The early morning was quiet at camp, and the crisp early December weather of South Dakota nipped at their skin, but the car cabin blasted heat out of the open door. Cas’ lips were cold, but quickly
became pliant under some careful kissing.

“Oi!” Rowena barked out the window.

Dean and Cas broke apart to look over at her. The passenger side window was down, and Rowena, Sam, and Jo all smirked at them.

“Gross,” Sam said loudly.

Jo nodded. “Agreed. Get a room.”

“Do we have to ride behind them?” Gabriel whined loudly. “Just imagine the trail of hearts and rainbows shooting outta that tailpipe. It’ll be like a five hour game of Mario Kart.”

“Oh, quit teasing!” Balthazar piped up, gesturing at Cas and Dean with a gloved hand. “Let the blokes say their last farewells before they die horrible, painful deaths.”

“Shut up!” Dean warned loudly before stepping away from Cas and sliding into his seat.

Cas walked around the front of the car, scowling at his brothers and narrowing his eyes. He jumped into the cabin as well and murmured, “They’re all quite annoying, aren’t they?”

“You have no idea,” Dean grumbled, putting the truck into drive and pulling out of the camp as Jody and Donna pulled the gates apart for them. “Crowley’s been following me around non-stop, asking me if we’ve had sex, or showered together, or said I lo—”

“Yes, he’s quite annoying,” Castiel interrupted, yanking his seatbelt across his chest abruptly. He scowled out at the road, even though it was rather pretty, with oranges and reds shining through the trees and casting their path in an ethereal glow. “I did manage to win an extra shower slot, however, after telling him that I’d made the first move.”

Dean’s jaw dropped. “You did not make the first move.”

“Dean,” Cas said, looking over with raised brows, “I don’t even know what he means by first move. I simply wanted the can of Pringles that accompanied the deal.”

“Sell out.”

“What do you think he meant by first move anyway?” Castiel asked thoughtfully, unzipping his jacket. It was quite warm in the cabin with the heater going. “Because, I suppose, technically, I raised you from Hell. Does gripping you tight and raising you from Perdition count as a first move?”

“I mean…” Dean broke into laughter, shaking his head at Cas. “I guess it does. Castiel fucks on the first date now, does he?”

“We did not—”

But Dean dissolved into laughter, hiccuping at the look of sheer horror on Cas’ face.

“I’m—I’m just kidding, Cas,” Dean chuckled, shaking his head. 

Cas rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest, staring out the window.

Dean glanced at him, after checking behind him to make sure Ro and the angels were still following. “Which, uh, reminds me, Cas. I’ve been meaning to ask…”
Cas looked over, his face pinched like it always was when he was waiting for someone to talk about something he was unsure of. Dean’s heartbeat picked up.

“I, well, um… Listen, if you ever wanna be alone with me…” Dean glanced at him quickly, his stomach quickly filling with flailing, panicking butterflies, “Well, uh… I’d be okay with that.”

The dip in between Cas’ eyes deepened as he said, “We already spend time alone, Dean.”

Oh, idiot. Loveable idiot.

Dean laughed nervously, and adjusted his hands on the wheel, tapping his fingers against the worn leather. “I mean to say, uh… There’s this place near Bobby’s that’s kinda out of the way and it has a good view and it’s pretty private. I just, well, you know there’s all these people at camp and it’s hard to be like, truly alone for a while.”

“Yes,” Cas agreed. “Someone usually needs something of us, don’t they? I suppose those are the workplace hazards of running a camp—”

“My point is—” Dean interrupted, needing to get his fucking message out before he chickened out, “—that I’m ready when you’re ready, okay? Like…just tell me and we’ll make some time for each other.”

“For…?”

“Dude. Don’t be dense.”

In the awkward silence that followed, Dean noticed that the heater was obscenely loud. Feeling like he’d done something wrong, he glanced over, the butterflies in his stomach falling dead like they were being shot at with arrows. Cas was staring out the window, face turned away.

“I...Forget it.” Dean swallowed hard. “Look, I didn’t mean to assume—”

Cas shook his head. Quietly, he murmured, “I’d love to, Dean. I really would. It would make me... very happy.”

Dean noticed Cas rubbing at his palms and picking at his gloves in his lap. Feeling like something was off, Dean reached over and took one of the hands, shaking it gently until Cas looked over.

Unsure why Cas had that weird, sad look in his eyes, Dean flashed him a smile he hoped looked encouraging. “Then I’ll show you that place soon, okay? You just gotta promise we make it out alive today.”

“I’ll certainly try.”

“No ‘try’, only ‘live’, ” Dean said, returning his gaze to the road. Between them, he held onto Cas’ hand tightly, not wanting to let go for the sake of whatever was putting that sad look in Cas eye. “I got stuff we still gotta do in this storyline. Stuff I still wanna say.”

In his grip, he could’ve sworn Cas’ hand shook.

***

With the two trucks and two bikes parked outside the bunker entrance—now grown over, with weeds lining the rails and long grass drooping over the entrance from the hill—the team stood atop the steps, eyeing the door warily.
“Ready?” Dean asked, looking around the team.

Rowena handed out hex bags from a backpack hanging off Sam’s shoulder. “I only have two—that’s all the ingredients I had for this type of magic. One per team. Sam, you can take one. I’ll be protected by my magic. Which one of you wants the other?”

She held out a small burlap sack, the string dangling from her long fingers. Dean reached out to take it, then turned and slipped the necklace around Cas’s neck. “You take it,” Dean murmured, winking. “‘Live’, remember?” He raised the sawed-off hanging from one arm. “I’ve got this bad boy to keep me safe.”

“You need protecting, too,” Castiel argued, brows knitting together.

Dean grinned, turning towards the door, climbing down the steps. “That’s what I got you for.”

“Romantic,” Jo teased, sitting on the top step, glancing over when Balthazar dropped down beside her.

“We’ll be here,” the blonde angel said, waving. “Pray if you need an emergency rescue.”

“I mean…” Jo pointed at herself and sighed. “I’ll be useless for a rescue, but I can open the door when you’re on your way back up.”

Castiel gripped her shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “That makes you very important, sister. The manual override will lock us in. If the outside door is closed, the warding is complete. Once the door opens, the sigils are broken and we can be allowed out,” he added, glancing at Balthazar, “so be listening for us. If we need the door opened, be swift.”

“Aye, aye, captain.” Balthazar sighed.

“We good to go, or what?” Gabriel asked, raising his eyebrows. “There’s a grenade launcher waiting for me down there.”

As Dean opened the doors, he groaned. ‘You are not using the grenade launcher, Gabriel.”

“You’re not my real dad,” Gabriel snapped, striding past him into the bunker. “You can’t tell me what to do!”

Exasperated, Dean looked out at Sam, Ro, and Cas as they started to file in. “Can’t we just lock the door behind him and go back home?”

“I wish,” Sam muttered, stepping into the bunker, clicking off the safety of his gun.

The bunker was eerily quiet.

At the far end of the library, a piece of paper floated towards the ground, like someone had dropped it from the ceiling only moments before they’d entered.

Some of the light bulbs had gone out, casting parts of the kitchen, war room, and library into darkness.

The five of them—Dean, Cas, Sam, Ro, and Gabe—stood at the top of the steps, looking down over the room.
While the silence was unnerving, it was clear that they were not alone in what used to be their home. The air was frigid, and every one of them could see their breath billow out in curly clouds before their eyes. It wasn’t the chill of a cold room, it was the chill of vengeful spirits, waiting to sweep out and destroy. The furniture was all broken, appearing as if it had been thrown about. There was blood and destruction essentially everywhere.

The air smelled like copper and rot. Blood had been spilt recently, and they would certainly be running into whoever, whatever, had left that scent behind them.

“We splitting up?” Sam breathed.

“Yup,” Dean replied quietly, beginning to descend the steps as his eyes darted around the war room. “Me and Cas are gonna head to his room, grab the first blade, then meet back here. You three go to the armoury, get the colt pieces.”

“Deal,” Sam said as they all stopped at the bottom of the steps. “Meet back in fifteen minutes, or we go looking for you.”

“Same for you. Wanna try the walkies?”

Gabe tugged his team’s walkie from his belt and raised it to his mouth. “Breaker 1-9. Get a haircut, you punk. You look like Justin Beiber.”

The walkie at Dean’s waist crackled and popped, but Gabriel’s idiocy didn’t come through. Just in case it was the walkie’s fault, Dean raised his to his mouth and glared as he said, “10-1, dipshit. Hope you trip and skin your knee.”

The radio in Gabe’s hand crackled and sputtered, but Dean’s voice didn’t go through.

“Crap.” Sam adjusted his gun in his hand. “No communication down here then. Likely too much EMF. We’ll just have to yell and hope someone hears us. You two sure you’re okay to go alone? D’you want Gabe? I have Rowena’s protective spell...”

“Nah,” Dean said, already nodding at Cas to follow him down the side corridor. “We’re just down the hall. Should be back before you guys are.”

With that, the two groups split, Dean and Cas creeping down the corridor to the bedrooms, and Sam’s team curling around the corner to the stairwell that would lead them to the armoury.

***

The place was covered in dust. Dean’s heart ached inexplicably when they passed the kitchen and he saw his former home destroyed. The table where he, Cas, Sam, and Jack had shared breakfast, as well as tears and laughter, was smashed to pieces in the middle of the kitchen, like someone had slammed it down in a rage. Pots and pans were all over the place, and the smell of rotted food wafted out of the open, blinking fridge.

Dean looked away when he saw a magnet that Jack had accidentally stolen from a convenience store in Alabama stuck all on its lonesome on the freezer door. At one point, probably the last time they’d been in the bunker, there had been a grocery list in Cas’ neat writing stuck under it. He’d requested all of Jack’s favourite foods, wanting to make sure the sugary cereals were available for his son.

The scene brought him pain as guilt settled back in his stomach.

Dean reached back in a moment of weakness, but to his relief, Cas’ warm, gloved hand immediately
held his, and Dean peered over his shoulder, flashing Cas a smile. “Stay close,” he whispered.

Cas nodded, rolling the handle of his blade in his hand, but sidling up to Dean, their hands gripped tightly between them.

Ahead, although the bedrooms weren’t far, the path to them was littered in flickering lights and gruesome splatters Dean didn’t quite care to know the origin of. A ways down the hallway, there were broken crates and boxes littering the base of the walls. With a terrible dip of his stomach, Dean recognized those boxes as the ones he’d meticulously labelled as ‘DARK MAGIC: DO NOT OPEN” when they’d moved in six years ago.

“Should we be concerned that there seems to be no one in the bunker?” Cas murmured near Dean’s ear.

Swallowing thickly, Dean muttered out of the corner of his mouth, “Not like you to ask questions you already know the answer to.”

In agreement, Cas hummed. He let go of Dean’s hand. Dean heard Cas pull his gun from the back of his jeans and click off the safety.

*Good angel.*

On cue, the bunker erupted around them. Pots and pans clattered in the kitchen, and there was the distinct noise of plates smashing and animalistic growling. Dean felt Cas spin and point his weapons behind them. Dean focused ahead, raising his sawed-off in a firm but sweaty grip.

The air around them grew so cold that his teeth started chattering and his skin pulled up into goosebumps under his many layers. Frost crept up the walls like veining, causing the paint to splinter and crack.

“Fuck,” Dean said, just in time for a series of terrible roars to sound from a hallway directly to their left. Dean turned his head just in time to see an army of zombies running at him, their arms outstretched, their fingers grasping and clawing at him.

“RUN!” Cas yelled, grabbing Dean by the hand and zipping in front, yanking Dean down the hallway.

Their feet pounded over the hard flooring and they had to jump to avoid obstacles. Behind them, dozens of feet followed, and Dean heard the distinct cackling that belonged to the Wicked Witch somewhere in the bunker.

Cas’ room was in the middle of the hallway, near Dean’s old room. They could see the door, but they could also see the shadows of monsters grappling and fighting at the other end of the hall. A tall, black cloaked monster was ripping apart a zombie, its long, decrepit hands tearing at its throat. When Dean and Cas’ footsteps approached, its head snapped up and two red eyes focused on them like laser pointers.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck—I don’t even know what that is!” Dean cried out as the thing swept towards them with purpose, its rotten mouth opening obscenely wide, its jaw pulling down towards its chest.

Despite his fear, they had to run forward. Back was zombies, ahead was what seemed to be a freakin’ dementor, and in between was Cas’ room.

“We’re not going to make it, Dean!”
The dementor was closer to the room than they were. Cas was right; they were fucked.

“DUCK, CAS!”

Immediately, Cas dropped and Dean fired, sending at least six salt rounds through the thing, but it was all for nothing. The thing just shrieked and continued to soar towards them.

Seconds from impact, Dean ducked and to his surprise, the thing swept over his head, its robes pulling his fringe back, and it purposefully bowled over the zombies. Dean and Cas rolled onto their backs, watching the monster go at the zombies. It clawed and tore at them, ripping their heads off and pushing them into its large mouth, its hands dripping with black blood.

“That’s disgusting,” Dean whispered, and then allowed himself to be yanked to his feet by an insistent Cas.

“Let’s go. Let it tear them to ribbons for all I care,” Cas growled, swearing again under his breath as he slipped on some blood and crate-pieces. “We have to hurry, there’s more coming.”

And he was right; down the hallway, he saw two spirits; small girls holding hands and skipping towards them, being chased down by a were-zombie they’d taken down last month and dropped off in the bunker.

Again, they were about to collide with more nightmares.

Dean ran after Cas. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fu—”

Just in time, they threw themselves into Castiel’s old room and slammed the door just as the ghosts of the little girls skipped past them. The growl and snap of the were-zombie roared by the door, then disappeared. There was a series of shrieks and giggles, followed by a chorus of moans and snapping that Dean could only assume was the meeting of a group of zombies, two spirits, a were-zombie, and that dementor-thing with red eyes.

Dean and Cas slid down the door, their asses hitting the ground in sync. Cas’ hand fumbled up behind him and he locked the door.

“Good idea,” Dean choked out.

“Thank you,” Cas replied, out of breath. “Sometimes I have those.”

The two men tilted their heads towards each other and broke out into smiles. Dean leaned forward and kissed Cas quickly, before pulling back and gulping. “Let’s get this blade before…”

In the corner of the room, Dean saw her; a woman with long dark hair and defined, dark features, wearing a long white dress. Gold twined in her curls. Her eyes were feline slits, and her smile was sly like the Cheshire cat. He knew her. He’d killed her. After stabbing her with a knife dipped in dogs blood, he’d thrown the knife back into their weapons trunk...and he’d then put the knife in the bunker for safe keeping…

Veritas.

As soon as he caught her eye, he felt his blood began to tingle in his veins, and his vision washed over in grey. In his head, he heard her voice.

“Time to tell the truth, Dean. You don’t quite know it yet, but he will be taken from you… Make the man happy; the happiest he’s ever been...before his time comes. Tell him your truth, say the words…”
Reveal to him the thing you’re holding back from him the most… He’s just dying to hear it.”

She gestured to Cas, and Dean realised that Cas couldn’t see her. Cas was looking around the room, getting up to move towards his bed.

His body was suddenly controlled by want, want, want… Tell him. Say the words.

Dean watched Cas get onto his hands and knees and set his gun aside. His strong hands wrapped around the edge of the bed and with a show of strength—and perhaps desperation—Cas flipped the bed over on its side, exposing the frame on the bottom. Quickly, he snatched up his angel blade and sliced cleanly through what could only be described as a cocoon of duct-tape. From within the shell of tape, wrapped around a supporting beam, out fell the first blade. Castiel caught it neatly and held it out before them.

“It’s still here,” Castiel exhaled in relief, shutting his eyes as he tipped his head back. “It’s still here, Dean. I’d feared one of the spirits had found it, I’d feared—”

Pushing himself to his feet, his mind whirling and writhing around his one and only purpose, Dean crawled over to Cas.

Cas tipped his head back down and one of those beautiful, rare smiles spread across his lips. “Dean, we retrieved our piece, we—”

Dean shut him up with a kiss, one that he poured everything into. His hands slid across Cas’ cheeks and into his hair. Under the flickering bulb above Cas’ head, they fell into each other. He felt Cas ask why against his mouth, but didn’t pull away. After a moment, Cas was kissing back just as fervently, and his hands, no longer holding an angel blade and a gun, were in Dean’s hair and on his face.

Dean’s hands slid down Cas’ sides and curled around his ribs before he wrenched him closer with a growl. He wanted Cas closer, he wanted Cas everywhere. Who knew when they’d be alone like this again.

Not wanting to break their kiss, Dean’s tongue slipped into Cas’ mouth as he pulled him to his feet, and then up into his arms. The room around them was just as destroyed as the rest of the bunker; drawers had been ripped from the dresser, broken into splinters around the room, but the bedside table was still where they’d left it. Sweeping his arm across it, the shade-less lamp crashed to the floor and Dean slid Cas back onto the table.

He gripped Cas’ knees, guiding him to wrap his legs around Dean’s hips.

Cas kissed back passionately, his tongue slipping against Dean’s, lips parting and opening for him. Sitting on the edge of the bedside table, Cas arched forward against Dean, and it made Dean’s heart slam fast into his chest. He felt breathless, dizzy—

Dean broke the kiss and sat back on his ankles, his hands on Cas’ thighs, his chest heaving.

“What’re you doing?” Cas breathed, his hands shaking as he leaned forward and dragged his fingers through Dean’s hair. “What is this? Y-You said you wanted to wait until I was ready. You wanted to show me that spot outside of Bobby’s…”

“I have to show you now,” Dean said in a rush, feeling sweat tumble down the side of his face. “I have to show you how much I care.”

“Tell him, Dean. Make him happy,” Veritas whispered, leaning down on Dean’s other side, no longer in the shadows. “Happiest he’ll ever be…”
“I have to make you happy,” Dean continued, his fingers fumbling as he pushed himself up onto his knees and reached forward, pulling Cas close with an arm around his waist. Cas sucked in a hard breath and gripped Dean’s shoulder for balance.

“D-Dean, I don’t think—”

“I love you,” Dean choked out, the words pouring from his mouth like vomit. It couldn’t be stopped; he’d wanted to say it for so long, he’d built it up in his head, promised he’d make them special, but… There they were. He’d said them.

Cas’ eyes went wide. His hands were certainly shaking, one against Dean’s cheek, the other gripping the material of Dean’s shirt at his shoulder.

Closing the distance between them, undeterred by Cas’ reaction, Dean slipped his hand around the back of Cas’ neck. “She wants me to tell you the truth,” he repeated against Cas’ lips. “The truth is that I love you. I’ve loved you forever—”

He moved to kiss him, but Cas turned his head and struggled away. “No. No, no, no—”

Once he stumbled to his feet, in a swift movement, Cas ducked down, grabbed the blade and ripped the hex bag from around his neck. In the very same moment the cord snapped, Veritas shrieked, her cat eyes bulging, and her nails turning to long, yellowing and cracked claws. She rose from her crouch, seeming to become bigger in the small room, taller—

Cas’ eyes widened and Dean understood that Cas could see her now. He could see her and he could kill her.

All she’d wanted to do was make him happy…

“Cas, no!” Dean cried out, moving to block Cas from killing her, but Cas was quick and he was furious. With a look of pure hatred, Cas twirled the first blade in his hand and shoved it through Veritas’ middle, spraying Dean in blood. The goddess shrieked and clawed at her stomach when Cas wrenched the blade out.

“Fuck you, bitch,” Cas spat at her as her corpse shrivelled and fell to the side, bursting into ash as it hit the bed. “I’ve gone through too much to go like this.”

The moment she was gone, the grey mist surrounding Dean’s vision curled away in wisps, and he inhaled hungrily like he hadn’t been able to breathe. Holding his hand against the wall, it all came crashing down on him. Dean clutched at his chest, feeling a terrible ache where his heart was. “Fuck…” He looked up at Cas, finding Cas staring at him, his face twisted in a strange expression. Blue eyes were damp, dark brown lashes were glistening, and his mouth was pressed into a thin line. Cas looked pissed.

“I’m sorry,” Dean breathed, his heart breaking. “I’m sorry for what I said. I thought—”

“Don’t,” Cas whispered brokenly, an angry tear dropping from his lashes and sliding down his face, “say that to me.”

Feeling pain fill his chest and every corner and crevice of his soul, feeling the sting of rejection in his eyes, Dean nodded silently, unsure of what to say when the only person he’d ever loved didn’t want to hear him say it. It didn’t matter that it had been supernaturally-induced and not perfect or special like Dean had planned; his heart felt shattered to pieces. All he could do was nod. Words were failing to form on his tongue. He felt sick. He wanted to cry. He really, really wanted to cry.
Do not cry.

But Dean was saved from having to come up with anything to say, or pull himself together under Cas’ gaze, because he heard Sam’s scream for help.

“Let’s go,” Cas whispered, quickly reaching up to wipe the tear away from his face with his palm.

Numbly, Dean picked up the sawed-off and Cas’ angel blade, while Cas led the way, the first blade held in a white-knuckled fist and the handgun Dean had taught him to use in the other hand.

Cas opened the door and they stepped out into the hallway, weapons poised to take down whatever supernatural creatures were waiting to fight them...for the second time.

***

“THIS IS A LOT OF SPOOKY BADDIES, SAM! HURRY UP WITH THE RIFFLING, WOULD YOU?”

At the doorway to the armoury, Gabriel hacked and slashed at zombies as they rushed at him, and raised a short shotgun in the other hand, blasting ghosts with salt rounds as they swept down on him. Inside the armoury, Sam was ripping apart the room, throwing drawers after he tore through them and slamming cupboards open and closed in search of the colt.

“I had all this organized!” Sam cried out. “Fuckin’ ghosts tore it all apart! I had shelves here with all our weapons alphabetized—”

“SAMUEL!” Rowena shrieked, her hands and eyes glowing purple as she struggled to hold up the warding that protected Gabriel. “ENOUGH BRAGGING ABOUT YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL PROWESS AND GET WITH THE COLT-ING!”

In response, Sam got on his hands and knees, wrenching open a cabinet that’d been tipped on its side. Metal boxes poured out, spilling ammunition everywhere.

“Nnnnyah!” Gabriel exclaimed, stabbing a zombie through the head with his angel blade. “Take that, you ugly motherfu—”

“FOUND IT!” Sam exclaimed, jumping to his feet, though he nearly cracked his head open when he slipped on a metal box. He shoved the colt pieces into pockets in his jacket, and zipped it up. Despite being cornered in a room by at least a dozen zombies—some of them even being hybrid of monster and undead—Sam felt ecstatic. “Let’s go!”

“Move!” Rowena barked at Gabriel.

The archangel walked backwards into the room, then ducked to the side. As soon as he was clear, Rowena hissed some words in a language even Sam didn’t know, and the shimmering purple forcefield she’d used to block them into the room burst forth from her hands and shattered like glass, shards tearing through the zombies and bowling them backwards across the garage.

Sam didn’t wait for the zombies to gather their bearings and get back up. He snatched Rowena by the hand and tore off out of the armoury, across the garage, and up the stairs, presuming that Gabriel was following. He trusted the sound of candy wrappers crunching in his friend’s pocket as insurance.

The three of them stumbled up the stairs and shoved themselves through the heavy door that led into the stairwell. They hopped over bodies they’d killed—and expected to reanimate any time now—on the way down. By the time they reached the level that would take them to the kitchen and war room,
they were winded.

Sam pulled out his hand gun, panting as he peered through the window in the door. “R-Ready?”

With sweat tumbling down her face and mascara smudged under her eyes, Rowena leaned down and pulled a gun out from under her skirt. She knocked off the safety with her palm and aimed the gun at the door.

“Ready,” she nodded.

Sam stared at her, feeling a rush of heat between his legs and his pants tighten. “Uh...since when do you have a gun?”

“I stole it!” Rowena huffed. She blew a damp curl from her face and added, “It’s exhausting wielding magic as powerful as that warding, Samuel! A girl’s got to have a backup plan while the magicks replenish.”

Sam shook his head and breathed weakly, “That is incredibly hot.”

“OH...my dad,” Gabriel said over his shoulder, looking away from the ghouls and ghosts tearing each other apart on the other side of the glass. He looked between them, annoyed. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but this is not the time for boners and flirting, okay? Get a room when we’re not minutes from our own ugly, gruesome deaths.”

“Sorry,” Sam muttered, though Rowena winked at him and nodded at the door.

“Well, let’s hurry back to camp, then, Sam,” she ordered. “Best hurry to get to the cabin before your brother and his angel. If Dean feels the same way about guns as you do, they’ll be rushing for some private time as well. The angel’s shot is getting more precise.”

Sam kicked open the door and the three of them poured into the corridor. Gabriel immediately began firing at ghosts as they flickered into sight, and Rowena took decently-aimed shots at zombies. Sam barrelled ahead, ducking into the war room. He cleared a path for them to the stairs, and his heart sank when he realised Cas and Dean were nowhere to be seen.

He knew they’d said fifteen minutes, but who the hell was counting?

“They’re not here yet!” Sam exclaimed as Rowena joined his side, her chest heaving rapidly, her hooded eyes glancing around the room, alert for more targets to take down. As Gabriel joined them, Sam realised the room was starting to fill with monsters. They were coming in from the kitchen and library, crawling over broken furniture, and flickering in and out of sight.

There were too many monsters, and not enough good guys.

“We’re fucked,” Gabriel exclaimed, dipping into a crouch as what appeared to be an undead werewolf prowled closer to him from the hallway leading from the bedrooms.

“Here,” Sam said, reaching into his coat, pulling out the colt pieces. He shoved them at Rowena and pointed up the stairs. “Go! Get out with the pieces, Ro. You run up those steps and get them to safety.”

“You’re a real idiot if you think I’m leaving you behind!” Rowena countered in an alarmed yell, her eyebrows jumping on her forehead.

Sam grabbed her by her face and planted a kiss on her forehead. He pulled back quickly, holding her
gaze firmly. “Then I’m a real idiot. Go give the pieces to Jo, and wait there for us. I need to get my brother and Cas. We can’t risk those pieces not making it out.”

Rowena looked torn, but as a ghost flickered a bit too close and roared at her not two feet away before Gabriel shot it full of rocksalt, she turned and ran up the steps.

Sam wanted to watch her, to make sure she was out, but he couldn’t. He turned back to the battle and started swinging, trying to make his way towards the bedrooms without meeting an untimely death.

“DEAN! CAS!” Sam cried out in a roar, hoping they were in ear-shot and could hear his panicked call for them.

Shoulder-to-shoulder with Gabe, they almost made it to the threshold where the war room met the kitchen—Gabriel had taken out the werewolf zombie with a well-aimed stab through its face—when suddenly they were cast into semi-darkness, and red lights flashed all around them.

Rowena screamed. ”Nooo! Sam! I’m locked in!’

Sam spun around to see Rowena wrenching on the heavy steel door with no avail. Of course, she wouldn’t be able to open it, not if they’d been thrown into lockdown.

At the foot of the steps, Asmodeus turned to them and smirked. “I told you boys; this game isn’t over, and this time, I won’t let you slip through my fingers…”

Gabriel kicked the werewolf’s face off his blade, pulling it out of the black, oozing flesh with a squelch, and he turned around. “I am so sick of you!” Gabriel snarled at Asmodeus, turning on his heel. He brandished his sword. “I’m gonna bury this in your stupid heart, Kentucky Fried Fuckface!”

“You,” Asmodeus drawled, pointing at Gabriel with a long, thin finger, “will be the first to go. I’ll relish in squashing your weak, feathery behind like the vile little bug you are. I’m going to truly enjoy plucking off your wings. Now… Shoo, fly.”

With a flicker of his fingers, Asmodeus sent Gabriel soaring through the air and crashing into a wall. Somehow—perhaps due to his stature in Hell—the Prince had all the monsters, ghosts, and ghouls, zombies included, standing down. They watched, growling and panting, some frothing at the mouth to get back into the action.

Sam’s hand began to sweat around his weapon. He looked back at Rowena, who watched what was happening to Gabriel with wide eyes shimmering in fear.

Gabriel groaned as he slid down the wall and shook his head, blinking hard. Asmodeus approached slowly and reached down, grabbing Gabriel by the neck. “Now, listen here, little pigeon. I died in this sorry bunker because of you. I came here to get you, and I won’t leave here without you, d’you understand? We’re going to become a partnership again.”

“Gonna…kick your…ass…” Gabriel gurgled, kicking out but missing as Asmodeus held him out at arms length.

“Perhaps at full power you may have been able to,” Asmodeus pondered. “But at the amount you’re operating with at this moment… I’m surprised you even survived the fall—”

Suddenly, there was a flash of movement from the darkness that shrouded the hallways to the bedrooms. Zombies watching the scene parted as they were shoved aside. Before anyone could do anything, Cas appeared with the blade and Dean in tow.
Asmodeus dropped Gabriel and wheezed, looking down. The tip of the first blade protruded from his middle, but was wrenched out quickly as Cas pulled the weapon back. A large, gaping hole was left that went all the way through the former Prince of Hell. His white suit was dripping in red, and when he turned around, stumbling away from Gabriel and Cas, his face was white.

Wordlessly, Asmodeus crashed to his knees, and then fell on his face. As soon as his body fell into the debris of the war table, he was motionless. Dead.

There was only a moment's pause, then Gabriel was jumping to his feet and rushing past everyone. The red lights around them all turned off and the regular lights flickered back on.

“Let’s get the fuck outta dodge!” Gabriel cried out, clattering up the stairs. “Quick, while the spooky beasties take a sec to come back online!”

Sam didn’t need to be told twice. Dean didn’t either, running past him and up the stairs. Cas joined them and as soon as the five of them were on the landing upstairs, Gabriel squeezed his eyes shut and whispered, “Breaker 1-9: Open the doors, and beam us up, Scotty!”

And with a rush of wings, they were gone.

***

Wordlessly, Dean had gotten into the truck driven by Rowena, sliding in next to Sam and slamming the door shut behind him. The chill of that cold shoulder left Castiel feeling frozen and numb as he climbed into the other truck cabin. Jo had come to his side, expecting to be a passenger. He saw the surprise flicker across her face as she realised she was driving, but walked around the hood and slid behind the wheel quietly.

She must’ve sensed his distress, because she didn’t question it, and drove behind the truck and the bikes without commentary.

At least, she’d been quiet for the first two hours of their five hour trip. Rumbling down the highway, somewhere past Columbus, Nebraska, Anael glanced over and asked, “Are you okay, brother?”

Castiel—who’d been nursing a lump in his throat, tears in his eyes, and a horrible, restricting feeling like barbed wire around his chest—simply murmured against his hand propped up on the window. “I’m okay.”

“I’ve learned that humans say ‘I’m okay’ when they’re not okay,” Jo commented lightly, drumming her fingers on the wheel. She glanced over at him. “You’re quite a frequent culprit of that, I must say.”

“Please,” Castiel begged in a quiet murmur, uncurling his fist for a moment only to brush away the tear. “Please don’t talk to me.”

“Did he say something to you?”

There was no need to question who she meant by ‘he’. They both knew.

And yes. Yes, he’d said something to Castiel. Something wonderful and beautiful, something that Castiel would’ve wanted to hear before his deal with The Empty. Those three words, before, would have blossomed something new and inspiring inside of him. They would have made him happy.

They would have made him the happiest.
His face tightened against his own wishes, and his chin trembled against his fist. He turned his face further from her, closer to the window. Thickly, he murmured, “Jo, please. I wish to be left alone.”

She listened that time, but didn’t stop glancing over at him every once in a while during their trip. He knew she did it because she cared about him, but Castiel was one worried glance away from getting out and walking home just so there wasn’t anyone there to witness his pain.

After five hours of driving, of being monitored by Jo like she was frightened he’d launch himself out of the car, they arrived at camp. As soon as he could, as soon as she cut the engine and the others started to pile out of the cars and off the bikes, Castiel pushed open his door and began walking. His duffle could wait to be unpacked. He needed to be alone.

Thankfully, no one followed. It was a small mercy, because Dean was right; it was rare to be alone at camp. Still, Castiel made it to the edge of the property and ducked behind an old, windowless van.

In the privacy afforded to him in this alcove created by the warding, shoddily-welded fencing, and the van, he broke down.

With his hands on his knees, the tips of his fingers poking out from gloves and digging into his skin exposed by rips in his jeans, Castiel felt the emotions surge up, angry at him for being suppressed. Dean’s ‘I love you’s replayed in his mind. Beautiful, sincere, kind. They had been truth, even if Veritas had urged him to confess. No spell could fake that sort of sincerity. Castiel didn’t need to be an angel to see the way Dean’s soul shined when he murmured those three words. He’d said them like he’d been waiting a lifetime to speak them to Castiel.

The absolute flicker of intense happiness had woken something up in Castiel’s soul, too. He’d been waiting—even though for years he didn’t know it—for Dean to say those words. The part of him that recognized Dean from a millennia of being in love seemed to explode, drowning in what felt like true happiness for just one second…

But he hadn’t given himself permission to feel that happiness. He couldn’t.

“When you finally give yourself permission to be happy and let the sun shine on your face, that’s when I’ll come. That’s when I’ll come to drag you to nothing.”

The very thought that The Empty would come for him, that it would take him away from this paradise he was making between him and Dean… The thought was inconceivable. After everything they’d overcome together, after every storyline he’d destroyed to reach Dean, after every choice, and every sacrifice…

To never be able to see Dean, or speak with him, to never hold his hand or feel his touch against his skin, or feel those lips warm his in the cold, crisp morning… To be dragged from that into complete blackness and nothing for the rest of existence?

Clearly The Empty was older than God, because Chuck didn’t have the depth of imagination to come up with such intense loneliness, such pain, such pure Hell.

The worst part was that there was no way to be certain The Empty would even come for him, now that he was human. There was no possible way to ensure that he was safe from being taken now that Jack was dead. As it seemed the deal was more spite than exchange, it seemed unlikely that it was severed. It wasn’t in The Empty’s nature to be merciful, or even fair. It was mad, it was absolutely mad. The uncertainty lay beneath the fear, making it even more choking.

Sliding down the side of the van until his knees hit the ground, Castiel raised his hands to his face
and wept into them, fingernails digging into his hairline. Air was pulled into his lungs through a pinhole and came back up in the form of wheezing, keening breaths. His heart slammed against his chest, wanting to break out and evaporate—that would certainly make everything easier. His hands were sweating and his face grew hot, even in the chill of December.

He thought he’d wanted to be alone, but the thought of being dragged from Dean’s arms into the Empty left Castiel wishing for anything other than being alone. As if she was still an angel, Jo appeared beside him after he heard her boots crunching over gravel on the other side of the van. He didn’t look up to meet her gaze—ashamed of his inability to restrain these emotions, embarrassed at being overwhelmed—but he knew it was her. She had a very distinct smell of worn perfume and cheap body wash that brought him comfort.

Wordlessly, she ducked down beside him and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. His vision was blurry, and hot tears ran down his face, but he could see her swinging red hair between them, and saw her knees bent beside him, covered in flowing, dirty silks.

“Do you want to be left alone?” she asked in a whisper.

Castiel shook his head, his hair swaying across his forehead. He felt her cold fingertips tuck a lock behind his ear. In a soft, worried swaying across, he felt her cold fingertips tuck a lock behind his ear. In a soft, worried whisper, she asked, “Are you okay, brother?”

This time, he didn’t lie. Castiel inhaled in a series of shaky, panicked breaths as he shook his head.

“No,” he breathed in a sob. “I’m not okay.”

Her hand rubbed at his shoulder. “Did...he say something to you?”

_Breathe. Breathe._ “Yes.”

His sister rested her head on his shoulder and murmured, “I’m sorry, then.”

Castiel lowered one hand to his lap, and lifted the other one to slide over hers on his shoulder, gripping her fingers. “Yes,” he whispered thickly, a tear joining others on his cheeks. “I’m sorry, too. I truly am.”

Jo’s other arm came around him in an embrace and Castiel rested his cheek on her head, giving himself permission to feel sadness.

Might as well, since he’d never be able to give himself permission to feel anything else.

Chapter End Notes

Yes. Yes, I DID put a dementor in the bunker. And yes, yes I did include the little girls from _The Shining_. Are we gonna say it was a monster that made Dean manifest spooky monsters from his nightmares? Sure! Let's go with that.

Kudos are lovely, but you know what makes the world go round? COMMENTS. At least, that's what makes jscribbles' little black heart thump and thrash with joy. So leave me a comment, tell me how much you hate me for making you cry, or hurting your wittow baby characters, or tell me how you want me to stop ranting so much in the author's notes. Go on. Do it.
(Also...for the impending commenters, let me just answer your question now; 10-1 means 'receiving poorly'. Or, if you work on a film set, it means 'I gonna go pee', but don't tell Dean that.)
Happiness

Chapter by MalMuses

Chapter Summary

Now that they've obtained all of the pieces to form the keys, Team Free Will and their comrades at Camp Singer discuss their next move. An ally helps them place their final playing piece on the board, and Castiel must deal with the unwanted appearance of an old adversary.

Chapter Notes

Hello...it's me.
I was wondering if after all these chapters...you might want one more from me?

Okay, I promise to stop channeling Adele, BUT, I am really excited (and nervous!) to bring you this chapter. We've got a lot going on in this one and I think--I hope--that you're gonna like where it ends up.

As always, I have to thank the whole Season Z crew...this fic wouldn't be what it is without any of them, my precious puffins of love. Special shout outs to Jess, who suffered through me sending her chunks of this at a pretty dumb hour of the morning, and to poor Courtney, who was waiting on me to get done with the damn thing.

I'm not going to tell you anything else about this chapter until we get there, so... LET'S GO!

- Mal <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the case of the chicken and the egg, it really didn't matter which came first, as they were each so dependent upon the other. (Though, once, Death had asked Chuck about it—the old man had always been so curious, after all—and he’d said that of course it was the chicken: how else would he have known what the thing inside the egg should look like?) But what many creatures, even powerful entities, did not realize was that in the case of life and death, Death had come long before life.

One day, Death will reap even God.

Death carries the energy that makes up souls, and takes it back to the universes' very beginnings; stored like batteries in spots here and there, heaven or hell, the empty, purgatory, any dimension of
existence that over the eons had developed a name. Then likely lost it and developed another. Ebbing, flowing, rewritten.

But, eventually, all energy would drift back out into the universe and return to its source.

Billie stretched out a hand, idly examining the atoms that made up her right forefinger.

The concepts of death, and time, and cosmic energy were so far beyond human minds that it was laughable. And yet, they were ruled by the whims of all of them. The humans would never understand what Billie was. Who she was. She was Death—a new Death, and yet, exactly the same Death as before. They could not die. They were eternal. Not just the source of all that went with dying, but of the absence of life, of matter, of time.

Humans were cute, with their physics and their theories. They tried—they made good progress.

But Billie was Death, and Death as they knew it was just a part of the greater They that controlled the breaths of the universe. As a Reaper, Billie thought she knew. Thought she understood. But the knowledge that had flooded into her upon her execution by Castiel’s hands years before had been overwhelming, transforming her, making her realize she knew nothing at all.

This little planet, these little people, she considered as she wandered hidden through Camp Singer, were unimportant. In the prodigious balance they did not tip the scales.

But.

Oh, but.

Some of them—the Winchesters, the angel, their friends, even the demon. Oh, how they shone. The pattern of their lives across her books was meandering and changeable, and there was so little to keep the interest of a being such as Death.

Death liked them.

And really, that was all that mattered. The universe worked on nothing but whims. The greater plan, the ultimate plot…it was just petty whim. God’s, for the most part. But now Billie’s.

Smiling softly to herself, Billie clicked her fingers. In her palm, a glass sand timer appeared. It was deceptively simple—the outer frame made up of molecules that humans had not yet discovered, found deep in black holes and in the rings of a distant planet that their telescopes had not yet even spied. The forging of the glass had been the heat of the first sun, and the swirling gas within the inspiration for the first nebula. Despite its importance, it was plain. And it held a simple plaque at the front, golden and gleaming, ever-polished by the fabric within the sleeves of Death themself. The name carved into it had changed a few times, as fashions came and went, but it only ever referred to one being.

“Chuck,” the plaque said.

And the sand of dark matter within dripped on, not eternal, no, not at all.
Dean leaned over the table in Camp Singer HQ, pressing his weight down into the wood through his knuckles. Spread out before them on the surface were all six key pieces. The Samulet, Gabriel’s horn, the staff of Moses, Alastair’s razor. And now, right in front of Dean, the newest and final additions: the colt and the first blade. Somewhere within each of those items was a piece of metal—a hidden core in the handle for some, like the first blade, or a more obvious chunk like the staff—that belonged to heaven, or to hell.

All six. Finally.

They’d fucking done it.

And yet, Dean wasn’t happy. He knew he should be, they’d gained so much ground in the last twenty-four hours. But it felt like he’d lost something, too, and the feeling churned sickly in his stomach, dampening the excitement he should feel.

The people gathered around him didn’t share his issues, though. Sam and Ro were both beaming, practically giggly, and Gabriel and Balthazar weren’t even squabbling with anyone, or teasing. Instead they stood quietly, grinning at the wooden surface covered with trinkets, like everybody else who’d ended up on the leadership team of the camp, one way or another. Except for Castiel. He’d disappeared the minute they came back, and Dean couldn’t bring himself to even work out if he should—or wanted—to follow.

For now, there were other things to focus on.

“Still got to get them assembled,” Balthazar pointed out thoughtfully, before stepping aside so that Claire could bring a large, heavily warded wooden box up to the table and push it toward the middle.

Rowena nodded her thanks to Claire, and then—mumbling under her breath in the distinctly magical way everyone just let her get on with—she began to tuck each item away within the box, out of sight and beyond detection, for human, angel, or demon alike.

“True,” Sam answered Balthazar. “But that can wait. The actual forging part is on Cas, so as soon as he works out the blacksmithing part, he can get going with that. For now, we have other things to think about.”

With a bunch of nods and murmurs, the group arranged themselves around the table, filing into chairs and settling in for A Big Talk.

Rowena finished the final whispers above the box and nodded to Claire. The youngest of them—but surprisingly strong—Claire grabbed the box by the iron handles at its side and hefted it up from the table, taking it away for safe keeping. Unbeknownst to the others, Dean had asked her to secure it in a hidden location in the camp and tell only Sam where it was.

Sam understood. Between the razor and the first blade, the less idea Dean had about where that box was, the better.

He was stronger, these days. But he wasn’t flawless. Far from it.

Around the table, everyone looked at Dean and Sam keenly, waiting. It took Dean a moment to register that they were expecting him to say something. With a dip of his head, he deferred to Sam. He just wasn’t in the mood.

Sam gave Dean an odd look but cleared his throat. “Alright. So, we have the pieces. Hopefully, if Cas can remember how to do it and get them forged, we’ll have the keys. We can open heaven and hell, and get Earth functioning again.”
The gathered faces all nodded: Dean, Rowena, Gabriel, Balthazar, Crowley, Jody, Donna. No Castiel, and no Jo either, Dean noticed.

“We still have at least three obvious problems that I can think of, though,” Sam continued.

Crowley nodded firmly, his lips in a thin line as he crossed his arms over his chest, the dark wool sleeves of his jacket pulling up to reveal pale wrists. “The zombies,” he agreed, “killing Chuck, and killing Amara. Which, if you recall, didn’t go so swimmingly last time.”

“I dunno, you got a pretty good hit on her. Better than almost any of the rest of us,” Dean pointed out, surprising himself with the compliment.

One dark eyebrow raising, Crowley nodded smugly. “Well, King of Hell and all that. It’s not just pretty text for business cards. Even then though, it wasn’t enough. All of heaven and hell tried, and we couldn’t do much more than tickle her good spots. You went on a suicide mission, I recall.”

Dean nodded, aware of all the eyes around the table resting on him. “I did. And I’ll do it again, if we have to.”

“Dean, no,” Sam said, flatly.

“Got any other ideas?” Dean threw back, his eyes locking fiercely with his brother’s.

“And we’d still have to work out what to do about Chuck, anyway,” Rowena interrupted. “It’d only solve half the problem.

Sam and Dean were still locked in a staring contest, but Sam responded to Rowena anyway. “Then two. If it takes two soul bombs, one for each of them, then we’ll do two.”

Dean parted his lips, starting, “Sam—”

“Dean and me,” Sam butted in, firm and intense, his hazel eyes never leaving Dean’s face.

The rest of the team was silent; this wasn’t their fight. Though Crowley leaned forward almost curiously, resting his elbows on the table as he looked back and forth between the two of them. Rowena looked like she was sucking a lemon, but said nothing.

“Sam…” Dean began, before trailing off. He didn’t have a leg to stand on, and he knew it. This was what they did, both of them. Always. Sacrifice. It was almost eerily fitting that at the end of the world, they’d do it together.

Another minute passed before Dean slowly nodded. “Okay.”

“Billie?” Dean’s voice raised suddenly, shouting.

Shouting, as if Death needed volume to hear when their name was spoken. Ridiculous. Billie smiled to herself slightly as she ebbed into view, standing so close to Dean’s side that his plaid shirt ruffled with a slight breeze.

“Holy shit!” he gasped, leaping up from his seat as he recoiled.
Rowena squinted at Billie. Death noticed that her aura was throbbing, sorrowful, rage-filled. But she didn’t show it on her face, and Death supposed that was none of their business. To Dean, Rowena said, “How did you even know she’d be listening?”

Dean gave an inelegant snort. “Because that bitch is always listening.”

“Dean,” Sam grumbled. “How many times do I have to tell you that you shouldn’t call women—”

Billie raised a hand, silencing the room. “I’m not really a woman, to begin with, as I’m as sexless and genderless as your winged friends over here,” she pointed out, gesturing to Gabriel and Balthazar. “And your simple language means nothing to me. Call me a she, a he, a bitch, a God. I’m Death, and I don’t care. Now—” She turned, snapping her eyes to Dean, “—what ridiculousness have you come up with to entertain me this time?”

Nervously moistening his lips, Dean took a step back toward the wooden table, resting his fingertips on the edge of it as he looked at Billie. He was close—a little closer than Billie was comfortable with, really. He must have been taking lessons from the angel. Even so, she didn’t step back, allowing him to speak.

“You said once—or the old Death did—that one day, you’ll reap even God.”

She nodded.

“Well, we want to kill him. And Amara too. We worked out from the manifesto you brought for Cas that was the secret to it—gotta kill them both, right? For balance. Darkness started to take the Earth when Chuck was dying, last time we got close to this topic. So, we have to kill both.”

Billie nodded again, placidly, already knowing this part, waiting for Dean to get to his point.

“So, do you think a soul bomb like we tried with Amara before would work? For both?”

Drifting from the table, Billie looked around at the assembled faces. Some were awed; Donna and Jody. Some were scowling openly—Crowley had never had any manners. Sam and Dean’s faces were hollow, resigned. She nodded.

“Yes, what we believed would be powerful enough to kill the Darkness would likely do the same for the Light,” she began. “So, I assume that you called for me because you have some epic, self-sacrificial plan, and you’re hoping I can bring you souls for your fragile, squishy, human war machines.”

Sam and Dean exchanged a look before they nodded.

Billie let out a long breath, rolling her eyes to the ceiling. “I thought it was just Chuck’s writing that made you both so melodramatically, heroically dumb. Turns out it’s just your natural wiring.”

Dean’s mouth flapped open, but it was Sam that recovered first.

“Is that a yes, or a no?”

“It’s me calling you both idiots,” she corrected mildly. “Suicidal ones.”

“No argument there,” Rowena huffed below her breath. Sam frowned.

“You are both forgetting something,” Billie intoned, trying not to let her amusement show too much—that wouldn’t do. “You aren’t the only chess pieces that can fit on this board. You’ve lined up
your rooks and you’re ready to jump your knights across to grab that enemy piece…but you don’t even have your queen in the game.”

Puzzled faces. If it wouldn’t have been uncouth to admit, Billie would have said she was fond of puzzled faces. She liked the mystery.

“There is a being in the universe who is more powerful than Amara. More powerful than God. Perhaps even as powerful as me, but without my dedication to—at least mostly—staying out of things.”

Surprisingly, Gabriel put it together first. He pushed up from his chair, leaning across the table toward Billie, wide-eyed. “Jack,” he breathed. “You mean Jack.”

Everyone turned, looking back and forth at each other, blinking.

“Jack was more powerful than God?” Dean asked, frowning at Gabriel.

The archangel nodded, a small grin across his face. “You have no idea why, do you? Because you don’t know how it works.”

It was Balthazar’s turn to look excited, then. “Of course… of course!” he clapped, grinning up at Gabriel like his pintsized brother had uncovered some great secret.

Gabriel preened down at him, winking before he looked back at Dean.

“Come on, Bilbo Baggins—out with it,” Dean snapped. “We haven’t got time for the Choose Your Own Adventure version.”

Gabriel sniffed. “Bilbo? Come along now. I’m definitely more of a Pippin, or Merry.”

Dean’s eyebrows hit the ceiling, but luckily Gabe chose to continue.

“Angels are powered by grace. Grace is the power of God, in its purest form. We actually can’t harness its full power—we’re restricted, I suppose you could say, by the way we’re built. We can only use so much at once… You’ve seen Cassie get worn out after spilling too much juice, I’m sure.”

Dean nodded silently.

“Right, well, did you know that angels can recharge their grace from souls? Souls are a way of accessing the base energy of the universe, like—”

“Batteries,” Sam interrupted. “Yes, we know that part. Saw Cas do it once.”

Gabriel raised a blond eyebrow at that but carried on. “Well Jack, he has both. He’s a self-charging grace battery, see?”

Sam tilted his head his expression curious. “So, he doesn’t need to charge up like a normal angel, sure. But how does that make him more powerful?”

“It’s like a feedback loop,” Balthazar butted in excitedly. “He’s more powerful at a base level than an archangel—probably just as powerful as God. But he doesn’t need a break, won’t weaken, won’t get worn out. Not if he knows how to use his soul and his grace simultaneously. Even God can’t do that—Chuck doesn’t have a soul, only grace. Granted, a lot of it, but… he created souls. He doesn’t have one.”
Dean snorted, muttering quietly, “Of course he doesn’t have a soul. I coulda told you that.”

“So, Jack could do it,” Sam questioned, ignoring Dean. “He could kill God. Kill Amara.”


She nodded calmly, finding herself smiling despite how long it took them to see the blindingly obvious. “Bravo,” she said, clapping slowly.

“You all seem to be forgetting,” Dean spoke up, “that Jack is dead. He’s in the damn Empty, without a soul. How is knowing he could do it going to help us?” Dean’s voice was flat and devoid of emotion in such a way that Billie suspected it meant he carried rather a lot of emotion on the subject of the Nephil.

Poor Dean, Billie mused to herself. So ill-equipped for feeling, and yet so very good at it.

“Well that, at least,” Billie said, “is an inconsequential piece. Allow me.”

With that, she faded from view—though she hung around just long enough to watch them all blink and scowl at each other, shaken and nonplussed by her disappearance, of course. Billie had never been that humble, after all. Even Death had some amusements.

By the time she stepped back into the room, even minutes later—using the door this time, just to throw them—they had all resettled around the table, and they were discussing using the manifesto to see if there was a way to forcibly summon God and his sister.

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Billie said, making three of the eight assembled folks noticeably jump in their seats.

“Oh?” questioned Dean, recovering first.

“Once you reassemble those keys, Chuck will feel it. It’ll be like a beacon. Those keys were forged at the Beginning. They’re part of him—it’ll be like a voodoo master poking a long-forgotten doll. And these days, wherever God goes, his sister isn’t far behind.”

“Makes sense,” Sam agreed, nodding. Awkwardly, he gestured to a seat at the table.

Billie didn’t take it.

Clearing his throat uneasily, Sam placed a forced smile on his face. “So, where did you go?”

Smiling quietly to herself, Billie held up her hand and snapped her fingers. It was purely for show, to signal to the little ants that something was changing—but she liked the drama, too, she’d confess.

Beside her, with a resounding crack, a body tumbled through space and time from where Billie had transported it and landed beside her. He stumbled only slightly—his wings catching him for the most part—before his bright smile moved around the table. He raised a hand, waving cheerfully.

“Hello, everybody,” Jack said.
“Are you ready to go back to camp?” Jo asked Castiel quietly. She didn’t manage to quite suppress the slight shiver that ran through her at the evening’s cold air encroaching, but to her credit Castiel thought, she at least tried.

“We’re already in camp,” Castiel replied sulkily, his eyes still damp, his spine aching from the curve of it where he sat on the dusty ground.

“You know what I mean, brother,” Jo replied with a soft snort. “You can’t avoid him forever.”

Castiel regarded his toes in their scuffed boots, slowly letting out all the painfully excess air that he seemed to be holding in his lungs. His ribs ached; that’s what he told himself. It was his ribs, not his heart.

“You’re right,” he said softly. “I need to talk to him. I’m sure I—well, I probably upset him greatly, thinking about it, now. I’m not very good at that, sometimes. The talking, being clear.”

Jo nodded slowly. “There are so many layers of meaning to humans, in the way they talk. But to you, too, now. He’s probably not understanding you, but you’re probably not understanding him, either.”

Slowly, Castiel nodded. He parted his lips to thank his sister for her quiet comfort, but the sound of heavy boots and calling from across the camp stalled him.

“Cas?” Dean’s voice came from out of sight, around the corner of the closest camp building. He’d been silent and hollow as they had left the bunker. Castiel now realized that Dean had taken his reaction as a rejection—how could he have possibly taken it any other way? But the anger and embarrassment that Castiel expected were not what he heard. Instead, Dean sounded…excited?

Taking a deep breath, Castiel rubbed roughly at his sticky cheeks. He had to explain, and he couldn’t make Dean wait for the truth. It would only hurt them both further. Castiel’s palms were oddly sweaty. He pressed his fingers into them, taking a deep breath, and pushed himself up off the ground. Jo moved away, giving him space to rise and approach Dean.

Dean was going to be furious with him. But he deserved it, he figured. He’d always known that he should tell Dean about the deal—that wasn’t a realization that had come with their more recent closeness. But he hadn’t been able to find the words.

An angel; a master of the six-and-a-half thousand languages that the world currently spoke, nevermind many more dead ones. But he hadn’t been able to find the right words.

He’d experienced a lot of emotions since becoming human; stronger, brighter, with more clarity than he could as a celestial wavelength. But this was a new one. Now that the initial heartbreak, sorrow, and self-pity had given him even a moment to breathe, a whole new emotion raised its head: shame.

Castiel dropped his eyes as he stood, stepping toward Dean as he rounded the corner.

“Dean,” he said immediately, not giving himself a chance to back out, “I owe you an explanation.”

“Cas—” Dean began, but Castiel didn’t give him time, his eyes still fixed on the ground, though he raised one hand.

“Please,” he tried. “Just let me get this out. You deserve—”

“Cas,” Dean said again, more insistent.
When Castiel looked up, Dean was fixed on him with wide eyes, something nervous to the set of his shoulders. Sam and Rowena were behind him, off to the side, and Castiel gave them a small half-smile, puzzled as to why they’d come to find him too.

“What—” he began, until his voice cut off sharply, his jaw slackening as Dean stepped aside, and his final companion was revealed behind him.

There was a second where the world stood still, physics and time and all those irritatingly human laws that Castiel now had to obey be damned. The Earth paused, and Castiel choked, taking a second to compose himself before he could croak out even one word.

“Jack?”

“Hello, Castiel,” Jack said, his smile equal parts joyous and nervous.

Dean watched as the kid moved forward, both he and Castiel cutting the distance between them to embrace sloppily in the middle. He couldn’t interrupt this. No matter what had happened in the bunker before, Cas needed this. Deserved it. So, Dean stayed silent, everything else locked down until the angel and his kid had been given some time. He jerked his head to Sam and Ro and, on the same wavelength, they all moved away, back behind the building, giving Jack and Castiel some semblance of privacy in a camp where there was no such thing.

“You don’t wanna…?” Sam questioned, tilting his head back toward Castiel as they removed themselves to a polite distance.

Dean shook his head. “Not the time,” he choked out, suddenly finding himself full of—full of—something, damnit.

Sam’s hand came up to his shoulder. “What happened back there, Dean? You wanna talk about it?”

_No. Yes. Maybe._

Dean looked up, opening his mouth to respond, but his gaze landed on Rowena, beside them.

“Oh, don’t worry about me, dearie,” she said mildly, interpreting his look. “I’ll just wander away to check the wards by myself. After all, Samuel will just tell me later.”

Dean rolled his eyes, and Sam looked a little guilty—notably denying nothing. “Stay safe,” Sam told her as she stepped away. She blew him a kiss, and somehow the sight of it made Dean’s chest too full again.

“Dean?” Sam asked, unsure.

Licking his lips, Dean shook his head. He wasn’t sure what he was shaking his head at—it was Sam. He could tell Sam anything, really, no matter how emotionally shuttered they both got around each other on occasion. If anything, Sam was the only one that Dean could tell.

Could tell that…

“Cas doesn’t love me,” Dean found himself saying, the words out and edged in tears and ragged
breaths before he’d even had a chance to remind himself that he wasn’t going to say anything.

He only had a moment to catalogue the utter confusion on Sam’s face before his view was obscured by the shoulder of Sam’s jacket and far too much hair, all blurred to Dean’s vision. “That’s not true,” Sam said immediately, sounding totally astounded. “There is no way that’s true.”

It was the first time Dean had wept since he’d left the bunker. He’d cried, of course—on the inside, sobbing, bleeding, torn. The invisible tears were the ones hardest to wipe away. But finally, with just Sam, the depth of his misery began to shallow out, escaping through his eyes. It felt monumental, the way he shook. No one was dead, but it felt like grief.

Mewling, shedding his sorrow into Sam’s jacket, Dean just let it happen.

Sam clung tight around his shoulders, not even attempting to soothe Dean; just holding him while he let it out, and for that, Dean was grateful. He was always grateful for his brother, but in these moments—the ones where Sam just knew not to say anything at all—he loved him more than ever.

Time stretched out lazily, and Dean was hazily aware that there was probably a lot of a very different kind of crying happening around the corner, too. For some reason that set him off again, causing Sam to make an aborted, desperate shushing noise, as if he had no clue what else to do. He just clung tight, like a vise.

Finally, dry, feeling dull inside, Dean raised his head.

“You needed that, huh,” Sam commented lightly, an awkward, lost smile pulling one side of his mouth as he looked down at Dean.

Dean bristled at the idea, but he was forced to nod sharply. “Yeah. I guess.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

“No.”

Sam nodded. “We won’t, then. But I’m gonna tell you right now, whatever happened—there isn’t a chance in all of this universe that Cas is rejecting you in the way you think he is. If he said that, or didn’t say that, or whatever the hell the problem is—there’s a reason, and you need to find out why.”

Dean stared glassily across at Sam. “You weren’t there.”

The derisive snort that erupted from Sam was very loud. “Maybe I wasn’t there for that conversation, but I was there for the rest of the decade. Something is going on, and whatever it is, it’s not what you think it is.”

Any response Dean could have given was lost, as the sound of footsteps approached from behind them, rounding the edge of the building. Castiel and Jack approached, walking side by side. They were both beaming, though Castiel’s face fell a little when they reached Dean.

“So,” Sam said awkwardly into the silence. “All caught up?”

“Jack has explained to me that Billie retrieved him from the empty and somehow restored his soul, yes,” Castiel said quietly, nodding. “And that the plan is for him to save Earth by killing Chuck and Amara. But I don’t understand how any of that happened.”

“Neither do I, really,” Jack said apologetically. “I was awake, sometimes, and I’d tried to get out of the Empty, but nothing I tried worked. And my soul… I thought it was gone, burned up somehow.”
Dean nodded, though he couldn’t quite look the kid in the eye. “Yeah. Well. I guess we could ask Billie.”

“Energy cannot be created or destroyed, except by me,” Billie said, popping up beside them like a freaking Jack-in-a-box.

“Jesus!” Dean cussed loudly, clutching at his own chest dramatically as she appeared. His poor heart was getting quite the workout as of late. “Can you wear a bell or something, for fuck’s sake? You’re worse than Cas used to be.”

Castiel seemed unconcerned by Billie’s sudden appearance, squinting at her firmly. “I can’t see his soul, anymore. How do we know that it—that he—” he cut off, unsure.

“Gabriel checked him out,” Sam said. “Stared at him for a minute and declared that the only way to make him shinier would be to make him radioactive, whatever the hell that means.”

Dean could see fear warring with hopeful joy on Castiel’s face, and all he wanted was to pull him close, kiss it away. Instead, he coughed, his eyes down in the dirt. “Billie said something about gathering energy…the power that Jack burned, the parts of his soul that disappeared, she just… scooped them back up from the universe, I guess, like mopping up a spill.”

Castiel’s frown was deeper. “Then why couldn’t she just do that before?” he questioned, biting, his eyes on her.

She eyed him calmly. “Because if I’d have changed what Chuck had written, he’d have just erased it and started the scene over until he got his way.”

Castiel blinked. “Oh.”

“I feel like there’s a lot I should catch up on,” Jack ventured carefully. “Maybe we could all sit down, eat perhaps, and you can tell me what’s been going on.”

Sam nodded, along with Castiel. Dean raised his head, about to respond, when the sight of Castiel and Jack smiling, standing together, hit him full force in the chest again. He suddenly knew with absolute certainty that sitting around and playing happy families with the ex-angel and the devil’s kid, however much he wanted to, was beyond him right then. He felt raw and exposed and he just couldn’t.

He shook his head, muttering a gruff lie about patrol, and excused himself.

They didn’t need him, anyway.

The atmosphere at camp was jovial that evening. Castiel spent much of it with Jack, hesitant and still a little scared to even let the kid out of his sight. Having him back after having grieved him so long was surreal. It was several hours before Dean made an appearance; and even then, Castiel got the feeling that it was for Jack, not for him.

They were all sat around the bonfire when Dean approached from the side, joining in on the periphery for a few moments before he approached Jack, crouching down behind the kid where he
sat on a log between Castiel and Gabriel, learning of all their silly tales and exploits while he’d been in the Empty. Dean tapped him lightly on the shoulder, and wordlessly, Jack rose and went with him.

Castiel couldn’t even imagine what Dean said to Jack, off near the wall of the infirmary, his human eyes struggling to even pick them out in the dim light. But he knew that Dean’s head hung, his shoulders hunched. His frame was hard, tight, stiff…and then, after a long moment, as Jack’s arms came up in a warm-looking hug, he sagged. Soft.

Castiel wanted to know what Dean said to Jack, but he knew it wasn’t his business. As he had forgiven Dean for his actions, Jack had to as well. On his own. It seemed that his son was much better at not holding a grudge than he had been.

Had he apologized for the gun, for the box? For the choices and mistakes that led them there? Or had Jack come to see where Dean stood, believed that maybe Dean was only doing what he thought needed to be done? Castiel found he didn’t want to know. He watched them hug, peaceful, holding on to each other in that special, familial kind of way, and something inside Castiel bloomed, his chest warm and floating.

He had to tell Dean the truth; he had to talk to him, to explain. They could overcome this last hurdle between them, Castiel hoped. He’d have prayed, if it wasn’t so hilariously pointless.

Watching for a few minutes more, Castiel couldn’t deny either the knowledge or the feeling; observing them together, the two people he loved most in the world.

Castiel loved Dean, and he truly believed that even if the Shadow from the Empty tore them apart for it…Dean would never give up. That wouldn’t be the end for them. They’d had so many ends, and not a one of them had stuck. Why would this be any different?

Pushing himself up off the log with his palms, Castiel belatedly realized that Gabriel had been talking the whole time. Gabriel rolled his eyes up at him, waving dismissively at Castiel’s apologetic smile.

“Go on, Cassie. No one’s going to have your attention while those two are in sight, I get it. It’s probably time for the two daddies to read the toddler a bedtime story, anyway.”

Although he fixed Gabriel with a scathing look before departing, Castiel wasn’t able to put much heat to it.

Castiel strode up to them as they stood next to the rough infirmary wall, waiting a polite distance away—just two or three steps—for them to notice him. Jack did first, smiling and turning from Dean.

“Castiel,” he said, somehow both happy and serious all at once, like always. “Dean and I were just talking about what happened in the graveyard.”

“Oh?” Castiel said, uncertain.

“Yeah,” Dean said gruffly to the dirt beneath his feet, still not looking at Castiel. It hurt.

“I believe we’re okay now,” Jack said, smiling quietly as he looked between Dean and Castiel.

“We’re good,” Dean agreed, nodding, a slightly watery smile at his lips. “Probably shouldn’t be, but, ah…end of the world and all.”

Jack nodded firmly. “It puts things in perspective. And we both understand each other, I think.”

“Jack,” Castiel said, turning his head to look at him rather than Dean. “I realize that you’ve only been
back a few hours, and you probably still have a lot of questions. But I wonder if you’d mind me stepping away for a bit—with Dean. We need to talk.”

The tilt to Jack’s head was like looking in a funhouse mirror. “Is that a thing you do now?” he asked, and the question would have seemed sassy or insincere from anybody else. But from Jack, it came with an inquisitive look and a smile.

“I hope so,” Castiel said, taking a breath. “But it’s not just up to me.”

Dean looked up, finally, opening and closing his mouth uncertainly.

“Please, Dean,” Castiel begged. “At least let me explain. If you want to walk away then, I’ll—I’ll understand. But please let’s talk first.”

Jack looked between Dean and Castiel several times, blinking, looking almost concerned.

For a moment Dean was frozen, but then he nodded, his entire countenance seeming to slump a little. “Yeah, man,” he half-whispered. “Of course.”

Seemingly content that, whatever it was, they were going to work it out, Jack gave them one last smile before he turned, walking back over to Gabriel with a small wave. “Goodnight, Dean and Castiel,” he called over his shoulder. “We can talk more in the morning.”

After watching him go, Castiel gulped against the heart-hammering feeling in his chest and turned back to Dean. “Maybe we can—” he gestured away from the fire, “—walk?”

Dean nodded. “Yeah, I was gonna go walk the perimeter and maybe raid the kitchen. That work?”

His tone was forced light, Castiel noted, and it was painful to think that he had done that. “Of course,” Castiel agreed, a squeak to his voice that he wasn’t terribly proud of.

They began to walk through the chilly night air, the grip of winter pulling at their skin and hair once they were away from the bonfire, but neither complaining. The quietness between them as they walked along the perimeter fence and up around the edge of camp grew into something tense and charged, and Castiel couldn’t work out what to say to break it, to fix it, to begin. It felt weird not to be holding Dean’s hand; strange how the habits of only a few weeks could change the norms of a lifetime.

They were nearing the supply building and kitchen when Castiel couldn’t take the strain any more, reaching to grab Dean’s forearm as they got to the door and blurting, “Dean—please, whatever you’re thinking about what happened, it’s not that. I swear to you, I promise…it’s not what you’re thinking. I made a mistake, I…”

Dean was wide-eyed, his breathing elevating quickly as Castiel spoke, but he looked away swiftly, toward the kitchen, as a strange, low chuckle came from within.

Castiel and Dean exchanged a small, puzzled frown as Dean pushed open the swing door to the kitchen area with one hand. “Hello?” he called.

There was no answer from within. Shoving down his disappointment and anger at the interruption, Castiel stepped up over the threshold, into the tiled area the camp used to prep all of their food. “Anybody in here?” he tried, following on from Dean’s shout.

Dean entered behind him, reaching up to flick on the light. The bulb stuttered but illuminated the empty kitchen, swinging slightly from a single pendant in the middle of the ceiling.
It was quiet. Too quiet; the kind of quiet that put a hunter on edge. With a buzz and a blink, the light went off.

“Cas?” Dean said, uncertainly, stepping sideways so that they were closer.

A soft, shushing, slithering sound chilled Castiel to his bones. In the erratic, flickering light of one of the Camp’s huge floodlights out beyond the window, Castiel could make out Dean’s unnerved, puzzled profile, and watched him turn as movement in the corner of the room caught his eye.

Instinctively, Castiel reached out for Dean as he took another step closer, reaching to grab his wrist, panic welling him inside him.

Blocking the exit, stood between them and the door, the darkness solidified. It became viscous, slithering up from the floor into a vaguely humanoid, blank face.

“No,” Castiel whispered, almost whimpered, and he felt Dean grab him back, their grip around each other’s wrists locking them together.

The Shadow pulsed, its moist-looking frame somehow both formless and solid all at once. Eerily, it looked at Castiel—no eyes, but it looked—and tilted its head. Its hands came up, each one making a small circle up near his shoulders.

It’s face split, a slit-like mouth parting in the goop and curling up at the edges. The smile made Castiel think of a macabre version of the smiling emojis he’d enjoyed sending to Dean and Sam in text messages, back before the End. But this wasn’t a happy smile, an acknowledgement of a message received. It was a creepy, sick, void-filled leer, eyeless and unnerving.

“What do you want?” Dean choked out.

The smile curved further. One of the Shadow’s hands raised, and silently he pointed to Castiel.

“Cas?” Dean said again, quiet. From his tone alone, Castiel could tell that the questioning word was directed at him, not the Shadow before them.

I need to run, need to fight, need to—Castiel cut off his thoughts. Those things were all useless. What did the Shadow even want? He hadn’t let himself be happy, he’d denied himself the one thing that—

With a strange, burbling shriek, the Shadow seemed to splatter outwards. It gurgled wetly as it climbed the wall at lightspeed, reaching the junction of the ceiling before it leaped at Dean.

Dean only had time to gasp before the creature covered him like wet paint, a grotesque slurping noise filling the air as it somehow amalgamated itself with Dean, dissolving into his skin, making his neck snap back and forth like a man possessed. Because he was, for all intents and purposes, possessed.

“Dean!” Castiel yelled out, frozen and afraid.

The grin that spread across Dean’s face was not his own. His movements jerky, he pulled his arm from Castiel’s grip and turned to face him, the floodlight out at the edge of the property filtering though the single window to illuminate the black veining that still covered parts of Dean's skin. His eyes were bulging, crazy-looking, entirely unblinking as he looked back at Castiel, his head canting to the side like he was examining a bug, or some other petty, fallen, winged creature.

“Hello, Castiel,” came the Shadow’s breathless, pitched voice, tumbling unevenly from Dean’s beautiful lips. “We need to talk.”
“Leave Dean alone!” Castiel barked, his fists curling into balls at his side. “Leave me alone. Please. You said you’d wait until… until…”

Dean’s face sneered, the entity wearing it moving his muscles in jarringly unnatural way. “Oh, well, I would , you see, I would very much like to,” he trilled. “But you haven’t left me many choices, Castiel, now have you, hmm?”

“I did nothing,” Castiel hissed desperately. “I’m not even an angel any more, I’m worthless to you —”

“Oh, Castiel,” the Shadow purred. “Our little deal was never about your worth, or even your ability to come to the empty when you die—because believe me, you will go where I put you, yes, you will —our little deal, you and I, your happiness , that was just a little comfort to me, you see; that you might suffer as I had to…” The creature moved around, circling Castiel slowly, Dean’s eyes resting on Castiel’s face so unfamiliarly that Castiel’s heart iced into place and forgot to beat.

“I don’t know what you mean, what the point is,” Castiel responded quietly, hearing the desperation in his own voice. “You told me that…you said…” Castiel gulped harshly, the sound loud in the quiet room.

“I said I wanted you to suffer,” the Empty replied flatly. “That I wanted you to go back to your normal life and forget about me. And then, what was it I said…oh, yes, yes…” He circled Castiel as he spoke, moving ever closer, hissing low in his ear. “ When you finally give yourself permission to be happy and let the sun shine on your face, that’s when I’ll come. That’s when I’ll come to drag you to nothing. ”

“But I didn’t,” Castiel said firmly. “I denied myself the one final—final thing that I—” Squeezing his eyes shut, Castiel shook his head. “It doesn’t matter what I say, does it.”

“Oh, Castiel,” the Shadow keened, his face right up in Castiel’s, unblinking. “You seem to be under the impression that I’m here to claim you; no, no. Though, understandable, yes…but not at all.”

Confused, Castiel stayed silent.

“You see,” the Empty said, raising a hand to his—Dean’s—forehead, pressing his middle finger to his temple. “I was so used to…quiet. Quiet, quiet, sleeping. It was what I needed, you see—absence. You know, you never gave me a name, your people , modern humans; but once, before that, during those Old Testament times you feathery beasts harp on about…the Hebrews named me, feared me, knew me.”

Castiel creased his brow, frowning in thought, before revelation struck like lightning. “You mean Sheol ,” he quoted. “The abode of the dead, before heaven, before hell...of course.”

“No one can avoid Sheol,” the creature purred, the bastardized bible quote not escaping Castiel. “Sheol is devoid of love, hate, envy, work, thought, knowledge and wisdom,” he continued. “There is no light, no remembrance, no praise of God, in fact—” the middle finger at his forehead jabbed hard—“no sound at all.”

Terrified, Castiel’s lungs burned as he forgot to breathe.

“But then, there was you.” The Shadow’s voice—The Empty, Sheol, whatever and wherever the fuck this thing embodied—got deeper, angrier, more threatening. “You woke me up. And since then, oh since then—” Castiel couldn’t stop looking at the finger pressed into Dean’s temple like a drill, the Shadow’s black-veined hand twitching unnervingly, repeatedly, so that Dean’s ring finger tapped
out a 140 beats-per-minute melody of anger against his skull, “—everything has been so loud, Castiel.”

He continued, his voice breathy, wheezy, burbling. He smelled like sea brine from up close. “Death popping in—not her place, you know, not her realm, no, no—angels waking, talking, walking, singing—the last one pretended he had a kazoo, Castiel! Oh, the noise!”

Of course. Of course Gabriel would have annoyed the shit out of him, from the second he woke.

“You…you really do just want to sleep,” Castiel realized. “That’s what you were made for, how you function. Dreamless sleep. The absence of everything.”

Dean’s face gritted its teeth grotesquely, a bare inch from Castiel’s face, his breath hot and musty and tinged faintly with whiskey. Dean’s Dutch courage, Castiel guessed, before talking to Jack. “YES! CASTIEL! How many times—” A sharp breath, “—How. Many. Times. Must I tell you people; hush! Hush hush!”

Castiel felt his windpipe constrict, and this time, he realized it wasn’t him; one of Dean’s hands had clamped around his neck.

His lips to Castiel’s ear, the Empty breathed out a soft, gentle threat. “In the dark, you won’t be able to shout, won’t be able to cry…you’ll die screaming, but you won’t be heard.”

Struggling against the hand choking him, Castiel found that he couldn’t even budge, the Empty making Dean’s fingers preternaturally strong. But then, just as rapidly as he’d grabbed him, the Shadow let him go—as if he’d suddenly remembered he wasn’t here for that.

The creature was insane, clearly; balancing on a knife edge of sanity, much as humans did once they got to the serious medical delusions that lack of sleep can cause.

“Why are you here?” Castiel gasped, tumbling down to the floor in a crouch, one hand to his aching neck.

“To renegotiate,” the Shadow chirped, spinning on his heel, making bizarre, goopy jazz-hands using Dean’s limbs.

“The deal,” Castiel clarified. “You’re here to renegotiate the deal I made to save Jack.”

“Yes, yes, of course—everything in the universe, out here, in the wake…it’s fluid, is it not? I’m—how would you say it—fitting in, with you all.”

Castiel found himself giving a snort. “Sure, you blend right in.” I sound like Dean, he distantly registered.

“Of course,” the creature burbled, impervious to sarcasm. It was walking swift circles again, Dean’s boots slapping loudly across the tile floor. “All I want, is nothing.”

Frowning, Castiel pushed back to his feet. “That makes no sense.”

“No, no, you’re not listening,” it hissed. “Not nothing…nothing. I want my sweet oblivion back, Castiel; no more noisy angels, no more pesky Nephilim, no more Death popping in and out like They have any right to my home, my inner workings, my very self…nothing, broken angel, I want nothing.”

“How.”
“Fix. This. Planet,” the Empty barked, abruptly right up in Castiel’s face once more, a wave of salt and damp and whiskey. “Do you have any idea how noisy it is down here? Not a soul going to hell, going to heaven, purgatory emptying onto your doorstep—and oh, the louder, bigger creatures are coming, you know, and you…oh my, do they remember you. God withdrew his Order from this place and it made ripples, Castiel…tiny ripples become waves, and waves crash to shore. Noisy, noisy, noisy.”

Castiel couldn’t help but roll his eyes. “You’d like some quiet, I get it.”

“So, we understand each other!” the Empty gasped almost happily, Dean’s hands clapping childishly. “You will stop it. Stop this, put things back the way they are supposed to be. And I will sleep!”

“You’re like a toddler,” Castiel observed, dazed. “Except no child ever wanted a nap as badly as you do.”

The creature’s head canted to the side, puzzled.

“Never mind,” Castiel said.

The Shadow, the essence of Sheol, stepped back from Castiel, it’s hands pressed together under its chin in a mockery of prayer. “That is my deal, Castiel.”

“So, to be clear,” Castiel said, his eyes resting on Dean. “As long as I reopen heaven and hell, and fix purgatory, one way or another—so that Earth functions as it should again, and you’re left alone—then your claim on me is null.”

“Yes,” the Empty said, more solemnly than it’d ever said anything, before spoiling the effect by running his hands obscenely down Dean’s front. “And you can be happy. You can have what you want, Castiel…do what you want. Hard, fast…biblically. And you can tell him…” It paused for a giggle, a sickeningly wet sound, before spinning its finger in a circle next to Dean’s temple. “All those eternal, precious thoughts in your head. Tell him that you’ve loved this meat sack and its messy, human, broken contents since the dawn of time.”

Castiel gulped hard, abruptly taken aback.

“Oh, I know,” the Empty tittered. “The whole universe knows. Every love story that God ever wrote, every tragic Romeo and Juliet, every Adam and Eve…Chuck always took inspiration from his surroundings, you know, yes, yes. And once—oh, once you were his favorite son. Don’t you remember that, Castiel? Why do you think he was so hard on poor, poor Lucifer? It was you, Castiel…you were his first real disappointment. Once burned…”

“Shut up!” Castiel hissed, unable to help his yell. “You don’t get to talk about any of that—you don’t get to talk about him, you—”

“What was it that he wrote?” The Empty chirped gleefully, gliding toward Castiel once more and stopping just in front of him, his hand raising to press to a very familiar spot upon Dean’s shoulder. “Set me as a seal over your heart, as a seal upon your arm. For love is as strong as death, its jealousy as unrelenting as Sheol. Its sparks are fiery flames, the fiercest blaze of all…”

Tears flowed down Castiel’s cheeks, and he couldn’t work out what was causing them. He trembled, pressing his lips together in a tight line and staring at the floor for a long moment before he could manage, “You have your deal. You won’t take me to the Empty any more, as long as this mess gets fixed. I agree to your terms. Now go.”
There was a sickening *slurp* as black goop seemed to explode out of Dean, up to the ceiling and on through, followed by a fleshy *thud* as Dean’s body hit the floor.

Castiel found his own legs giving way, and he was a mere puddle on the tile. He stretched over, managing to grab Dean’s shoulder. Shaking it, he didn’t even bother to try and keep the fear from his voice, the tears that still clung to his cheeks betraying everything even if he had.

“Dean?” he croaked.

For a terrifying minute, Dean lay prone. Castiel scrambled, searching his wrist for a pulse—but then he spluttered, like someone choking on bile and horror, and rolled over to his stomach. Vomiting across the tile, Dean shook wildly, his muscles trembling like they were being shocked. The smell of the grotesquely black and bloodied pool slammed into the back of Castiel’s throat, but he didn’t care.

“Dean—are you okay?” Castiel begged desperately, crawling closer, reaching to Dean’s shoulder. Where his brand should be, where Castiel’s heart felt like it still was.

Dean gazed at him blankly for a long moment as his shaking subsided. Then, he gasped weakly, “You—you made a deal.”

Castiel’s stomach turned to lead and sunk down somewhere between his feet. “Dean, I—I was going to tell you—” he began, but he stopped as Dean raised his hand.

Shaking his head, either uncaring or unaware of the matching tears that drifted slowly, carelessly across his freckled cheeks, Dean pushed up from the floor. He took a shaky breath, running one hand across his face as he looked down at Castiel. Then he turned on his heel and left.

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Billie watched as Dean Winchester stumbled out of the kitchen door. If she’d had a heart, it would have ached for him; that wasn’t fair, to find out like that. But the angel too, his very essence wept. It was all so sad.

But then, most stories had a little angst, before the beautiful end. Pulling out Chuck’s timer from the pocket dimension where it lived, she studied it once more.

They needed to hurry.

---

Dean and Castiel had shared a room in the camp ever since it was created. At the beginning, when they were barely speaking, it had been silent and caused their roommates some grief—but not them, particularly, on that score at least. After so many years, they were used to sleeping while ignoring some unresolved tension between them both. Or in Castiel’s case, watching Dean sleep while silently brooding. Over the months though, as they had finally grown closer, their sharing a room had become pleasant. Private. They hadn’t actually noticed for several days when their roommates had
found somewhere else to drag their mattresses, though they wouldn’t have confessed to it. But it was only very recently, since that first soft, cautious kiss underground in the dark, that they’d given up on the pretense and begun to share a bed.

Not that there was much happening in that bed. One step at a time.

Even so, it had been the best part of the day. The quiet closeness, the warmth. The first morning that Castiel had woken with Dean’s arms looped loosely around his stomach, the man’s chest pressed up to his back, he’d thought that the Empty might take him there and then.

That wasn’t a concern, now. But now of course there was a more significant problem.

Castiel paused outside the door, wondering if he was doing the wrong thing by even trying to talk to Dean. But even more than the anger or the harsh words that were bound to come his way, Castiel realized that the worst of it was the feeling and the knowledge that he had hurt Dean. That he was the one that had put that haunted, blindsided, sorrowful expression on his face.

He didn’t knock on the doorframe or anything like that, deciding to take his chances and step inside, facing him head on.

Within, Dean perched on the edge of the mattress—their mattress—his head in his hands. Only a few weeks before, Dean had upgraded their bed and several others in camp to memory foam mattresses. They were nothing like the luxurious one Castiel knew that Dean had slept on back in the bunker, but as they’d driven past the abandoned mattress warehouse up in Sioux Falls proper while on a supply run, Castiel had learned what *whiplash* meant. There was no arguing with Dean at that point; they were stopping for mattresses.

It was a tiny comfort in their harsh lives, and on that front, Castiel would give Dean whatever he could. He cleared his throat.

“Can I come in?” Castiel asked quietly, despite being already over the threshold, door closed.

Dean didn’t respond, the tightness in his shoulders enough.

Castiel moved across to the broken chair that took up an otherwise empty corner of the room. They usually flung their outer layers there at night; they slept in thin pants and t-shirts, no heat in the room. Castiel played with the zip on his over-washed maroon hoodie, unsure.

“It was over a year ago,” Dean suddenly announced. Castiel didn’t need to ask what he was talking about or confirm it. So, he said nothing, and let Dean continue. “You kept it a secret all this time. You could have— I could have—damnit Cas, I could have helped.”

Castiel’s eyes and cheeks burned in unison with shame. Too dried up to cry after the day he’d had, he just nodded. “I’m sorry, Dean,” was all he managed.

“Yeah,” Dean scoffed. “Of course you are.”

There was a long, tense moment where Castiel thought that perhaps he should leave, but then Dean’s voice came again.

“Come to sleep, Cas.”

It wasn’t much, maybe…but it felt like a lot.

Dean’s anger still took up too much space in the bed, and Castiel wasn’t sure if there was room for
him under the sheets, however much he wanted to slip between them and convince Dean to see things his way. He wanted to apologize, to beg, to plead; but as an angel he’d been built in superiority, and even now it was still hard.

“Are you sure? I could find somewhere else.”

With a long sigh that carried his hands up over his face and through his hair, mussing it up the way Castiel was so fond of, Dean straightened up. Still sitting on the edge of the mattress, he turned toward Castiel. It was progress at least, and he’d take whatever Dean offered on that front.

“I want to be mad at you,” Dean said, quiet and low. “But I can’t, so come to bed. I get it, okay? I get why you didn’t tell me.”

Castiel blinked, thrown. “You do?”

“Yeah.” Dean gave a dismissive shrug before moving to stretch out on his side, very pointedly occupying only one half of his precious memory foam. “I’m a mess. I’m a fuck up, I’m flawed. If you’d have told me, I’d have reacted badly. It wasn’t what you needed.”

Castiel frowned deeply, moving over and crawling across the bed until he was above Dean, kneeling between his legs. He didn’t touch him, one hand framing each side of Dean’s neck as he carefully hovered. “No,” Castiel said, shaking his head. “You’re wrong. I was afraid, Dean. And we didn’t need another problem. It wasn’t to do with you, it was me. It was my problem, and I—I’m prideful Dean, and for a celestial being I was pretty stupid, too. I made a lot of bad choices.”

It was Dean’s turn to frown, then, his knees coming up to frame Castiel’s thighs, pulling him in even as his expression pushed him away, his hands wrapping around Castiel’s ribs to tip the balance and welcome him down to his chest. “Dude, you aren’t perfect. We already decided that neither of us was, and that’s okay. The Empty thing...that shit wasn’t your fault.”

Unable to help himself, Castiel beamed down into Dean’s neck, nuzzling his nose across the warm skin and inhaling Dean’s musky, soapy scent. “You are perfect,” he confessed, floating on a high of forgiveness and closeness and happiness that he was finally allowed to feel.

Dean gave a snort over Castiel’s shoulders as his hands began to slip and slide up his spine, stroking contentedly. “You trying to say I got no flaws, Cas? Because, boy, are you wrong.”

Castiel pulled back, sliding his hands up the side of Dean’s neck to cup his jaw. Studying the line of freckles faintly dusting the side of Dean’s nose—the ones that looked like the constellation of Cygnus back when it had first been formed, and that he liked to kiss whenever Dean would let him —Castiel huffed out a light breath and shook his head. “Dean Winchester,” he said firmly, fixing Dean with a solid stare that he knew would pin him to the pillow. “You are a celebration of everything Chuck got wrong. You are made of flaws, and thus, you are perfect.”

Castiel felt Dean’s cheeks heat beneath his palms as Dean squirmed, and he grinned, loving it. Loving that he was the one to do it. That he was allowed.

It made him happy.
Dean loved the feeling of Castiel above him, pressing into his chest. Like a weighted blanket, it soothed him, made things easier.

He did understand, he did.

Sure, he was fucking furious that Castiel had made a deal with the Empty to save Jack, back then, and that he’d thought his own happiness or existence was a fair price to pay.

But that was Cas. It was so very Cas.

“I wish you knew what you were worth,” Dean found himself whispering, rolling onto his side so that Castiel moved down to lay beside him. With a practiced foot, Dean slipped the sheets up to their waist, before pausing, tapping at the thick material across Castiel’s chest. “Get this off, bud. You’ll overheat.”

He watched as Castiel blinked down, as if he’d forgotten that he was still wearing his hoodie, his belt, even his shoes. Excusing himself for a moment, Castiel stood and shucked them off, tucking his boots under the chair. Dean heard fabric dropping and folding, and the pulling sound of Castiel’s night-time wear being tugged up over his thighs. After an indeterminable minute, Castiel slipped back into the bed, bringing the sheet up the rest of the way to their shoulders.

They looked at each other across the pillows Dean had pillaged weeks before, along with a new mattress. The fabric between them felt like an ocean. Dean wanted to close it, but he was a stubborn bitch, and he was still mad enough that he was struggling.

Castiel’s fingers snaked under the sheet, finding Dean’s. Lacing their hands together. Dean let out a long sigh at the touch.

It was okay. They were going to be okay.

“I’m sorry for getting mad at you,” Dean managed to say, using his words. Sam would have been proud. “I didn’t understand, but now I do. Though I still think its bullshit that you hid that from me.”

Castiel’s eyes dropped down to the fabric again. “You’re right. I made the wrong choice. But once I’d done it, I…I didn’t know what to do. The longer I went without telling you, the harder it became to do.”

Dean squeezed at his fingers. “I get it. It’s not like I haven’t done the exact same thing but with different circumstances. Hell, you were probably just doing what Chuck planned, anyway, at the time.”

Blinking slowly, as if that had only just occurred to him, Castiel nodded. His stubble scratched audibly across the pillow, a soft sound between them.

Taking a breath, Dean knew what he needed to say, knew what Castiel would be wondering, worrying about.

“Me and you, we’re okay. I think we’ve both changed a lot since you made that choice. And Cas,” Dean murmured, struggling past the little crack in his voice, “I don’t regret it. What I said, I mean. I regret what happened, the crap at the bunker turning into all this… but what I said was true, anyway.”

Castiel’s face tilted up, his blue eyes wide and searching. He looked afraid, but that made sense, given everything.

Dean resettled their fingers, entwining his hand tightly with Castiel’s and bringing it up to rest on the
pillow between them. He pressed his lips gently to the tanned skin of Castiel’s knuckles, holding them before his lips as he breathed his truth across them. “I love you, Cas. Still. Always. No matter what.”

Over the pillow, Castiel’s face crumpled into an expression of happy tears, though his cheeks stayed dry even as his eyes squeezed shut. They’d cried enough for one day. His breath came out in a huff, shuddering, and his forehead bowed forward to press to where their hands were joined.

Smiling quietly at the way that the ex-angel was clearly overwhelmed, Dean reached across, wrapping an arm loosely over his shoulders; not pulling Castiel in, just inviting him.

Castiel came willingly, tilting across the space and shuffling his hips on the memory foam so that he lay only a few inches away, leaning into Dean’s chest. “I thought I’d ruined everything,” he admitted down into the bed. “I’d found you every lifetime for a millennium, and I worried that this was going to be the last one, the final one, and that I’d truly messed it up.”

"Still kinda blows me away," Dean confessed to the bedsheets, "that you're here. That I was in any way worthy of an angel, in any of those lifetimes. It doesn't seem real."

Scooping his hands under Dean's jaw, Castiel pulled Dean's gaze back up to his. Dampness was growing in Dean's eyes, open now, unashamed. "Dean," Castiel said plainly, “I waited for you, every single incarnation, for eons. I'd do it again, over and over, to hear you say just once what you just said."

"Just to hear me tell you I love you?" Dean deflected, smiling playfully. "Seems a little big-headed there, Casanova."

Castiel wasn't about to let Dean get away with knocking this away with humor, it seemed—-and Dean got it. They'd waited too long. "To hear you say it," Castiel clarified, “and gain the inferred permission to say it back. To have you hear it in the way I wanted—needed—you to hear it."

Dean was quiet, Castiel's fingers light on his jaw but not allowing him to pull away, a subtle but determined hold.

"Not as a brother," Castiel continued. "Not as a friend. Just as the one person I have always loved above all others—above duty, above God. Above myself, above the whole world, on more than one occasion."

Dean didn't squirm, his lips parting with a heavy breath but saying nothing.

"There's no such thing as soulmates, you know," Castiel said, thoughtfully. "Not officially, at least. Certain matches were ordained by heaven, but that was more strategy than eternal intent. But your soul, Dean...I've cradled it so often, built it from the ground up. Used my own grace to heal it, fix it, create it anew. My own hands. You are an extension of me, and me of you."

Dean's breath was ragged, his eyes somehow moistening again, but Castiel pushed past it, determined.

"There may not be a grand plan beyond Chuck's whims, Dean, but my fingerprints are on your very soul. It fits into my hands like no other. And there is no other that I've ever wanted to hold, and protect, and love, like yours. Not since the dawn of time."

Tears fell.

Castiel wiped them with his thumbs, blinking hard. "I love you, Dean Winchester. You deserved to
hear it, you always did. I'm sorry I made you wait."

Dean was trembling as he curled forward, his forehead buried into Castiel's shoulder. He turned, his nose nuzzling into Castiel's neck as he murmured wetly, "You big fuckin' sap."

Their chests pressed together, wrinkles of fabric flattened with the need to hold, to be close, and to solidify everything they'd just said. Dean rubbed his eyes, sick of tears, and occupied himself with kissing his boyfriend instead—the title seemed too little, against the backdrop of the history of time, but it was all they had. Castiel’s lips were permanently dry, but somehow in a way that made them soft and pillowy, the huge expanse of them caressing Dean’s own in a way that was rapidly becoming everything, to Dean. From the very first, practically chaste kiss, Castiel’s mouth had felt like home.

Bringing his hands around to slide them across Castiel’s flanks to his back, Dean cast aside every other worry—how Jack was going to kill Chuck, how the forging of the keys was going to go, if Jack had truly forgiven him, if Sam was going to make fun of Dean tomorrow for his soap opera-level day—and just lost himself in Castiel, instead. It was everything he’d needed for so long, and there was no barrier between them anymore. Castiel knew that Dean was in love with him—that perhaps he’d always been. And he returned it with his own love, that Dean could feel the depth of with every single kiss.

It was relief, and bliss, and everything.

Dean swept his tongue across Castiel’s lower lip, moistening it as Castiel opened up to him, deepening everything. Castiel pressed further up to his side as Dean rolled back into the pillow just a little, not flat on his back, but tilted back enough to have Castiel leaning over half of his chest. It freed up Castiel’s back, and meant Dean could run his hands along it, down, sliding over warm fabric beneath the sheets.

“Dean,” Castiel breathed against him as Dean’s fingers found the skin where his t-shirt met his sleep pants. It was only one word, deep and rumbling, but laced with meaning.

“Yes, angel?” Dean practically whispered, unspoken that Castiel wasn’t an angel anymore, but that he’d always be Dean’s.

Kissing deeper, Castiel didn’t respond for a minute, returning to tasting Dean’s lips and suckling on his tongue. Dean had no complaints. By the time Castiel pulled back—barely two inches, if that—his eyes were shining in a whole new way, and his hands were sliding down to press at Dean’s forearms, something hesitant in the motion, almost shy. He guided Dean’s hands lower, across the firm, round cheeks of his ass through his thin pajama pants, an unspoken question in his eyes.

Inhaling shakily, smiling, Dean let out a low groan as he went with the movement, letting his fingers shift across the warm swell of Castiel’s butt before lowering them a fraction further, to the back of his topmost thigh. Enjoying the play of firm muscle beneath his hands, Dean encouraged him up and over, pressing his own leg between Castiel’s.

Castiel gave a soft gasp just under Dean’s ear as the warm, hot length of his noticeably erect cock pressed up to the front of Dean’s thigh. “Dean” he asked, voice weak and needy. “Is this…is this alright, do you want—”

“Yes,” Dean interrupted gently, pressing his leg forward and wrapping his arms more firmly around Castiel. He let his hands roam to Castiel’s hips, sliding his fingers under the fabric, resting on hot skin as he encouraged him to rock and rub against his leg. “I’ve got you, baby,” he whispered. “Go ahead.”
After a few minutes of pressure, the feeling and the heat of Castiel thrusting against his thigh became too much, and Dean reached down to push the sheets back. He was achingly hard; the soft noises Castiel was making would have been enough, the way he mewled and writhed as he rubbed himself off against Dean, but combined with his lips, the feel of his hardness, and the damp spot of precome that Dean could see soaking through Castiel’s light gray pants now that the sheets were gone, it was too much. Dean couldn’t resist, his hand reaching to grab at his own cock through the fabric of his plaid pants. “Cas,” he gasped, pleading. “Do you mind if I—”

And then Castiel’s hand was there, on the front of the fabric, trailing down Dean’s length. His fingers wrapped around Dean cautiously, even as he thrust up against him, measuring the heft of Dean with fascination. Castiel’s rhythm didn’t slow as Dean lifted his hips, pushing his pants down, freeing his eager, twitching dick to the air. Dean wondered for a moment if it was going to be too much, too fast; he knew Castiel wasn’t the most experienced, but as an angel, he must have known and seen so much over the years—

Dean’s uncertain thoughts whimpered to nothing as Castiel’s hand wrapped around him, matching its pulls to the rocking of Castiel’s hips. “Oh, fuck, Cas…” Dean let out, turning his face so that he could bury his exclamations into thick, dark hair, trying to keep quiet, knowing how close the rest of the camp was. “That feels so good—you feel so good. Don’t stop, please…”

Castiel’s breathing was becoming erratic, and Dean was emboldened by the unevenness of the sound.

“Come here,” Dean encouraged, one arm around Castiel’s back moving up to the back of Castiel’s head as he let out an involuntary whimper. He curled Castiel’s face into his collarbone, and let his other hand roam southward, sliding completely under Castiel’s waistband and around to the front. “Let me take care of you, too,” he added, voice shaking.

There was a soft cry against Dean’s neck as his fingers tightened on Castiel’s dick—it was thick, and heavy, and unbelievably hot. “Dean,” Castiel forced out, his tone graver than it had ever been. “I think I’m going to orgasm soon,” he said. So formal, and endearing, and so completely Castiel that Dean let out a laugh—though it came out a little strangled, Castiel’s hand movements speeding up to encourage Dean along with him.

“That’s okay, Cas,” Dean reassured him. “More than okay, I want you to. Just let go, baby, come for me.”

Castiel’s breaths turned to grunts, his hips twitching and thrusting into the tunnel of Dean’s hand in a way that was so beautiful and so sexily distracting that Dean’s own impending orgasm was almost a surprise.

“Shit, Dean,” Castiel gasped out against sweaty skin, the rare curse just pushing Dean further toward the edge. “Oh, oh—Dean,” he cried, a tremor running through his body that would have told Dean that he was reaching completion even if the hot mess beginning to stream across Dean’s knuckles didn’t. “Ah—Ah—Ahh…” Castiel let out a long sound of contentment, his lips snatching at Dean’s collarbone even as he rocked his last few thrusts. “I love you,” he pressed into Dean with his mouth. “I love you.”

“Fuck, Cas!” Dean squeezed his eyes shut, coming hard from the sounds of Castiel just as much as from his hand, though that worked hard, stripping streaks of come from Dean with a firm wrist and twist to the head. “Yes—fuck—Cas, you…” Dean trailed off, panting, his shirt-chest sticky and damp. He turned immediately, wrapping his arms around Castiel and ignoring the mess. It was like his very bones wanted to strain out of his body, just to be closer, closer. “I love you, too,” he whispered, over and over.
In the morning, they’d talk to everyone at Camp. Figure out the keys.

But for tonight they rested, together, every inch of one pressed into the other. Dean stroked Castiel’s hair, his breathing evening out. Castiel had his hand up under Dean’s shirt, caressing his ribs.

“Dean,” Castiel whispered after a moment.

“Yeah?”

“I’m happy,” Castiel confessed, his voice shaking. “I’m going to let myself be happy.”

Chapter End Notes

HAPPINESS, Y’ALL!

And JACK! And...The Empty! A tricky character to write, it turns out--what did you all think of him?

We’re steaming toward the finale of our season now! On Thursday October 3rd, the lovely fangirlingtodeath513 is bringing you **SZ x 20: Lawrence**. Then, on Monday 7th the excellent CR_Noble is rolling in with **SZ x 21: The End of All Things** before we end with myself and an entire TEAM of cowriters on the 10th, bringing you the SZ Finale, Malachi right before S15 begins.

Thank you so much for coming along on this journey with us! If you felt inclined to share this project on Tumblr, we’d love you just the teensiest smidge more! ;)

- Mal <3

P.S. Time to confess...there was a secret, subtle-ish Buffy reference in this chapter. Anyone spot it?
Chapter Summary

With all the key pieces in hand and a vague idea of how to assemble them, the Winchesters head off the beginning of the end; Jack, Gabriel, and Balthazar take a trip to seal off Purgatory.

Chapter Notes

*takes a deep breath* AHHHHHHHHHHHHH YOU GUYS WE'RE ALMOST AT THE END!!! I can't believe it. This fic has been such a wild ride and everyone has been so lovely, we're all super stoked to share the last couple of chapter with you guys! This one was super fun to write now that the boys can finally work out their UST :)

Hope you guys enjoy!

-Courtney (aka fangirlingtodeath513)

Dawn filtered through the tiny window in their cabin far too early for Dean’s liking. Still, he kept his eyes closed and enjoyed the warmth of the body curled up against him, the soft, deep breaths of a heavy sleeper tickling his neck. Dean never thought he'd have this, much less enjoy it for the few days that he has, so he gave himself another moment to relax with his angel in his arms.

The next time he woke, it was to a loud banging on the cabin door. Cas whined against his neck and curled closer, arm draped over Dean’s torso. It was warm and comfortable and safe, and if they weren’t in the middle of the end of the world, he’d tell whoever was at the door to fuck off. Instead, he brought a hand up to lazily rub at Cas’s back, yawning as he pressed a kiss to the angel’s forehead.

“I don’t wanna get up either, but we do have a world to save, especially if we want to keep you on Earth.”

Castiel sighed, nodding and stretching out alongside Dean. His hair tickled Dean’s chin, though he found he didn’t really mind it.

They forced themselves out of their bed, much to Dean’s displeasure. He’d stay in bed all day with
Castiel, given the chance, but they didn’t have that option. They needed to figure out how to make the keys, and help figure out how the hell Jack was going to take on two of the most powerful cosmic entities at once. He was sure they had the first of many long days ahead of them, but there was a spring in his step as he crossed the little cabin to the front door and pulled it open with a small smile on his face.

Sam took one look at him, eyes flicking down to Dean’s shirt—still stained from his and Cas’s activities the night before—and then back up, wrinkling his nose. “Breakfast meeting if you two decide to leave the bedroom today. Gabriel and Balthazar are gonna try to work with Jack afterward, teach him how to use his soul to power his grace.”

Dean nodded, running his fingers through his hair and yawning softly. “Yeah, we’ll be there. Give us a sec to get dressed, we’ll meet you guys there.”

Sam hovered for a moment like he wanted to say something, but he seemed to think better of it as he turned on his heel and headed back toward the main building. Dean chuckled, grabbing fresh clothes from their bedroom and quickly changing into them.

“What’s so funny?” Cas murmured, a distinct warmth in his eyes as he watched Dean dress.

“Perks of being an older sibling, I get to make fun of Sam for having sex, but he’s just grossed out when he finds out I did the same,” Dean answered with a grin, tugging Castiel close for a soft, sensual kiss. Castiel basically melted against him, which was all kinds of adorable. He almost voiced that, but they really did need to get to breakfast. Reluctantly, he pulled away, chuckling at Castiel’s frown.

“I know, but we need to make the breakfast meeting. We need to brainstorm, see if we can jog your memory about how to make the keys.”

Castiel hummed, following Dean out of the cabin and toward the main building. Crowley lingered, undoubtedly exiled out there to make sure Dean and Cas actually made it to the meeting. He rolled his eyes at them as they approached, opening the door and following them inside.

Hardly anyone looked up when they walked in, thankfully. Jack, Gabriel, and Balthazar were deep in conversation at one end of the table. Jody and Donna looked like they were ready to fall asleep in their breakfast, and Sam and Rowena didn’t look much better. Dean took the seat directly across from Sam, lacing his fingers with Castiel’s once the former angel took the seat to Dean’s right.
“Let’s get this show on the road, shall we? Some of us have things to do today.”

Sam rolled his eyes, shooting a glare at Crowley. “What could you possibly have to do today that’s more important than saving the world?”

“Oh, don’t be so melodramatic, Moose. We’re still far from saving the world, lots of hoops to jump through before then. Damien needs to figure out how to kill God and God’s sister, and Feathers needs to figure out how to make the damn keys to put the world back in order. Don’t even get me started on Purgatory.”

Dean frowned. He hadn’t exactly thought about Purgatory, but Crowley brought up a valid point. They didn’t have the first clue how to close the Purgatory portal Chuck had opened. They couldn’t just leave it there, endlessly spitting monsters back onto Earth.

“Jack, do you think you’d be able to close it? It’s a rip between our world and Purgatory. You’ve opened a rip between worlds before, do you think you’d be able to close one?” Castiel asked, hand still loosely gripping Dean’s. It made Dean’s heart flutter, so much so that he almost missed Jack’s response.

“I think so, yes. It would be a good way to practice powering my grace, too. Do you want me to go now?”

Castiel hummed thoughtfully. “It may be best to do it soon, before we face off against Chuck and Amara. Just in case you need time to recharge. Dean and I could accompany you.”

“Absolutely not. We need you two working on the keys,” Jody reminded them with a frown, pushing her empty plate forward so she could rest her forearms on the table. “Dean’s the only one that can read the manifesto, which is where I bet we’ll find our answer. And, since you wrote it Cas, you’re the one that can decode it. Gabriel and Balthazar can go with him. Donna and I, too, if that’d make you feel better.”

Dean could almost feel Castiel’s hesitation, but they all knew Jody was right. The keys needed to be a priority, since they didn’t have the first clue how to assemble them. They couldn’t do anything until they had the keys. Eventually, with a heavy sigh, Castiel nodded. “Gabriel and Balthazar will keep him safe. Dean and I will look through the manifesto again, see if we missed anything.”

“We need to find somewhere else for this showdown,” Rowena piped up, arms crossed over her
chest. “There are far too many muggles here to risk a cosmic showdown that could obliterate them. We can’t exactly do it in the middle of the zombies, either. We’ll need to find a controlled place to bring the keys once they’re forged, somewhere that risks the fewest number of people being hurt.”

Dean ran a hand through his hair, scratching at the stubble on his jaw. “Let’s just worry about one problem at a time, alright? Cas and I will work on the keys and Jack can go with Gabriel and Balthazar and try to close Purgatory. Focus on those, for now. We can worry about everything else after that.”

X

Dean poured over the manifesto for hours, reading passage after passage out to Castiel in the hope that they’d jog something in the former angel’s memory. None of them did, so Dean dropped a pen into the book and snapped it shut, putting his head in his hands for a moment. There was a dull throbbing behind his eyes and if he heard one more ‘no’ from Castiel, he was gonna lose it.

“Why don’t we go have lunch? Jack’s leaving soon, I want to make sure he’s okay,” Castiel murmured, resting a hand between Dean’s shoulder blades. Dean took a deep breath, running his hands through his hair as he sat up.

“Yeah, I need a break. Let’s go.”

Hand in hand, they headed for the main building. There were a few muggles milling around, but most of the leadership was nowhere to be seen. It was a bit strange, but Dean could write it off pretty easily, considering how annoyed and hungry he was. He and Cas settled at the table with their lunch, chatting quietly with some of the muggles while they ate.

“Stull!” Sam said as he rushed into the building, Rowena and Jack not far behind.

Dean and Cas both blinked at him in confusion, their half-eaten food forgotten in front of them.

“What about Stull?” Dean asked, eyes narrowed at the three standing in the doorway.

“It’d be a fine place for a showdown, don’t you think? Middle of a cemetery, no one will be nearby that could potentially end up in danger,” Rowena explained,shrugging.
“I remember seeing a blacksmithing place last time we went to Lawrence, you guys could make the keys there if you really do just have to melt them down. I’m sure you need molds or something, but once we’ve got those, it’d be perfect. Lawrence is only, what, half an hour from Stull?”

“Twenty minutes. Maybe more if there’s a ton of zombies,” Dean murmured as he thought. It wasn’t a terrible idea, actually. With a blacksmith’s place nearby, they would have plenty of time to forge the keys and get them to Stull before Chuck and Amara showed up. The people that lived nearby were probably either dead or zombies and anyone that survived could be moved out of the way before they got to the final showdown.

“Lawrence,” Castiel gaped, wide eyes turning to stare at Dean. Dean blinked at him, confused and a little concerned.

“Uh, yeah, what about it?”

“That’s where I hid the molds. In Lawrence. You read out a passage earlier that I didn’t understand —where it began, so it shall end. Nothing clicked at the time, but Lawrence makes perfect sense. It’s where this timeline—this story —began. Your house in Lawrence.”

Sam frowned, beating Dean to the punch, “Our house wasn’t even there when the manifesto was written, though. How could you have hidden the molds here?”

Shaking his head, Cas stood and started pacing behind his and Dean’s chairs. “No, you’re correct. It wouldn’t be anything corporeal, at least not on this plane. It would’ve been far too easy for Chuck to find, or any of the angels he undoubtedly sent to clean up what I put into motion with the manifesto. I would’ve hidden it somewhere only I would remember where to find it, somewhere no one would ever think to look for it but me.”

Dean, Sam, and Rowena exchanged a look, all silently agreeing that it was best to let Cas ramble on while he was in the zone, despite only understanding half of what he was saying. Most of the muggles quietly excused themselves since it was painfully obvious there had been a major breakthrough in world-saving efforts.

Cas stopped in his tracks and frowned at them. “Why are you all so quiet?”

Dean glanced at Sam and Rowena, shrugging. “Seemed best to let you keep going. You wanna
explain that in English for the laypeople here?"

Cas smiled, slipping his hands into his pockets. “Of course, my apologies. Angels always knew that Lawrence would be the beginning of the end of the world since the events there would ultimately lead to the fight between Michael and Lucifer, Heaven and Hell. Your parents were… persuaded, for lack of a better word, to be together, and some universal string-pulling occurred to get them to settle in Lawrence. This story, the final story, began in Lawrence, so it’ll end there too. We’ll find the molds there, more than likely in a pocket dimension—I’ll need Jack’s help for that since I won’t be able to access it anymore. Then, once we’ve got the keys, Stull is only a short drive away.”

Sam and Rowena nodded their agreement while Dean shrugged, opening his mouth to say something before all the attention in the room turned to the doorway where Jack, Balthazar, and Gabriel were standing.

“Are we interrupting?” Gabriel asked slowly, eyes darting around the room at the four of them.

“No, of course not. Are you leaving?” Castiel asked, immediately switching his focus to Jack. Dean would have been upset about it, but he knew how much the kid meant to Cas—hell, how much the kid meant to all of them—so he stayed back and let Cas talk.

“Gabriel and Balthazar think I’m ready. The faster we close the portal, the faster we can get our world back on track,” Jack answered with a smile. Castiel looked worried but before he could say anything, Jack continued, “I can still fly and even if I’m drained after I close Purgatory, we can always borrow a car to get back here.”

Dean snorted despite himself. The kid was still so innocent after everything that had happened. ‘Borrow’, like whoever owned the car was gonna want it back.

“Be careful. Get back here in one piece,” Sam said softly, nodding once at Jack. Dean could tell his little brother wasn’t thrilled about letting Jack go off on his own so soon after getting him back, but what choice did they really have? If Jack really did have the power to close Purgatory, maybe they actually had a shot at beating Chuck and Amara.

“I know, you need me for Chuck. I’ll come back, I promise,” Jack said, nodding and smiling at them. Sam audibly scoffed and Castiel made what could only be described as a disgruntled squeak. Dean rolled his eyes, crossing the room and clapping Jack on the shoulder.
“Kid, we want you to come back because we just want you here, okay? Chuck be damned. We’ll find a way to beat him, even if you can’t.”

Jack beamed at him, wrapping Dean in a tight hug. “I want to be here.”

Dean blinked down at Jack for a moment before he wrapped his arms around the kid. “Look, just… be careful, okay? We don’t need you dying again.”

Jack nodded, hugging Sam, Cas, and even Rowena before flying off with Gabriel and Balthazar.

“Are we a hugging family, now?” Rowena asked, though there was a small smile on her face that belied the disgust in her tone.

Dean chuckled, sliding his arm around Cas’s shoulders and pressing a kiss to his temple. “End of the world and all that, might as well be.”

X

Jack’s feet landed less solidly on the ground than he would have liked. Gabriel and Balthazar stumbled next to him as their feet sunk into the ice-crusted snow that covered the visible landscape of Maine. They weren’t far from the portal to Purgatory—the unbridled energy of it thrummed through Jack and hit him right in his core. He squinted against the light from the setting sun, spinning slowly on the spot.

“Let’s hurry this up, shall we? I’m not overly fond of this weather situation,” Balthazar muttered, shaking the snow off his shoes.

Jack held up a hand, eyes slipping closed as he tried to limit the energy down to a single direction. It took a moment but eventually he found it somewhere on their left, so he inclined his head that way, only starting down the trail once Gabriel and Balthazar both nodded at him. He could hear them crunching along in the snow behind him, so he focused his attention on the energy flowing from the portal. All he needed to do was narrow it down to a specific area... there! Jack stopped in his tracks, which made Gabriel and Balthazar bump into him.

“It’s nearby. Maybe a five-minute walk that way?” He gestured into the woods just off to the left side of the trail. “I can feel it, it’s...strong.”
“Think you’ll be able to close it? Balthazar and I aren’t really in a position to help.”

Jack hummed. “I suppose I’ll have to be able to then, won’t I? Come on.”

He led them off the trail, carefully picking his way through the dense woods on the side of the trail. He almost lost his footing a few times which, given the thick layer of icy snow, wasn’t very surprising.

They were within eyesight of the portal when Gabriel grabbed Jack’s wrist and stopped him from walking. Jack turned to frown at him but Gabriel pressed a finger to his own lips, nodding toward the portal. The minute Jack turned his attention back to the portal, it was obvious why Gabriel stopped him. There were a few people gathered in front of the portal, gazing up at it. It was almost like they were hypnotized by it, unable to hear the three people that approached behind them. One of them was obviously a werewolf, judging by the long claws that protruded from his fingers. The other two looked human, though Jack had no doubt that they were monsters of some kind.

“I wonder if they’re trying to get back through…” Jack murmured, head tilted to the side as he observed the three. They didn’t move at the sound of Jack’s voice, which only confirmed the fact that they were unaware of the presence of Jack, Gabriel, and Balthazar.

“They don’t know we’re here,” Gabriel whispered, glancing between Jack and Balthazar. “What do we do? We can’t leave them here.”

“Once the portal’s closed, we can kill them and send them back, can’t we? We won’t face the same issue we’re having now, and I’m assuming reapers are still bringing souls to Purgatory, even if they do eventually get back out.” Balthazar shrugged, fingers wrapped around the handle of the machete that hung at his side.

“I suppose that’s my cue, then,” Jack said softly, arms hanging limply at his side. He was suddenly nervous, body tingling with anxiety as he stared at the portal. What if he couldn’t close it? If he couldn’t even do that simple task, how would he ever beat Chuck?

“Jack? You okay, kiddo?” Gabriel asked softly, raising an eyebrow at Jack.

Jack cleared his throat and nodded. “Sorry, yes. I can do this.”
“It’s okay if you can’t. Just give it your best shot.” Gabriel smiled, squeezing his shoulder before taking a few steps behind Jack with Balthazar.

Jack nodded, taking a deep breath and rolling his shoulders, focusing all of his attention on the portal. He could feel his grace surge between every atom of his being, spurred on and amplified by his soul. He felt powerful as his grace wound through his veins, his nerves ebbing away as he approached the portal. Slowly, he brought a hand up, palm to the portal, and let his eyes slip closed as he concentrated. He pushed grace from his body and felt the current in the air shift as his grace floated between the molecules of gas to the portal, carefully and meticulously sewing the rip in the universe closed.

He wasn’t sure how long it took. He didn’t open his eyes until everything went quiet and even then, he opened his eyes to near darkness. The gentle hum of pure energy had dissipated, leaving only the quiet breaths of Jack and his two companions, along with the quiet crunch of snow as Gabriel and Balthazar sheathed their weapons and returned to Jack’s side. The bodies of the three monsters laid at the foot of where the portal had once been, their blood painting the snow a bright pink.

“How do you feel?” Balthazar asked softly like he was afraid to break the silence around them.

“I feel...” Jack paused, wiggling his fingers and feeling his grace spark between them. “I feel good. Great, actually. My grace is almost at the same level as before I closed the portal. I did it.” Jack beamed, not wasting a moment before grabbing onto Gabriel and Balthazar’s hands, flying the three of them back to camp.

x

Dean finally got up out of his seat and interrupted Castiel’s pacing. He had been pacing for an hour, since Jack, Gabriel, and Balthazar left.

“Cas, hey. You gotta relax, man. You’re gonna wear a track into the floor if you keep pacing like that. Our cabin is small enough as is, let’s try to keep it intact.”

Castiel sighed, arms slipping around Dean’s middle in something that resembled a hug. Dean loved that they could just casually touch like this with nothing holding them back—no hidden feelings, no curses, no deals that hung over their heads. It was refreshing, so much so that Dean didn’t even hesitate to wrap his arms around Cas’s shoulders.
“I’m sorry, I know. I’m just nervous. I need to let my energy out somehow.”

Dean smirked, pressing a kiss to the top of Castiel’s head. “I can think of a few more productive ways to let off some steam,” Dean muttered against the top of his head.

Castiel smiled, tucking his face against Dean’s neck. “Oh? What are those?”

Dean snorted. “How in-depth do you want me to spell it out here, Cas?”

He could feel Cas smile against his neck. “I’m not sure what you mean,” Cas said coyly, pressing a soft kiss to Dean’s neck.

Dean hummed, leaning his cheek against Cas’s head. “Well, we’ve got the cabin to ourselves for now, and I picked up some… supplies last time we went for a supply run. We could make use of our alone time and distract you from your nerves.”

“Supplies?” Cas leaned back to look up at him, brows furrowed in confusion.

Chuckling, Dean nodded. “Yeah, supplies. Lube, condoms, stuff like that. Just… y’know. In case.”

Castiel raised his eyebrows, though Dean could make out a hint of a smirk on his lips. “Of course. Supplies. That’s a little presumptuous, don’t you think?”

Dean blinked at him for a moment, frowning and rubbing the back of his own neck. “Uh, yeah, I guess it kind of was. Sorry, I—”

Cas cut him off with a hard kiss, fingers twisting into Dean’s shirt. Dean kissed him back, head spinning as Cas pulled away. “I’m just kidding, Dean. It sounds like a great idea. Here?”

Dean grinned, holding up a finger and digging through his pile of clothes. He found a sock, snickering to himself as he slipped it over the doorknob on the outside of the cabin, grinning at the look of confusion on Castiel’s face. “It’s a human thing. Sock on the door will keep anyone from
Cas still looked confused, but he didn’t question it. Instead, he tugged Dean close and kissed him again, this time much more passionately. Dean wound his arms around Cas’s waist, tugging the former angel tight against him. He could already feel Cas’s cock hardening in his oversized sweatpants, so he gently guided them back to the bed, lips never leaving Castiel’s.

They fell back onto the bed with a soft *woosh*, tangled in each other as they continued making out, hands warm as they roamed each other’s bodies. Cas shuffled around, straddling Dean’s waist and slipping his hands under Dean’s shirt as he pressed a line of kisses down the side of his neck, lips soft and warm against the skin there.

He loved having Cas like this, so close to touch. Cas found the sensitive spot beneath Dean’s ear and gently bit down there, making Dean arch up against him with a soft gasp.

Cas grinned, leaning back and tugging at Dean’s shirt, trying to get him out of it. Dean sat up and let Cas slip it off, pulling him in for yet another kiss before returning the favor and getting Cas out of his shirt. His hands explored the newly exposed tanned skin, gasping as Cas ground their hard lengths together.

Eventually, Cas’s hands drifted down to Dean’s jeans, fingertips tracing the outline of his erection through the fabric. Dean groaned, grinding up against Castiel’s palm.

“Fuck, Cas, please,” Dean said breathlessly, eyes locked on the former angel as he unbuttoned and unzipped Dean’s jeans, tugging them down his thighs.

“Please what, Dean?” Cas murmured, palming Dean’s hardness through his boxers.

“Fuck, I—” he cut himself off as Cas’s thumb brushed over the head of his cock, inhaling sharply. “How do you want to do this?”

Castiel’s movements paused, which ripped a whine from Dean’s throat. “I…don’t know. I’ve never done… *this* before.”

Dean smiled, sitting up to kiss Cas lightly. “One step at a time, hm? Let’s get the rest of these clothes off.”
Cas grinned, fingers already at the waistband of Dean’s boxers. “I think I can do that.”

Dean chuckled, lifting his hips and letting Cas tug his boxers off before he rid Cas of his sweatpants and boxers. He leaned back and took a moment to drink in the sight of Castiel naked above him.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” he breathed, chuckling when Cas blushed.

“So what now?” Cas murmured, trailing his fingertips down Dean’s chest, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

“Depends on how you want this to go. Do you want—”

“I want you,” Cas interrupted, wrapping a hand around Dean’s cock and stroking experimentally. Dean grunted, rocking his hips up.

“I know, but do you want what we did last night, or…more?”

Castiel blinked at him, head tilted to the side like he hadn’t thought about the option of more. “What do you mean by ‘more’?”

Dean squirmed a bit as Cas’s hand twisted over the head of his cock, groaning softly. “Y’know, more. Sex.”

“What we did wasn’t sex?”

Dean frowned. “No, it was, just a different kind.”

Castiel smirked and realization dawned on Dean.

“You’re messing with me.”
Castiel grinned, thumb brushing over the bead of precum at Dean’s slit. “Perhaps. I’d like more if you’re offering.”

“Oh, I am definitely offering,” Dean muttered, tugging Cas down on top of himself and kissing him breathless, slipping a hand in his hair to grip it lightly and guide their kiss. Cas opened up to him almost instantly which was all kinds of hot and he would’ve loved to keep kissing him, but he kinda wanted to get to the main attraction, too. Cas seemed to pick up on that, pulling away and sitting back on Dean’s thighs.

“Show me what to do?” Cas asked, voice deep and gruff with arousal.

Dean shivered, nodding and nudging Cas off of him. He rolled over and reached for the bag he had tucked beneath their bed, grabbing the bottle of lube and a box of condoms, tossing both on the bed next to them before tugging Cas back on top of him. “You sure?”

Castiel smiled, leaning down to kiss Dean lightly. “I’ve never been more sure of anything, Dean. I want you.”

Dean licked his lips, nodding and grabbing the bottle of lube. “Alright, um…I’ll bottom first and then if you decide you wanna try later, we can do that too.”

Cas raised his eyebrows and nodded, though he looked a bit confused. In lieu of explaining, Dean coated his own fingers in lube and guided Cas off his lap. Cas knelt on the bed off to Dean’s left, watching him curiously. Dean had never done this for an audience before and he felt kinda weird about it, but he reminded himself that it was Cas. So, despite his nerves, he let his eyes slip closed as he carefully and meticulously opened himself up.

The room was silent, save for the slick sound of Dean’s lube-coated fingers and his quiet panting. It didn’t take long until another set of heavy breaths joined his own, making Dean crack his eyes open to look up at Cas.

He looked absolutely wrecked. His hair was a mess, his cheeks were flushed a beautiful shade of pink, and his mouth was hanging open as his eyes watched Dean’s fingers disappear into his own body. His cock hung hard and heavy between his legs and it made Dean’s mouth water, but that wasn’t what they were here for, at least not right now.
“Dean, can I…?” Cas trailed off, fingers twitching where they were resting on his thighs. Dean nodded quickly, pulling his fingers out and grabbing for the lube. He coated Cas’s fingers, spreading his legs wider as the angel settled between them. “Like this?” Cas brushed one slick finger over Dean’s hole, teasing lightly before nudging the tip of his finger inside. Dean sucked his bottom lip between his teeth and nodded.

“Yeah, like that. You can go all the way in, I was already up to two fingers.”

Castiel nodded, pushing his finger all the way in before slowly withdrawing it and adding a second finger. He had a look of pure concentration on his face as he pumped his fingers into Dean and it made Dean bite back a laugh. He was so adorable like that and it was unfair, frankly. No one should be allowed to be that cute, ever.

“You can add another finger,” Dean said breathlessly, grunting and grabbing onto Cas’s free arm when he did. Cas’s movements immediately stopped and he found a mix of concern and fear on the angel’s face. “I’m good, Cas. Promise. Keep going.”

Cas nodded slowly, entirely focused on stretching Dean around his fingers. It went on for a while, much longer than Dean would have liked, but he knew this was new for Cas and he didn’t really want to rush him. Eventually, though, after three nudges to his prostate left him seeing stars, Dean grabbed Cas’s free hand and pressed a light kiss to his palm.

“I’m good, Cas. You ready?”

Cas blinked up at him and withdrew his fingers, swallowing and nodding. “I’m…yeah. Yes. What do I…do?”

Dean chuckled, sitting up and kissing him softly as he grabbed a condom and ripped the foil open. “I’m gonna put this on you and then get some lube on you and then you fuck me.”

Castiel’s eyes darkened at that, watching intently as Dean rolled a condom onto his erection and slicked it with lube, wiping his hands off on his discarded shirt. Dean shuffled onto his hands and knees, glancing at Cas over his shoulder.

“Ready when you are.”
Cas frowned. “But I want to see you.”

Dean flushed at that, clearing his throat and shifting onto his back, legs spread as Cas settled between them. Cas inched forward on his knees, the head of his cock leaving a trail of lube over Dean’s hole. Dean nodded quickly, wrapping his legs around the angel’s waist.

“C’mon, Cas, want you so bad,” Dean breathed, biting his lip as Cas gripped the base of his own cock and slowly, so fucking slowly, guided it into Dean.

It wasn’t like Dean had never done this before, but this was endlessly better because it was Cas’s cock splitting him open, brushing over all the right spots inside of Dean as Cas shook above him, leaning down to kiss sloppily at Dean’s neck. Dean slipped a hand in Cas’s hair, tugging gently until their mouths slotted together perfectly in a deep, sensuous kiss Dean didn’t know he was longing for.

“You can move,” Dean murmured against Cas’s lips, idly stroking the hair at the base of his skull. Castiel shook his head, letting out a harsh breath.

“I-I’m afraid that if I move right now, I’ll orgasm. Just…Dean, you feel so incredible,” Cas grunted, burying his face against Dean’s neck and lightly nipping the skin there, panting softly.

Dean smiled, kissing the side of his head. “Take your time, there’s no rush.”

After a couple of minutes, Cas pressed a kiss to his neck and rolled his hips experimentally, groaning softly. “Dean, it feels…”

“I know,” he said softly, thumb stroking over Cas’s cheek. “Take as long as you want, we’ve got all the time in the world.”

Castiel chuckled breathlessly. “No we don’t, but I appreciate the sentiment.”

Dean grinned, leaning up on his elbows to kiss him softly. They stayed like that for a few minutes, Cas lazily rolling his hips as they kissed until they were both vibrating with need. Cas broke their kiss as he began to properly fuck Dean, pulling all the way out before pushing back into him with reckless abandon. His thrusts were rough and uncoordinated but Dean couldn’t care less, especially since he got to see Cas like this. Debauched was the only appropriate word for it. His lips were swollen and spit-slicked from their kisses, his face and chest were flushed a perfect shade of red and
he was covered in a thin layer of sweat as he chased his release, hands roaming every inch of Dean that he could reach. It was ridiculously hot and it set Dean’s nerves on fire as he mumbled encouragements, spurring Cas on to fuck him harder and faster.

Soon, the room was entirely silent save for the quiet slap of skin-on-skin and their quiet pants. Normally it would have been way too quiet for Dean’s liking and he would try to fill the quiet with some kind of dirty talk or moaning, but he couldn’t be bothered. He was too caught up in watching Cas come apart above him to care if they were quiet.

“Dean, I’m…fuck, I’m close,” Cas said breathlessly, eyes flicking up to meet Dean’s gaze.

Dean smiled reassuringly. “Go ahead, nothing’s stopping you. Come for me, Cas.”

Dean wrapped a hand around his own cock, stroking lazily as he watched Cas tense above him, thrusts growing erratic as he moaned out Dean’s name and filled the condom, chest heaving. Dean twisted his wrist on the upstroke, coming with a soft gasp and coating his stomach with his own release. Cas collapsed on top of him with a groan, nuzzling against Dean’s neck. Dean chuckled, wrapping an arm around the angel’s shoulders.

“You okay?”

Cas nodded slightly, sighing happily. “Amazing.”

He smiled and pressed a kiss to Cas’s head, stroking his back lightly. “Why don’t we clean ourselves up and take a quick nap?”

He could feel Cas’s frown against his neck but he nodded, pulling out of Dean slowly. “What do I do with the condom?”

Dean snorted. “Right, forgot you didn’t use actual protection last time you did this.”

Castiel flushed, watching as Dean rid him of the condom and tied it off, tossing it in the wastebasket in the room. Dean grabbed his shirt, wiping them both off before flopping back onto the bed and tugging Cas down next to him. Castiel smiled, nuzzling into Dean’s neck and draping an arm over his middle. “Nap?”
Dean hummed, tugging their blanket over themselves and nestling into their bed, warm and content with his angel in his arms.

They startled awake to loud banging on the cabin door. It was dark, obviously well past sunset, so Dean rubbed at his eyes and sat up.

“What?”

“Get dressed and get out here. Jack’s back!” Sam shouted through the door, footsteps fading as he walked away. Dean yawned, running a hand through his hair and tossing Cas his clothes. They dressed in silence, lacing their fingers as they left the cabin and headed for the main building.

Jack was already there, surrounded by the camp leadership. Dean and Cas filtered into the room, lingering near the back so they didn’t interrupt Jack.

“I can do it, I can beat them. I know what I’m doing. I’m ready.”

“Are you sure, Jack?” Cas asked softly, ignoring when every pair of eyes in the building turned to him.

Jack grinned. “I’m positive. I closed Purgatory and replenished most of my lost power without even thinking about it. I can do it.”

Dean and Cas exchanged a look, nodding.

“We should head to Lawrence, then. Dean, Jack, and I will find the molds and make the keys. Whoever wants to accompany us can head to Stull and clear the area. Once we’ve got the keys together, it won’t be long before Chuck and Amara show up, and we need to make sure the area is clear of civilians long before then,” Cas said, addressing the room at large.

“We’ll go, obviously,” Rowena said, nudging Sam with her shoulder. Sam nodded along, smiling at her.
“Jody and I’ll go too, we can bring anyone we find back here while you all do your thing,” Donna volunteered, thumbs hooked through the belt loops of her jeans.

Nodding, Dean cleared his throat. “I think everyone else should stay here. We need as few people at Stull as possible, and we need people to keep the camp in order.” In case we don’t come back stayed unspoken, but it hung heavy in the air between them, painfully obvious to anyone who listened to the conversation.

“We should get a good night’s rest and then leave in the morning. Jack, you can fly us there, right?” Sam asked, smiling gently. Jack nodded and most of the group dispersed, no doubt heading back to their cabins. Castiel turned to follow suit, so Dean grabbed his arm and kissed his cheek lightly.

“I’m gonna grab us something for dinner, meet you back at the cabin.”

Castiel smiled, pulling Dean in for a kiss before nodding and heading out into the cold winter air.

“Thanks for the sock on the door, Dean,” Sam crossed his arms over his chest, rolling his eyes when Dean turned to look at him. “What are we, fifteen?”

Dean grinned, grabbing a few different things from food storage for him and Cas. “Figured I’d warn you so you didn’t walk in on somethin’ you didn’t wanna see. I know you’ve done that enough in our lifetimes.”

Sam wrinkled his nose, shaking his head. “You’re gross. Just…ugh. Lock the door next time, the sock was a bit much. Jerk.”

Dean flipped him off over his shoulder, collecting two bottles of water and opening the door with his elbow. “Bitch!”

X

They hit the ground in Lawrence a few minutes after sunrise, shivering in the chill of the early morning air. Sam, Rowena, Jody, and Donna made their way around town looking for a car that would actually work while Dean, Cas, and Jack made their way to the Winchester’s old house.
The streets were entirely abandoned. There was ice covering the sidewalks and half-melted snow lingered on the lawns of long-abandoned houses. The Winchester house sat on the same middle lot as always, nestled between two equally suburban houses. The two trees in the front yard were frozen over and coated with snow, branches heavy and sagging with the weight. The sidewalk was cracked and broken and the smell of death still lingered in the air, making Dean’s upper lip curl in disgust.

“Let’s get inside before any zombies decide they’re hungry,” Dean muttered, stepping up onto the sidewalk carefully and heading straight for his old house. He hardly had any memories of it, at least none from when he was living there. He remembered coming back with Sam, years and years later, but anything from childhood was just a hazy memory.

The front door gave way as soon as Dean touched it, clattering to the floor and kicking up a cloud of dust. He poked his head inside, listening carefully for any sign of movement. He didn’t hear anything, but he grabbed his gun and checked the house anyway.

“All clear,” he murmured as he made his way back down the stairs, brows furrowing when he didn’t find Cas and Jack in the entryway.

“Living room!” Cas shouted, so Dean tucked his gun away and headed for the living room.

Cas and Jack were huddled on the floor near the fireplace. For a minute, Dean thought they might be trying to start a fire until he saw the soft glow of Jack’s grace in his palm.

“You found it?”

“The pocket dimension, yes,” Cas answered, glancing at Dean over his shoulder and patting the empty space on the floor next to him. “Now it’s just a matter of searching it long enough to find the molds. Pocket dimensions can be tricky, there’s no telling how long Jack will be looking.”

They sat there for what felt like hours, though based on where the sun was, it had been an hour at the most. Dean’s ass was aching from sitting on the cold, hard wooden floor when Jack’s eyes flew open and he yanked his hands back. Two heavy cast-iron molds were grasped tightly in Jack’s hands as he beamed at Dean and Cas.

“I got them!”
Castiel sagged with relief, reaching out and taking one of them, brushing his thumb over the indent in the cast iron. “I can’t believe you actually found them. We might be able to pull this off.”

Dean scoffed. “Of course we can pull this off. We do impossible shit all the time.”

Castiel smiled softly, pushing himself to his feet and holding out a hand to Dean. “Come on, let’s get to the blacksmithing place nearby. It should still be usable.”

Dean took his hand, letting Cas pull him to his feet. He took the other mold from Jack and they walked the few blocks from the Winchester house to the blacksmith’s shop, pushing the door open. It was eerily quiet, though they could hear the sound of the wind whistling through a broken window somewhere inside. They made their way through the small store and display room that made up the front of the building, slipping through the ‘Employees Only’ door into the back room.

“Do you know how to do this?” Cas asked, frowning as he glanced around the room.

Dean cleared his throat, nodding slightly. “Sorta, yeah. I’ve never done it myself but I watched Dad make some kinda charm once. Pretty small, so the same kind of thing we’ll be doing.” He crossed his arms over his chest, sighing. “Only thing is, we’ve got no power.”

“I can take care of that,” Jack said with a smile, eyes glowing. Every machine in the room whirred to life, instantly filling the space around them with the loud clangs of metal and the soft swishing of gas running through pipes.

“Jack, bud, why don’t you let me see if there’s a generator around first, okay? That way we don’t use your powers unless we need them. You’re gonna need all your strength for later.”

Jack frowned, the glow fading from his eyes. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Cas smiled softly, squeezing Jack’s shoulder. “It’s okay, Jack. We know you were just trying to help.”

Dean left the two of them there as he headed deeper into the store, keeping his eyes peeled for anything that even remotely resembled a generator. He found one tucked way in the back corner and it was a giant one, more than capable of powering the entire place for the small amount of time they’d need it. He checked the gas tank, sighing with relief when he found it was full. This place was
clearly untouched when shit went down, luckily for them. He switched the generator on, grinning when the lights flickered on above them and he heard the machinery kick on once again. He made his way back to Cas and Jack, grinning at them. “Seems fate’s on our side today. Jack, why don’t you go see if they need a hand at Stull? Cas and I got this, we’ll pray when we’re done.”

Jack smiled and nodded. He was gone in the blink of an eye, or at least that’s the way it seemed. Dean’s eyes flicked to Cas and he raised an eyebrow.

“So? Should we get this show on the road?”

Castiel nodded, setting the warded box containing the key pieces on the table. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

Dean snorted. “Don’t really have a choice here, do we? Gotta get it done one way or the other. I can fumble my way through. Why don’t you get those out and I’ll go have a look around at the equipment?”

Cas started fiddling with the box, so Dean wandered away to check out everything in the store. He wasn’t exactly eager to be near Alistair’s razor or the First Blade, so the longer he could draw this out, the better. He found a small oven in the back with a small bucket inside, obviously for melting down metal. The controls didn’t look too difficult, and it looked easy enough to pour into the molds. He glanced at the temperature, frowning. They didn’t even know what kind of metal it was, how they were supposed to know what temperature they needed to melt it down was beyond him. Still, he cranked the temperature up and hoped for the best. He found a closet full of safety gear, so he grabbed stuff for himself and Cas, carrying the pile back out to the main room.

“So how do we know what piece to melt down? Like, I assume we’re not melting down the entire Colt, right?” he asked, setting the pile of safety gear on the table next to Castiel. Castiel blinked at the pile before looking up at Dean.

“No, of course not. I remember carving Enochian onto the pieces we would need, we just have to find it.”

Dean raised his eyebrow, pulling the leather apron over his head and tugging the thick gloves on. “What did you carve?”

Castiel cleared his throat. “The future.”
Dean hummed, slipping a pair of safety glasses on, crossing his arms over his chest. “Ready when you are.”

Castiel nodded, frowning down at the pile of artifacts. “I hate to break these, given the historical significance, but…”

“There ain’t exactly anyone around to appreciate the historical significance, Cas. Besides, three of those things are evil.”

“You’re right, of course. Let’s tackle the Hell key first—I doubt Chuck will be looking for that one.” Cas grabbed the razor, meticulously taking it apart until he found the tiny Enochian carving on one of the pieces, handing it over to Dean. He did the same with the Colt, passing the piece off to Dean as he grabbed for the First Blade. Using one of the heavy molds, he crushed the handle, revealing a fragment of metal hidden inside the bone. He passed it to Dean, letting his eyes skim the length of Dean’s body as he stood up. “Do I need to wear all of that?”

Dean hummed, already heading for the oven. “Not yet. These have to melt first anyway, we can’t do anything until then.” He grabbed the handle of the bucket, pulling it far enough out of the oven to drop the metal pieces inside. He pushed it back in, closing the heavy metal door and clamping it shut. “Alright, well, that’s taken care of. Should we get the Heaven pieces ready?”

“Already on it,” Cas murmured, dismantling Gabriel’s horn and fishing out the engraved metal running through it, setting it on the table. The Staff of Moses was next, which lost the metal tip at the top. Dean questioned it since it seemed a little obvious, but Castiel pointed out the inscription on the bottom of the tip, the part that was attached to the staff. The amulet was the last piece and it broke Dean’s heart a little bit to see that one go. Heaven piece or not, it still had sentimental value for him and Sam. Cas pulled it off the necklace, setting the entire amulet in the pile with the rest of the metal.

“There’s no specially engraved piece from that?”

Castiel smiled and shook his head. “The entire amulet was formed from the metal needed for the key, it’s why it resonates when Chuck is nearby.”

Dean hummed. “Makes sense. That everything?”

Castiel nodded, closing the warded box and setting it aside. “That’s everything, yes. Now we just
need to make the keys."

Dean turned, checking on the oven. The metal had only just begun to melt, so he took his safety gear off and left it on a table near the oven, taking the chair next to Castiel. "You okay? You’ve been awfully quiet today."

“I’m just nervous, I think,” Cas murmured, shuffling closer to Dean and leaning his head against Dean’s shoulder. “What if this doesn’t work? What if Jack can’t beat them?”

He kissed Cas’s head softly. “Then we find another way. We always do. One way or another, we’re gonna fix this world.”

They sat there like that for a while, silent as they took in the stakes of what they were about to do. If they fucked this up, it could be the end of Jack—again—and a death sentence for the rest of them. No way Chuck would let them walk out of there if he figured out what they knew.

“I should go check the oven,” Dean murmured after a while, squeezing Cas’s hand gently. “I’ll be right back.”

Cas nodded and let him up, following suit as Dean donned his safety gear again. Dean raised an eyebrow at him, so Cas shrugged. “I want to help.”

“Bring the mold with you?” He crossed the workshop to the oven, sweat starting to bead on his forehead just from the heat it was giving off. He cracked the door open, whistling quietly as a wall of heat spilled out, tugging the bucket out far enough to look inside. The metal inside was entirely melted, swishing around in the bucket as it moved. Cas set the mold on the table beside Dean, curiously peeking into the bucket.

“So now we just pour it in the mold?”

Dean nodded, adjusting his grip on the bucket. He lifted it off the hinge it was hanging on, carefully moving it over the mold. He lined up the small spout on the side of the bucket with the mold, carefully pouring the molten metal into the indentation. The steam from the metal hitting the cold mold fogged his safety glasses up almost to the point where he couldn’t see. Cas took them off and wiped them clean before replacing them, which made Dean’s chest oddly warm. He set the bucket back on the hinge, pushing it back into the oven and clamping the door shut.
“Alright. Hell key, complete. Let me grab another bucket and we can get the Heaven one going.”

“There’s one here,” Cas muttered, already heaving the cast-iron bucket off the floor and bringing it to Dean. Despite the bagginess of his clothes, Dean could see his muscles bulge with the effort and suddenly Dean’s pants were uncomfortably tight. Cas tried to hand it to him but Dean was far too distracted to realize what he was doing, so Cas rolled his eyes and stepped around Dean. He dragged the bucket from the oven, setting it on the floor and replacing it with the new one, dropping the Heaven metal fragments inside. “How long will we have to wait for these ones?”

Dean blinked at him, returning to reality even though he really didn’t want to. “Probably at least half an hour. It’s gotta warm up the cast iron before the metal can even start to melt.”

Cas hummed and Dean took a moment to look him over. He looked strangely good in the safety gear, hair flopped over onto his forehead as sweat started to soak through it. Now that Dean thought about it, the room was getting kind of hot…

“Dean? I asked what you wanted to do until then,” Castiel said slowly, head tilted to the side and brows furrowed in concern. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m—” he cut himself off, licking his lips. They were together now, he could just be honest. “You’re insanely hot like this and it’s a little hard to concentrate when you’re standing in front of me like that.”

Cas blinked at him, a slight blush coloring his cheeks. “Oh, well…thank you. I’m sorry I’m distracting.”

Dean smirked, grabbing Cas’s wrist and pulling him close until he was flush against Dean. “I’m not.” He tossed the safety gloves on the table near them, bringing a hand up to cup Cas’s cheek as he kissed him softly. Cas’s lips were warm and he melted against Dean almost instantly, arms sliding around Dean’s middle as he returned the kiss.

As much as Dean would have liked to stand there and make out, they didn’t have all the time in the world. He quickly shrugged out of the leather apron and the safety glasses, setting them on top of his gloves as he helped Cas out of his safety gear. His hands found their way under Cas’s slightly-too-big Henley, caressing every inch of warm skin he could reach. He backed Cas up against the table, hands gripping at the angel’s hips as they resumed their kissing, though this time was much more desperate. Cas’s arms slid around Dean’s neck as he tried to pull Dean closer and closer until they were pressed together from head to toe. Dean could feel Cas’s thick cock hardening through their layers of clothes. He never thought he would find that a turn-on but it seemed like, with Cas, the
smallest things were a turn-on.

They didn’t bother taking their clothes off this time; they didn’t have enough time for that. Instead, Dean pushed Cas’s sweatpants and boxers down to mid-thigh, wrapping a hand around his hard, heavy length and giving it a teasing pull. Cas melted against him with a soft moan, gripping onto Dean’s arms. Dean chuckled, pulling Cas’s mouth back to his own as he jacked him off, letting Cas’s precum slick the way. After only a couple of minutes, Dean was overwhelmed with the need to taste, so he kissed his way down Cas’s neck as he sank to his knees. Cas watched him curiously, so Dean darted his tongue out to lap at the head of his cock. Cas shuddered above him, gasping and tangling a hand in Dean’s hair.

“Dean, that…”

“I know,” Dean chuckled, giving his cock a few more strokes before leaning forward and taking the head into his mouth, lips stretching over the warm flesh. Dean probably found this far more arousing than he should have, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care. This was Cas, he didn’t have to posture around him anymore. He had a chance to show him what pure pleasure felt like and he intended to do just that. He kept his hand loose around the base of Cas’s cock as he guided about half of it into his mouth, straining for air. Cas’s eyes fluttered closed and he let his head fall back, groaning breathlessly.

“Dean, fuck, your mouth…”

He would smirk if his mouth wasn’t otherwise occupied. Instead, he leaned back and swirled his tongue around the head, teasing the frenulum and groaning softly when it earned him another bead of precum. Cas shuddered and his hand tightened in Dean’s hair, tugging lightly. Dean grunted softly, hollowing his cheeks and bobbing his head. Cas moaned above him, his free hand scrambling for something to hold on to. It ended up on Dean’s shoulder, clutching tightly.

“Dean, please, I-I can’t—” Cas cut himself off with a low moan, his grip on Dean’s hair tightening as he spilled into Dean’s mouth. Dean grunted as the salty, bitter taste of Cas’s come filled his mouth, hand still stroking his cock to work him through his orgasm. He swallowed, wincing at the taste as he let Cas’s softening cock slip from between his lips. Cas blinked down at him, eyes glazed as he watched Dean. For a moment, he looked like he might sink bonelessly to the floor, but then he grabbed Dean by the shoulders and hauled him to his feet, kissing him fiercely. The intensity of the kiss had Dean’s painfully hard cock stirring in his jeans, so he dropped a hand down to palm himself through the thick fabric. Castiel pulled away, shooting him an accusatory look as he swatted Dean’s hand away. “Let me.”

Dean raised his eyebrows, nodding and letting Cas push him back against the table. He didn’t want to push the angel, especially given what it had taken to get them where they were, but then Cas sank
to his knees and tugged the front of Dean’s jeans open.

“Cas, hang on, you don’t have to—”

“I know I don’t have to. I want to, Dean.”

Dean blinked down at him, leaning back against the table and nodding. “Go for it.”

Cas grinned up at him, tugging his jeans and boxers down around his ankles, letting his palms skate up Dean’s thighs. “Do I just…” he trailed off, shuffling forward to give an experimental lick to the head of Dean’s cock, making the man above him shiver. Castiel hummed, obviously pleased with himself, and wrapped his hand around Dean’s cock, giving it a few quick tugs. He gave a few more experimental licks to the head before soft, warm lips enveloped it, sinking farther and farther down his shaft. Dean grunted, threading his fingers through Cas’s hair as the angel swallowed him down. The warm heat of his mouth had Dean on the edge almost instantly, though Castiel didn’t seem inclined to hurry this thing along. Instead, he pulled off of Dean’s cock completely, his tongue warm and wet as it traced the ridges along Dean’s shaft.

“Yeah, Cas, just like that,” Dean gasped out, fingers stroking through Cas’s hair. It was mostly to give his hands something to do so he didn’t turn a bruising grip to Cas’s shoulders. “Can you just… fuck, right there,” he whimpered as Cas’s tongue traced the frenulum, head falling back as his eyes slipped closed. “Not gonna last long like this, Cas,” he murmured, biting his lip as Cas took him into his mouth once again, bobbing slowly up and down the length of Dean’s dick. It was a far cry from the best blowjob Dean had ever gotten, but just the fact that it was Castiel’s mouth around his cock, Castiel’s tongue tracing every inch of skin left a heady, intoxicating feeling spreading through Dean’s veins.

It didn’t take long before he came with a soft cry. Cas made a noise somewhere between surprised and disgruntled, so Dean did his best to shoot him an apologetic glance. “That does not taste pleasant,” Cas muttered as he pulled off of Dean’s cock and swallowed, nose wrinkling.

Dean laughed breathlessly, leaning back against the table. “Haven’t exactly had time to eat my fruits, been a little busy.”

Castiel frowned up at him. “What do fruits have to do with this?”

Dean peeked down at him, chuckling. Cas’s hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat. Dean’s
hand moved of its own accord, sweeping the hair away from his forehead. “Fruit makes it taste better. Supposedly, anyway.” He tugged Cas to his feet, kissing his forehead lightly. They took a few moments to catch their breaths before redressing and tugging the safety gear back on, turning their attention to the oven.

“It’s actually done,” Castiel said softly, glancing over at Dean. Dean wondered if the same nervous butterflies currently residing in his stomach were also plaguing Castiel.

“Alright, let’s do this. I’ll pour it, you pray to Jack.”

Castiel nodded his agreement, stepping back and letting his eyes slip closed. In the meantime, Dean carefully moved the scaldingly hot bucket over to the only remaining mold, pouring the molten metal into the indentation. It spread through every notch and began to cool immediately. It would be incredibly cool if Dean wasn’t so terrified by the aftereffects of these keys being assembled.

The flutter of wings signaled Jack’s arrival. He shot an inquisitive glance between Castiel and Dean. “What…what are you wearing?”

Dean glanced down at the safety gear, chuckling. “Protective stuff for the hot metal. Doesn’t matter. We’re good to go.”

He and Cas quickly discarded the safety gear, though Dean kept the gloves on so that he could grab the molds. They exchanged a nod before turning to Jack.

“Let’s go,” Castiel murmured, his right hand settling onto Dean’s left shoulder. The skin there itched even though it had been years since Castiel’s handprint had been there. Dean idly wondered if that was Cas’s way of claiming him, even back then. He made a mental note to ask once this was all over.

Their feet hit the snowy ground in Stull and four pairs of eyes turned their way. Sam’s eyes immediately flicked down to the molds.

“I guess we’re really doing this,” he muttered, clearing his throat and glancing at Rowena, Jody, and Donna. “Ready?”

Dean and Cas exchanged a look that was part fear and part relief. One way or another, this would be
over today. Dean set the molds on a nearby grave, threading his fingers through Castiel’s. “Ready as we’ll ever be.”
It was almost time, Death thought as they gazed at the hourglass.

Stull was alive with activity, the Heaven and Hell keys shining like beacons of energy. They called to Billie, and they were not the only one. The spirits of the dead unable to cross over to the next realm were drawn like moths to a flame, and with them an army of reapers.

The spirits were restless, flickering and flitting around the beacons as if they were trying to find their own way through. These were not the dead tied to Earth by some unfinished business. They knew they no longer belonged there.

The reapers stood watch. Waiting. But even they vibrated with energy, anger at what God had done to their world.

The humans, the nephil, and their angel were stoic as weapons were pulled from duffel bags and passed around. The witch and her hunter had their own bag of supplies. They set up a makeshift altar on a large, flat headstone nestled into the grass.

It would be difficult for them, Billie knew. The small group didn’t have the knowledge that Death did. They couldn’t be certain of their success.

But Billie could, and they had no doubt that God would die today.

Sam watched Rowena from the corner of his eye as the unloaded spell supplies from the large black bag they were packed in. He could feel in his bones that something wasn’t quite right. She was far too calm. There wasn’t an ounce of fear in her body language or her eyes as she carefully spread a
large black altar cloth across a headstone.

It was already inscribed with symbols. Sam recognized enough of them to know they were archaic runes and sigils meant for protection. They had no idea what Chuck might do, so they tried to be prepared for anything.

“Hey,” Sam said softly as he passed a jar of something slimy to Rowena. “You okay?”

She smiled up at him, blinking away a snowflake that clung to her eyelashes. “Yes, Samuel. As well as I can be given that we are about to make an attempt on God’s life.” Her fingers brushed softly against his as she took the glass jar from him.

“We’re going to win,” Sam assured her, his voice much more confident than his heart. In truth, he was terrified. More terrified than he’d been when his only choice was to throw himself into the cage with Lucifer. He couldn’t remember a time when he’d been this scared.

Rowena cupped his face with a hand. “It’s alright to be frightened, Sam. The weight of the world on our shoulders is a heavy burden to bear.” She leaned over and pressed her soft lips to his.

Sam wondered if he’d ever have the chance to make love to her again.

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Castiel gripped his angel blade, keeping a sharp eye out for any movement that didn’t belong as he weaved through gravestones and made his way to Jack.

“Hello, Castiel,” Jack said with a crooked smile. He sat quietly on the stone at the door of a mausoleum. He was the only one of them who carried no weapons, and though Castiel knew Jack didn’t really need them, it didn’t calm his anxiety. He’d already experienced the pain of losing his son once; he wasn’t sure he’d live through it a second time.

“Hello, Jack,” Castiel replied. He tried to smile back but was unsuccessful. “You should have a weapon.” He sat next to Jack and held out the handle of a machete.

Solemnly, Jack wrapped a hand around it. “If it makes you more comfortable, I’ll carry it. But I don’t need it. I’m strong enough to do this without it, Castiel.”

Castiel hesitated, taking in every feature of Jack’s face as though he might never see it again. If they failed, he knew he wouldn’t. The thought made his chest ache and brought tears to his eyes. “I know you’re strong enough.”

“I can do this,” Jack promised. “We can do this. We can fix everything. It’ll be even better than it was before.”

Pulling Jack into a tight hug and feeling his mortality more than he ever had, Castiel said, “As long as I’ve got my family, the rest of the world can go to Hell.”

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The waiting was the worst, as always.

Time seemed to slow to a screeching halt, snow falling softly around them. The only sounds around Dean were shaky breaths drawn by his companions and the brush of fabric as they fidgeted restlessly, eyes sharp and weapons in hand. Dean looked around at the people that had become his family and couldn’t help but think of the Island of Misfit Toys.

They were all broken, scarred. But that was what made them who they were. Seven people willing to do whatever it took to hang on to their tattered world. Even face down God. Broken, but beautiful all the same.

Squeezing Cas’s hand, Dean cleared his throat. This was the part where one of them usually made some heartfelt speech and Dean teared up and told Sam ‘no chick flick moments.’ But Dean couldn’t find any words of inspiration, not this time. “I, uh, just wanted to say… in case, ya know… I just want you to know that I, uh, I love you guys. All of you. You’re my family.”

Cas squeezed his hand a little tighter, and from the corner of his eye, Dean saw Sam put an arm around Rowena and pull her closer. Jody smiled softly at Donna and reached for her hand.

“Perhaps we should call Billie,” Cas suggested. “We’ll need her.”

Dean shook his head. “She’ll know when it’s time to come.”

The sharp smack of clapping hands interrupted their conversation and seven pairs of eyes turned as one toward the disruption.

“That’s all very touching,” Chuck said. “Really, I couldn’t have written it better myself.” He stood about thirty yards away from them, looking ridiculously normal in an oversized sweatshirt and jeans. Beside him stood his sister, in the very same black dress Dean remembered from their last encounter.

Dean’s hand tightened around his weapon, a machete he knew would be useless against this particular pair of monsters. That knowledge didn’t stop him from wanting to swing it at Chuck’s throat in an attempt to lop off his murderous head.

As if Cas could read Dean’s mind, he tugged Dean’s hand gently and murmured, “Stick to the plan.”

“So, you found the keys to Heaven and Hell,” Chuck said, crossing his arms nonchalantly over his chest and smirking. “Congrats, guys! But what exactly is it that you intend to accomplish here? We all know you can’t kill me, and I’m not going to let you reopen the gates.”

He seemed so confident. It made sense, Dean supposed, for God to think himself invulnerable, unbeatable. Did he know that Billie had brought Jack back? Or was Death so powerful they could pluck at the strings of the universe unbeknownst to God? Dean ignored him, though his grip on the handle of his blade was so tight it made his knuckles ache, and turned his attention to The Darkness instead.

Taking a step toward her, Dean dropped Cas’s hand. “Amara,” he began. “It doesn’t have to end like this, does it? You and me, we’re still connected.” It was hard to say the words, even if it was a practiced lie, with Cas standing right behind him. “We can work something out, right? Just you and me?”

“Dean, no,” Sam said, brow furrowing in confusion. It was almost as if they’d rehearsed it. “What about Cas? What—what about me?”

Amara looked over at Dean, her hard expression softening. It was still there, whatever feeling she
had toward him. Gratitude, maybe, for bringing her and her brother back together. Perhaps even whatever twisted brand of love she’d tried to sell him on the first time around. “Why are you putting yourself through this, Dean?”

“I don’t—” the break in his voice was very real, raw truth and emotion falling from his lips. “I don’t want to die.” Tears welled in Dean’s eyes, threatening to spill over. After everything they’d been through, after everything they’d done, he finally had the chance at a life with Cas and he didn’t want to lose that.

The rest of the group gaped at Dean as Amara walked softly between graves to take his hand. Everyone except Jack, who was nowhere to be seen.

“We can talk,” she said, cupping Dean’s cheek with one hand and making him look at her. She was smiling at him, but there was something in her eyes, a spark of something that Dean didn’t trust for a moment. Her hand traveled down his face and neck, and she trailed a finger down his chest.

Dean had to bite back his revulsion as Amara brushed past him, turning him and leading him away from the rest of the group by the hand.

x

Castiel watched the love of his very long life turn the corner of a huge mausoleum with one of the most terrifying creatures in the universe and hoped like hell it would be Dean that returned. His now human mind filled him with doubt, but he had faith in Dean, in Jack.

“Dean!” Sam called after him, disbelief tainting his voice. “DEAN!”

“It’s all over for you, Sam,” Chuck said, drawing Castiel’s eyes back to him. Jody and Donna were shifting uncomfortably on their feet nearby, eyeing Chuck warily. “I’m the most powerful being in the universe, and you jackasses have been a thorn in my side since the literal beginning of time.”

“Screw you,” Castiel spat without any need to fake the anger in his tone. They had to keep Chuck distracted, preferably talking and not throwing them around like ragdolls, until Amara was dead. “All you are is an overgrown child that breaks his toys when they become boring.”

Chuck shook his head, laughing derisively. “You, Kassiel, are the worst mistake I ever made.” He stepped forward, pointing an accusatory finger at the ex-angel. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to mold a character from scratch, put an infinite amount of time and effort into building them and making them exactly what you want them to be? Only to have them ruin every single plotline you write them into? Over a flawed, poorly written character that was never meant to survive in the first place, no less. I mean, really! Who do you think you are?”

Hands fisted at his sides, Castiel’s entire body vibrated with rage. If he could, he’d strangle Chuck to death with his bare hands.

“I don’t get it, Chuck,” Sam said, saving Castiel from having to speak. “I mean, you’ve literally rewritten entire worlds. Why keep us around at all?” As he spoke, he slowly moved so that he stood between Chuck and Rowena. “You could have just scrapped us—”

“STOP TALKING!” The voice that came from Chuck’s mouth was laced with power, dark and deep, and painful, even against Castiel’s ears. “It’s time for the grownups to have a conversation.”
Sam was trying to speak, his brow furrowing and his lips moving, but he couldn’t make a sound. He’d been silenced at the command of God.

Chuck walked toward Castiel, flicking a wrist and freezing Jody and Donna in place when they surged protectively forward. “Look at you, Kassiel,” he said, disgust dripping from every word. “Look how pathetic you’ve become. You were always my favorite, don’t you get that? I made you the most powerful of the archangels.”

Castiel flinched away as Chuck reached for his face. “Don’t touch me,” he said, locking eyes with his creator. He was, as Dean might say, pissed.

“You can have all of it again,” Chuck said, resting his hand on Castiel’s shoulder. “Come back to me, my son. I can give you everything you once had. You’ll stand at the head of Heaven’s armies. Worlds will bow at your feet.” Smiling, he added, “You’ll be able to fly again.”

Castiel gaped at him. How could Chuck possibly think that he would abandon Dean for power?

Waving a dismissive hand, Chuck continued, “I know, I know. You’re probably wondering how I could possibly be willing to take you back after all the repetitive betrayals. I am willing to forgive everything you’ve done and bring you back into the fold.” He leaned in with raised eyebrows and a smirk. “I won’t even erase your memories this time. Come on, Kassiel! How could you refuse an offer like that?”

Without a conscious thought, Castiel drew back one arm and barreled his fist into Chuck’s jaw. It sent a shockwave of pain through his hand, but Chuck hadn’t been expecting it and he was knocked back a few steps, though he kept his feet under him. “It’s called character growth, you son of a bitch!”

Face twisted in anger, Chuck lunged for Castiel. Power crackled through Stull, sending ripples through the ground at their feet. “What did you do?” Chuck asked, eyes wide as he grabbed a fistful of Castiel’s shirt.

Amara led Dean much further into the boneyard than he’d intended to go. His heart raced, and his fear tasted coppery in his mouth. They were nearly at the treeline when she stopped and rounded on him. “I should thank you,” she said, smiling at him.

The sincerity in her voice, in her expression, caught him off guard. “For what?” he asked.

“For the time I’ve gotten to spend with my brother. If it weren’t for you, we never would’ve made amends.” Amara took a step toward Dean and he swallowed harshly. “My brother thinks you’re written badly, but I disagree. You’re special, Dean.”

He swallowed harshly. “I’m not special. I’m just a guy trying to survive.”

Shaking her head, Amara squeezed the hand she still held. “You don’t understand yet. There’s a reason why Chuck has rewritten your story so many times. You are capable of things no one else in the entire universe can do.”

Dean wasn’t sure what the hell Amara was talking about. She seemed so different than the last time
they met. “I’m just doing what anyone would in my shoes.” His free hand wrapped around the handle of the machete tucked into the back of his belt.

“You affect the people around you in ways that your human mind couldn’t possibly begin to know, Dean.” Amara laughed. “I like you. It’s unfortunate, really, that things have to end this way.”

Fear coursed through Dean’s veins like a drug, an amphetamine that heightened his senses and awareness. “I thought we were going to talk about that. About changing things.”

“You and I both know that was never what was going to happen.”

“You’re probably right.” Dean freed the machete and swung it hard; he knew it wouldn’t hurt Amara, but he had to stall for time. She caught his wrist, squeezing until the blade fell from his grip and he gasped in pain.

A tear fell, streaking down Amara’s cheek. “I wish I didn’t have to do this, Dean. I can’t let you kill me. I have to protect him.” Twisting Dean’s arm, she wrapped the fingers of her other hand around his throat and lifted him off the ground.

Dean kicked his legs and squirmed as he gasped for air. He clawed at the hand tightening around his throat, crushing against his windpipe. “Please.”

“I don’t have a choice,” she replied, her voice cracking uncharacteristically. “I’m so sorry.”

His heart thrashed against his ribs, threatening to burst out of his chest as Dean struggled for a lungful of precious air. Amara’s fingers pressed bruises into his flesh, painfully cutting off any chance he had for a breath. Still Dean fought. He flailed and scratched, trying vainly to pry infinite strength away from him.

It was useless.

That didn’t matter.

Dean would never stop fighting.

He still had too much to do. He and Sam had never taken that beach vacation. There was that hot dog stand in Coney Island Dean still wanted to take Cas to.

His fingers grew weak.

Dean wanted to be there to help Jack get ready for his first date. See Claire walk down the aisle.

Blackness crept in around the edges of his vision.

It couldn’t be over. It couldn’t end like this.

He couldn’t see anything anymore, couldn’t breathe.

Dean’s back slammed violently into the ground, burnished orange burning away the darkness obscuring his vision. He heaved a painful breath, coughing and sputtering as he looked up.

Amara stood there, arms out and head tilted back. On each side of her face was a hand that glowed hot with energy. It sparked through her, like a lightning storm just below the surface of her pale skin. A sparkling fireworks show of holy light and utter darkness lit her from the inside out. But she wasn’t fighting back. Her eyes were closed and a serene smile spread delicately across her lips as the fire of Jack’s grace consumed her.
The ground shook beneath Jody’s feet and the air rippled with unearthly power around her, leaving behind a silence so utter that it rang in her ears. If not for Donna’s quick reflexes and strong hands, she’d have landed on her ass, but there was no time for thank yous. Jody wasn’t entirely certain her words would carry through the thick, heavy quiet anyway.

The soundless reverberation must have broken Chuck’s concentration because she was able to move again. Jody hoisted her rifle up and against her shoulder as Chuck grabbed a fistful of Castiel’s shirt.

“What did you do?” His anger cut through the thick, stifling shroud of silence. “This… This isn’t how this is supposed to happen!” Chuck shoved Castiel back, turning away and running a hand through his hair. “No,” he said. “You know what? I’m done with this game; I’m done with all of you.” Still facing away, he snapped his fingers.

It began slowly, at first. Zombies appeared near the outer wall of the cemetery, slowly moving toward the small group of still breathing humans. The suffocating quiet was gone, filled now with the sick squish of rotting flesh, the groan of the undead, and the sharp fearful breathing of Jody, Donna, Sam, and Castiel.

The zombies appeared more rapidly and moved faster, with more purpose. Elites. They let out a blood-curdling screams as they advanced on the humans. Then Jody saw her. There at the center of the rotting masses, a young girl with long, blood-matted hair and scraps of skin peeling from her face. She locked eyes with Jody and raised an arm that was bent unnaturally at the elbow. Throwing her head back, she shrieked and every undead soldier in Stull froze to throw howl an answer to her call.

“Fuck,” Jody cursed.

The zombie queen and her army descended upon them.

Jody quickly lost track of Sam and Castiel in the chaos, but she felt Donna at her back as she fired round after round through her rifle. No matter how many bodies dropped to the earth, more came at them. It was an endless sea of stench and rot and death. “I’m out!” she shouted as she dropped her rifle and quickly freed a Bowie knife from her belt, burying the blade in the softened skull of one of her attackers. It squelched and covered her hand in black congealed blood. She pulled it out and slammed it into the temple of another zombie.

“Me too,” Donna said behind her. Jody could feel Donna moving, slashing and stabbing through as many bodies as she could.

They were surrounded.

Bodies piled in front of her but the zombies just kept coming, slipping and stumbling as they tripped over their fallen comrades and dragged themselves toward Jody. She lost count of how many she killed. Everything was a blur of movement and adrenaline and the will to survive, to keep fighting. Her knife embedded in a skull too fresh to be soft and Jody couldn’t free it.

Yanking on it as hard as she could, Jody finally got it to slide out from between broken flesh and bone. She wasn’t fast enough, the next zombie was too close, it’s ghastly hand already grasping for the warmth of life.
A blade sprouted from its forehead, spraying blood across Jody’s face, and then disappeared. The thing dropped to reveal Dean standing behind it. His face was red and his eyes bloodshot, dark purple bruising on his neck.

“I got your back,” he rasped, taking his place with them.

There wasn’t a chance to breathe a sigh of relief. There was only the fight, constant, exhausting. “Where’s Jack?” Jody shouted, freeing her blade from another enemy in the countless herd.

Dean grunted with effort, and she saw the telltale splatter of blood from the corner of her eye. “Went after Chuck!”

Suddenly the air around them thrummed with power and the zombies slowed. It was almost enough to give them a moment to catch their breath. From somewhere nearby, Jody could hear Rowena’s voice chanting fast in some language the sheriff could never hope to understand. It didn’t matter.

Whatever the words were, they were slowing the zombies down enough to give Jody, Donna, and Dean a fighting chance.

x

Jack fought his way through zombies with the machete that Castiel gave him. His grace still felt like it was almost at full power, but after everything, he knew it was probably best that he preserve his strength as much as possible. Self-charging battery or not.

The zombies in his path were easy work, like slicing through a stick of butter with a hot knife. Jack hardly broke a sweat and left a trail of bodies in his path.

“Chuck!” he shouted when he finally laid eyes upon God. He let his grace burn brightly, stretching out his wings as he advanced.

“You don’t want to do this, Jack,” Chuck advised him with a tilt of his head. “Don’t think that because you beat my sister you have a chance at killing me. You’re not even in the same league, kid!”

“You deserve to die,” Jack said. God, he could see now, was surrounded by his very own militia of elite zombies. Each one appeared to be chomping at the bit to get to Jack.

“For what?” Chuck asked. “For seeking perfection? For ending a flawed world? This place is just a speck of dust in an endless cosmos. There are so many other worlds. Better worlds.”

Jack shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. This is my world and I will protect it.” He raised his hands in front of him, sending his grace through his outstretched fingers and burning through the elite zombies that stood between him and Chuck.

Otherworldly shrieks rose through the graveyard as one, and Jack looked around to see a mass of elites breaking from the rest of the horde and running straight for him. Ignoring them, he strode forward, closing in on Chuck. He sent his grace out through his hands again, straight for the monster who called himself God. Jack watched the fear flicker through Chuck’s eyes as he was knocked to the ground.
God laughed, regaining his feet. “You will die trying,” he spat and snapped his fingers.

Jack staggered, the breath punched out of his lungs as he felt his grace drain from him completely. His soul was intact; he could recharge, but the elites were on him already and they were significantly more difficult to kill.

They moved strategically, working as a group to wear Jack down while Chuck watched. Even the practiced swipe and stab of his machete often missed. With his attention divided between trying to fight off the monsters and recharging his grace, Jack was tiring quickly.

He stumbled and fell to the ground; the zombies didn’t waste their chance. They piled in on him, burying him beneath their rotting flesh until he couldn’t see past them.

x

Everything was falling apart around Sam. Cas had finally managed to cut a path through the never-ending throng of undead to stand at his side, protecting Rowena as she cast some unrecognizable spell. He could feel it working, the power of it hung heavily in the air around them. But it didn’t stop the zombies. It only slowed them.

It wasn’t enough.

Rowena’s voice was a steady background to the hack and slash, squelch and splatter of his blade. The knife was all Sam had left to protect her with now that he’d run out of bullets.

“Whatever you’re doing, you need to do it now!” he shouted at Rowena as a soft eyeball popped on the point of his knife. He didn’t bother dislodging it from the zombie’s face, simply swinging his arm hard to one side, cutting through the soft, rotting skull to bury the tip in another attacking monster.

There were too many. They moved too quickly. He couldn’t hold them off for much longer.

“I need you to help me finish the spell, Samuel,” Rowena said.

Sam grunted with the effort of slicing the top half of a head off in front of him. “Little busy here!”

“Dean!” Cas shouted. “We need you!” His breathing sounded heavy next to Sam. He was tiring. They both were. But they continued their battle as Dean, Jody, and Donna waded through corpses both moving and still to surround Sam and Rowena.

“Now, Sam! I need you!” Rowena shouted over the din of groaning undead and swinging blades.

He pulled his knife back out of a temple and turned to face her. “What do you need?” he asked as she rose to stand in front of him.

“This spell…” Rowena’s voice cracked as she spoke, full of emotion. “It requires a life, Sam.”

His brow furrowed in confusion, but as her green eyes brimmed with tears, Sam understood and his face hardened. “No. We’ll find another way.”

Rowena grabbed Sam’s arms and shook him. “There’s no time for that now. This is it. Our only chance.”
Blinking away blurred vision, Sam shook his head. “No, Rowena. You can’t ask me to do this. I can’t do this. I won’t.”

“You have to.” Rowena reached up and held Sam’s face gently between her hands. “This is where my book ends, Samuel. It’s been written, and certainly not by God.”

“We can change it. There has to be something, anything else!” Sam’s heart sank even as he continued to argue. He knew Rowena was right. But he couldn’t accept it so easily. There was too much between them now. He closed his eyes, but the tears fell anyway. “Please don’t ask me to do this.”

“I have always known that my book ended with you,” she said softly. When Sam managed to open his eyes again, he saw that tears streamed down her cheeks as well. “Don’t you understand? I need you to live.”

Sam shook his head. “I can’t. I can’t do this.”

“You can,” Rowena said. She guided him back a few slow, small steps until they both stood on the makeshift altar. “You will. I’m not afraid of death. Not anymore. If you live, I shall be happy with the fact that I died to save the one I love.” She took the hand that was wrapped around his knife and guided it to her throat. “Quick and clean, but you mustn’t waste a drop.”

This couldn’t be happening. Not like this. Sam cried and wrapped his free arm around Rowena’s waist. “I love you,” he said and then pressed his lips to hers for the last time. He lingered there, memorizing the taste of her, the feel of her. Holding her body against his, Sam pressed the knife into her flesh, cleanly slicing both arteries.

Sam wept brokenly as blood poured from her, soaking into his shirt and covering his skin. Streams of it dripped down Rowena’s arms, falling in tiny droplets from her fingertips to coat the altar cloth they stood on.

The rest of the group cut away at zombies, the ring of metal zinging through the air and ending in the soft thud of bodies tumbling to the ground at their feet.

Sam didn’t let go of Rowena even after the rise and fall of her chest halted. Her heart ceased its erratic rhythm and like a shockwave, power erupted from the core of her being and spread outward. It had no effect on Sam or the other humans, but the zombies were knocked off their feet, sent flying back through the air.

The shield was massive, holding the horde at bay nearly fifty yards away from where Sam stood, clutching the body of the woman he loved.

Chapter End Notes

MUHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

YELL AT ME Y’ALL, I KNOW YOU WANT TO AND I LOOOOOOOOVVVVVVVEEEE THE TEARS AND PAIN OF MY READERS <3
Malachi

Chapter by MalMuses

Chapter Notes

Hello, readers!

Unfortunately, I don't have time for a long authors note, today. This final chapter is coming to you live from TorCon 2019, and after a long series of struggles and internet problems, the last beta edits were completed in the early hours of the morning after watching Jensen, Ruth, Lisa, Kim, and Bri sing at SNS. Several of the authors involved in the story are here and its honestly a nice touch that we get to post the last chapter of this fic while we're here.

Without further ado...the finale.

- Mal <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Enough.”

The word echoed, not just through Stull cemetery, through the graves and the boneyard and the long-dead trees, but out farther and higher and deeper; all of creation, all of time, all of Being, just… paused.

Billie walked forward, but the leaves under their boots didn’t crunch, their heels soundless in the void.

Around them, every character playing their part in the battle to end all battles simply…stood.

The universe was between breaths.

With a blink of Billie’s eye, Chuck and Jack both slumped slightly, like puppets with cut strings, as control of their bodies was returned to them in the eerie quiet.

A single crow hung in the air overhead, its wings outstretched, unbeating. One for sorrow.

Billie’s eyes rested on Chuck, continuing to crunch soundlessly across the crisp, frosty leaves and grass. “Edom may say,” Billie quoted calmly, “‘Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins.’ But this is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘They may rebuild, but I will demolish.’ You sure spelled it all out for them, didn’t you, Chuck?”

“Eh,” Chuck gave a dismissive shrug, but fear swirled deep in his eyes. “So I was a little harsh in the Old Testament. It was a phase.”

“I am the Lord. I change not,” Billie quoted right back at him.
Chuck’s lips thinned into a line. “What do you want?”

“All I want is to do my job. Bear my responsibility. An area where you have failed, Elohim.”

“Haven’t been called that one in a while,” Chuck said flippantly, although, Billie noted, he looked satisfyingly sweaty.

Billie raised a hand, flapping their fingers dismissively. “Elohim, Yarweh, Jehovah, He Who Is. Chuck. They all mean nothing. They aren’t your names any more than Billie is mine. Pen names for mediocrity, the biggest peddler of poor airport fiction in the universe—”

Chuck began to interrupt, sputtering, but Billie’s finger raised once again, ineffable calm blanketing the air.

“Stop. I am bored of you.”

At their side, from nothing, came the scythe. It was tall, taller than Death’s form, and long and curved and deadly. It had looked different over the years, of course; though humans couldn’t understand it, reality is nothing more than perception. But right there, in Stull Cemetery, it gleamed sharply in its purest, deadliest form.

Chuck’s face darkened, reddening as his eyebrows pulled together. Suddenly there was no frustrated writer, there was no reluctant prophet, there was only God. Fury crackled behind his eyes, and even within Billie’s broken moment of time, crimson storm clouds gathered overhead.

Billie raised an eyebrow up at the bloody, foreboding sky. “Really? You’re going to attempt to fight me—” One final step forward brought the oldest being in the universe chest to chest with the most wrathful, “—child?”

Silent, Chuck swallowed harshly. But, to his credit, he held his ground.

“They don’t know, do they?” Billie softly crooned, their whisper the loudest sound in the cosmos. “They don’t know, that this is why you kept rewriting, rewriting, editing…why you kept trying to change the ending. Because you never cared about their endings. You were trying to change yours.”

The silence was thick and bloated with terror.

“I’ll admit,” Billie said thoughtfully, “finally getting the nephil to the Empty—I didn’t see that one coming. You did pretty well there, pushing enough to force all of their hands. Even when it almost fell apart at the last moment, you still achieved your goal, in part. But what I don’t understand…” Billie trailed off for a moment, looking around and raising their hands, gesturing about the graveyard to all the frozen faces. “Why this? Why give them this sorry illusion of free will that they’re currently enjoying? I’m sure it wasn’t mercy.”

Chuck parted his mouth, closed it again. It took a moment, but his shoulders slumped. “I wanted them to change things.”

Billie nodded slowly.

“I didn’t want to die,” Chuck confessed, softer, more resigned, older. “I wanted to leave, and they’d move on, because they’d think they were free.”

“But you aren’t the one writing your story, Chuck,” Billie said, almost kindly. “It took a lot of nudging, a lot of stepping in, for me to get them to this point. So that this plot can have its true ending.”
“What is its true ending?” Jack suddenly asked, his voice curious. He’d been all but forgotten, standing silently, watching their exchange.

Billie’s smile across at him was kind. They were, in their own way at least, fond of the kid. And they did love a little extra dramatic flair… “Jack,” Billie said, surprisingly warm. “What is the meaning of the word Righteous?”

Jack frowned softly, but his solemn reply came with a tiny smile. “I believe it means virtuous. Right. Good.”

With a snap of her fingers—pure theatre, of course—Billie summoned Dean Winchester to their side.

“That is correct, Jack,” Death said. “But people often forget that the truest meaning of Righteous is morally justifiable.”

Dean was blinking, looking around with a mixture of terror and fascination that Billie just loved to see on peoples’ faces. “What’s happening?”

“We’re going to end a story,” Billie said.

Dean took an aborted, half-step back. “Mine?”

The small chuckle that Death let out seemed to disconcert Dean further, but they couldn’t quite help it. “No, Dean. The Righteous Man is here to serve his final purpose. What is the most morally justifiable trait of humanity, Dean?”

Looking equal parts confused and displeased, Dean was silent. But Jack, who was beaming, strangely eager—and full of understanding—stepped forward to press a hand to Dean’s shoulder, gripping his arm firmly, with meaning.

“Free will,” Jack said. “You’re here to give humanity its greatest gift, Dean.”

Smiling eerily, Billie extended their scythe toward Dean. “I hope you remember how to hold it.”

Dean’s hand shook as his fingers wrapped around the staff-like scythe handle, and he didn’t bother trying to hide it. “You told me you would reap God.”

“And I will,” Billie said. “But not alone. And you should know by now, I reap, Dean. I don’t kill. That…when it’s morally justifiable…is your job.”

Chuck moved back, mostly on instinct it seemed; but Dean was quicker. The second that he understood what Billie needed of him, he hefted the scythe back and swung. Jack pulsed like a beacon; his golden power pouring through his hand into Dean, through Dean into the scythe.

There was a sound like breaking glass beginning to tinkle; like a water glass at an opera just beginning to crack when the world’s best singer reaches their final, piercing note.

Without having even been able to raise his arms, Chuck stumbled down to his knees. The scythe was stuck all the way through him; a solid, accurate hit. His eyes were wide and panicked as Billie moved forward, stepping away from Dean and Jack to crouch before Chuck, one finger gently titling up his bearded chin.

“Let a righteous man strike me,” Billie quoted softly, Psalms falling from their lips like a funeral prayer. “For that is a kindness.”
Above them, the sky cracked, and Chuck was gone.

Sam, I've gotta get to Sam, was Dean’s first thought the moment that Jack’s power stopped tingling through his hands. He moved to hand the scythe back to Billie, but somehow, it was already gone.

He looked around woozily, shaking his head in the thick silence.

All around Dean, the air felt wrong. Charged, then null, then buzzing, then like there was none. The world seemed to be stretching and reforming, the skies rolling through an odd rainbow of greys as if they didn’t know whether to storm or be calm.

Billie raised a hand dramatically, then let it slowly fall; the world breathed out again, and the crow overhead flew off to join another, on a branch nearby. Two for joy.

As soon as there was breathing space and all the people around unfroze, Dean bounded over to Sam. His brother sat in the grass, his huge frame made frail and tiny by grief and horror, Rowena’s petite, bloodless body still held in his arms.

This wasn’t fair. How many times could a guy survive losing the person he loved in his life? Dean thought of Castiel, and was instantly reminded of the black, ashy imprint of wings on the floor. Sam had been there for him, then, even when Dean hadn’t been honest about what he’d needed. Now it was going to be Dean’s turn—and how fucking unfair was that? Hadn’t Jess been enough? Hadn’t Sam suffered enough?

As if they could hear his thoughts—hell, they probably could—Billie materialized next to Dean as he slowly lowered himself to his knees next to Sam.

“It came to pass,” they noted quietly.

“You knew it would,” Sam growled through his teeth, damp hazel eyes moving up to Billie’s face. “Spare me the prophetic mumbo jumbo and sympathy, okay? I just—can’t I get one damn minute before you deal out the ‘I told you so’s’?”

Dean pressed his hand lightly to Sam’s shoulder, leaning in, not saying a word. For a moment, Sam didn’t move. Then all at once he slumped, a wailing, keening sound disrupting the quiet graveyard as he fell sideways into Dean, his face wetting Dean’s shirt even as he made fists in Rowena’s hair. He held her tight for a minute longer before he huffed out a shaking, wet breath and lowered her reverentially to the floor. Turning, Sam crumbled into Dean.

There was movement behind them; everyone was approaching, Jody and Donna were whispering softly, plans were being made to gather vehicles from the town. It faded out, inconsequential in the moment. The world was carrying on, but they needed a slice of time to mourn the one they’d lost.

“We—we did it,” Sam gasped into Dean’s plaid. “I should be happy, but—"

“Hey, hey,” Dean murmured futilely, his arms clamping around Sam’s shoulders automatically. It was only a split second before Castiel was there, at Sam’s other side. He shared a meaningful, sorrow-filled look with Dean across the top of Sam’s head, then leaned in, too.
Dean wasn’t sure when he’d started crying too, but he was, and a quick look showed him Castiel’s tear tracks in turn. The three of them all clung together, sobbing out grief and relief in equal measure.

Amidst the grieving, the world was changing. Rebalancing. Adjusting to being simply as it was created, without the powers of either God or his sister affecting it. The air felt…off. But the sun was still whole, and that, Castiel considered, had to be a win.

Rowena, though. She’d given everything, and in doing so, Billie’s words from the year before had come to pass. Because Death, it seemed, out of all of the higher powers of the universe, was the only one that was infallible.

The only one who’d helped them to live, too, ironically enough.

Castiel’s knees cracked as he rose up to his feet, giving Sam’s shoulder one last squeeze. Dean stayed sat in the mud beside his brother, Rowena’s lifeless body on the ground, pale but peaceful.

“Is there nothing you can do?” Jack solemnly asked Billie, back behind the small, grieving group. Castiel’s attention was pulled by Jack’s voice, and he made his way over to them silently.

“The ending of her book is unchanged. Only a hugely powerful force could bring her back, and rewrite that ending; no matter what else changed, every version of her life had her ending up here,” Death intoned calmly.

Jack and Billie stared at each other for a moment, and Castiel was surprised to see that there was something like a challenge in Jack’s eyes.

“Check again,” he said, his eyes never leaving Billie’s.

Death parted their lips, but then gave a small smile. “Very well,” they said. With a snap of their fingers, a thick, leather bound book appeared in their hands, and they flipped directly to the back, reading. Another slow, impressed smile fluttered across their face. “An interesting way to deal with some of your problems, but I can’t say I wholly disapprove.”

Jack smiled calmly, cheerful yet serious, in that way he always managed to be.

“Hmm,” Billie let out softly, allowing their eyes to drift down to the book. When they looked back up to Jack, it was with a small grin. “Very well,” they said.

Grinning right back, Jack turned to look at Castiel as he stood nearby, observing curiously. “Castiel, would you mind helping me with this? Or rather, helping Sam. It might take me a moment…”

Castiel couldn’t help but tilt his head at the cryptic words, but before he could question them, Jack was bounding past him—straight to Rowena.

Sam stumbled to his feet as Jack reached down, placing a hand either side of Rowena’s bloodless face. “Jack, don’t—” Sam paused sharply as Castiel darted forward to pull him back.

“No! Just…wait,” Castiel couldn’t say anything else, as he wasn’t even sure what Jack was doing. But none of them had been through everything that they’d been through to not trust each other.
“Give him a minute.”

Frowning, his cheeks damp, Sam paused. He gave a small sniff, his eyes darting back and forth between Jack and Castiel, before settling on Rowena. “Alright,” he croaked.

Jack was crouching above Rowena’s still form, frowning, looking closely at her as if he could see something they could not. A breeze picked up; the crows in the trees took to flight with a loud caw; *three for a girl*, by then . The scent of graveyard dirt hung on the breeze, and distantly Jody shouted something to Donna…Castiel heard the sounds, but he was so enchanted by Jack’s movements, he couldn’t pay them any heed.

Glowing, warm, gleaming grace emanated from Jack’s hands in one of the purest, softest forms that Castiel himself had ever seen. It didn’t burst from him, it trickled, gently easing from his outstretched hand to caress its way across Rowena’s skin.

With a heaving, dragging breath, her eyes flew open, her neck arching.

“Ro!” Sam yelled, trying to dart forward—but Castiel had his left arm, and having taken his cue from Cas, Dean had him on the right.

“He’s not finished yet,” Billie said calmly. They were very good at lurking, Castiel decided.

“What’s he doing?” Sam asked, so much hope in his voice that Castiel clung onto him a little tighter.

“Dumah showed me,” Jack said distractedly, peering around Rowena’s face. To her, he said softly, “I’m not quite done yet. Can you feel it yet?”

The glowing increased, and Rowena gasped shakily. “I can feel *everything.*”

“x

“Well, that was a terrifying few minutes,” Jack said calmly, looking up at the soft afternoon clouds overhead. “The world felt very odd for a minute there, while it rebalanced itself.”

Dean agreed, but he didn’t have the words to explain what that had felt like; so, instead, he slumped against a convenient dead tree, quietly sweating, letting the rest of the world carry on.

Sam and Rowena—whatever Rowena was now—were having a bit of a moment, and so the rest of them had stepped away, giving them a bit of space while they regrouped.

Appearing on either side of Jack, Gabriel and Balthazar seemed to agree, too; they both looked distinctly like they’d had their feathers ruffled; enough that they used the waning scraps of their grace to be present.

“Winchesters,” Gabriel commented, shaking his head as he reached a hand out to Dean, raising an eyebrow at his drooping form. “You can never stick to the plan, huh?”

“Like you can talk,” Dean grumbled, grasping the archangel’s hand to stumble upright nonetheless.

“Are you alright, Dean?” Jack asked, softly concerned. “You’re a vessel, so my power shouldn’t have hurt you, but—”
Dean raised a hand, stopping Jack. “I’m fine. Drained, is all. I guess that’s the best use we’ve ever found for me being Michael’s hand-puppet, huh?”

Billie titled her head, smiling at Dean. “Oh, even with all this, you didn’t work that out yet?”

Raising an eyebrow warily, Dean asked, “What now?”

A chuckle from behind Dean settled his nerves instantly, because it came from Castiel. He approached, sliding an arm around Dean familiarly as he stood beside him. “You weren’t made as Michael’s vessel, Dean.”

“Lemme guess, another rewrite? I wasn’t even supposed to be an archangel suit?”

“Oh, you were,” Castiel confirmed. “You were supposed to be mine.”

Dean blinked.

“No wonder Michael and Dean never got along,” Jack said thoughtfully. “Round peg, square hole.”

Gabriel gave out a snort. “More like he was grossed out having to use Cassie’s vessel. It’s like wife swapping, but down to your soul. Poor Mikey was so angry, turned him into a bit of a dick, honestly. Wasn’t his fault though…Daddy wrote him that way.”

“You’re saying Michael actually was the good guy?” Dean questioned Gabriel.

With a slightly sad smile, Gabriel shrugged. “Believe it or not, we all were, once. Bad writing, Dean-o.”

“Huh,” Dean said.

Donna and Jody cut in, approaching the group from where they’d been patrolling around the outskirts of the cemetery. “Well, the witch sure did a good un’ on those zombies,” Donna said. “Not a one of ’em is moving! Can’t find the creepy kid though.”

“Eve,” Dean said solemnly. “It had to be. She could change her appearance at will, but baddies always have a thing for creepy kids, for some fucked up reason.”

“We should work out our next steps before they have time to regroup,” Castiel suggested from next to Dean.

Squeezing his boyfriend’s hip, Dean nodded and agreed with him. “Yeah. I guess we could ask Billie to—”

They looked, but Death was gone.

“—freaking bell, I swear. Next time I’m at a pet store, mark my words,” Dean muttered. At Gabriel’s raised eyebrow, he sighed and resumed. “I guess we’re driving back, in that case. Billie teleported me over to Chuck before, so I was just gonna see if we could get a perk.”

Gabriel gave a chuckle. “Yeah, Death isn’t so great at staying around. I guess they do have something in common with Dad after all,” he joked. “So are we splitting up? You guys take the hell key back to camp and work out how to track down Eve—Balth, Jack, and I will drive over to the playground?”

“The playground?” Donna asked, confused.
“There’s an entrance to heaven in a sandbox,” Castiel said, as if that explained everything. “Unfortunately, only angels—and nephilim—can pass through. So, Gabriel, Balthazar, and Jack will have to be the ones to unlock the gate. Do you remember where it is, brother?”

Gabriel nodded. “Yeah, never forgot that part. Past Joshua’s garden. The official entrance…I used to use it all the time.”

“Seems like a good plan to me,” Dean said. “Split up, get this done faster. Looks like Jody and Donna found us some transportation; the angels can take the truck and the humans can take the cars. Let’s get Sam and his angel-witch... or whatever she is now—” Dean pointed sharply toward Jack, “—which you are going to explain the shit out of later, by the way—and then let’s get outta here.”

After everyone had exchanged nods, Dean began to step away toward Sam; it was time to break up the awkward, post public “I love you” whispering session that was occurring at the edge of the spell-circle they’d created. At his side, he felt Castiel pull away for a moment, hesitating briefly before he followed.

Heart sinking, Dean realized that Castiel had made an aborted step in the direction of the truck that the angels were taking before he’d caught himself and moved to follow Dean. Looking over at Castiel, Dean saw a briefly downturned expression on Castiel’s face before he swept it away behind his usual stoic, calm expression. He was definitely more expressive as a human, but he could still pull out that blank, angelic calm when he needed. Dean frowned, wishing that he wouldn’t.

Dean might not be the best at dealing with emotional situations, but he wasn’t stupid.

Clearly, he wasn’t the only one who’d noticed; approaching from the circle with Rowena, Sam raised a silent eyebrow.

Alright, Dean, he pep-talked himself quickly as they moved toward the banged up old Buick that Jody had hotwired on their behalf. If you’re gonna do this relationship thing, instead of just the sex thing...you gotta step up.

“Hey,” Dean said quietly, shoulder checking Castiel as they approached the car door. “You okay, buddy?”

Castiel raised an eyebrow. “You can stop calling me that any day now,” he said cattily.

“Oh, fuck you,” Dean grumbled light heartedly. “I was trying to have a moment, gimme a break.”

“A moment?” Castiel asked.

Oh, air quotes, Dean thought, smiling despite himself. You adorable bastard. As Donna and Jody headed off to their vehicle, and Sam and Rowena folded themselves into the back of the car, Dean hesitated outside of it, his hand on the roof. “I was trying to ask you if you were okay. You’ve been doing well with losing your grace and all, but being packed into the human car because you can’t use the playground entrance anymore is a bit of a kick in the nutsack, really.”

Hand resting beside Dean’s on the roof, Castiel gave a small smile and nudged their fingers together until they were holding hands on top of the car. His smile grew a little bigger. “I’ve gained a lot more than I lost, Dean.”

Stepping up closer, Dean couldn’t help but capture Castiel’s lips, smiling against them. “That feels a bit like flattery,” he said against them with a cheesy wink.

“Oh good,” Castiel said, chuckling gently. “It was supposed to be. I must be getting better.”
They’d only briefly touched lips again, chest-to-chest, when Sam pounded loudly on his window. “Get a room! I’m at crotch-level down here!”

Flushing, Castiel stepped back sharply, but not before Rowena piped up. “Oh, don’t listen to Samuel, dearies. I certainly don’t mind.”

“Rain check on the emotional talk?” Dean suggested, reluctantly moving around the hood of the car to the driver’s side.

“Yes,” Castiel agreed. “Let’s get back to camp and give Crowley his key.”

Camp was chaos.

They’d been a few miles out still when Rowena had shuddered, wide-eyed, her hands flying up to bury fingers in the flaming waves at her temples. “The barrier,” she choked out. “It’s gone.”

“The barrier?” Dean had asked, panic rising.

“The spell protecting the camp. I can’t feel it.”

In the rearview mirror, Dean had caught Sam’s eyes. “Eve,” Sam said.

Dean nodded. It seemed the most logical. If she’d been pushed back at Stull, where would she go next other than the place that she knew they weren’t currently defending? She’d had a head start on them, after all.

By the time they’d hurtled down the old approach road to what had once been Singer Salvage, the camp was already overrun. The exterior fence and its supplemental barrier were long gone, stacks of cars tumbled into piles of twisted metal and broken glass, and bodies piling up around the tattered entrance points.

Not all of the bodies were zombies.

“No,” Castiel breathed out quietly as Dean used the car as a battering ram, causing twisted zombie forms to hurtle back in all directions. His hand was already on the door handle as Dean spun them ludicrously in a circle, taking out as many undead as he could with the car’s spinning wheels.

The survivors in camp looked to have fallen back into the buildings, terrified muggle faces pressed to windows and occasionally lucky pot shots fired from doors. In the midst of the writhing mass of elites, the blonde, dark-eyed girl from back at Stull Cemetery stood, calm and unmoving. Her smirking face carried a small, proud smile as she watched the pandemonium all around.

His hand still around the door handle, Castiel didn’t take his eyes from her as he asked, “How can we kill her? We don’t have any phoenix ash.”

“Dude, I have no idea,” Dean confessed, his eyes locked on the eerily rotting skin of the young female zombie ahead of them.

“Look!” Sam said, his arm coming forward suddenly past Dean’s headrest to point towards the kitchen and the zombie waves outside of it. In the midst of the chaos was was one of the camp’s
restored trucks that they used for supply runs.

On top of the cab, stood Claire and Crowley.

They were both covered in blood and mud and viscera. Claire had a shotgun lifted to her shoulder, two cans of ammo at her feet. She aimed and shot on a loop, looking frazzled and haunted, but, all importantly, alive. Beside her, Crowley stood. His eyes blazed red, jets of black smoke swirling around him. Clearly, he had decided that the time for him to release the last of his powers had come; he fought viciously, taking down waves of zombies as they approached, so that Claire could pick off the stragglers with her sawn-off. They were a lethal team, but even from the relative safety of the car, Dean could see that they were struggling.

“Weapons are in the trunk,” Sam said. “The second we get out, they’re going to be on us.”

“And unless we can kill Eve, they’re going to keep coming to her, like a freakin’ beacon,” Dean pointed out.

Up on top of the cab, a zombie hand snaked up from behind, suddenly ensnaring Claire’s ankle as she took aim at a crawler from Crowley’s latest attack. With a scream that was audible even over all the zombie sounds and gunshots all around, Claire tumbled forward, shotgun flying, and slid over the side of the truck. Dragged down into the melee, Dean lost sight of her.

“Claire!” Castiel yelled, throwing open his car door.

“Cas!” Dean darted out after him, and Sam and Rowena quickly followed.

As they pushed for the back of the car so that they could raid the trunk, swinging and kicking and pushing back the zombies that had surged forward the second they emerged, a deep roaring sound tore through the air.

Reaching the trunk, Dean swiftly kicked a young surprisingly spritely zombie out of his way so that he could yank it open. Getting his hand around the handle of a machete, he began to clear a little space for Sam and Castiel to load up with weapons. The roaring sound increased, and Dean spun, roundhouse kicking a middle-aged, suited zombie out of his way. As it went down, Dean saw Crowley on top of the truck. Hands out, smoke swirled around him, pouring out and forcibly pushing the invaders away from Claire as best he could.

Crowley frowned, and even from a distance, Dean could see him trembling and sweating.

“We gotta help him!” Castiel’s voice cut through the air behind Dean, and suddenly he was at Dean’s side, gun in hand. “Crowley needs help!”

Even as Castiel said it, Crowley lurched, his red eyes flaring unevenly as he stumbled and fell to his knees atop the truck.

“He’s not gonna make it,” Dean realized, using his machete to sweep forward. “His power is finally giving out.”

“He’s using the last of it to protect Claire,” Castiel said, his voice heavy.

To Dean’s right, a flash of bright light brought with it a smell of burning flesh.

“Close your eyes!” Rowena screamed out. “I’m not really sure what I’m doing, boys—so duck!”

Dean realized what exactly was happening only as he hit the floor, Castiel’s body over top of his,
pressing him into the mud and shielding Dean’s eyes. He felt the wave of grace burst out of Rowena; a buzzing, warm, familiar power that passed straight through his body as it erupted from within her, burning every zombie surrounding them.

When Dean lifted his head again, Castiel finally letting him up out of the mud, he was met with the astonishing sight of Rowena, grace lighting her eyes, and the shadows of giant fucking wings shielding her and Sam on the floor.

“Holy shit, Ro!”

Dean could feel himself gawping, but he didn’t even care. Jack had made the witch a freakin’ angel to circumvent her human story ending, and it was blowing Dean’s mind. As amazing as it was, though, it just wasn’t the time to dwell on Jack’s apparent ability to make angels out of humans.

“Get to Claire!” Dean barked.

If Dean hadn’t been fighting off zombies, if he hadn’t been focused on keeping them from Castiel so that he could aim, then he’d have made much more of a big deal of the fact that petite, fiery Rowena was standing in front of Sam and shielding him like a little boy. Sam looked entirely befuddled by the change in status quo, but as it was, Dean merely appreciated that he didn’t have to worry about Sam himself.

Ahead of them, the zombie child that Eve had become slowly turned, watching them calmly.

They started running toward Crowley’s truck, where he was crouching down and extending an arm to Claire and yelling her name, when the sky overhead flashed gold.

A buzzing, warm feeling rocked through the air, gone as soon as it came.

Dean had barely begun to say “what the fuck” when Jack appeared in front of them, in the midst of the clear space Rowena had created, a flutter of wings and a soft breeze.

“Hello!” he said. “We did it!”

“Jack!” Castiel yelled, pointing off behind him to where Eve stood, calmly watching them, her lip curling up in a worrying smile.

Spotting her, Jack began to back up, until he stood between Dean and Castiel. “She’s still alive?” he asked in confusion.

“We’ve got no idea how to kill her,” Dean explained, not taking his eyes from her as she began to walk forward.

Jack’s head tilted. Like father like son. “She’s a zombie now, correct? An elite zombie that can control the others, just like she could call to her children before?”

“Yes,” Castiel answered, raising his sawn-off as they backed up against the beige, mud- and blood-splattered buick.

“So, can’t you just shoot her in the head?” Jack asked innocently.

Dean blinked. “Motherfucker,” he muttered.

There was a bang as Castiel caught up with the conversation.

“Nice shot!” Sam crowed from under Rowena’s wings, off to their left.
Swaying, a black hole blown right between her eyes, Eve crumpled, soundless.

“She didn’t even get time to start her villain speech,” Dean commented. “They always have a speech.”

On top of the lone truck, once surrounded by a sea of zombies but now only a lighthouse in an ocean of husks, Claire and Crowley leaned against one another. Claire was soaked in mud, head to toe, and dipping with blood that was hopefully not hers. Even so, as they slid down from the roof and picked their way through to bodies toward Dean, Castiel, Sam, and Rowena, Claire was the one supporting Crowley. He leaned on her heavily, clearly very weak, clearly almost human.

“Good timing, old man,” Claire called as they approached.

Dean bristled automatically before Castiel elbowed him gently in the side. “She means me,” Castiel pointed out, softly amused.

“Forgot I was dating an older man for a second there,” Dean admitted, grinning, before turning to Crowley. “Hope you saved the very last drop of that juice, your majesty,” he called across to the limping, barely-demonic ex-King of Hell.

Crowley nodded weakly, sweat leaking down his temples to soak his beard. “Yes, I should still be able to get into Hell with the key.”

“Well, this is a lovely heartwarming reunion,” Claire interrupted. “But we need to check for survivors and burn the Queen and her zombie entourage.”

“You,” Crowley said, weak but eternally snippy, “need to take a shower. You smell as bad as you look.”

“Bitch,” Claire muttered.

“Jerk,” Crowley threw back, making Dean’s brain turn to white fuzz for a long moment.

Sam recovered faster than Dean did. “Yeah, uh, you go get clean. And you rest, Crowley. We’ll sweep for survivors. Good job getting most people into the buildings, at least.”

Crowley didn’t answer, too busy staring at Rowena, his mouth slightly open. “Mother?” he squeaked.

“Oh, yes, Fergus,” she trilled, spinning on the spot. “Do you like them?”

“Yes, very pretty, mother,” Crowley said slightly weakly. “But looks aside, is someone going to tell me why the bloody hell you’re all glowy, and you’ve got a better pair than pigeon over here?” He jerked a thumb toward Castiel, his eyes remaining on Rowena.

“Hey,” Dean said, defensive on Castiel’s behalf. “Cas’ wings have a story to them, okay? Just because he lost a few feathers in the fall—”

“He looks like he got run over by a mack truck,” Crowley bit back, clearly feeling a little better if snark could be a measure.

Dean felt his hand forming a fist, but Castiel’s arm on his elbow calmed him. “Very good, Dean, I appreciate you defending my honor; however, Crowley is undoubtedly correct in this instance.”

Crowley rolled his eyes dramatically. “Down, boy. Your bird has lovely plumage, if a bit crispy—
but what the hell happened to HER!” he growled, poking Rowena in the clavicle.

“So, get this, Jack made her an angel,” Sam said quite proudly. Beside him, Jack nodded eagerly, smiling wide.

Crowley had looked like he needed to sit down before, but at Sam’s declaration he looked like a classic novel heroine overcome by hysteria, and Claire had to grab his arm, to her obvious amusement. “How?” he squeaked to Jack.

“Oh, it’s not that difficult. An angel named Dumah taught me, back when I didn’t have a soul. Though I worry that the people who the process was tested on back then weren’t fully consenting,” Jack considered.

“Well, dearie, you didn’t exactly ask my permission either,” Rowena pointed out.

“Rowena,” Castiel said dryly. “would you like to go back to being dead, instead?”

“Oh, no, thank you. This is lovely. Rather pleasant, in fact, compared to hell.”

“But mother,” Crowley complained, sounding incredibly put out. “Your reputation will be in tatters. What will the Mega Coven think?”

“Oh, screw them,” Rowena said. “I’m an angel.”

Dean cleared his throat, pointing his machete at camp. “Alright. Survivors? Family drama later?”

Nodding, the group moved away from the cars to begin putting Camp Singer back together. Dean kicked Eve’s tiny zombie face as they passed her. “And we’ll burn this one first, just in case. Send this bitch back to purgatory where she belongs.”

“Agreed,” Sam said grimly. “I’ll start the pyre.”

x

A few minutes later, Camp singer buzzed with life. The muggles didn’t have the full picture of what had occurred, but ever since the sky had flashed gold a few minutes before, even they had noticed that the world just felt better.

“So, what’s the plan up there?” Dean asked Jack as they walked toward the shower block, leaving a team of muggles spearheaded by Castiel to organize the zombie disposal. “You got Gabriel sitting on a cloud, looking all chubby-cheeked with a harp?”

Jack gave Dean a slight smile, looking at him from the corner of his eye. “Heaven isn’t really like that, Dean. It’s quite…clinical, in fact. But you’ll see, later.”

“Nah, humans can’t get through the portal, bud,” Dean pointed out.

“Oh, no, I’m going to take you and Sam there. We all need to talk, with Gabriel and Balthazar, but at present they can’t leave. They can barely keep the lights on as it is—Heaven was dying long before God left.”

“Yeah,” Dean said quietly. “Cas told me that much. Does having Gabriel back up there help?”
“It does,” Jack conceded. “But he’s not at full power yet. And, apparently, I am the main attraction when it comes to that. But we’ll talk later, all together, once we’ve sorted out hell.” Jack’s smile was secretive, and Dean wasn’t sure that he liked it.

Sam and Crowley approached, Sam from the edge of camp and Crowley from the other direction, in clean sweatpants and a long-sleeved Henley shirt that made him look a heck of a lot less demonic, if Dean was honest. Regardless, Dean was glad he was back; even in its current form, the Hell key that Castiel had given him felt like it was burning a hole in his pocket, tugging at his subconscious in a way he didn’t like.

“Hello, boys,” Crowley greeted them. “Ready for me to go and close all the doors? Back to ye olde plan of yore; humans above, demons below, never shall they meet?”

Dean nodded. “Yeah. You were right then, and right this time, too. New Earth, right? Our version.”

“That’s the idea,” Sam agreed.

“Wait, so, that’s the plan?” Jack asked, his brow creased somewhat unhappily. “Crowley takes the key down and locks the door behind him?”

“That’s the general gist of it,” Crowley said solemnly, his eyes on the dirt under the toes of his scuffed black boots. “Nothing gets out. New souls go to heaven, or get brought in by Billie’s reapers. That’s it, the only transactions. No deals, no possessions.”

They all stood awkwardly, unsure and silent.

The key felt heavy in Dean’s palm, and the longer he held it, the more he felt his skin crawl. Without a second thought, he reached out, cupping the back of Crowley’s hand into his and pressing the key firmly into his palm. “You’ve earned it,” Dean said honestly. “Wouldn’t want anyone else down there but you.”

“Yeah,” Crowley said, his eyes on his palm, his voice only just bridging the gap between them. “I guess I have.”

Using their still connected hands, Dean pulled Crowley forward, crushing the demon into a sudden, tight hug. “For what it’s worth…” He trailed off.

Crowley just nodded, a small smile quirking the corner of his lip as he pulled back. “Yeah. You too.”

The door to the shower block at their left crashed open, almost knocking Sam onto his giant moose ass. Claire stormed out, her hair wet and one side of her face still muddied. Small, unarmed, and yet somehow one of the most fearsome things Dean had seen in his life.

“No!” She barreled across the grass, an accusing finger pointing straight at Crowley. “No. This is a fucking STUPID plan!”

“Claire—” Crowley began, cut off immediately as Claire stalked right up to him.

Before they knew what was happening, she’d wrestled the key out of Crowley’s hand and was waving it in his face instead. “You are a lot of things, Crowley, but you actually aren’t usually a liar. So, you look me in the face, right now, and tell me that you want this.”

Dean and Sam exchanged a wide-eyed look over the top of Claire’s head. Jack’s head tilted in confusion, standing next to Crowley like an adorable bunny who had no idea it was in danger.
“Why wouldn’t he want it?” Jack asked, like an idiot.

“Shut up, Dead Boy! I was talking to the demon!”

Jack tilted the other way, and it took all the strength Dean had not to dive forward and tackle him to the ground. Kid was never gonna be able to run Heaven if he couldn’t even tell when he was standing on a bomb.

“I don’t have a choice, firecracker,” Crowley pointed out quietly. “I’m the only demon in the vicinity, topside. And I’m certainly the only one you can trust.”

“You can come back,” Claire hissed. “You don’t have to stay down there.”

“The gate won’t let even a drop of demon blood through, when I lock it,” Crowley said, surprisingly softly. “I’m sorry, Claire.”

For a minute, the two stared at each other, Claire’s expression pure fury, whereas Crowley’s was just sad. Everyone else stayed deathly quiet.

With a sharp, jerky nod, Claire broke away. “Yeah. Greater good I guess, and all that. Whatever.”

“Claire—” Crowley began.

“I’ve got mud to clean off,” she mumbled, spinning on her heel and heading back into the shower block. The door slammed behind her.

After staring at his feet for a moment, Crowley cleared his throat. “Well, I suppose I should get going, then.”

“Would you like a ride?” Jack asked, stepping forward and reaching his hand toward Crowley’s shoulder.

“Sure,” Crowley said. With a light breeze, he was gone.

x

It was several hours later when the sky flashed red, a massive thunderstorm blowing in, though Castiel had no idea what had taken so long. It was blissful though, to take a deep breath when it was done. The world felt fresh, clean, and new once the rain stopped.

Heaven and hell, functioning as they should; Earth left alone, balanced in the middle, peaceful. They still had some ends to tie up, of course—the remaining zombies, now leaderless and crawling, needed to be rounded up. They had to work out what to do about heaven, how it would work with the angels gone, and there was so much rebuilding and recovery to be done around the world.

But they’d do it in time. Truly free, for the first time. The atmosphere at camp was buoyant as they stood around, lit pyres glowing like celebration lights. Sam had added Eve’s rotting, eerie form to the biggest one, and a cheer had gone up all around camp.

Only Claire seemed down.

Castiel moved across to her where she was watching the flames with her arms crossed, mudless and
in a clean hoodie.

“You did a good job, before,” he offered quietly. “Defending all these people. You’re a good hunter, Claire.”

“I know,” Claire said flatly, her eyes on the flames.

Castiel stood for a minute more, having learned from Dean and Sam that sometimes, silence is often the greatest comfort. It worked, after a while.

“He saved me. Again,” Claire said quietly, apropos of nothing.

“He did,” Castiel agreed. “He was good, in the end, as much as it pains me to admit it.”

“He was my friend.”

“He was,” Castiel agreed.

“Never really had a friend before,” Claire said. “I mean, not really. Jody is more like a mom, and the other girls…we get along, I guess. They’re family, they were with Jody too and they had no choice. But Crowley…that was different.”

Castiel nodded, truly understanding. “Crowley chose to be your friend. No one made him, he just liked you. Related to you somehow. And found family can be some of the strongest there is.”

“Yeah,” Claire said softly, watching the pyre burn.

There was a *whoosh* of wings and a sudden voice from behind them both.

“Gosh, you’d think someone died.”

“Crowley!” Claire spun, gawping.

“The one and only,” he said, holding his arms out to the side.

“But—but you…” Castiel said, baffled as well.

“Well,” Crowley said, shrugging a shoulder just a little too nonchalantly. “Turns out, you gotta be a demon to stay in hell.”

Claire’s brow creased. “Wait, so you…”

Crowley nodded slowly, something akin to a tiny blush at his cheeks. “Had a little chat with Jack here, once we closed the gate. Turns out he can purify blood *without* the painful injections and long, teary crying sessions. Can burn it out without killing, if he’s super careful.”

“So…” Castiel looked up and down. “You’re human. You’re fully occupying your vessel.”

Crowley shrugged, still awkward. “This guy was dead years ago. Doubt he’ll mind too much if I steal his face.”

Castiel didn’t get the chance to question any further as Claire darted forward, crushing Crowley in a hug for the briefest of moments, before pulling back to punch him in the shoulder.

“You sneaky fucking asshole! You could have told me!”
“Where’s the fun in that, firecracker?”

Heaven looked like the incorrect stereotype of a mental asylum from an old horror movie, Dean decided, something that was matched in horror only by the fact that it made an odd amount of sense, somehow. It was white, everything white, and gleaming; endless corridors of numbered doors and eerily blinking lights, like the generator was giving out in the storm and the deranged, straight-jacketed killer was just waiting for his moment to escape. Again, that seemed uncomfortably close to what heaven had once been. But now, God was gone. The angels were gone; though if they’d come back from wherever they were—Castiel had been resolutely certain that anyone who retained even a drop of grace would have felt the moment that Chuck died—was still an unknown factor.

For now, it was Gabriel, Balthazar, and a scruffy-looking dude named Indra that occupied the throne room of heaven.

“Where’d you come from, anyway?” Dean asked the crumpled, grumpy looking angel as he approached the throne area with Castiel. They’d been introduced before Castiel gave Dean an impromptu tour, though he skipped certain parts. (“You don’t really want to know what Naomi did in there, Dean.”)

“Got left,” Indra said dryly. “Heaven locked up, and Daddy took all his favorites off to another reality, another story. I was never a favorite; why’d you think I was riding a hobo and stuck on the outside of heaven guarding a sandbox?”

“I’m sorry,” Castiel said, and Dean realized that he sounded vaguely uncomfortable.

Dean looked between the two. “Why?”

Castiel stared at his toes, but Gabriel piped up happily from next to the throne. “Let us out, didn’t he, way back when? We tricked him, poor sap, but he’s the one that let us walk out with the keys back when Kassiel was rebelling for the first time.”

“Please don’t call me that,” Castiel said, so quietly that perhaps only Dean heard.

“If you all don’t mind,” Jack said, appearing suddenly with his hand on Jo’s shoulder. “We do have something important to discuss.”

Sam and Rowena also appeared; Rowena’s hand on Sam’s shoulder, and a slightly horrified expression on Sam’s face.

“Angel transportation, right?” Dean said sympathetically to Sam. “You’re not gonna be able to poop for a week.”

“Gross,” Sam muttered, before Balthazar clapped his hands to get everyone’s attention.

“We need angels!” he announced, crisp pronunciation making the sentence no less baffling to Dean. “There are millions of souls up here. And they need to stay up here.”

“Which they won’t,” Gabriel took over, “if we can’t even keep the power on. Archangels are great, Nephilim even better. But we’ve got one archangel and one nephil, and it’s not enough.”
“So…” Dean ventured, his eyes slipping to Jack. “You’re going to just… make more? Like you did with Rowena?”

“Sort of,” said Jack. He moved forward and lowered himself into the throne. “Gabriel and I had a long chat on the way here to open the gate. It turns out that Gabriel has no interest in running heaven. He wants to remain as heaven’s messenger, but with a pass to come and go as he pleases.”

“Surprise, surprise,” Dean heard Sam mutter.

“So, I’m going to,” Jack finished.

Dean felt Castiel freeze by his side. “So,” Castiel said quietly, “you are going to make new angels, and take over Chuck’s place. Or the place he should have had, until he left us.”

Castiel’s use of the word "us" hurt Dean in an odd place, but there wasn’t time for that.

Jack nodded to Castiel. “Yes. I have the power, but not the experience to run heaven. But, we also talked about some of the…problems, shall we say, with how heaven was previously run. And we think we have a solution.”

Dean and Sam exchanged a look before raising an eyebrow each.

“We’re making heaven a democracy,” Jack chirped proudly. “For now, I will create enough angels to take up the positions that the archangels once held. Then, as people are reaped on Earth, their souls will be brought to heaven, and the purest of them will be offered the chance to become angels, until heaven’s rank are full once more.”

Dean blinked. “A democracy? Like… voting? Like, angels are going to get a say in their own lives? You’re giving angels free will?”

Jack nodded firmly. “Of course.”

“So,” said Sam, looking around at the assembled group, “what does this have to do with us?”

Gabriel pushed up off the edge of the throne, grinning at Sam. “You and Dean-o are already predisposed to be a good fit for the wavelengths that make up an angel—not everyone will be. So, as Rowena is already an angel, and Cassie can be given his grace back too, we thought that it only made sense to add two new archangels to the house: lanky and cranky.”

“Wait—us?” Dean choked out.


Castiel was very quiet, and Dean felt an odd hush take over the throne room as he turned to him. “Cas?” Dean asked. “You got anything to say about this?”

Having been studying the toes of his scuffed boots very intently, Castiel nodded slowly. Avoiding Dean’s eyes, as if he wanted to dodge the inevitable discussion, he looked only at Jack.

“Thank you, Jack. I think that your changes are…good. I know that with Gabriel and Balthazar’s help, you’ll do a good job, here. But I—” Castiel chanced a look at Dean for only a moment, “—I have no wish to become an angel again.”

“You’d rather stay human?” Gabriel said incredulously. “But they’re so…temporary. And weak.”

Ignoring Gabriel, Castiel turned to Dean. “Dean, you should make whatever decision is right for
you. But for me…” He let out a long breath, trailing off for a moment as he reached for Dean’s hand, tangling their fingers together as if no one else was there. “That part of my life is done. I have been a warrior of heaven my entire existence; but I’ve never been happy until I fell.”

Suddenly, Dean was choking up for a whole different reason. “You—you want to stay on Earth. Because you’ve been happy there, with…with me. Even all the times that—”

“Yes,” Castiel cut in softly. “But if you want to have that kind of power, Dean? I won’t begrudge you that. We’ll work something out.”

We’ll work something out, Dean thought. He means he’d still love me, want to be with me, regardless.

Even so, Dean shook his head, turning to Jack again, keeping his hand in Castiel’s. “Thanks, kid. But y’know, I’ve kinda already got everything I wanted.”

He felt Castiel’s hand squeeze his, and someone—probably Gabriel—made an exaggerated *aww*-ing noise.

“I’ll do it,” Sam said. “I’ll become an angel.”

Dean blinked, surprised, turning to look at his brother.

“All my life,” Sam said quietly, “I was the demon kid. Lucifer’s puppet, destined to be bad. I just…I get to choose to be different.”

Dean’s chest squeezed. “Sam, you were always different.”

“Do we have to stay here?” Rowena asked, warily. “The angels, can we come and go? Or are you locking the gate, like with hell?”

“Yes,” Jack clarified quickly. “After a period. We’d need you to stay until we have enough angels in the world to keep the lights on without any worries. But then you can leave and return as you wish, spend time with people you love, doing things you enjoy. Free will and love, I’ve been taught, is what makes people human.”

“Then me, too,” Jo said. “I’ll become an angel again, on those terms.”

Turning to Castiel as Jack and Gabriel began to discuss logistics with Sam and Jo, Dean smiled across at him. “You’re sure?”

“Very.”

“You don’t miss your grace, or think you’ll get bored on Earth? You’re not, like…afraid of dying?”

Castiel shook his head firmly. “Why would I be? When I die, I’ll come to heaven, now. Jack will make sure of that. I’ll have a room, with a number, and I’ll get to spend eternity with you, riding around the Midwest hunting ghosts and vampires and rugaru.”

“That…that’s your idea of heaven?” Dean said, not sure if he was more amazed that he was included in it, or that it was so…normal. For them, anyway.


Dean grinned. “You know what…it is. But we don’t have to wait until we die for that, Cas. After all—now there’s somewhere for them to go when they die, someone has to put all those remaining
“So, you and me?” Castiel clarified, his smile lighting up his face at Dean’s agreement. “And Sam too, when heaven is stable again? In Baby, driving around, like old times?”

Catching Sam’s eye for a moment, just enough for a nod, Dean grinned and pulled Castiel in for a tight hug. “Exactly. Team Free Will. Saving people, hunting things.”

The cosmically constructed hourglass, now empty, sat in Billie’s palm. Too light, but just the weight it should be. The names on the plaque swirled and changed from one to another when they moved it in the light, but they always settled back on ‘Chuck’.

This one had been important. But, in the scheme of things…oh, not even the most important one Billie would hold, or the most important being that Billie would reap.

But everything is important in its moment.

So Death slipped the hourglass into their sleeve, to keep. It would have pride of place on their desk, later, along with several books.

The book of Dean Winchester, whose ending was no longer blood and hellfire and pain. It was constantly changing, no longer written by anyone but himself.

The book of Samuel Winchester, whose ending changed in time with his brother’s, but was always happy, and never lonely.

And finally, the brand new, crisp book of Castiel, the name of Kassiel having no place on that spine. It was a fresh book, and Billie would have to write it herself; angels didn’t have them. But this was the only angel to ever fall more than once, Death thought as they materialized a quill, and he deserved a happy ending too.

Earth would be well, under their watch. So, Death would watch over them, in turn.

Chapter End Notes

The End!

Or, just another type of beginning.

Did y’all see the S15 premiere yet? (No spoilers in the comments, please!) How is our season holding up by comparison? Did you enjoy the ride?
We had a great time creating this whole season for you - so much that we've even considered doing another. We hope you liked it as much as we did.

If you did, please consider reccing it somewhere or sharing it on tumblr!

- Mal, jscribbles, SOBS, Gii, fangirlingtodeath513, castielslostwings, cutelittlekitty, CR_Noble, & EllenOfOz.

<3

P.S. How about some timestamps, y'all? Subscribe if you'd be into it, some of us have some in mind!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!