It's the Stars That Lie

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It's the Stars That Lie

by seperis

Summary

We fight, we lose, everyone dies anyway, I know. However, I don’t see why, if we're going to fight anyway, we shouldn't believe we're going to win.

Notes

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

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

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

--Day 63--

That's a lie, he discovers. And not even a good one.

Dean wakes up these days in stages, rising into consciousness like being dragged from the bottom of the ocean to a heavy, lethargic mass of low-grade aches that surrounds him, pinning him in place for what feels like forever before he finally gets used to it, remembers that this is how a body feels.

Everything else comes even more slowly: the give of the mattress beneath him; the ceiling stretched out above him; the walls of the room closing around him; but the longest part is the worst of all. Consciousness is an adventure every goddamn time: he pulls the pieces of himself together into some kind of coherent whole, making sense of the mess that's him and who he's supposed to be and what happened to him. While his name comes the fastest, the rest of it always takes time.

Dean, Chitaqua, brownies, fever, infection: he's got it. His ankle hurts--hairline fracture, Vera was right--but it's healing: his arm throbs dully and it's getting better, or so they say; he still can barely feel it.

Slitting his eyes open, the room's a dim, blurry mess around him, and he blinks slowly, waiting for focus like he waits for his name and the details of his life. Eventually, he identifies the sound of voices over the flat, monotonous beep of the heart monitor, and waits again for them to become more distinct, first resolving into two separate ones, and then, finally, making out the actual words and what they mean.

One's Cas, though; he always knows the sound of his voice, sometimes before he knows anything else.

"…reflexes last night," a woman is saying. "He's on the extreme high end of normal, which shouldn't surprise me, considering what happened when he was hallucinating."

Turning his head carefully on the pillow, he stares in the direction of the doorway, waiting--he's always waiting, always--for the slow spin to stop from the sudden movement. Eventually, the blurred suggestion of a doorway forms, Cas slumping against it and facing a woman--Vera, his mind supplies in relief--who's reading from a clipboard barely restraining a small mountain of paper.

"You're still surprised," Cas says, managing to give the impression the wall is the only thing holding him up because he just can't bother making the effort to do it for himself. Pushing his hair back from his eyes, he raised his eyebrows. "I assume you're following--"

"Yes, yes, I still disarm before coming in here, I'm not stupid." Now that's interesting; he wishes he could follow up, but experience confirms he learns a lot more when they think he's out. "I'd kill for a baseline on him, something. Darryl didn't leave any records, the fucker, so I'm working from observation and a lot of guessing. Even for a hunter…never mind." Faintly, he hears the sound of shuffling paper and squinting, he can see her skimming them with professional familiarity. "For someone on their deathbed a week ago, he's doing remarkably well, by which I mean hostile, uncooperative, and cranky as hell. Dean Winchester is definitely in the building."

Bullshit: he's a model goddamn patient.

"He's always perfectly pleasant with me," Cas says, crossing his arms and confirming exactly how wrong Vera is.
"You ever heard of 'divide and conquer'?” she asks, glancing up. "Learn it, watch it in action next time he wakes up."

"I am not familiar with that reference,” Cas tries in his best 'human ways are strange to me' voice, which just might work with pretty much anyone who hasn't actually met him.

Case in point. "Like I'm going to fall for that." There's another rustle of paper before she sighs. "You know, if there were still medical journals, I'd be selling this to all of them. I don't even know anymore. Miracle is such a cliché, but….

"You do realize that humanity survived plagues, infections, injuries, and all manner of viral infections before the advent of modern medicine?” Cas asks curiously. "There was a high mortality rate, granted, but survival of the fittest, or something like that, I think. Darwin was extremely annoying, much like Calvin, so I didn't pay close attention." He makes an irritated sound. "Is it a human characteristic to choose the most obnoxious possible person in any given era and name a major political, scientific, or religious movement after them? Why?"

There's a brief, baffled silence, and he finds himself fighting a grin at Vera's expression. "God, you're like this when you're clean?"

"Verily," Cas answers. "Have you actually read Origin of Species in its entirety? It's an excellent alternative to chemical sedatives, should we run out of them. I tested this: two chapters or less, I'm unconscious or desperately wishing I were. Even Valium doesn't have such consistent results."

He's not gonna laugh. He's not. No matter how much he wants to.

"Do I want to know what Calvin did to piss you off?” Vera asks, like she knows she's gonna regret it but can't stop herself. He knows the feeling.

"Predestination."

Dean and Vera wince in unison at the edge in Cas's voice: time for a new subject.

"Right. So, uh…." He hears the sound of papers being shuffled in what sounds like desperation before Vera sighs in something suspiciously like relief. "So where were we….right. Short term memory still seems a little off, not a surprise, he's only been awake a week, so we just need to watch him. Long term, though--he's said a couple of things, especially when he's feverish…."

"That's normal, isn't it?" Cas interrupts.

"Yeah, I'm not worried," she assures him. "Some retrograde amnesia is common and usually fixes itself, given time. Even if it doesn't--if all he comes out with is some sketchiness in recent long term memory, that's better than the best a specialist probably would have predicted. There's something else…." She pauses, voice dropping. "I never knew he had a brother."

Dean swallows, mouth dry, as Cas says, "Vera."

"I'm not asking anything; it's his business and I'd never expect you to confirm or deny. Tell him--just tell him that nothing that happened during the fever goes any farther than here."

"I will," Cas says quietly.

She studies the clipboard again, flipping the sheets rapidly. "I'm not a neurologist, and my rotation in that department was short. Take as a given the spots probably won't get worse and there's good chance they'll get better. I'll send Alicia for some more texts, but this is in territory I'd need a medical
library, a degree, and about a decade or so in the field to know enough about to guess. Mostly, it'll be a matter of him learning where the spots are and not freaking out about them. Could use a therapist, maybe--" 

"Yes, I'm sure Dean would be happy to speak to a psychologist. Do you know where we can acquire one?"

Vera laughs then covers her mouth, looking guilty. "Let's not tempt Joe. For now, if you notice anything--I'd say don't draw attention to it, but Dean can and will be pissed if he notices and you pretend you don't, so whatever keeps him calm and focused on getting better. Right now, any stress could cause a relapse, and his body doesn't have the reserves to deal with it. There's no margin for error here."

"I don't think that'll be a problem," Cas says thoughtfully. "I'm sure he'll do everything he can to aid in his recovery."

She raises her eyebrows in polite disbelief. "Have you met him?"

"He's listening to us now." His eyes flicker to Dean with a hint of amusement, and Dean stares back, wondering how the hell he knew. Turning his attention back to Vera, Cas adds with painful earnestness, "I would have told you he'd awakened, but I didn't want to risk him trying to get up and follow us if we went out of his hearing range. That would also be stressful, correct? I certainly don't want to be responsible for slowing his progress."

Vera stares at Cas like she doesn't know he's like, world champion of the expressionless stare and there's no way she's gonna win this one.

"Dean," Cas says in the exact same voice, "do you recognize us?"

"No," he answers deliberately. "Mickey? Disneyland?"

"He's always been insane," Cas tells her. "You didn't notice before? How on earth could you miss it?"

Vera's eyes narrow before she jerks her head toward the door. "Yeah, I'm gonna take a nap on the couch. You got him until I wake up."

Cas just doesn't know when to quit. "If I need you--"

"If he's not in full arrest for at least a minute, I'll shoot you," she says over her shoulder. "Then I'll know it's serious. Later."

Cas doesn't bother hiding his smirk as he closes the door behind her, only pausing to grab a chair from near the bathroom door and pull it toward the bed before dropping into it with a sigh. Blinking at him, Dean wonders if it's possible he's literally in a whole new world again.

"Her aim?"

"Very good," Cas admits, reaching the short distance between them to touch Dean's forehead with a thoughtful expression before sitting back, hooking a knee over one threadbare arm, bare foot swinging idly. "Excellent: ninety-eight point six exactly. How are you feeling?"

"Shitty," he admits, wishing Cas would move a little closer. Talking is still an effort when his current maximum volume is 'above a whisper' and only that by sheer determination. Looking him over, Dean takes in the easy slump, the loose shoulders, and realizes he's never seen Cas relax without the
aid of sex or drugs, and even then it wasn't like this. Even the constant signs of low-grade sleep deprivation that Dean's insistence on living life on a sane schedule only began to put in a dent in are almost gone. "Less than yesterday, though."

"Headache or nausea?"

He thinks about it; headaches are pretty much always, but though there's a faint pounding in the back of his head, it's nothing like the ones where the only time the lights are on is when Vera's examining him. "Not really."

"It's the seventh day since you woke up, and your intermittent fevers are now a full hour shorter in duration and have lessened in severity than they were then," Cas begins. "Today's first started after your morning examination following breakfast. It reached one hundred and three point six before it began to drop, and happily, you didn't threaten to exorcise anyone or require me to restrain you. A very pleasant change: please continue to refrain, if it wouldn't be too much of an imposition."

Dean bites his lip at Cas's very audible sigh as he slumps further into the chair: humans being sick are so annoying.

"Vera changed your IV and gave you something to lower your temperature and help you sleep. You woke briefly at noon and consumed your recommended amount of nutrition and suffered another examination in very poor spirits--or so Vera implied--before falling asleep again. This afternoon you exhibited two low-grade fevers lasting one hour and ten minutes and forty-five minutes, respectively, but they were not accompanied by hallucinations, for which we thank you, as it puts Vera in a terrible mood to be mistaken as a demon and seems to hold me responsible for reasons I have yet to understand."

He might, actually, remember something like that happening a few times.

"It's now five o'clock in the afternoon, you aren't running a temperature, and you seem relatively cognizant of your surroundings. Please don't correct me if any of this is untrue: it's pleasant to interact with you without being required to restrain you first."

Dean feels himself grinning at Cas's soliloquy, painfully grateful for the way he always starts off with day and time, breaking up the muted, timeless void between brief periods of consciousness into concrete landmarks of progress and events (and sarcasm, because Cas), whether he remembers them or not. The first three days after he woke up were the worst, a half-conscious nightmare of not quite remembering what happened and exhaustion, too feverish to be able to sleep for long but not quite enough to be entirely conscious. Every time, though, two things stayed the same: Vera and her professional confidence, and Cas and his calm certainty, and they made sense when nothing else did.

Concentrating, he tries to figure out how much of today he actually remembers, but it's a crapshoot at best. Vera checks his memory and reflexes every morning and evening, innocuous questions interspersed with explanations of what she's doing and why, but Dean's never been too tired not to feel a start of fear when he hears them, when he has to grope for answers and hope that they're right. That's her job, and he gets that, but he's glad Cas doesn't think it's supposed to be his, too.

That doesn't mean he ever forgets what Cas needs to hear.

"Dean Winchester," he says as clearly as he can. "Chitaqua. Kansas. End of the world."

Cas smiles at him, blue eyes lighting up, and seeing that is pretty much the highlight of his goddamn day. "It's not over yet."
Grinning back, Dean settles in for a little time being conscious and cognizant of his surroundings.

"You have two hours until your next exam and dinner, which will be broth but in a green cup instead of a blue one, along with whatever Vera feels would best serve your nutritional requirements. Are you thirsty?" Dean hesitates, eyeing the IV bag by the bed, then nods firmly. The sooner he can drink and eat regularly, the sooner he's off that goddamn bag, and his mouth tastes like shit anyway. Cas stands up, inclining his head toward the bathroom door. "I'm going to fill your glass. I'll be back in a moment."

He waits for Dean to nod again before picking up the glass and making his way to the open door of the bathroom. Cas isn't and has never been a talker, but all Dean's uncertain memories since the fever broke come with the sound of Cas's endless narration, sometimes tired, always sarcastic, and so effortless now that Dean thinks he must have gotten a lot of practice during those two weeks of fever. He rarely remembers the details, sometimes doesn't even understand the words Cas is using or what they mean between one sentence and the next, but hearing him somehow makes that okay.

Returning to the bed, Cas sets the glass on the bedside table and helps Dean sit up with the unthinking, effortless ease of post-angel strength and a lot of practice, arranging the pillows behind him for maximum comfort with minimal effort before settling Dean back against them.

"Small sips," he says seriously, holding up the glass. They're both good at this; Dean can manage not to make a wet mess, and Cas has some kind of freakish ability to tell exactly how much he can take. "You're responding exceptionally well to the antibiotics," he continues, timing each sip to Dean's strength. "Vera thinks that if you continue at your current rate of progress, you'll be able to begin solid foods within the next week, and some of it may not be pureed."

Dean raises his eyebrows in excited acknowledgement of the fact that's a huge milestone in his life and tries not to remember when cheeseburgers were a feature in plural.

"The cast on your ankle, provided you continue not to aggravate the injury by trying to walk--as you tended to do during the fever, much to our displeasure--should come off in four weeks," Cas says when they reach the halfway mark, sitting back as if he's not waiting to see if Dean's too tired to finish the glass in one go. "The wound on your right arm is showing great improvement as well. There's no further sign of inflammation or swelling, the flesh is beginning to close, and the danger of sepsis has passed entirely. Vera checked the sutures this morning and thinks they can be removed in two weeks if it continues to progress at the current rate."

Dean nods, fighting the urge to flex his hand against the bed; he can't tell if it's working anyway unless he looks, and too often, it just doesn't. That he might have actually lost his arm is something he doesn't want to think about too hard. "Will I be able to use my arm again?"

"Vera doesn't think you'll lose all mobility," Cas answers without hesitation. "There's no way to predict the extent of impairment until its fully healed, of course, but she thinks--"

"What do you think?" Cas frowns, starting to answer, but Dean cuts him off with a shake of his head. "You trained hunters, Cas. Don't tell me you don't know how to do an assessment."

Cas hesitates, then sets the glass down and braces a hand on the mattress before transferring himself to Dean's right side so smoothly he barely disturbs the mattress enough for it to do anything more than squeal a half-hearted protest. Settling cross-legged beside him, Cas picks up his arm, carefully stretching it across his lap where it lies like a hunk of meat. Turning his hand palm-up, Cas spreads out the fingers carefully, drawing a finger up the center of his palm; there's a distant tickling, but the only way Dean knows for sure is because he's watching it happen.
"There's nerve damage, as you already know," Cas says, voice coolly impersonal as he folds Dean's lifeless fingers into a fist before easing them open again. "The extent is uncertain, but there's no reason to believe you won't regain gross and some amount of fine motor control as well as sensitivity."

Dean swallows hard. Using a weapon takes more than 'some amount'.

"As soon as it's fully healed and the extent of the nerve damage discovered," Cas continues, "we'll begin exercising it regularly to regain full use. In the meantime, we'll concentrate on strengthening your left arm and hand to compensate for any weakness in your right."

Dean gives him a dark look. "I'm shit with my left."

"You won't be when I'm done with you."

"Cas…" Dean takes a deep breath, wondering how to explain it doesn't work that way. "If I can't use my right arm--"

"You will; the only question is what the limitations will be and at that time, we'll work on how to deal with them," Cas interrupts, getting his full attention. "If you can't believe that for yourself, then believe me. I trained hunters and I'm very good at it. I also know what can be taught to a human body and what can't, and this is one of the things that can."

Dean nods slowly; actually, Cas does know what a human body can learn, from the inside out. "Okay."

Setting his arm back down on the bed, Cas rests his chin in one hand, an unexpected smirk playing at the corners of his mouth, blue eyes dancing behind the fall of too-long bangs. "I'm looking forward to when you're well enough to begin. Consider it an expression of my gratitude for seventy-five sequential breakdowns and rebuilds of the entire arsenal present in the Impala four and a half years ago because I wasn't taking it seriously."

"That wasn't me," Dean protests, fighting down unexpected laughter. "Only seventy-five?"

Cas's smile takes on a predatory edge; it's not a bad look for him. "I'm going to enjoy this."

The couple of times Dean got to watch Cas and Amanda sparring were great for more than the sheer entertainment value. It was easy to see why half the camp sulked when he gave the order about staying off the training field after ten to give Cas and Amanda their private badass time. When the 'holy shit they're trying to kill each other for fun' wore off, though, he started actually thinking about what he was seeing and what it meant.

It's weird to see himself and even Sam in Cas, but satisfying, too, in a way that he still can't explain to himself. That Cas trained Amanda is obvious, and not simply because he sees those echoes in her as well. It's not just confidence that makes you willing to step on the field with someone stronger and faster than you can ever hope to be; that's trust written straight into the bone, as unthinking and automatic as she breathes, as effortless as it's always been between him and Sam.

He stares at the glass significantly, and Cas immediately reaches over him to retrieve it, giving him another drink. Time to take advantage of being awake enough to have an actual conversation. "So the camp?"

"Patrol reports that the lack of activity continues and requested permission to hunt down the brownie colony that attacked you to execute all that they find in your name." Dean almost spits out a mouthful of water, glaring at Cas suspiciously. "I agreed, of course, and it's understood their corpses will be
presented to you in lieu of flowers, of which we have none."

Reaching up, he wipes his mouth weakly, careful of the IV line. "So it's not just you that's crazy. Is it the air here or something?"

"The brownies are fortunate I'm no longer an angel," Cas remarks idly, "or they and all their descendants would be cursed unto the end of time."

Eyes wide, he nods in acknowledgement that Cas is still the craziest of them all and indicates he wants another drink. "Keep going."

"I reinstituted written reports, so when you're better, you'll be able to review my tenure and evaluate if I'm performing my duties to your satisfaction." Cas gives him a narrow look as he holds up the glass. "I'd also like to thank you, in case I forgot earlier; this time, at least, I wasn't the last to know I was placed in charge of a militia. Finding out at the same time as everyone else when Vera announced it was an improvement, yes, but perhaps at some point, I could be told first? Just a suggestion."

"My memory these days," Dean says sadly. "Total blank spot: no idea how that happened. Sorry about that."

"Could you at least pretend that you care about being convincing?"

"I could," he allows, taking the last satisfying swallow. "I just forgot."

Cas rolls his eyes as he sets the empty glass back on the bedside table, and Dean braces himself for the inevitable moment he gets up and tells Dean it's time to rest because he's tired. He's always tired, but he's not always awake, and it's rare enough that he values every second he can get.

To his surprise, however, Cas reaches for the spare pillow, twisting lithely in place until he's stretched out beside Dean on his stomach, tucking the pillow under his chest. Dean blinks, distracted by the careless sprawl of Cas's body, loose and comfortable in repose, as settled in his skin as if he lives there; different, he thinks vaguely, but he can't quite make out how.

"Joseph and his team will be returning to the eastern checkpoint tomorrow to get the information we requested," Cas says, propping his chin on one hand and reaching up to absentley push messy bangs from his eyes. "He was understandably reluctant to leave the camp during your fever, but as you've demonstrated this week that you can be trusted not to die unexpectedly in his absence, I felt comfortable giving him my personal assurance you would remain among the living until his return."

Alicia, Joe, and his team returned to the camp two days after the fever started and pretty much everything took a backseat to the drama that was Dean's attempt at dying in the stupidest way possible. Joe was placed in charge of helping Alicia get what they needed from the hospitals and (he's pretty sure he wasn't supposed to hear this part) may or may not have argued with terrifying sincerity about getting a doctor from the nearest non-infected state up until the fever finally broke. How, he's not sure (the word 'gunpoint' may or may not have been in there), but he's still on the fence between being touched and kind of horrified. (Touched is winning, and what that says about him he'd prefer not to know. Gotta be the air.)

"Thanks," Dean says, failing to fight back a smile. "Glad I got your confidence."

Cas shrugs an eloquent 'my pleasure, of course'. "He thinks it should take five days to a week including travel time, as he'll also make a stop in Kansas City and bring back Melanie's report on our salvage efforts at the military outposts there as well as some of the priority items. If there's anything
"you want to request from the border guards, I can tell him before he leaves in the morning."

"Nothing I can think of right now." He remembers going over the original list with Joe before the first border run, but that sketchiness in long-term memory thing isn't entirely about who he isn't, and in some spots, details are sometimes pending. "Anything else?"

"I think that's all for now," Cas decides, tilting his head. "Everyone sends their support and hopes for your full recovery, of course."

"Of course," Dean says, straight faced.

"At least they're no longer camping outside the front door." He makes a face, sinking more deeply into the mattress. "Joseph led group prayer in five languages and several denominations at all hours of the day and night until you were confirmed to be recovering. The repetition was becoming annoying, so I taught him two in Enochian for the sake of variety. His accent was much improved by the tenth rendition."

Cas taught Joe how to pray in his native tongue: for some reason, that makes his eyes prickle. Blinking rapidly, he realizes in annoyance that it's getting harder to keep them open: worse, he knows Cas sees it. Before he can protest--sick or not, there's always time for being stupid--Cas helps him to lie back down. It's like a countdown; he's about five minutes from unconsciousness, and God, he's tired of that.

"Nothing else?" Dean asks before he can stop himself. He could sound more pathetic, but he can't quite see how.

Cas hesitates, giving him an uncertain look. "Someone was sneaking out of Kyle's cabin the last three mornings just before dawn."

"What?"

"Amanda mentioned it when she was bringing us more canned broth two days ago," Cas answers with a frown. "Along with the number of cans of broth we have in inventory, which--"

"Are you…" Cas won't meet his eyes. "Dude. You're gossiping? With Amanda?"

"No--I don't know. I've never been interested in other people's questionable life choices or felt any particular need to remark upon it," he says slowly. "And yet today, when she came by to see if there was anything Vera needed, I asked her if there was any indication whose failure of standards led them to willingly engage in sex with Kyle and was extremely disappointed she didn't have an answer."

Cas looks so weirded out that Dean almost feels bad for him. Which is the only reason he asks, "Anything else?"

"Zoe is doing something requiring excessive amounts of incense at midnight every Thursday, which is making her roommates Christina and Penn nervous and also constantly smelling of patchouli, which I've been curious about for several days," Cas answers obediently. "And Kat and Andy--"

"Wait, which one is Andy?" Dean doesn't fool himself he can identify every person in the camp yet on sight, but--

"You probably haven't spoken to him directly," Cas assures him so confidently Dean decides to believe him. "Until I assigned Alicia to patrol and he became a member of her team, he worked with Zoe on ammunition manufacturing and weapons maintenance. Five feet ten inches, one hundred and
fifty-two pounds, brown hair, brown eyes, bears a passing resemblance to the boy next door whose persistence--one might characterize it as 'stalking'--eventually leads him to gain the affections of a supermodel through what I assume is some unnamed form of Stockholm Syndrome that Hollywood believes is a valid basis for a successful long term relationship."

"You used to watch a lot of TV."

"The Lifetime Channel was extremely educational on the formation of primary human relationship bonds," Cas says wistfully, which may be the most terrifying statement ever uttered on planet earth. "In any case, since you became ill, he and Kat have been spending a great deal of time together--I assume for reassurance in the face of your pending mortality--but Amanda isn't sure if that's going anywhere now that you are recovering. It seems they do this a great deal and it always ends in friends without any benefits at all. Why I have no idea; orgasms cause a release of endorphins that improve the mood, decrease aggressive tendencies, promote emotional bonding, and can result in a substantial increase in general health altogether. The addictive properties generally assure continued--what?"

Dean stares at him wordlessly.

"Please tell me you didn't actually believe sex was merely for procreation," Cas says after a long, worried pause, expression slowly resolving into something like pity. "That could have been far more easily and consistently accomplished with simple parthenogenesis, or even the addition of estrous cycles to the human genotype--I think it's known as 'going into heat'--"

"Right, got lucky there," Dean interrupts, abruptly remembering he knows how to talk. "So back to the camp; what else did Amanda tell you?"

--Day 65--

Dean emerges from the depths of unconsciousness to the definition of life lived on what feels like a mattress-shaped frying pan, complete with a fucking ton of blankets piled on top for sweating to death purposes. Vaguely, he wonders if this is what it feels like to be a grilled cheese sandwich, assuming he isn't actually one.

His first efforts fail so spectacularly he almost wonders if he imagined them. Dropping his head back onto the pillow, he tries to remember a distant time--weeks ago, a lifetime, whatever--when this could be solved by the ability to kick the goddamn blankets off. "Jesus."

"He was right--God, that's annoying." Blinking a few times to adjust to the lack of light--survey says it's pretty goddamn late--he's not disappointed at all that it's Vera who appears in his line of sight, a suggestion of a smile on her face as she absently pulls her hair back, winding the twists into a loose ponytail as she starts toward the bathroom. "Hey Dean. Give me a minute, okay?"

When she comes back, she's carrying a full glass of water, a clean towel, and a wet cloth, setting the first them carefully on the bedside table. "How you feeling?"

Like shit, he wants to tell her, but that would take up valuable kicking the fucking blankets off energy he can't afford to waste on stating the goddamn obvious. Gritting his teeth against the shock of pain from his still-healing ankle and annoyance for his still fucking useless right arm, he readies himself for a third attempt when Vera belatedly realizes what the problem is, efficiently stripping off the blankets and piling them at the foot of the bed before sitting down beside him and reaching for the wet cloth.
"Headache or nausea?" she asks as she gently wipes his face with slow, careful movements before setting it aside. He shakes his head, trying not to moan in sheer relief at the wash of cool air over his sweaty body. "Light okay?"

When he nods, there's a click as she flips on the lamp on the bedside table, looking him over with sharp brown eyes before taking out a digital thermometer from the drawer and removing the cover.

"Open up," she says, and with a sigh, Dean obeys; the last time he argued, she listed all the alternate locations she could use in order of preference, which by now he knows isn't an idle threat, especially since Cas treats her suggestions like Holy Freaking Writ.

At the rapid beeping sound, she takes it back, nodding before looking him over, and her slightly satisfied look telling him he's apparently doing great for being life endingly exhausted and recently baking in his own sweat.

"Ninety-nine point one, good job," she tells him, setting it on the metal tray on the far side of the bedside table he's come to categorize as the place she and Cas put anything that needs to be sterilized before use. Which seems to be everything. "Sorry about that," she says, indicating the blankets as she gets his chart from the drawer and makes some notes. "You were getting pretty bad chills this evening. I brought you some water. You up for it?"

To his own surprise, he's able to almost sit up on his own with Vera bracing him, which ups her satisfied look by an order of magnitude as she steadies him, arranging the pillows and picking up the glass.

"So--"

"Dean Winchester," he tells her, dragging out each syllable for maximum sarcastic impact. "2014. Palin. Kansas. Two plus two is four. It's day ten of how is this my life. Anything else, Nurse Ratched?"

"Someone's feeling their oats," she remarks, pausing to wait as he fumbles his left hand around the glass along with hers, just to prove he can. It's kind of awesome, even if he's pretty sure it's the glass holding up his hand and not the other way around. Still, no time like the present to work on that 'using his left' thing. "My grandmother used to say that, no idea. Think you can drink it all?"

Even if he wasn't thirsty, his mouth tastes like shit. "Oh yeah."

Vera watches him, not even pretending to be casual about it, pulling back halfway through and waiting for him to nod before giving him the rest. Another surprise: he's still wiped by the time he's done, but not as much, and he's getting closer to normal drinking sizes.

"Excellent," she says, getting her chart again and making another note before glancing up at his half-full IV. "Your fever spiked late this evening after dinner, nothing serious, and it looks like--no promises here--you can start solid food at the two week mark. We'll go slow, but the sooner we can get you eating regularly, the better." Warming the stethoscope in her hand, she slides it under his scrub top, which is all he wears these days. Easy in, easy out, easy to throw away, he guesses, though he wishes they came in more colors that 'seventies-era motel room yellow' and 'eye-searing teal'. Sometimes Cas mixes and matches them, which he assumes is his punishment for almost dying because even the blind couldn't think those go together without passive-aggressive hostility being a factor. "You know the drill--"

"Deep breathes," he agrees sourly, trying not to think about what she's hearing in there as she moves to his back, then asks him for regular breaths. It feels like forever, always does, and when she's done,
it's another eternity while she updates his chart. When she's done, he glances at the heart monitor and then at her, raising an eyebrow. At some point, he's gonna have to deal with that. "Well?"

"At the two week mark, we'll take you off," she says, surprising him. "I'm only a practitioner nurse, and I know just enough to err on the side of overkill. But from what I can tell, there's no permanent damage."

"What?" That's--really not what he expected to hear. "You're sure?"

"As sure as I can be when I'm not a cardiologist and I'm doing this in a cabin instead of a hospital," she answers, draping the stethoscope around her neck. "Without a full medical history--and a doctor in front of my name--I can only guess and work from observation, but by now, I would have found any severe damage, and there's not even a murmur."

Dean nods slowly, still trying to take that in. "My heart stopped twice."

"I was there," she reminds him, cocking her head. "We'll take it slow, but honestly, I'm not too worried; I just want a full two weeks of stats before I take you off it. I wouldn't tell you if I wasn't sure."

"Right."

Nodding, he clears his throat. "So--"

"That doesn't mean you'll be running laps and fighting demons anytime soon," she says, raising her eyebrows in reproof; she's terrifyingly good with that look. "Your reward for surviving is an immune system shot to hell and back, and right now, it can't handle a secondary infection. Lucky for you, I haven't left the cabin or interacted with anyone directly but Cas since the first week of the fever, and Cas is a dead zone for infection. Dies on contact, actually. These days when I'm in a bad mood, I imagine demon-shaped bacteria screaming in despair as they die when his immune system stabs them to death or something." She shakes her head ruefully, a grin playing around the corners of her mouth.

"Anyway, that doesn't mean we can afford not to be careful."

Like Cas, she looks better, too; the lines around her eyes are absent, mouth less thin, warming more easily in a smile, the ashen quality of her skin is almost gone, and he's pretty sure he's not imagining the bounce to her step. Cas can hide just about anything he doesn't want seen; Dean could be ten seconds from dying and Cas would still be able to calmly tell him he'll be fine without a single tell to the contrary. Vera's a pro and it shows, but after living with Cas, pretty much anyone else is a semi-open book, or at least a book in a human language he can actually eventually read. She thinks he's getting better, she's sure of it, sure enough that she's giving him openings to ask questions because she not only has answers, she likes the ones she'll be giving.

"No margin for error," he tells her, which makes her smile widen. "I remember."

"And your memory's fine so far," she agrees. "Short term is about what I'd expect considering how much you're sleeping and with the intermittent fevers, and your retention is fine. Your long term's got some spots, which you already know about, but don't be alarmed if you find more of them. Also, not a neurologist, but--"

"Not a lot I can do about it," Dean finishes for her. He won't say there's anything about this that's not shitty, but he's gotta admit the potential usefulness of 'because fever' when he doesn't remember something that Dean Winchester should. "Anything else?"

Tucking the chart back in the drawer, she glances at the door briefly. "Okay, Cas has me on the clock here, so I don't have a lot of time."
He doesn't brighten even a little at that. "It's late, tell him to get some sleep."

"Cas likes visual proof you aren't dying, and unlike you, I don't get to play the pathetic card when he's in a bad mood," she points out, ignoring his outraged expression. "Oh please, don't even. I've seen you doing it, and he falls for it every goddamn time."

He ignores that in the spirit of not wanting to piss off the person who controls his IV line. "What's going on?" Vera's expression flickers; oh, that's not a good sign. "What happened?"

She hesitates. "He's reading my medical texts."

For some reason, he suddenly feels a sense of foreboding. "Okay?"

"All of them. Cover to cover," she explains. "Let me give you some context: you know what the first thing a medical student does when they know just enough to understand the words they're reading?"

Dean shakes his head, upgrading to 'alarmed' on the strength of Vera's pitiless stare.

"This afternoon was three hours--three hours--of Cas methodically panicking in alphabetical order--alphabetical order--about all the possible complications that may or may not occur from a hypothetical secondary infection that you don't have, and a list of all the possible infections you could conceivably get in order of severity, communicability, potential to mutate unexpectedly, and mortality rate when I pointed out--twice--that there was no secondary infection."

"Oh God."

"I'm going to kill him," she says calmly. "I'm sure I'll be sorry later, but--"

"Alphabetical order, yeah."

"Cas doesn't get sick, and has infinite knowledge, a perfect memory, and nothing to do but take patrol reports and watch you sleep if you're not awake to keep him entertained," she continues with fragile composure. "He's inventing a whole new plane of hypochondria by proxy and sterilized the entire kitchen three times today, and Dean, even I don't know why. I hid my books, but it's a small cabin and that's not gonna last long, and I can't do anything about infinite knowledge."

"So he needs something to do, right." Vera nods firmly. "So what do I--"

"Thanks for asking," she answers brightly, and he realizes belatedly that he's been had. "Find him something to do, Dean."

"I'm really sick--"

"You ever want that catheter out?"

More than he wants to live, to be honest. "I'm on it."

"I thought you'd see it my way," she answers in satisfaction as she gets to his feet. "Be right back."

Dean's still hating her silently when Cas appears as she opens the door, glaring with unfocused hostility at something (her, the door, the wall, life). "Hey, I was just about to get you," she says, then looks at back at Dean with a smirk. "Give us a minute, okay?"

Half-closing the door makes it a little harder to hear, but he gets Vera saying, "He's fine, much better than earlier. How do you always know when he wakes up, anyway?"
"Punishment for my sins." When the door opens again, Cas stalks to the bed, staring down at Dean like he's not performing to expectations, and at this point, he suspects it's just to fuck with him. "You have to stop doing this."

"Yeah, that'll work," Vera says from the doorway, sounding amused. "Modern medicine's stumped, but your disapproval of biology should make it rethink the error of its ways any day now."

"Go away," Cas says as he reaches to pull the nearby chair closer and drops into it like standing is for losers, eyes flickering to the IV before they turn on Vera and narrow. "Is there something else?"

"Per our deal," she reminds him. "You get him when he's awake."

"You would make an exemplary Crossroad demon," Cas tells her sincerely. "Remind me to write you a letter of recommendation to Crowley if you decide on it as a future career."

Dean looks at Cas in fascination. "You make worse deals than I do."

"Have fun," Vera says with a cheerful wave, shutting the door behind her with relish and leaving Dean the sole beneficiary of Cas's glare. It would probably help if he could stop grinning, but he's not sure that's possible, especially when the glare's coming out from behind a mess of too-long bangs that he has to push out of the way every so often.

Cas manages to keep it up for a few moments longer before he finally gives up on anything resembling upright, slumping disconsolately into the overstuffed seat and swinging a leg over one arm of the chair, heel beating a lazy rhythm against the side before he decides to remember Dean's lying right in front of him.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, giving the impression that he hopes the answer is very bad and therefore worth dragging his ass all the way in here to observe it.

"Pretty good," Dean answers with all the good cheer he can summon; sure, he's exhausted, but Cas is a dick and that's what's important here. "You?"

"I could be suffering in Hell right now," he muses, and maybe Dean's reading 'regret' into his voice, but no, he's really not. "I assume that would be worse."

Dean reminds himself firmly not to laugh.

"Nothing new to report from earlier today. It's eleven-fifteen at night on the ninth day since your miraculous awakening. I'm being told you're getting better, but your propensity to abruptly become feverish without warning makes me doubt your commitment to returning to good health."

"I try to time it so it won't annoy you," Dean tells him solemnly. "Fucking biology: what can you do? I'll do better, pinky swear."

Cas glares at him, like he wants to tell Dean just what he can do with biology, in alphabetical order even.

"Everyone in the camp is--well, hungover or attempting to be, since apparently every night is now celebrate your slow and endless recovery night." Dean watches, fascinated, as Cas's heel hits the side of the chair just a hair too lightly to rip through the thin fabric. "I suppose I can't object if they continue to perform their duties to my satisfaction, such as they are."

Remembering what Vera told him, he almost sighs. Honestly, if he wasn't sleeping most of his days away, he would've seen that coming a mile away, because when Cas admitted to him that he didn't
like idleness, the only surprise there was that Cas would think he'd be surprised.

"Mow the lawn."

Cas slow-blinks his certainty that Dean's insane. "What?"

"Cas, there are weeds taller than some of the cabins and we have cables for the generators going right through 'em. Hell, replace the cables while you're at it before we all die in a fire, literally." This is actually a really good idea. "Nothing's going on? Manual labor never hurt anyone. Keep 'em from getting soft."

Cas nods tentative agreement. "Because of the fire hazard."

"Yeah. Actually, no." He tries to think how to put this, considering both their frame of reference on what constitutes normal living conditions, but what do you know, he actually has some opinions about this. "Joe's roof is about to fall in, no lie, I have no idea why it hasn't yet, and his solution is for him and Kamal to sleep in the kitchen. Jane's cabin doesn't have running water anywhere but the toilet, so she goes to Amanda and Vera's to shower and get water for coffee, and Mark and Frank have water but don't have a working toilet, which is the weirdest symmetry ever. Half the cabins don't have a working stove and are doomed to the mess even when Zack's cooking and that's gotta be grounds for murder, since he can't cook. We have generators in the garage that just need some spare parts to get running, but instead, we're running the entire camp off six and live with the random lack of lights and hot water, and it's not like we don't have the fuel. Why?"

"Is that a trick question?" Cas asks warily.

"Until I got here you didn't have a working stove or fridge and seemed surprised that a kitchen wasn't for alcohol storage," Dean says. "Which makes sense; this is you and it's not like you know better. What's everyone else's excuse? Was it always like this?"

Cas looks at him blankly. "The flora was shorter, I think."

Yeah, he should have guessed. "Cas, I lived most of my life in motels that charged by the hour or my goddamn car, and I still know this is a shitty way to live."

"We had other priorities," Cas says, starting to look annoyed. "In case you've forgotten, we were trying--"

"--to save the world, I get that. It's just--" Dean gestures vaguely. "You go fight, come back, sleep, keep up your training, and that's it?"

"There's also sex…" Cas trails off, searching Dean's face intently. "It bothers you?"

"Yeah, it does," he admits, frustrated with his inability to explain. "Hell if I know why, though."

What he noticed as an invisible observer he filed away as someone else's (this Dean's, Cas's) responsibility and forgot, even after the responsibility technically became his. He'll cut himself a little slack before the fever--teaching Cas to do dishes and cook and clean up after himself while all the time hearing a phantom Sam laughing at him in his head was kind of distracting, not to mention learning about Chitaqua and everything--but now, he's got all the time he needs to think, and he's been doing just that.

"Even with the excess toilet paper we now possess," Cas says slowly, "I still have no desire to revisit the brief periods that latrines were necessary."
Dean blinks in horror. "You've really had to use latrines?"

"I didn't, but Bobby supervised the repairs on my cabin, as well as Dean's and several of the others, which noticeably, have never had problems with their running water or roofs." Cas's gaze flickers to Dean and away, but it's enough to catch a glimpse of--something. "Now that I think about it, this would be an excellent use of everyone's time."

Dean nods and feeling ambitious, starts to roll casually on his side before he remembers his ankle and manages to jolt it and his right arm badly enough to make him gasp, a cold sweat breaking across his forehead. Before he can make his frantic panting look less like panting, Cas is there, one hand on his shoulder and easing him back.

"Do you need--"

"I'm fine." He'd probably be more convincing if each word wasn't being ground out between clenched teeth, but what he'd need to take to deal with the pain would knock him out so fast he wouldn't know he was asleep until the next time he woke up, disoriented and exhausted and panicking as he struggled to remember not just what happened or where he is, but his own goddamn name.

No matter how Vera looked today, she checks his reflexes, his memory, listens to not just his answers, but the words he uses and how fast he can give them. His heart stopped at least twice during a fever that ran high enough that they got a goddamn industrial icemaker working when medication and cool baths failed to bring it down, and the fading remains of water stains on the floor show him exactly where the tub was located. He was ready today to hear what kind of restrictions he'd have to live with, because every goddamn day, all those tests, all those notes, Vera's rare expression of surprise when he catches her unaware, are all about the brain damage she was sure he would have when--if--he woke up.

No matter what they tell him, he can't help but wonder if next time he wakes up, he won't remember anything at all; next time that there's a fever, it won't drop back down; next time his heart stops, Vera won't be able to get it started. No one walks away from a fever like that almost untouched without a fucking miracle, and there aren't any of those anymore.

He can feel Cas looking at him, but he keeps his gaze stubbornly fixed on the ceiling, the wall, anywhere else, because Vera didn't need to tell him he's Cas's one and only hobby these days. Cas's powers of attention are epic, and when you're the entire focus of them, you know it. He won't even pretend that bothers him anymore, but it can be pretty goddamn inconvenient when it comes to hiding anything.

"Vera says not to tax your energy too much, as you have none," Cas says casually, still seated on the edge of the bed, and a quick glance confirms Cas is equally fascinated with the lack of view of the night outside the window. "I could review the latest reports with you, or simply summarize: nothing is happening. However, if you wish, I can read you Phil's, which now includes a rudimentary system of chapters and occasional digressions into his feelings during key portions of his patrol duties."

Dean forgets to avoid Cas's gaze, looking at him incredulously. "About how he wants you to bang him until he can't walk? Why aren't you getting this?"

"If he wanted to have sex, he would have asked," Cas answers with the maddening logic of someone who lost his virginity in a goddamn militia camp and has no idea people who think every day could be their last have streamlined the process of getting laid beyond all recognition. He's tried, but Cas genuinely doesn't comprehend a world in which people sometimes have to invest in drinks and small talk before anyone gets to cop a feel, much less any orgasm-related action. "Besides, this was more--"
something about the sun in glory cruelly stealing the moon for itself when it could have any star in
the heavens. He seemed very bitter about it."

Okay, gotta give Cas that one. "Was he high?"

"No, I asked after the meeting," Cas assures him, still looking bewildered. "I verified the weather as
well. It's been overcast with a thirty-five percent chance of rain all this week."

Dean makes a mental note to eventually read it for himself, when even the idea of reading doesn't
make him want to die. "Better or worse than the hippo porn?"

"It's called 'journey to the…'--"

"He fucking hippos yet?" he asks curiously, surprised to realize he misses Cas's semi-regular updates
on hippofucker's progress down the Nile, where apparently everyone is both drop dead gorgeous and
offers sexual favors, and every hippo encounter is rife with a growing sense of uncomfortable sexual
tension. He gets why Cas was getting nervous; that's a lot of weirdly charged hippo encounters for
one person.

"I--no, not yet." He hesitates. "I've been distracted by other--events."

Dean almost dying of a fever, yeah, that'd be distracting. "Sorry?"

"It wasn't you," Cas corrects him with a shake of his head. "I stopped reading it before you became
ill so I could start translating it into English. I meant to give it to you when I reached the point I
stopped, but I was going to ask Kamal to review it first, as modern English isn't my native tongue."

"You're translating hippo porn for me?" What do you say to that, Dean thinks blankly; thank you just
doesn't cut it, somehow.

"Yes," Cas confirms after a noticeable delay, and he doesn't think he's imagining that Cas is bracing
himself for something, though what, he has no idea. "I thought--you seemed to find it interesting.
You're under no obligation to read it, of course, I simply--had some free time and needed something
to do to pass the…time."

"Can I see it?" Dean asks impulsively. "Uh, I mean--if you have it around somewhere."

Looking dubious, Cas nods and gets to his feet. "As you wish."

He watches Cas vanish out the door, coming back with one of the goddamn spiral notebooks and the
original text, giving Dean another uncertain look before seating himself on the edge of the bed again.
Setting aside the book, he opens the spiral, and Dean can just make out the neat lines of Cas's print,
mark-outs and corrections everywhere in every color under the sun.

"It may not be--"

Dean pats the mattress on his other side hopefully. "Read it to me."

"What?"

"Do you know who's fucking Kyle yet? Zoe's incense fetish going anywhere?" Cas shakes his head
in what Dean's pretty sure is bitter regret. "Then yeah, I want to hear this. Start at the beginning and
catch me up." It hits him suddenly; Cas stopped reading while he was translating. This could be the
text equivalent of watching TV together or something, which is so Cas that Dean feels himself
grinning. "What are you waiting for?"
Cas rolls his eyes, murmuring, "Yes, sir," under his breath before moving neatly over Dean's legs in one of those effortless shifts of balance that barely disturb the mattress (or Dean's arm, his ankle, the heart monitor, the IV, and other things currently attached to his body that he tries not to think about if he can help it). Reaching for a pillow, he stretches out beside him with a little sigh, folding the cover back and scanning the page before fixing Dean with a look just edging on uncertain. "I haven't had a chance to edit--"

"Anytime you're ready," Dean interrupts, settling himself to listen and ignoring Cas rolling his eyes.

"As you wish. 'Beyond the reaches of the Great and Holy swamp'--yes," he interrupts, looking up with a pained expression, "he didn't seem to know what to call the Delta, so he went with swamp, it's--execrable, there's no other word for it. 'Beyond the reaches of the Great and Holy Swamp, there dwelt a fair youth of beauty indescribable'--though he does try, for the next…" He scans the page, "…six, seven stanzas. 'Skin of well-burnished copper'--I think he meant bronze, but definitely metal, in any case. Lips of ruby--'a carbuncle gleaming like a blister swollen with new blood'--forgive me, I tried to make this sound sane. In retrospect, a pointless endeavor."

Dean tucks his left arm under his head and gives Cas an interested look. "Youth?"

"Should I have clarified?" Cas says, flashing him a grin. "Did you expect the appearance of a maiden for our Athenian hero to rescue?"

He grins: the dick. "Keep going."

--Day 66--

When Vera gives him his morning exam, Cas is suspiciously absent, which is definitely a first.

"He called a meeting of the whole camp," Vera tells him casually, stethoscope against his chest. Her eyebrows jump as she frowns down at his chest, which he assumes is in response to the sound of anticipation. "He said you had an idea to improve camp morale or something."

"Interesting." Dean glances out the window, wishing there was a view of the porch from here. "When?"

"They're gathering outside now. Lean forward," she adds impatiently, listening for a few pregnant moments before sitting back. "Okay, you're not dying yet. So--"

"You can watch from the door, right?"

"Yeah," she says suspiciously. "What's he doing, Dean?"

"Something new." Yawning, he settles back into bed to sleep the sleep of the righteous. "Go. You don't want to miss this."

--Day 67--

"--I don't think so," Cas says thoughtfully, dark head resting in one hand as he flips through the pages with a frown, tucking his hair impatiently behind his ear for the fifth time in the last hour. More than once, Dean's thought about introducing Cas to the concept of 'scissors' to solve the problem for good, but that would rob him of the entertainment value of Cas in a weird, eternal battle with his hair that he's never gonna win, and Dean's exactly bored enough for this to be fun.
Currently stretched out on his side in a faded green long-sleeve t-shirt and baggy jeans, relaxed and comfortable, Cas chews on his thumbnail while scanning the original poem in question, one bare foot tapping restlessly against the edge of the mattress. Frowning, he reaches for the pen that now accompanies him to every hippo-porn reading to make a correction, chewing contentedly on the cratered wasteland he's already made of the cap, tilts his head--and there we go, sixth time, and every goddamn time, it's a surprise.

Restless, as it turns out, was an understatement; if Cas isn't in motion, he desperately wants to be. Even when he's still (rare, and usually medically necessary), it's obviously under protest, a near-visible vibration growing beneath his skin. From Vera, he knows Amanda's regularly dragging him to the training field a couple of hours every day when Dean's sleeping (he assumes as part of the plan to keep Cas occupied and Vera sane: it's a small cabin to share with a sick guy and a living, breathing example of perpetual motion even when infinite knowledge isn't being used against her), but from what he can tell, all that does is take the edge off. Even Dean's constant exhaustion is cowed by all that aggressive, barely contained energy, like he's getting a contact hit from sheer proximity.

"Most humans wouldn't understand territoriality among the gods," Cas says finally, tipping his head sideways to stare at the page, fingers knotting in his hair absently before pushing it back again and rolling bonelessly onto his stomach, feet in the air and looking at Dean solemnly through a fringe of brown bangs. "Fuck my life, he thinks in horror, that's adorable; it's gotta be the brain damage Vera's not finding. "He less than most. Or anyone, ever."

Dean's about to point out that no one would fight a hydra by calling on Pallas Athena--Jesus, in Egypt? She'd laugh her ass off--when Vera appears at the open door, giving them both a look that's supposed to be annoyed but is mostly--Dean doesn't want to say 'startled' but it's kind of hard when her eyes fix on Cas sprawled over the greater part of the bed and then at him.

Cas belatedly notices Dean's attention and pushes himself lazily upright, hooking an arm around his knees. "Yes?"

"Just time for Dean's medication," she answers as she crosses the room, handing him the glass and a few pills and thereby cleverly getting hold of the spiral. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she marks the page with one hand and flips backward, eyes widening. "Holy shit, no wonder Dean sounded like he was dying. What is this?"

"Hippo porn." Taking the glass from Cas, Dean demonstrates his new talent for holding it without assistance and finishing the water along with his pills without either dropping it or collapsing from sheer exhaustion. Cas checks his temperature at a touch--he hasn't asked how he does that, figuring the answer is going to be weird (because Cas) so why bother--and Dean watches his face for any developments. "I'm fine."

"You're flushed," Cas says calmly, ignoring Dean's groan. "Vera--"

"From laughing at hippofucker," he protests. "Pallas Athena. Falling in love with a guy who only gets it up for--"

"That," Cas interrupts, "has yet to proven. Though I admit, I can't think of a less horrific alternate explanation."

"Wait, this is what you were translating for Dean?" Vera asks in surprise, focusing on Dean again with an unreadable expression. Flipping it back to the original page, she reluctantly gives the spiral back to Cas and gets out her stethoscope, automatically sliding the end into her hand. "Can you sit up, Dean? Off the pillows."
"I can do that," Dean tells her confidently, doing just that as she slips the body-warm metal under his scrub top and against his chest. "I could do this two, three minutes. All on my own."

"You're an inspiration to us all. Deep breath for me." She nods distractedly, listening, then moves it to his back. "Again. Now just breathe regularly." It's so automatic that Dean's almost surprised when it's over, and she sits back, looping the stethoscope around her neck with a faint smile. "Solid food at two weeks. You know what that means?"

"That I get wet bread and not-pureed meat?"

"That you and the bathroom can officially become re-acquainted." She grins maliciously at his flush. "Yeah, I thought you might like and be totally embarrassed by that. And my work here is done."

He touches his chest automatically. "And the monitor?"

She nods, grin softening. "You're not out of the woods yet, but the trees are thinning a lot. I'm going to get some blood tonight, but if everything checks out—not that I can check much, because say it with me—I'm--"

"--the best doctor ever," Dean tells her honestly. Her grin wobbles. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Blinking at him uncertainly, she starts to get up. "Uh, Dean, Cas, can I borrow hippo porn when you're done? It's great."

"Dude, stay for the next installment; you can catch up when I go to sleep," Dean says. "You gotta hear Cas read it. He hates the hero and the future boyfriend—I mean, everyone, really."

"I like Osiris," Cas answers defensively. "He's the only reasonable person in the entire poem."

"He wants to kill them both," Dean explains.

"I'm not sure of the origin anymore," Cas says, frowning at the open page disapprovingly. "There's a very strong medieval quality to the hero's journey--"

"Not a lot of hot virgin guys being pursued by horny failed college students on the Nile in medieval poetry," Dean answers easily. "Not that I studied the subject, but S--a friend would've told me when I made fun of what he took in college. It would've gotten my attention, trust me."

"If there was, I've have read it," Vera agrees, not seeming to notice his almost-slip. "I went to Texas State for my bachelor and Nursing at UT. If that was in the curriculum--anywhere, ever--I would have found it."

"There is that." Cas gives the spiral a dissatisfied look. "Of course you can borrow it--"

"But you won't get his ad-hoc lectures on the religious structure of the priesthood." He smirks at Cas. "Tell us about the nympho priests of the Great and Holy Swamp."

Cas's eyes narrow. "Egypt's priesthood included scholars, musicians, scribes, doctors, lawyers, and architects as part of their service to their gods. They didn't offer sexual favors to random disreputable youths with laughably terrible language skills, and if they had--they wouldn't, but they certainly wouldn't have been refused. That's insane."

"Here we go," Dean whispers, managing to get a surprised Vera by the sleeve and drag her against the bed before saying more loudly, "You played flute or something, right?"
"Three of my vessels were born to the caste and the last one was trained from early childhood as a 
musician-priest and scribe in her service to Egypt's gods. I played all of the sacred instruments and 
acted as scribe for three pharaohs when they were in the temple complexes of Memphis and Thebes 
as well as in Alexandria," Cas answers testily. "My services were requested by Cleopatra Philopator 
herself when she was anointed Pharaoh and god on earth by Ra, not that his presence was necessary 
to confirm her obvious divinity." He looks wistfully into the distance. "Ra's expression when he saw 
me--I suppose you had to be there."

Vera blinks slowly. "You knew Cleopatra? The Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile," Cas stills; first 
mistake: she was Pharaoh which is totally different because gods, "married Mark Antony--"

"Shut up," Dean hisses frantically far, far too late for it to matter. Cas's eyes widen, and he can't help 
but wonder if Cas sometimes judges him silently for knowing that goddamn Mark Antony speech.

"If you wish to speak of casting pearls before something that it would insult swine to be compared to, 
we can discuss that unspeakable union." From the corner of his eye, Dean sees Vera mentally adding 
Mark Antony to Calvin and Darwin on the list of people Cas apparently regrets not smiting the fuck 
out of when he had the chance.

"We don't," Dean promises sincerely. "Total dick, no lie, should have been drawn and quartered--"

"Beheaded, his body burned in holy fire, and his ashes scattered to avoid contaminating the earth."

"That." Satisfied, Cas returns his attention to the spiral and Dean whispers, "He has a thing for 
Cleopatra and one of Antony's earlier wives, it's--weird. And for fuck's sake, don't ever mention 
Brutus or some guy called Opimius." At Vera's quick, grateful nod, he turns his attention back to 
Cas. "So--"

"In any case, none of the caste of priests would lower themselves to consort with someone who 
called the Delta a swamp." He consults the page, then looks at Dean with exaggerated patience. "If I 
may continue?"

"Sit down," he murmurs to Vera, shifting enough to give her enough room on the bed to sit down. 
"We're about to get to how hippofucker kills a hydra with Athena's help due to her wanting his loser 
Athenian ass. Because that would totally happen."

"I'm glad that Athena didn't know about this," Cas murmurs, shaking his head. "'As he regretfully 
left the weeping priestling upon the swamp shores, lamenting the deathless call of his soul's respite'--I 
don't believe this, Eratosthenes should have killed him and butchered his putrid corpse before 
allowing him loose upon the world to commit this atrocity upon literature and good taste--'he braced 
himself for the least great of the great monsters…." He stops, staring at the page in bewilderment. 
"What does that even mean?"
--Day 70--

Though sitting up on the edge of the bed is exhausting, Dean's way too happy to care. Today, he got to sit up with a tray in front of him, and there was broth (with almost-meat!), wet bread, and vegetable something but definitely not mush, *on a plate*. Sure, it wiped him out, but whatever, *he sat up and ate actual food*, or at least something like food was fed to him because using utensils are still a work in progress, but the point is, he *did it*.

Giving the IV a long look, he decides that today--right now--he doesn't care about it, because he's looking right at the bathroom and in a moment--when he's less dizzy--he's gonna be using it as God intended.

"Dean--"

"Shut up." Dean reaches for the IV line and loops it over his wrist, then looks at Cas until he reluctantly walks over to the pole and kicks off the brake. Dean pulls it closer by its tubing--making Cas twitch and move it the rest of the way, which was the entire goal--before looking up at Cas expectantly. "Okay, operation piss in an actual toilet is a go. Ready?"

"No," Cas says, frowning down at him. "Not at all."

"Whatever." He extends his hand for Cas to help him up, shutting his eyes against the brief vertigo and letting Cas take his weight until his vision clears again and he can focus on the suddenly monumental task of walking a whole ten steps to the bathroom door. From the bed, it seemed a lot shorter.

"Okay," he tells himself as Cas places his now-constantly-tingling right arm over his shoulder, adding a deep breath for good measure before taking a step and gritting his teeth against another wave of vertigo. Jesus. This is gonna take longer than he thinks his current situation is gonna wait.

"Just a moment," Cas says, the arm around Dean's waist tightening, and the fact that he can still feel the floor under his feet is the only way he knows he's even standing up; it's like floating, except well, it's not. Tilting his head to look at Cas, currently maneuvering the IV away from Dean and taking it himself, careful of the tubing, he smiles his approval of preternatural strength, and not just because it's being used for a greater (Dean's) good.

The last couple of weeks have confirmed something Dean's suspected for a while; Cas has really been holding back on what he could do, and it wasn't just about seeing him fight. Cas said he never lived with anyone before, and Dean's pretty sure now that wasn't just the result Cas's highly developed misanthropic tendencies, though that probably helped.

There are things you just can't hide when you live with someone for long, but to give Cas credit, he managed to do it so well it never actually occurred to Dean that what he saw on a daily basis was less important than what he didn't.

Either the result of necessity in the face of extended illness or sheer, constant exposure, Cas is slipping, and in the most ridiculously mundane ways possible: fumbled glasses never hit the floor (Cas never seems to fumble anything, ever, but he and Vera aren't blessed with reflexes that may or not possibly break the sound barrier if required), trays of food are never overturned by anyone's sudden movement (it happens, he's tired, hospital corners, did he mention *tired as fuck*?), IV lines are
never pulled out by accident or tripped over to and from the bathroom, and Dean's steadied before he even notices his loss of balance sitting up or standing. More than once, he's seen Cas move things out of Vera's way when she's distracted before she can trip, catch any number of items falling from the bedside table before even gravity has time to notice, and retrieve pens, books, the clipboard, and Vera's stethoscope before Vera can accidentally sit on them or Dean roll over on them.

That Vera doesn't notice doesn't surprise him; Cas is very good at it, probably from years of practice when being around people was obligatory. What surprises him is that he does, and on a guess, he's supposed to. He's just on the verge of asking for a deck of cards and seeing how much Cas knows about using all that for evil and profit, or at least some awesome practical jokes because Dean's exactly that bored and why not?

Maneuver accomplished, Cas shifts Dean's weight back to the floor before stopping, feet just touching the wood. "Are you going to insist you simply require balance just to prove a point to no one who will actually care?"

Dean scowls at him; he can damn well walk to the bathroom. "Dude--"

"Is the goal to attempt to travel the entire distance into the bathroom--which will inevitably fail, but you may try--or use the bathroom for one of its intended purposes? You'll only accomplish one of those things. Decide now so Vera can--"

"Don't say it." Frowning into the open door, the cool tile beckons temptingly with its lack of invasive instruments and utter horror, he admits Cas may have a point. "Yeah, okay. Let's do this."

"Thank you." The sarcasm is half-hearted at best, Cas's concentration focused on assessing Dean's strength--non-existent, as usual--before the IV pole is placed just to the side of the door, tubing carefully maneuvered to easily slide beneath it--he can't swear to this, but he doesn't remember the bottom of the door having that much of gap--and he's carefully left to lean back against the sink by the toilet in semi-casual triumph.

"I will be right outside," Cas says after a few seconds of Dean staring at him significantly. Some moments aren't meant to be shared (or even exist, but he's accepted he's going to have a lot of moments like that in his immediate future). "Very well, please attempt to avoid falling and concussing yourself before I can stop you."

Dean smiles brightly. "Get out, Cas."

With a dubious look at the toilet, Cas turns to the door, closing it deliberately behind him. Dean squints; yeah, that's definitely a new gap. Dismissing it, he savors his moment of triumph for a moment, then gets down to business, in charity with his scrubs. Hideous teal or not, they definitely make this a lot easier.

Dean's been hospitalized--wow, a lot--but the advantage of a hospital is that everyone is, for the most part, in the same goddamn position of achieving wellness with the assistance of zero privacy and constant personal humiliation. A cabin in Chitaqua is not a hospital and Vera and Cas are not vaguely medical shaped persons of indeterminate identity who he'll never see again.

On the other hand, Vera is a medical professional and she knows how to turn on the faceless thing well enough that he can deal, given an hour to get over the horror of someone that hot having seen pretty much every inch of his body in the shittiest circumstances possible. Cas, while not a medical professional and--from Dean's observation--intimately interested in and acquainted with human bodies in almost surreally complicated maneuvers in the interests of orgasms, still lacks even the most
rudimentary understanding of self-consciousness; embarrassment doesn't even register.

More importantly, unless it's brought to his attention via a lot of explanation, he doesn't even notice it in other people. It can be comforting--oblivious to Dean's discomfort when Vera's examining him--or utterly beyond horrifying--carrying on a one-sided conversation with Dean from the doorway (and dear God it took a long time to get him that far away) as Vera does a catheter removal interspersed with questions to her about the process that will haunt Dean's nightmares---but it's the kind of rock-solid consistency that he really thinks he needs more of in his life.

Cas sees no reason why he shouldn't be in the bathroom for Dean's historic moment, but once Dean explained--using way more words than he should've needed--he agreed to it with the same faint bewilderment at the weirdness of humanity that Dean remembers from a certain newly-vesseled angel. Some things never change.

Slowly, taking his time to savor the moment (and not fall the fuck over), Dean turns to the sink, reaching for the faucet to wash his hands. Glancing up at the mirror, time seems to stop, and something in Dean's mind snaps with an audible crack, like a twig breaking in a quiet forest, or maybe, just maybe, the world really ended after all.

"…Dean," Cas is saying urgently, and he stares up at the wide blue eyes--worry, he thinks distantly, terror, what?--but when Cas touches his face, trying to get his attention, Dean flinches hard enough to knock his head against the wall with an audible thump like a splitting watermelon. "Dean?"

Blinking, he stares over Cas's shoulder at the mirror, now innocently reflecting the ceiling and the far wall, and tries to figure out how to put this. He really should have asked--that fever, it was high, right, so maybe he--this is Cas, and he said he can't resurrect him again, but what if he tried and--"Am I dead?"

"What?" Cas's gaze follows his to the mirror in bewilderment before returning, color draining from his face. Before he can get away--he's flat against a fucking wall, where he's going to go?--Cas rests a hand on Deans' forehead that he can feel is shaking. "Is the fever--"

"I saw--" Dean swallows--everything's in slow motion and weird and right now, he…doesn't know. Looking down, he shoves up the sleeve the long sleeve t-shirt he wears under the scrub top and stares at his own arm under the bright, harsh bathroom lights, noticing for the first time how thin it is, bones pushing insistently beneath papery yellow skin broken in peeled patches of dead white like they'll break through at any moment--how did he miss that? He thought the scrubs were just stupidly huge, but maybe he's just--he stares at the bandage covering his forearm and looping over his wrist and palm, peeling skin around the edges in curls of pus-white, and it doesn't hurt, it should hurt why doesn't it hurt? "What happened to me?"

"Dean," Cas says softly, fingers pushing Dean's head up, blue eyes searching his face intently. "What's wrong?"

"I--in the mirror--" Reaching up, he touches his forehead, sliding up to feel the stubble--his hair, what happened, when did that happen--drawing his fingers down clammy skin, trying to find what he saw in the mirror. Sunken cheeks, skin stretched too tightly over bare bone, hollowed out eyes ringed in thick circles of rotting black, patches of peeling yellow and white skin broken with shocks of angry red, smears of green and dots of purple, fleshless lips stretched to splitting over teeth--it had taken a full minute to realize he was looking at himself. It looked dead--it looked dead, days dead, just starting to rot but not bright enough to know it was supposed to stop walking, stop breathing, stop living. "Cas, did you--the fever, did you do something when--did I really recover or--"
"Did I resurrect you as a zombie?" Cas interrupts, so transparently incredulous that Dean snaps back into the room with an almost physical jolt, like he sat down hard enough to jar him to his bones. Which, he realizes abruptly, he probably did; he's sitting on the floor, right. He doesn't remember how that happened. "I--no," he seems to decide. "I lacked the necessary components, such as knowledge, and unfortunately I still possessed sanity, such as it is. Being subject to the constraints of reality was also a problem."

Dean nods, licking his lips and winces, flashing on that fleshless mouth grinning at him from the mirror. He doesn't even realize he's staring at the mirror again until Cas turns to look at it, studying it for a few long minutes.

"Oh," he says, sitting back on his heels abruptly. "Your appearance surprised you?"

There's not a word in the English language that could be less appropriate than 'surprised'. "Yeah, a little."

Cas glances at the mirror again with an expression Dean can't interpret, then shifts off his knees, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

"Vera attempted many different treatments before we found one that worked," he says, watching Dean intently. "There were side effects from those as well as the fever. Vera said that you would find it much less disturbing to not wake up to seeing your hair begin to fall out, and in any case, I assumed even if it was not total, you would find the patches--" he pauses, obviously searching for the right word, "--annoying and wish to shave it yourself for--aesthetic purposes until it began to grow again. I dealt with the problem so it wouldn't be a source of stress."

"Right." He actually doesn't know how he would have reacted to seeing that. Survey says: really fucking badly. "Okay, and--"

"You've lost almost fifty pounds since the fever began," Cas continues, watching him. "Your current diet hasn't been sufficient to do much more than keep your weight static, and you're still dangerously underweight. Currently, your skin is also recovering from the side effects of the combination of medications and the fever itself, and in case you aren't aware of this, you haven't been exposed to direct sunlight since you arrived here. It is temporary, though I can see how you might find it disconcerting. He pauses, blue eyes widening. "Your body did something unexpected and it upset you because you didn't know what it was doing or why it was doing it."

And he looks dead, but Cas's sudden comprehension reminds him that once upon a time, Cas's body wasn't just new to him but new to him. When it started acting human and he--still wasn't. When he had to figure out what to do with it.

"I apologize," Cas says, looking away with a frown. "I should have realized what you would experience when you saw yourself."

"S'okay," he answers. "Well, you not noticing I look like a corpse--"

"You don't," Cas interrupts, looking at him in surprise. "In addition to weight, muscle tone was also lost and your current low level of activity contributes to its slow return. Dean, as the one who is primarily responsible for your daily care, I can assure you, the changes are both temporary and largely cosmetic."

He nods slowly; even knowing that, knowing it was probably shock, the image of the thing in the mirror won't get out of his head. "It doesn't--bother you," he tries, not sure what he's asking. He's been out of it enough to ignore what couldn't be helped--sponge baths, his mind offers in belated
horror—but he didn't have any idea what it was Cas and Vera were looking at, touching, dealing with day in and day out. Honest to God, he's never been that fucking hung up on how he looks, not like this.

"You look--" Cas pauses. "You look as if you survived a fever that almost killed you. You look like you woke up and knew who you were and where you were. You knew who I was and who Vera was and then you fell asleep. You look like you woke up again and you still knew those things. Every day, you do these things, and when you have a fever, it goes away, and when you fall asleep, you keep waking up." Cas's voice cracks. "You couldn't look any better than you do right now."

Dean wonders if near-fatal illness is the new drunken confession time.

"Yeah, okay." After a second, he says, not looking at Cas, "Uh, you know, I--haven't said--told you, I mean." Rolling his eyes at himself, he forces out the words. "I get how much this--doing all this--you shouldn't have to. That wasn't part of--" Their agreement, which is looking a lot worse from Cas's side these days. Like, even worse than it did before.

"I have no idea what you--" Cas sighs, looking annoyed, but at least that lost look vanishes. "I understand human discomfort with forcible intimacy due to medical necessity, as Vera explained it to me very thoroughly." Oh God, he's glad he missed that conversation. "If you were in a hospital, it would be--" He obviously has no context for it, so he gestures vaguely to convey what Dean assumes is 'however you feel that is strange to me', "--different. But to remind you, I formed your body from its DNA and that was crumbling bones and some mortifying flesh."

Dean stares at him. "Jesus."

"As I was saying," he continues, eyes narrowing, "I know it very well. In a sense, other than yourself, of course, I'm best qualified to care for it, and I--" He pauses again, obviously trying very hard to be sensitive or something, which is kind of disturbing. "Other than yourself, of course, I have the most right to be chosen to do so. Why you would think otherwise is--" His expression conveys how weird humans are about shit like this and that he's getting tired of it, so stop already. "I suppose your illness makes it difficult to understand."

"Yeah, that would be the reason. Don't know what I was thinking." The sarcasm's totally wasted; Cas just nods, pleased, like Dean's said something unexpectedly reasonable. He'd put this up to Cas trying—very weirdly—to make him feel better, but exposure apparently does wonders for his Cas to English. In a way, he kind of gets how Cas sees it; he supposes if he was having this hideously embarrassing conversation with Sam—with Sam feeling like Dean does right now—he'd be pretty much trying to say something like this, and he probably wouldn't be doing much better. Without, admittedly, any reference to being resurrected from his DNA or his goddamn bones and mortifying flesh, Christ.

"I'm saying thanks," he decides. "Now can we--"

"Get out of here? Yes, please." Cas liquidly shifts to a crouch—what does he do with his bones when he does that, anyway?—then hesitates, glancing at him warily, and yeah, that flinch. Making a monumental effort, he hooks one nearly boneless arm over Cas's shoulder and waits for Cas to ease them both to their feet, content to let him handle the logistics. What's the use of having an ex-angel with residual superpowers if not to use them for personal gain, like moving?

"Jesus, what the hell happened," he wonders, forcing his eyes away from the gleam of the mirror on their way to the door. "Bathroom, just wanted to piss in a goddamn toilet."

Cas doesn't comment, helping Dean back into bed, fussily arranging his IV—no heart monitor or
other things to worry about these days, Dean realizes with a flicker of remembered pleasure—and waiting for him to finish his glass of water and take his medicine, and it's almost like it didn't happen at all. Dean's drifting a little as Cas excuses himself, and sleep is just on the horizon when he comes bolt upright, startled awake by the sound of something shattering.

Dean stares at the bathroom door, utterly floored, as Cas comes back out, checking himself when he sees Dean staring at him incredulously and belatedly trying to hide his bleeding hand. "Dean. I thought--"

"What the--" Okay, fuck that. "Come here. Wait, get the first aid kit and then come here. Now."

Cas sighs, going back into the bathroom before emerging again with the kit. When he reaches the bed, Dean has all the energy he needs to jerk Cas down on the bed.

"Dean--" Cas says in alarm, righting himself in a disorienting blur of speed ending with soft landing in the middle of the bed, barely even bouncing the mattress as he settles to give Dean a scowl, and Dean takes a moment to appreciate watching Cas do that; it's just cool. Then he leaves it for later, because Cas is trying to hide his hand.

"Did you just--Cas, I saw your hand, stop it. Let me see it." Looking even more annoyed, Cas extends his hand, and Dean jerks it closer in malice aforethought to get a better look. Taking in the split skin over the first and second knuckles, the rest reddening with the promise of serious bruising in the near future, Dean checks carefully for slivers of glass before, satisfied, he glares at Cas.

"What the hell was that about? Did you break the goddamn mirror?"

"I never liked mirrors," Cas starts.

"Except to shave and you know, not cut your throat," he says incredulously, pulling the kit closer and unpacking it on the bed between them. "What the hell--"

"Every time you go in there, you would've either avoid looking in the mirror or forced yourself to look at it and remembered this," Cas says. "Now you won't have to."

Every once in a while, Cas does shit like this, startling him so badly he can't even get around to working out a way to deny it.

"Seven years bad luck." Cas rolls his eyes; yeah, right, look at his life to date. Doing a quick clean and bandage, Dean almost decides they've hit their limit on how many times Cas misses the concept of 'awkward' in conversations for the day, but the way he said that…. "You don't like mirrors."

"No."

"What do you see?"

Cas meets his eyes. "Exactly what's there."

Swallowing, he thinks of a tiny barn in the middle of nowhere, shadows of something incomprehensibly huge stretching across the walls, contained by a being who defined the impossible. He wonders, really wonders, how often over the years Cas stood there and stared into that goddamn mirror, penance or punishment or masochism or hell, all three, looking at what was missing, and honestly, he's glad he gave Cas a reason to get rid of the fucking thing.

"So how's it going with the camp and everything?" he asks quickly, belatedly letting Cas take his hand back. "Anything new to report?"
Cas raises an eyebrow, a hint of incredulity wiping the blank expression away. "You mean among those that survived after I drew a blood circle to resurrect you as a zombie and used their lives as the sacrifice to whatever god was still available, of which there are none?"

That's his fucked-up angel; there's always time for sarcasm. "Get me some water and we'll start there."

Dean's found exploiting Cas's level of comfort a distinct advantage post-fever; he won't mention Dean looks tired as long as he's comfortable, and that chair is a fuckload less comfortable than getting half a mattress to lounge on.

"Joseph's team returned earlier today," Cas says, leaning an elbow on his knee, pillow conveniently in reach to pull out for lounging purposes at any moment; Dean now makes sure of it. "He turned in his preliminary report before he went to bed, but he's supposed to report tomorrow after he and his team have slept."

"In a hurry to get back, huh?" Dean asks, finishing his water in quiet triumph. "Sounds good."

"We had more than Joseph expected in the accounts, and he was also able to use all of what we offered in trade, so apparently we saved money we can use for later bribery purposes."

Dean snorts. "I like to think of it as embracing the spirit of giving."

"Then I suppose the use of blackmail at the eastern checkpoint should be considered embracing silence in the spirit of kindness?" Cas asks curiously.

He reaches for his glass of water and takes a drink. "Do I want to know?"

"It's one of the few sexual acts I've never been remotely tempted to try or even know existed. Fortunately, Joseph didn't feel the need to tell me how we found out."

"That would be no." Cas nods in relief. "So what did we use and what did we get?"

"Twenty M16A2 rifles, thirty M-24, and fifteen M-4 carbines from the military supplies we acquired. Ammunition, of course, and several boxes of grenades, as well as a small amount of the C4, though Ana insists we keep the rest of it for our own use, which I assume means we have a use for it."

"You said she was an explosives expert in the Marines, right?" Cas nods. "Ours is not to question why. Ours is to keep the woman who likes to blow things up happy."

"That was my feeling as well."

Dean frowns. "We kept some for ourselves, right?"

"Yes, of course," Cas answers with a snort. "Two teams were assigned to continue inventory of the military outposts and move their supplies here, but as yet, we have yet to complete those in Kansas City alone. Two of the cabins were repaired enough to act as storage, but we'll need another one soon at this rate of acquisition."

"Cas, you ask yourself why the border guards--who are pretty well armed from what I understand--need weapons?"

"They trade them on the black market as well as to those in the infected zones for exorbitant prices; it's very lucrative from what I understand, and some of what we acquired isn't available anywhere..."
else. If you're worried whether it will be traced to us here, don't be; the border is under military rule, and any border guard discovered dealing any supplies to those within an infected state for any reason, especially arms, is shot on sight."

Dean swallows, not sure if he wishes that were a surprise. "And they still think it's worth the risk."

"They make the people in infected zones pay exorbitant prices for seeds to grow food, gasoline to run their vehicles and generators, antibiotics to heal infections and illnesses, and water purification supplies when their water supply is limited to rivers and lakes," Cas answers evenly. "Love of money is the root of many evils, as I'm sure you know, not least what people will choose to become in their pursuit of it. They've become experts in concealing their activities when utilizing the black market to their personal benefit, provided we make it worth their while, and we do."

Yeah, still not surprised. "What about contacting Dean's old dealers?"

"Nothing has resulted from our initial inquiries, but Joseph didn't expect any answer for at least a few months due to the number of channels being utilized," Cas answers, voice losing that chilling edge; only Cas, Dean reflects, can convey so much condemnation in so few words. "We were able to get the current passcodes for all the border checkpoints currently in the United States and on both the Mexican and Canadian borders, as well as all the border patrol routes. They are subject to random change as well every time the border guards are reassigned, but we are guaranteed accurate updates for the next four months, which is when the next change of personnel is scheduled."

"Holy shit." He only asked for the Kansas ones. "Tell Joe nice job."

"The border guards, I assume, have never heard that there are some things money, or sufficient carbines, can't buy," Cas says with the ghost of a smile. "As you requested, we now have an updated list of the infected zones in the United States, both the fictional public version and the actual list, and the current commonly used routes between the infected and non-infected states used by those companies with authorization to deliver goods. The worldwide data on the spread of Croatoan is pending, since international information is difficult to obtain, which I assume means they'll tell us what they want in return for that information at the next scheduled meeting. The other information you requested is also available, but Joseph's preliminary report was only a summary for me to give to you. When we meet with him tomorrow, you can ask him for the specifics."

Dean opens his mouth and forgets the question when he catches the pronoun. "We?"

"Yes, he's coming tomorrow afternoon to give his report to you in person, though I'll be in attendance of course," Cas says casually. "Vera said the risk is very low provided the meeting is short in deference to your strength and Joseph takes the appropriate precautions. I explained them to him before he went to bed, and Vera will examine him before he's allowed in the room."

Dean thinks of the mirror again with a start of horror. "I don't think--"

"He needs to see you," Cas interrupts, something flickering across his face that Dean doesn't quite catch. "He needs to see you alive and breathing and hear you speak to him and know you're getting better. They all do, but Joseph's visit will reassure them--"

"Who?" he asks blankly.

"The camp," Cas answers, like he's wondering about Dean's sanity. "Your soldiers. Those who lived on the porch for two weeks and only with an effort could Vera and I assure them you were well enough that they could leave. There was praying and singing, I'm sure I told you about that. Your entire fever had a soundtrack of morbid hymns, depressing a capella secular music in the key of tone.
deaf as well as rhythm absent and volume excessive, and terrible drinking songs during frequent periods of mass inebriation, listening to which I'm certain deserves its own circle of Hell."

"You were serious about that." Dean tries and fails to think of something to say to that other than apologize for humanity not being up to the standards of an angelic choir. "Did Joe really threaten to kidnap a doctor?"

"Oh yes," Cas answers easily, starting to look amused. "Once I had to threaten to chain him to his own kitchen sink and tell him his grandmother would be terribly disappointed in his behavior."

Right. "Were he and Dean--"

"No," Cas interrupts, amusement fading into seriousness. "They weren't."

Oh. "He wants to see me."

"Almost as much as I did and still do waiting for you to wake up," Cas tells him. "Anything else or will you attempt to hide beneath the covers when he arrives?"

"I could order him not to come." Cas rolls his eyes, and he wonders why he's even trying. "Fine, whatever. When's the next meeting with the border?"

Cas's expression tells him he didn't miss the change of subject. "In a month." He hesitates, looking--Dean's not sure what that look means. "I thought it might be advisable to stay in closer contact to more quickly receive information on recent events, so Joseph will continue meeting with them regularly once a month."

So this is what it looks like when Cas decides to try something new. "Good so far. Anything else?"

"We're both also still one and two on the current FBI Most Wanted List and the militia is still listed on the terrorist watch list, though as of two weeks ago we're located in Georgia. So we still can't board any flight on the continental United States, assuming air travel wasn't currently banned throughout most of the world."

"Tell me I'm number one."

Cas's mouth twitches. "You are, but only because Dean was actually seen trafficking weapons on the Texas border while I had the sense to stay hidden." Looking satisfied, he adds, "Half of the currently occupied cabins are now up to standard for electricity and plumbing, the generators in the garage repaired and in use, and three quarters of Chitaqua has been mowed, so the fire hazard is all but eliminated."

Dean nods and carefully avoids thinking that one, Cas is probably being literal, and Chitaqua has a lot of fucking lawn. "Awesome."

Cas hesitates for a long moment. "Amanda wished to talk to me in private today."

Dean reminds himself firmly this is his camp and being sick, this is the only way to get to know his people. "Anything new?"

"She thinks she knows who is spending their nights with Kyle. She's narrowed it down to three people, and she has a theory on why one of them is the most likely."

Dean leans forward. "Who?"
"You're aware Kyle is very argumentative on patrol assignments since Cynthia was injured and I replaced her with James? He thinks he should have been consulted on the composition of his team and that I'm overstepping my authority, or so he tells anyone who will listen to him expound on the subject, at length. Excluding me, of course."

"Of course." Dean files that away for future thought. "Keep going."

"You told me the first time you arrived here, you were the subject of an altercation with Risa regarding--"

"Jane, yeah, I--wait. No way." Dean stares at him. "You're fucking with me."

Cas closes his eyes. "They're apparently finding consolation for our cruelty to them with each other."

"Oh God," Dean says, appalled, before forcing himself to get back to the subject. "So what's going on with Andy and Kat?"

--Day 73--

Dean appreciates that his recovery is gonna be slow and not every day will be filled with exciting progress reports. He gets this, he does, but the last time he had problems with solid food, he had the flu. Sam, being a giant fucking girl, fed him vegetable broth and grass (sprouts? Whatever) even though he could have done it himself if Sam didn't maliciously given him a spoon that weighed a fucking ton. It was hugely embarrassing, and Sam enjoyed every goddamn minute of it.

It's not the quality of solid food (bread, shredded meat untyped, chopped vegetables untyped, soup in all its terrifying incarnations), or how tiring it is to sit up to open and close his mouth on command, or even the sheer embarrassment of having to be fed two meals of three.

It's that it's difficult, because he's never hungry now: it's hard, because he forgets about meals until one's in front of him: it's an effort, every damn time, because he doesn't want to eat. He recognizes the schedule that Cas adheres to like a goddamn message from God; it's the one he started and made Cas follow to get some goddamn normalcy living here and he follows it to the goddamn second; he has to, because if he doesn't, Dean wouldn't remember to eat.

The only thing that makes this less utterly humiliating is the sheer weirdness of Cas's grim determination to apparently master the complicated art of being a nurse without any actual people skills or even a working idea of what those are or how to implement them. He can't say in all honesty he's helping Cas out with his Interacting With People 101 either, and not just because it's kind of hilarious.

Cas was good at being a junkie and good at being a dick and good at making sure everyone knew those things; it was a script that was easy and simple, almost effortless in a life that was anything but, and Dean gets that, he does, but he figures it's time for a change. Historically, Cas has been fine with going off-script given motivation, and, historically, Dean's been pretty good at supplying it. One way or another, Cas is gonna start actually dealing with having a personality of his very own and letting other people see it live and not whatever he thought up that might be useful in alienating people as much as humanly (post-angelically?) possible.

As Cas impatiently holds out the last spoonful of canned cream of chicken, swimming with may or may not be bits of actual meat, Dean's pretty sure he's about a second away from getting it shoved straight through his throat; so fine, he's also motivated by being fucking sick of being this goddamn sick.
"I don't need--" Dean tries and then it's all shitty metal-flavored cream of and teeth hitting metal and Jesus, they should have let him die. Swallowing frantically, he wipes his mouth and glares at Cas. "God dammit, Cas!"

With a sigh of insulting relief, Cas sets the empty bowl aside and glares back at Dean as if he deliberately contracted a fever just to fuck with his life. "Even if currency were a valid method of exchange for goods and services here," he says bitterly, "I still couldn't pay anyone to deal with this no matter how much I offered them."

That's his surly ex-angel working impromptu. "Do your federal warrants include crimes against humanity? Because I think I'm seeing why." Rolling his eyes, he sighs noisily when Cas touches his forehead, blue eyes distant. At some point, he stopped finding it creepy, which yeah, could be fever-related brain damage, but at this point, he really can't find it in himself to care. "How am I doing?"

"Your temperature is approximately ninety-nine point six two eight three degrees Fahrenheit. As it hasn't risen to a critical level in over two weeks, you continue to respond appropriately to the antibiotics, and you're now able to consume a minimal amount of nutrition at every meal, I think we can safely say the nightmare is almost over."

Short version: still not dead.

"Thanks, Cas. It's been great for me, too." He crosses his arms, careful of the IV line, feeling annoyed with his own exhaustion just from sitting up and swallowing on command. "I can't believe a brownie bite does this."

Vera's started hiding her charts since he started spending more time awake, and she's good, but he's better at pretending to be asleep and catching her reading them--charts, during the Apocalypse, he's not sure why that's funny, but it is--with a bewildered expression.

They went through a lot of treatments, that much he was told, but it wasn't until she left the clipboard on his bed that he understood what that really meant. He pulled out the bottom ten pages before she came back to get it--considering the number, barely noticeable--and read through them during his designated nap times (read: whenever either Cas or Vera decided he looked tired and they were only mostly right) trying to figure out what the hell happened to him. It's not that Cas wouldn't tell him if he asked; it's that whatever happened, he's not sure Cas is ready to talk about all of it. The two times his heart stopped are worrying, but not nearly as much as why the last one has a lot of cross-outs, entire areas of potential prognosis scratched out entirely.

Vera's a very good nurse and a hell of a working doctor. She didn't do that because she thought she made a mistake in treating him or did something wrong--she was the only one who would be reading it, or understand it for that matter, or so she probably thought. She still tests him every morning and evening, and while the quality is less intense, more routine, there's a reason she's still doing it and still making notes on his progress (chart shows: almost insanely good, awesome). The only thing he can guess is that something changed between when she got his heart going the last time, her initial observations (likely at that point, the potential damage) and coming back later and removing it because apparently, she thought they were wrong.

Then Cas says, "It doesn't."

He hesitates, glancing back at the closed door, then at Dean, blue eyes searching. Whatever he's looking for, he seems to find; to Dean's surprise, he gets up and locks the door before settling himself cross-legged on the bed. "At least, I don't think it wasn't entirely the brownie bite."

He nods slowly. "Okay."
"Actually, I'm sure it wasn't, but I was trying to be considerate of your continued weakness and causing you undue stress during your recovery."

The sad part is, Cas probably thinks he's being nice; for him, it probably is. "Thanks," he says between his teeth, remembering that he's got to be sensitive and shit to Cas's feelings here, since he's got to try and model non-dick behavior on the off-chance Cas picks it up. Stranger things have happened, like *almost dying from a brownie bite*. "You wanna explain?"

"No, I don't, but it seems I'll have to anyway." Cas rubs his eyes tiredly, and Dean feels a faint twinge of guilt before he can suppress it. "You contracted a very mild infection from the bites, one that under normal circumstances you wouldn't have even been aware you had. However, it's not uncommon for it to spread without sufficient treatment, which is why I insisted on treating you when you returned from patrol. Why the team leaders didn't insist on doing so immediately is still a mystery."

Dean doesn't ask what Cas did about that; three quarters of Chitaqua is mowed, after all.

"Instead of simply becoming somewhat ill after a day or two and lasting a week at most, within ten hours, it escalated in a pattern similar to someone suffering from an autoimmune disorder." Before he can start to wonder if this is panic-worthy, Cas adds rigidly, "Or someone who had been thrust into an entirely new environment and therefore, had no resistance to any of the bacteria present."

He wishes he couldn't follow that. "Dorothy, we're still in Kansas, not Oz."

"You were displaced in spacetime," Cas answers quietly. "It only looks like the same world; it's not."

"Like *War of the Worlds*, death by goddamn cold? Is that what--"

"Something like that, except no, not at all, so stop interrupting me so I can try to find a way to explain this." Cas looks like he's visibly bracing himself. "In general, moving humans in spacetime is discouraged, though there's no way you could know that, since it seems to happen to you with alarming frequency." There's a general impression Cas feels Dean just didn't try hard enough to avoid it.

"I'm special like that." He almost wishes he hadn't asked. "What does that mean? Is this going to happen every time I get injured?"

"It's complicated," Cas says, avoiding Dean's eyes. "However--"

"You don't know."

"A corporeal body can't survive the process of being moved through space and time without protection, obviously." Dean nods impatiently; that's so not fucking obvious. "What is less obvious is that just being in the wrong time is equally dangerous, though for different reasons."

Dean stills. "Wait, if you knew this could happen, why the hell didn't you tell me when I got here?"

"It shouldn't have happened." Cas slumps, visibly bringing himself under control before he continues. "It's--insert the word 'impossible' here, I don't have a better one, though you're a living example of just that."

He nods carefully, trying to decide how to approach this. "Why?"

"The same reason that the manipulation of time is almost exclusively limited to those that exist outside of time," Castiel answers tightly, and the way he's staring at the bedspread scares Dean like
nothing he's actually said. "In a manner of speaking, existing outside of time means that when living within linear time, it is always as a visitor, so that protection is inherent to their very being. Moving someone else in time automatically extends that protection to them by the law of contamination. There's no way to separate one from the other and no possible way to voluntarily withdraw it; in essence, for the purposes of this conversation, you're part of them. When I took you to see your mother, whether or not I was visible, I was there; you couldn't have stayed in that time if I wasn't."

"And there's no way around that?"

"With the exception of literal divine intervention in the laws of Creation themselves--that would be my Father, in case this needs clarification--there shouldn't be, but as you're here....." Cas makes a face; yeah, he gets it. "It's not just that. The power required to do this--to move you from your own timeline into another one entirely--is tremendous, far more than simple time travel, and the knowledge and skill to do it are even more rare. At this point, I've eliminated all the potential candidates, including those that I made up to entertain myself when reality failed me."

"Right." Swallowing, Dean makes himself ask. "So how long until--how long do I have?"

Cas frowns. "What do you mean?"

"What do--" Dean stares at him. "Until I die! Until being here kills me! What the fuck do you think I'm talking about?"

Cas's expression flickers briefly, too fast for Dean to follow. "While this doesn't shorten the list of ways you can die here in any meaningful sense--this being you--we can eliminate 'existing here at all' from consideration."

"You just said--"

"If you stop interrupting me, I would have already finished this explanation." Cas looks at him meaningfully, which he ignores. "In the future, any injuries or infections should follow the same course as they would have in your own world, though the process is uncertain, this being new--"

"Cut to the chase."

"You're adapting to this world." Cas lets out a breath. "Humans do this quite often. That's how you survive your environment; you adapt to it. In this case--Vera could explain better, but it's not uncommon to attempt several different treatments before finding the one that works for a given illness. The challenge was keeping you alive long enough for a treatment to be found that would slow the spread of the infection enough for your immune system to begin to respond."

Dean licks his lips. "You could tell what was happening to me."

"I didn't know I could until--I felt it," Cas says, looking away. "I knew all we had to do was keep you alive long enough for you to adapt; once you did, you would recover."

"You just needed time."

Cas nods. "From Vera's observations, I think the reason why your condition degraded so rapidly is that in your world, you were never bitten by a brownie. They're non-terrestrial in origin, which gives the human body a limited immunity to the bacteria they carry, but to compensate for that, the infection rate is very high. You, however, had no existing exposure from a previous infection in your world, which might have been enough for your body to note the points of similarity."

"And it won't happen again?"
"There's a small possibility of a slight increase in severity should you contract a virus or another infection for some time—which is inevitable, I know—but this infection acted as catalyst, giving your body the blueprint. Rather like a very drawn out and hideously slow vaccine or—" Cas brightens, looking pleased with himself, "--learning a new language. It's fluency is still in question, but it's only a matter of time."

Like learning a new language: that almost makes sense.

"So that's it? Just bad luck? "It can't be that easy. His life isn't that easy.

"Good luck in one way." Cas hesitates, mouth thinning. "Your body may have adapted faster if it were measles, due to your body having those exact antibodies--one world to the left, that is--and if your vaccinations were up to date, which I doubt considering this is you, but in theory. On the other hand--brownie infections are normally very mild; anything more serious might have killed you before your body could adapt. For that matter, if it was anything that Vera wasn't familiar with or that we didn't have the means to treat, it might have been different."

"And how long are we at plague level precautions here?" Dean asks.

"While your recovery might seem slow, it's actually progressing very rapidly; the problem is the strain your body was under during the fever. We're in a camp, not a hospital, and right now, you're vulnerable to any infection, however mild, which could then result in a relapse, which you don't have the reserves to deal with. This cabin and this room are currently as close as Vera and I could get to something resembling the conditions you would have at a hospital, but now that you're relatively cognizant, a great deal will be up to you and how well you follow Vera's strictures."

Dean nods slowly. "And if I do? Letter and spirit."

"According to Vera, there was no damage to any of your major organs, which--she tries not to use the word 'miracle' but even I can't think of a better word--so if you adhere to Vera's schedule and avoid any further infections during your recovery, she thinks--and I know--that you should be fine." Cas smiles faintly at his dubious expression. "There are certain advantages associated with having an angel resurrect you after your body had already almost entirely decomposed; I'm very intimately acquainted with your specific genetic makeup and its exact parameters. While I won't go into detail, suffice to say, I now better understand why my Father chose to create Eve from Adam's still-living rib; it saved Him a great deal of time and bother. While building an entire human body from DNA fragments is of course far less difficult than starting with bare dirt and an active imagination, I would have done a great deal for just one well-preserved--" He glances at Dean's expression and stops short, fighting back a smirk. "Too much detail?"

"A little, yeah." Dean cocks his head. "Even without Grace you can still tell?"

"Grace only provided the most convenient means to accomplish your resurrection," Cas says slowly. "It was a tool, nothing more. You were an act of Creation, and what I create I will always know."

Mouth dry, Dean can't make himself look away; when Cas finally does, he's not sure whether to be relieved or disappointed. "So--that's it?"

"As soon as Vera clears you and you're stronger, I've suggested performing a series of vaccinations for whatever we can get through the border." Dean makes a face, but he kind of likes living, so. "She agreed, since the ones you would have had in childhood would have expired in any case and being a nurse, she knows the importance of that in this world for anyone. The entire camp will be participating as well, if that makes you feel better."
"And that won't--set this off again?"

"I lied," Cas answers flatly, and Dean's stomach drops. "I know you weren't up to date; the last time was when Bobby took you and Sam when you were ten after Sam almost got lockjaw from stepping on a nail. Unfortunately, your father was far too concerned with--"

"Cas."

"--avenging his dead wife to take the simplest measures possible to prevent the unnecessary death of his youngest son and refused to leave you with Bobby permanently for reasons I have yet to understand, considering he was willing to give up hunting until you both came of age." The look on Cas's face warns him not to push, but mostly, he's too surprised by what Cas said about Bobby to try; he never knew that. "I ordered Joseph to begin negotiations at the next scheduled meeting with the border to get everything he could from Vera's list. What happened to you here has never happened in all of time, and this will hopefully lower the risk to your life. At least in this."

They need a new subject now. "So what was that about selling my soul, anyway?"

Cas abruptly goes still, eyes darting to Dean and away, but not fast enough for him to miss something disturbingly like panic before he tries for casual. "Hallucinations are not uncommon during fevers. Don't let it trouble you; for the most part, you were incomprehensible as well as belligerent."

"Which means there were times I wasn't." Dean sighs in resignation. "What'd I say, Cas? Crossroad, Lucifer, Crowley, who?"

"It wasn't always clear," he answers evasively, "but that could be that during your more vocal periods, I tried not to listen too closely. It was unsettling."

"You're doing a shitty job avoiding the question."

"I can't think of a plausible reason to escape the room without risking you'll drag yourself out of bed to try and follow me and thereby precipitating a relapse," Cas explains depressingly. "Pretend I'm doing a better job and take as a given that one day, you would've eventually found it very, very funny."

"Okay," Dean says, officially unnerved; he's pretty sure he's watching Cas freaking the fuck out. "Would you eventually find it funny, though?"

Cas looks conflicted. "I suppose that might depend on the quality of your aim and my ability to avoid you."

"Twenty question is over," he says, giving up. "Just tell me. Not like I haven't sold my soul before; there's nothing new here."

"Why do you--" Cas looks away, mouth tight. "I don't think I truly understood what my counterpart had done to you, despite what you told me."

…and he was wrong. This is definitely something he hasn't done. "Oh."

"As it turns out, even while drunk, you were surprisingly careful on what details you chose to share." Cas looks into the middle distance with a closed expression. "You thought--you thought he took your brother and you--" He shakes his head. "They were estranged for so long before Sam became Lucifer's vessel, I forgot how much you meant to each other."
Dean wonders if it would be better or worse if he remembered what happened; it's not like he can't guess. "I told him…Christ." He stares at Cas in horror. "I thought you were him once, didn't I?"

Cas doesn't look at him. "It--wasn't just once."

To Dean, Cas had once been someone else entirely; unknown enemy to reluctant ally, who became friend and then family, whose betrayal and death had gutted him alive and left scars that he didn't even realize have begun to heal. It's distant now, like years have passed since that day at the reservoir, a lifetime, another life entirely. He's always thought of them as different people, but Dean's not sure when how he thought of them changed, when this Cas became simply Cas. He doesn't know how to explain that, not now, not and be believed.

"Eventually," Cas continues with grim determination, not quite twisting the bedspread into bare threads, "I understand that we will find this funny. Assuming we survive long enough for it to become a charming anecdote that we unfortunately will be unable to ever share, seeing as it requires knowing you're not from here. And that my counterpart became a god with very poor ethics and a decided strain of rampant megalomania."

"Technically," Dean tries, "it was more pre-god, I think--"

"That doesn't help."

Yeah, he didn't think so. "You're nothing like him. I know the difference."

Cas snorts softly. "I know You were feverish. I don't think--"

"Vino veritas, right? It's a lie. The only truth in liquor is what you're still willing to lie about. So whatever I told you--"

"Worship is not all that he wanted from you."

"Worship was kind of de facto." Dean blows out a breath. "Look, Cas, so I thought you were him. What, did I--"

"What do you think?"

This could be worse, but he can't imagine how. "Cas--"

"I accepted it," Cas says, looking at nothing. "Your offer of worship. And then I made you promise not to die."

"Oh." He may not remember this, but it's surprisingly easy to imagine. "Just--let me get this straight. I offered, what, worship, love, and loyalty--"

"And obedience," Cas interrupts, looking pained. "You threw that in unexpectedly near the end."

"Right, and obedience." Right there, Dean thinks the contract would have failed, possibly accompanied by hysterical disembodied laughter. "And the only thing you asked for--ordered--was for me to not die? Anything else?"

Cas's eyes narrow. "I can think of several things now I should have requested."

"Yeah, hindsight's a bitch." He tilts his head back, thinking. "And I lived. Not bad for a Fallen angel, though kind of shitty for a god."

"Dean, it wasn't a real contract." Cas looks away. "I can't actually--I didn't save you."
"Pretty sure the ice baths and drugs and IV thing helped, though," Dean observes. "More manual labor, less snapping, I get it, but hey, this is how humans have been pulling it off for a while. You're doing okay for a newbie."

Cas blinks at him for a moment, tilting his head; humanity is so strange, it suggests. I really don't know what to do with you at all.

"Anything else I should know?" Dean asks; if there's anything else that's gonna traumatize them, might as well get it over with. This time, Cas's mouth twitches, just a little, but it's enough. This is gonna be okay.

"I suppose you might want to apologize to Vera eventually."

Oh God, did he hit on her? In front of Cas? "Why?" Then, relieved, he remembers. "The demon thing? Yeah, that was--"

"Oh, she got used to that," Cas says, a hint of malice in his voice. "At some point, despite the care both of us took to disarm ourselves when in your presence due your surprisingly improved reflexes, Vera forgot her boot knife. After pinning her to the bed and disarming her, you accused her of being someone named 'Meg' and attempted to exorcise her." Cas frowns faintly. "I thought Meg had been absent from earth for several years now. Did she return?"

Dean closes his eyes and wonders how the fuck this is his life. Meg. Jesus Christ. "Weird. So--"

"Which is when we decided restraints would be advisable, as you continued to address her as Meg until your fever broke, often combined with telling me not to trust her." He has no idea what his expression is telling Cas, but the blue eyes narrow suspiciously. "Dean--"

"Yeah, that fever, Jesus, no idea." Dean raises an eyebrow. "Nice work with the restraints, by the way."

"Thank you." Cas smiles back, blue eyes lightening. "Your safe word was not 'thirsty'."

"Fuck you." Dean hears the rattle of beads that means that Vera's back from her break time on the porch, and glances hopefully at the spiral on his bedside table as Cas returns from unlocking the door. "You have a few minutes for another installment of hippo porn?"

"Good, made it just in time," Vera says as she comes in the room, checking over Dean over with laudable speed before nudging him over with a hip and sitting down. Cas looks between them. "Well?"

Opening the spiral, Cas opens it to where they left off yesterday. "My translations from this point are rather questionable." It's said more in hope than any actual doubt of the accuracy of the translation, which after the last installment Dean understands.

"No problem," Dean assures him, settling his pillows again as Vera leans against his upraised knees hopefully. "We're at how the bare curves of the hippos' backs--how did he say it?--'emerged slick and gleaming from the recesses of the swamp'."

Vera frowns at him. "Wait, there were 'shadowy crevices' in there somewhere."

"'From the murky depths they emerged slick and gleaming in the spill of moonlight, deepening shadows like crevices between each mound of delicately rounded flesh, as if arching into a willing hand.'" Cas stops, closing his eyes with a shudder that Dean and Vera share. "It's a metaphor."
"Still hoping for Tawaret?" It's so not a metaphor.

Cas gives him a flat look. "You have no idea how much."

--Day 77--

Vera puts down her stethoscope with a sigh that Dean decides to interpret as a good sign. "So you managed your entire dinner--"

"Delicious wet bread and almost-meat," he says with relish, not mentioning the canned vegetable whatever because he's working on blocking it from his memory. "Any chance of a hamburger? Maybe with actual cow in it?"

"Dream on." She looks at him speculatively. "But you can have your bread dry, how's that?"

"I've never been so happy in my life." Stretching, he feels a faint twinge in his ankle, but it's pretty much healed now, and he looks forward to testing that one day with more than trips to the bathroom. Looking at his right arm, newly bandaged and dressed that morning by Cas after Vera removed the stitches, he flexes his hand, watching the fingers spread slightly in response before he relaxes them, the feel of the soft blanket grainy and rough, the barest sense of pressure against the pads.

Even with the stitches off, his arm's a mess: between the bites themselves, the stitches he tore out several times during the fever, and the spread of infection that needed drainage cuts, all he can really tell is that it looks like shit and won't look much better when the bandages come off permanently. Motor control is an inconsistent and limited work in progress, but at least that's progress and he's got a tennis ball living on his bedside table to prove it. The nerve damage, however, is a lot less certain. Sensation is returning to his fingers in drips and starts, but the space between his elbow and five inches above his wrist on his inner arm is still a dead zone no matter how much Vera pokes at it.

"It's still healing," she assures him when she sees where he's looking, picking up the chart and absently making a few notes. "Dean, we really won't know until you've had more time to work with it, but at this point, practical mobility is a given."

Dean licks his lips and fails to make a fist, fingers struggling briefly toward his distant palm before he lets them relax again. Closing his eyes, he rubs them clumsily against the blanket again, a reminder that at least he can feel them. "I can't even hold that damn ball for more than a few seconds without dropping it."

"You will," she answers, so transparently sure he almost believes her. "Alicia picked up a few more books on physical therapy on her last run. We're gonna take it slow, but as long as you don't rip anything open, progress is up to you. Be smart: if I see you're overdoing it, you lose your unsupervised tennis ball privileges."

"I shoot with that hand," Dean answers; he does, and he will again one day. "I'm gonna be careful."

"Yeah, I believe that," she snorts, finishing her notes before standing up. "Okay, in honor of you not being dead for three weeks and no sign of relapse or secondary infection, I get to leave the cabin for a few hours and Amanda's making me dinner to celebrate. She hates to cook, but she's really good at it, so this is a once in a lifetime event. You wouldn't believe what she can do with canned anything. Do not get sick tonight or I'll kill you myself."

Dean crosses his arms and smirks up at her. "Date night?"

"Get your mind out of the gutter. She's my best friend and my roommate." Vera's eyes narrow. "For
some reason, we haven't had a lot of time to talk lately."

"Seriously?" He stares at her. "She's insanely hot, terrifyingly dangerous, and lives with you. And you want to talk?"

"You aren't giving me romantic advice, are you?" she asks incredulously. "Tell me you're not doing that or I'll never stop laughing and Amanda will be pissed I missed dinner."

He scowls at her. "Might help your mood, just saying."

"My mood--"

"Vera, he isn't armed, and you're far too ethical to attack him when he's too weak to defend himself," Cas interrupts from his doorway slouch, ignoring Dean's glare. "I understand it can be difficult to remember under duress, but should you forget, I'd have to stop you and possibly lecture you on how none of us can kill Dean no matter the provocation, in lieu of mowing duty."

"Because he's our leader," Vera snarls, staring at Dean hatefully. "What about hurt him? Nothing serious, I promise. It'll heal. I'm a nurse. I know how to do that."

"Amanda's waiting on the porch to escort you home for dinner," Cas offers, tipping his head against the frame. "Should I tell her that you and Dean are too busy arguing about your potential sex life--"

"Cas!"

"--for you to appreciate the meal she spent several hours preparing, or would you rather join her and complain to her about Dean being…." Cas pauses for a moment, frowning thoughtfully. "Being himself?"

Vera gives Dean a long look, then Cas an even longer one before she heads toward the door, pausing to tell him, "Fine. See you in the morning."

Dean watches her leave, listening to the angry sound of beads and Vera's voice, followed by Amanda sounding soothing as they fade into the distance.

"Provocation?" he asks as Cas makes an elaborate show of getting comfortable on the other side of the bed, frowning at the pillow like it's not up to his standards of fluffiness and its failure makes him doubt his faith in cotton and polyester stuffing. With a sigh worthy of a martyr faced with substandard torture devices, he tugs it closer and proceeds to settle stomach-down on the mattress without a single squeal of springs, which Dean's really beginning to resent. "I was trying to be helpful--"

"Is that what that was?" Settling his chin on his crossed arms, Cas gives him a sardonic look. "Humans and their ways are often strange to me, so elucidation is in order. Please explain how telling Vera that she'd be in a better mood if she had sex with Amanda was supposed to be 'helpful' and not 'incendiary' or an excellent way to wake up in an ice bath for non-fever related reasons?"

"Have you seen Amanda?" he demands, wondering privately where that tub is now anyway. "Cas, don't tell me you haven't noticed--"

"That Amanda is very attractive?" Cas asks. "She was my student, for one--"

"Like pretty much everyone you've had sex with. Try again."

"--and two, she's a lesbian, in case you somehow missed that."
"Doesn't mean you can't appreciate the view," Dean answers reasonably. "Vera's been under a lot of stress. God knows, if anyone should get a little fun, it'd be her."

Cas raises his eyebrows, unconvinced.

"Fine, I was being a dick, too." He blows out a breath, frowning at his bare feet poking from the hem of the yellowest scrub bottoms ever to escape the seventies. God he misses regular clothes. "It bothers me that she's doing all this for me while hating my guts. I mean, she's one fuck of a professional, don't get me wrong, but it's gotta grate a little that after all this time wanting to kill me, she's responsible for saving my life."

"Maybe you should talk to her about it." Under his fascinated gaze, Cas tilts his head thoughtfully, like he's trying to work out something really complicated, like say, human interactions. "Or should I--"

"No, oh God, no." Cas blinks, looking startled. "Uh--okay, quick lesson on people. She's your friend, right?" He nods slowly, which hey, progress. "And you're my friend. I don't need confirmation," he adds when Cas starts to nod again. "Never--and I mean never--be the middle man in that kind of situation. It never ends well for anyone."

"Why?" he asks immediately, because this is Dean's fucking life. "Wouldn't that help dissipate tension if I could--"

"Tell her what? That you're choosing sides for reasons unknown?" Before Cas can start to answer--Jesus, he knows that look, Cas has thought about this--Dean shakes his head and tries not to look too frantic. "Put it another way; it's not your fight. She's your friend, and God knows, it's not like you have a lot of those here."

Cas is quiet for a long moment. "You're my best friend." Dean almost forgets to breathe, staring at him wordlessly. "What happened wasn't your fault, and you suffer for it anyway."

"Was it the right decision?" he asks deliberately. "I've been here long enough to know the answer, but you need to say it."

"Yes," he answers reluctantly. "It was callous, but it was necessary."

"Then it would have been mine. That I wasn't the one who pulled the trigger doesn't mean anything. I would have--and one day I'll probably have to, if I live that long. Telling her to just get over it already--that's a dick move. There's no good reason to do that to her."

"It makes you unhappy," Cas says quietly. "That's reason enough for me."

Dean looks away, trying to remember the last time someone--anyone--other than Sam or maybe Bobby ever cared about something as stupid as him being unhappy. Like that mattered in the entire trauma that is his whole goddamn life: unhappy is a step up in his emotional well-being, now that he thinks about it. But Cas wants to talk Vera into liking him--a conversation even Cas can't pretend not to know will end shitty at best--because Dean wants her to like him and he's unhappy that she doesn't. Because being in a militia camp is more like being in high school than high school, or so he assumes if the most recent drama that's Kyle and Jane's mid-dinner fight in the mess last night is any indication; it's not like he stayed at any one long enough to get past the introductions.

(Or spam and canned pea fights ending in tears (Kyle's) and mowing duty (both). On a guess, that may be specific to his militia camp, though.)

"Thanks," he says. "But I got this one, okay? Just give me time and I'll think of something. I'll wear
her down, no problem."

"If you're sure."

"I'm sure." He manages a quick grin. "I appreciate the thought."

"As you wish." Cas doesn't look reassured, but Dean gets the feeling there's something else bothering him. "There's something else we should discuss."

He nods, bracing himself in advance; it's that kind of day. "Hit me."

"Before you provoked Vera, did she have the opportunity to tell you that tomorrow morning, the IV will no longer be necessary?"

"I didn't---fine, no, she didn't. Really?" He really wants to get rid of that IV. "Last night on the drip?"

"Yes, provided there are no unforeseen complications when she examines you in the morning." Cas pauses just long enough for him to wonder what the bad news is before continuing. "Since you don't need to be under constant observation anymore and you can see to your own basic needs, Ana, Brad, and Chuck will be taking turns staying with you during the day. Vera will still examine you every morning, at midday, and in the evening, and I'll be here every night, of course, but you're well enough to be trusted not to die if one of us isn't watching you."

Dean checkmarks 'allowed contact with people' on his mental progress chart. "In the cabin, not the room, right?" Because he'll have to take off half a check for lack of privacy. Vera and Cas don't count; they've seen him in every possible shitty condition, and sheer repetition burned out the humiliation and eroded his boundaries to the point of non-existence. He kind of looks forward to the day he gets those back; basic self-consciousness while naked in front of people he's not related to or fucking isn't so much to ask here. Or at least remember how to fake it.

"In the cabin," Cas assures him. "They'll check on you hourly, but they've been instructed to knock first and wait five seconds for your response before entering the room."

Really. "Five seconds?"

"Vera said that was the standard for good manners," Cas answers with a hint of satisfaction in a new human lesson mastered. "All of them have agreed to limit their interactions with other members of the camp to minimize the danger of exposing you to further infections. They're aware of sterilization procedures while in this cabin and before and after interacting with you directly, but I'll remind them regularly."

Dean feels bad for them already. New shit job: watching the sick guy breathe. "What'd you have to do to get them to agree?"

Cas looks at him like he's being particularly slow, which Dean resents like fuck. "I won't even dignify that with a response. Are they acceptable to you?"

"Sure. I mean, you and Vera gotta be tired of being stuck in here all the time." Belatedly, he realizes what this means and fights back the unexpected rush of disappointment. "And she said it's time you got out of here and rejoined the world. In daylight, anyway."

"That was a surprise to me as well," Cas agrees heavily, sinking more deeply into the mattress and sounding baffled. "I didn't realize I interacted so much with the world that my absence would be noticeable, or it would be to anyone's benefit to change that."
Or if he were Vera, striking while the iron's hot and Cas's non-orgasm-related interactions with the world are mandatory. If there was ever a time to establish a habit, it would be now. "Been running the entire camp from the porch while I was sleeping, huh?"

"It's working very well, and I don't see any reason to change that." He grimaces, adding with noticeable reluctance, "However, she may have had a point in that you need rest, and now that you're not as ill as you were, their presence here will be a disturbance."

Dean makes himself nod. "And there's shit you gotta leave here to do that takes longer than an hour at a time."

Watching Cas making an effort to become one with the bed and almost succeeding, he gets the impression that any kind of effort on his part will bring this plan to a dead halt. It's tempting; to distract himself, he focuses on the people who are going to be his new watchers. Brad's on watch, though off the top of his head he can't remember if he's ever had a conversation with the guy; Ana's on Joe's team, so her life has just got suckier; and Chuck--he tries not to think too hard on the fact that since the day after the team leaders were burned, Chuck's avoided being anywhere near him, but it's not like it's hard to figure out why. So this'll be fun for everyone.

Which reminds him of something. "Not Alicia?"

"No," Cas abruptly focuses on some point over his shoulder; he doesn't straighten, but he looks like he might want to. "Not Alicia."

Uh huh. "What's wrong with Alicia? She's got medical training. Why hasn't she been helping you and Vera out anyway?"

"Nothing's wrong with Alicia." For a second, he thinks Cas may actually try to leave it at that, but then he sighs. "She's very capable and she was very helpful when Vera was doing research on your condition, especially since unlike Vera, she could leave the camp to acquire the books that Vera needed, as well as lead the teams that were searching the hospitals and identify the equipment we needed. However, under the circumstances, everyone who hadn't been exposed to you already were restricted from treating you during the fever."

"Why?"

"I don't know, I made it up," he answers impatiently. "Vera was distracted, so I suppose she accepted that as infinite knowledge, I didn't ask." He shifts in something not entirely unlike guilt. "I couldn't risk anyone seeing you that might be able to make inconvenient comparisons, and while I couldn't be absolutely certain I knew all the people that Dean had sex with, I was absolutely certain who hadn't."

"Oh." Crap, he forgot about that. "Him and Alicia, yeah. Was it--"

"Perhaps we should discuss Dean's past relationships at another time." Cas's expression makes it clear that now isn't a good time and never would be much better. "For now, I didn't realize the end of a relationship could be that--awkward. For that long. And that was just as an observer."

Yeah, he's not up to hearing that pretty much ever; the Jane and Risa thing was enough, thanks. "How noticeable are we talking about here?"

"The most obvious are two major scars, one on his left thigh and one bisecting his left hip; one healing wound on his back, which Alicia stitched herself that would be a scar by now; three tattoos--you don't need them, two were for very specialized rituals, and one when Dean got drunk with a
tattoo artist one night…"

"She'd remember that much?" Dean asks uneasily, wondering why he's surprised; Chitaqua is nothing if not creating new planes of paranoia.

"She's not the only one." Cas meets his eyes, troubled. "More than once, our survival has depended on being able to accurately identify something impersonating a member of the camp. Regular sex is an excellent way to become intimately acquainted with someone's body, and Dean's habit of short term serial monogamy and regular injuries assured there was plenty of opportunity for very close observation."

It's not like he wants to bang his predecessors exes (so much no there), but Jesus. "So never let anyone see me when I'm not dressed? Avoid short sleeves, shorts, bare feet, what? Do I need to layer up?"

"As I've not criticized your wardrobe choices yet, I think you can assume anything you've worn in public until now is fine," Cas answers dryly. "Human memory degrades with time, and combined with Dean's habit of isolating himself after being injured, only his most recent sex partners would be able to immediately recognize the differences on sight. Alicia is a special case; our doctor had only recently been killed when Dean needed his back tended to, and that was less than a month before you first came here." He shrugs. "It's less of a concern now than it was before the fever. Losing almost a quarter of your body weight is far more dramatic a change, and if any difference is noticed, it'll be put up to your illness."

"Because being sick makes tattoos and scars disappear?" Dean stops to rewind the conversation with a sinking feeling. "Wait, when did anyone but you or Vera see me before Joe's visit?"

"You put me in charge of the camp, and its members needed reassurance you were alive," Cas answers, irritatingly reasonable. "The window was sufficient to reassure them you were well. Human memory is malleable and I took advantage of that; they'll vividly remember seeing you then and as they watch you during your recovery and after, if they ever notice an inconsistency in your physical appearance--scars heal, recall can be faulty, and the rest will be relegated to imagination."

Huh. "That'll work?"

"Yes," Cas answers. "It will."

Every once in a while, Dean's reminded that Cas is terrifyingly good at the art of manipulation.

"However, for your watchers, I chose those who didn't often interact with Dean directly as well as never had sex with him," Cas continues with a hint of amusement. "For the second criteria, any of the male population would be relatively safe, of course."

Yeah, no surprise there. "And Ana?"

"Like Amanda, she's exclusively interested in women."

Dean thinks of the number of women in the camp that aren't either lesbians or hate him and really doesn't like that uncomfortably low number. "So you don't know how many he--"

"This wasn't my usual lack of attention; I made an effort to know nothing about Dean's activities if it were possible." Cas's expression tells him that was a wasted effort, but denial has been a close and personal friend. "Unfortunately, it was inevitable that there would be overlap unless I restricted myself to the limited male population, and I wasn't willing to inconvenience myself that much just so Dean would feel more comfortable." Before he can brace himself, Cas looks at him curiously. "Why
did that bother him? I never did get a satisfactory explanation."

"Uh." Dean blinks slowly, scrambling to find an answer that won't lead to having to actually think about that ever again. "Human thing, we're weird like that. So, Vera's right. About you getting out of here, I mean. Duty calls and everything, I'll be fine."

Cas nods reluctantly. "I'll return to check on you during the day and as soon as my duties are complete every evening, of course, and I'll provide you with a schedule of the days' activities. Ana, Brad, and Chuck will be instructed to get me and Vera immediately if there's any change in your condition, but if you require my presence at any time, don't hesitate to tell them to find me."

"No problem."

"They will enforce my continuing order that no one enter this cabin without your or my explicit permission, but you can begin to receive regular visitors," Cas continues. "When you're ready, I'll create a schedule of appropriate times to visit and how long they're allowed to stay to avoid tiring you unnecessarily."

Trespassers will be faced Chitaqua's endless acres of lawn, on a guess. Then: visitors. Visitors, among whom are an unknown number of women who were involved with Dean Winchester. Fuck his life; he's gonna need Cas to make him a reference list after all, because yeah, he's gonna need to know.

Eventually. "I'll think about it." They really need a safer topic already, where all roads don't lead to the terrifying minefield of this Dean's sex life. "So--"

"You're worried you'll be bored now," Cas says out of the blue. "Fortunately, I have a solution for that."

Maybe talking about creepy sex was safer after all. "Uh--"

"As I told you, I reinstituted full reports from all patrol members after you appointed me to command Chitaqua in your absence," Cas continues brightly. "They're ready for you to review at your leisure, which you now have."

Holy shit. "Everyone?"

"Yes." Very faintly, he sees the uptick of one corner of Cas's mouth. "I feel that you, as my commander, should have the opportunity to evaluate my competence as thoroughly as possible."

"I meant to tell you about the putting you in charge thing, promise," Dean says desperately, doing the math on six four person patrol teams times seventeen days; despite filling the jeep with reams of paper in all its many types, Chuck may need another supply run soon at this rate. "Fever, Cas. Vera was in on it!"

"Vera saved your life," Cas answers. "Despite your best efforts to prevent it."

Seriously? "You're blaming me for almost dying?"

"It was extremely stressful, and perhaps this will encourage you to consider how your actions affect others," Cas says serenely. "I haven't decided yet if perhaps it might be useful to require everyone in the camp to submit daily reports for you to review. It would have the benefit of helping you become more familiar with the daily duties that maintain the camp as well as provide variety in your reading if you think that the patrol reports will bore you. And I certainly don't want you to suspect even for a moment that I'm neglecting my duties. What do you think?"
Dean shuts his mouth, staring at Cas; he'll do it, and then all Dean's got to hope for is a camp-wide revolution to stop it. He's pretty sure that usually, he wouldn't like that. "Patrol's great. Looking forward to it."

"Excellent," Cas says, rising to his feet. "I'll go get them."
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

--Day 79--

"So he's gone crazy with power?" Dean says sympathetically as late afternoon begins to melt toward evening and Cas's return to watch him eat a well-balanced meal, literally, because Cas does that. Nostalgic, he remembers when Cas's stalking didn't include a paper trail because these days, it's fucking documented: meals, sleep, every fucking time he goes to the bathroom. He's even outsourced his stalking, giving it that edge of unreality that honestly, doesn't even blip the weird radar anymore and God, he misses having some kind of grasp on normal, even if just in theory. "Welcome to my life."

In honor of three weeks without dying, he gets not only non-scrub clothes, but occasional visits to the living room, which is a production that requires a quarter hour of prep and a panicking watcher. It's totally worth unusable arm, shitty ankle, and general post-move exhaustion (requiring an immediate nap) just to see a whole new room and out the front door to the world beyond the confines of the cabin. From here, he's unable to deny the fact he's the main attraction at a camp tottering on the edge of either homicide-grade boredom or mass trainwreck syndrome; everyone in the camp seems to find a reason to wander past these days, and subtle they're most definitely not. Including, he's noted in interest, Andy and Kat looking like they want to be holding hands and possibly skipping; it's cute in that way young love visibly armed to the teeth and wearing military surplus camo always is.

Vera makes a face from the armchair she dragged over from the sunny spot left of the couch to the other side of the coffee table, feet braced on the scarred surface and glaring at him with all her might. (That armchair's new, or new to them, anyway; the old one is now stationed in his room, which makes him really curious about what report covers a furniture supply run.)

Smiling at her, he lounges triumphantly with two glasses of water, a bowl of slightly stale crackers for snacking purposes (the number of which he consumes recorded as well), and the box--box--of reports that make up the current backlog. To his own surprise (he'll never, ever admit this to Cas), it's actually interesting reading, which he assumes is either the effects of mind-numbing boredom or, possibly, the most bizarre brain damage in history.

"Cas said to tell you he'll be running late today," Vera says finally, eyeing the stack of reports Dean's failed to make any appreciable dent in (seriously, twenty-one days of reports now, and seven teams now that Vera's on duty). "You want to eat now?"

"I guess that means the romance is dead," he observes as he sorts through the stack as subtly as possible to find hers and Amanda's, who's showing a hitherto unknown talent at making everything sound like a slapstick comedy routine. Vera's team is in the middle of a getting to know you period on local patrol in the mornings, as this is the first time they've actually had a chance to work together. Apparently Amanda and Sean together are the Apocalypse's answer to Comedy Central, with Jeremy's more laconic deadpan bringing it all together. No one can be having that much fun on patrol every day; he's seen the local route, and it's all sad trees and potholes. "Late from the office, never brings me flowers--I'd take some nice weapons….corpses of my enemies, maybe--"

"Shut up." She sinks more deeply into the chair as he finds her report, scowling at him. "Did you authorized him to start those up again? Why?"
"You're a team leader," he points out reasonably. "Cas thinks team leaders should write reports. Well, everyone writes reports now, but still. How did you not see this coming?"

Most of the patrol leaders seem to have reached the resigned stage of grief or something when it comes to write-ups, because creativity and readability are going way up; Sarah and Mel are both tentatively showing something like a personality, and Mel's even occasionally funny. Joe's have changed, too, now some cross between impressively professional and then breaking into hilarious anecdotes from his time in the Israeli army, life in Philadelphia as a network administrator, and doing time at rabbi school when applicable, which is a lot.

The two new patrol leaders Cas appointed when Dean gave him the camp, however, started off with a bang. Alicia's voice was distinctive from the get-go: very excited, deeply eager, almost crackling with energy, and interspersed with verbatim dialogue excerpts and contemplative passages on what she'd do if they were ambushed at random points on the route (there was something with a tree, a rope, a net, a silver knife, a very old Etruscan curse, and four bottles of holy water that he marked for potential use). Mark's, on the other hand, are relatively succinct (by value of succinct when the page count is above five at minimum) and intensely matter of fact, conveying the necessary information in the least number of words in well-diagramed sentences with an easy to follow paragraph structure like an English teacher, which as it turns out he was once on a job years ago (haunted high school, no surprise there) and never got over it.

Then there's Kyle.

Staring at his latest report, Dean wonders what the hell Kyle thinks he's going to accomplish writing shitty, passive-aggressive patrol reports other than make Dean assume he can't do his goddamn job. The only thing that keeps him from writing off Kyle like, yesterday is that his team's reports reflect a much less asshole version of Kyle: professional, approachable and friendly with his subordinates while on duty, and almost eerily competent. That Cas both confirmed this alternate-universe Kyle existed and didn't seem particularly concerned made Dean reluctantly place the Kyle issue on the backburner. This isn't Sid Redux, but it's something, and when he's awake more than a couple of hours at a time, he's going to find out what it is and deal with it.

"You think it's funny, don't you?" She stares at the six pages with an expression that makes Dean quickly put it down, just in case she suddenly develops the ability to set things on fire with her mind. Considering where they are and what's happened already, it's not impossible. "You weren't doing these when you asked me if I wanted my own team."

"In retrospect, that was a mistake," Dean replies earnestly. "After thinking about it, Cas had the right idea."

Her scowl depends. "Only because you're not the one who has to write them."

Rank has its privileges. "I read them." He thinks it counts if he has them nearby; seriously, how many trees died for this? "Everyone's doing great."

"Bullshit."

"Oh please, this is nothing." Dean sorts through the pile, coming up with a crumpled stack of paper, neatly paper clipped. "See this?"

Vera peers at it. "How long--"

"Twenty-two pages, by Cas, covering his first day in command of the camp. Front." Vera's eyes widen as he flips the first page, "and back. Ask me how many of these he wrote?"
"How did he find that much to write about?" Vera asks in wonder, leaning forward to squint at the ridiculously tiny print. "And how does he write that small?"

"No idea, must be some angel thing," Dean tells her, frowning at it. "This includes everything—and I do mean everything—that occurred in the camp from dawn until dusk, including verbatim reproductions of the meetings with patrol, the team leaders, Chuck, Sheila, Penn, Zoe, you, lunch, bathroom and laundry breaks, and every time he watched me sleep. With timestamps. In case I thought he was slacking off or something."

Vera sits back, shaken. "You win."

"Thank you." Setting it aside—and smoothing the crumpled edges automatically—he thinks of Phil, whose current love letters slash reports to Cas are officially forty-five pages in print almost as small as Cas’s. That sun and moon thing is getting weirder, which he didn’t really think was possible; Phil really resents solar heat for melting the moon's frozen soul or something, and tells them all about it for ten pages straight. Metaphor, yes: for what, no idea, but he's getting the impression (thanks to hippofucker) that he's missing something important here. He slept through key parts of English class, which right now he kind of regrets. "Does he seriously read all of these?"

"Yeah," Vera answers with a sigh, twirling a loose twist of hair between her fingers and looking bewildered. "He seems to enjoy it."

"He must miss the internet. All that useless information at the tip of a mouse click."

Vera nods absently, frowning into the middle distance, and Dean gets the feeling she came by for more than just checking on his health and continuing survival and telling him he's kind of a dystopian housewife using those exact works. He's still considering how to get her going (commentary on her sex life or lack thereof is probably a bad idea) when she straightens in her chair with a determined shift of her shoulders.

"Thank God," he breathes, tossing the reports aside for Cas to deal with when he gets home. "Took you long enough. What's up?"

Vera blinks. "I wasn't that obvious."

"You really are," Dean observes. "It's cute, really."

Fortunately, Vera only struggles for a second before giving up. "I'm just curious what the hell is going on."

No matter how tempting it is, he just barely avoids saying 'lying here in boredom'. "Break it down for me."

"The information Joe got from the last border run was a lot more thorough than for use in obscure ways to track Lucifer."

"Have you been listening to the radio?" He waves a hand. "Car commercials. Detroit's still on fire. I need recent events that aren't fiction. I have hippo porn for that."

"Only the east end," Vera says uncertainly. "Maybe Mitsubishi started exporting again, I don't know. East Coast is supposed to be clean. Look--"

"I wonder what Impala parts are going for these days," he muses aloud. Even thinking of the state of the Impala makes him twitchy. He's not sure any amount of parts short of new everything is gonna be of help.
"Jesus, you're annoying," Vera breathes. "Dean, you gotta know people are wondering about the orders Cas is giving now."

"I can't even stand up without passing out," he points out. "My doctor told me recovery's gonna be a bitch, so the most I'm going to be doing for a while is telling Cas he's doing a good job and practicing eating with a fork until I'm cleared for duty. Hey, you're my doctor, right? When's that happening?"

"It just got a week longer," she answers grimly. "Dean--"

"Internal plumbing is your friend and so are roofs that aren't falling in," Dean interrupts. "And we all discovered Nate knows how to drywall, which who knew? Seriously, people have a problem with that?"

"No, it's just--different," she says, picking her words carefully. "Mowing, setting up a new laundry and mess schedules to be violated on pain of more mowing, which is definitely motivating, don't get me wrong. It's just a lot of change."

"Change is awesome," Dean tells her. "We need to shake things up. Maybe with working bathrooms and less fucking latrines? Just saying."

"Patrol leaders don't choose their members anymore," she says, watching him closely. "Me, Alicia, and Mark all got teams already picked out for us, and Kyle didn't get a say in who replaced Cyn. When Sid asked about his team, Cas said he hadn't decided yet."

Cas wouldn't have told her any of that, but he can think of someone who's extremely good at picking up gossip and lives with her. "People have a problem with change?"

Vera's gaze sharpens, but he wasn't trying to be subtle. "Cas has gotten ambitious, that's all. It's just talk."

"That you just happened to hear?"

"I pay attention," she answers shortly. "Why?"

"Anyone use the words 'Lucifer's brother'?"

Vera stills, dark skin noticeably paling, but her voice is steady when she answers. "No, nothing like that."

"Okay, then just spit it out," he says, relaxing. "You wouldn't have started unless you thought it was important."

"Yeah." Vera licks her lips nervously. "Okay, fine, they think maybe you--Jesus, this is hard."

"You gotta do better than that."

"I'm trying!" She makes a face, slumping back in the chair and looking genuinely unnerved. "They think you gave Cas command because he's fucking you. Clear enough?"

"Now?" He gazes dubiously at his arm, poking semi-skeletal from the sleeve of the t-shirt, then at her. Fuck being up for it: he's barely awake long enough to eat, much less anything requiring even minimal participation on his part. "I guess he could," he says slowly, trying to work out when the hell he'd fit that in between naps, sleeping, resting, and (subtly) throwing up because food hates him now and it's rapidly becoming mutual, "but gotta tell you, he wouldn't getting much out of it--"
"No, since before you were sick...." She looks at him incredulously. "You didn't know?"

"How the hell would I know--" He stops short; suddenly, a lot of things are coming together. "How long? Since I got back?"

"You really didn't...." she trails off. "Dean, what the hell did you think would happen when you moved in with him and took over his entire goddamn life? And he let you?"

That's--actually a pretty accurate summary of events, come to think. With a sinking feeling, he remembers what Cas said about this Dean's serial monogamy slash cabin avoidance and now that he's thinking about it, the sheer lack of living room orgies he hasn't been subjected to on a daily basis.

"No drugs, no drinking, no orgies, no--Dean, all Cas's hobbies were interactive, and now his only interaction is with you," Vera continues hotly. "He's doing work--voluntarily--pretends to be interested when people talk to him, and almost never tells anyone to fuck themselves without at least minimal provocation, which is saying something. I say this with affection, but Cas believes celibacy should be considered a mortal sin and grows his own drugs, which by the way he ordered mowed down."

Dean straightens in alarm. "Tell me someone--"

"No, weed's safe, Jeremy distracted him just in time," she reassures him. "Don't worry, whole camp is watching out for it now. We take shifts."

"Consider that an order as of right now," he says, relaxing against the pillows in relief. "I'll explain to Cas how weed doesn't count because everyone likes it a lot."

"Thank you," she answers sincerely. "Dean, you get back, start giving all these new orders, Cas becomes a productive person--you really didn't notice this?--you get sick, and now you give Cas the entire goddamn camp and tell everyone he can do what he wants with it, and he's doing things with it."

"He's not ordering mass executions!"

"He's giving orders! Cas inspected the cabins for minimal living standard--where he got those I have no idea, but a checklist was involved--but the team leaders were told to use their own judgment when he was drafting the statewide patrol routes, including where they should be checking and how long they should take."

That's his rebel ex-angel, getting shit done. "He acted out the meeting for me. Did Kyle really try to argue it wasn't his job to know what he was doing?"

"Pretty much." She cocks her head, studying him. "You didn't even guess--"

"Never occurred to me." In retrospect, though, he can't see how it didn't. Sure, there's the guy thing, but Chitaqua has been an education in how flexible people get when your options are limited and you live life like an adrenaline rush that never ends. Not to mention this is a group of people in a war zone where the war inexplicably stopped and have nothing to do but talk. He should know; he's becoming one of them, but to be fair, Zoe's incense thing is getting weirder by the day. "Does Cas know?"

"No." She pauses, looking torn. "I guess if someone asked, he would have denied it, but--he doesn't think like that. He would have told you if he'd heard anything."
Yeah, he would have, and how interesting that Amanda left that out of her daily news report. "You don't think that."

"I know he's not."

"Because you asked?"

Vera rolls her eyes. "Dean, you imagine anyone--anyone--asking Cas that question?"

That would be hilarious, gotta admit. "So how do you know?"

"Well, your reaction, for one," which yeah, point. "Two…Dean, I practically lived here during the fever and a couple of weeks after. Cas doesn't hide shit, and you never bothered before. I'm pretty sure something like that--I'd know, okay?" She blows out a breath, mouth quirking in reluctant amusement. "Besides, Cas said something about how long you have to practice to achieve expertise in celibacy."

"Jesus, he used those words, didn't he?"

"Pretty much verbatim."

Right, so. "Why didn't you tell him?" Vera stiffens warily. "You had a reason."

"Rumor's just rumor," she answers evenly. "It's bullshit, everyone knows that. Before you got sick--it made sense you'd be a little off, and the team leaders were new and you didn't know them yet, not like you did the old ones. Cas--life changing experience almost seeing you die, learning the value of life, I don't know, it's Cas. It's not like you were ever into men before."

"There's that." Dean crosses his arms. "That wasn't your reason, though. Me or Cas?"

Vera starts guiltily. "What?"

"So it's me." Vera's mouth shuts tight: bingo. "You were worried how I'd react when Cas told me."

She does him the courtesy of not pretending she doesn't understand. "You're straight."

"And that makes me a dick who gives a fuck about who fucks who?"

"Girls doing it are hot," she says deliberately. "Guys doing it is okay, mostly, depending on the company. But it's a whole different ballpark when the straight guy hears he may be taking it up the ass. Weird yet true fact."

"That's not fair."

"That's life," she answers flatly. "Try being a bisexual Black woman and we'll talk about fair. Ask Amanda what it's like to be a gay female hunter and what fair means then. Talk to Sean about life lived gay in fundamentalist country and yeah, I'll take your definition of 'fair' under advisement. Until then, my judgment calls are based on experience, and experience tells me straight guys don't take that shit well."

Dean bites back the automatic retort because actually, he's not sure. He wants to say it wouldn't have mattered--Jesus, why the fuck would he care, it's the end of the fucking world, for fuck's sake--but he's not sure. He can't be sure of anything but now, and right now…

"It doesn't bother me," he says slowly, almost relieved to realize it's true. "Knowing that."
"I'll give you this one," she says grudgingly. "Your first reaction wasn't what I expected."

"To be honest, that came out of nowhere." Uncrossing his arms, he tries to think, but for some reason, he keeps remembering Kyle's reports, Sid's resentment, how many of the people here he's only now learning about through reports because before the fever he didn't try to, not enough. Now's all he's got, and now, he's stuck in this cabin. "If I ask why you're telling me now--"

"It was me doing it now, risking how long it would take for Ana or Brad to get over their awe, or you finding out from your first scheduled visitor when you get around to having them," she confirms, eyeing him with reluctant sympathy. "Your health aside, no one should have to deal with being hit with something like this out of the blue."

"Thanks," he tells her, surprised. "I appreciate it."

She blinks at him and looks away, frowning at the threadbare upholstery on the arm of her chair for a moment. "I can try and deny it if you want--I have the cred from living here while you were sick, but…seriously, Dean, drowning your trauma in alcohol and casual sex works for everyone else, including you once upon a time. Just had to shake things up this time?"

"I contain multitudes," he answers distractedly, wondering what to do with this. It's a little late to pull off a denial, and best case scenario there is everyone thinking that he's having a torrid affair with Cas and he's so ashamed of it that he's denying it, which isn't by any stretch of his imagination an improvement. "Other than everyone assuming I trade blowjobs for the worst job in the camp--which means Cas got a shit deal, no surprise there--does this cause more problems or solve some that would happen otherwise?"

"Why would it help…." She stills, letting out a breath. "'Lucifer's brother'. You knew about that?"

"Cas told me about that a few weeks ago, before the fever," he answers truthfully, watching the flicker of remembered fear and anger followed by wary surprise, and thinks about what she said about paying attention, like maybe there was a reason she needed to. "You tell me what would be a bigger problem: shooting the guy I put in charge while I'm sick, or shooting the guy I'm sleeping with and then put in charge while I'm sick because of my feelings?"

She doesn't protest that she didn't think he had feelings, which is definitely progress. "You don't think…." Dean thinks of that day with the patrol leaders, about Luke and Kyle: people do stupid shit when they're scared, and even if they're sorry later, you can't take a bullet back. "Call it post-fever paranoia, but I'll back it up if I have to. Think that's clear enough that anyone could work it out?"

She cocks her head, and to his relief, her mouth twitches. "I take it this is my new job?"

"If you choose to accept it," he answers, straight-faced. "I need a spy. Every good Apocalypse has at least one." Anyone who can coup the camp--and get Cas to support it after the fact (which to be fair, explains Cas's mood that day in Dean's cabin)--isn't just good at paying attention; they're good at knowing how to use what they hear.

"This is more a mole-like position, but I'm in." Vera looks at the wall behind him, obviously thinking. "So I should--"

"I don't care if you have to state outright that anything happens to Cas, this ends with them looking down the barrel of my gun, just make sure it gets across. It's the end of the world and the age of bullshit has officially passed."
Vera stares at him.

"Post-fever paranoia," he assures her; he can't quite pull off his counterpart's thousand yard dead-eyed stare of imminent homicide, which he's really okay with. "Cabin fever. Two years later belated reaction to finding out one of my lieutenants tried to kill Cas. Pick one."

"You know," she says slowly, "I can probably get it across without outright threat of immediate execution, if that's okay with you."

He nods agreeably. "Whatever works."

"And when Cas finds out?"

He really wishes she used 'if'. "He's kind of busy right now. When he's got some time, I'll talk to him about it, see what he thinks. I'll pencil that in for a few years from now."

Vera gives him a dubious look.

Reaching across the bed, he pulls out Phil's report--stapled, they have *staples* in Camp Apocalypse?--and holds it up. "This is Phil's patrol report."

Her expression tells him she, at least, knows what they really are. "Yeah, about that."

"Phil is--hold up." He flips it a few pages, blinking at the fucking tiny text and realizes what he's been reading all this time. "Oh God. I'm the sun fucking the frozen moon that is Cas? Is that what he's saying?"

"Give me that." Getting half out of the chair, she plucks it from his hand and squints down at the text, then nods, biting her lip. "Huh. Your cruel rays scorch the moon's--"

"Don't remind me," he interrupts before he has to think about the implications of white-hot solar flares brutally wounding the moon's fragile fucking feelings--sorry, *ethereal surface*. Yeah, metaphor: he gets it now. "So how long has Phil--"

"Almost since he got here," she answers, wincing at something on the page before handing it back. "He writes poetry about Cas's eyes--'cerulean' rhymes with something, who knew--and their epic destiny together. It's kind of romantic, in a creepy way no one really wants to think about."

Dean stares at it, realizing something else; Phil isn't just in love with Cas, he's trying to steal his leader's putative boyfriend while he's sick, the asshole. Who does that?

"I don't even know what to do with that."

"Open secret: he doesn't want to fuck Cas; he wants to marry him and have his holy nephilim babies. Three, I think: he told us the names last time he was drunk. I got drunker to forget."

"How could he have his--never mind, I don't want to know." And he thought hippofucker was unclear on anatomy and how it worked. "Everyone knows about this?"

"He wants to get married in June in a church."

"This isn't happening." Making an effort, Dean focuses on where he was going before the traumatic (adulterous?) digression. "Cas has no idea," he says, dropping Phil's report with a satisfying plunk on top of the others and fighting the urge to wash his hands or set them on fire or something. "I told him about this ten or fifteen pages ago. I told him *last week*. He doesn't believe me. He's gotta be fucking with me here."

"He's not," Vera admits with a pained expression. "I mentioned it, too, and he just looked at me. It's the flirting thing, I think. It doesn't process. You know Cas, he's--"
"Direct, yeah." Her heartfelt nod tapers off into a speculative look. "What?"

"Just saying," she says, an unexpected note of teasing in her voice, "your angel."

Despite himself, he feels his cheeks getting hot. "Okay, for the record? Not my fault, that was independent research on his part. Not like he checked with me. Or that he needed to, because it wasn't any of my business what he did," he adds belatedly when her mouth begins to twitch again. "Where were we again?"

"He once said something about your idea of an educational field trip when he was still an angel," she says, bracing an elbow on the arm of the chair, chin in hand, eyes dancing. For a second, he really wants to pretend he has no idea what she's talking about. "Figured second time was the charm. Not like you'd learn subtlety in a brothel."

Oh God. "Again, not my fault, but great story if you leave out the part where we got thrown out of the brothel before anyone actually got laid. I can't believe he told you about that."

"He always said it was--educational," she says. "When he could finally stop laughing. It was one of his favorite stories about you."

"About me?" He pauses, a warm feeling blooming in his chest. That happened before the break in the timeline. This one is, actually, about them, not just the other Dean.

Vera shrugs casually, but Dean doesn't miss the wariness return. So she's testing him; he's okay with that. "He used to talk about you and him sometimes. Stuff that happened before you came to Chitaqua, I mean. He'd get really high and he'd tell a few of us some stuff, nothing bad."

"He ever tell you that when we first met he tried to blow out my eardrums?" Dean says with a sigh, relieved by her grin as she shakes her head. "I gotta think of an embarrassing story about him. Which will be hard, since he's still shaky on what the word means. Anyway, did I cover everything or--"

"Yeah, I think you answered my question," she says after a moment. "Except what's going on now."

"You didn't ask that yet."

"Yeah, I did, we got sidetracked," she says. "I'm talking about your epic love affair with Cas to everyone except the other person supposedly involved in it, you owe me."

"Yeah, you got a point." He thinks about how to answer her. "The Colt didn't work and that was kind of it as far as mythical weapons go. So we'll have to do this the hard way."

"You're calling the last two years easy?"

"I think fucking around for a shortcut when the entire goddamn world is falling apart isn't gonna cut it anymore." Vera flinches, and Dean realizes what that sounded like to her. "Look, that came out wrong. The thing is, as of right now, it's still the Apocalypse, and our one shot at killing Lucifer is gone." He think of those holes in reality in the city and pushes them to the back of his mind again: one thing at a time. "Okay, easy was the wrong word. Let's say it's gonna get complicated now."

"What does that mean?"

"I have some ideas," Dean says slowly. "It's still in the planning stage."

"Joe's trip to the eastern checkpoint," she says casually. "I get why you still have him doing it. He used to deal with the American military when he was in the Israeli army."
"Yeah, and since he's kind of Chitaqua's only religious authority figure, the rabbi thing seems to make him appear trustworthy and us less crazy," Dean agrees, intrigued by her roundabout approach. "Also helps that all his federal warrants are in like, Kentucky for some reason, which hey, is the south trying to secede again?"

"Third time in four years," Vera confirms. "Third time may be the charm. Cas told him it's going to be monthly now, Joe's visits to the border, which is new. We used to do this once a quarter."

"We need more information," he answers firmly. "Though at this rate, we may need to think of alternate sources of bribery. I mean, we could get Cas's lab back in production, but I'm still not feeling 'drug dealer to the American military and border patrol' on my federal résumé if it's not there already, though at this point, hell, why not try for a complete set?"

"Yeah, and access to the not approved for public consumption zone maps, directory of U.S. border stations, and the domestic terrorism lists along with the FBI's most wanted."

Interesting. "You got all that from Joe?"

"Yeah." Vera radiates sudden wariness in his general direction, and he makes a mental note he was right about why Joe talked to Cas first that day and allows himself a moment of smug triumph. "He didn't think it was supposed to be secret or anything."

"It's not." He's gotta be more careful. "It's really not. I just didn't think anyone cared. Joe didn't ask why I wanted most of it."

"No, everyone figures you'll tell us when you're ready."

"Yeah, that's gonna be a problem," Dean murmurs to himself, ignoring her started expression. "You also read the reports, which is also fine, for the record. Feel free to keep doing that. In fact, all the team leaders should be doing it; I'll talk to Cas."

She shrugs so casually that he's knows she's been waiting for this part. "Cas is pulling Amanda and Mark in the evenings for extra training starting today."

"Everyone could use some improvement," Dean points out, though he's gotta wonder what Amanda could possibly be shaky on other than 'not being a badass'. "We should do a refresher for the whole camp, what do you think? Not like anyone's getting much done in the field these days."

"They're the only two people in the camp now besides you and Cas who were already hunters before they came here," she says. "Me, Amanda, Mark, and Debra were in the last group that Cas trained. After he did our final evaluations, he held Mark and Amanda back another couple of months but he didn't tell anyone why, including them." The implication is that he knows and is holding out on her just to be a dick.

"Yeah?"

"I mean, everyone assumes it was because he wanted Amanda to do our quarterly checks. Work was cutting into his recreation time."

"Yeah, I forgot about those," he says sunnily and her expression dissolves into annoyance. "When's the next one again?"

She doesn't roll her eyes, and he admires her for that. "Uh, a month ago, I think. Been kind of busy around here."
He's gotta see this. "Good, I'll tell Cas to schedule one of those soon."

Vera makes a face. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." He gets why Cas found it difficult to avoid liking her. "Okay, I'm impressed. So you think he pulled them--"

"He didn't tell them what they were doing or why, but not like it was hard to guess," she says impatiently. "We don't need three instructors for new recruits: well, two, I guess, since Cas doesn't have time right now with everything else. Not for just a few new people." She cocks her head. "I assume recruitment is on the agenda. He's been riding the fuck out of Amanda during downtime--which yeah, they both seem to enjoy--but it's not just for the joy of casual violence."

"We could use some new blood."

"Just how much new blood are we talking about here?"

"You haven't asked Cas about this yet, have you?"

Vera snorts. "No, of course not. He wouldn't tell me anything and just bring it to you anyway, so might as well cut out the middle man."

Actually, he kind of needs a middle man right now. "I have a job for you."

"Besides spying for you?"

"This is an extension," he assures her. "Everything you just told me? Go ask Cas about it. Except for the entire sex for a shitty job thing; I'll handle that part."

"What? Why?"

Dean blinks. "Uh--about the sex thing….?"

"No, not that," she answers impatiently, adding, "though better you than anyone, ever. I mean, why ask Cas what I asked you?"

"Oh, that." Dean shrugs. "He said something about extra training the other day."

Vera nods in bewilderment.

"I just realized I forgot to ask him why." Dean grins at her. "He's running late. Hey, you know where he is right now, right?"

"Vera says you're doing very well," Cas tells him upon his arrival, squinting down at Dean, happily seated on the porch stairs even knowing the only way he's getting back inside is going to be Cas-assisted. The great outdoors, as seen from the porch; it's all that he dreamed of, even with the camp walls obscuring his view, with stubby remains of grass a uniform 'very short' as far as the eye can see. Dean takes in the messy brown hair, still damp from a surreptitious pre-homecoming shower, and bites back a smirk; subtlety, thy name is not Castiel of Chitaqua. "Are you sure that you should be out here--""}

"Cleared it with Vera before she went home." Leaning back against the pillow cushioning him from banister of the stairs, he can almost convince himself he doesn't actually need it to stay upright, then gives the horizon and its lack of a visible light--for a couple of hours now--a pointed look. "So how's it going?"
"I apologize for being late," Cas says immediately, which may or may not be evidence for the 'Dean is a dystopian housewife' scenario, and wonders who's been instructing him in fifties human relationship habits; fuck the Lifetime Channel backward. "I was working on something. Did you already eat?"

"It was meatloaf surprise night at the mess. What meat, who can tell? Ana came by to check up on me and I told her to run to the mess and grab you dinner. You should eat."

Cas stares down at him for a moment, and Dean wants to tell him for completionists, when you're trying to hide your secret training regime that was apparently the source of the entire lateness issue, take clean clothes with you that are similar to what you were wearing when you left home. The jacket doesn't hide his shirt is now faded purple, not off-grey, and it's not like Cas has a grasp of variety in clothing.

"Go," Dean adds magnanimously, waving to the door. "Bring it out here so we can work on your human skills. You're still shitty at the eating at regularly scheduled intervals thing. That happens when you're late. We talk about that yet?"

After a second of glaring—which he ignores as obviously as possible--Cas climbs the stairs and goes inside, coming back out a few minutes later with the horror that is a mess dinner and a blanket and extra pillow (and, Dean notes, sans boots and socks: he really doesn't like shoes when they aren't required). Dropping the blanket over Dean's lap, he sets down the plate and tucks the pillow behind Dean to supplement the one he already had, then sits down on the step a couple of feet away and evaluates the meat for a second, eyes narrowed.

"You don't know what it is either." Dean tugs the blanket more securely around him, trying and failing not to be touched by the gesture, which doubles as a tacit acknowledgment that he's allowed to decide some of his own limits. This may be stretching them--the banister really is his best friend right now--but it's something that he's able to sit here at all.

"I've never been curious enough to ask," Cas admits, picking up his fork with the kind of determination Dean usually associates with facing imminent death with dignity. "Though I'm sure if you had eaten more of it, you might have been able to identify it."

Dean ignores him, reveling in the cool, quiet night as Cas methodically applies himself to the tedious process of avoiding starvation. It occurs to him that, weirdly enough, living in Chitaqua has been among the most peaceful times in his life. All it took was time travel, an Apocalypse in progress, a militia camp, and near-mortal illness to pull it off, too.

When Cas finally finishes, he sets the empty plate to the side--Dean figures the entire putting the dirty dishes in the sink to deal with later can be skipped tonight--and gives him an unreadable look.

"What?"

"Don't tell Vera," he replies inexplicably, then reaches back for two brown bottles he apparently brought out with him, passing one to Dean. "It probably won't kill you."

Despite himself, he starts to grin. "So you're feeling really guilty?"

Cas hesitates. "Dean, you need to eat."

Oh, that's why. "I wasn't hungry," he says shortly, irritated with himself for not remembering Cas actually tracks his eating habits for a reason other than being a creepy stalker. "It's not a big deal; I'll make it up at breakfast."

"Were you able to keep any of it down?"

He considers lying, but that's actually pretty stupid. "No. Ana grabbed me some extra bread and fake cheese from the mess, happy?"

Cas takes a drink before saying, "That was not raccoon."

He almost drops his bottle. "We eat raccoon?"

"Not today, no." He grimaces. "It was unusually terrible tonight, yes. I assume Zack's on mess duty this week."

"Didn't think anything could be worse than your cooking," he says honestly. "Zack proved me wrong. At least yours still qualifies as food."

"That could almost be a compliment," Cas answers, one corner of his mouth quirking up. "If it helps, that's probably not the result of your illness. Consuming wild game can cause problems in the healthy if they're not used to it. We have enough alternates to it at this time--"

"Cas, I'm not asking the mess to make me my own special meal," Dean interrupts. He gets the entire privileges of command, but he's gotta draw a line somewhere, and this is it.

"Vera was very specific regarding your diet," Cas says patiently, "and as I was saying, I'm relatively sure it can be followed while excluding the local wildlife, such as it is. I'll talk to Chuck in the morning and see what's available in inventory. The camp can certainly perform their daily duties without my constant oversight by now."

"What does that have to do with--"

"Cooking still takes a great deal of concentration for me," Cas answers, like he's not sure Dean's paying attention, "so I'll require the extra time. Not to mention acquiring sufficient recipes."

It takes Dean a minute to work out what he's talking about. "You want to cook?"

"You need to eat to regain your strength. That would be facilitated by food that doesn't cause you active nausea, and that much I think I can accomplish. Unless you continue to object to my cooking, in which case I should tell you that I have no idea what other kinds of non-domestic meat varieties are in the freezer and Nate's a worse cook than Zack is, which is why until now he's been banned from handling food."

Dean braces himself with a drink first. "And now?"

"Fielding two more teams has left gaps in the camp's infrastructure," he answers. "It's only temporary--if for no other reason than to preserve Nate's life--until I can work out a new rotation, but until then…"

"I'm okay with your cooking," Dean tells him. He's still sick, and there's nothing about what's in the depths of the freezer or Nate's cooking skills that's not stressing.

"I thought you might be." Cas takes another drink, looking bizarrely satisfied; Christ, he's weird sometimes. "Why is Vera asking about your plans to expand the camp?"

"It's been hours since we talked," Dean observes, settling himself for a very good time. "What, did she take a nap and go for drinks with Amanda first? Dude, you need a better class of spy."
"You told her that was her new title."

"Official spy? Cas, we live in an apocalyptic melodrama. That pretty much requires someone have a spy and I don't know anyone else here well enough to figure out who can pull it off other than her. Come on, Chuck would suck as a spy, and Joe's talents are best used manipulating the border guards for fun and profit."

"I don't think it counts as spying when you told her what to say and then pointed in what direction to go to find me."

"Dude, I didn't need to point, you told me your schedule," Cas's eyes narrow further, and Dean grins at him. "I mean, you obviously had a different one today, but--"

"Dean," Cas interrupts, "if you want surreal conversation, I can accommodate you, but I need several hours, as running this camp for you has interfered with my usual production schedule for hallucinogenics."

"That's really sad," he says sympathetically. "I'll make it up to you: home meth lab okay? Brain cells, who needs 'em?"

"I don't think we have any formaldehyde," Cas answers patiently. "So no. Why did you tell Vera you wanted to expand recruitment?"

"I was actually really careful not to say that." Dean takes a sip of beer; warm and slightly flat, it's still awesome. "What did you tell her?"

"That you didn't give me permission to discuss what you told me." Cas very unsubtly shifts over until he's less than a foot away, just in case Dean suddenly passes out and Cas has to save him from death by stairs after almost death by fucking brownie bite. "Under the circumstances, it's almost true, though for accuracy, it would be more I had no idea there was something to discuss."

"You didn't tell me your 'training exercises' were to teach Amanda and Mark how to train hunters." Dean smirks at Cas over the rim of his bottle. "Wanna talk about that?"

"That didn't occur to me you might have any objections," he answers in surprise. "I meant to discuss this with you tonight. Joseph is ready to begin negotiations with the communities that seemed the most open to our presence."

"The ones who didn't shoot at us on sight?"

"He's decided to start with those who didn't shoot at us at all," Cas answers. "Which admittedly is a rather short list, but hope springs eternal or something like that. In any case, in addition to weapons, ammunition, assistance with retrieving supplies from the cities, and potentially manual labor, I thought we might have something of equal value to offer them. Training."

"Training." Dean turns that over in his head. "Like everyone here?"

"If they wish, but I think as our opening offer, knowledge and basic instruction in how to defend themselves against the most common supernatural enemies they face to supplement what they've learned already. Of course, that wouldn't change our duty to protect them, but this could also buy them time to contact us and for us to get there if it's something they can't handle themselves. You said something once…." He doesn't quite meet Dean's eyes. "We tried to save the world instead of people and failed. So--"

"We'll try doing it a Kansas town at a time." Dean feels a smile stretching his face almost wide
enough to hurt; he must look ridiculous. "Teach them how to save themselves. Yeah, let's do that."

Cas lets out a breath, taking a drink from his bottle in barely hidden relief, and Dean wonders why the hell he'd think he wouldn't be on board with that. "That's why I needed to start working with Mark and Amanda immediately. It's been two years since I initially instructed them, and I wanted to see how much they retained. Others can be assigned to take their places on their teams if Joseph's successful. If you have no objection, of course."

"Really don't." He waits for a moment. Anything else?"

"With the successful negotiations with the border guards, I don't think crossing it will be particularly difficult," Cas says out of the blue. "So within reason, we're not necessarily limited to staying in Kansas for much longer. I'm relatively certain we can keep both our faces off the cameras after mapping the current patrol routes that they're using, though doubtless that it will be expensive." "True." Dean cocks his head, wondering where Cas is going with that. Not that he wants to be trapped in the state or anything, but it's not like there are a lot of other places he wants to go either. At least, not yet. "I have some things to add for Joe's next visit. If we can afford it."

"As Joseph told you, between what's in our accounts and what we salvaged so far from the military outposts, we have more than enough for our purposes. What do you have in mind?"

Sitting back, Dean takes a long drink while he considers his options. Cas said that this Dean taught him everything he knew so he could train other hunters, and he agreed to do it because Dean's purpose for him became his own.

It's not a surprise, not really, not when he thinks of the Dean Winchester he met here; if he saw anyone in this camp—hell, in this world—as more than their value or lack of to the mission, he'll be relieved to hear it but probably wouldn't believe it. However, four years ago and change, it was different; they were only a little past the break in the timeline, and he and this Dean Winchester couldn't already be so different that he could look at Cas, still mostly-fresh from a recent resurrection and desperately wanting to be useful, and only think of the best way to use him.

Four years ago, Cas wasn't Fallen, not yet, and probably never imagined a time he would end a patrol meeting telling Kyle in excruciatingly filthy detail exactly what he could do with the butt of his rifle and his ass before sentencing him to mowing duty (Amanda acted out the entire thing yesterday before Cas got home, it was amazing). He would go along with Dean because it was his purpose, yeah, but that doesn't mean it was the only reason, or if it was, it would stay that way.

"Domestic terror suspects with federal warrants issued in the last five years with a history of credit fraud, identity fraud, and suspected association with survivalist groups or militia involvement. Preferably with numerous aliases in several states," he offers blandly into the cool evening, then sits back and waits.

"Potential hunters," Cas answers promptly. "They are also likely to deal in weapons, as they would have the contacts, the experience to act as intermediaries, and they wouldn't be easily caught. They probably have at least one federal warrant for weapons trafficking under one of their aliases by now, likely in a southwestern border state, but I doubt that those aliases are linked to any of their others yet."

Dean nods, fighting to keep his expression neutral. "You know the history here, so you tell me what they'd be doing now."

"They're hunters; they'd concentrate their efforts in infected zones providing either supplementary
containment of the Croatoan threat in the cities and on the borders or assist the local populations affected by the rising level of supernatural activity. It's also likely they're the source of some of the supplies that get passed across the border by the guards, though the markup is probably considerable for the zone residents."

"Where would they be now?"

"Many established multiple semi-legal aliases in various locations throughout the country before Lucifer rose, so their actual locations would rarely correlate with where they are reported to be. Due to their expertise with creating false identities, they would have established contacts early on to assure they could acquire the necessary papers to pass between infected zones and clean states to assure they can do their jobs as well as acquire supplies that are not necessarily easy to acquire other than through legal channels.

"What should I ask the checkpoints to give me so I can narrow down the possibilities?"

"Individuals can't acquire passthrough credentials for themselves; they can only be issued to a company or corporate entity that was approved by the government for transporting goods across the borders," Cas answers, frowning into the distance. "The unexpunged list of those companies legally issued passthrough credentials for the checkpoints would be extremely useful, but that's very highly classified, and as yet, we haven't been able to acquire a reliable copy."

Dean doesn't like the sound of that. "Why would that be classified?"

"I assume if we saw the full list, we'd be able to identify the reason," Cas says wryly. "However, in lieu of that, the current public list of those companies issued passthrough credentials and what those credentials are for is sufficient. For now, I'd settle for the schedule of oil deliveries between uninfected states, their origin and destination of record, and the list of regular drivers for each company carrying any oil product."

"That's specific," Dean remarks casually, bottle hanging loosely from one hand.

"For hunters, oil is one of the very few things they can't manufacture themselves, they need in large quantities, and currently it's almost impossible to get it other than legally. And oil--"

"The Federal government tracks gasoline sales," Dean says, keeping his gaze firmly on the camp walls as he takes another sip from his bottle. "Especially now. Knocking over an oil truck would get attention they can't afford, so they gotta do this as legal as possible. How do you think they're getting it?"

"That would depend on both the origin and destination of record, whether or not the destination listed is the ultimate one," Cas answers. "Negotiating with the border guards would be the easiest option, who for reasons best known to the vagaries of advanced bureaucracy, have the power to issue copies of any company's existing passthrough credentials from the checkpoints with almost no oversight, which is why ours imply we're associated with General Mills and regularly deliver large amounts of food to Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana."

Dean closes his eyes. "Irony or salt in the wound?"

"Possibly both," Cas admits before continuing. "The border guards are also the most expensive option and it would still require acquiring transportation for the oil and discretion on how much to buy at any given location and how long to wait between purchases in an uninfected zone, increasing the risk of discovery. The remainder, in order of likelihood: negotiating with the oil companies directly; a series of legally existing but highly fictional gasoline stations in an uninfected state or
states; or direct negotiation with the military in an infected zone."

"How'd you decide the order?" Dean asks curiously, taking another drink.

"Experience and a great deal of guessing. The military would be the least expensive if they were able and willing to make a deal similar to the one Dean made here; however, that would depend on the practicality of the commanders. The oil companies are the most reliable source and the most convenient. They have pass-through credentials in all the contiguous United States, Canada, and Mexico, means of transport, and can quickly deliver to any location we indicate. Further, they would only charge the currently black market price of triple the already ridiculously high legal price of oil per barrel, which would be a bargain compared to the border's three hundred percent markup when they're feeling generous."

"Holy shit."

"Which is why Joseph was very pleased they liked our newly acquired weapons so much," Cas says in amusement. "However, the oil companies are subject to very close government scrutiny and random inspections, and are fined with monotonous regularity when their employees are arrested for selling oil on the black market, completely of their own accord, of course. They're also very surprised and outraged, with equally monotonous regularity."

"You sound a little skeptical of their sincerity, Cas."

"I apologize for misleading you; their regret when caught is quite sincere," Cas assures him. "They are also startlingly adept at finding the list of buyers that their former employees sold to--apparently, when one illegally sells oil on the black market, it's necessary to thoroughly document who it was sold to, when, quantity, and how much they paid and leave it somewhere extremely easy to find--and are always willing to cooperate with authorities in any way they can."

"You really want to smite the entire oil industry right now, don't you?"

"Sodom and Gomorrah would look like a practice run when I was done," Cas agrees pleasantly. "For the second--I have no idea what is required to set up non-existent gas stations or what exactly that even means, but I do know it was an option being used by some of Dean's former contacts and was working very well the last time he made contact with them."

"That's why lawyers exist," Dean agrees. "Okay, other than oil, how else could we find them?"

"Shipments of silver and rock salt in unusually high quantities, perhaps," Cas says after a moment of thought. "The logs for the Michigan checkpoint--"

"--might show something since that's one of the biggest natural rock salt deposits in the U.S. And the government's looking for terrorists, not people who really love salt."

"This was far less complicated when you simply went to the appropriate bar and waited for your contact to overcome his paranoia. At least then, intoxication wasn't necessarily a drawback." Cas looks at him with something not quite satisfaction. "Did I pass?"

Dean grins outright. "Giving you an A. You were a hunter before you Fell. You didn't tell me that."

Cas's expression changes to confusion. "I told you that Dean taught me everything that he knew."

"You went on jobs with Dean, right?" he asks, remembering what Vera told him about Cas and his stories. "Before you came to Chitaqua?"
"And Bobby," Cas confirms. "His expertise and skills were invaluable. When I was with him, I could do anything that his wheelchair would make difficult as well as protect him from harm, though Dean explained that part I was not to at any time mention to Bobby."

"Dean didn't go with you?"

"Not always, especially when the job required extensive travel and would take many weeks of research at various locations. Also, some of the older hunters of Bobby's acquaintance found Dean--somewhat abrasive on occasion."

Oh yeah, he still gets that reaction sometimes. "It's called 'cutting the bullshit'."

"Is that what it's called?" Cas asks curiously. "It works better, in case you didn't know this, after a six-shot minimum and no implications anyone had their testicles summarily amputated."

"Fuck you, Teddy was an asshole….hold on, that happened here?" Sitting back, Dean stares at him. "Outside Seattle, about three and a half, four years ago, may or may not have been a chimera lite?"

"If you mean a substandard magical construct resembling a classical chimera if you squint and have no idea what one actually looks like, then yes. He was the only one who'd--"

"--seen it and survived to tell the tale, okay, this is weird. Sam talked him down, got it out of him. How about here?"

"He was a practicing Roman Catholic and extremely devout," Cas answers casually. "I performed a miracle and transmuted all the water into wine. Considering what happened to him, he certainly deserved it."

Dean opens his mouth, then remembers this is Cas he's talking to. "All the water?"

"Yes, and interesting note: humans have a very dramatic reaction to seeing the sinks or toilets abruptly begin to fill with a 2006 Screaming Eagle Cabernet Sauvignon, despite the fact it's one of the finest red wines ever produced in this country. As Napa Valley was an early casualty, we won't be tasting its like for some time, if ever."

He's wondered, a little idly, when Cas discovered his sense of humor and how this Dean reacted to it. Now, the big question is if this Dean even recognized what was happening when he saw it; maybe Cas should have told him, but he can see the attraction of seeing how long it took him to work it out for himself. The air, he thinks fatalistically: gotta be the air.

"Dean thought it was an accident." Cas smiles at him, admitting nothing. "Lecture all the way home?"

"Sixteen and a half hours in the Impala broken by a night at an extremely questionable highway motel, two bathroom stops, and one diner with a very confused waitress."

Dean bites his lip against laughter at Cas's smug expression before reluctantly returning to the original subject. "So you went with Bobby; cross-country drives must have been an experience."

Cas's expression softens, a faint hint of a smile. "How'd that work out?"

"He said that while it was welcome to have someone listen to him for a change, it was--" Cas's forehead creases, "--like riding with a corpse that blinked occasionally, and I would never learn anything if I didn't ask him when I didn't understand what he was talking about."

Dean would do anything to have been around to hear Bobby and Cas in that truck. Back then, when
Cas still had Grace and Bobby came to the horrified realization he somehow picked up another goddamn stray (he can see Bobby's face now). A stray with epic cosmic powers that even then were starting to fail, the entire history of the world in his head, and even more terrifying, would listen to every word he said like it was Biblical writ. Because Cas wanted to learn, and God knew, Bobby couldn't have resisted the opportunity to get at least one of his kids on the right track.

"You enjoyed it." Cas looks startled. "The job, I mean. It wasn't just because Dean told you to do it. You liked doing it."

There's a difference between doing the job because you have to and because something in you just needs to do it. Given a choice, he would have done it, and Sam wouldn't have, he's always known that, but it was Sam who showed him that Dad wouldn't have, either. Not given the choice.

"It was my duty," Cas answers slowly. "I didn't object to Dean's plan for me, and I learned everything that he taught me as quickly as I could so I would be able to help him."

So he wouldn't be useless. "That wasn't the only reason."

Cas is quiet for a long time, gaze fixed on some point in the distance, bottle loose in one hand. "No," he says finally, blue eyes dark and shyly surprised; he really never thought about it. "Using the skills that Dean taught me--it became something I needed to do. The more I learned, the more I needed to do it. Does that answer your question?"

"Yeah." He lets out a breath; he didn't realize how much he needed to know that. "So your offer to the people in here with us, to teach them--"

"There were never enough hunters, even before," Cas interrupts, flickering him an unreadable look. "Dean…wanted to even the odds. It's one of the reasons--before Chitaqua, I trained hunters. We both did. I don't think I was very clear--on that part."

That makes sense; this Dean already knew Cas could do the job when he put him in charge of training Chitaqua's soldiers. He's really got to make time to ask Cas more about what they did before Chitaqua was founded. "You think you'd be interested in doing it again? Teaching, I mean."

Cas hesitates, blue eyes suddenly unreadable. "It's been a very long time since I did that."

"But you can still know how to do it."

"It's not a matter of knowledge," he answers. "It's a matter of practice. I'm not human."

"Cas, that has nothing to do with--"

"I don't mean human prejudice," he interrupts. "I mean I could kill them by accident on the training field during instruction."

"Oh." Weirdly enough, that never occurred to him, and from Cas's expression, it probably should have.

"That's the reason I only train with Amanda and sometimes Mark," Cas continues, still frowning faintly. "They're the most skilled in the camp, and they're constantly aware of the risk of injury even in practice."

"How'd you do it before, then?"

"When I was first learning, I had Grace, so it didn't matter; there were numerous ways to protect
those I was teaching if necessary. I was also taught very carefully to know exactly what I could risk with those I trained until it was reflexive, in preparation for when I no longer had Grace. After I Fell, when I was both teaching and going on missions, that early training held and was constantly reinforced. However, I've spent two years in the field, and it's become clear that I'm extremely out of practice."

"Morbid curiosity, gotta be. "How out of practice?"

"That's the other reason I needed to meet with them today. I asked Amanda to evaluate me while working with Mark," Cas says. "She would prefer I stick to marksmanship for the time being. She's offered to work with me regularly to simulate someone less skilled, but she doesn't have active experience in instruction to be certain, so to avoid involuntary manslaughter during a teaching exercise, it's probably best I avoid doing that for a while."

Dean makes a note to watch him with Mark. Amanda's incredibly good, maybe the best he's ever seen, which makes sense with having access to a former angel taught to train hunters. How much is natural ability, how much is wartime conditions, and how much is training, however, is up in the air. Seeing Mark working with Cas--who noticeably isn't Cas's first choice of sparring partner--may give him a better idea about that. It may also help his vague sense of inferiority after watching someone only a year or two younger than him make Cas work to put her on the ground only to bounce back up to do it all again.

"Do you hold back with them at all?" Dean asks, trying to sound casual.

"With Amanda? Only when necessary for her immediate safety," Cas answers depressingly. "I'm useless to her if I do otherwise; I'm her only opportunity to practice with something--"

"Someone."

Cas rolls his eyes. "--someone that is comparable to what she faces in the field under controlled circumstances. Greater strength, greater speed, and I know how humans fight and can simulate how many of our enemies do as well."

"So you're also a practice dummy."

"Yes," Cas agrees, mouth quirking: from what Dean can tell, he's barely controlling the urge to say it's probably the most fun he has on planet Earth since he Fell, orgasms aside.

"And you like that." Dean doesn't bother waiting for Cas's enthusiastic nod. "Can a human beat you?"

"It's possible to defeat anyone, given sufficient time and preparation," Cas answers. "However, that's immaterial; there will never be sufficient time when it's most needed, preparation will never be perfect, and in a straight fight, I'll always win. So to win, the best course of action is to avoid the possibility of a straight fight and find another option." Like assassination, Dean thinks, fighting down anger with an effort. One of his students, at least, learned that lesson a little too well. "Anyone who doesn't understand that won't survive six months, if that."

Cas's voice changes, becoming more thoughtful, with an edge of something like bitterness. "Humans are always at a disadvantage when they fight the supernatural when it comes to both physical and metaphysical abilities. Millennia have passed, but in some ways, you've barely advanced beyond the most basic protections of your earliest ancestors."

Dean raises an eyebrow. "You're saying hunters have been slacking?"
"No, of course not," Cas answers distractedly. "Even when angels walked the earth and fought with hunters, they rarely offered hunters anything but the most basic skills of their profession. There must have been a reason for that, but as I never asked why, it eludes me."

"Bootstraps," Dean offers, intrigued. "Maybe we were supposed to learn the rest of it ourselves."

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"Hunters didn't fight for land or profit against other humans; they fought for the existence of your species," Cas says hotly. "That's why we were allowed to give instruction and assistance to hunters in the first place, but why the arbitrary limit on how much? This wasn't natural law; there was nothing to stop us from offering more, so why not teach you everything we knew? Infinite knowledge: we knew all things, all they would face, yet we let generations die through simple lack of understanding or the inability of hunters to pass on new skills before they were killed. I know the weaknesses of almost everything we could possibly face, and I can simulate exactly how to kill those that can be killed; I could teach in three months what could only be learned over generations of hunters if they survived long enough to pass on their skills. If I could do that when I no longer had Grace, the Host could have done the same in moments."

Dean blinks. "How long have you been thinking about this?"

"I'm not sure." Cas slumps back on the step with a frown. "Preparing Amanda and Mark to instruct civilians if the communities agree….even if what they pass on is only theory and the most basic instruction, that considerably lowers the risk of a hunter dying before they gain experience even during an Apocalypse. My experience with Bobby and meeting other hunters—I never realized you were the exception among hunters, not the rule in both knowledge and ability."

"Me?" Cas nods, and Dean isn't warmed by that at all, even a little. "Dude, I've seen Amanda. I've never been that good."

"Combat is the least of what a hunter needs to know," Cas answers dismissively, which is news to Dean. "In any case, remedying that is simply a matter of practice; you weren't instructed consistently in combat techniques and drilled in them until they were reflex. The breadth of knowledge you have, however--anyone can learn the rudiments of fighting, but it's far more rare for any hunter to be able to learn as much as you and apply it."

Dean ignores the faint heat at Cas's assessment. "I had Bobby and Sam, and Dad."

"And most hunters worked alone," Cas agrees. "Why?"

"Uh." Because that's how it is. Looks like Cas isn't the only one who doesn't think to ask why. "I don't know."

"I do," Cas says quietly. "Because that was how you were taught."

Dean starts to mention that's stating the obvious, but then reviews the conversation. "From the first?"

"From the very first hunters to walk the earth, it was closely held within family lines or learned by those motivated to find someone to teach them. When Dean asked me why," Cas continues softly, that edge back in his voice, "I couldn't give him an answer."

"And a new way to train hunters is born," Dean says, reluctantly impressed with the other Dean; he never would have thought of that. "They're trained in teams?"
"Dean liked groups of three to five; it was more practical," Cas answers, relaxing at the shift to the practical side. "It wasn't arbitrary, however. Hunters are suicidal by nature--"

"Hey!" Dean says, offended. "Hunter here."

"I rest my case," he answers pointedly, ignoring Dean's scowl. "Given responsibility for others seemed to help curb that tendency, which could be illustrated by you and Sam's work together. You and Sam were far more likely to seek out non-suicidal options when you had the responsibility of each other's lives in your hands."

Reluctantly, Dean nods. "Fine, I'll give you that one."

"The best measure of a hunter's skill is understanding the art of the possible and settle for that rather than the perfect. While everything can die, practically speaking, it may not be worth the effort or the price you have to pay to achieve it. In this one way, John Winchester impressing responsibility for Sam on you at an early age did have some limited benefit--even when you worked alone, you were already used to finding alternatives a to messy and protracted death, and willingly sought out temporary partners when the job would benefit from that. Both of those are rare qualities in hunters, and even then, trust was always an issue. Dean thought that training new hunters with partners would pass on those qualities as the default, not the exception, as well as encourage them to trust those they worked with. He was correct; the mortality rate was lowered significantly and jobs were finished more quickly and easily than otherwise. A hunter's job is to protect others, and they can't do that if they get themselves killed before they can do it."

"What if that's the only way to save someone--okay, a town, let's try that. You still think that?"

"I'd ask what's wrong with simply finding a means to successfully deal with it that won't cost you your life."

"Right," Dean agrees. "And if that's not an option?"

Cas tilts his head. "I've been told if I don't like my current options, I should make new ones."

He grins. "Okay, I'll give you that one, happy?"

"Ecstatic."

"So Mark and Amanda are it right now," Dean says. "Anyone else you think could eventually learn how to teach? I'm going to guess there's a reason you only taught Amanda and Mark that part." At Cas's raised eyebrows, he shrugs. "Very said something about how you kept them longer than the rest of her class. She guessed what you were doing, in case you didn't know that."

"Not surprising," Cas answer cryptically. "Amanda was taught by her parents from early childhood and was primary caretaker for her two younger siblings." Cas doesn't need to explain where those younger kids got their instruction; he was the one who taught Sam first, made sure he kept up his training right up until the day he left for Stanford. "She also has the temperament to deal with those less skilled than she is and can adapt to their differing levels of ability. Mark learned from another hunter when his family was killed in his late teens, and while not as skilled in instruction, he was malleable enough to be taught to do it competently." Cas leans an elbow on the step behind him, frowning at nothing. "Kamal and Alicia have the temperament, and Melanie and Joseph are also possibilities, as they are both patient as well as methodical. The rest--it's been a very long time since I did their initial and final evaluations for Dean. However, we can't afford to remove anyone else from duty for the time it would take to train them." Cas looks down, as if for his Notebook of Everything (now five volumes and counting) and frowns at the realization it's not there. "Our first priority is to
field at least two more teams for patrol without affecting the watch or basic camp functions, especially if any of the communities accept our offer."

"Any candidates?"

"Yes, but…" Cas's frown vanishes as he looks at Dean. "I don't want you to think I don't respect your judgment, so I feel the final decision should be yours."

"I don't--"

"I'll provide all the relevant information you require to decide," Cas interrupts earnestly. "I'll begin the list tomorrow for your perusal."

Fuck his life: Sid (and possibly Kyle) aren't exactly shining examples of his judgment here. "Fine, whatever." Before Cas can decide there's anything else he should do (technically speaking, his job), he remembers something from earlier. "Vera said something about quarterly checks?"

Cas makes a face. "After I--"

"Opted out?"

"That's a very kind word for it," he says wryly. "Dean assigned Amanda to be my assistant in quarterly checks of the camp--I assume in the hopes I'd eventually change my mind--and she technically reported to me after each one. Amanda pretended I was merely testing her memory when I asked for an update…." He straightens, looking annoyed. "There hasn't been one since Dean received information on the Colt. I should probably--"

"Yeah, tell me when I'm allowed farther than the porch and that's when we'll do it." Dean finishes his bottle absently, knowing he's officially procrastinating now. "So, I've been thinking."

"You've certainly had the time for it," Cas says mildly. Startled, Dean looks at him and sees the amusement's back. "Don't let me interrupt."

He scowls half-heartedly but puts down his bottle. "We don't know how to kill Lucifer. If there's a way to do it that's not the Colt, we really can't take another five years to find it anyway. By then, he doesn't have to have me dead to win this; there won't be enough people left to make a difference anyway, much less enough organization to do anything if there were." He tries to decide how to say this. "So--"

"You want to expand Chitaqua." Cas grins at him over the rim of his bottle. "I assumed that from Vera's first mission as official spy and your very subtle interest in Dean's training techniques. Do you have a particular number in mind?"

"Not really," he answers carefully, trying to ignore the headache growing behind his eyes: fuck the goddamn fever. "I mean, no idea how many we could get."

"Contact other militia groups that may have been founded by hunters?"

Cas is deadpanning this like he's going for an Oscar. "Eventually, yeah."

Though not yet: what Cas said about hunters struck a nerve. They hunt alone, but it's not just that; they think alone, and even short-term partners aren't ever entirely trusted. For all the weirdness of Chitaqua's soldiers, just watching the patrol teams and reading the reports from the patrol leaders have taught him a lot about how they think, and it's never in the singular. Even Sid complaining about not having a team is something; it doesn't even occur to him he doesn't need one to go on
patrol even when nothing's happening out there.

He doesn't just need hunters to do this; he needs hunters who can work together, trust each other, not just know the job but all the possible ways to get it done. So when they fight, they don't die, because they have time and three other people to find another option.

"You want more people capable of instructing others in hunting," Cas says before taking a leisurely drink from his almost empty bottle. "So they can protect themselves and others."

Dean scowls at him. "Now you're just dragging this out for fun."

"You seem to be enjoying keeping me in suspense. Or are you simply enjoying how long it takes me to give up and simply ask you if you are planning to start a war against Lucifer?"

"We're already in a war with Lucifer," Dean counters, and Cas's expression changes, amusement supplemented with--something else. "I want us to start actually fighting in it."

"So let's do that." Cas's grin widens, and Dean's hit all over again by the difference since the fever. He remembers what Cas told him about not thinking, because he wanted to forget and that was the closest he could get. Today, he wasn't just dusting off his infinite memory and answering his questions; Cas gave him answers he didn't know enough to ask for and thinking of ways they can use them. An exceptional computer, bullshit: that's nothing compared to Cas as (he hopes, secretly, but he does) a partner. "You thought I'd object?"

"Not really," he answers. "Though you know, we don't even know how to fight this yet."

"Then we'll learn," Cas answers, putting his empty bottle beside Dean's and turning to face him. "If your only reason to fight is to win, then you're not fighting for the right reasons. The reason you fight is because there's something worth fighting for."

Dean lets out a breath he didn't realize he was holding, reaching up to absently rub his forehead, annoyingly aware of the growing headache, temples already sensitive to the touch. Not to mention he's starting to struggle with the upright thing. Goddamn fever. "Yeah, that."

"I didn't Fall because I thought we could win," Cas adds more quietly. "I did because to win or lose was irrelevant; this world isn't Lucifer's to have. If he wants it, he'll have to fight for it." Before he can respond, Cas reaches over, pressing the back of his fingers against Dean's forehead, frowning faintly. "Headache?" Dean nods reluctantly. "The fever is returning. You should go to bed. We can continue this conversation tomorrow."

Dean drops his head back against the bannister in sheer frustration. Planning a futile war interrupted by a goddamn fever. Why not? "This sucks."

"You're still healing; that tends to be exhausting." Cas sounds way too amused as he pulls away. "I'll give you something so you can sleep tonight. You'll feel better in the morning."

Closing his eyes against the sharpening ache, the memory of fever-images of the camp boundaries and Lucifer flicker through his mind, insistent, like something is desperately trying to get his attention, but it fades before he can work out what it is.

"I need to meet with Joe tomorrow about negotiating with the communities," he says. "There's a couple of things...." Another stab of pain interrupts the thought.

"That is an excellent idea," Cas says, "and I meant to suggest it myself, but this discussion will be far more successful if you tell me after I've given you something to help with the headache and you're
somewhat prone."

Giving up, he lets Cas get him to his feet and take his weight before he can stumble himself into a humiliating step-related death; Jesus, just sitting on the porch doing nothing wipes him out. "I'm getting better?"

"You're much better," Cas assures him as they go inside. "And tomorrow morning before meeting with Joseph, you get to sample my first attempt at making an adequate breakfast. It'll be an adventure for us both."

Oh God, he forgot about that. "I can't wait."

Chapter End Notes

I'm going on vacation tomorrow, so only one chapter this week, and it may be delayed next week by a day or two. My entire extended immediate family is going as well, including the MIL of my middle sister, so I will be living in very interesting times.

Notes: The problem with abruptly consuming wild game when you're not used to it--especially wild game that doesn't come from a supermarket or butcher--is a thing and can be a fairly miserable thing if it's your only option. If you ever had friends over and introduced them to buffalo jerky (delicious, no lie, they agreed), there's a slightly greater than sixty percent chance they'll speak to you the next day, but consider the slightly less than forty percent chance they might not, and it gets sketchier the farther into 'interesting' and 'unusual'. 
The names of the towns are partially imaginary, due to the fact I unexpectedly became twitchy destroying too many actual Kansas small towns, but I still needed to anchor where they are in the state.

--Day 86--

"You thought I was being paranoid," Vera says over her shoulder as Dean squeezes the tennis ball to an internal beat of triumph and watches the IV finally--finally--roll out of the room for good, to be taken to the infirmary by Joe and Kamal and used by actually sick people and not just really goddamn tired ones who may have the occasional fever or three.

He's been off the IV for over a week while Vera carefully tracked his progress, and her notes show that he's finally starting to gain weight, which sadly enough, can be directly attributed to his current personal chef.

(Cas may have a shitty relationship with food, but at least when he cooks, it's edible; the mess seems to have some kind of sadomasochistic relationship with it even when Zack's not in charge, and the food inevitably loses.)

"You get that a month ago, you were trying to exorcise me? With my own knife?" she asks from the doorway, crossing her arms, eyes fixed on the ball. Feeling stupidly optimistic--must be a day ending in 'y'--he tosses it and is almost as surprised as Vera when he catches it, fingers closing loosely over the rough surface.

Squeezing it--still not his best work, but he's getting there--he grins at her. "You really gotta get over that."

Through means that Dean assumes are using camp resources for personal gain--or Dean's gain--he not only has several sizes of balls of various types and levels of firmness, he also has clothes that actually almost fit. Chuck brought them by this afternoon, spoils (he assumes) of the Kansas suburbs (he's gotta find the "Supply Dean with clothes" supply run report), freshly washed and after looking them over, Dean piled them up on the foot of the bed for Cas to deal with when he gets home, mostly because he's still not sure where to put them, the closet being an armory and everything.

While he's glad to have jeans that (nearly) fit again and therefore freedom from sweatpants for daily wear (not looking at the size helps, because sometimes, you just don't wanna confirm how much of your body mass is missing), he's kinda gotten used to being offered one of Cas's eclectic collection of t-shirts, the ones that Dean didn't even know existed until Cas pulled out one of the many boxes from the weapons closet last week.

"They were mine," Cas told him so casually at Dean's question that he immediately added that to his mental list of Things About Cas Before Chitaqua. "Dean advised that I alter my wardrobe to more easily blend into the population when I went on jobs."

Taking each painstakingly folded shirt, Cas shook it out with an abstracted air at odds with the
careful way he laid them on the bed, and Dean watched, fascinated, at the emergence of a collection unlike anything he would have expected.

*Rammstein*, so much not a surprise: *Alice in Chains, Marilyn Manson*, and *Nine Inch Nails*, he could have called that one sight unseen (probably his preferred soundtrack when shooting up; God knows a few hours of that and Dean would be doing it from self-defense): *Queen, Radiohead*, and *Dave Matthews Band*, really, Cas?: *Grateful Dead*, of course: *Metallica*, hell, yes: *N'Sync*, holy shit, didn't see that coming. Several movies also made the cut, along with a couple of State Fairs, half a dozen theme parks, a *Star Trek* convention (Spock, of course), and no less than two separate *Sea Worlds*, Atlanta and San Antonio.

Picking idly at the hem of his current daywear (*Breaking Benjamin*), he wonders idly if one of those boxes has the music to back some of those shirts; on a guess, he's going with yes. Eclectic, yes (this is Cas) but random it's not, packed up in a box--out of sight, out of mind--and barely worn more than a few times. Cas currently wanders around in three to pack former Wal-Mart specials in black and grey, army surplus, and sixties-era guru wear in all the wrong sizes: faded, tears neatly stitched when needed, with old bloodstains and bleach marks, scrupulously clean, but obviously used at random.

It's almost like a before and after, maybe an exploration and interest brought to a sudden halt. Because no one sane--even Cas--would think a grown man in a *N'Sync* t-shirt blends with anything, anywhere, ever.

"Well," Vera says as she comes back, interrupting his thoughts, and checking the room with a discerning eye for stray medical paraphernalia, "I think we can safely say that if you're not stupid, you're past the danger of relapse and might even survive a hangnail. Congratulations."

"And the fevers?"

She grimaces. "Yeah, I don't know. The frequency's dropped, and you're recovering from them faster each time, so--immune system, who knows. If I were guessing--and I am--it might be chronic."

"You mean the rest of my life I'm gonna be getting these?" He really doesn't want to think about that, but considering the prognosis at one point was 'will die in the next five seconds', he's really gotta think positive here.

"Maybe?" She shakes her head at his expression. "Look, brownie infections are weird anyway. Yours is pretty much the worst possible iteration without being dead, and it was a close thing. From here out, this is learn as we go." Before he can respond, she adds, "Your bloodwork is still sketchy, so I'm putting you a steroid and antibiotic for the next month to avoid unexpected pneumonia, though your lungs seem fine, so don't worry about it."

"Right," Dean answers blankly. "Pneumonia?"

"It's mostly precautionary, since your immune system is still getting over the brownie infection and it's still--but other than that...give it a couple of months and no one would know you spent two weeks doing your damndest to die." She abruptly drops onto the foot of the bed, spilling the pile of clothes onto the floor and staring down with a unsettlingly blank expression. "Like it didn't even happen."

"Vera?"

"A month ago, we were--" Her voice cuts off, shoulders hunching defensively. "I haven't practiced medicine regularly in over three years, and the only people who knew I used to were Cas and Jeremy. I had to remember things I didn't even know I'd learned, and it wasn't enough." Her head
snaps up, eyes dark. "I'm not sure you understand this; you didn't just almost die, Dean. You started almost dying from the get-go and kept it up for two weeks. I did my time in the ER and intensive care on forty hour shifts, and that was nothing compared to this. I'm not a real doctor, and he thought I could--" She shuts her eyes, hands staring to shake. "Nothing I tried even slowed it down. Your heart stopped twice, and the second time….I never--I couldn't even--even figure out what the hell was happening to you!"

"Vera--"

"Brain damage was a given, okay, and I couldn't even be sure you'd wake up again long enough to know you'd lost half your cognitive functions or stay a goddamn vegetable, but you know what?" She opens her eyes, and to his horror, he think she's about to cry. "You woke up like you hadn't spent two fucking weeks frying your own goddamn brain. Which, whatever, your brain had no idea either. I ran you through all the tests I knew that didn't require an MRI and--well, maybe you're crazy, but not like we'd know the difference."

"It wasn't you, Vera."

"Yeah, you're damn right it wasn't me--I have no fucking clue how you--"

"It wasn't your fault, Christ!" Where the fuck is Cas? He needs reinforcements five minutes ago. "Vera, you saved my life." She opens her mouth, but he just manages to get in first. "Sorry I made it hard for you."

"You're sorry--"

"I mean, not like anyone saw death by fucking brownie coming," he continues doggedly. "It's not usually that dramatic, I get that."

She stares at him for a long moment, hostility slowly draining away.

"No," she says finally. "You're special like that."

"You have no idea." After a second, he adds, "Really, thanks. For someone who hasn't practiced for a few years--"

"I kept my hand in." Dean can't figure out what she's thinking right now. "You know--well, you don't, probably. Cas wouldn't go to the camp doctor after what happened when he broke his foot."

He straightens so fast he sees spots from the head rush. "What?"

"Darryl--he really didn't take the not-quite-human thing well." She shrugs, not looking at him. "He--"

"He wouldn't treat him." Jesus Christ, he hopes to God that this Dean was just a shitty leader who didn't know what was going on in his own goddamn camp. The alternative is so much worse. "You took care of it?"

"Setting the bones? No sweat, I could do it in my sleep. Didn't even have to worry about infection, just made sure he stayed down until they were healed." She hesitates, chewing her lip uncomfortably before adding, "Cas didn't want you to know. Darryl was the only doctor we had, and he didn't think--"

"Yeah, I get it." If he wouldn't tell this Dean about his lieutenants trying to kill him, a little medical prejudice wouldn't even make the fucking radar.
She nods before looking up, expression wary. "I told him I wouldn't tell you if he promised to tell me every time he was injured and let me treat him. First time he didn't--or I even thought he didn't--I went to you and told you everything. With the records to prove it."

"That worked?"

She meets his eyes with a flicker of humor. "Let's put it this way; he never risked testing me on that."

Dean hears the second reason loud and clear: so that's why Vera was around for Cas's experiments in better living through chemistry. Talk about the gold standard for blackmail for a good cause, and documented, even: he needs to see those goddamn records.

"So I really owe you here." She blinks in surprise. "Why would Darryl--okay, this is ridiculous, Jesus Christ, what the hell is wrong with people?"

Vera's eyes widen. "What the hell happened to you in Kansas City?"

He stares back at her; there's no way anyone sane would make the leap, but he suddenly, viscerally gets what Cas was afraid of, why he wouldn't even risk anyone being here during the fever who might see the physical difference. They might not--probably couldn't--come to the right conclusion, but there are a lot of dangerously wrong ones they could think of, too.

"Sorry, I--" She sits back, staring at her hands as if she's never seen them before. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry, that's really not my business."

"It's okay." Dean dials down from outright panic, trying to think what would happen if everyone found out--then stops and revises it into what would happen if she found out. The risk she wouldn't believe him, that she would, that she'd let it slip to someone, anyone, even by accident, in this camp. A camp where paranoia is reflexive, a fucking doctor refused to treat Cas, and there were (are?) people who called Cas Lucifer's brother and at least one tried to put a bullet in his head because of it.

She trusts Cas, and he knows Cas trusts her, but this isn't about trust, it's about this fucking world and what they risk every time they go outside of Chitaqua's wards. In the back of his mind, he thinks of Chuck: Leave with you if he had to? Kill us to do it? Yeah, he would. He wouldn't like it, but it wouldn't slow him down. It's not like he didn't believe it in theory, but that assumes Cas would want to survive having to doing it, or even be able to. When he was an angel, maybe it wouldn't have mattered or even been applicable, he could do it and never count the cost, but now . . .

"You don't have any reason to trust me," he says finally. "Or like me, I get that. You still saved my life. Don't think I don't appreciate that."

"I have reasons to hate your guts," Vera says flatly, and no, it wasn't just about Debra. It was about the kind of man who ran a camp where Croat wasn't the only way to get a death sentence by bullet, and what he knows is probably only the tip of the iceberg in what he doesn't.

"I know, and I'm not trying to--"

"Bullshit, you're trying your damndest," she says acidly. "Talk about not being subtle, you could take prize in it."

"Look--"

"Why, who the hell knows; the ways of Dean Winchester are ineffable," she continues brittlely. "The thing is, when you're not trying, it's the same. I can't even tell the difference anymore."
Dean swallows. "People change."

"It seems to be a theme with you these days," she answers. "I don't know what to do with that."

"It could be the entire saving my life thing," he tries warily. "You know, once you save a life, whatever."

She's quiet for a long moment before looking up, brown eyes thoughtful. "It could be," she admits. "I hope not, though. I'm okay with not hating you anymore."

He wonders if he's supposed to respond to that.

"I came here to fight, any way I could," she says. "I didn't think we could win, but I had to try, you know? World ending, no way to stop it, but it--it was--"

"Worth fighting for."

"Yeah." She searches his face. "Do you think we can win?"

"I know we haven't lost yet."

Vera nods, eyebrows drawing together like she's trying to stare directly into his mind. "Okay." He's still wondering what the hell is going on when she nods as if to herself, abruptly getting to her feet. "Thought I'd get that out of the way. So, where were we?"

"You don't hate me anymore?" It's pretty much all he's got.

"Yeah, and you're clear of the infection," she agrees, crossing her arms with a smile that this time reaches her eyes. "You're out of danger. Now comes the hard part."

Dean tries and fails to follow. "What?"

"Recovery." Her smile widens in cheerful malice. "Let's talk about how we're getting you back to normal."

"...and daily walks, supervised," Dean finishes in outrage, waiting for Cas to fake a little sympathy as he finishes with the dinner dishes. It hasn't happened yet, but hope springs eternal or something. "Did you see the size of the pills in the new and improved treatment regime?"

"I'm not that masochistic," Cas answers, smart enough to hide his smile with a closing cabinet door before turning around. "Apparently, while under normal circumstances I'm a terrible cook, my abilities right now suit your current diet, since blandness and tastelessness are desirable qualities where you're concerned."

He's gotta admit it; it may not be even diner quality, but he can keep it down easily. It helps, oddly enough, that he's also sitting at the table to eat off a plate and not poking himself with his own fork while the bed springs whine a nerve-jangling soundtrack to his failure. He's gotta admit, as motivation to teach your left hand to do things, repeatedly stabbing yourself in the gums does the job just fine. "It's like your own personal superpower or something."

Cas just smiles at him and wipes his hands meticulously on a dishtowel--they own those now, who saw that coming?--before his eyes flicker to the front doorway for a deliberate moment and dart back to Dean. It's so transparently an elaborate performance of how to act suspiciously that he's gotta be doing it deliberately. It's also impressive as hell; he's even got the 'not meeting his eyes' and cryptic
amusement down pat while dithering over which order to stack two identical plates in the cabinet.

"Perhaps you should rest in the living room," he says casually after finally satisfied that his arrangement is the best possible.

Finishing his water, Dean tries to decide if he wants to play: why not? "I'm a little tired, fever and all. Maybe tomorrow?"

"I can make coffee," Cas offers, not missing a beat and already turning toward the pantry. "If you have no objections."

"Maybe a cup," Dean concedes after a long pause, getting to his feet with his best yawn--he even adds a protracted stretch just for the fuck of it--and pretends not to see Cas roll his eyes.

Wandering to the couch, Dean notes the sudden absence of the box of reports (one of two, he recently discovered, to his horror) and sighs deeply, not entirely for Cas's benefit. Getting better has some drawbacks, as it turns out; the more he gets to do, the more he notices what he still can't, and getting his evenings awake, upright, and talking to Cas in here or on the porch back comes with missing when he could do all that over a beer or two, which is now very special occasion and probably will be for a while.

Still though, he doesn't miss it that much; just being able to spend an hour or two (these days, forty-five minutes, but he's getting there) hanging out with Cas again and talking about something other than his goddamn health makes up for it. Before the fever, it was the best part of his day, and not just because it was the only time he wasn't pretending to be someone else. In some ways, now it's even better; Cas is on a learning curve as much as he was and still is, and this is territory neither of them knows and are learning while doing. Dean's journal isn't much of a help when it comes to running the camp, and now he's starting to understand why Cas didn't like how much time he use to spend studying it.

Glancing into the kitchen, where Cas is measuring out coffee with the kind of precision you'd use for explosives and sketchy ritual magic with very undesirable side effects when you get it wrong (much like explosives, come to think), he considers that distinct probability he's not the only one who looks forward to this.

Vera's talk with him last week got him thinking, and not just about how to bring up the subject with Cas (still pending the thinking part; he can't even imagine how to start). Granted, he's been distracted since the fever by the surviving and getting better thing, but he doesn't have that excuse for before, and it doesn't say anything good about him if the entire goddamn camp came to this particular conclusion because there was actual evidence of just that (thanks for breaking it down, Vera; apparently, Cas isn't the only one who needs things spelled out sometimes).

That's only the start, though. Reading reports, talking over what happened each day with Cas, the problems that need an immediate solution and those that don't but will eventually, their shared bewilderment that they've managed--against all odds--to avoid a camp-wide revolution overthrowing them for sheer incompetence (though Nate's three days in the mess were pretty tense before he and Cas worked out the new rotation), it hit him while examining Cas's list for their two new potential teams that every name now came with attached face and even a tentative personality and vague knowledge of their skills, and it only took him almost three months to pull that off.

Wait, no; it took him less than three days once he started seeing regular visitors and saying hi to anyone who walked by the cabin (who he now knows were hoping he would do just that) and spending a few minutes talking to them. Interesting, that: so what the hell was he doing the almost-three months before that again?
Yeah, a whole new world, he needed time to get used to it, fine, but he's gotta wonder how much time he really needed to spend brooding about the unfairness of it all while reading this Dean's journal and feeling inadequate. Sure, learning shit took a lot of his attention, but for the life of him, he can't remember if even once he ever thought of this as anything but another job--a much more difficult one granted, but still just a job--and learning it just enough to make people believe he knew it before walking away once he was done, ready for the next one.

Dean's journal: yeah, let's think about that. It makes a pretty good historical record of missions past and obsession getting a book deal, hell yes, but you'd never know without very close reading and a considerable leap of intuition that Dean was running a camp and the people on the missions were his own soldiers, not random hunters he happened to be working with at the time. The latter would make a hell of a lot more sense, since there's a real lack of names in more than passing unless you're lucky enough to be a casualty, and on a glance, there's no indication they were even people he knew.

Like Chitaqua and the soldiers he recruited, trained, hung out with, regularly f**ked in serial monogamous bliss, were a job--a much more difficult one, granted, but still just a job--that he learned very, very well and he would walk away from once he was done, ready for the next one.

That job, by the way, was killing Lucifer; the rest was, apparently, just details.

He didn't run this camp, that was details; his team leaders did, and a bang up job they made of it, by the way, and he's not even just holding what happened to Cas against them. Reviewing at his post-fever leisure what Chuck first told him about Cas and the team leaders, at the time he remembers thinking vaguely Chuck wasn't one of their biggest fans. Really, he should have followed up on that a lot better considering it already bit him in the ass once with Luke, but hey, he finally got around to it by sheer accident.

Three days--three days--of shooting the shit with every person who walked by his door, he's come away with a lot more than just the identities of his own soldiers and an impressively eclectic list of hobbies you can maintain in a militia camp that isn't sex, drugs, heavy drinking, and contemplating the end of the world (the last of which assuring the existence of the other three).

(Among them: one book club, Amanda and Christina officiating, with very few books they read very slowly; one D&D run by Rob as Dungeonmaster in which Joe, Kim, and James are very active members; a weekly poker night (almost everyone from what he can tell); a camp-wide betting pool that encompasses everything in the world you could possibly bet on; a semi-regular lottery of premium goods like shoelaces, socks, toothpaste, and God help them, underwear; and memorably, Vera's occasional sewing classes, which he suspects she told him all about in a test of the theme of change is good or possibly desperation on how close the camp was to 'optional nudity on random days' except maybe not optional. This led to a revelation (and belated explanation of Chuck's paper obsession during that supply run), an immediate emergency meeting with Cas about what exactly was considered a priority in days gone by, and a dramatic revision of said priority list, starting with 'everything not f**king weapons, salt, and mystical herbs; for f**k's sake, they're auctioning off briefs!' He also learns Cas learned to sew from Bobby, and he and Vera have opinions on how to do it. He didn't know mending torn clothes involved opinions, but he does know it involves supplies, and the supply list now has those and more.)

Three days of chatting, all that, and the added impression a few of them were possibly as afraid of their own (dead) leaders as they were of the Fallen angel in their midst. What he doesn't have--yet--is the reason why.

When Cas told him the journal wasn't an instruction manual on becoming what he's not, that might have been said in the desperate hope that wasn't exactly where Dean was going with it. He can't
even blame Cas; evidence suggests that's exactly what he was doing.

He's still brooding on that--but in a self-actualized way, Sam, not an exercise in irony--when the sound of beads jerks his attention to the doorway to see Joe walk in, wet brown hair pulled back in a ponytail and freshly shaved. "Hey, am I--"

"Your punctuality is exemplary," Cas says easily from the kitchen doorway, and that is one fuck of a smug smile. "I forgot to mention that Joseph returned from his meeting with a few of the communities before I went off-duty and wishes to give his verbal report to you tonight."

"Welcome back," Dean says blankly, counting backward twice and still coming up with five days since he left. They'd assumed he'd need at least a week just to find someone who wouldn't a.) assume they were there for extortion/blackmail/fuck knows what horror and ask them to leave, b.) that and at the point of a gun, c.) skip all that and shoot on sight, which isn't common but not nearly as rare as it should be, which would be 'never'. "So, uh--"

"I'll get everyone coffee," Cas says brightly, wandering back to his domestic chores with something that may actually be a spring in his step as Joe grabs the armchair from beside the couch and pulls it to the other side of the coffee table, the better to face him with a wide grin. Dean takes a moment to remind himself to stop moving the chair; no one seems to like it there, and it's not like there's a view out that window other than 'depressing'. "Joseph, please begin without me; I can listen from here."

Dean looks at Joe curiously. "So, how did it--"

"Glad you asked," Joe tells him with no effort at being casual. "I might have some prospects."

Oh thank God. "Good, so--"

"--yeah, it's great," Joe says. "Didn't even have to look for them. They found us."

Dean sits back, not sure what that's supposed to mean. "What?"

"I checked your original list of prospective towns who showed a positive response to our initial visit and gave it to Joseph as a starting point," Cas tells him, materializing to set two cups down between him and Joe. "Your notes indicated Harlin seemed to--"

"Yeah, Mel's team made contact with them," Dean interrupts, pulling up the memory after a panicked delay. "She said something--they weren't nervous, not like some of the others were." That would be the ones that shot at them when they were in range, and Sarah's jeep has the repairs to the body to tell them the exact caliber of the bullets. "They were also doing pretty good. Even had electricity in the part of the town they were living in, and they had a regular patrol that seemed to know their jobs. Seemed friendly, too. No one took their kids and ran inside when they saw us, anyway." Which again, not like some of the others, who literally did just that, sometimes while firing at them. "They were looking for us?"

"Or their patrol extended their range considerably and just happened to be in just the right place at the right time to almost pull off surprise when they saw our jeep and decided on the fly to hail us down and say hi," Joe answers, cocking his head. "Which sure, could happen."

"They're located just south of the northern perimeter of District 4," Cas says, returning with his own cup of coffee and seating himself on the right side of the couch, tucking one leg underneath him before achieving his favorite comfortable slump into the corner. District 4: southern Kansas border to forty miles north of Wichita, two alternate routes, three to five days to complete, got it. "The patrol teams continue to follow your order to greet anyone they see, explain their purpose if they seem
friendly, and be amiable, casual, and non-threatening for the length of the interaction, and leave immediately should anyone seem uneasy to emphasize our good intentions. So far, there's been no opportunity for them to practice their people skills, as they've seen no one, so I remind them regularly."

"He quotes you," Joe offers to Dean's horror. "Every time they leave the camp for their route. We can all recite it by now. Want me to--"

"No. So you used the patrol's regular route?" Dean asks a little desperately. Grin widening, Joe nods. "How far were you off the time a team would normally come by?"

"I wasn't," Joe answers, glancing at Cas for confirmation. "They usually hit there afternoon on day one, but they took an alternate route this time in case anyone was watching and got nervous seeing two jeeps."

"Good call; looks like someone was doing just that."

"Gets better. The only access road they could have used was ten miles south and light green, meaning shitty as fuck," Joe says, taking a quick drink of coffee. "Shitty because, and could be wrong, not like Mel's worked road crew--"

"It was fucked up deliberately," Dean finishes for him. "She mentioned something about that."

"Mel reported the destruction of the asphalt was very conveniently located," Cas says. "It became medium to dark green--very passable to excellent, if haphazardly patched--after less than two miles, when it was no longer visible from the main road."

"She was right," Joe says. "On a guess, some repurposed fireworks and a working knowledge of homemade explosives for the initial destruction, which wouldn't be as rare as you think for anyone who grew up on the family farm or took a shop class or two in high school."

"My shop classes taught me how to make a box and a really shitty cabinet," Dean says, offended. "What the hell, there was an optional explosives lecture I didn't know about?"

Cas gives him a searching look. "You know perfectly well how to manufacture explosives from anything that can be found in a standard kitchen."

"It's the principle of the thing," he answers, still annoyed as he turns his attention back to Joe, whose indulgent expression as he looks between them tells Dean that he thinks he's watching domestic partners having the cutest argument ever. Also, what the hell does Cas have in their kitchen these days anyway? "So they were definitely watching for us. Keep going."

"Right." Joe composes his expression to something like professional if you ignore the twitching. "So they waved us down--it was very casual, they even had someone very obviously checking what was a perfectly fine tire and holding a tire iron--and we stopped, did the greet, and then I told them why I was there."

Dean leans forward hopefully. "Tell me you said, 'take me to your leader'."

Joe grins. "They even pretended it was funny."

"And so you followed them back to Harlin?"

Joe's expression changes, brown eyes flickering to Cas, who just stares back expressionlessly. "Not exactly."
"They--brought their leader to you, no, of course not." Dean fights down a spurt of belated fear, but he can't quite keep his voice equally calm. "You went back with them. Alone."

"And I disarmed in front of them and asked them to check me before I got in their jeep," Joe answers calmly, and Dean just manages not to drop his coffee cup. "Ana, too. Leah and Mike stayed with our jeep and two of their patrol, Felipe and Christopher, volunteered to wait with them. They offered to disarm as well, and I said no."

"You learn that in negotiation or hostage school?" Dean snaps.

"I learned it in a militia camp where they know we can find and kill all of them with an arsenal equal to the American military," Joe answers soberly. "And my commander told me--"

"I didn't tell you to go in there practically naked!"

"--that the only thing they know for sure about us is what we do when they meet us. They saw one of your lieutenants willing to do exactly what we were going to ask of them: believe in their good intentions. Dean, sometimes you just gotta spread our bread upon the water--"

"It comes back." It always comes back.

"Dean?" Cas says finally, and he realizes he said that out loud. Taking a deep breath, he makes himself nod, focusing on Joe again.

"Right, what's done is done. What happened then?"

Joe relaxes slightly, taking a hasty drink that empties his cup. "They took me and Ana to town, where serendipitously, the mayor was hanging around one of their admin buildings--at least, that's what it looked like once we got inside, Mel didn't go farther than the edge of town--and he invited me and Ana in for refreshments and you know, chatting." "Casually."

"Very," Joe assures him, sitting his empty cup down and looking amused. "I don't think they thought I'd buy it, but they appreciated I played along. So there we are, in a room that might be mistaken for where you have meetings with a snack tray of cookies--"

"Cookies?" Dean straightens; so that's what hunger feels like. He almost forgot. "They gave you cookies?"

"Cookies, coffee, a vegetable tray, and tiny sandwiches," Joe says gloatingly. Dean doesn't want to think Joe is maybe getting back at him for the totally justified anger earlier, but yeah, that's exactly what he's doing. "Dinner was amazing--wait, jumping ahead, sorry."

"I hate you."

Joe smiles in satisfaction. "Anyway, we talked with the mayor--Daniel but call him Danny, mid-forties, married with two kids and one on the way, former lawyer, I'm guessing corporate or real estate from his conversation--and his deputy, Sandra, late thirties, former high school principal and designated shark, and two of what I think were their equivalent of patrol leads; friendly, but spoke only when spoken to and not much, though God knows I tried. Not a bad choice, actually," he says thoughtfully. "She has experience making recalcitrant teenagers confess their sins. I was this close to admitting I cheated on my tenth grade algebra exam."

"You pay for your sins," Cas intones solemnly as he gets to his feet, pausing to get Joe's empty cup
on his way to the kitchen. "Great and small, you pay for them all."

Dean bites back a smile at Joe's expression. "So they seemed interested?"

"We shared heartwarming stories of fighting evil, the ridiculous prices charged by the border guard, and the challenges of successful animal husbandry," Joe says thoughtfully. "They assured me nothing they offered contained pork, which was nice, and we had a good laugh about keeping kosher when faced with squirrel pie, and no one mentioned how on earth they knew I was Jewish, including me."

"Guessed?" Joe smirks, cocking his head. "Border guard."

"Yeah, and pretty detailed if I'm right. They barely caught themselves before they got to the 'rabbi' part if Sandra's extremely timely change of subject is any indication when I was trying to find out," Joe answers. "It's not like the border won't happily take money for pretty much anything."

"So they're smarter than we are," Dean says. "Wish we'd thought to do that; add that to our next meeting. So how long did they keep up the small talk?"

"Until the mayors of the other four towns showed up."

Dean blinks, wondering if he heard that right. "Four other towns?"

"Andale, Noak, Mount Hope, and Ichabod."

"Cas, where--" A map is dropped in front of him as Cas passes Joe his coffee cup, which on a guess was hidden somewhere in the room in preparation earlier today. "Thanks." District Four: he marks off the three of the towns and doesn't even find a glimpse of the other two. "Okay, I give up: Noak and Ichabod? Seriously?"

"That's what they said," Joe says, sipping his coffee.

"Ichabod. As in 'Crane'?" Seriously?

"As in I didn't argue the point but accepted their expertise on the subject of their home towns," Joe answers virtuously. "Anyway, four extra mayors, their four deputies, and eight people who introduced themselves and didn't hide their weapons before taking a seat in line of sight to me and Ana, and we all got down to talking about what Chitaqua wanted and why. From somewhere, he pulls out a legal pad, putting it on the table between them. "My notes and the terms, but I can summarize until I can write Cas a report."

Picking it up, Dean looks for the first blank page and doesn't find it, but does find a lot of what may or may not be writing. It's definitely not Hebrew but he can't prove it's English on a glance, either.

"Cas," he says, staring at the first page and fighting the urge to turn it sideways to check readability on the horizontal plane. Joe's handwriting is much better in his reports. "Make more coffee. This is gonna take a while."

"So we all had dinner with Danny and his family and friends as a kind of going away party last night--roast beef and roasted potatoes, by the way--"

Dean groans. "Seriously, fuck you. You could have brought home the leftovers at least."

"--and he told us that after speaking to the other mayors that afternoon, they'd like us to return in a
week, give them time to discuss it amongst themselves and consult their respective councils," Joe finishes, stealing the last cracker from the bowl and munching it contentedly.

Dean lets out a slow breath. That was pretty much the best case scenario; anything other than a flat refusal (bullet optional) or terrified instant acceptance is a win as far as he's concerned. Anytime a well-armed, terrifyingly competent militia starts making requests, it's hard not to see the guns and wonder if request is another word for order.

"We left noon today and came straight back here," Joe continues as he picks up his half-empty coffee cup. "Mike and Leah mostly spent time with the towns' patrol after they arrived the first day, but I told them to get some sleep and write up their reports tomorrow, since you'd have enough to read tonight."

"Thanks." Flipping the page, Dean skims the tentative terms again: guns and ammo, of course, and some tentative suggestions on helping with planting and harvesting or livestock or repairing buildings and houses for occupation, but Joe underlined the 'training' thing three times to emphasize that went over really, really well with a tiny note that he thinks is 'Alison actually looked less than bored for a second there', because Joe's observations are kind of hilarious when readable. "Nice job, by the way. In case that wasn't really fucking obvious."

Joe grins lazily. "Yeah, that's what I was thinking."

Dean snorts, skimming the next page. "Tell me more about their trade agreement with each other."

"You know the drill: trade food and labor, mutual defense, not work against each other, the usual," Joe answers. "No surprises, just a question of finding out what they each wanted separately and what was mutual between them all. Danny told me the first night that they thought it would be best for us all to meet at once, which made sense if they wanted to make sure that the offer applied equally to all and we weren't...."

"Trying to divide and conquer," Dean finishes for him, and pauses to study his expression. "It wasn't just that, though."

Joe makes a face. "They definitely compared notes from the teams they met and what they were told during the second survey, which again, makes sense. No one wants to be the one who gets less than the others, and trade deals have a way of breaking down fast if everyone's not careful. It was going great, actually; lots of overlap between the towns on what they wanted from us, respected each other to back down on one thing to get another if it meant they could all get it, arguments were professional--Dean, meetings in IT finalizing design documents got hotter than this in five minutes, but they managed to keep their tempers for four entire days and by the end have a unanimous agreement in place to take back their towns."

Dean looks at Cas, whose eyebrows are lost beneath his bangs but are probably pretty goddamn high now. "I'm impressed with your almost superhuman negotiation skills."

"Like I said, that's what I was thinking," Joe agrees. "If anything that happened in that room was because of me, that is."

"This was going too well, I knew it," Dean mutters into his cup, then realizes Joe looks amused. "What?"

"Yesterday morning, I was going over my notes and realized I'd been played but good," Joe answers wryly. "Worse, I got played and still got exactly what I wanted. I didn't know that could even happen."
"Anytime you want to explain, I'm here."

"Until then, it was just a lot of little things, nothing I could point to, until I went back to that first
day." He sits back. "Before I left…what you said about the people here and what they'd think, I
knew that already, but it didn't hit me what that meant until I saw it live and in action in a room
where me and Ana were the only ones who weren't armed."

Dean grits his teeth against the reminder. "They were jumpy?"

"Oh yeah, I don't blame them, not when I think about how many kids I saw running around outside,
what they were risking just talking to us and how we'd react to a 'no'," Looking at Dean, he shrugs
uncomfortably. "They tried to hide it, but they watched us every second, and that first day, me or
Ana moved suddenly or got up too fast, everyone jumped and sometimes literally. One of them,
though, and to give her credit, she's got some titanium nerves on her, never twitched; even if she
wasn't worried about me and Ana like everyone else, she should have been getting edgy just from
contact."

"How long did that last?"

"Day two, they'd all settled down, even their ten person security force. Dean, no one comes down
that fast from that level of alert after a few hours of talk over celery sticks and mixed nuts followed
by a good night's sleep where you get time and leisure to think worst case scenario with added
insomnia," Joe answers soberly. "I should have had to double down that morning on being non-
threatening, but on my way to the meeting, I got introduced to Danny's kids on their way to daycare
and caught an escaping three year old without anyone drawing on me on principle."

"That's unusual," Cas remarks, looking at Joe thoughtfully. "You think it was related to the woman
who seemed calm the first day?"

Joe hesitates. "Not at first. Most of day two and three were spelling out the potential terms and Q&A,
I let them decide how they wanted to do this. They all asked questions--good ones, bad ones, and
weird ones, I made a top ten list for all categories--but one of them--she asked good questions, don't
get me wrong, but they weren't hard ones.

"I'm guessing same woman?" Joe nods. "So she didn't want too much attention."

"Nope, but that made sense; she was typing on a goddamn laptop the entire time, taking verbatim
notes, I assumed, though now I'd kill to have found a way to get Ana over there to get a glimpse of
her screen and see what was actually on there," Cas tilts his head, blue eyes narrowing. "Most of the
time, she looked bored while typing a hundred and twenty words a minute, drank a couple of carafes
worth of coffee, and made me feel inferior with a pen and two legal pads. Also made me wish I had
a secretary because my hand was killing me by the beginning of the third day."

To Dean's surprise, Cas starts to smile. "Was that when you--"

"Had my moment of revelation? Yeah, which says a few things about me I'd rather not know," Joe
says ruefully as Dean looks between them in bewilderment. "Let me give you the demographics: five
mayors, two were women; five deputies, three were women; but our personal security force of ten,
all men. They sat at the back of the room, didn't say a thing, but on a glance, it looked like a lot of
men with a few women and--"

"--a secretary who was taking notes," Dean finishes for him. "Perfect distraction."
"Even wearing glasses and looking harassed every so often when I was talking, like I was going too fast for her to keep up." Joe slumps lower in his chair. "I'm pretty sure now she was either just smashing the keyboard for the fuck of it or making fun of us, and from the way her deputy Claudia looked when she glanced at the screen a couple of times, I'm leaning toward outright mockery."

"Let me guess--Alison of Ichabod, may or may not be of 'Crane' fame, who got her own carafe of coffee."

Joe closes her eyes. "Pencil behind her ear she never used showed up the second day. She had to be fucking with me at that point just to see if I was paying attention." Cocking his head, he begins to grin. "You see a bored woman in a mostly male meeting who's the only one typing and acting annoyed to be doing it, you don't think 'leader', you think 'secretary'. I do, actually, know better than that."

"You just didn't think they did." Dean grins at Joe's rueful expression. "So she was controlling the meeting? The other mayors let her?"

"A little background from Mike and Leah: for obvious reasons, they weren't too eager to break down their social and political structure just to satisfy our curiosity," Joe says, looking startled when Cas sets a full coffee cup on the coffee table in front of him before coiling himself neatly in his corner of the couch with the most innocent expression in the world. Dean hides his smile behind his own cup: using preternatural speed for evil, check. "Thanks, Cas."

"You're welcome," Cas answers tranquilly. "You said they were mayors; is this a lifetime position or one related to the actual meaning of the word?"

"These are small towns, with populations between probably three and nine hundred each; at that level, it's either a Platonian wet dream of communal democracy or small-scale despot, and none of them gave the impression of ruling with an iron fist over a cowering population," Joe answers. "Leah and Mike confirmed Harlin is closer to the former and nowhere near the latter, and I told them exactly what to look for. Could be wrong about the other four," he admits, "but I don't think so. Even a casual trade agreement needs some basic rules to work from, and I got to know Danny pretty well. He's not just a good guy, he's a lawyer; he's not stupid enough to deal with the devil and think he's gonna come out ahead unless he's the devil in this scenario, and he's not."

Dean starts to wonder if Joe is every going to the point when he realizes he just did. "Joe, who were you actually meeting with the last few days?"

"Seems obvious now, doesn't it?" Joe asks, shaking his head. "I wasn't meeting with five towns with a good trade relationship, but a single established trade alliance made up of five towns with a single agenda and a single leader who knew exactly what she was doing. An alliance, by the way, that worked together to play me like a goddamn piano. God knows they've had the time to learn to trust each other, since that alliance is nearly two years old."

Son of a bitch, he's impressed. "And Alison…"

"If she's not one of the founders, I'm gonna be really surprised," Joe answers glumly. "I'm pretty sure they don't know I figured out what was going on, but I'm not actually willing to bet on it. That woman was good."

"You liked her," Dean says with a smirk.

"Her and her deputy Claudia make one hell of a two-woman act. Claudia, in case this needs mentioning, was quiet, careful, and pulled off the best impression of being vaguely intimidated by
being in the meeting I've ever seen, which I didn't buy for a second, thank God." Joe sighs. "On a
guess, the next week is pretty much everyone offering up their impressions of us so Alison can give
her recommendation to the rest. Which is a diplomatic way of saying she's the one making the
decision, and God help us if she's just buying them a week of time before giving us a no. It's all or
nothing here; we don't get any of them if we don't get her."

Dean nods slowly. "How much do we want them specifically?"

Joe frowns, fingers tapping restlessly against the arm of the chair, and Dean can see him thinking
about it, carefully evaluating them as purely trade partners. "I don't think it's a coincidence that
Harlin's doing better than any town we've seen up close yet, and guessing, the other four are doing
just as good. And I liked what I saw and what Mike and Leah told me about. More importantly,
getting them will go a long way toward potentially settling with any other towns who don't know if
what we say we want is what we mean to get." He pauses, looking more thoughtful. "Everyone had
something to bring to the table, which I think helped a lot, especially since I don't think they expected
what we were offering."

Dean flips to the page with the terms and nods. "Escort service outside their safety window; they can
expand their trade."

"Exactly, and add in training them--they really didn't expect that--shows we won't hold that over
them later." Joe sits back. "It sure as hell isn't beneath my paygrade to help them bring in the harvest
and get their products around the state, and then getting some extra fit adults out in the fields or
moving goods to help out isn't anything to sneeze at, either. They got a lot of kids and a lot of jobs to
get done just surviving, not to mention I'm pretty sure it would be reassuring to feel they're
guaranteed our attention once the attacks start again."

"So you think there's a good chance they'll take our deal?"

"Keeping in mind I only got a little over a day knowing who was making the decision?" Joe
grimaces. "Honestly, if it was a no, we wouldn't have been there all four days. I'm pretty sure Alison
was the reason they were calmed down by day two and start the actual talking, and she wouldn't
have done that if it was gonna be no. Leah and Mike noticed their access to the town got upgraded
by day three, and very casual social dinners with a few of the town residents who were prepped
beforehand on where to take conversation. That's a lot of work and effort for an inevitable no, so--
let's go with better than average on the 'yes', but no guarantees."

"I already ordered the patrol continue to use the alternate route until Joseph's concluded his
negotiations and we've received their answer," Cas offers into the thoughtful silence that follows,
adding at Dean's surprised attention, "You were correct about their apprehensions regarding us. Even
if they are aware of our patrol schedule, seeing a team before they're ready to speak to us might
appear--questionable."

Dean smiles at him. "Yeah, let's avoid even the appearance of dickery."

"That was my feeling as well," Cas says in satisfaction. "Joseph, were you able to get an impression
of how many people there are among the towns and the farms dependent on them?"

"I was very careful not to ask and they were equally careful not to tell," Joe starts, which Dean gets.
Even if he has no idea what the hell he or anyone else here could do with the information, whatever
they're imagining is probably kind of terrifying, and the point here is less of that, not more. "Three to
eight thousand people between them all, with an upper limit of ten thousand."

Dean whistles. "That's a big margin of error."
"Ichabod and Noak aren't on the maps, so I'm guessing based on the towns within two hours by SUV on a medium green road or better from any of the other four towns," Joe answers. "They're a trade alliance, that means goods that they have to move by road, and this is an infected zone, which means distance equals risk. Original populations of those were between two hundred and ten thousand. People think they don't need people up until they realize they do, and this is one of those times that numbers are almost always better." Joe focuses on Cas. "Cas, from what I got from the border, you work out a timeline yet?"

Dean looks between Joe and Cas. "What?"

"It's probable that the borders were closed long before the official announcement of Kansas being zoned as infected," Cas tells him. "It's always been guesswork on the amount of time between when a state is zoned and when it's officially announced. Usually it began with isolation of the cities and slowly expanded to encompass the state, with California as the most dramatic example of when that didn't work and they were forced to announce prematurely due to massive civilian casualties on the border of Nevada that weren't quite enough to avoid those escaping to spread the word throughout the country. Including where else they saw checkpoints while fleeing across state lines."

Dean winces. "You remember the population of Kansas before everything?"

"Roughly two point eight million," Cas says immediately. "Kansas was nearly decimated before Croatoan was successfully contained; I'd estimate between those who successfully left the state before the border was closed, the spread of Croatoan, and attrition the number is now between one quarter to half of a million people, though there's no way to estimate the current birthrate. The smaller towns and rural farms had the protection of semi-isolation after the border closed, and if they were warned--"

"They'd shoot on sight any stranger showing up by policy."

Cas and Joe nod in unison.

"So it paid to stay small, avoid attention, and shoot the fuck out of strangers." That matches the patrol reports and makes this group of towns a lot more interesting. Croatoan doesn't work in isolation; there's a short window before it manifests and sane thought becomes the first casualty; that would explain why they were watching the patrols so carefully, note the schedule they're on. "Survival odds: what if you lived outside the travel time window for Croat from the major cities and airports? Small towns, off the major highways, the military and us keeping Croat in the cities and outside the state borders, got though the first year--"

"All you have to do is worry about everything else, and that's not counting food, water, and shelter," Joe says with a sigh, then glances out the window in surprise. "I should let you two get some sleep," he adds, getting to his feet and looking at his coffee cup regretfully before being interrupted by a yawn. "I'll tell Leah and Mike--"

"Two days from now is early enough," Cas says unexpectedly, glancing at Dean queryingly.

"That's fine. You're all off-duty until then. By the way--good job." Joe grins, saluting lazily on his way to the door, beads tinkling merrily behind him. Leaning over, Dean picks up the legal pad again, flipping through the pages before giving Cas a frown. "Don't say it."

"Vera declared you free of infection today," Cas answers meditatively. "I suppose staying up past your bedtime could be considered a reward for good behavior."

Dean groans. "You still suspect the entire fever thing was just to fuck with you, don't you?"
"There's no proof either way," Cas admits after extended contemplation of his coffee cup. "I suppose I must rely on faith that it's not true, which as you know, is not my forte."

Dean jerks his gaze back to the legal pad so Cas won't see him grin, flipping through until he gets to the mayoral meet and greet, complete with names and looking for the Ichabod contingent: Alison and Claudia, Manuel and Hans their probable patrol leaders-slash-security. "Think we'll get some last names if they think we're trustworthy enough?"

"If they still use them," Cas answers idly. Dean looks at him, startled. "We don't use them here."

"Some of us are using aliases because of our multiple federal warrants or hiding our last names because of same," Dean answers, thinking fondly about how impressively wanted his militia is, and under way more names than he thinks anyone should have to keep straight, which come to think….

"It's not just that."

"The military are the only ones who offered surnames, and for the reasons you mentioned, we tended not to," Cas answers meditatively. "However, even with our limited contact with other residents of the state before now, I don't remember surnames being offered to patrol, and at least for them, there was no reason to conceal them. Here--I suppose it's unnecessary, as we all know each other."

"There's that."

Cas shrugs. "Surnames in their various forms were historically used for the purpose of tracing lineage, claiming membership in a clan, tribe, or extended family group, identify their origin, or in some cases, as a more specific form of identification in very large groups," he says, warming to the subject. "They also acted as a means of separating individuals into identifiable groups. In smaller populations, however, it's not common for them to be used for reasons other than ceremonial."

"How would you introduce yourself to someone these days?" Dean asks curiously. "Just Castiel?"

"As 'of the Lord' could be considered on the order of a sick joke, as well as highly inaccurate, yes," he answers, looking amused. "I suppose in formal situations--if one occurred--'of Chitaqua' would be relatively accurate."

"Cas…." Dean tries to think how to put this. "When you started hunting, did Dean--I mean, you were here full time and everything. He ever--you know, get you a name?"

"I had many aliases--"

"Not for jobs, just--I don't know." He doesn't, and it's weird enough he's not even sure why it bothers him. He used aliases all the time without even thinking about it for the job--for that matter, he was pretty dead under his real name for a while, which seems to have changed here--but that's different. "Forget it."

"Dean suggested I use James Novak to procure a driver's license, as that is the body I was using, and he would take me to acquire his birth certificate, but between jobs and other things…."

"Didn't happen." From Cas's expression, he's not entirely unhappy about that, either, and Dean agrees, though he can't quite put his fingers on why.

"A few weeks later, however, while Dean was otherwise occupied, Bobby told me to accompany him to the DMV and gave me an envelope before explaining I was not allowed to leave until I could do so in a Class Three vehicle and he'd wait." Cas hesitates for a moment, then stands up. "Wait here."
Startled, Dean nods, watching Cas go into the bedroom. It's only a few minutes—long enough, Dean thinks, to open one of those boxes—before he returns with a brown envelope that looks startlingly new, the creases fresh and sharp, as if it's barely been used. Still looking uncertain, he sits down on the couch again, looking down at it, then hands it to Dean. "This is what he gave me."

Putting down the legal pad, Dean takes it, looking at carefully taped flap before sliding a nail along the edge to get it open without messing up the paper. Opening it, he considers the contents before carefully pulling out a birth certificate, uncreased and brand new, like it just came from Vital Statistics, throat tightening as he makes sense of what he's reading.

"Bobby had asked me earlier that week to choose a day and month that I felt was significant," Cas says quickly. "I didn't know what he wanted it for or why, so I gave him the day and month that--"

"That we first met." Dean swallows. *Castiel Gabriel Singer*, right there in official government print; Dean knows a forgery when he sees one and this isn't it. How the hell Bobby pulled it off, he doesn't know, but it matches the social security card, still crisply new, and a goddamn driver's license with Bobby's address on it, so shiny it looks like it's never even been used. "Your first?"

"Dean procured me several identities before…." Cas trails off, eyes flickering to the envelope. "When I came out, Bobby told me to drive us back to his home because the DMV would give a license to a monkey and he wanted to be sure I could actually do it, then told me to put this away for safekeeping and never to use it on a job. I asked him what it was for, and he said it was for me. He said everyone got one of their own first, and we did it all backwards, which wasn't a surprise since we were idiots."

"Yeah, that's Bobby." There's other documents—another license for Kansas, a library card, a piece of mail, just a circular—but the name on them is the same. "Castiel Singer: I like it."

"I--" Cas breaks off. "Until you mentioned it, I forgot I still had it. I suppose if someone asked me for my full name, that's what I would tell them. If that's what you meant when you asked."

"Yeah, that's what I meant." Carefully, Dean slides everything back inside, running a thumb over the tape and resolving to raid Chuck's office supply collection if they're out of tape from Cas's last mapmaking adventure. They need a change of topic, and look at that, two empty cups right there. "Want more coffee? Porch: we're gonna have a wild celebration of coffee and sitting outdoors, if you're up for it."

"Yes, thank you," Cas replies immediately, then looks at the envelope uncertainly. "I should--"

"I got it," Dean answers, snagging the cups with his free hand; this isn't going into the bottom of Cas's not-thinking box again, but a different kind of box would be fine. He's just grateful it didn't meet the same fate as the Impala, since on a guess, that's where this Dean's went if he ever even had it "Top of the closet with my wallet okay?" Where he keeps an outdated Dean Winchester Kansas driver's license stuffed in the lining, bent to hell and back, the last he ever legally got under his own name, but still his own.

"Yes," Cas says after a minute. "Thank you."

"Did you know about the weekly poker games?" Dean asks, sipping from his cup and thinking of maybe getting some kind of cool lockbox or something, add that to the next supply run for things like this. Maybe get Cas to start opening up those goddamn boxes where apparently, Cas may or may not have been storing a life before Chitaqua.
Beside him, Cas pauses, lowering his cup to look at him curiously. "No. I'm a terrible poker player."

Taking another sip, he considers that. "Did Dean?"

To his surprise, Cas's mouth twitches. "Your rant on the lack of sufficient needles and thread and boxers compared to briefs was extremely energetic; I wondered about that."

"They bet underwear," Dean argues, scowling at him. "If you don't see something wrong with that, I don't even know what to say."

"Chafing does discourage going without," Cas muses, like he tested this extensively at some point, which is even less of a surprise than Cas being a shitty poker player.

Gambling is very personal and what you play says a lot. Stacking the deck and counting cards, manipulating your opponents to think a bad hand is good and a good hand is shit: Cas has all the skillsets (deadpan like a lifestyle choice, manipulation raised to a fine art, and not even including what he demonstrated he can do with a deck of cards and his speed for Dean's post-fever amusement), but his personality doesn't quite match the game. Roulette is fatalism by definition, and he can see how that might appeal to Cas once he Fell and lived his mortal life in the joy and delight that's a militia camp with the occasional rationing on soap, but that's just a side effect; it's not who he is.

Cas, angel or mortal, isn't a fatalist; he's a risk-taker of the first order, willing to pit himself against impossible odds without hesitation (or sanity, when it comes to facing multiple archangels armed with nothing but righteousness or Michael with a goddamn Molotov cocktail). Craps, single roll, winner take all: he'd never hesitate to pick up the dice and make the call. No matter what anyone says about method and strategy, it's being willing and able to risk everything on a single throw of the dice that's the difference between someone that plays to win and someone who knows that sometimes, the only way to win is to play.

"I don't know if he knew," Cas says, startling him from his thoughts. "He didn't attend the games, if that's what you're asking. It might have been to avoid too much familiarity--"

"--with his soldiers, among whom are those who were intimately familiar with his bodily fluids and sleeping patterns," Dean finishes, taking a drink at the bitterness in his voice. "Never mind."

It's not fair to do this to Cas, and it's embarrassing how long it took him to get that. It's not just because Cas isn't responsible for this Dean's decisions, though that'd almost be better if that was his reason for doing it anyway. It's easy--maybe too easy--to forget that to Cas, this Dean wasn't just his leader but his friend, the guy he chose to Fall for, who did it even though he didn't think they could win, and Cas is still feeling that loss.

(He tries not to, but sometimes, when he's too tired to stop himself, he thinks of the difference between being willing to die for someone and being willing to live for them and all the shit that comes with living. When he's very, very tired, he also thinks, watching Cas sort laundry on the bedroom floor with a baffled expression or read reports at the stove while methodically stirring tonight's dinner, of the kind of choice you make so that, no matter how high the price, even if it's everything, you're the only one who has to pay it and do it willingly and without regret. No matter how tired he is, however, he never thinks, not once, what it would be like to know that someone thought you were worth that.)

Vera's revelation about what the camp thought they were doing explained something that Dean wondered about, the rare days that Cas suddenly vanishes after Dean goes to bed and he doesn't hear the surreptitious sound of climbing to the roof. In retrospect, he's glad he assumed all this time that
Cas was getting very laid somewhere else, or he might have been dick enough to follow him and on a guess, Cas wouldn't have liked having his private grief interrupted, wherever it is that he buried this Dean's ashes.

He's also not entirely sure he would have taken finding out about that live and in person any better, and being saved having to potentially examine why that bothers him is another reason he's grateful to Vera for telling him.

"Anyway, Amanda and Sean invited me to the game next week," he says, "but I had to promise to teach them any cheats I used that they didn't already know."

"Amanda supplemented her credit card fraud income with semi-regular back room poker tournaments for very high stakes," Cas offers in lazy amusement "She taught Sean everything she knows. They were playing you."

"I figured." Taking another drink, he adds casually, "You should come, too. No way to get better if you don't practice. Maybe teach 'em something new; infinite memory of poker throughout history would be useful for that. You could also help out Andy: Kat says he can't keep a poker face worth a damn."

Cas's cup freezes halfway to his mouth.

"Sheila and Mike are moving in together, by the way," he continues, watching the camp walls intently. "I told her to clear it with their roommates and you first--"

"She did," Cas says quietly. "During what everyone now calls Home Improvement Week Two, we repaired the cabin that belonged to Stanley and Terrance, the former team leaders. It didn't need very much, so I inspected it this week and told Sheila it was acceptable and helped her move some needed items that were too heavy for her alone." He stops, blue eyes dark. "She asked for my assistance, because she wanted to finish before Mike got back from Harlin so it would be a surprise."

"Tell me the 'surprise' is the finished moving part, not the moving in together part."

"It's the former; they became very good friends during training--I remember she used to cover for him when he would come to class with a hangover," Cas says suddenly. "He had lost his wife and child only a few months before to Croatoan, and he drank heavily if given the opportunity. He had the good sense to appreciate her efforts to keep him from being thrown out of Chitaqua, and--how do humans put it?--pretended to care about living until it became true."

"Fake it until you make it?"

"Grief works on its own schedule," Dean says as carefully as possible; Cas's last disappearing act was three nights ago, the same day Sheila stopped by for a chat and bursting with anticipation, and it's not like he needs anyone to draw him a diagram this time. Cas said he didn't pay attention to what went on in the camp all this time, but Dean's come to suspect Cas lies to himself almost as well as he does to him. "So--"

"Sheila also reminded me to add birth control to the list for the border," Cas says out of nowhere. "I assume Erica was responsible for telling Joseph when it was needed and adding it to the regular list. And condoms, of course."

Dean thinks about his very sexually active camp and Joe's mention of Danny's currently-percolating bundle of potential joy with a start of alarm. "Uh--"
"We have at least four months before it becomes an issue. Alicia happened to need to ask me a question after Sheila's visit and gave me a very detailed list she also happened to have on hand."

"Thank God," Dean breathes, finishing off his coffee in a gulp; it's not that he doesn't like babies, but adding in a daycare rotation is gonna put Nate back on kitchen duty and oh God, no. And also, babies in a militia camp fighting the Apocalypse, of course: bad idea, no time for any of that. Like there's going to be a world left for the kids already here to grow up in. Like they'll have time to grow up.

Like that's ever stopped anyone, ever. "Make sure--get Vera to do it--that everyone knows if--you know, failure rate happens, that kind of thing, we can work with that. No one's gonna have to leave."

He stares at his empty cup, wondering frantically how that would work anyway, though make it up seems to be working for them so far. "Whatever they want to do is fine, I mean."

He's not sure what to make of Cas's silence; it's not like Cas is unfamiliar with reproduction or the ways to keep it from happening that don't include being creepy and weird about other people's sex lives and telling them how to have them. He could be thinking Dean doesn't entirely understand what a militia camp does, or what an Apocalypse is.

"If you think they need to know that," he adds uncomfortably. "Anyway--"

"They do need to know, and under the circumstances, as you're still recovering--and I assume would immediately develop a fever if necessary to avoid it--I'll make the announcement," Cas interrupts calmly, like they're talking about pretty much anything camp related that's not this. "I'll confirm it's by your order, and that should be enough."

Dean's so relieved it takes him an entire minute to understand what Cas isn't saying, which is the reason Vera can't pass this on with her magical gossip powers. It's gotta be official, especially if (when) a completely opposite order already existed.

He really, really regrets the lack of beer right now. "Did anything happen before that might make them--worried about that actually happening?"

"…no," Cas answers slowly. "If it had, that would have been a very popular topic in the camp. Dean, at some point, you won't be able to avoid thinking about what you've been doing since you were awake long enough to start telling me what changes you want implemented in the camp."

Fuck beer: this is a whiskey night, unlimited shots. "It's not just a job."

Cas turns on the step, blue eyes very dark, and yeah, that's what Dean calls 'weaponized attention'. Because Cas would learn to do that.

"Living here isn't a job," he answers. "There's a difference between a job being your life and treating your life like just another job, and neither one's great, but the first is still better than the second." He almost grins at Cas's nod. "Not gonna pretend you don't understand?"

"Of course not." Looping an arm around one bent leg, Cas rests his chin on his knee. "Tell me more."

"My job," he says deliberately, "isn't to pretend to be someone else. It's to lead this camp, which I do by letting everyone think I'm him--well, and by making you do most of it for me, granted, but fever and everything--that actually helped, now that I think about it."

Cas raises an eyebrow. "Now I'm going to tell you that don't understand, and it's completely genuine."
"Life isn't a job; it's life," he says, searching for the right words. "Living here isn't a job; I'm not going to be walking away when it's done--I mean literally, even if tomorrow we won the Apocalypse, I'd still be here, just with less to do. He treated this like a job, because that's all it was to him; that's why he went to Kansas City, why he took his team leaders and you; his life was the job, and you were just how he was going to get it done. Five extra guns, and once they ran out of bullets, they were--" He bites down on his tongue, but it's way too late.

"Useless," Cas says coolly.

Dean closes his eyes; he really, really needs to practice the 'not being a dick about Dean' thing. "Cas--"

"You aren't wrong," Cas continues. "That's what I was supposed to be."

"That's what you were to him," Dean says quietly, not looking at Cas. "What he wanted you to be, all of you. That doesn't make it true, though, and that's why he had to work at it. He didn't know about the poker games, and if he did, he never would have gone to play, even if he was banging one of the ones going. You even told me why: sex is just physical, it doesn't mean shit. He didn't have to tell you that; he showed you every day of your mortal life in this goddamn camp when he'd fuck his soldiers but left running the camp to his team leaders so he wouldn't have to deal with any part of their lives but what they did on his missions. They deserve better than that." He stares at the porch steps intently. "You deserve better than that."

"And you don't?"

Dean thinks about it. "I want to fix the porch so next time everyone camps out on it, we don't lose people to epic splinters when that right side finally collapses. You got most of Bobby's books boxed up in the closet, right? The ones that won't fit in the old utility closet?" He looks up at Cas's startled nod. "I'm going to learn how to drywall from Nate, build you a library already. If we get the agreement, we--yeah, you, too, even misanthropy needs a break once in a while--are gonna go meet Danny and his wife and kids, hang out with the other mayors, let Alison make fun of us to our faces, do some time in the fields. Learn how a potato becomes French fries. Do you know, 'cause I don't."

"Poker night?"

"Beat the shit out of everyone here," Dean answers, starting to smile. "Figure out what the fuck Zoe's doing with that incense, and am I the only one who wonders about the 'Thursday' thing? She was a groupie, right? Didn't you used to be called the angel of--?"

"Don't say it, Amanda suspected that as well, and she's investigating," Cas says quickly, looking haunted. "Groupie?"

"Uh, nothing." Tell Cas he accidentally gave up the joys of mass casual sex for monogamy and domestic harmony with his leader, and also, Phil is a fucking would-be-if-he-could-be homewrecker, wait, not that part. He better get on that sometime soon. "Learn how to be a good leader, fight evil, save people, teach you how to really play poker, get Joe to teach me how to hunt for food…I don't know. What do you think?"

Cas thinks about it, head tilting. "Anything else?"

He's got a list, actually, and it's still growing. "World's not over yet. Looks like I got some time, so might as well start doing something with it. You in?"

"It's very late," Cas says abruptly, taking both their cups as he gets to his feet. "Tomorrow will be
your first day without constant watchers, though they'll still be checking on you several times a day. I think you'll find even this limited return to your normal activities tiring."

Dean nods and takes Cas's extended hand, fighting down his own disappointment; Cas didn't say no, that's the important part. If he's gonna ask a craps player to risk everything on a single throw, he's gotta be patient enough to wait for when he wants to call.

Bracing an arm over Cas' shoulders is almost reflexive, as much as his frown at the beads that currently don't even pretend to be a door and adds that to the top of the list: get them a fucking door already.

Cas pauses just short of the doorway, regarding the beaded curtain thing like he just noticed it's there, then looks at Dean. "You do realize I know perfectly well you dislike them. It just amuses me to see how long it will take you to articulate your displeasure."

It's not that he doesn't know Cas is a dick; it's just that it's hard to tell when it's the result of the fact Cas has a fucked-up sense of humor or when it's a deliberate effort. He reluctantly admits that this time, it's probably just something Cas thinks is funny, but right now, he doesn't get points for that.

"Dean, if you want a door, we can get a door," Cas adds, not even bothering to hide the smile in his voice as they make their way across the darkened living room. "However, installing it is beyond my abilities. The cabin came this way."

"And you just--went with it?" As they reach the bedroom door, he remembers that Cas probably had a pretty good reason not to get on door-related home improvement. Claustrophobia from shit he doesn't even remember: there had to be a way Falling didn't fuck him, but Dean's still unclear on what that is.

"It didn't seem terribly important at the time," Cas admits, which he kind of figured. "Privacy isn't a concept I had developed when we came here, and even now, the--finer points, you might say, still elude me."

"I can probably do it," he offers as he drops gratefully onto the edge of the bed, not sure of that at all, but Cas mentioning it makes him want to try anyway; it's not like this needs advanced construction skills. It's a goddamn door. "Use your leader power for personal gain and send everyone on a mission for a door. But make them measure it first or something."

"You have no idea how to install a door." Crouching, Cas looks at him in amusement as he efficiently strips off Dean's socks, automatically balling them together in preparation for tossing them toward the small wooden crate that appeared at some point since the fever to hold laundry. Like maybe Cas is getting the entire basic organization of your living space thing, though it could also be with him and Vera keeping him alive, tripping over dirty laundry had become a hazard for Vera and she put her foot down. "You want to do it anyway. How typical."

"Look who's talking. You're going help me plan a war I have no idea how to even fight," Dean mocks him. "You think I can win it anyway."

Cas goes still, dropping the balled socks to roll a lopsided few inches under the bed, staring up at Dean blankly.

"Cas?" he prompts, but Cas doesn't move, and by now, Cas's baseline mockery should have kicked in. "Uh, you don't think--Cas, come on, you can't think I can win this."

Cas reaches out, plucking the sock ball off the floor and unnecessarily taking the time to stand up and
carry it to the crate to dutifully drop it inside before surveying the piles of clothing around it that result from his usual blind general-direction throw. Dean watches incredulously as Cas begins to actually straighten up, which historically has required both Dean and Vera to point out at least five times before he actually notices. And yeah, Dean does know he's channeling Sam these days, but this is Cas and if Dean's gotta take the nuclear option when it comes to living conditions, he'll do it and like it.

"Cas, look at me."

Frowning Cas puts the last shirt into the crate and turns around, expression flat. "We fight, we lose, everyone dies anyway, I know. However, I don’t see why, if we're going to fight anyway, we shouldn't believe we're going to win. The only thing we risk is that we might experience a profound sense of disappointment if we survive long enough to realize that we've lost."

Cas is looking at him with that expression again, the one that's only shown up since the fever, but this time, he gets what he's looking at. Cas said that he didn't Fall because he thought they'd win, it wasn't the point, and Dean gets that, and God knows by the time he had, no one had told him any different. It was the Colt or it was the end of everything, and even Dean fucking Winchester hadn't believed it could end any other way, saying with the indifference of resignation to accept Michael with his team dying less than a mile away and the Colt in his hand; we're not gonna win, so why even try. It won't work.

"Craps, I knew it," Dean breathes, light-headed: he called that one, and how. "Come here."

He waits for Cas to cross the room, watching him drop into an easy crouch, blue eyes meeting Dean's without hesitation, and what's in them-- "You really think we can win?"

"Yes," he answers. "I know we can. The question is, are you in?"

Dean wonders if this is what it's like when someone gets their faith back. When they want it back, because it's worth fighting for, too. "Fuck disappointment. I'm in."

Cas smiles up at him, and it's almost enough to stop him breathing. "I was thinking that as well."

"We don't have a plan…"

"A plan would be advisable, but we do have a course of action."

Dean squints up at him as Cas gets to his feet, going to the drawer where dwells Vera's latest punishment for him making it hard for her to keep him alive. "We really don't."

"Save the world," Cas answers, taking out two bottles and placing them on the bedside table. "We're starting now, one small Kansas town at a time."

"Joe said--"

"Joe underestimates himself by habit; he's very good at what he does. His observations are always accurate, and they indicate a very positive response to our offer. If it was 'no', he would have known it and told us."

Uh huh. Dean braces a hand on the mattress behind him. "Five towns in the middle of Kansas isn't much."

"It's an excellent start," Cas says, glancing over his shoulder. "I feel ambitious."
Yeah, he's getting that impression. "Okay, I'll bite. Tell me what you got."

"You should take your medication," he says in an abrupt switch of topic, picking up a prescription bottle from the bedside table and scanning the label before shaking out a pill and retrieving the second one to get another one and leaving them on the bedside table. Turning around, he meets Dean's incredulity with suspicious sincerity on his way to the door. "I'll get you some water."

Resigned to Cas being himself, Dean starts to reach for the pills when it occurs to him that he doesn't actually remember when a bedside table showed up in here, though on a guess it was during the fever. Glancing around the room, that's not the only thing that's new, and without the distraction of medical shit, it's kind of obvious. He must have been really been out of it if he didn't realize he's been taking all this individually instead of as part of what appears to be a greater theme.

He'd suspected for a while that Cas, being the only occupant of the cabin, took the most minimal approach possible to arranging his living space. When Cas gave him the room for his use, the only change was that after a lifetime of motels, Dean failed at remembering to make the bed in the morning and had to teach Cas how to warn a guy before leaving the bathroom after a shower wearing a towel (work in progress, sometimes he forgets to remind Cas, no reason. He's very sick. His memory is shitty).

In addition to the bedside table (holds more prescription bottles than Cas's entire drug cache) with added lamp (definitely added during the fever), there's the crate (which if he squints, he can read used to hold ammunition for a AK-47, so point for recycling) and the worn armchair (he assumes is for both reading hippo porn to Dean purposes as well as the most comfortable option for Cas to not so subtly fall asleep in while observing Dean continuing to breathe), both of which are fixtures that he barely noticed. However, now there's also the following: a table and chair in the far corner, stacked with reports, maps, a box of pens and pencils, and various camp related paraphernalia for Dean's reading pleasure, and a battered chest of drawers with a duct-taped leg slumping gratefully into another corner that he thinks that he vaguely remembers showing up a day or two ago. Like maybe Cas realized that clothes should be put into places that aren't on the floor, which is kind of a huge leap of personal growth, since he thinks closets are for arsenals.

Shifting to sit back against the pillows—now that he thinks about it, they're all suspiciously lacking in flatness and the number is four times greater than two—he takes another look around. There's a definite sense this is now someplace someone lives, not just staying. Add a couple of posters and a lava lamp, and this could almost pass for what Dean's hazy memories of must-see TV would call a normal bedroom. Even with Lisa, sharing a bed and a house and something like a normal life, it sometimes felt like he was never more than a visitor; when he left, it was easy, maybe for both of them, because the only real change was the lack of his presence.

He's still thinking about the potential for lava lamps and if the generator could handle one—fuck it, he's kind of always wanted one, so why the hell not—when Cas returns with both the water and another prescription bottle that's probably Vera's latest additions to Dean's schedule of medications. Scooting over so Cas can sit down, Dean assumes from their size that she's really enjoying using her medical knowledge for revenge; he's only surprised she's not administering them herself so she can watch.

Cas waits for him to manfully get everything down before saying, "Dean--"

"I think we can win," he says, knowing Cas needs to hear it, and maybe he needs to say it. He can't figure out why the fuck he made this so goddamn hard, like false hope is somehow worse than no hope at all. Like he actually thinks it's false fucking hope; this can be, will be, is the real thing. Fake it until you make it: he can do that. "We just gotta figure out how."
"What--" Cas stops, staring at the empty glass like it'll suddenly confer wisdom or an unexpected and needed amount of Eldritch Horror. "You want to recruit so we can expand our numbers."

"For a start, yeah. Not just that--everyone's fighting this, and they don't have to be part of a militia to do it. Doing it together might help."

"Though more people joining us would also help."

"An army would help," Dean admits, then revises that. "I have an army. It's just a small army."

"You'd like a bigger one."

"Wouldn't hurt." Dean cocks his head at Cas's intent expression. "What, you got one around and forgot to tell me about it?"

"I didn't forget," Cas corrects him, standing up. While Dean's still working out what that's supposed to mean, he adds, "I think I may know where you can get one."
Chapter 5

--Day 87--

When Dean wakes up the next morning in a quiet, empty cabin, no babysitter in sight—or in the living room or kitchen (or bathroom, hiding in the shower, ready to pounce holding Cas's goddamn permitted activity list and wearing Cas's most disappointed expression)—it hits him all at once; he's actually getting better.

After taking a quick shower (no one hovering nervously outside the bathroom door, assuming silence means concussion and darting in to rescue him from the harmless spray of lukewarm water) and getting dressed (no one listening worriedly at the bedroom door, assuming any and every sound is Dean tripping to his death and rushing in to save him from his pants), he makes what turns out to be an epic journey to the kitchen where breakfast is waiting patiently on the table (no one watching sharply for him to choke to death at every protracted swallow, Heimlich-maneuver-enabled for deployment at the first muffled cough) and stares at the well-balanced meal waiting for him on the table, already so tired he kind of wants to sit on the floor, eating optional.

So right: he might be getting better, but the absence of observers is pretty much the only thing that's actually changed. Vera warned him about this part.

"Now the bad news. You're not gonna feel any different for a while. You're gonna be exhausted, you're still gonna have to remember to eat until your body remembers how to transmit hunger, and the occasional nausea isn't going away. That's gonna take time, Dean, not gonna lie to you, but it will happen. It's just gonna be slow."

Falling gratefully into the kitchen chair, Dean picks up the cup of coffee and lets sweet, sweet caffeine wash through him before surveying the bowl of oatmeal—staple of apocalyptic living everywhere—short stack of toast, and a bowl of canned fruit without enthusiasm before reminding himself that eventually, he'll remember what it feels like to be hungry, but until then, he'll just have to fake it. He doesn't need to be told this is the ideal of breakfast nutrition (at least from what's available at Chitaqua), because Cas actually both reads and believes what they write on the goddamn cans. And asks Vera in horrifying detail how to get all the nutrition possible stuffed into Dean.

Sourly, he surveys the multivitamin and glass of water that Vera and Cas seem to think is supposed to be dessert and thinks how proud Sam would be. He's gonna be drinking lattes and listening to shitty Indie music next, he can feel it.

Reaching for his spoon, he grimly sets himself to get through this, pulling over one of the maps he and Cas were reviewing a couple of days ago and Cas left on the table with several reports for his breakfast entertainment. Cas's second act as Dean's proxy in Chitaqua—right after the Mowing of the Goddamn Lawn—was to split Kansas into four working patrol districts in addition to the local patrol for Chitaqua, which satisfied both the unsurprising re-emergence of Cas's anal-retentive nature (when applied to things not related to sex, drugs, and maps) and Dean's feeling that this is gonna work really well up until they actually have something to fight. If the holes in reality are actually turning out to be some kind of supernatural-repellant, that may actually be the defining example of the concept of irony.

The animals are definitely coming back, however; squirrel and raccoon last month, from what shows up in the mess (thank God he's not eating anything from there anymore), and the last check of Wichita revealed a rat renaissance in progress, which reminds him to tell Cas rat is not and will never be food and make that a goddamn order. Between determined spoonfuls of oatmeal so unbelievably
bland (though sweet; Cas learned his sugar lesson well) that he has to check and make sure he's not just imagining he's actually eating, he starts to wonder if they were wrong about why the supernatural population took a nosedive and hasn't resurfaced yet.

Reaching across the table, he pulls the other map of Kansas closer and studies the lumps of tiny white stickers that cover Kansas City, Topeka, Overland Park, and Wichita almost entirely and are absent from anywhere else in the state. After Dean was out of danger, Cas resumed his observations of the holes with Joe in attendance and under strict orders to shoot Cas in the ass if he did anything sketchy, which Dean assumes is why he was subjected to an hour long extempore speech on the meaning of holes both physical and philosophical throughout history and realized how very, very close Cas was to getting Vera’s gun up his ass before Cas was put on landscaping and home improvement detail.

Cas also confirmed--as much as he could for something he'd never seen and never thought possible--that at the current rate of decay, it would be two years before they degraded to less than fifty percent and could be presumed dangerous. The brief meeting with the team leaders (sans Sid) to finally tell them about this new Apocalyptic development went way better than he or Cas expected, which he attributes to the 'will it kill us now?' school of thought: so few thing in a hunter’s life can answer that question with a ‘no’ that it's kind of exciting when it actually happens.

Apocalypses, he reflects thoughtfully, really changes your standards for optimism. Sure, they have no idea how to deal with it when it becomes (potentially) lethal and oh God, what then, but it’s a really nice thought that the world might survive long enough to worry about it.

Turning his attention back to the map, he pulls a few of the reports from the second state survey closer, skimming the first page of Cas's twenty-two page summary (because, Cas). All of the communities they successfully made contact with (read: those that didn't shoot at them) reported the same thing; they're living in a monster-free Apocalyptic utopia in which their only worries are food, water, shelter, and the border guards' addiction to snorting diamonds or something, which is the only explanation for a thousand percent markup on such luxury items as aspirin and seeds for the backyard vegetable garden. It doesn't make sense, though. That happening on the day of Lucifer almost but not quite winning makes sense if every threat to humanity out there was able to sense what happened that night (and weren't friends with Lucifer, which surprisingly is more common than you'd think), but they're closing on three months and the only representatives of the non-human forces arrayed against them are brownies, which only proves that brownies are stupid vicious fuckers.

Joe's contacts at the borders weren't able to tell them much on that score (there isn't, as it turns out, a national supernatural tracking program in place, which really makes him wonder what the government thinks is actually happening these days), but what little he managed to get suggested that Kansas may be the only place this is happening, which means the hole in reality as supernatural repellant theory is out the window.

Dean gets a second cup of coffee to brace himself for the canned fruit course, flipping back to the neatly sectioned Kansas map and concentrating on how to balance regular team rotations between districts with scheduled downtime. Cas's updated list of the current population of Chitaqua came with notations on skills, limited personal history, and duties both former and current, because Cas (Also: very subtle asterisks by certain feminine names which yeah, Dean counted because historical alternate universe versions of yourself's trainwrecks are like that).

Currently they have seven teams—not including Sid's, which consists of Rob, currently assigned to extremely vital mess duties to temporarily hide the fact that Sid’s not getting another goddamn team until Dean's sure they'll survive him, which will be never--but the problem in getting two more out
there isn’t just keeping the camp running. While everyone in Chitaqua can fight, leadership isn’t a skillset most of them seem to have and Cas’s pick of Alicia and Mark may be the last two who could be trained into it. Not to mention if the deal goes through with the communities, Vera’s team will need a replacement for Amanda, and Mark’s will need a new leader to take over civilian training efforts, and probably a couple of other people to help them out, which hey, delegation works, he’ll let them pick who they want.

Dean locates the list from the pile of papers on the other kitchen chair to get through the two pieces of toast (spread with maybe-butter, maybe-not, didn’t ask, don’t want to know) and a multivitamin large enough to substitute for a .22 if they ever run out of bullets before surveying the detritus in satisfaction (he’s learned to appreciate the value of celebrating each small step forward to a greater goal). Though he’s gotta admit, he’s not sure the number of steps between ‘successfully finishing breakfast’ and ‘defeating Lucifer’ can actually be counted without a computer and a couple of months of calculations to discover a brand new number to express it.

Sitting back, Dean wonders uneasily if he just made a shitty math joke. It really is a whole new world.

Leaving the dishes for his first check-in to deal with--he’s exercising his still-recovering-from-near-death privileges when it comes to household chores--he picks up the maps and reports to carry to the living room, spreading them out on the coffee table in a way that suggests he’s actually doing something before collapsing on the couch with a sigh of relief.

One and a half hours on his own, and he’s not dead yet; it’s celebration time. When he gets the energy to sit up, which will be any minute now.

Reaching up, he lazily confirms that shaving is definitely on the morning agenda. Cas hasn’t replaced the mirror in the bathroom, but Alicia contributed a small hand mirror that, braced against the lamp in the bedroom, fulfills the criteria of less in the way of having to stand up and an extremely limited view while he gets the business over and done with, with the added advantage of Dean adding speed-shaving to his skillset with by now an excellent record in regard to a lack of bleeding.

Giving the stacks of reports, maps, and the first two of Cas’ now six-volume What Dean Needs to Know Series (first edition, spiral binding), he stretches out on the couch and closes his eyes before reaching out, letting fate decide his first order of business.

Dean wakes up with a start, blinking vaguely at the ceiling until his mind clears up enough to orient himself to the here and now.

It’s still unsettling, waking up in a cloudy haze of uncertainty on where he is and what he’s doing; his life to date hadn’t been forgiving of post-sleep disorientation, and his body, barring extraordinary injury or supernatural related reasons, has never failed him. Taking a calming breath, then another, he forces himself not to fight it, letting everything come together in its own time. Progress is made up of small steps, and he knows it’s getting faster, getting easier every day, and that his own instinctive panic is probably officially a factor at this point, but that doesn’t help those first few seconds, few minutes, when he can’t think enough to remember that.

It’s gonna take time, he reminds himself bitterly, rubbing his eyes before looking at the living room ceiling and letting himself, just for a second, resent how little control he has over anything right now, even his own goddamn body. He’s finding it dangerously easy to understand why Cas hates human bodies; this shit is ridiculous.

Squinting toward the nearest window, Dean measures the quality of grey light and realizes it's
probably noon, and his first morning on his own was, like every other goddamn morning since the fever, lost to sleep. Pushing off the blanket, he pauses, frowning; while the weather is still doing variations of 'chilly' and 'clammy' with an option to 'kind of cold' come nightfall, he doesn't remember getting a blanket this morning.

A faint sound from the kitchen brings him upright, swinging his legs to the floor before he thinks better of it, and he swallows as black spots dance before his eyes because he also forgot that getting up like a normal goddamn person is something he still can't do. Digging his fingers into the arm of the couch, he gets his vision back in time to see Cas watching him worriedly from the kitchen doorway and promptly forgets he hates everything right now.

"Cas?" Progress means that he doesn't see Cas before dinner these days unless he wakes up at the ass-edge of dawn, which he doesn't, ever. Which really makes him wonder about the benefits of progress sometimes.

"According to your current schedule," Cas says, like he's reading it right now, "it's time for lunch."

"I thought Chuck…" He cuts himself off, grinning at Cas's raised eyebrow. Far be it from him to protest Cas wanting to come home for lunch instead of leaving it in the refrigerator carefully wrapped and labeled on the off chance Dean mistakes the other three occupants of the refrigerator--that being bottles of Joe Beer--as his midday meal, and it's not like he hasn't been tempted. "Not complaining. What're we having?"

"Chicken soup," Cas answers solemnly, turning to go back to the stove, where Dean, craning his neck, sees a pot is currently stationed, blue gas flames flickering beneath it. Getting up--more slowly this time--he makes his way to the table after a quick check to verify that it's recognizable as soup, since Cas's first (and second) interpretations of soup sometimes appeared in the form of a solid, semi-gelatinous mass and lesson fucking learned. This looks very edible, however, and since chicken is actually in it, definitely a member of the canned food family. "Vera gave me a list of appropriate items that were currently available in supply and I abused my authority to acquire most of it and bring it here. Not that anyone would protest your return to good health, of course," he adds. "But it would be cruel to force them to resist temptation. Especially since Penn refuses to tell anyone what is in this week's stew."

Dean glances at the empty crate by the no longer empty pantry, the door open enough to note it's scrupulously clean and filled with a lack of variety of canned and jarred food that's been verified he can keep down and subject to Cas's continuing search for the most efficient method of organization. Idly, he wonders if they're back to alphabetical by size or if Cas went for a color-based theme; it wouldn't be the weirdest he's tried. He has fond memories of last week when Cas tried to explain using several diagrams and a lecture on the origin of non-Euclidean geometry. The upshot is that he's now justified in sleeping through that class in three schools during junior year; the downside is, if he was given the final now, he'd probably pass it on the first try, which just confirms that one, this is the stupidest Apocalypse he's ever heard of, and two, he may not actually hate geometry.

A whole new world, Dean muses. One where geometry makes sense.

"What's in the stew?"

Cas hesitates. "She mentioned that she'll making boots out of the skin."

Dean tries and fails to convince himself fur will be involved. "At this rate, cannibalism may start looking good pretty soon."

"There's always the MRE's," Cas offers, then visibly shudders before turning off the stove. "Sit
down while I set the table."

Dean hides his grin as Cas methodically collects two bowls, two glasses, and two spoons from the cabinets, origin Supply Run for Kitchen Shit he assumes, and one day he's got to find that report. Vera maliciously explained everything there was to know about human meal customs when Cas took over as chef in residence, and Dean's pre-fever days of eating on the porch or on the coffee table came to an abrupt end in the post-tray, post-fever world.

He doesn't regret it, though, not after a few days of watching Cas's almost ritual adherence to setting out dishes and flatware in precise formations before the addition of food and people to eat it. It reminds him of the way Cas cleans his guns and organizes his armory, the way he's started to fold each piece of clothing after he does laundry before putting it away and continuing adventures in organizing the pantry, the way he took to Dean's insistence on a routine that's since been expanded to all of Chitaqua because Cas learned the meaning of a schedule and found it awesome and everyone else should too or die trying.

Some things couldn't be taught, Cas told him; observation and repetition had to do the heavy lifting when it came to food and sleep and maintaining his body when he couldn't understand what it needed. What he didn't say, what Dean didn't think to ask, is about the shit that has to be taught, because biology's one thing, but there aren't any built-ins for humans when it comes to how to live your daily life.

Cas had a dozen aliases on earth before he even got his own name; it makes sense that he became a hunter before he learned the first principles of being human, and this time, Bobby wasn't there to pick up the slack.

"Chuck had a very late night and will be working on something for me for the next two days, so he'll be unavailable," Cas says out of nowhere, narrowing his eyes at the table before moving one of the bowls a quarter inch to the left. "To celebrate your recovery from near-death, I told the camp at the morning assembly that I was taking the afternoon off. Vera offered to handle anything that comes up today, so I left orders to report to her until tomorrow morning."

Dean opens his mouth to remark on Cas knowing there was such a thing as a day off these days--how the slacker junkie guru has fallen--when sense of what he said penetrates. "Uh, you told everyone you were off duty until tomorrow so we could celebrate I'm better?"

Cas edges a spoon to the exact center of the paper napkin before looking up. "Yes."

Dean nods tightly; he doesn't even need to ask how Cas phrased it. Off the top of his head, he can't think of a single one that doesn't sound like Cas took a sexday because Dean's well enough to participate. Fuck his life so very fucking much.

"What'd they say?" he asks in sheer morbid curiosity.

"To have fun," Cas answers, adding after a moment of thought, "Don't tire you out too much on your first day. Vera laughed a great deal."

"Yeah," Dean hears himself agree, calm with horror. "We'll be careful about that."

As Cas returns to the stove, having achieved the platonic ideal of table setting, Dean sits back in his chair, completely unsurprised that despite over half a decade on this planet, the most recent half exploring human sexuality in its many, many, Jesus so many forms, Cas would manage, against all odds, to remain utterly oblivious to innuendo when it was probably grinning back at him from every single goddamn person in the camp. It makes a hideous kind of sense, in that perfect fubar storm kind
of way; if Cas couldn't understand why this Dean would have a problem sharing sex partners or get Phil's slowly more disturbing pleas for love and biologically impossible baby abominations (please God), anything less subtle than an outright statement of intent would go right over his head.

Eventually, he gets that he's gonna have to break this down for Cas, and if he's not past the point of plausible reasons for putting it off yet, he's right on the edge. For himself, he's past pretending his reasons for not sharing is less about how to tell Cas with the least amount of personal trauma (though that's a factor, yeah) and a lot more about how he has no fucking idea how Cas will react. Ideally, he won't care, and Cas's history backs that up, but when it comes to Dean's history, 'worst-case scenario' is always the first assumption, and usually true, and the most likely ending is Cas ending his inexplicable voluntary dry spell in an hour or less, likely with Zoe pouncing, because that Thursday incense ritual isn't fucking subtle.

(He's still not sure why it bothers him more that Zoe and Phil are trying to steal his (rumored) boyfriend while he's sick than the fact he has one at all, but he puts it down to 'asshole behavior' and he's not standing for that shit, not in his camp.)

It's not that much to ask--after everything that's happened, being stuck here, living the identity of his own worst nightmare of who he could be and what Sam might have become and how the world might end, a fever that nearly fucking killed him, holes in fucking reality on a two year countdown to death by random fucking glance--that he gets to keep this, at least for a little while longer. He doesn't think he should have to give up the only person who knows who he really is and doesn't care he wears the same face as the man he's pretending to be, and who doesn't seem to notice that Dean's got a monopoly on pretty much all of his (very limited) free time or seem to have any intention of changing that anytime soon.

He's not being fair, and the excuse that fair makes no part of his life doesn't change that he shouldn't be the kind of person who honest to God doesn't give a shit.

The waft of canned soup jerks Dean's attention from the uncomfortable direction his thoughts are trying to take; relieved, he reaches for the spoon as Cas fills each bowl and adds a ruler-straight stack of bread to the table before sitting down with the resignation of someone who's answer to 'cake or death' would require flipping a coin and a request for more time to consider his options. Because cooking food still doesn't mean Cas likes it, and he's really, really got to do something about that.

Between each carefully timed bite, Cas recites his morning in exacting detail, but even the weird new responsible Cas can't repress his natural inclination to mock the fuck out of everyone in his line of sight, and Dean learns that Kyle's on a record seven day streak of not being sentenced to mow Chitaqua's endless lawns ("Later, we observed a whistling porcine take to the heavens while a lion laid a lamb." "You're a sick fuck, you know that?"). Laura and Gary's uncomfortably public displays of affection escalating to the point where Cas suggested they film it and use it in trade on the border as porn is always in demand ("…they were doing that in the mess?"). "Yes, and badly, so we wouldn't get much for it."). and Sid is sulking in hilariously undignified silence after Cas assigned him to assist the mechanics when he rigidly pointed out that he couldn't perform his duty as patrol leader without an actual team.

"He even try to argue?" he asks, leaning an elbow on the table as Cas collects their empty bowls and plates and goes to the sink, pausing for a moment to visibly brace himself before stacking everything on the counter and reaching for the homemade dish soap and a sponge.

"Sidney?" Cas snorts, pausing only to turn on the water and wait for it to heat before plugging the sink and turning around, expression sardonic. "Of course not. Though I assume Sheila and Frederick will be the beneficiaries of the multiple ways I am oppressing him for my own sadistic amusement."
"Which to be fair, you kind of are." Cas's nods in serene agreement. "Does he know anything about engines?"

"They've been ordered to instruct him on the principles of automobile repair and assign him tasks suited to his abilities when he is not required in the mess."

Dean grins, filing that away, because while Vera doesn't name names (she doesn't need to, Dean's got this 'knowing his people' thing down cold now), he's pretty sure Sid is near the top of her watch list, and not only because he almost killed her by sheer incompetence. "Glad to know you're not letting power go to your head."

"I could have assigned him extra shifts keeping Chitaqua free of excess foliage in Kyle's place," Cas adds, looking like he regrets his inexplicable mercy as he turns back to the sink. "After I'm finished, would you like coffee?"

"Sure," Dean answers without hesitation, sliding his chair back and starting toward the living room; he figured this was coming. "I'll catch up on reports."

Dropping on the couch with a sigh, he belatedly realizes that the coffee table was reorganized while he was sleeping, maps and reports and journals stacked neatly to one side to make space for a new stack, because Cas lives for reports and seems to believe more is always, always better.

With another sigh, he grabs the top one while he waits, and it's gotta say something that he's halfway down his skim of the page before he picks up this isn't anything like a report. Going back to the top, he blinks--this is printed.

"We have a printer?" he calls toward the kitchen, reading the salutation--this is a letter? People still write letters?

"Chuck has one," Cas replies over the sound of vaguely hostile splashing.

That would explain all those boxes of printer paper; he just assumed Chuck was indulging in paper-based nostalgia for his computer.

"Chuck wrote these?" He skims more slowly down the first page as the background noise of running water cuts off, cabinets open and close, and Cas's footsteps start toward the living room before coming to an early stop. Glancing up, he sees Cas doing something a lot like avoiding coming any farther into the room. "Cas?"

Cas's eyes focus on the letter in Dean's hands. "So I should probably explain what it is that you're reading."

"It looks like some really detailed letters Chuck wrote to someone--" He checks the salutation again; it's been a while since he's seen an actual honest-to-God letter in the age of email. Though he supposes current events are causing a comeback, though that does make him wonder if he should have watched The Postman after all; it's not like he had any idea that might eventually be relevant to his life and times. "--Gloria. Dude, we have a postman out here?"

"Not...exactly."

"Chuck's ex-girlfriend?" Looking back down a little desperately, he focuses on the date at the top--seriously, do letters usually have those?--and stops, doing some fast math. March; almost eight months ago. Dropping it on the couch beside him, he picks up the next one, marking the date: ten months ago; next: fourteen months; seventeen months; twenty-one months, he's seeing a pattern here. Skipping to the last one, he stares at the date for a very long time: one month before the first entry in
"An old friend." When he looks up, Cas almost seems relieved, and Dean mentally removes 'deliberately being a dick' from why the hell Cas isn't just explaining what the hell is going on. "She lives in Georgia, just south of Atlanta."

Dean nods, already forming his next question when he realizes that sounds familiar. "Hey, weird coincidence. That's where the FBI thinks we are."

To his credit, Cas almost looks uncomfortable. "Yes, I noticed that. I assume that means they're still making regular payments to our contact in the FBI."

"We have a--" Back up: he's not gonna get anywhere doing this piecemeal. "Cas, why was Chuck writing to your old friend in Georgia?"

"Because it's the current location of your army--well, part of it, in any case--and I ordered him to maintain contact with them after we settled here."

As the silence stretches out between them, Dean honestly has to wonder why the hell he's surprised.

"The coffee should be ready," Cas says brightly into the blank silence. "Let me get that and I'll try to explain."

"You do that," Dean answers, staring at the empty doorway as Cas retreats back into the kitchen. "I like coffee."

By the time Cas sets his cup on the coffee table, Dean's gotten through the first letter and just hit page two of the second one, riveted despite himself. Chuck the novelist's got nothing on Chuck the Kansas-bound Freedom Fighter getting his epistolic groove on, and boy, he had no idea Chuck's inner writer was that fucking sarcastic. As Cas takes the chair opposite the couch, Dean gives him a speculative look.

"You ever read these?"

"Chuck wanted me to approve the first one," Cas admits, wrinkling his nose as he takes a sip from his own cup. "I skimmed it, but I really wasn't interested in the details. Why?"

"No reason." He flips to the next page and bites his lip, because seriously, Chuck saved these? With an effort, he puts it aside and turns to look at Cas. "Break it down for me."

"I told you I used to train hunters for Dean before I came to Chitaqua, and that I gained instruction from other sources so I could do it well."

"Other hunters, yeah." Dean realizes he's having a once in a lifetime experience here: Cas actually making an effort to ease into a subject. He gets why he prefers the direct approach; he's shitty at anything else. "Keep going."

"I didn't tell you that I gained that experience at Dean's earlier camps. Chitaqua was only the last one."

"The last one." They were somewhere else before coming to Chitaqua, probably in Georgia, so far so good. "He had another camp before he came here?"

"Six camps."
Yeah, he heard that wrong. "What?"

"The first four were the only ones besides this one that he was personally involved in founding," Cas continues, like he thinks that's the confusing part. "The other two were formed by his order and their construction was overseen by two of his lieutenants, but we came here before they were completed. The other six--well, you might say it was treated as a standing order despite the lack of Dean's actual presence."

"That's more than six." Because getting the math right, that's the important part here.

"There are now twelve. Thirteen, if you count Chitaqua."

Dean takes a drink of coffee. "Twelve camps. Four he personally founded. Two he ordered built but never checked out. Six because--someone thought it was a really good idea and kept doing it. And--this one." He's got to admit, that does equal thirteen.

"Yes. Chitaqua, however, could be said to be independent of the earlier ones."

"You don't say." He finishes the cup in a gulp and sets on the coffee table before meeting Cas's eyes. "When was Chitaqua founded?"

"April 2012." Leaning forward, Cas drops a worn, leather-covered book on the coffee table between them. Taking a deep breath, Dean picks it up, flipping blindly through pages of his own neat print with a sense of unreality. "Dean didn't know I still had his first journal. I assume he either didn't remember to ask me what happened to it or he thought that it was left behind."

"And you didn't volunteer the information."

Cas shakes his head. "No."

Staring at the yellow-edged pages, he thinks about that; for some reason, he never really thought about the date other than assuming that before they came here they were moving around so much before that he didn't bother keeping a record. Which come to think was a stupid goddamn assumption.

Skimming the page at a glance, he pauses and goes back to the top, reading more carefully. This isn't just a record of missions and casualty reports written with the disinterest of a solitary hunter, but pages splashed with reminders and to-do lists, missions and meetings recorded with amused commentary about people who aren't just his soldiers, observations and ideas crammed between plans for the future, hope and determination and certainty written into every word that he could--they could--save the world. Dean Winchester before Chitaqua: it's like reading the words of an entirely different person.

"Cas, when did Lucifer--"

"Dean was on an extended mission and sent a message through our contacts to meet him here," Cas answers. "And here we stayed."

"Where was the mission?"

Cas meets his eyes. "Detroit."

Dean lets out a breath. A different person entirely, yeah: this was Dean Winchester before Detroit; before Sam said 'yes' to Lucifer and his world ended; before he stopped believing there was anything left worth saving. So that's how it happened.
Closing the journal, Dean smooths one hand over the worn leather cover before putting it with the letters, wondering where the hell he's supposed to even start. It's not that he doesn't have questions--God, so many, and a few are even ones that he's wanted to ask and just didn't get around to yet--but what's killing him is there's one he didn't even think of, and right now, he doesn't know why.

The time between the fork that defined this world's path and Chitaqua is still unknown territory, but until now, he didn't realize just how much. Not once--not once--when Cas gave him glimpses of that time--jobs with Bobby, learning to be a hunter, learning to train others, weapons trafficking on the Texas border, trying to stop the spread of Croatoan, helping people escape as Croatoan went epidemic, the FBI's most wanted list, for fuck's sake, domestic terrorism--did he ever stop to think about how little Cas actually told him and how he made it sound like so much more. On a guess, that was exactly what Cas meant to do.

"So before Chitaqua, he was building camps to train hunters?" Dean asks slowly. "That's why he needed a new way to teach them."

"Yes."

He sits back, feeling strangely hollow. That year on the run from the Host and Lucifer, him and Sam and Cas and Bobby, and never once did it occur to them that last minute miracles weren't the only way to handle a proto-Apocalypse that they always assumed that if it happened, they'd lose.

This Dean Winchester, on the other hand, decided to start training new hunters because if the Apocalypse happened, he thought they could actually win.

"Georgia was first. What about the others?"

"In order: Georgia, Tennessee, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Now they also include Florida, Arkansas, Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia, and most recently, Texas."

All south of the Mason-Dixon: looks like the south seceded a while back, just no one knows it yet. He pulls up a mental list of the zoned states, completely unsurprised to see the overlap.

"Texas was just zoned as infected the first time I was here," with added bombing because apparently that's a thing. He gives Cas a sharp look. "Most convenient coincidence ever or--"

"Me, with help." Which he guessed. "The future is always complicated, and once prophecy was broken, it became plural. When I had Grace, I could see all of them, but they were--confusing due to the number of variables, and not being human, I couldn't judge which was the most probable or even desirable to occur. In this, humans who possess any degree of clairvoyance have a distinct advantage; their vision tends to be singular and the stronger it is, and the more of them that had that specific one, the more likely it was to occur. Giving them the possibilities would often trigger their own abilities and the most likely scenario discovered."

"Predicting the future by committee." That's--kind of cool, actually. "How'd you find them?"

"They tended to be attracted to Dean's presence," Cas answers, smiling faintly and Dean swallows down the lump in his throat at the fond expression on Cas's face. "Accuracy reached ninety-eight percent for three months in advance and eight-one percent at one year. We did better in generalities, and the order we founded the first six camps followed the order those states would be declared infected and their borders closed. The next six--from what I remember--were chosen from the list of potential infected states to concentrate on those contiguous to the original six to make it easier for the camps to keep in contact with each other as well as assist each other when they were finally zoned."
"Okay, let's start at the top," he decides, hoping his voice sounds normal. "Georgia, the first one, when was that?"

"Five years ago, Dean and I went to Bobby's to establish a temporary headquarters, both to contact other hunters and to more easily track the progress of the Apocalypse and help as needed. At the time, Croatoan was still only a possibility, and not the most pressing, though we would later stop the initial distribution through the swine flu vaccine, which was Pestilence's first attempt to achieve an epidemic. Bobby had the beginnings of a system to discover where our help was needed and locate the nearest available hunter to handle it if we couldn't do it ourselves."

"Those jobs you did with Bobby--the ones that took a couple of weeks--that's one of the reasons he took them, right?" Dean asks, putting it together. "Got you around the country more so Bobby could get more contacts and use your memory for awesome?" He cracks a grin at Cas's nod. "Yeah, I'd have hated doing that. No wonder he told you to go."

"Bobby took jobs that required extensive travel to build up a more stable network as well as consult in unusual cases, especially those that would need my abilities," Cas confirms. "My memory was an advantage; Bobby could concentrate his efforts on the job as well as avoid the possibility of hunters becoming suspicious of our motives if they saw handwritten notes about them, their location, their experience, and their skills. He was also pleased that he'd never have to ask anyone to repeat their phone number again."

That right there would be worth its weight in gold, or an entire drive of Cas's increasingly bizarre questions back then. "That's when Dean trained you?"

"Yes, though at the time, it was to improve my skills so I could be of help to Bobby, as there was still no guarantee how long I would have my Grace," Cas answers, finally losing the unsettlingly good posture in a modified slouch, which Dean takes as Cas starting to relax. "In retrospect…"

"--that was probably where he got the idea to train hunters," Dean finishes for him. Training Cas would have been different from teaching Sam; he needed to get back all the way to basics--human basics, even--to give Cas context for what he'd be learning, and that would have gotten him thinking. "So why Georgia? How'd you end up there?"

"A job that was on Dean's priority list for us to handle," Cas answers, and Dean watches one leg surreptitiously drape itself over the arm of the chair and feels himself starting to relax as well. "Bobby was alerted to a group of what appeared to be demons terrorizing rural farmers south of Atlanta in late November of 2009, and anything that involved demons was subject to Dean's personal attention." Yeah, no surprise there. "After we completed an exorcism of all of the demons involved, we were approached by one of those who had been attacked, a woman with an unusually strong but very limited degree of clairvoyance. It was triggered not by an event but by a person involved in it, which is not unusual in itself, but its limitation was that she had to interact with the individual in question for it to work."

"That's specific."

"Clairevoyance by its nature is extremely idiosyncratic," Cas says with a moue of resignation for the weirdness of humans, tucking his hair behind one ear to look at Dean solemnly; fuck his life, that's still goddamn adorable. "As she put it, her reputation for being extremely hospitable to strangers and highly involved in social events in her community was entirely based on never knowing what event or which person at it would be significant. She asked us to remain when we were done, as her son's flight had been delayed and she had a great deal of food for Thanksgiving and no one to eat it. As we had to make sure the demons didn't return…."
Dean grins; who the hell turns down turkey? "You helped her out. Again."

"We agreed to stay for a few days in case there were any further attacks," Cas agrees, foot starting to swing idly. "Dean told her a little about what we were doing and how few people there were who could help, and she offered us the use of her property for whatever we might need it for."

Dean blinks. "Wait, she just--offered up her land over dressing and cranberry sauce?"

"Turkey sandwiches and Lays potato chips--Thanksgiving was the previous day," Cas says earnestly, because apparently the type of meal was a factor here. "She told me later that she wasn't entirely clear on the reason why she offered, just that it was necessary, which depressingly is a very common characteristic of human clairvoyance."

"Seriously, she just said--I have land, take it for whatever because I have a good feeling about you?" Dean asks incredulously.

"The feeling, as she described it, was more 'imminent doom and the end of all things in a rain of blood and fire' if she didn't," Cas explains. "And toads, of course. We were definitely preferable to that."

Dean wants to say something, but he's kind of stuck on the 'rain of blood and fire'. 'And toads, of course.'

"The next morning, Dean asked her how she would feel about using her property to establish a safe place to train hunters if there was enough space available to do so," Cas continues, oblivious to Dean's inability to stop imagining toads descending from the sky at terminal velocity and Penn making a stew out of the remains. "As she was the second largest landowner in Georgia, space wasn't a problem."

Dean jerks back into the present with a bang. "What?"

"Gloria is the second largest landowner in--"

"This just stopped being unbelievable and started being creepy, for the record."

Cas's expression flickers through a lot of variations of something before settling on 'resigned'. "Gloria's clairvoyance became active during puberty, which isn't uncommon. However, unlike most clairvoyants, her first vision was very powerful and--memorable."

Yeah, he hates it already. "What did she see?"

"Lucifer being released from his cage, though unfortunately, the time was ambiguous." Dean shuts his eyes. "She only saw the face of one of the men and for obvious reasons, she remembered it."

"Mine." Jesus Christ. "So she knew me and Sam...."

"Yes. However, she had enough context from what she saw to...."

"Not shoot me on sight?" Taking another breath, he makes himself say the words. "How much does she know?"

"Dean told her everything," Cas answers calmly, and Dean hears 'right back to the Hell thing' crystal clear. "He said--he said we weren't the Host, and for her to make a decision--"

"Consent's not just a word." Not anymore. "She needed to know everything so she could make the
choice."

Cas blinks, blue eyes focusing on him in surprise. "Yes."

Dean licks his lips and makes himself nod. "And she agreed. I mean, obviously. And Dean had a place to start training hunters in Georgia."

"There were so few," Cas says, expression darkening. "The jobs we took--and the ones that we couldn't, for that matter--made it very clear that the most immediate threat to humanity's survival might be the lack of hunters. The mortality rate even for experienced hunters was becoming unsettlingly high, which not only reduced the number available but the number of new hunters that could be taught their craft."

Dean thinks about what Cas told him about the history of hunting last night. "They weren't just dying on the job, were they? They were being targeted."

Cas stills, blue eyes widening. "I thought it was a possibility, yes. How did you--"

"What you said about hunter families," he answers distractedly, feeling the pieces slotting into place. "When I asked you what Lucifer was doing before--" Cas nods quickly, sparing him the necessity of 'he started wearing a Samsuit', "--now I got my answer. He was stacking the deck."

Cas frowns. "Poker?"

"That's Lucy's game: count the cards, stack the deck, and cheat the fuck out of everyone at the table with a smile," Dean confirms. "Son of a bitch. He knew how angels trained hunters; hasn't changed since the beginning. Was it those who came from families who'd been doing it for years?"

"Yes," Cas answers slowly. "They made a significant percentage of the deaths."

"Makes sense. He takes out them, he takes generations of history and skills with them that we can't get back. Not to mention they were probably the ones most likely to want to teach new hunters and knew what and how to teach 'em." He realizes that Cas is staring at him like he's never seen him before. "What? That's what you thought was happening, right?"

"Even with Bobby's network, there was no way to get a complete list of those killed, much less personal details, but....I suspected, yes."

"Good call."

Cas nods slowly, still looking--yeah, no idea. "Thank you."

"So getting back--you told Dean all about hunters throughout history, and he figured it was time for a change," Dean continues, filing this conversation away for later. "Instead of making people chase down hunters and hope the best, he wanted somewhere they could go to get training, and used Bobby's network and those jobs you and Bobby went on to spread the word. So far so good?"

"It's almost as if you were there," Cas confirms with a slow smile, leaning his head on one hand. "We also had the assistance of Gloria's family in this. Her eldest son, Elijah, wasn't a hunter, but after he arrived and found out what happened to Gloria, he asked Dean to train him, and the rest of her extended family eventually made the same request. They made the core of the first group of hunters to be trained at Alpha."

Huh. "How extended?"
"Twenty-one members," Cas says calmly, taking a sip from his cup while Dean fails to breathe. "Elijah and his five siblings, Gloria's younger brother and his wife, their four children and their spouses, the two surviving grandchildren of her older brother and one of their spouses, and the two children of Gloria's deceased husband's only sister."

Dean nods blankly. "So that's--extended."

"Gloria and Elijah were very persuasive," Cas says. "Gloria's younger brother was also among those who were attacked by those demons, so we had the advantage of an audience who already believed us."

"Yeah, that'd do it."

"What Dean wanted was a place, protected by the strongest wards possible, to teach new hunters what they needed to know in relative safety and assure that they had the necessary skills before they actually started to fight," Cas continues. "Elijah was able to translate that idea into reality, which was something neither Dean nor I had the necessary knowledge or experience to do. By New Year's Day, Elijah had created the infrastructure for the first camp with the help of those hunters who responded to Bobby and Dean's request for assistance and the first recruits."

"All twenty-one of them." Jesus, saying it doesn't make it any less weird.

"Seventy-two," Cas corrects him casually, mouth twitching at Dean's expression. "Bobby's network was very efficient."

"In a month?" Fascinated, he studies Cas's pleased expression. "And that's when you learned to train hunters?"

"Yes, though in a sense, it could be considered on the job training. Unlike the call for recruits, the response among experienced hunters was--less than enthusiastic." Dean grimaces; hunters are paranoid fucks, and secrecy is a way of life, yeah, but come the hell on; the middle of the pre-Apocalypse should be considered a goddamn exception. "However, we made up for quantity with quality; the ones that joined us tended to be both highly experienced and extremely skilled, and many came from families who had been hunting for generations and had experience in instructing others from teaching younger family members.

"They were able to help Dean create a model to train new hunters that was simple, thorough, and made instruction both faster and easier. I was among the first who learned to instruct hunters using that model so it could be observed by those with more experience, since my Grace could protect the new recruits from injury while I learned as well. It also helped that after learning from Dean how to fight in a human body, I was familiar enough with it to access my memories of generations of hunters and teach this body to use those skills so I could pass them to others."

"And with Grace, you could also heal yourself when you made mistakes." Practice dummy on himself; of course he did, and probably had a blast doing it. "So Dean created boot camp for hunters."

"That was its original purpose, yes." Cas answers evasively, adding a performance-art quality casual stretch. "Gloria's property was extensive, and being undeveloped, that allowed a great deal of flexibility in the camp's design, which Elijah took advantage of when building Alpha."

Dean raises an eyebrow and just manages not to laugh. "No electricity, no water, no roads?"

"Gloria was also a retired English professor," Cas adds idly. "Her children--until that time--were
either still in college or involved in various white-collar professions that had no affiliation, even historical, with hunters."

He'd have to be dead to miss that cue. "No development means nothing on government surveys to worry about. And she wasn't on any of the watch lists for militias or survivalist groups." Cas grins at him. "Yeah, I passed, keep going."

"Her family also had a great deal of capital and extensive contacts throughout the state, and one of Gloria's younger sons was in the process of finishing a degree in engineering. Elijah met with the other hunters to find out what would be needed and used his family's resources to build the initial camp far more quickly than Dean expected. We, of course, gave him access to Dean's multiple accounts and he quickly became an expert at creative methods of acquiring further capital."

"Dean taught the son of an English professor and the second largest landowner in Georgia identity and credit card fraud?"

"And I taught him laundering," Cas adds, then frowns. "It's nothing at all like The Sopranos."

Dean marvels yet again that no one thought to check what Cas was learning about humanity via premium cable and the Lifetime Channel. Tony Soprano isn't a role model for anyone, ever. "Yeah, who knew? Keep going."

"Using Gloria's property had another advantage; due to the fact that her family could claim the land both by legal ownership and blood right, Bobby was able to create extremely powerful wards to protect it. This not only assured that new hunters would be protected while they learned their craft in a controlled environment but also effectively made the camp the safest places to be on this entire world."

"So not just boot camp," Dean interprets, startled. "Somewhere safe for their families to stay, if they had any left." Of course Elijah would think like that; he wasn't a loner, not with his entire goddamn family joining up and with the input of those hunters with a family history doing it.

"Elijah began to expand the camp's function beyond simply training hunters as quickly as he could without attracting unwanted attention," Cas confirms. "Soon, entire families were living in the camps and they provided a labor force that helped to expand functionality. Elijah thought ahead; he also worked to make Alpha as self-sufficient as possible should the worst happen while there was still time for experimentation. By the time the epidemic began, the groundwork was completed for the first four camps to become permanent residences in addition to hunting camps, and work had already begun on the next two." Cas hesitates, foot stilling briefly. "Dean and Bobby learned a great deal from Elijah and the creation of the initial camps, which they adapted when we came here."

Dean's going to go out on a limb and say Chitaqua is definitely not the Elijah model, though. "How different are those camps from Chitaqua?"

"It's been over two years since I was in the South," Cas answers, blue eyes fixing on some point above Dean's shoulder, and despite the slump, Dean can see him tensing again. "I'm rather curious as well. When we left, Elijah had been successful in providing a minimal living standard for those in his camp that included electricity and running water with the help of several residents with engineering experience. And no one had to live in tents, which trust me, was greatly appreciated by all."

"Plumbing and working roofs." Cas smiles, obviously remembering that conversation. "So you did know what I was talking about."

"I never said I didn't," he answers obliquely. "I just didn't notice until you mentioned it. It's been over
two years since I left Alpha."

Two years not thinking about it, yeah; this isn't just history, part of this Dean's life, but another part of Cas's life, too. "You haven't been back since you got here?"

Cas shakes his head, staring at the wall again. "No." There's a long hesitation before he adds, "If you're amenable to a field trip, we could satisfy both our curiosity and go there ourselves."

"To Alpha?" It's not a brothel, but he's gotta wonder if this ends with them being thrown out anyway. "So the leader—Elijah, right?—you want to contact him and—" He gropes for the right words. "Get permission for a visit?"

"The camp has two leaders: Elijah is administrator of camp functions, while Amy trains and leads their hunters and handles camp security and defense. Considering their function as residence, education center, and their duty to protect the state, they divided the duties to take advantage of their strengths and provide for the various needs of all the camp's residents, and the other camps began to follow their model in that as well."

On a bet, that wasn't this Dean's idea, either. "So you'll contact the leaders? Who's been pony expressing all this time, anyway?" Someone who could be trusted with the information, wouldn't tell Dean Winchester the time of day, and was the one person—maybe the only person—that looked at the resident junkie slash Fallen angel and saw a person, albeit a really fucked up one. The one who brought a kid to Chitaqua and trusted Cas to help him and who couped the entire goddamn camp because she trusted Cas to save them.

"I talked to Vera and Jeremy this morning and asked them to prepare to leave for Georgia to inform Gloria of our impending arrival if you decided to go," Cas answers, still not looking at Dean. "And bring back any information Gloria feels we'll need before we arrive, of course. However, I don't think anyone will hold us to a specific date, as your health is paramount."

Dean nods, keeping his expression neutral. "And if they tell us no?"

Cas looks up, and damned if he doesn't look amused. "I highly doubt it would occur to anyone to deny you access to any of the camps for any reason."

"Because Dean founded them?" Right: this is Cas. "If he fucked off for two years and Elijah and Amy are in charge of the one in Georgia—"

"Elijah and Amy were placed in charge of the Georgia camp by Dean's order," Cas interrupts. "Each of the camps was placed in the charge of a trusted lieutenant, but they were founded in Dean's name and operated under his leadership. I think under the circumstances, they would welcome your return once their reservations have been aired."

Dean stares at him for a moment, wondering what he's missing. "But he left."

"He's also dead, but as they don't know that, it's irrelevant." Cas tilts his head. "You chose to be Dean Winchester here, and I told you that this camp was yours. I just didn't mention that it wasn't the only one."

"You're saying—what? That they're mine?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

Dean leans over and picks up his cup, holding it out to Cas. "I need more coffee for this."
"And I'm telling you, this isn't the goddam Host," which is a low blow, but he's way too rattled to stop himself, "and people don'twait around for people who abandoned them. Which, in case this wasn't obvious, is exactly what he did!"

Cas finishes his third cup of coffee from the second pot with every indication of enjoyment, which despite everything else, reminds him to check with Chuck on their supply of tea and see what Cas makes of it with the addition of sugar. Why didn't anyone--Dean fucking Winchester--tell him about the magic rule that sugar makes anything better? And he does mean anything--may not make it good, but it does make it better.

"Your lieutenants are loyal--"

"Two. Years."

Cas rolls his eyes. "And almost six months, yes, I know. Would you like the days, hours, minutes and seconds as well?"

Dean wonders what kind of clean and sober makes someone crazier. Maybe it's the abstinence thing? "If it's that easy, then why didn't you tell me before?"

Cas calmly refills his cup--this time, he brought the pot with him, and well-whiskeyed by the taste, this being the definition of a special occasion and/or reason for heavy drinking--and takes his time adding sugar and cream, pausing every so often to check the flavor and fuck with Dean's head before sitting back in his chair to give him the most patient look in the history of looks.

"Cas? Why didn't you--"

"I thought that much would be obvious," Cas says coolly. "When would you have liked me to tell you?"

What. The. Fuck. "I've been here almost three fucking months--"

"Of course, how foolish of me; the opportunities have been legion," Cas says. "You tell me which of these would have been a good time: the first three weeks, when you were both miserable and invisible; when Chuck revealed your existence to the entire camp and we both were so drunk that we redefined 'maudlin' as well as the concept of a 'hangover'; when you were learning about this world as well as the camp when not engaged in excessive brooding?" Before Dean can answer, Cas straightens with an arrested expression. "During the fever, of course; why didn't I--"

"Fuck you," Dean snaps. "How about when you agreed to help me be him? How about fucking telling me then what the fuck I was signing up for before I signed up!"

Cas stills. "Chitaqua was the only thing you signed up for. That's the reason I didn't tell you."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Three people here know about the other camps besides myself: Chuck, Vera, and Jeremy," Cas says flatly. "Chuck was the only other person besides myself and Dean who came here from them. Vera and Jeremy only knew what I told them so they could help Chuck keep in contact with Gloria. Vera and Jeremy had no reason to tell you about the camps, as they believed you already knew about them, and the day you told me you wanted to do this, I instructed Chuck not to tell you anything about them and to refer any questions regarding anything we did before Chitaqua to me."

Startled, Dean rethinks every (very limited) interaction he's had with Chuck since he left Dean's cabin with Cas that day. "Is that why he usually avoids me unless you're around or I'm
unconscious?"

"I may have been unduly emphatic on the subject," Cas admits, not looking all that guilty about it. "Fortunately, you were far too busy learning about Chitaqua and our history here to be very interested in Dean's past--"

"Yeah, my bad, I was more curious about yours."

Cas stills, but before he can say anything Dean charges on.

"So why are you telling me now?" he asks bitterly, thinking of everything Cas told him about his time on earth and how much was real. Cas is the best liar he's ever met; he can do it with nothing but the truth. "Were you testing me all this time? Did I finally pass? How?"

"It wasn't a test."

"Then what was it?" Dean demands. "Why now and not back then?"

After what feels like forever, Cas finally says, "You chose to do this in Chitaqua because of what Chuck had already set in motion. It was your choice, but your options were limited."

"That's not an answer," Dean snaps back. "You were hiding this, and don't tell me this was that not thinking shit, not this time; you worked at it." Cas looks away. "You didn't tell me I was the one who stopped the Apocalypse when Dean died. You didn't tell me you trained Dean's hunters here. You didn't tell me--" About Luke. He's got enough self-control to cram the words back down his throat before they get anywhere near air. He's not pissed enough to throw that in Cas's face; he's not the kind of person who does that, and he'll never be someone who could do that to Cas. "Were you ever going to tell me?"

"When you first said that you wanted to do this in Chitaqua," Cas says slowly, looking up, "if I had told you that there were other camps that also looked to Dean for leadership, would you still have chosen to do this?"

Dean frowns, startled by the question. "I don't know. If I'd known they were out there waiting for him..." Whether or not he could do it isn't even on the radar; if they're out there, waiting for Dean Winchester--well, he's Dean Winchester now, so-- "Yeah. At least make contact with them or something."

"I know," Cas says. "I never doubted that you could do it or that, given this information, that you would. That's why I concealed it from you."

"Why--" All at once, it clicks; that was, actually, an answer. "You were giving me a choice."

"You had no choice coming here, or in being revealed to the camp as Dean Winchester," Cas confirms quietly. "You may blame me for deceiving you--I did, and it was deliberate--but it was done to assure that what choice you had left was yours alone, free of coercion or expectation. Consent," he adds, echoing Dean earlier, "isn't and will never again be just a word."

Yeah, he gets that. "You didn't want me to do it, though."

"You were so unhappy when you came here," Cas says softly, blue eyes unfocused, like he's seeing something beyond this room. "I remember how that felt."

Dean sucks in a breath.
"Everything you knew was gone," Cas continues distantly. "You were trapped in a world not your own, surrounded by strangers, and some of them wore the faces of people you thought you knew. You had so much to learn with so little context for it; all you could do is hope that, eventually, you'd be able to understand, and in time, you would. In time, it grew easier; in time, it hurt less. That doesn't mean you can ever forget what you lost." Abruptly, Cas looks at him, blue eyes dark. "That doesn't mean that, given the opportunity, you wouldn't go back."

Fuck, he gets it now. "Cas, listen--"

"You'd go back, to your brother and your life and your world," Cas continues ruthlessly, "and with you would go the memories of the people you met here, the camps that you led, and the world whose Apocalypse your presence stopped. That wound would never heal, Dean, not for the length of your life. You wouldn't let it, and I didn't want you to have to carry it.

"So I deceived you, I concealed what I could and redirected your attention when necessary, I did everything short of lying to you outright, and yet, despite my best efforts, the only thing I successfully concealed were those camps," Cas finishes unhappily. "And possibly only managed that because you were delayed by a near-fatal fever. What you want to do here now makes further concealment not only pointless but dangerous and cruel; you can do this, but having all the tools would help. That doesn't change the fact that when you go back, it won't be in joy and relief--"

"If," Dean interrupts desperately, wondering why the hell he didn't make this clearer last night. "If we even find a way for me to do it--which right now is impossible since everyone who can do it is dead or fucking Lucifer--you think I'd do that now? So long, good luck with the Apocalypse thing, gotta get back to hunting monsters and helping people in my world, which isn't in danger of anything but a werewolf uprising or something?"

"Werewolves are--?"

"Cas, come on. You think I'd leave now, knowing the second I do, it's game over, Apocalypse won by fucking Lucifer, rocks fall and everyone dies if they're lucky?"

Cas goes still; holy shit, he really didn't know. "You'd stay."

"Yeah," Dean answers. "I didn't have a choice coming here, fine, so I'm making it now; I'm staying to see this through."

"You may not have a choice--"

"There's always a choice," he interrupts. "Mine's called 'Sam and a fuckload of books'." Among other options if it comes down to it, but if Cas didn't think of it, there's no reason to tell him.

"Despite the evidence to the contrary," Cas says unsteadily, "it's not that easy to cross time and space with any reasonable chance of success."

"With Sam on the case?" Dean snorts. "I give it a couple of weeks, tops; I'd be back before you had time to miss me or Lucifer got on his world conquest plan. Not like he's started yet, so we'd be fine."

"You're serious."

"Like death, taxes, and winning this thing," he answers, meeting Cas's eyes. "I'm in. Any questions?"

"You'd give up your home, your brother, your entire life, to fight for a world not your own in a war there's no guarantee we'll win?"
"If you need a guarantee before you'll fight, you're doing it for the wrong reasons," Dean answers. "You fight because it's worth fighting for. Besides, not like you can talk; that's exactly what you did."

Cas shuts his mouth with an audible click of teeth.

"You can't forget what you lost," Dean tells him. "That doesn't mean there wasn't a good reason for doing it. Would you go back if you could?"

"I'd go back," Cas says softly, and for an endless moment, Dean feels his world grind to a brutal halt. "I'd go back to the moment before I Fell, when I stood before the Host for the last time, and I'd tell myself that it doesn't matter what I choose, that we would always lose. So when I Fell, the Host would know exactly why I did it." He pauses for a pregnant moment. "And this time, I'd tell them to fuck themselves before I left."

Dean thinks, lightheaded with relief: I'm gonna get you for that one.

"That," Cas adds thoughtfully, one corner of his mouth twitching upward, "still bothers me sometimes."

Slumping back into the couch cushions, he stops fighting the smile spreading across his face. "So while we're here, anything else I need to know about him? Married, had kids, opened Purgatory and became a crazy god….?"

Cas tilts his head before looking at Dean from behind a mess of dark hair. "Three and a half years ago he had unprotected sex with an extremely attractive hunter at Alpha and acquired an unpleasantly persistent case of pubic lice that he inadvertently passed on to--"

Oh fuck no. "Shut up."

"Then no," Cas says, grinning at him bright enough to light the sky, "that would be it." After a moment, he sighs. "However, there are some things…."

"No," Dean says flatly, feeling the beginnings of a faint throbbing in his head that he knows from experience will only get worse, so he's got to do this fast. "I'm in this, and that means I need to know everything. You can't just decide for me what I need to know, even if you think it's for my own good. Not anymore."

"I've never lied to you." After a few seconds of ignoring Dean's patiently stare of are-you-fucking-with-me, he rolls his eyes. "I don't think what either of us say when we argue counts. If you feel differently, you've made several statements that I feel require clarification on their veracity."

Probably more than several, and unlike Cas, he doesn't have an angelic goddamn memory. "Give you that one," he concedes grudgingly, fighting the urge to rub his temples; it won't help. "You can't keep deciding what I should and shouldn't know about my own goddamn life, Cas. Not like you've been doing that great a job so far."

He regrets it the moment the words come out of his mouth. Cas doesn't flinch, but even through the flare of pain that's his headache leveling up, he can see guilt flicker across Cas's face before his expression goes blank.

"I can have Chuck continue the explanation if you feel that you can no longer trust me to--"

"Not what I meant and you know it." He feels the beginnings of a chill and just barely suppresses the shiver; Christ, he doesn't have time for this shit right now. "Look--"
"I can't tell if you're actually angry with me or using that to conceal that you're tired and suppressing a headache," Cas interrupts. Dean would argue that, but a glance at the sky tells him that it's been over three hours since lunch and actually, that could be why he's feeling off. Goddamn fucking brownies. "Before you argue any further and increase your discomfort, I think I can explain. As a hunter, you concealed much about your life because without context, people would believe you were insane. Though it could be argued that knowing the context only makes you seem more insane for voluntarily choosing hunting as your life path."

"Not helping your case here."

"I apologize," Cas answers, not even trying to fake sincerity. "Should I be more obvious in drawing the parallels between what at this time would make no sense to you but when you have context, would be more understandable?"

Dean supposes he might deserve that, at least a little. "I get that."

"I won't lie to you," Cas adds, holding his gaze. "I won't prevaricate and I won't conceal what is mine to tell. If I can't answer your questions, I'll tell you that and the reason why. I promise you that."

He nods slowly. "Okay."

"Good. Can we now turn our attention to preventing a potential relapse or did you enjoy spending time sitting in ice engaged in conversation with your feet? Riveting, I assure you; if only I'd thought to borrow Chuck's camera."

Resigned, Dean stalks to the bedroom--which does nothing for his temper and even less for the headache--flipping off the lights on his way to the bedside table and finding the ibuprofen by touch. Fishing out two pills, he swallows them dry before dropping onto the mattress with a sigh as it squeals a nerve-jangling welcome.

Shoving back the blankets, he glances up and sees Cas standing uncertainly just short of the bedroom door.

"Headache," he says clearly, pasting on a smile that might pass for real in the dark. If Cas couldn't see in the dark.

"It was just the headache."

"No, it wasn't." Cas hesitates before taking a step back. "If you need anything--"

"You'll be there," Dean says automatically, echoing another conversation they never got to finish, when he didn't know what to say so he didn't say anything, instead leaving it for a morning that never came and maybe never will. This time, he still might not know what to say, but pretty much anything is better than nothing at all. "Cas, wait."

Cas hesitates before returning to stand just outside the doorway.

"It's mostly the headache," he says firmly, ignoring the skepticism Cas-ward. "I get why you didn't want to tell me, okay? It's just..." New. Weird. A reminder that he'll never be anything other than a ghost, and this time, it's by his own goddamn choice.

In December of 2009, Dean can't swear to it, but on a guess, he was doing shots in the nearest bar and failing to get laid before returning to a motel room to hate everything before he passed out. Here, Dean Winchester was doing jobs, training Cas, building a hunters network, being offered real estate, designing hunter boot camps, and getting entire families to pledge their lives and money to a war against Lucifer while spreading crabs across rural Georgia. The only surprise is that he didn't cure cancer, Croatoan, and pull off world peace and a new age of mankind, but maybe he had to sleep or
something. And Detroit, of course. Goddamn fucking Detroit.

It's not like he enjoyed seeing himself worse-case scenario, but as it turns out, seeing best-case isn't actually better. He gets why Cas Fell for this Dean, why Cas doesn't see him when he looks at Dean; they're really nothing alike, not at all.

Jesus, this world got a shitty deal when it came to Dean Winchesters meant to save it; he may actually be a downgrade.

He takes a deep breath and this time manages a real smile; you never forget what you lost, and it's a dick move to punish Cas for it. "It's a lot to take in. And you know, you hiding it from me. Still pissed about that."

The faintest relaxation of Cas's shoulders tells him that there's one thing he can do that this Dean couldn't; when he lies to Cas, Cas believes him. "I could make it up to you."

To his own surprise, he feels his own tension drain away. Cas thinks he can do this; failure's inevitable, sure, but it's never stopped him before. "Oh yeah you will."

"Get some rest," Cas says with a faint smile as he turns away. "I'll wake you when dinner's ready."

Dean thought the hardest thing he'd have to do was leave that room when Cas woke him for dinner; he was wrong. So, so very goddamn wrong.

Hard was choking down every mouthful of food between each and every question Cas would expect him to ask, listen to each and every one of his answers, and wait for Cas to finish washing dishes and nod enthusiastically when he asks if Dean wants more coffee, go face that goddamn coffee table, and start learning everything.

"Gloria's responses to Chuck's correspondence, as well as Vera's and Jeremy's reports from their time with Gloria, are here," Cas tells him, sitting cross-legged on the other side of the coffee table as he points to each neatly organized pile, sorted descending by date, because Cas. "By my order, they didn't enter Alpha or leave Gloria's home during their stay, and Gloria assured that no one knew of their presence."

Dean nods automatically then stops, frowning. "Wait, so how did Elijah and Amy think Gloria was getting her information? Really convenient clairvoyance with a two to four month timetable?"

"As they don't know she's clairvoyant, no; I assume it was more deliberate ignorance," Cas answers, adding at Dean's surprise, "Dean, Gloria was born nearly twenty years before the Civil Rights movement in the Deep South and attended the University of Georgia one year after it desegregated. She was one of the first Black women to receive a PhD in Georgia as well as achieve tenure as a professor."

Dean winces. "So adding 'totally crazy chick who thinks she can see the future' was probably a bad idea."

"Let's say that she felt that adding that to 'Black', 'female', and 'in the South' wouldn't be an improvement on her lot in life," Cas agrees. "Elijah may have his suspicions, but he's her son; even if he does, he wouldn't care."

Despite himself, he picks up one of Gloria's letters, the neat print marching across the page in rigidly straight lines. They say you can tell a lot by someone's handwriting, and he's definitely getting 'English professor' from each ruthlessly punctuated sentence complete with semi-colons, which he'd
assumed for a long time were invented by his English III teacher just to fuck with him. Looking at Cas, he cocks his head, curious. "So she was a friend?" Cas doesn't use that word very often (read: ever), and Dean's still not sure he entirely gets Vera may actually define the term in letter and spirit both.

Cas rolls his eyes. "In case this needs clarification, at the time I was still an angel and her husband was recently deceased, so no, I didn't have sex with her."

Not where he was going with this. "And she was what, seventy?"

"Sixty-seven," Cas answers, starting to frown. "Why would that matter?"

Dean starts to answer, but the genuine bewilderment stops him short. "No reason," he says instead, tapping the letter for distraction purposes. "She was okay with the angel thing?"

"Humans generally are, whether we reveal ourselves or not," Cas says with the faintest trace of irony. "It seems to only be a problem when we're not."

Yeah, that: let's try this again. "But she knew about you?"

"As with all divine gifts, the disadvantages are legion and the advantages practically non-existent," Cas answers. "Not to mention they tend end in madness, addiction, suicide, or the beginnings of a new religious movement with unsettling theology, narcotic abuse, and a penchant for setting people on fire." Dean blinks. "However, the divine origin of their gifts mean that they recognize us in our vessels. And outside of them, of course, but as you already know, viewing our true form isn't recommended."

Dean remembers Pamela and nods firmly before making a semi-convincing attempt to hide a fake yawn; time to get down to business. "So I should--"

"Go to bed?" Before Dean can react, Cas sweeps up journals and letters and deposits them on in Report Box 2. "Excellent idea. This can wait until tomorrow."

"Dude." Dean grits his teeth and tries 'casual'. "I like reading in bed. Helps me sleep."

"Then I'll provide you with alternate reading material."

So that didn't work. "What are you doing?"

"I don't make idle threats," Cas answers, leaning an elbow on the coffee table. "I'd prefer to avoid having to prove that to you, but if you persist on this hideously familiar course of action, I will set that box on fire and very possibly myself rather than spend one more night listening to you pace despondently in your room and pretend it's for educational purposes."

"Uh--"

"If you wish to indulge in feelings of imaginary inadequacy and self-loathing," Cas continues, "you'll do it like everyone else; excessive drinking, four to six joints, and a handpicked selection of extremely maudlin power ballads that I know from experience will make suicide seem extremely attractive at the exact point you lose hand-eye coordination and forget how to walk. If we do it with Eldritch Horror, the misery can be extended into the morning after without any further effort on our part."

Dean closes his eyes. "Cas--"
"Or I could seduce you," Cas offers, and Dean opens his eyes to see Cas's slow, satisfied smile. "Your choice, of course."

To his surprise, Dean opens his mouth to answer and hears instead a choked laugh emerge. "Jesus, Cas."

Cas tilts his head, studying him for a moment, then gets to his feet. "Get up. I want to show you something."

Dean obediently drops on the bed at Cas's patient stare and watches Cas open up the closet-armory. If this is Cas's seduction technique, Chitaqua just got a lot weirder than he thought, and not like it was weird before.

"I had to be tied to my bed when I broke my foot," Cas says over his shoulder, which brings up some very interesting thoughts on Vera's method and upgrading 'potential seduction' to 'moderate to high'. "Convalescence is very boring, as you know. There is only so much to read."

Bracing a hand behind him, Dean sighs noisily and tries not to look around for those Velcro restraints. "Your library must have gotten a workout. Learn any new sigils or spells?"

"I learned the one ring rules them all." Crouching, Cas pulls two dusty, water-stained boxes out before making a satisfied sound and pulling out another one, less waterstained but just as dusty, and brings it to the bed. Materializing a knife from somewhere, he hands it hilt first to Dean, who takes it with a sense of growing alarm on exactly what the plan is here. "You can do the honors."

Dean looks between the box and Cas and decides to just ask. "If this is weird sex toys--"

"Those are in the utility closet library," Cas assures him, sitting down and looking between him and the box while Dean tries to figure out how the hell he missed that during his (several, failed) Eldritch Horror searches. "Top shelf, behind the Latin dictionary and volumes four, ten, sixteen, nineteen, and twenty-one of the 15th Edition of Encyclopedia Britannica, published in 1983."

"Why only those five?"

"The garage sale only had those five."

Right. "Why were you at a garage sale?"

"My cell phone was out of minutes and I needed change to use a pay phone to call Dean," Cas answers, like it should be obvious.

"And you bought them because...."

"They were twenty five cents each," Cas replies. "I needed at least four quarters because Dean's cell phone was usually under the seat of the Impala and it would take at least two calls before I received an answer. So I exchanged my five dollar bill for two ones, seven quarters, and five books, which incidentally were also the first items of personal property I ever purchased. It was very exciting, and the books were both interesting to read and exemplary door stops." He gives Dean a long look before glancing at the box. "Anytime you're ready, of course."

Dean slow blinks his acknowledgment it actually happened just like that and turns toward the box, squinting at the vaguely familiar faded green smear of words before he sucks in a startled breath. Reaching out, he traces the memory of Sam's name in his own angry scrawl.
"This was at Bobby's."

"I found it in the attic when Dean and I went to...I told Dean we might need Bobby's books," Cas says, voice wavering briefly. "He didn't notice it among the other boxes."

Getting on his knees, Dean slits the packing tape and shoves open the cardboard leaves to stare unblinkingly at the stacks of paperback books, the spoils of almost twenty years on the road and more used bookstores in more cities than he can count.

"When Sam went to Stanford, he didn't take much with him," Dean says, picking up one dog-eared Ursula LeGuin, eyes prickling unexpectedly as he carefully opens the cover and sees Sam Winchester printed neatly in blue ink. "He used to hide these everywhere; Dad's truck, Bobby's, in the back of the Impala and under the seats, like I wouldn't notice or something. I got them all together and hid them from Dad until I could get to Bobby's and leave them there. I forgot about that."

Closing it, he puts it back again and retrieves another, Sam Winchester in careful cursive this time, fifth grade, got an A on his handwriting assignment and God. God. "I always meant to give them back."

He's still nosing through the books--Philip K Dick, Matheson's I Am Legend, dog-eared and cracking binding with Gibson's Neuromancer beside it, Vonnegut and Joyce and King's The Stand (disturbingly appropriate these days, now that he thinks about it), the complete works of Jane fucking Austen from English III and Tolstoy's Anna Karenina from English IV when Sam was taking the AP exam and Dean mocked the fuck out of him but read it anyway.

He always did, the habit built over the years of checking Sam's homework that he never quite remembered to stop, skimming Sam's neatly written essays at four in the morning still scratching at patches of dried blood behind his ears because showers could happen anytime but Sam left for school at seven on the dot. Virgil's The Aeneid, Homer's The Iliad and The Odyssey, Cervantes' Don Quixote: Sam chose French when he went to Stanford, which meant Dean was saved the potential horror of Sam noticing that it lost something in translation and agreeing, yeah, the original is so much better.

(Dean's only excuse for this is spending three months in the southwestern border states after Sam left; more specifically, three months in the colonias on the Texas-Mexico border, where the supernatural could do whatever the fuck it wanted because for reasons Dean can guess, most hunters seemed weirdly oblivious to reports that came from places where the people lived shit lives without running water and didn't do so great with English. If a few dozen people died crossing the border in circumstances weird, no one really seemed to notice or even pretend to care. Necessity makes a kick-ass teacher when it comes to language skills when you're the only person who can help and your first job is to convince them you're not a gun-happy rancher or Sheriff Arpaio's hunter equivalent.

In retrospect, he wonders if this Dean was thinking about that, too, when he went for the boot camp idea. A place that people could find and be taught, any kind of people, because saying that Gordon Walker was representative of hunter diversity would only be accurate if diversity means numbers not much greater than 'one'.)

"I apologize if it seems that I...." Dean tears his gaze away from Sam's name to look at Cas, wondering what the hell is bothering him. "If I shouldn't have..."

"I give up," he admits after a long moment of Cas failing to explain. "Are you apologizing for saving them or reading them? You didn't tell Dean you had them, right?"

"I thought one day he would regret leaving them behind," Cas answers carefully, like maybe he witnessed the death of the Impala and the history inside it. "I don't always understand human
sentimentality, however, so I may have been mistaken. Then I was--tied up--and I needed something to do and not in a dead language."

"Cas, tell me you aren't apologizing for reading Sam's books," Dean says blankly. "I mean, I don't even know how to answer that. I don't care. Sam would be thrilled. You'd be geek buddies." He takes a moment; it's not the first time he's had the uncomfortable feeling that if Sam had been the one that Cas saved from Hell, they might have avoided a lot of problems that were entirely of Dean's making when it came to Cas.

"I'm not sure either." Reaching into the box, Dean bites his lip as Cas takes out a tattered copy of *The Hobbit* with the careful reverence of holy words or powerful ritual magic. "I enjoyed them a great deal. Your brother had excellent taste."

"Total geek," Dean agrees. "I wish you'd known him better. Him and Sam--well, you and Sam, that was before the fork in time thing, right?--started shitty, yeah. It got better."

What Sam would make of Cas, he doesn't know for sure, but one *Lord of the Rings* reference, and Dean would be stuck in extended edition hell forever in the closest motel Sam could find. Between starting their own Addicts Anonymous for the semi-supernatural, comparing sexcapades with unfortunate partners (remembering Sam's reaction to Dean telling him about the orgies, he made a note then and there never to ask Sam what he got up to in Stanford, ever), and telling Dean all the ways he's an idiot. In alphabetical order, even.

Sam would like him, he realizes; more than anyone, he'd understand what Cas is, caught between two things never meant to go together and still having to somehow make it work; he'd get what Cas lived with every day, how hard it was to fight yourself and the world at the same time. He would have figured out Cas from the first, knew exactly what he was looking at; in some ways, it might have been like looking at himself.

"He'd like you," Dean says impulsively. Cas's head jerks up, expression unreadable, and belatedly it hits him that Sam is *Lucifer* here; any associations Cas has with Sam Winchester are gonna be traumatic at best. "Uh, I mean my Sam--"

"I assumed you weren't talking about the man currently acting as vessel for Lucifer," Cas interrupts. "That is very--" He hesitates, obviously stuck for just the right word. "--kind of you to say."

"Yeah, I'm known for that, except I'm not. He'd--" Dean figures he might as well go for broke here. "Might not believe this, but you have a lot in common."

Cas looks at Dean like he's wondering if he's running a fever. "Besides unfortunate addictions to dangerous substances?"

"And being geeks," Dean points out. "Dude, just own it already." He needs to talk to Rob about introducing Cas to their D&D nights, come to think; he remembers Sam mentioning he got into that hardcore at Stanford, and God knows Cas needs a few (non-sex, non-drug, non-alcoholic) hobbies.

"I'd like--" Cas cuts himself off, looking surprised at himself, eyes darting to the book in his hand. "Dean wouldn't talk about him. After they separated."

There's a world he never spoke of his brother, a world where all he is to anyone is Lucifer's vessel. There's something obscene about that. "Yeah, I figured as much."

"I want to know about him," Cas says quickly, like he's trying to cut off any opportunity for Dean to refuse. "The time that I knew him was probably not the best time to pursue an acquaintance."

"The time that I knew him was probably not the best time to pursue an acquaintance."
mouth twitches when he looks at Dean. "I was somewhat distracted. I should have--I regret that I didn't attempt to know him better."

Dean swallows; words are hard right now.

"And you," Cas adds, watching Dean warily. "I thought--you always asked me questions about myself, but I wasn't sure I could…if it would be too painful for you."

"You can ask me anything," Dean interrupts roughly. Clearing his throat, he tries again. "No, I'm fine with it. Ask away." A little desperately, he looks back at the box. "So how many of them did you read?"

"All of them," Cas says with a sigh, and Dean makes a mental note to add 'get Cas more books' to the next supply run. "Several times."

Dean keeps his gaze firmly on the box. "What'd you think of Don Quixote?"

"Extremely enjoyable," Cas answers promptly. "Though I wish I could read it in its native language; I feel something might have been lost in translation."

Dean hides his smile behind a copy of A Time to Kill and adds 'Don Quixote, in Spanish', to the mental supply list. "No reason. So--"

"Though I'm curious," Cas says in a rush of words, "about what they all have in common. While all of them were interesting, the theme is--somewhat eclectic. To say the least."

"It's called 'High School'," Dean tells him, settling down to explain the Winchester Method of Formal Education (complicated). "Twenty of 'em. We'll start with Sam's freshman year, first high school: no lie, the reading was insane."
Chapter 6

--Day 89--

So Dean's new day goes something like this: wake up, breakfast, read about Alpha (wonder if that's its actual name or a product of Cas's thing for Greek letters like with the patrol routes), nap, lunch, walk around the camp (slowly) with Chuck or Ana or Joe (who apparently won all Brad's Dean-walking shifts over the course of three weeks of poker nights, which is just weird enough to be true) with an added every fucking person in the world watching him (or in Chitaqua, fine), read more about Alpha until dinner, nap (during which all Alpha-related material mysteriously vanishes until morning), and coffee on the porch with Cas, followed by dead to the goddamn world before waking up to do it all again.

"I never knew walking was a spectator sport," Dean tells Cas venomously over a dinner of some kind of casserole that if it had any kind of normal flavor--and maybe actual meat of the non-canned variety--he thinks he might remember from Bobby's greatest hits. Say what you want about Bobby's culinary skills, he didn't have a huge variety, but what he could do with red meat was magic. He wonders if Cas has been introduced to salt yet and decides to make that happen soon. "It's--"

"Understandable. Since the fever, you've been somewhat inaccessible other than during scheduled visits, your random invitations to anyone passes into your line of sight as seen through the front door when you're awake to come in and say hi, and patrol meetings," Cas answers reasonably. "Much like any other respectable addiction, the more attention you give them, the more they want, and I don't think a twelve-step program will help."

Is Cas is saying he's like heroin? "And Dean was Mr. Social Animal at large?" Dean asks skeptically. "Excluding his sex life, please."

"Now that you mention it," Cas answers slowly, as if experiencing a minor revelation, "he wasn't. You, on the other hand, made a point of engaging in conversation with patrol after the meetings, with the mess staff when you went for coffee, and occasionally indulged in extempore chats with anyone who came within ten feet of you, which probably led them to forget that and now feel neglected when you're not providing their fix."

Yeah, definitely heroin: it's like Cas actually searches out new ways to be weird.

"If they miss anything, it'd be your sex parties," Dean points out and shoves a spoonful of casserole in his mouth before something else comes out. Cas eyebrows leap briefly. "What?"

"I'm just saying, half the goddamn camp is stalking me and it's weird. Would it kill them to come over and talk to me?" He stabs a fork into a piece of probably-canned green vegetable (type unknown, taste hideous, seriously, what does Cas have against salt?) and chews frantically before he's forced to swallow. "Uh--"

"I'm sure they like you," Cas says calmly, taking a bite of maybe-carrot: very orange, very square, very mushy. "But I can survey the camp to allay your insecurity, if you wish, and offer the option to check 'Yes' or 'No'."

Dean glares at him.

"'Maybe'?"
"I'm telling Vera you're slipping me beer when she's not around and hiding the bottles under the sink behind that bucket we never use."

"They probably don't want to overwhelm you and are simply waiting for you to extend them an invitation," Cas says sullenly, managing to make eating look like only a slight improvement over an eternity on the rack. Looking at him, Dean realizes he's not the only one benefiting from bland meals at strictly scheduled intervals; Cas has definitely crossed the nebulous line between 'pre-starvation and how' to a healthy 'tragic tapeworm victim'. Buddy eating: it works. Who the hell knew? "Tell Vera to spread the word that you wish for her to be changed. Furthermore, I'll implicate Joseph if it comes to that, as he's the one supplying the beer and replace him with Sidney during your daily walks after Vera thoroughly lectures him on care and support of your near-invalid self."

"Bring it," Dean retorts, getting another spoonful of casserole and chewing deliberately. "No bridges in Chitaqua."

"I'll build one."

"I grew up with Sam Winchester," he answers, staring into Cas's eyes. "You wanna start a war, you're gonna lose."

Cas stares back for a long moment before rolling his eyes and stabs the next bite of casserole like he's imagining it's Dean's head, which he takes as a win. He can be gracious in victory.

"You might also tell her that her surveillance technique is a disgrace and I taught her far better than that," Cas adds casually, surveying his nearly empty plate as Dean drops his fork. Looking up, Cas smiles at him, showing more teeth than Dean knew came in human mouths. Maybe Fallen angels get more or something? "Should you remember during your next attempt at proving that the art of subtlety when arranging clandestine meetings is well and truly dead, of course."

"Uh--"

"While it's possible you're simply uncertain how well I'm performing my duties and wished for an objective third-party to give their opinion, that's far too reasonable, this is you, and you chose Vera. Which leads me to assume she's not so much watching me as watching to see who, if anyone, is upsetting me and why and then reporting it to you." Scrapping up the last bite, Cas sits back to stare at him. "Tell me it's the first. I won't even ask you to be believable; all I need is the words."

This would be a great time for a fever, Dean reflects; brownies are just the gift that never fucking gives you anything. "Look, I--"

"There's no reason to go to such elaborate measures simply to satisfy idle curiosity and obviously, you had no intention of telling me, which means that you want to know so you can handle it."

"Do you even need me here for this?" Dean asks seriously.

"While discovering what you are basing your definition of 'upsetting' on is worrying enough, at this moment I'm far more interested in exactly how you plan to handle it."

"Yeah, no idea, Vera said she'd think of something," Dean admits, then makes the mistake of adding, "But shooting's not on the table."

"Because she took it off the table."

Dean slumps in his chair. "Yeah."
Cas closes his eyes. "Why?"

So maybe dinner counts as the new 'next morning'. "Luke."

Less than two feet away across a kitchen table, there's no way to miss Cas's reaction, no way to pretend it's anything but exactly what it is; two years and change later, and Cas is still afraid.

Finally opens his eyes. "That was years ago."

"For me, it was a month ago," Dean answers quietly. "You? I'm thinking it's always been yesterday."

"I told you that I took care of it."

"Yeah, and that's not happening again," Dean says, wincing at the stricken look on Cas's face. "You shouldn't have had to take care of it, Cas. That was on him, and now it's on me."

"Dean," Cas starts, "I doubt anyone here has any plans to assassinate me."

"Then I won't have to make Vera a liar by shooting anyone," Dean answers mildly. "I get you can take care of yourself, but that doesn't mean you always have to. This is how it works; you watch my back--my camp, whatever--I watch yours. Separation of duties or something. Dude, I'm recovering; anything could throw back progress. You wanna be the reason I don't get better because I'm worried?"

Cas sits back in his chair, eyeing at him with wary respect. "Well played."

"When I'm good, I'm good." He applies himself to the last three endless bites, aware he won't get away from this table until the plate is clean. It would be embarrassing except except Cas feels like he has to set an example, and there's a lot of truth in the hells you make for yourself. "So, finished most of the letters, still looking at the reports."

He's gotta give Phil this one; his may be long and creepy as shit, but the narrative voice really helps when he ignores the fact the latest edition included a entreaty to the heavens that the sun move on to, wait that it's attentions may wander, as is its wont (What. The. Fuck.). He can also see how months of daily reports under Cas's paper fist have improved the art of writing a report, at least as far as Vera's concerned. Her and Jeremy's reports to Cas (by which he means Chuck) are unreal, packing everything Gloria told her and Jeremy covering three months at Alpha, along with Vera's and Jeremy's own observations, into a condensed mass of information not unlike the equivalent of being hit by a very large (textual) rock. They're interesting, hell yes, but even Vera's (obviously) limited knowledge regarding this Dean's history with Alpha is still a few orders of magnitude more than his own.

Also, Chuck's letters spoiled him, and also taught him a very important life lesson that maybe should be self-evident; gossip isn't just universal, it's fucking addictive, and Chuck may not actually sleep.

About anything officially camp related, he was pretty circumspect--noticeably so, which Dean can read as Chuck really not liking the progress of Dean's descent into dickery and picking his words with care--but camp gossip knows no rules of engagement and Chuck's keyboard is fucking brutal. Dean passed out reading them this morning, unable to make himself stop, only to pick up right where he left off (dried drool makes a good bookmark, for the record) as soon as he could get rid of his post-walk watcher (Ana today).

The upshot of this is that Dean has a fairly accurate record of every current and former relationship in the camp, as well as a painfully detailed expose on his counterpart's sexual history: who this Dean
slept with, how long he was with them, the inevitable, generally horrifyingly public ways they ended, and why (Risa and Jane: not as uncommon a situation as it should have been). Even more hilariously and disturbingly, he's now got Cas's as Chuck observed it, and the fucker observed a hell of a lot.

He thinks he gets why Cas was surprisingly reluctant to go into detail about exactly how much overlap there was between him and this Dean. Even in a camp where he knows, just from observation, sex is everyone's favorite hobby, this Dean and Cas would've only been entirely sure of where they stood in relation to the women here over the last two years if the room contained only Amanda and Ana, who being the only two lesbians, knew nothing in the personal about their cocks or what they did with them. Everyone else was an eternal crapshoot that took a lot of not thinking about it to work at all.

It makes him morbidly curious what the parties in the camp were like back then (excluding Cas's of course); once the alcohol came out, nothing would be sacred and often at battlefield volume and in groups. If this Dean didn't ever manage to burn out the weirdness by sheer will….

"Dean?"

Blinking, Dean focuses on Cas, who's looking at him with a quizzical expression and holding two empty dishes. "Huh?"

"You've been staring at the refrigerator and smiling for two minutes and fifteen seconds."

Dean's smile widens until his cheeks start to ache. "Just thinking of desserts."

Cas's eyes narrow suspiciously, but he finishes gathering up their empty dishes and takes them to the sink, setting them on the tiny counter before meticulously rolling up the loose flannel sleeves of his overshirt and turning on the hot water.

"Do you have parties?"

Cas's hand stops half-way to the anonymous bottle that contains dish soap, turning around with an incredulous expression, like he's wondering if Dean's ever met him.

"Not yours, love guru," he explains, and Cas rolls his eyes, turning back to the sink and adding soap to the waiting water. "I mean the camp--barbecues or something. We got grills." Which he suspects were the backup for the generators for those with stoves and anytime Zack had a shift in the mess. "Just--you know, food, everyone gets drunk, hangs out, someone tries to dance, badly thought out hook-ups, that kind of thing."

"For the entire camp?" Satisfied with mound of off-white foam, Cas turns off the water and places the bowls, plates, and silverware in the sink and reaches for the sponge. Dean takes a moment to reflect that almost three months ago, Cas didn't own a sponge, dish soap, or silverware, and seemed hazy on the function of pots and pans in relation to a kitchen or for that matter, what a kitchen was for. Now Cas cooks, cleans, and does laundry before and after work while Dean sleeps the day away, complains about being tired and bored when he gets home, and makes him sleep on the couch when they go to bed at a reasonable hour.

Jesus, he thinks blankly; banging Cas every night is the only scenario here where he doesn't look like a dick to the entire camp, fever or no fever.

"Yes," Cas is saying as Dean starts to wonder just what everyone thinks he's doing with Cas--whose slow days used to be when there were three people or less--and how fucking amazing he must be at
it for anyone to believe Cas thinks getting it is worth all of that. "Not for some time, however."

That box behind the Latin dictionary and Encyclopedia Brittanica (volumes four, ten, sixteen, nineteen, and twenty-one: holy shit, that box was big) had things in it he didn't even know existed and some he thinks probably shouldn't. If that's the standard they're using....

"Dean, did the refrigerator upset you in some way?"

"Huh?" Cas is staring at him again, looking worried. "How was I looking at it?"

Cas tilts his head, thinking. "Like when it's three in the morning and you realize you're watching an infomercial for a snuggie, and even though you could simply acquire a robe and turn it backward to achieve the same effect—if you even had a need for a robe or had ever used one, which you didn't and hadn't—you suddenly need snuggies in every available size and color."

Dean shuts his mouth so fast he almost bites his tongue.

"Sizes still confuse me," Cas explains.

"Huh." That's pretty much all he's got.

"To be fair, Dean didn't tell me not to use the credit card he gave me for bulk snuggie purchases," Cas continues, starting to frown. "He also took the cheetah print in turquoise and cinnamon to give to an exotic dancer he was seeing at the time, and that was a limited edition that could not be found in stores."

"Still mad about that?" Dean hears himself ask.

"That was a long time ago," Cas answers dismissively. "To err is human, to forgive divine. And he promised never to do that again after he returned the next morning to find all of his clothes were inexplicably on fire in Bobby's front yard."

"Huh," he says, again.

"I fixed them," Cas adds casually. "After he apologized, of course."

"Of course," Dean repeats.

"As I was saying," before expounding on the Great Snuggie War and clothes burning on Bobby's front lawn, triumphant victor: Cas. Of course, "am I supposed to continue to pretend not to be curious about what you've decided regarding my suggestion?"

"Going to Alpha? Nah," he answers, sitting back in his chair and grinning at Cas's back. "I'm just having fun seeing how long it will take you to--wait--articulate your curiosity." Cas turns around, blue eyes narrowing, and Dean loses it, laughing so hard he nearly knocks himself out on the edge of the table.

"I don't like you very much," Cas says eventually.

"Bullshit, you love me," Dean wheezes helplessly and straightening with an effort, painfully aware of how tired he is already. Adding that goddamn walk apparently sucks for even more reasons than usual, and experience tells him if he goes to bed now, he'll wake up just long enough to take his meds and be out like a light until morning. "You wanna talk, make it fast," he says as lightly as he can. "Gonna be another night of the dead." He wonders vaguely if Cas minds all that much when it gets him an evening free. What he does with it, Dean has no idea, because it's definitely not sex:
seriously, he's gotta get Cas a goddamn hobby and definitely more books. "Dude, who knew
walking was that tiring?"

Castiel finishes the dishes in thoughtful silence, wiping his hands on a dishtowel that appeared at
some point (Kitchen Shit Supply Run, probably), then returns to the table. Instead of sitting down, he
gives Dean a thoughtful look.

"You're getting better, even if it doesn't feel like it now."

"Recovery--more exhausting than dying; good to know."

"Under the circumstances…." He trails off, studying Dean intently. "I may have a solution to that."

Dean glances dubiously at the coffee pot. "Coffee isn't gonna cut it tonight. You have a better idea?"

"I wasn't thinking of coffee." Cas tilts his head, blue eyes speculative. "The question is, do you need
a dealer?"

"I'm almost certain this is not a medically approved use of prescription central nervous system
stimulants," Cas says thoughtfully as Dean considers the unexpected benefits of having junkie
friends. "Fortunately for you, I don't use them for medically approved reasons either, and I'm also a
practicing junkie, so I don't particularly care."

"There's gotta be a moral in this," Dean admits, "but for the record: Cas, your drug habit?
Awesome."

Cas smiles. "I've enjoyed it as well."

Leaning back against the rails of the porch, Dean marvels at life on the other side of the clean and
sober and likes it a lot. The constant fatigue is almost gone, and for the first time in what feels like
forever, he doesn't feel an impossible weight dragging at every muscle when he moves. "The
Georgia thing, gotta get that out there. This is important shit, Cas."

"And your decision?"

"Let's do it," he says firmly. "Vera and Jeremy, when will they be ready to go?"

"I told them to start getting ready before I came home tonight," Cas answers over the rim of his cup,
because it's the porch, it's after dinner, and that means coffee. "I assumed that would be your answer.
We'll meet with them tomorrow to go over what they'll be doing, and they can leave the next
morning. If that's acceptable, of course."

"It's like you read my mind." Dean waits for a second, but Cas just sips his coffee. "So anything
else? Important business? Anything happen--monsters, plumbing, Sid complaining about the internal
combustion engine, Gary makes everyone really uncomfortable in the mess again…."

"Boredom. You generally go to sleep less than an hour and a half after dinner and it's been a
problem." Cas shrugs. "I solved it tonight with thirty milligrams of D-amphetamine mixed salts from
my rapidly dwindling supply and a pot of coffee."

"You gave me drugs so I could entertain you?" He takes a drink of coffee, feeling inexplicably
warm. "Dude, it's like you're corrupting with power right in front of me."

"Ave Maria, gratia plenta," Cas drones, closing his eyes. "Dominus tecum, benedicta tu in
mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui Iesus. Sancta Maria mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen." He tilts his head "Usually only legitimate with an ordained Catholic priest, but as an angel, I could forgive human sins, and as I'm currently in a human body, I formally forgive my transgressions, in nomine patri et fili spiritu sancte, Amen. Again." He raises his eyebrows. "Better?"

Dean bursts out laughing, aware of Cas's sigh before his cup is taken from his hand, which makes it that much harder to find any kind of motivation to stop. Eventually, he straightens, feeling lightheaded and better than he thinks he's felt in months. Years. Jesus, he thinks, what the hell, Cas. "So what happened with the camp today?"

Cas blinks. "What?"

"I have no idea what you're doing." At Cas's worried look, he quickly shakes his head and takes back his cup for another drink. "I don't mean you aren't telling me what's going on, or--I don't want a report, Cas. I'm tired of goddamn reports. I want to know what you're doing."

"Then you want me to…."

This may take a while. "Let me tell you about my day. I slept, had breakfast, read reports, took a nap until noon because that's how I roll, lunch, walk, read, nap, dinner, then my best friend tempted me into wild night of drugs and drinking coffee on the porch before I go to bed and plan how I'm killing every goddamn brownie in the state before I fall asleep." And this is his life: it's not all that bad, come to think. "You?"

"My day." Cas finishes his coffee, setting the cup down to think. "I attempted to skip breakfast, but Vera reminded me that I had to set a good example for you, which is ridiculous since you weren't even awake, but she was very persistent and it took less time to agree. Speaking of, it's time for you to rejoin the morning patrol meetings on a regular basis; I already cleared it with Vera. Progress."

He hates dawn. "Thanks.

"I evaluated Sarah's team in small arms practice, as I wanted to verify their skills have not degraded due to lack of activity."

"Did they?" From Cas's expression, he's gonna go with 'yes', and 'hell, yes'.

"Their accuracy was appalling with some of our inventory," he states, blue eyes narrowing. "I've given them a week to improve their skills to my satisfaction."

Dean suffers a moment of severe cognitive dissonance; why does he think he's heard that before? "If they don't use them regularly--"

"They should be familiar enough with every weapon we have to use it adequately in combat. There's no excuse for incompetence. At any moment, they could be faced with something that will without a doubt try to kill them and they might not have a wide selections of weapons to choose from." Blinking, Dean sits back, fighting down the sudden urge to burst into hysterical laughter: ages five up, that's Dad on the goddamn range. He's pretty sure Dad said just that. "Each of our vehicles is outfitted with a full arsenal for a reason, and everyone has a private arsenal of their own weapons. There's no excuse for not being in practice with every one of them."

"So you're taking care of that," he says, hearing the faint wobble in his voice and ruthlessly crushing it. Dad would be so proud. "Good call."

"If they don't require treatment for blisters, I will consider that a form of disobedience and act
accordingly," Cas adds with righteous satisfaction. "Dean wouldn’t even let me off the range until I achieved basic accuracy with every weapon we had with both hands. I assure you, while at that point my Grace was much diminished, it still took a great deal to strain my ability to heal myself, and I had blisters. It was not enjoyable, but I did learn."

"He was hard on you." He's not sure how he feels about that, even though he thinks he knows why. He even kind of agrees, looking at Cas now, Grace-free and so goddamn mortal it almost hurts. This Dean had to have known they were on a time limit, that when Cas's Grace ran out, he'd have to be ready, more than ready.

He wonders suddenly what that was like, to know—to know with absolute certainty—that what he taught Cas, or more, what he didn't, what he forgot to—would decide whether he lived or died the first time he fought while mortal. Because Cas wasn't human, had never been vulnerable the way they were, and that was the one thing Dean couldn't teach him how to understand before he actually was.

"He was training me so I could teach others to survive." Like it's obvious. "I had to know everything to do that. It was difficult to understand at first, but drilling did help."

"I bet."

"I suppose the degradation in their skills isn't a surprise. I haven't been particularly tenacious in keeping up my own training, either." After a pensive pause, Cas continues, "Then I was required to have an early lunch and met with Chuck regarding the supply situation. When you can stay awake for at least four hours without the use of prescription stimulants, you will either take over the evening patrol report instead of simply observing it or handle Chuck's constant updates on the rate our supplies are diminishing. I'm certain it's very important, but he can be very, very shrill."

"I don't know patrol well enough," Dean tries without any expectation of being believed. "You can give me Chuck and supplies now; he's here for lunch anyway, might as well do something besides watch him stare at me nervously and clear his throat." Or apologize, though Dean still hasn't worked out if it was the 'hiding shit from you' or 'avoiding you' or 'reporting to Cas how much you ate and if you finished your plate'. First two, yes; the second one, hell no.

Cas puts on his third-best disappointed look. "You were handling patrol before."

"You were there."

"You do realize that almost everything we're doing now is the result of your orders?" Before Dean can argue whose been doing the work so far, Cas rolls his eyes. "The only actual change from before the fever is that now I give them your orders instead of you giving them yourself. What, exactly, is the difference?"

"You're trying to make me feel better." It's kind of working.

"For all of my existence, my job description, as it were, was to carry out orders, sometimes in far less detail and with far fewer resources than you've provided me," Cas says impatiently. "You not only tell me what you want done, you tell me why, and when I offer suggestions, you not only listen to them, you use them."

Dean never thought of it like that. "When the Host told you to keep me in line--"

"Their only suggestion amounted to 'threaten him with something', with 'something' unspecified."

"Huh." He's kind of unwillingly impressed; Cas kind of failed, yeah, but considering what he'd had
"So I'm better at this than Zachariah? Not a high bar there."

"It's not the height of the bar," Cas intones, solemn as a judge at an execution, "but that you clear it. You do so regularly. Well done."

He gives up. "So the rest of your day?"

"This afternoon I observed Sarah's team at their first practice session on the range, then I remembered that we were out of clean clothing and started the first of three loads of laundry, which I checked on every thirty minutes and completed before I came home to make dinner, which I then awakened you to eat. I want it noted that my cooking apparently is much less objectionable and I'd like to be told so. It's important to validate your subordinates regularly to provide encouragement and express pleasure in their efforts, and as you seem to be unaware of that, we can start with that."

"You're getting better," Dean admits. "I mean, I can still taste how much you hate food, but the hint of resignation is improving the flavor a lot."

"I assume that wasn't a compliment, but I'll pretend it was." Dean nods earnestly. "I had dinner with you and then gave you drugs and forgave myself for my transgressions, though I'll be honest, Dean--using illicit drugs isn't a sin and it never has been. For my Father's love is all encompassing and He created marijuana from that love and in that love, we should use it for the purposes for which it was created. Having sampled it, I assure you, this is fact. I have no idea how it escaped becoming a sacrament."

"Wouldn't argue doctrine with an angel," he answers, straight-faced. "So pretty good day?"

"One of my better ones." Cas studies him for a long moment before he seems to decide something. "Tell me why you're worried about going to Georgia. I knew you'd decided to do it, but not why you delayed disclosure."

Dean grimaces; yeah, he'd figured Cas would know that. "You really think I can pull this off?"

"You did it here." Cas shrugs, leaning back against the step. "In this case, you'll have an advantage you didn't before. It's been over two years since they've seen Dean, and he was very different then." Building camps, attracting random clairvoyants by sheer metaphysical charisma, recruiting legions of adoring families to do his bidding, being unbelievably awesome at everything, getting laid by every woman who saw him and spreading crabs through the greater South, yeah, almost forgot that: thanks for the reminder, Cas. "Human memory is inconsistent and surprisingly vulnerable to the power of suggestion, or in this case, you actually being Dean Winchester in all ways but the rather minor fact that you aren't native to this timeline."

"Minor. Really?"

"Your identity is inarguable; you are, actually, Dean Winchester. Who you are now will be far more powerful than memories over two years old. I can give you the chronology of events and acquaint you with the identities and histories of key individuals, but they won't expect you to remember every detail from when you were there before, since they won't remember either."

"You mean they'll just assume I'm an asshole if I don't remember something that they do." Cas cracks a smile, not even bothering to deny it. "I forgot to ask: you said other hunters taught you. Which ones do I need to know about before we get there?"

"I learned from all of them," Cas answers, leaning an elbow on the step behind him. "But my primary instructor at Alpha was Amy."
Dean leans forward in surprise. "Alpha's co-leader? The one that runs the hunters?"

"Yes." Cas shifts in place, staring in the direction of the camp walls intently. "If I'm fortunate, I can delay the inevitable demand she evaluate me and realize how much my skills have degraded for at least a day or two after we arrive."

"Whoa," he says. "I've never seen that look on your face before. She that bad?"

"I spent more than one night hoping the Host might find me just so I wouldn't have to face morning evaluations," Cas mutters under his breath, looking at his empty cup like he's wishing for something harder, like whiskey or maybe cyanide. "The first time Amanda complained about an evaluation during training, I told her about Amy. She never did again." The blue eyes fix on Dean and narrow. "You'll probably like her."

Uh huh. "And that's--bad?"

"You have a type," Cas says cryptically, getting unexpectedly to his feet. "More coffee?"

"Yeah," he answers, fumbling for his cup and handing it over. Watching Cas go back inside, he tries and fails to figure out what just happened, but he's gotta admit it; he's really looking forward to meeting her now.

When Cas comes back out, looking like nothing happened, Dean takes his cup and decides to go with it. "Question. More an observation: you know how you're not used to living with anyone? That includes when you get out of the shower, by the way."

Cas's cup pauses mid-air as he gives Dean a syrupy smile. "How careless of me. Should I start announcing when I am leaving the bathroom, since the sound of the water being turned off is apparently not sufficient?"

"Try." Dean gestures toward Cas. "You got three separate stories, or was that just one really bad day? Lower back right of the spine, left thigh two inches from the knee and quarter inch from the femoral artery, left calf graze." Among other things, but usually at that point Dean remembers staring is wrong. Cas's eyes widen. "Dude, I'm a hunter. I know bullets, anatomy, and how to fix what goes wrong when those two things meet. When was that?"

"Those weren't from Luke, or any human," Cas assures him. "In general, the supernatural doesn't use guns or need to. When they do use them, however, and they can match my speed, it tends to have unfortunate results. Two demons and a hostile water sprite whose human lover was killed by gunfire and she wanted to keep the theme."

"You killed him?" Cas nods. "What'd he do?"

"He attempted to perform a human sacrifice with thirteen infants he bought or kidnapped from people in the infected zones. The border guards took his money so he could pass, of course, but they also sent word to Chitaqua about the excessive number of children he had and which border he last crossed," Cas answers, blue eyes chilling into something beyond anything as simple as 'cold'. "He used his blood in the binding of the sacrificial circle, which couldn't be broken without his death, but I didn't know that until I had time to examine the circle. After making a few alterations to the original design, I buried his intact body beneath it and activated it before I left."

Dean stares at him, mouth dry. "Hell sounds like a great place for him to learn the error of his ways."

"Twelve deaths, their agony prolonged with torture done with pleasure for the sake of power," Cas answers softly, smiling faintly into the distance. "The Host always had the right to claim vengeance
for such deaths, but they rarely exercised that power. In any case, the Host wasn't here, I was, and my former entitlements are difficult to forget. When that circle breaks--and eventually it will, the roof of that house was not in good repair--he'll be grateful for the relief of the rack." His smile widens, eyes turned inward. "Though it doesn't matter how long it takes to break the circle. It's forever in there."

"Good," Dean hears himself say, and Cas snaps back to the porch with a jolt, looking at him with naked alarm, like he just realized what he let Dean see. Infinity, Dean thinks fondly, really needs a change of subject. "You used to go on a lot of missions with Dean?"

"Yes," Cas answers, making an effort at what passes for normal. "Usually one to three each month. Dean generally gave me two days warning so I'd be prepared."

Be clean and sober, Dean interprets. "You miss that?"

"I was created to be a soldier. When I fought for the Host, my satisfaction was in doing my Father's will, of course."

Right, he believes that. "And in kicking a lot of ass for righteousness."

"That was part of it," Cas agrees, beginning to relax. "Enjoyment as you understand it is foreign to an angel."

"Didn't answer my question."

Cas tips his head back. "After I Fell and I became subject to the entire range of human instinct, it was--different. I enjoyed participating in missions, especially when combat was almost certain, which was nearly always. So the answer is 'hell' and 'yes'. "It also helped me to--understand something I didn't before. Humanity thinks of themselves as violent--I think the quote is nasty, brutish, and short--but it's only a very small part of you balanced with many other parts. Angels are different. We are wrath, vengeance, justice--we are our Father's judgment and we carry out His will with neither compassion nor mercy. Violence is essentially what we are, leashed only by our obedience to our Father; without that leash, we are chaos incarnate."

He nods, fascinated at this glimpse into what Cas was--still is, really, beneath the human skin and subject to human instinct.

"When you think of Hell, of what we did to find you, you think of its horrors and the deaths of those who failed, but for us--for us, it was--pleasure is not the word," he continues, looking uncertain. "At least, not then. Our orders were to find you; to do that, all was permitted, nothing denied us in pursuit of that single goal. The Host was unleashed and all of what we are was turned on Hell itself." He smiles faintly, an faint echo of how he looked talking about the Host's right of vengeance. "Dean, when we finally found you, Hell must have been somewhat relieved, and not just because of what you were meant to do. At that point, they were starting to run out of places to hide you and each place we failed to find you we destroyed. I'm not sure we could have destroyed all of Hell, but I'm still uncertain as to why we weren't allowed to try."

"But then I found you and we had to leave. It was--" he glances at Dean and adds quickly, "--very joyous, of course. There was a great celebration afterward."

"Did you all get drunk and cry about how you could have conquered Hell?" He's never seen Cas like this, even when he was an angel, maybe especially then. "You're mortal now."

"Yes," he says thoughtfully. "And my only leash is--myself, I suppose."
"That's what humans call an upgrade."

"You would say that." He shrugs. "Without Grace, the danger I pose to humanity is greatly diminished, but that doesn't change my nature. There was a reason that our first words to humans were 'be not afraid': we were as much monsters as anything you hunt."

Dean rolls his eyes and starts to take a drink. "You're not a monster, Cas."

"I'm an abomination."

Dean almost drops his cup. "What?"

"Abomination," he repeats obediently, like it's nothing, like it's not obscene. "I'm not an angel, but what this mortal body holds within it isn't and will never be human. I shouldn't even exist, much less have survived so long in this form."

"Like a demon getting his humanity back free and clear?" Dean asks deliberately.

Cas's eyes widen, the calm shattering. "No, of course not. Demons began human--"

"There's nothing human," he interrupts, "in a demon. I know." Swallowing, he looks away. "You said--you said humans were afraid of you now, but I wasn't. You ever wonder if the reason is--because I was a demon?"

Cas is quiet for a long time. "Dean--"

"I mean, torture was--that was my thing. It's still..." He pauses, thinking of that other Dean. He knows why this Dean did it, why he wanted to train Cas to do it, too; it's in him, too. It makes him wonder how Cas can call himself a monster and not see the one sitting right in front of him. "You know, stupid question. I don't even know why I asked."

"It's not stupid," Cas says slowly. "I'm not sure what you'd do with the answer, however."

"Go ahead," Dean says, shrugging as if this isn't scaring the shit out of him. "What?"

"The first demons were created by Fallen angels, those that joined Lucifer in Hell," Cas says. "The first tortures used in Hell were created in Heaven and practiced by the Host to discipline its members for disobedience."

"Holy shit," Dean breathes, straightening. "What they did to you in Heaven when they called you back that first time, when you left Jimmy....they tortured you? That's what they do to angels when they disobey?"

Cas's expression doesn't change, but Dean gets the feeling he's surprised he remembered that. "Yes. When I returned from Hell, I recognized the methodology. It's very effective."

"They did that to you." No fucking wonder Anna was freaked out, why Cas came back acting like that. It shouldn't surprise him, considering what they did to him before he Fell, but somehow, it still does. "Your own Brothers. Son of a bitch."

"Knowing, that, you will appreciate what it meant to inflict upon human souls what was only meant for angels," Cas continues after a moment. "You were created in our Father's image, and to corrupt that was the goal, of course, but the method they chose--even Fallen, they were still angels. Their purpose was to love humanity, to serve it, to care for it. That couldn't be denied, but it could be twisted to purpose. They thought humans were weak in their mortality and their lack of purpose, so
much less than we were; the solution was to make you as we were.

"You can't change the essential nature of a human soul," Cas continues. "But like love, it can also be twisted. I know what the rack is, what it was purposed to do. Angels haven't changed since time began, not our purpose, our vocation, or even our language. It was not until I was disciplined in Heaven that I understood why. The rack doesn't hold you, Dean; you can rise at any time, but to do so, all that you are must be left behind."

Dean licks his lips. "It's a choice."

"It's a lie," Cas says flatly, startling him. "It's not a choice when there's only one answer you can give. You don't give up because you can't bear the pain any longer, Dean; it's when you forget the reason you continue to endure it, when you forget what you will lose when you rise will be far worse." His mouth tightens. "What rises from the rack can then be formed in our image. Angelic instinct without angelic purpose, our abilities without Grace; you are made all that we are unleashed, and as your creators, you worshipped us in hatred."

Mouth dry, it takes two tries before he can get the words out. "Did I--did I have wings?"

"Yes."

Dean wonders if he's going to throw up.

"Even if you retained all of your memories of Hell, you wouldn't have the context to understand what you were there."

"What I remember..." Dean swallows. "Sometimes, I don't know why I--what I did to Alistair, I didn't need to even think about how to do it. It pissed me off, because it was nothing to--what I could do, even if I couldn't remember it. In Hell, I knew I could do--Jesus, anything, and here, there wasn't enough. Nothing I did came close to what--"

"I know."

"You remember everything I did," Dean whispers. "You took my memories so I wouldn't go crazy when I got back."

"I did," Cas answers calmly. "Your mind would have shattered if you were exposed to them, but even had you been able to safely keep them without burning your own mind out, I would have taken them anyway."

"So I wouldn't have known for sure I'm a sadistic serial killer who gets off on torture?"

"Exactly." Cas tilts his head at Dean's expression. "You aren't, so having those memories would be--well, pointless, for one, and counterintuitive to bringing you back in the second. Hell feared you, Dean, and in a place built of fear, that is an accomplishment, but your memories wouldn't have let you understand the reason why."

Dean blinks, startled. "What?"

"It took them thirty years to break you. You compare yourself to your father, but your father is what made it possible to break you at all. From him they had a template; you broke in thirty years, but they had already tried for over one hundred and sixty. Far more importantly, with you, they couldn't afford a single mistake; you were their last, their only chance to begin the Apocalypse. Their time wasn't unlimited; we had already broken the perimeter of Hell when they placed you on the rack. Everything in Hell was bent to this single purpose, to breaking you and creating you in Hell's image,
and nothing less could have made Dean Winchester into Alistair's apprentice. You were their greatest success in all of time and to you they gave everything they were. You were made in Hell's very image."

Dean tastes bile. "That's supposed to help?"

"It took them thirty years to create you, and for ten long years, Hell personified walked among them," Cas says softly, a ripple of satisfaction in his voice. "All that they were, you were as well, from the moment you rose from the rack; in those years, they watched you become far, far more. You grew more powerful, more ruthless, and it was not merely those demons you created who followed you; you were new in a place that had forgotten the meaning of the word, and you were power that had never learned a limit. Alistair watched for you to turn on him, to gain his power, and Hell watched you, too, because Alistair was among the greatest of demons and when you destroyed him, they knew that would only be the start."

"What--" Dean licks his lips, mouth dry. "What did they think I would do?"

"Lucifer uncaged might be less dangerous to those who ruled Hell than what they would do for you. The Fallen had ruled Hell for eons to escape bending their knee to humanity, but a human in their own corrupted image would make them kneel, and they wouldn't just have to, Dean. They wanted to. To serve humanity, after all, was their purpose, and though they could twist that purpose, they couldn't escape it."

"I could take the memories of Hell from you and rebuild your body from its essential parts into a new whole. I could absolve you of your sins and place you within your human body and guide your first breath. But what was done to you was fundamental to your being, and it cannot be changed or altered. In Hell, it made you a demon, but it didn't make you less human; on earth, you're still human, and what they changed is still there, but now it is--leashed. By yourself and yourself alone." He pauses. "It's a part of you, but among many parts, all of them human; unlike in Hell, however, here you remember that you're human. That's what you can't understand about your time there. When I took your memories, they were true, but that didn't make them any less a lie."

"Does that really make a difference?"

"Yes," Cas answers, certain. "It does. Your very existence is the proof."

"One person isn't a good indicator of demons becoming human again."

"You are the only one who has ever been allowed to try."

It's kind of terrifying, how Cas can just do that; he could make Dean believe almost anything.

"So I brought back a thing for torture," Dean says, ignoring Cas's frown. "Even if I don't do it. Anything else?" Cas hesitates, which isn't comforting. "Cas? Is there something else I do that's--from there?" He can't think of anything, but would he even notice something more subtle? "What?"

"I don't know," Cas says, and right here, Cas proves his point about the convincing voice, because he's sure as fuck not using it now. "It's not traumatizing," he adds, more certain, giving Dean a thoughtful look. "You probably would never notice."

Yeah, like that's gonna help. "What?"

"On the roof that night, you seemed nervous. You said you were usually fighting when you were that far from the ground."
"Yeah," Dean answers in surprise. "Why?"

"You aren't afraid of heights," Castiel says. "That's why you don't notice being afraid of them when you fight. You're angry at them, and when you aren't fighting, you don't understand the source of your anger and assume that it must be fear. It's not."

For no reason, Dean remembers sitting by Cas and looking out into the darkness, wishing it wasn't so dark; from the way Cas looked, it must be amazing.

"When they remade you, they gave you our instincts and our abilities, as much as they could of what they were, but they couldn't give you Grace." Cas pauses, mouth tight. "They gave you wings and the desire to use them, but not the ability to fly. Until I raised you from Hell, you still tried."

Cas looks away with a frown, shifting restlessly on the step; Dean looks at him for a few seconds before it dawns on him that he might be witnessing Cas actually uncomfortable.

"That bothers you?" Even heartwarming stories of Hell can't compete with the sheer weirdness of Cas being bothered by—of all things—Dean being subconsciously pissed because as a demon he couldn't fucking fly. That doesn't even make sense. "Cas, why—"

"It doesn't bother me," Cas says sharply, eyes fixed on the step. "I mean, any more than all of your experiences in Hell were an abomination, of course."

"So why—" Dean cuts himself off, staring at the back of Cas's head for a few long minutes and decides to switch tracks. "Why are you telling me now? I mean, if you've always known that was the reason that I didn't like heights since I got back—"

"I didn't know." Cas really seems fascinated with that step. "Dean never told me heights bothered him, and in general, sharing stories of Hell is not something that either of you—or me, for that matter—do as a way to pass the time."

"Huh." Fair enough. "So how did you know?"

Cas hesitates again. "I recognized it."

"Oh." Dean sits back against the bannister, too surprised to even feel freaked out that Cas could read him that well. "That's how you feel when you're up there?"

"Unlike you, I knew the what I was feeling and why," Cas admits.

"Unlike me, you could remember having wings and actually using them." Dean really didn't see this conversation coming. "And you feel it all the time."

Cas nods, taking a sip from his empty cup and making a face when he realizes what he just did.

It's not that Dean doesn't think Cas is that masochistic—he is, Dean's pretty familiar with the type—but that's not why Cas had been up there. "Does it help?"

Cas takes longer to answer this time. "When I let it, it does. I only go now when I can let it."

"Yeah." Dean thinks of how the world must look from the roof of the cabin; it's not like flying, nothing like it, but it's not supposed to be. "View must be amazing."

"It is, though I suspect you'd enjoy it more during the day," Cas says abruptly. "I should have arranged time for that. In the summer, there's—" Abruptly, he cuts himself off, looking annoyed. "Of
course, if you simply avoid heights when you aren't fighting, you won't notice."

Well, now he could, which is probably not what Cas wants to hear.

"I liked it," he answers honestly. "It's quiet. At night, no one around, no one interrupting you by climbing up the roof to annoy you--"

Cas rolls his eyes. "I told you that I didn't mind the interruption."

"Yeah, I believe you now." Dean kind of thinks he gets this. "You knew I felt it too. I just didn't know what it was." He waits a beat before asking, "Did that help? Me being there?"

Cas goes still, eyes searching Dean's intently. "I didn't expect it to."

"So yes," Dean confirms. Picking up his coffee cup, he takes another drink. "Is it different during the day?"

"You'll have to judge that for yourself," Cas answers slowly, looking--Dean has no idea, but he's pretty sure it's okay. "When you're stronger, I'll show you."

Dean nods; he's surprised to realize how much he's looking forward to it. "Can't wait."

As Cas helps Dean back to bed--at this point, Dean can't even bother himself to be embarrassed that Cas has to help him with his boots, it's just that goddamn normal--Dean glances toward the *The Hobbit* he left on the bedside table; it was one of Sam's favorites.

He liked the *Lord of the Ring* movies--though he never dared tell Sam that, see *extended edition hell*--and he's surprised to realize he might actually be curious.

Cas sees his glance and smiles as he deposits the boots against the wall, another point for Cas learning to live like a person and putting things away.

"You get a chance to see the movies?" Dean asks, reaching to pick up the battered paperback that Sam took with him everywhere for months. He's going to go with 'no'; he just can't see this Dean picking them up if he didn't notice Cas's dangerous affection for television and late-night snuggie purchases. If he's right, Cas is the type that would comment on the difference between the book and the movie, and if Sam was any indication, combined with Cas's truly epic grasp of sarcasm, that's like, hours of entertainment without even leaving the couch.

Might be a good idea to read them all first, just in case; not like they don't have a whole goddamn state to pilfer for a TV, a working DVD player, and all the abandoned movie collections a guy could want. Make popcorn, too: he's really gotta introduce Cas to popcorn with real butter.

"No," Cas answers, right on schedule. "I did see a great deal of John McClane, however."

Dean grins at him, shoving the covers back enough to make himself comfortable against the headboard. "Gotta see the classics, Cas."

"So Dean explained."

After setting out Dean's medication, Cas goes to the bathroom for water, leaving Dean to consider glumly that there's a pretty good chance he may actually get through that box of Sam's before he's recovered enough to actually do shit.

"Since you finished off Sam's collection, why didn't you get more books?"
Cas looks at him blankly.

"I mean, I'm pretty sure somewhere has an intact bookstore or library or something. Isn't that where Vera got those medical books and you sent everyone for Home Improvement Week I and II?"

"Yes," Cas says slowly, giving Dean the impression he's not seeing the connection between 'more books to read for fun' and 'obvious places to get them that he sends people regularly'. "I didn't think about it. In general, when I was on missions, there wasn't a scheduled period for shopping."

"So why didn't you just go and grab some when you had some free time? I mean, during supply runs--" "I wasn't--I didn't go on supply missions before you came here." He picks out an unfamiliar bottle and takes out two pills, handing them to Dean. "Take these as well. Vera gave me these this morning and said to tell you that your iron is still very low and anemia is unpleasant. Joseph and Kamal should return from their hunting trip tomorrow, and if they were successful, we'll test your tolerance with fresh venison should we be so fortunate as to find some deer. It's possible your reaction before was due to the freezing process--"

"It'll be fine," Dean assures him, doing as he's told and taking the pills, but he can't stop wondering what word comes after 'I wasn't--' that he wasn't supposed to hear and Cas really, really didn't want him to notice. "Seriously, everything was making me sick then."

"I wonder if it's possible to summon a cow," Cas muses as Dean finishes his water and subtly pulls up his legs, satisfied by the way Cas absently sits down on the edge of the bed. "Surely if spirits can be summoned, there must be some way to bring the corporeal form along with it."

"Cows have spirits?" He really doesn't need to know that about his hamburgers.

"It was an analogy," he answers dismissively, noticeably not answering the question, for which Dean's forever grateful. "Perhaps a location spell. I could use leather as the base, though I'm not sure if that would qualify as an essential characteristic." He looks at Dean hopefully. "What do you think?"

"I've been sick too long," Dean admits reluctantly, horrified by his own interest. "I think I have an opinion on this one. Tell me how you'd put it together."

--Day 91--

Vera's door is cracked open, two packed duffle bags perched on the steps leading to the small porch. It's not even dawn yet, the east only a lighter shade of grey, but she must have been up for hours already. He raps his knuckles against the doorframe in warning before poking his head inside.

"Vera?"

Dean winces at the sound of something dropping before she appears from the closest door, looking startled. "Dean? What are you doing up this early?"

"Disobeying my doctor." It was a special hell getting Cas to agree to wake him up, but since technically she's doing this for him, Cas reluctantly agreed he deserved the chance to see her off. It's weird how technically being Cas's commanding officer has absolutely no effect on what he's allowed to do. "Where's Amanda?"

"She hates goodbyes," Vera says with a smile in her voice before adding, "You coming in or not?"
"Since you asked, why not," he decides, closing the door behind him and looking around the tiny, bare living room, a worn couch and battered coffee table the only furniture. They all live like they'll pack up and leave in an hour; he guesses everything she owns is in those duffle bags outside. "So you ready?"

"Yeah, I'm good. Uh…." She trails off uncertainly before jerking her head toward the kitchen. "Coffee?"

"Yeah, thanks." He follows her to the rickety kitchen table, one leg supported by a chuck of wood that from the look of it came directly off a tree, and watches her locate a second cup and pour from the half-empty pot. Taking it with a murmured thanks, he warms his fingers around the fragile ceramic body and warily lowers himself into one of the spindly metal chairs as Vera joins him at the table.

"If you're looking for Cas," she says after taking a drink, "he's still with Jeremy."

"He said something about needing to check--something," Dean tells her, remembering Cas's totally not obvious dart out the door before he even finished saying the words. "He's only that vague when he's hiding something. I knew I should have asked what."

"Secret weapon even Jeremy doesn't know he's got," she confides, resting her elbows on the table as she takes a sip from her cup. "I mentioned last night that Jeremy was a little nervous. It's like a reflex or something; Cas doesn't even know he does it. He'll repack Jeremy's bags and double check his ammunition, remind him to shoot first and run away after, the usual. Jeremy doesn't have to admit he wants Cas to tell him it'll be okay, and Cas doesn't have to acknowledge it's something he needs to do."

He sits back, impressed. "You're good."

"Not the best fighter," she says, counting off the points. "Don't know shit about religions past and present, don't know a dozen dead languages, no military background, and no experience as a hunter." She shrugs. "I had to expand my skillsets somehow. My survival depended on it."

Dean files that away without a change of expression: survival. "Be useful."

Her eyes narrow curiously, but all she says is, "Yeah. People are hard--anyone who says otherwise is lying through their goddamn teeth--but learning their buttons is easy. Once you know that--"

"'Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world.'" Vera's mouth drops open. "Archimedes was the shit, no lie. Guy though he could shift the earth itself; all he needed was a place to stand."

"I wish you'd space out doing this kind of thing," she remarks irritably. "It's weird."

"It's really useful to know," he argues. "So, Archimedes, you think you know what lever's gonna work to move Alpha?" She stills, cup half-way to her mouth. "I know what I'm asking you to do, and it's not just going down there to announce my return to a chorus of trumpets. Though you and Cas tried your damndest to make me think just that yesterday. Dying, not stupid."

"You're not dying," she says in annoyance. "I know Gloria, and she's told me enough about Amy and Elijah to get a read on them. Once I meet them, I'll have a better idea of how to go about it."

"You're gonna convince them of something you don't even believe yourself." Setting down his cup, he studies the surface of the table intently before meeting her eyes. "Like I said, I know what I'm asking you to do."
"I never said that." He rolls his eyes. "Dean, I'm not still here because I like living two steps above a refugee, and I didn't willingly cross the border into an infected zone to get here just because why not. I'm here--I chose to stay here--because I believe in what you're doing."

"And now you're going to Alpha to argue on behalf of the man who killed your girlfriend," he says deliberately. "Believing in what I'm doing isn't the same thing as believing in me. That, you have no reason to do."

She lets out a breath in a hot rush. "Dean, I told you--"

"I know what you told me, but that doesn't change what happened. Now I'm sending you to argue for me, and you're allowed to tell me how much you hate having to do it," he interrupts, keeping his voice even. "You're allowed to be pissed about that, Vera, come on."

She starts to get up. "I don't have time for this--"

"Sit down." She hesitates, hand tightening on the back of the chair, before dropping gracelessly into the seat, possibly just to get a better angle for glaring purposes. "That works? It doesn't on Cas, he just stares at me. He'll do it eventually, but it's pretty clear it's because he decided he wanted to. No idea how he does it…"

"What do you want?" she asks flatly.

"I'm going to tell you two things," he answers. "What you do with them is up to you, but no one should walk into negotiations without knowing everything, and no one shouldn't know one thing the other side doesn't. First, though: you don't have to come back."

She blinks slowly. "What?"

"You can stay there," he clarifies. "When you're done negotiating, send someone else back with the information, come yourself and then go back, whatever, you and Jeremy both. It's been a while since I've been to Alpha, but it sounds pretty good. You can fight there just as easily as here. I'd write you a recommendation, but who knows how Elijah and Amy would take that, so…"

"You're throwing me out?"

"No," he answers quickly, hearing the thread of fear in her voice. "I'm saying, I'm giving you options. This is a shit job you're going to do for me, among many shit jobs in a shit life in the place where you lost someone you loved, and the person who pulled the trigger is your leader. There's doing your duty and great job, but it doesn't have to be this hard."

She swallows, looking away. "Life's not fair."

"That's a shitty excuse for doing nothing." She starts, eyes snapping to him in surprise. "Life's not fair, you know what that is? It's a heads-up to fix it." He meets her eyes. "I can't bring her back, and I can't change the world so she never got infected at all. But I can do this. It's up to you what you do with it."

She licks her lips, nodding slowly. "That's number one?"

"No, we're getting to that now." To his surprise, that is already harder than he thought, and it's not gonna get easier now. "Your negotiations are going to suck. They know a lot about me that you don't, which yeah, true for you, too, but they'll assume you know more than you do. You can probably hide that pretty well, but one thing you need to know. I had a brother." He winces, taking a breath. "Have a brother."
Her expression flickers through a couple of tries at something before settling on resignation. "I know. During the fever--"

"I remember." She looks guiltily surprised. "I overheard you talking to Cas--never mind. You never said anything, and I appreciate that."

"I'm your doctor," she says, a glimmering of a reluctant smile curving the corner of her mouth. "We get all the good shit, and the best part is knowing things no one else knows. Telling would ruin it."

Dean's surprised to realize he's smiling back. "Blackmail, always an option."

"Don't think I haven't considered it." She relaxes in her chair, leaning forward to rest an elbow on the table. "They know you have a brother. You think it might come up?"

"You asked the wrong question," he says, watching her. "What should you have asked?"

She hesitates, eyes searching, but she doesn't disappoint him. "Why you're hiding it from us if they already know."

"There we go." Her mouth twitches reluctantly. "The reason you don't know is part of the reason I left the South in the first place."

He's starting to think he gets why Cas agreed with his predecessor's assessment of the situation here; what Cas can't tell him, because he might not even know, is if he would have agreed before he spent two years in a camp where humanity disillusioned him so thoroughly. Dean doesn't know all of it yet--and God knows how he'll find out, though he knows where he's starting--but that means he's only going by instinct. This Dean was wrong about a lot of things, and it starts here: people are people, good and bad, and sometimes, they're bad at it, but sometimes, they're not. The moment you forget that, the moment you stop believing anything else, you lost your reason to fight at all.

"I have a younger brother," he says, meeting Vera's eyes. "His name is Sam Winchester."

She nods, waiting.

"Lucifer needed to claim his true vessel--the human body he could use to begin his conquest of earth--and there was only one of those. That's how it works, I guess; one for him, and one for Michael, final battle between them for earth and heaven, you know the spiel, vessels, all that, right?"

"Cas explained it to me," she agrees warily. "His commentary on Michael was something to hear, let me tell you."

He can imagine. "Did he tell you why the Host left?"

She hesitates, one finger drawing absent circles on the table. "They didn't get what they wanted," she says finally. "He wasn't very specific, and he lapsed into Enochian a couple of times, but I got the gist."

"You didn't," he says quietly. "He didn't tell you much because he was protecting me."

Her eyes fly to his face.

"About two and a half years ago, Lucifer claimed his true vessel and could walk on earth, start the war. The only way--according to the Host--that he could be defeated was if Michael claimed his and they got out their sibling rivalry with Heaven and Earth as the stakes." He takes a deep breath. "Lucifer's vessel said yes, but Michael's didn't. So the Host left."
"Who--" She licks her lips again. "Sam was Michael's vessel and he said no?"

"Sam is Lucifer's vessel. He said yes," he answers, throat tight. "I'm the one who said no to Michael, and that's why the Host left."

Her eyes widen. "You."

"Me." Now that it's out there, it's easier; the truth really does set you free, who knew. "The Apocalypse could have ended two years ago; all I had to do is say yes to Michael, let him fight Lucifer, and paradise on earth, all that. Instead, you get this: an Apocalypse in progress, a dead girlfriend, and a war we don't know how to fight against a goddam archangel whose riding my brother. Life's not fair's just an excuse, Vera; if anyone's to blame for that, it's me."

"If you had…" She sits back, looking at nothing. "Cas didn't agree with them. He stayed behind for you."

"Cas is fucked up," he points out, ignoring her scowl. "Gotta tell you, as an angel? Take away the drugs and sex thing, not a lot of difference. He's always been crazy."

"No, that I believe." She looks up at him. "Who but someone crazy doesn't run from a fight they're gonna lose?"

Someone who doesn't give up, and maybe, just maybe, never really wanted to. "Yeah."

"Unless it's worth fighting for," she continues, still watching him. "Angels didn't think they could win, they ran for it. Heaven and Earth, right? But not us. That's why you said no. Either way, we weren't gonna win this."

"There's no way you can know that."

"You're sending me to negotiate with Alpha and think I don't know how to hear what people aren't saying?" she asks, cocking an eyebrow. "Dean, a lot about you I doubted, but never what you were doing. Michael kills Lucifer, or you kill your own brother; no one, no one, picks the second unless the first is worse. Tell me I'm wrong: what would have happened if you'd said yes?"

"Paradise on earth," he answers.

"And humanity?"

Jesus. "I don't think we'd get to see much of it. Can't prove it or anything--"

"You don't have to," she interrupts. "The Host left. That's proof of what they were fighting for." She hesitates, expression changing "Who knows about this?"

"Not many alive," he answers slowly. "Chuck and Cas know all of it."

"Chuck I guessed," she agrees shortly, still staring at him. "Who else?"

"Gloria, Amy and Elijah, and the other camp leaders knew I had a brother, maybe a few others, I'm not sure. It's been a while. That he's Lucifer's vessel--no idea, but there's no way someone didn't make the connection by now. Me being Michael's? I'd be stupid to think someone won't. This was prophecy, and the Host spread that shit to their followers on earth and so did Lucifer."

"Brothers, yeah: this screams Biblical destiny, Cain and Abel, talk about recycling your material." She levels a sharp look at him. "There's more you're not telling me."
Dean sucks in a breath but doesn't deny it.

"Don't say anything," she says immediately. "Not now. I only need to know one thing--the more? Who knows that?"

"Cas, Chuck, and Gloria," he says, wondering where she's going with this. "No one else."

"So that's why," she says softly, almost to herself. "All this time, I thought…"

"Vera?"

She blinks, eyes narrowing. "Why are you telling me now? For the negotiations? Dean, this isn't coming up unless I want to use it for blackmail, you have to know that."

"Vera, if you were the type to blackmail, I wouldn't send you to negotiate for me in the first place," he points out. "I'm telling you--"

"So I can decide if I even want to," she finishes for him, voice rising. "That's why you started with the shit about me defecting to the South!"

Okay, not what he expected. "Uh--"

"You tell me I can leave if I want, then tell me exactly why I should, that's how this is supposed to work? Because you're responsible for the Apocalypse? Are you fucking with me?"

"You're pissed," he observes intelligently. "Why?"

"I don't know yet!" she snaps. "Does Cas know you're telling me?"

"No."

From the look on her face, that's not the answer she expected. "You didn't tell Cas you were dropping this on me?"

"It was--" He's not sure, actually. "Cas is crazy?"

"Oh God," she breathes, closing her eyes before opening them on a glare that pins him in his seat, almost literally. "Dean--you can't tell anyone else about this. Tell me you won't, not anyone, not for any reason."

Somewhere, this conversation went way off-track. "What--"

"I don't have time--Jesus, you do this an hour before I leave? I can't--" She stops short, looking at him incredulously. "Promise me you won't tell anyone--anyone--what you told me today until I get back. You can talk Cas into anything, but I'm not the angel who Fell for you; I won't care how betrayed you look at me. Not like I'll be here to deal with it, which'll help."

"I don't--I don't do that."

"You do do that," she confirms brutally. "You're good at it. Promise me, Dean; I'm bringing you back the entire goddamn South, so I think you can give me this."

Dean swallows. "They might not--Vera, I won't hold it against you if they refuse. Not like you can perform miracles."

"Now you think I can't?" she demands, almost half-out of her chair. "Or that I don't want to?"
"I have no idea how to answer that," Dean confesses, staring back; he suddenly understands how a deer in headlights feels. "Neither?"

"I'm gonna do it," she says flatly. "Now promise me--promise me--that--"

"You gonna tell me why?" he asks in frustration. "I know what happened to Cas, I know about Luke, and I get what the risk is! But I spent two years lying to my entire fucking camp, after I promised to lead you, and that shit's gotta stop! I gotta do better if I'm going to ask everyone to fight a war and expect anyone to believe we can win it!"

"Holy shit," Vera breathes, dropping back into her chair with a thump. "You think we'll win?"

"Thanks for not making me work to prove my point," he mutters. "Why not?"

"Can we?"

"Why not?" he demands. "What's the worst that could happen? We'll be really disappointed before we die, fine. Life's shitty enough, no reason to add fatalism to it."

"You--" She opens and shuts her mouth helplessly before finally saying, "You had to do this an hour before I leave?"

"In retrospect, the timing's not my best," he admits. "Whatever happens in Alpha--"

"I'll get them."

"--I know you're gonna do your best," he continues firmly. "But I won't hold it against you if you can't. That's on me."

"How they feel right now is on you," she says flatly. "How they feel when I'm done is on me. I'm gonna move the earth, and I know exactly where I need to stand to do it. I can do this, Dean."

He swallows. "All right."

"You trust me with this," she continues more quietly, "then trust me enough to know what I'm talking about when I tell you this: some secrets are meant to be kept. This one--this one you need to keep. Promise me you'll keep it."

Dean doesn't fight it, not when she looks like that. "Until you get back?"

"Until I get back," she confirms shakily. "Let me get you Alpha before you decide to rearrange Chitaqua's entire collective mind into the new world order. I'm supposed to be your spy, the least you can do is wait until I get back so I have something worth spying on. This? Epic potential. I don't want to miss it."

"You got it." He looks at his empty cup, realizing he's out of reasons to be here. "Right. So I should--"

"Get me a cup while you're up," she interrupts, holding out her mug. Half out of his chair, Dean looks between it and her expectant look. "I got about thirty minutes before Cas comes to repack my bags and double check I'm armed."

"He does that to you, too?" Dean asks on his way to the coffee maker. "Jesus, what the hell is that?"

"He checks you?"
Dean nods, filling their cups with the last of the coffee and returning to the table. "Ever since I got here." He makes a face, then just goes with the slip. "He's been a little paranoid since the thing in Kansas City."

"You mean you going missing for over two weeks?" she asks with really unnecessary sarcasm. "Wow, that's completely unexpected."

"And what'd you do to get Mr. Are You Wearing At Least Five Guns Or You Can't Get Out of the Jeep riding your ass?" Dean asks, taking a drink as she grimaces. "That bad?"

"He was stoned off his ass and I was halfway across the camp on the way to my jeep," she mutters, shaking her head. "At dawn. How the hell could he tell I forgot my boot knife?"

Dean takes in her disgruntled expression and bursts out laughing.
Chapter 7

--Day 92--

Ana looks startled when she comes in to see Dean already on the couch one and a half hours after
dawn, well fed and with enough caffeine and D-amphetamine whatever in his bloodstream to laugh
in the face of detox. The taste of hypocrisy on multiple levels is bitter, but pills usually are, and he
put extra sugar in the coffee to see if it would help; it did, thanks, Sam.

"You're up early," she says with a smile, pausing uncertainly where the chair isn't and looking
immediately to where the chair is today; in front of the window with a terrible view of bare ground
with scrubby accent grass and in the near distance, the cabin of Dean Winchester's torture
shenanigans. "So--"

"Breakfast accomplished," he assures her with a smug smile, which makes Ana roll her eyes.

He keeps smiling as he watches her go to get the chair, dragging it the other side of the coffee table
and sitting down to look at him in polite interest. Cas didn't ever need to tell him she used to be a
Marine; one look at the flawless posture, the kind of upper body strength he wouldn't mind having
for himself, and brown hair pulled back into the most severe ponytail in the history of ponytails and
he got it loud and clear. Not to mention her default when not sitting is 'parade rest', which was
definitely a clue.

Cas did, however, need to remind him yesterday morning when they were watching Vera and
Jeremy leave that he didn't need to worry about making up a good story about where they were
going because no one would ask. Not Alicia in the infirmary who inherited all of Dean's medical
records, not Amanda who's taken over the job Spy At Large and team leader, not Vera's team,
friends, or the camp at large who watched as well. Not even Joe, and it's not like Joe doesn't know
he can ask questions by now, but Dean supposes the habit's hard to break.

"How's your foot?" she asks, glancing down at the brace that replaced the cast two days ago on his
ankle.

Vera, after consultation with a very wary Alicia, decided to remove it before she left; it was like
being the exhibit in a very back to the earth hospital, Vera falling into lecture mode with Alicia, Cas,
and Joe in attendance while sawing off the cast and everyone (including Dean) stared in fascination
at the dead zombie foot attached to Dean's leg with an almost physical revulsion (or maybe that's just
Dean).

Cleaning it up like it was a real foot, she chanted out what to watch for and the dangers of overuse,
then where the Velcro restraints were and smiled at everyone's enthusiastic affirmation they knew
exactly how to use them. Because this is his camp, these are his people, and every fucking one of
them lives life like Finding Private Ryan and Finding Ryan's Privates are the same goddamn movie.
With Velcro bondage, because why the fuck not.

"Good," he says, not looking down; a sock under the brace hides what shouldn't be viewed by any
eyes. "Trying to think of an embarrassing story about Cas," he adds. "Vera's been taunting me with
the brothel story he told everyone about, and payback is gonna be sweet."

Ana's eyes widen before she breaks into a peal of laughter. "I remember that," she says breathlessly,
wiping her eyes as she straightens from what wasn't even generously a slump, because Marines can't
do those but pretend they can. "If it helps, not everyone--"

He rolls his eyes. "That doesn't help at all."

"--and we were all high or drunk in honor of surviving training, so not like most remember." She shakes her head fondly. "Time honored graduation gift: weed and a lot of it. Nate wouldn't stop giggling until Zack took him home, and..." She make a face. "You know how that always ends."

He doesn't, but if he's reading Nate-Who-Has-Drywall-Skills right, the word 'repressed' isn't inapplicable and he can guess.

"So Cas thought Dazed and Confused was a documentary, right," he says in resignation, which coaxes another laugh from Ana. "Yeah, I offered Vera a bottle of Eldritch Horror and she still wouldn't tell me what else he told you all that night. Or a single fucking embarrassing story about Cas, by the way."

Ana's eyebrows draw together in confusion. "Eldritch...." 

"That shit from Cas's still," he explains casually, watching through half-lidded eyes as Ana goes still. Reaching down, he pulls an anonymous brown bottle from the side of the couch and sets it on the table between them, because creepy sex toy discovery wasn't the only thing on the agenda when he searched the utility closet, just the weirdest. "This."

Ana stares at the bottle then at him, eyes narrowing. "You set me up."

"I did, and this is a one-time offer," Dean answers easily, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "Decide fast, though, because Joe's here at lunch, and he's offered to get a first-born--where, I didn't ask--to trade for another bottle of this. Guess he already finished the other bottle--"

"Joe got a bottle?" Ana asks incredulously, a fire in her eyes not unlike that you might see in the smoldering remains of Joe's exploded kitchen. "Son of a bitch, he didn't share? I'm on his team!"

"And you two had steak and potatoes in Harlin and Joe told me all about it, down to the exact color of the melting butter," Dean counters, just to see her guilty twitch; revenge is indeed sweet. "Can't trust anyone these days, can you? You can walk away now, and we'll never speak of this again."

Ana glares at him and noticeably doesn't get up and walk away. "What do you want?"

"Three embarrassing stories about Cas that you can guarantee not everyone already knows," Dean says in satisfaction. "Implicate Vera in at least one for a get-out-of-report day."

Ana looks dubious. "You can do that?"

"It's my camp," Dean points out, not particularly surprised that doesn't help; this isn't like the Apocalypse or anything, this is Cas and his not entirely comfortable relationship with reports. "He won't notice, yes, I'm that good, you got any more questions or do we have a deal?"

"I'm in," she answers firmly. "Three stories about Cas, one including Vera, and I'll throw in Joe and Amanda for free."

Doing drugs while abusing his power and not a little added blackmail and he's barely finished breakfast: he'd like to see this Dean pull this shit off while still sick, with a bum foot, and kind of high. "What did Amanda do to you?"

"I'll start there," she decides, settling back in her chair with a look that honestly to God would scare
him if he were Amanda right now. Thank God he's not. "Two years ago, in training. You tell me if I should be over it yet."

"No fucking way," Dean answers sincerely, thinking of the price of stolen snuggies paid in burning clothes on the front lawn; Amanda's getting off light. He reaches for his coffee cup. "I can't wait."

Dean, in three months of his life: was sick, almost died, is currently living another person's life in another (Apocalyptic of course) world and that wasn't enough, no, but honestly, he can see why the universe thought that when his greatest hits include 'demon in Hell' and 'suburban semi-house boyfriend, with kid' it was time to level this shit up and said shit get real.

A Fallen angel who thought the siege of Hell was 'not enjoyable as you know it' (read: fun, Cas. Divine fun if you need it, but fun) and who punched the fucking bathroom wall just short of breaking through the cabin itself is haunted by the two year old memory of a human with a gun who shot at him.

In a world where you hunted Lucifer, and all the monsters in the closet, under the bed, and lingering behind you are really there and really fucking after you, Vera trained as a hunter but thinks knowing how people worked was the only way she'd survive.

The brothel story--it's funny, no lie, he gets why Cas tells it--came out during unofficial graduation from training night, when Cas was very high, it was very late, and the only ones still awake were Vera, Ana first choice Dean watcher and the first person Joe named without thinking when he wanted his own team, Amanda gossip queen forever, Joe sneaks around against orders at the border, Nate who does drywall on the side, and Kamal who Cas was going to ask to check is translations for hippo porn and he really, really should have thought about that.

He found out that extempore discussion with Jody and Kamal about the tragic lack of places to rollerblade in Chitaqua on the day of the supply run (and equipment debates because gear is important and the wrong kind can kill) began the first time they met in training.

Apparently it's gotten better; it used to be debated at the top of their lungs and ended in them fighting it out in what could generously be called sparring if Amanda didn't make them disarm first because why take the risk? Especially when Ana credits that for their almost miraculous improvement in combat skills, which makes him wonder how many demons died for Nike's lack of a social conscience and what that means in the greater scheme of things.

(Cas thought it was funny, Ana told him with the kind of affection you reserve for the crazy older brother who went Goth freshman year of high school and thought Nietzsche was fucking deep, dude, fuck you and smokes way too much weed while muttering about the Man. In the utility closet that day, Dean did indeed find Nietzsche, so.)

After Ana leaves (with a bottle in her hand and a smile on her face), Dean gets up and moves the chair back to the window before sitting down. It's a depressing view, but it's not like he's here for that; he's trying to work out why, a few months after Cas broke his foot, there's a chart showing that Vera removed a bullet dangerously close to Cas's spine (without anesthesia, just a local, holy fucking shit) that corresponds to a sprite encounter in Dean's journal but no mention of an earlier human sacrifice in Michigan that went Cas-shaped and the thirteenth kid that survived it.

Reading back, however, he did find a postscript to a mission five days after Debra's execution for Croatoan in its second stage, where a team leader came back to camp and died, cause of death execution for Croatoan first stage, and that's when he closed the journal. He missed it the first time, didn't think to look for it; this was a mission journal, why would Dean mention it, but also because when Cas told him what went down, he told him why, but Dean didn't have any reason to wonder
about the 'how'.

Not until reading that single sentence, a journal that no one but this Dean would ever read, he found out he has one up on his counterpart; in this very camp are two different worlds, and this Dean only knew about one.

Joe isn't Cas; they have lunch on the coffee table like sane people and not ones that Cas absorbed from Vera and a lot of sitcoms. He waits for Joe to drag the chair over and sit down before saying over his sandwich (something green, something meat, spreading no idea and thank God), "So you almost stabbed yourself to death with a butter knife during training?"

"You were restricted from touching anything that could be a weapon for two weeks in training by Cas's order," Dean continues, enthusiastically taking a bite, the lack of flavor improved enormously by the taste of Joe's sheer horror. "So here's my question: how many left feet do you have? Amanda-"

"Amanda?" Joe chokes out, barely getting the sandwich in the vicinity of the place before dropping it with a wet plop and staring at Dean. "All things training are supposed to sacred and we do not speak of it. She swore--"

"Wasn't Amanda," Dean says and leans back with a satisfied smile that says, 'yes, I'm that fucking good' and lets Joe draw his own conclusions. Joe's expression tells him that worked really well. "Steak and potatoes, broccoli and cookies, you thought I forgot about that?"

Joe doesn't move. "What did Cas tell you?"

"I think the question is 'what do I want?'," Dean answers reasonably, resting an arm along the back of the couch and making himself comfortable. "Ask yourself, Joe: do you feel lucky?"

Joe gapes at him.

"Two stories, embarrassing, involving Cas, that you can personally guarantee most people here don't know," Dean says regretfully; this is fun and all, but this is business. "In return, my silence, and who may or may not have a full bottle of Eldritch Horror in their cabin right now and I know for a fact doesn't plan to share and you didn't hear it from me."

"Done," Joe says immediately.

"You're easy," Dean observes. "Ana held out for a get-out-of-report-day."

He watches in fascination as Joe's expression darkens; he's gonna guess that's what wildlife around here sees when they see him coming. "Leah," he breathes with a lifetime of bitter betrayal. "Ana was on her way to her cabin when I got here."

"You and Leah are tight," Dean assures him. "She'll share, right? I mean, unless she knows about the bottle you didn't share with your team. Which she knows…right about now."

Joe closes his eyes and feeling merciful, Dean reaches to grab the second bottle and hopes to God Cas assumes he's drinking his days away from boredom. Setting it gently in the center of the table, Dean waits for Joe to open his eyes and fix on the bottle.

"Here," Dean says, scooting the bottle until it nudges against Joe's plate. Looking like a man who
just found God, Joe reaches for the bottle, then hesitates, looking at Dean suspiciously. "For free. You can walk away."

"You're fucking with me," Joe says, right on schedule, but like Ana, he doesn't walk away. Poker players never leave the table if there's still a chance to win, and Ana and Joe are always at that weekly game.

Joe is smart. Gets around team leaders at the border to get information and suborns one of the team members to do it and sits at a negotiation table with twelve guns ready to be pointed at his head armed with nothing but his voice. And like Vera, when he needed something badly and he was out of other options, he went to Cas to get it. Time to find out why.

"Bread upon the water," Dean says seriously, nudging it again so it rattles temptingly against the plate. "Payback for the brothel story. I need everyone to stay away from the cabin after Chuck gets here until Cas gets home. You gonna help me out?"

Joe starts and then begins to grin. "I get you; I'll pass the order when I leave on the down low. I got a story with Leah's name on it, in case you're curious."

"I am," Dean agrees in satisfaction. "You got anything on Alicia, by the way? No reason."

Joe cocks his head, grin widening. "I might. Not training though; she was before I got here."

"That's fine," he answers easily. "Anytime you're ready."

There are a lot of questions now that he wants to ask, and a lot of them start with 'how'.

Three bullets, he told Cas, but two inches right of the spine is the oldest of them, and that's the first one Vera had to remove herself. The mission record agrees on this much: there was a sprite, there were shots fired, Cas killed the sprite, and everyone came home for the night. It misses entirely that Cas came back with a bullet in his spine from a vengeful sprite with surprisingly good aim, which he assumes is because Cas thought that was irrelevant while bouncing serenely in a fucking SUV for a few hours back to camp to keep a promise.

Vera's records on Cas are nightmare fuel for anyone who knows what they're reading, and Dean probably knows more now that anyone but Vera, but that bullet is a fucking novel all in itself. For someone who said she hadn't practiced for an entire year before she came to Chitaqua and was a practitioner nurse before, that scar's as clean as someone who'd been treating bullet wounds all their professional lives. He never would have guessed this kind of history on a glance, though, so good thing this time he decided to ask. He doesn't care how much time she spent in the ER, bullet removal wouldn't have been common enough for her to do it this well and not by the fucking spine.

Vera also didn't spend enough time in the ER to restart his heart twice, shooting him up with epinephrine like it was going out of style because admitting brain death was for losers who believed in shit like reality. She wasn't kidding about opening him up, either; when Vera was doing surreptitious medical equipment removal before the official date, there were things he saw in one bag he's pretty sure are OR-specific.

He wishes he could ask if this is where it started; when Cas obediently reported in for treatment and told her there was a bullet, not much bleeding and definitely not actually severing his fucking spine. She didn't say 'are you fucking kidding me' like anyone else; life or death, experience whatever, much like two later cardiac arrests, she had shit to get done and she'd do it.

She was working under three very powerful restrictions when treating Cas for anything and she
knew it: she wasn't a doctor, Dean couldn't know it wasn't Darryl doing it, and Darryl the fucker couldn't know at all. She didn't tell him the last one, but she didn't need to; for reasons proved with a bullet to the spine, Darryl refusing treatment that once wasn't the only reason she didn't want Cas in the infirmary for any reason, maybe especially when it comes to anything that might require anesthesia.

Because to Vera, the most important thing for survival is knowing people, their buttons, and how to push them. She said some secrets are meant to be kept, and this was one of them. She might kill Cas by accident, but somehow, his chances were still higher with her than anyone else.

Vera and Joe were the worst students in that class, as it turns out--second and last group Cas trained at Chitaqua--but Amanda drilled Vera and Joe every night so they'd pass evaluation the next day. Joe told him, laughing, about rock dodgeball because Cas unwillingly clean and sober was Cas bored, irritable, and needing entertainment in the worst fucking way and what were they there for but to provide.

Ana and Joe both affectionately called Amanda teacher's pet; Cas expressed affection and approval in your progress with bruises and a lot of them, and Amanda was the blue-blackest of them all. And after that, every night, Amanda dragged Joe and Vera out to the field so they'd feel just as loved. Shared pain is probably a bond that takes a lot to break, and what do you know, it didn't.

Fast forward a few months later, and here's what Vera knew she had to work with:

No one knew she was a former nurse but Cas (and later, Jeremy), so she didn't have infirmary privileges or the experience to know what to do with a fucking bullet two inches from Cas's fucking spine. Someone else did, though; Alicia, an EMT, a member of Erica's team, Darryl's occasional backup before going full time when the fucker died, but she was in Cas's first class, not second (as Joe so helpfully explained), and in this camp paranoia is a way of life, trust has to be earned, and Vera didn't even know her. However, in this case, she knew and trusted someone who did.

Some secrets, Vera told him, are meant to be kept. Some things people don't need to know, because it's dangerous, and the most dangerous thing maybe wasn't just Dean or Darryl, but anyone knowing Cas had a bullet in his back only months after Luke tried to put a bullet in his head. Or maybe--just maybe--the wrong person. Alicia, as it turns out, wasn't one of them; Joe told Vera what no one else knew, that Alicia was his mole on Erica's team, that helped him at the border, and he trusted her, and Vera trusted Joe, so that was all she needed to know.

Joe went to Alicia, and Alicia strolled into Darryl's infirmary, picked out all the things you need to treat a bullet wound, and walked Vera through removing a bullet two inches from Cas's spine with nothing but a local and a lot of desperation. How she handled recovery he figures followed Cas's idea of graduation gifts; weed and a lot of it, no missions for the junkie getting high for a while, no questions to be asked, and the first time in history drug abuse saved lives or at least Cas's ability to walk.

Alicia's also a team leader, one Cas picked himself, which makes sense; nothing quite builds up trust like someone who worked with Vera on your goddamn spine. Some secrets have to be kept, Alicia's name is never mentioned in those records no one knew Vera was making for a patient no one knew she had because no one knew she was a nurse. Because in this camp, paranoia is a way of life.

He can't ask, of course; they're all very good at hiding in plain sight. He could be wrong about how some of this went down, but somehow, he knows he's not.

Getting up, Dean ignore the faint throb of his ankle to drag the chair to where Joe and Ana put it (everyone puts it) and sits down; when he looks around, he revises his original assumption that
Amanda and Ana were the only ones who don’t like their backs to either of those two windows or the front door.

Dean’s room has blinds (when they got there, he has no idea, but they’re there now) and an actual door; these windows don’t even have curtains, and the doorway doesn’t have anything that could possibly resemble a door. You can see out with some limitations, but from outside, you can’t see much, especially important when the sun is in the west and there’s no eastern glare in the window with a view of the camp no one likes.

Depositing the dishes in the sink for someone else to handle, Dean settles down for his third visitor of the day; today, he thinks, looking at his foot thoughtfully, his ankle’s gonna be way too sore to take a walk.

Chuck, poor oblivious fucker, walks right by him toward the bedroom before stopping in the doorway, frowning with a confused expression and turning around to be met with the full force of Dean's best smile.

"Hey, Chuck," he says pleasantly, one foot up on the coffee table because elevation is good for soreness when it's real. "Sit down. Got a question."

"Dean." Chuck blinks at him and going right for the chair by the window to pull it into position, sweet spot hit on the first try. Sitting down warily, he tries a smile. "So, you ready to--"

"Nah, no walk today, ankle’s sore. So I've been thinking about supply runs; remember when you told me how they worked before that first one I went on?"

Chuck frowns. "Yeah?"

"Who went on those, anyway? Back before I got here, I mean. How'd that work?"

"Everyone," he answers, sounding surprised. "I mean, whoever was free. I did the supply lists, gave them to Dean, he sent a couple of teams with whoever was available. Why?"

"Cas never went on them?"

"He didn't leave the camp except for missions with Dean. I mean, most of them. Sometimes Dean didn't think--okay, why are you looking at me like that?"

Dean unlocks his jaw enough to use words. "Because I'm trying to think of a way that this won't end with you telling me that he was actually never allowed to leave the camp unless it was for a mission. Tell me he was just high all the time."

"Well, he was, unless he was prepping for a mission, most of the time anyway," Chuck concedes. "But no, he didn't leave. Dean really didn't…." Belatedly aware of the sound of his own words and what they mean, Chuck trails off. "I said that wrong."

"I really hope this doesn't end with you telling me Dean actually ordered Cas not to leave the camp," Dean tells Chuck calmly and means every goddamn word.

"No, it wasn't like that. I mean--maybe you should ask Cas--"

"I'm asking you, and you're not telling Cas shit about this, got it?" Chuck nods in terror, which is as it should be. "Start over. Dean told Cas not to leave the camp? Why?"
"I don't--I mean, okay, look. Look, if Lucifer found him...."

This isn't happening. "Jesus fucking Christ, don't tell me he thought Cas was gonna join Lucifer?"

"No!" Chuck shrinks into the chair, looking uncomfortably like he wants to cry. "No, it wasn't about that. Last of the Host on earth, okay? Cas is mortal, but he didn't become human, and Lucifer--Cas didn't tell you about the wards?"

What the hell does that have to do with anything? "He told me they keep Lucifer out."

"These wards could keep the Apocalypse out," Chuck says, like Dean should know this already. "He put the last of his Grace in them and then--I don't know, changed it, somehow, I don't get it. It wasn't enough--he really didn't have much left to put in them--but he said he could use that to get more."

"More? From where? There aren't any angels left." As Chuck starts to open his mouth, he wonders for a second what it means that he actually knows the answer to this one. Maybe he's been here too long, but he's not even surprised. "Lucifer. He used Lucifer's Grace in the wards?"

"Cas thought it was funny," Chuck offers. "I mean, poetic justice, right? He said Bobby gave him the idea, but he hadn't been sure it would work or if it would do what he thought it would. So every time Lucifer's on the plane and does anything, we get some of it. If Lucifer knew about it--Cas didn't think he did, but--"

"Lucifer wouldn't be happy."

"Oh, stealing Grace from other angels is...." Chuck makes a face, which Dean assumes means pretty fucking bad. "Besides, Cas was the only one who could do--whatever he did to get it."

Dean wonders idly just how much they'd gotten from Lucifer's temper tantrum. "How'd he set the key, by the way? I mean, I got through them, no problem, and I'm not actually from here."

"Blood, kind of?" Chuck's face scrunches up in thought; if Dean tilts his head, it reminds him a lot of Sam's troll doll collecting phase. "We all kind of stood there while he stared at the wards for a while, drew a sigil with our blood, the blood vanishes, and presto; we're in."

That sounds familiar. "What's the sigil look like?"

"Hold on." Chuck looks around and seeing the reports box, grabs the top notebook (new one, Cas was running out of space again) and flips it open before pulling a pen from behind his ear, because Chuck is like that and starting to draw something. Dean stares at the shape forming on the page for a startled moment, then forgets his elevation needing ankle and leans over to take both from Chuck, flipping the page and drawing it like it's supposed to look. This one, he could draw it in his sleep.

"Yeah," Chuck says in surprise, craning his neck to look at it. "How'd you--"

"That's Cas's true name." He glances at Chuck. "You didn't recognize it?"

"Now I do." Chuck turns the notebook and nods slowly. "Huh. He didn't really tell us anything about it, just said it would help him focus the wards."

"You can summon angel with that," Dean says slowly. "And do a lot of really sketchy shit to them once you do if you know the right rituals." Names have power, he's always known that, but the most powerful is the one that you use to define yourself. There's a reason Rumpelstiltskin was required reading when he was a kid, with added Dad-administered quiz. "You're telling me Cas used his true
name in the binding?"

Contamination, he thinks. Everything you do leaves traces behind, good or bad. The bad shit is what you know about, because it's what bites you in the ass. The good you don't, because when it works, you don't even know it's there. And human blood is like the fucking nuke when it comes to ritual magic, nothing like it; you can use it to control someone, to kill someone, or maybe just identify someone to be cared for, to be protected, by the last of an angel's Grace that would know his true name inside wards that apparently can hold out against the Apocalypse itself.

"He doesn't have Grace anymore, not in him," Chuck says, like that's even the point. "But I think--I think even in the wards, it still knows him. It's his, just--in there."

"So Dean wouldn't let him leave because of the wards?" Missions but not supply runs due to danger of murder by Lucifer: why… "He thought if he was with Cas, he could keep Cas safe? From Lucifer?"

Chuck makes a face. "Well--"

"Cas," he says blankly, remembering the shower wall, some dead demons in Kansas City, and all the cool card tricks Dean taught him to do, all of which require speed just short of that of light. "He thought--"

"Look, you gotta understand," Chuck interrupts. "Sam's Lucifer's vessel, Cas Fell, and then Bobby died, and while he didn't hate me or anything, Cas was kind of all he had left here and it seriously fucked with him. I'm not saying he handled it well, but--Dean had two goals: kill Lucifer, and not lose the only person on earth he had left until he got the job done. He'd watch Lucifer kill everyone in Chitaqua, and as long as Cas wasn't one of them, it didn't even matter."

Chuck scratches his head, giving Dean a considering look before moving back to his chair, pulling it a couple of inches closer before sitting down. For a second, Dean's suddenly aware of who Chuck is, what he is, a flickering something, like light pushing out just beneath his skin. It's not that he's God, or God's avatar or whatever he was in his world, but that whatever he looks like, however he acts, he's a prophet, and it wasn't random chance that got him the job or that he did it. Dean knows enough now that prophets, the real kind, don't have the kind of life that ends in a bed of old age; suicide might not have been an option, but few of them lived long enough to get serious trying when life would do the job for them. Chuck may be prophecy-free, but until he came here, Dean hadn't realized that didn't change a damn thing except what Chuck could actually see; a prophet was a prophet until the day he died, and that kind of open line to the divine didn't go away even when the radio went silent.

Chuck isn't stupid, but sometimes, Chuck forgets that and Dean figures it's time to remind him. "Dean, what is this about?"

A bullet two inches from Cas's spine, a team leader named Luke who was executed for first stage Croatoan, and maybe the reason Cas never ever lies, no matter how creative he gets doing it. Only Cas would be able to see Croatoan first stage, and he would execute a member of the camp for attempted assassination and tell a lie that this Dean would never think to question or doubt, no matter evidence to the contrary.

"Cas said the team leaders hated him."

"Yeah, the angel thing…" Chuck trails off with a shrug. "It was mutual, trust me. You think you've seen him be a dick? That's just baseline; with them, he put effort into it. I mean, not that I blame him," he admits, something darker in his voice. "Everyone was scared of them. They were--intense,
"Let's put it that way."

"They were pretty close to him, to Dean, right? Really loyal."

"This is where the word 'fanatic' works a lot better," Chuck offers. "Just saying. And yeah, I guess. They were the ones he trusted the most, ran the camp for him."

"And not stupid, right?" Dean continues, ignoring Chuck's wary look. "Come and find their one true crazy leader and it's all bloody promises of revenge and then they notice the unbeliever in their midst that Dean likes best."

Chuck's eyes widen. "Uh..."

"Stop me if you've heard this one before; so Dad has these kids, right, and they're obedient and loyal and all that shit, but for some reason, Dad's favorite is the dick that doesn't give a shit about Dad or anything else and does his own thing. Any of that ring a bell?"

Chuck blinks, licking his lip nervously. "You realize you're comparing Dean to--"

"I'm not done yet. Dean wanted fanatics, that's what he needed to do this, so he went with what he knew would work." So that's what he was missing. "Lucifer's brother, bullshit, that was just the tip of the iceberg: did Dean fucking Winchester thought he could pull this shit off when we're living with how well that worked out for God? Cas should have gotten around to telling him it didn't work with Luke's fucking body!"

"He told you he killed Luke?"

Dean nods. "What you're going to tell me now is why he didn't kill the rest. The ones that couldn't know he had a bullet in his spine that Vera took out under a local because even staring at that, she wouldn't tell Darryl or risk Cas going under anesthesia."

Chuck lets out a slow breath.

"If it was warmer, I might have found out if Cas ever opens the windows; on a guess, the glass is to give warning of shots fired. The doorway doesn't have a door, and Cas's cabin faces the camp wall, not the camp itself, so only people that should be around are the ones coming here and he can see them all. I was surprised Nate knew how to drywall, but Cas wasn't; he'd know, he was called in to hide the bullet holes so well I can't even find them and believe me, I tried."

"So when Luke was executed for Croatoan first stage in front of Dean," he finishes, "Cas would be taken at his word with no evidence of anything else. Five days after Debra died for stage two at the point of Dean's gun, and now you're going to tell me how they're connected so that when Cas needed a bullet out, Vera did it, and when she couped the camp, she got a fuckload of help to make it happen."

Chuck sits back, looking--he's not actually sure what that is, but it's all focused on him. "There are two stories of what happened, the official and the unofficial," he says slowly. "Then there's the truth. The one thing that everyone knows for sure; the reason it happened's still breathing."

Dean really hates fucking games. "Chuck, what the fuck..." Then he remembers what Cas told him happened after Debra died. "Vera was living with Cas when Luke and whoever else was involved shot at him." He was the best of limited options, Cas said. Jesus Christ, talk about an understatement if he's right. "Chuck, what happened when Vera saw Dean shoot Debra?"

"She didn't get off a shot," Chuck answers. "This was early in training and Vera'd barely started on
the range. Cas got her down and out of sight—he's not faster than a bullet, but not like you couldn't
tell what she was going to do—but Erica saw it, I think. She was the only one of the team leaders
there that day."

Liking this Cas would have been hard, you had to work at it—or maybe it wasn't hard at all when you
knew it wasn't all there was to him, that there was more.

"The thing is—no way you could know this, but Cas didn't like teaching," Chuck says, startling him.
"I mean—it wasn't not liking it, but it was just—something he did like anything Dean told him to do.
When Dean told him they needed a second group of recruits, that was the first time Cas said no to
Dean. Dean couldn't do it himself, not and everything else."

"So how—"

"Yeah, no idea, but when Cas went to the training field for that group, he said it was for the last time
and he meant it," Chuck answers, wrinkling his nose. "First time, Cas evaluated everyone to the
ground before he and Dean decided which ones to accept, but this time, he took every one of them
after evaluation, and trust me when I say—"

"Joe and Vera sucked."

Chuck snorts, shaking his head. "Jody and James weren't much better. Let's say the only bright
points were Amanda, Mark, and Debra." He frowns, looking at Dean for a long minute. "Right, you
wouldn't know—Cas took teaching seriously. I mean, he got clean when he agreed to teach that
group and stayed clean until he was done with them, which just saying, that's something for Cas. He
doesn't make mistakes. Dean never questioned Cas's decisions, not when it came to training, and he
helped invent the model. Dean didn't ask why Cas didn't get rid of anyone; he figured Cas knew
what he was doing and not like he would be involved this time anyway. Cas was on his own this
time."

"Cas was really good at it," Dean confirms, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice. "Of course
he was. It's the only thing that he thought made him useful, right? Not like he had anything else to
offer."

"It's like you never said anything you regretted," Chuck says finally. "Even if Dean meant it—and he
might have, Cas knew exactly how to push every button to set him off—that doesn't mean it was true.
Not when he said it, and not when he cooled down enough to admit it. But Cas….he never let him
forget it."

"Why should he get to?" Dean retorts. "Cas can't."

"You ever think maybe not everything was Dean's fault?" Chuck shakes his head. "Dean fucked up,
but Cas made it a competition, winner loses all or something, who the hell knows. I'm the last one to
say Dean didn't make mistakes—and they were legion, okay—but he couldn't do everything. He
couldn't save Cas from himself."

"He didn't have to," Dean replies. "All he had to do was give Cas a reason to want to. He got him to
Fall for him, but he couldn't manage to give him a reason not to hate living with it?"

"You weren't here," Chuck answers quietly. "You have no right to judge what happened."

"I'm the one who has to live with it," he says, staring at Chuck until he looks away. "Don't tell me I
don't get to judge the fuck out of him for every fucked-up choice he made, not when I'm the one
who's paying for them. Now tell me what else I'm paying for, Chuck. We'll start with Vera."
Chuck flinches, looking anywhere but at him.

"Give me--just a second, okay?" Chuck takes a breath, a little color returning to his face. "Vera was staying with Cas while he tried to talk her down from going after Dean. I mean, she had zero chance getting to Dean, much less killing him, but she was his student." He hesitates, looking at Dean thoughtfully, then seems to change his mind. "Five days later, Cas performed a public execution in full view of the camp on Luke and said it was for Croatoan, Dean didn't question it, and that was pretty much it."

There's no fucking way this Dean would have fallen for that, but the journal proved he did. "Who were they after, Vera or Cas?"

"Both of them," Chuck answers. "Everyone here was trained by Cas; accuracy wasn't gonna be an issue. Cas is good at watching his back, but with Vera--I think they thought he'd be distracted, and they were good; they only needed a second. Even if they didn't hit him the first time, they knew there was no way they'd miss her, and that'd give them their second chance to get him."

Dean nods tightly.

"Not faster than a bullet, and not faster than a lot of them," Chuck says quietly. "They knew they only had one shot at this and they were gonna make it count."

"Except they missed both of them," Dean answers slowly, feeling like he's almost got this, but not quite. "Either way--they failed, so what the hell did they think Cas would do after shots were fired?"

"They didn't think they'd fail."

Dean almost laughs in sheer disbelief. "You're fucking with me."

"They knew Cas was a Fallen angel and was their instructor in training. After that, they only knew him as the guy who got stoned and hosted orgies to entertain himself and Dean let get away with it, which yeah, pissed them off. They didn't trust him--again, angels, not a great reputation here--but it got weirdly personal when it came to Dean; they hated Cas for that. They'd been in the field for two months by this time, and I guess Cas didn't seem so scary compared to what they were killing every time they left Chitaqua's walls."

"And forgot who taught them how to do it." Chuck nods. "He played the junkie really well."

"Cas works well off a script," Chuck agrees. "They were stupid and started to believe it. Funny thing, though--they actually picked the worst possible time to try. Clean, sober, dealing with Vera, a class of students--"

"--and he knew they were coming," Dean finishes for him, looking at where Chuck's sitting right now: perfect. "Bet the windows were up, just to make it that much more tempting."

Chuck makes another face, which he assumes means he's right. "Then he executed Luke--"

"Only one of them."

"That's all he needed if he made it count," Chuck says. "Nothing changed, not really, Dean never knew a thing, and Cas didn't have to do it again."

"He knew they would come for Vera," Dean says numbly. "Because she wasn't the first unbeliever in Dean fucking Winchester who was supposed to die."
"We had a lot of accidents on patrol," Chuck confirms bleakly. "Bigger question; how many who we thought left actually survived long enough to do it before Vera's class got here? No one knows, but Cas--I think he may have had his suspicions, but after that night he was sure, and he made it his business to find out."

Sitting back, Dean shuts his eyes, thinking of the camp and its leaders--Jesus, its current leaders, the people he'd gotten from Dean's fucking journal, the ones that were trained to take these positions by their predecessors and who learned the risks but maybe never learned the reason. And the reason Cas didn't want to give them extra responsibilities, not then; why back before the fever, he said he could take those extra meetings with the Penn and Sheila and Evan and Chuck.

"That's why he waited a day to do it."

"Like I said, the timing couldn't have been worse," Chuck says. "You know his memory, Dean; he trained everyone who came in and knows everyone who left. They got his full attention that night, and he didn't waste time wondering why. He did the math on attrition and didn't like whatever number he got. Add in that night with Vera, and it was as good as a confession."

Like the math that bothered him when it came to those dead hunters before Dean founded Alpha.

"Who was involved that night?"

"The team leaders, that much we know," Chuck answers. "Their teams weren't part of it, but how much they knew is anyone's guess."

"Darryl."

"Vera thought so," Chuck confirms. "The rest of the camp….two I'm sure of, they died during the last mission before Kansas City, three I wondered about, the last one was killed when we went for the Colt. Three or four that left were maybes, but I wouldn't bet against them."

"Thirteen, maybe, that you think," Dean says through numb lips. "Any of them could have been in on it. That's why he did it like that, right in the middle of the camp. Why not everyone who took a shot at him that night? Why just Luke?"

"Luke was the ringleader, for one." Chuck licks his lips. "Three guesses on the second, and I'll give you the first two."

"He didn't want Dean to know." Fuck Dean goddamn Winchester. "Son of a bitch."

"Not like the survivors would open their mouths after that," Chuck says wryly. "Luke was all he needed. It wasn't just he'd kill them; it's that he could and Dean would accept whatever Cas told him without question. They got the message loud and clear."

And fuck yourself, Cas told them, with one bullet.

"And live the rest of his life in a camp where anyone could be gunning for him for that." Jesus, two years of that: no wonder Cas was high all the time. That kind of pressure, it was that or snap and go on a goddamn rampage.

Chuck looks surprised. "I think you can safely exclude one group from that."

"Vera's class." That goddamn not-coup on Chitaqua: they had practice working together getting shit done, starting with covering up Luke's death in plain sight. "Does anyone else know why Cas did it besides them?" The bleak look fade, replaced with something a lot like satisfaction. "Cas trusts you."

"Yeah, he does," Chuck answers easily. "Who do you think Cas came to first about his suspicions about the deaths?"

Not this Dean. "You."

"Me," Chuck confirms. "I said no one knows what really happened that night, so they guessed. I made sure they got it right."

Dean stares at Chuck; the cool brown eyes stare back without apology or regret. "What did you tell them?"

"The last thing Cas told me after he told me it had happened before," Chuck answers calmly. "That it'd never happened again."

"You gonna tell Cas about this?" Chuck asks finally, lingering over his third cup of whiskey-laced coffee. Dean's still working on his first, not because he doesn't need it, but because he's gotta keep a clear head.

"He didn't want me to know." Chuck nods, not bothering to offer up an explanation, since it's pretty obvious. "He doesn't want me to be afraid of them, not if I'm gonna be leading them." He doesn't want to believe that Cas would think he might not believe him, but then again, he remembers how surprised Cas looked when Dean agreed with him about the attrition rate on hunters from families with that tradition.

"He wouldn't have risked you--Dean, Cas is paranoid. If he thought anyone was left who was actively a threat, he'd have killed them after I outed you." Chuck winces at Dean's expression. "No deaths, is what I'm saying. The team leaders were the ringleaders, and they died in Kansas City."

"It wasn't just the team leaders, though."

"No way to be sure, no, but I'll tell you this. After that? We had a several people up and leave Chitaqua, and they were on my list of possibilities."

"And if you're wrong?"

Chuck licks his lips before meeting his eyes. "Doesn't matter if I'm wrong. Dean, even if someone thought they'd get Cas and survive it now, everyone knows nothing and no one would save them from you."

He smiles at Chuck. "Good."

Chuck flinches, looking away. "Yeah." Sinking lower in the chair, he clutches the cup to his chest. "Dean, something else--"

"I think I hit my limit on trauma for the day," he interrupts. "Maybe tomorrow?"

"When you do talk to Cas--be careful, okay?" Startled, he looks at Chuck, who's staring into the depths of his cup like it just might confer a wish if he tries hard enough. "Cas doesn't--angel on earth, wearing a body but not human, you know the entire litany. It's true, he's not, and it shows."

"It's bullshit," Dean snaps automatically. "He's himself, and that's a lot more human than a lot of people I've met."

"Yeah, that's why I'm saying it shows," Chuck answers cryptically, taking another hearty drink and
wiping his mouth. "Cas is a soldier, he's done worse before breakfast--or the equivalent in the Host--
and it didn't stick. He kept it, too, and considering our line of work, it's a hell of an advantage.
There's a reason Dean kept Cas in the field no matter what he did, and I'll be honest here, Cas
wanted it just as much. Body counts don't worry him, even the ones that look human."

"Dean liked Cas's sociopathic tendencies," Dean answers, taking another drink because why not.
"Thanks, Chuck."

"Humans are sociopaths," Chuck corrects him, rousing himself enough for a look of bleary-eyed
disapproval. "Angels are angels. You of all people know better than that."

He does, is the thing. "Where are you going with this?"

"Killing doesn't bother Cas," Chuck answers. "But this? This did."

"Killing Luke?"

"No, of course not, that was justice, very Cas; his biggest regret is probably that he couldn't conduct
a purge of Chitaqua that day and be done with it." Chuck sounds terrifyingly like he's trying to be
reassuring, and much more unsettling, Dean does, in fact, feel reassured. "I can't explain, but this--the
entire thing--it got to him. I'm not saying it was the reason for his descent into drug-fueled crazy, but
it put some nitrous in the tank. Kicked him up a notch when he was teaching, and floored the
accelerator when he was done."

"You don't know anything about engines, do you?" Chuck frowns vaguely before nodding
agreement. "It bothered him, but you don't know why?"

"I know Cas maybe better than anyone, which isn't saying a lot, but still. When you talk to Cas--and
I can't believe I'm saying this--be careful."

"Because this bothers him, yeah." Dean considers Chuck's a lightweight with whiskey, but drunken
logic isn't necessarily wrong. "What do you think I'm gonna do?"

"Throw this entire conversation at him like you're deploying a missile for maximum personal
impact," Chuck answers immediately, like it's obvious. "Because you're pissed he didn't tell you
himself. How does that work for you, by the way? I can tell you how well it worked for your
predecessor."

"I'm not gonna do that." Chuck's drunken skepticism is even more annoying, possibly because it's
kind of justified. "I'm not." He does, actually, know how well that works, and he needs more time to
think about this. "Tell me about the wards again."

Chuck slow-blinks his incomprehension of English.

"The wards," Dean repeats, setting the cup aside to avoid further temptation. "I need a less traumatic
missile. What did you say about Lucifer and the wards?"

Cas stops dead halfway across the living room, and Dean can actually see the moment he registers
that Dean's wearing boots. "You are unusually attired for an evening resting inside."

"Just keeping you on your toes," Dean answers, cocking his head. "So. Fresh air."

"Dean, that didn't work the first time, I was indulging you."
"Yeah, faking it works for me. Fresh air, exercise--"

"Exercise?" Cas repeats, as if he's never heard the word before.

"Barely exercise. More like rolling over. Except not in bed, and with my feet. Walking, Cas. I want to take a walk. A nice, slow, fresh air walk. Nothing wrong with that. I do one of those every day. Sometimes two. I missed it today, and it's a nice night so why not?"

"I could carry you," Cas concedes, looking like maybe he almost finds this conversation interesting. "I'm sure that I can procure a camera to immortalize this twice in a lifetime event. The other being when I bring you back."

So they're doing this the hard way. "Why'd you write your true name into the binding for the wards?"

Cas goes still, and hey, looks like he's interested after all. "That question isn't one anyone should know to ask. It also doesn't particularly matter. It was one of many equally effective options."

"Yeah, but you didn't choose one of them. You chose this one."

Cas studies him for several long moments. "Do you have any idea what you're asking? Or even why?"

"No," he admits. "No idea. You do, though. So. I want to take a walk, see the sights, and maybe you show me what exactly it is that makes this camp able to survive the Apocalypse even after your death. Since weirdly enough, I do know Grace won't hang around here after your death. Grace shouldn't hang around, period. Not unless you did something to make sure it would. You taught me that."

"Not in this world," Cas mutters, looking irritated. "Why does it matter? It doesn't have any bearing on--anything, really."

"Except the part where it protects us from the end of the world." Cas just looks back, stubborn. "Look, just show me, okay? Nice walk, get way from these four walls, learn something new…." Okay, he's going for broke. "When I touched them after I got here, I could feel--something, I don't know. What the hell are they, Cas?"

"You did." Cas's eyes unfocus. "That's--I'm not sure what that is, actually."

"Could Dean feel them?"

"No, he couldn't." Cas's eyes flicker toward the door. "A walk would be excellent exercise. I want to see this."

Thirty minutes later, Dean's touched the ward keys ten times and still has no idea what the hell's going on, much less what Cas is getting out of it. The eleventh time, it dawns on him that without some kind of intervention, this doesn't look like it's stopping anytime soon, and he wonders if the wards are getting as frustrated as he is, or if he's just crazy. God, he hopes he's crazy.

Dropping his hand, he crosses his arms, waiting for Cas to notice him, and then realizes how doomed to failure that plan is just on concept. "Okay, Cas? What the hell are we doing?"

"Hmm?" Cas blinks, reluctantly turning his attention to Dean. "If you're tired, you can sit down."
"Thanks," Dean says, hoping he doesn't sound as sincere as he feels as lowers himself onto the ground with a sigh. That talk with Chuck instead of taking a nap is hitting him hard, and Jesus, he's fucking sick of feeling like this. Be patient, he reminds himself bitterly. Like he has a goddamn choice. "Any time you're ready."

"Some humans can feel wards," Cas begins, which he can already tell means this conversation is gonna be weird. "It's not uncommon."

"I don't. I mean, I never did before. Not like this, anyway."

"Like what?" Abandoning the key, Cas sits down across from him in the scraggly grass, curious. "It's intrinsic to me, so I don't know how a human experiences them."

"Before I came here?" He thinks carefully. "A tingle when they came on, maybe, I didn't really pay attention. It was just--background, I guess."

Cas tilts his head. "When did you touch them?"

"A week and change after I got here. It was--different."

"How?"

"It's not background. It was like--like I was supposed to notice."

Cas's eyes widen, never a good sign. "As if it wants you to notice it?"

"Maybe? Wait, I mean--it's not even alive." Cas's expression isn't reassuring. "It's not alive, Cas. It's--whatever it is."

"It's not alive," Cas agrees, then fucks it all up by adding, "However--"

Jesus Christ, this isn't happening.

"--life is a very general term and subject to interpretation. Plants are alive--"

"Plants don't act excited to see me!" He didn't just say that.

"Oh." Cas starts to smile. "Really?"

"Do I have another fever? Tell me something that makes sense." Dean glances from the wall to Cas a little desperately. "What are they? What the hell did you do?"

Cas's smile vanishes. "You're afraid of them."

"No," Dean lies automatically, because hell yeah, but whatever the fuck it is, Cas made it, and he won't be scared of that. "No, they're weird, that's all. Just, a warning would have been nice."

"I didn't realize it would be necessary." Cas reaches out, touching the wall gently, barely a brush of fingertips. If he wasn't this close, if Dean wasn't looking right at him, he never would have seen the way Cas relaxes, just a little. "They aren't alive," he says, voice soft. "I'm not sure, but--"

"It's your Grace in there, right?" Cas head snaps around. "I could--it felt like you. The first time I touched it."

"You shouldn't have been able to sense that." Cas really isn't helping him stay calm about this. "I wasn't aware you had had any contact with them, or I would have been more prepared."
"To tell me you don't know why I can sense them?"

"To be reassuring despite the fact I don't know why you can sense them. I need more time if you want me to be convincing. It's nothing you should worry about," he adds quickly. "It's just a surprise, that's all."

Dean's gonna go with that, mostly because it's not like he's got a lot of choice here. "Why'd you choose your true name for the binding? Was it the contamination thing?"

Cas smiles again, and it's worth it--freaky wards and everything--to get Cas to look at him like that. "Yes. It's part of the reason I thought it would work with you. I'm not an angel anymore, nor do I have Grace, so my true name has very little practical power over me, but it's still my name, and its existence gives it power. In this case, I thought using it might be a way to link to my Grace once it was fully within the wards, since it once they were formed, it wouldn't be mine anymore."

"Contaminate it by binding it to your true name." Dean tries with more confidence than he feels, and is rewarded with another smile.

"That's what I hoped would be accomplished. My ability to manipulate it would be far more limited than when it was within me and still mine, but for what I wanted to do, it would be sufficient."

"And that worked?"

"I don't know." Cas answers slowly. "It wasn't necessary. My Grace still recognizes me. It's still mine, simply--inaccessible, because I shaped it to this purpose. It shouldn't do that, but then again, angels don't generally use the last of their Grace to create wards, so maybe that's perfectly normal and no one ever tried." He looks at Dean speculatively. "What else did Chuck tell you?"

Dean shrugs, non-committal. "That Lucifer's powering them."

Cas smiles slowly, malicious and satisfied all at once. It's a good look for him. "Yes. He does."

"Gabriel would have loved this," Dean tells him, grinning back helplessly. "I mean, he'd be pissed he didn't think of something like this first. Lucifer's powering the wards that protect this camp from him. That's--awesome."

"I had no idea it would even work." The smile widens at Dean's expression. "The wards are based on Bobby's design for the southern camps. It wasn't ideal--we didn't possess some of the necessary components, nor do I have his skill--but with some alterations, it was possible, even if they wouldn't have been as strong or as thorough as the other camps possessed. Before I Fell, I--stored, for lack of a better word--my remaining Grace within the framework of sigils for the wards, but didn't have time to do anything else before the Host summoned me. When I returned and had the leisure to check, it was still safely contained, which meant I had more options than I would have had otherwise.

"Once Bobby's sigils were in place and I was sure they would be stable, I planned to seal my remaining Grace within them and away from me permanently; I couldn't hold it anyway, so it wasn't a hardship. However, there wasn't very much, and I couldn't estimate when it would run out when it was both maintaining the framework of the wards as well as powering them. Then it occurred to me," he adds thoughtfully, "that it didn't actually matter whose Grace was within it. Once it was sealed inside and bound, it was lost to them, and the bindings I used were very, very powerful."

"So you needed more Grace." Cas's practicality comes out at the weirdest times. "Not a lot of that around."

"There was only one candidate," he agrees. "For my purposes, however, Lucifer was the best
possible choice. Archangels are very powerful and their Grace is—not infinite, but for all intents and purposes, very close to it. However, the only ways to acquire an angel's Grace is to either kill them in ritual combat or engage in some extremely questionable and time-consuming rituals, which--" He makes a face. "It would be rather inadvisable to try, let's put it that way."

"So you didn't do that…what am I saying, of course you did." Dean sighs, leaning back on one arm. "Why not, right?"

"Obviously I couldn't kill him to get it, so I had to try something slightly less impossible," he answers reasonably. "Research confirmed that the available options were either ridiculous, beyond the capabilities of any but a god with an inexplicable desire to die in the most unusual and protracted manner possible, or in one case, an unorthodox second century proto-environmentalist who had no expectation of surviving very long but who wanted to bring fertility to the Sahara desert."

"Seriously?"

"If he'd been in Africa, it might have worked. However, as the Ukraine is considered the breadbasket of Europe, we could still consider it a success." Cas sighs wistfully. "Brilliant mind, terrible sense of direction."

"You're kidding." Dean leans forward, startled. "Wait, it worked? How?"

"His goal was specific and the means he used to achieve it followed. It required forcibly summoning an angel and then binding them on this plane. How powerful the binding depended on the strength of the individual who created it, but in this case, that didn't matter, because the point wasn't to hold an angel, but force them to expend Grace to break the binding. And generally, when summoned and taken prisoner, we don't stop to verify the exact amount of Grace required to break the binding."

"Then kill the guy who did it." Suicidal and practical: not a combination you see every day. "And that releases more Grace."

"I can state with certainty that this was a plan that was guaranteed to work without fail," Cas states. "However, while some of the Grace will eventually be absorbed by the earth, it's very slow and—for the purposes of this conversation only—can be said to drift and end up absorbed by anything. To do what this man wanted would require all of it be directed into the earth in a controlled manner—and how he discovered this, I can't imagine—which would cause not only an exponential increase in fertility, but the equivalent of a radical ecological shift in an area roughly the size of the Ukraine to support it." Looking into the middle distance, Cas shakes his head. "Even when the Grace had been entirely consumed, the ecological change assured that the fertility of that area would remain unusually high, barring natural disasters of non-divine origin, of course."

"Like when we found Anna's Grace, the way everything was growing there." Even sealed up, it didn't just affect that tree; an entire garden grew up around it. "So he needed it to go into the earth, or somewhere specific anyway. Which I'm guessing is the part you were interested in."

"How he did it was relatively simple. Four sigils that when combined and inscribed on a suitable conduit would attract Grace, which the conduit would then immediately conduct into the earth in a non-destructive form."

"Like lightning rods," Dean says with a grin and grinning even more when Cas narrows his eyes. "Grace-rods."

"Do you want to hear the rest of this?"
He nods, biting back another grin. "Right. You had your sigils for the wards and a conduit, right? So now all you needed was Grace. So?"

"This is where it became less simple," Cas admits. "Grace is necessary to maintain a vessel's physical form and protect it from harm as well as act as both buffer and filter for human biology and instinct, and consequently, it's in constant use. It not only saturates our vessel, but also--" he tilts his head. "Leaves traces behind. The amount is very small and almost immediately absorbed by Creation, but the more Grace we use, the larger the residuals and the longer it takes for it to be absorbed."

He thinks he sees where this is going. "And Lucifer leaves a lot of that when he's here."

"An archangel doing nothing but existing here would leave a large footprint, but as you know, they have no concept of moderation and a very liberal definition of 'doing nothing'." Dean grimaces sympathetically. "The problem was, the range of the sigils was extremely limited, and the conduit had to be close to the wards themselves. I could make the necessary alterations to extend the range, but whoever created it was likely not actively suicidal, merely extremely committed to dramatically improving grain collected per hectare. There had to be a reason that he and those after him chose to do it this way without alteration. If there had been a successful alteration, it would have been recorded."

"You got infinite knowledge of all time and space, but you think humans--humans--could do it better than you?" Belatedly, Deans' aware that sounds much worse than it did in his head, and he's gotta admit, it didn't sound great there, either. "Let me try that again."

"I'm not offended." Cas says expressionlessly, and Dean has an entire second to try to decide if he can blame this on a sudden fever that vanished inexplicably before he sees the corner of Cas' mouth uptick and remember that right, he's kind of a dick. "Also, I couldn't actually test my changes, as I didn't have very much Grace and even less time. Is that a more satisfactory explanation?" He's still thinking about that when Cas's eyes flicker to the key sigils again. "So within those limitations, what I had to do was somehow get his Grace here, and it's not as if I could call Lucifer here, take his Grace, and banish him again.

"Then it occurred to me," he adds thoughtfully when Dean's still nodding along, "that actually, I could."

Dean freezes mid-nod. "What?"

"Call him here," Cas says calmly. "And then acquire his Grace." Getting to his feet, he extends a hand to Dean. "Come on. I'll show you how I did it."

Dean thought he saw every goddamn sigil in the camp by now; between his first weeks here and his current daily walk of the camp, he could probably find each one wearing a blindfold. As the cluster of cabins grow steadily more distant behind them, Dean tracks their progress in his memories of the complicated loops and curls that decorate the walls. He knows their shape like he drew them himself, what each means, and he even knows now what they do together, but that's just enough to appreciate that he's got no idea how the hell it works or how Bobby thought of it.

"How did Bobby think of this?" he asks, cursing under his breath as Cas catches his elbow almost before he realizes he's about to trip on the uneven ground. Cas's brutal war against overgrown foliage was thorough, and the rigid schedule assures that they now live in a militia camp with a well-maintained lawn (where there happens to be grass, anyway), but this far from the more populated parts of the camp, the ground hasn't had regular exposure to dozens of feet and two ton vehicles to crush it flat. Which reminds him. "Why were the boundaries set this far out anyway?"
"In answer to your second question, it was a matter of simplicity," Cas admits, face an indistinct pale oval when he glances at Dean. "When we found it, Chitaqua was abandoned, and claiming it in its entirety assured no one else could claim any part of it."

"The wards are based on ownership." At Cas's sidelong glance, he shrugs as casually as he can manage, hoping Cas's night vision won't pick up the smug grin. "You said something about it once."

"Do you need me here at all?" There's a smile in his voice. "Yes, and no. Bobby's original design was based on a claim of ownership to the land instead of delineating the territory with sigils. The advantages are obvious, of course."

So he's being tested, okay. "Sigils can be erased, but ownership can only be broken by either right of conquest or single combat--spoils of war."

"What if the original owner returns here?"

Dean snorts. "Nine tenths of the law is possession, right? For this, anyway. I guess that's where single combat comes in if the claim's disputed?" He wonders if this is how it feels to be Sam, busting out useless-at-first-glance-yet-freakishly-relevant-soon-after stupid magic facts at any given opportunity. Dean can't prove it, but he's really starting to wonder if there's a cause and effect between them learning something stupid and obscure and immediately having a job just stupid and obscure enough to need it. It happens a lot.

"Essentially, yes." Effortlessly, he directs Dean around a pile of rocks and dirt before coming to a stop. Dean tries to work out what makes this part of the wall different from the rest of it and fails. "As to your first question….I was both Bobby's reference source and his assistant, and I know what each sigil means, how they interlock, and why it works. I taught him the principles of two of the languages represented here, and explained dozens of ways that wards have been created and used throughout history." He tilts his head, examining the wall. "Despite that, I have no idea how he thought of doing this from what I told him."

He doesn't sound too unhappy about that; if anything, he seems fascinated, studying the shadowed walls as if he's still floored by its very existence. Then he abruptly steps away from Dean, dropping to a crouch beside the wall. Squinting, Dean squints down at him, aware of a vague sense of motion before a small circle of light illuminates a rock flush against the wall. Moving it away with one hand, he points the penlight at the revealed area and gestures at Dean. "Come here."

Crouching beside him, Dean studies complicated sigil that was hidden behind the rock, aware that Cas is watching him. He starts to reach out then hesitates, glancing at Cas warily, who nods reassurance. "You can touch it. It requires blood to be activated."

Feel more confident, he ghosts a finger over them, left to right; somehow, it's familiar, but body memory confirms he's never drawn it before. Sitting back on his heels, he stares at it for a second, then starts from the right, and gets it. "This isn't just one."

"No."

"You got banishing on top of--" He hasn't drawn this, but he's pretty sure he's seen it before, or something like it. "It's gotta be a summoning, but I've never seen it like this."

"You haven't," Cas confirms. "That Lucifer's true name in the context of a summoning."

For some reason--why, he has no idea--he kind of thought Cas meant like, symbolically or something. "Here? You're summoning Lucifer here?"
"I did tell you--"

"Inside the camp?"

"--that I was summoning Lucifer, how was that in any way unclear?"

"I didn't think you meant literally!"

"Why on earth would you think that?" He's gotta give him that one, because look who he's talking to. Dropping neatly onto the ground, Cas points the flashlight at it again, the easier for Dean to stare at it in sheer horrified curiosity. "I did tell you once that if you wished to summon Lucifer--"

"--you had a spell for that." Dean glares at him helplessly. "You're enjoying this."

"I developed a taste for suspense from exposure to prime time drama," Cas agrees. "Did you ever watch House?"

"I thought he couldn't get through the wards."

"When I first did this, the wards didn't yet have that kind of power, so it wouldn't have been a concern even if it was relevant, which it wasn't and still isn't. Technically, he's not being summoned through the wards, because he never actually arrives." Before Dean can work out what that means, Cas shakes his head. "It'll be easier to show you."

Dean watches as Cas puts the flashlight between his teeth, followed by a brief flash of metal, but it's not until Cas reaches out, blood almost obscenely bright against his fingers, that Dean gets it. Sliding his fingers across them, he sits back, and Dean watches in shock as the sigils glow faintly, barely visible in the light from the flashlight, before abruptly going out.

Taking the flashlight out of his mouth, Cas studies it critically. "He's still absent from this plane, it seems."

So that actually happened. "You're summoning him and banishing him at the same time. He can't manifest."

"More that I'm banishing him before I complete the summoning, but generally speaking, yes."

Absently, Cas licks the remaining traces of blood from his fingers, and Dean almost loses the thread of the conversation. "Out of time, it wouldn't matter; a summoning and a banishing exist and occur independently of each other. On this plane, existence is subject to linear time, which forces events to occur in sequence. Not only that, linear time is subject to--"

"Cause and effect." He can see it now. "The banishment cancels out the summoning just after it starts, and since you're calling him in linear time, he's got to answer the same way." Except for one part. "Okay, how are you getting his Grace?"

Cas tilts his head, inscrutable except for that goddamn uptick of one corner of his mouth. "Do you know what actually happens when you banish an angel?"

Honest to God, he has no idea what he did to deserve this. "It banishes them from this plane."

"Yes, but the reason for that is that it banishes our Grace, and our true form goes with it, either with or without our vessels. It's actually more complicated than that, but if you accept that, this will make my explanation much shorter." Dean nods in relief at Cas's expectant look. "Summoning calls an angel, but in linear time, manifestation involves following a sequence of events, and technically speaking, their Grace arrives here first. That Grace is then captured by the sigils and conducted into
the wards just before he's banished."

"And he never manifests at all." He's getting what Cas meant by going with simple. "How'd you find out about the summon/banish thing?"

Cas suddenly finds the wall really interesting. "You might say I took a more proactive approach and-

"You'd never done it before." And they're back to crazy. Like he'd thought they'd be anywhere else. "It's never been done before, has it?"

"No." Cas gives him a flickering glance. "Even if there was some other circumstance someone would want to do something like this--I haven't thought of one yet, and I've tried--time is foreign to us except as it affects those subject to it. Angels don't think in terms of--"

"They don't," Dean interrupts, watching Cas's profile. "You do."

"Living on this plane helps," he admits reluctantly. "It seemed so ridiculously obvious that it never occurred to me that it wouldn't work. It wasn't until after it did that I wondered how I'd thought of it at all."

Following Cas's gaze to the wall, Dean realizes there's something missing. "So where're the sigils?"

"Yes, about that." Cas's pause this time doesn't seem to be for the purposes of dramatic timing. "I mentioned the problem with range. The sigils summon Grace, but to do anything with it, they need a conduit for the Grace to take it where it is supposed to go."

"Yeah, that sounds kinda familiar," he agrees in resignation. "Though it's been like, five minutes, so thanks for catching me up. Where's the conduit, Cas?"

"I may have been mistaken about their creator not being actively suicidal." Cas picks up his knife, reopening the cut on his finger, then switches the flashlight off. Following the motion, Dean watches as the sigils begin to glow, brighter without the light pollution of the flashlight, but it's Cas's hand that gets his attention, the pale glow trailing up each finger in a thin, blue-white line, crossing over the knuckles and filling in four shapes on the back of his hand before joining together in a square that flashes weakly before vanishing.

When Cas turns the flashlight back on, Dean thinks now he's got all of it. "You're the conduit."

Flexing his hand, Cas settles it on his knee. "The human body is of Creation--it can be a conduit, but it can't survive exposure to Grace, especially the amount that would be released by a disgruntled angel. Even this body. However--"

"Your true form can." Dean licks his lips, eyes drawn back to Cas's hand. "How'd you get those on there?"

Cas grimaces. "Essentially, a glorified branding iron heated in a fire fueled by holy oil. I know that sounds--"

"Holy shit." Dean's running a thumb over the skin of Cas's hand before he realizes what he's doing and takes a second to give zero fucks about it, finding the narrow lines by memory and tracing them down to the invisible sigils. His memories of the rack can only be described in the context of pain in a human body, but it's a lie to even try; it's different, and he doesn't need to ask exactly what it meant to get that burned into Cas's true form. He's not sure if it's him or Cas responsible for the faint tremble of their hands, and only with an effort can he make himself let go. Looking up, he swallows, not
even needing to make it a question. "You did it yourself."

"Yes."

Cas flexes his hand, and Dean wonders how the fuck he could have gotten through it, drawing each sigil with careful precision, tracing the long line of each channel on his skin and calmly burning each one through thin flesh and fragile bone and into his own goddamn true form without flinching. Or if he'd nailed his hand down to be sure he wouldn't, maybe to his own goddamn floor or onto fucking rock to make sure he wouldn't accidentally move. Of course he did it alone, of course he did; he'd never ask anyone to help him and have see that, not if he had any other choice.

"My true form channeled Grace from Heaven since the moment I was brought into existence, and the genetic line of this body was designed to contain it without harm, but there are limits." The pause this time is longer, and Dean's hands clench into fists in his lap as he waits to hear the rest of it. "My connection to Heaven was burned out of me by the Host, as well as the ability to contain Grace, but they couldn't change what's intrinsic to me without killing me, any more than your body could be stripped of its ability to exist on this plane without killing you. They could take away my ability to ever hold Grace again, but they couldn't take away my ability to channel and use it."

He doesn't have anything like context to imagine what that must be like for Cas or even what it means, but he thinks he understands now why Cas says he's not an angel. If the Host came back tomorrow, all apologies for being wrong (Dean snorts in his head at the thought), he couldn't go back, not when he can't get Grace from Heaven, can't even hold it, and without it, his body's the only thing he's got to hold his true form. He isn't just locked up inside it and can't get out; even if it was possible to leave, he can't, because without Grace, it's the only place his true form can exist.

Making an executive decision, Dean breaks the silence with the first thing that he can think to say. "Who else did you tell about how the wards work?" He's pretty sure already he knows the answer.

"Counting you?" Cas makes a production of thinking about it, and like that, whatever that was before's gone. "You. Somehow, I didn't think that anyone would be comfortable summoning and banishing Lucifer from our very walls."

"Yeah, might not have gone over well." He considers the wall, mostly to stop himself from asking why Cas told him. "So all of it comes from summoning Lucifer's for grace-napping? I mean, he has to be on this plane to get his Grace?"

"He has to be on this plane for me to summon him, yes, which is a limitation. To get Grace? Interestingly, not anymore," Cas makes a face, like this is the part that's supposed to be confusing. "Everything he does on this plane leaves residue, but wherever it happens to be, it seems to be--attracted here proportional to the amount of Grace. I'm not sure why exactly, perhaps it's lonely and wants companionship on this plane."

"Right." He's pretty sure that sounded normal. He's crazy, after all.

"I'm joking," Cas says seriously. "It may simply be bored, I don't know. At this point, summoning Lucifer is largely for my own entertainment." He tilts his head to regard the sigils with malicious satisfaction. "He must have guessed by now that I'm doing something other than merely amusing myself, but how I'm doing it--much less why--still seems to elude him."

"How can you be sure?"

"If he knew, he might be able to stop answering the summons." Dean blinks, trying to convey what-the-fuck by expression alone. "Angels don't generally subscribe to the concept of free will, and
Lucifer is still an angel. An angel doesn't decide to answer a summons; they simply do it, unless they have reason not to, especially when that summoning is by another Brother.” The blue eyes narrow thoughtfully. "I'm not even sure that if he knew, he would be able to stop: at least, not easily. Neither intent or action cause him harm, and while what I'm doing is for the purpose of keeping him out of the camp, he's only harmed if he tries to enter it. There's no way for him--for anyone--to tell that Grace is what protects the camp. Except me. And apparently, you."

He watches Cas's smile widen incrementally as he gazes at those sigils. "That's why you still summon him."

"Using him to strengthen the wards that keep him out really never stops being funny, no."

"Not just that." Startled, Cas meets his eyes, and Dean stops breathing, stops caring if he ever does again. It's not that he ever forgets what Cas is, or that he even wants to, but the memory's like thinking a lit match is like staring at the sun, like a drop of water to an infinite ocean. It's over almost as soon as it starts, and he hears himself finish exhaling, words chasing themselves off his tongue like they'd been there all along. "To remind him. That he may reign in Hell and might one day rule on earth, that he's so powerful even the Host ran away and he could end existence by accident--but he's still just an angel like any other. When he wants a vessel, he has to ask, and when he's surrounded by holy fire, he can't get out, and when he's summoned, he's still gotta obey. And when he's banished, he's gone."

And fuck yourself, Cas doesn't need to say every time.

Cas looks at him for a long moment, then picks up his knife. "Give me your hand."

Dean doesn't hesitate, knuckles brushing against a callused palm as Cas takes his hand, placing the tip of the knife against his index finger, watching the skin part in a line of blood before he even feels the sting.

"You know my true name because I gave it to you freely. Now write it."

Turning to the wall, Dean scans it briefly before sketching the sigil on the cool stone and stepping back, watching blankly as a thin edge of gold, like the sun breaking through an overcast sky, begins to trace the edges of each sinuous curve, blood vanishing beneath it until Cas's true name looks like it was written in pure light.

"That," Cas says, in a voice Dean's never heard him use before, "is new."

It doesn't stop there, though; thin fingers of shimmering light arrow across the wall toward the key sigils, joining with a flare of brightness like a captive star is hidden somewhere behind the pitted stone before racing across the walls, threads of gold that turn each sigil of the wards into a miniature sun spilling sunlight like liquid gold. Turning, Dean follows their progress around the perimeter of the camp as each sigil bursts into light, mouth dry as it rushes back toward them, the last sigil lighting up and the tendril of gold meets the ward keys, completing the circle with a sense of something locking into place before arrowing back to Cas's true name that was written in Dean's own blood.

Stunned, Dean looks down at the worn green t-shirt he'd put on this morning, running pale, bony fingers over fabric whose color wasn't this vibrant in the weak grey light of morning, fingertips brushing the faded blue denim of his jeans, fresh brown dirt ground into the knees, the toes of scuffed black boots peeking out from beneath the frayed-white hem. Around them, grey-brown rocks are scattered between clumps of scraggly, vividly yellow-green grass that dot the rich brown-black earth. Blinking, he turns around; the darkness is pushed effortlessly beyond walls, the camp illuminated in a bowl of light that doesn't need the long absent sun to be bright. 
Dean feels the brush of Cas's shoulder against his and manages to clear his throat enough to ask, "Uh, can everyone….

"I don't think so," he answers slowly. "No one is screaming yet. I think we can safely assume we're the only ones who can see this."

Before he can form a response to that, the light intensifies, swallowing shapes into outlines that melt away until the world's nothing but light, dazzling gold lightening to shimmering white and ribboning into more colors than he thinks he should be able to see. His only point of reference for the real world the solid warmth of Cas's shoulder, his own fingers closing around the familiar shape of Cas's wrist, for some reason, standing in light incarnate.

*Don't be afraid.*

"I'm not," Dean breathes, feeling the smile spreading across his face as warmth sinks into his bones. He's not afraid at all.

He's not sure how long it lasts, or if it lasts any time at all, but abruptly, it's over. The chill, clammy night closes back around him, the cabins vague, dark shapes in the distance, his night vision unaffected, without even a retinal burn to remind him. Licking his lips, he tries and fails to think of what the hell you're supposed to say after seeing something like that.

"It's less confused now by you," Cas says suddenly, voice unnaturally loud after the shocked silence. "You and Dean were--it could tell something was different. The introduction seems to have explained matters as they stand."

Making an effort, Dean responds, because Cas is his friend and friends do shit like that for each other. "Oh." Then. "Wait. We have the same blood. How would it know--"

"You weren't afraid of them. They like that." A little wistfully, Dean thinks of a time--ten, maybe fifteen minutes ago--where hearing that would be kind of weird. "Apparently, it was a refreshing change--" Cas stops short. "Not that they're alive, of course."

"Yeah." Dean's had very enthusiastic sex with people who weren't this alive. Thinking about the first time he came to this world, the wards he didn't even *know existed* let him through, easy. "So it's not just blood."

Cas is silent, but he's getting the feeling that it's because he's not sure how to answer that. "No," he answers finally. "It knew the difference."

"And the glowing thing…." He has no idea what comes next.

"When I said they could outlast the Apocalypse," Cas interrupts him, sounding surprised, and turning around, Dean stares at the utterly mundane walls, scarred surface, and fights the urge to touch them, search for the invisible lines of light, "that was a severe misjudgment on my part."

Dean just had something not unlike a spiritual experience that involved these wards and a lot of light; if that's not kind of powerful, he's gotta know what the hell Cas is using as his standard. "They're not that strong--"

"They're very strong." Cas tilts his head, eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "I think these could outlast the dissolution of reality itself. Lucifer's temper tantrum, it seems, has effected an upgrade."

He's never taking a walk again. Fresh air can fuck itself if this is the kind of shit breathing it leads to. "So that's why they glowed?"
"Oh, no, they had nothing to do with that. I just noticed, that's all." Stretching absently, he finally turns his attention to Dean. "I have no idea why they did that. You were the one that touched them," he adds, blue eyes wide and brightly curious. "Dean, how did you make my wards glow?"

"You're such a dick," Dean grinds out as Cas helps him up the porch stairs, hideously aware every time the shoulders under his arm begin to shake. "Don't talk to me."

"Dean--"

"You know what? Fuck you."

Reaching out with his free arm, Dean shoves the beads out of their way, hating the way the cheerful wooden tinkling mocks his justifiable rage and promises himself that tomorrow, he's got an appointment with them and the first object he grabs out of Cas's fucking arsenal with an edge.

"Dean--"

Feeling Cas's shoulders spasm, Dean thinks longing about exactly where he's gonna put all those goddamn beads when he's done. "What did I just say?"

"I apologize," Cas says without making any kind of effort to pretend he's not having a fucking blast, which yeah, that's an improvement from laughing so hard he fell backwards over a fucking rock--wait, it's not. "I didn't mean--"

"You so did." Fueled by justifiable (and possibly homicidal) rage, Dean jerks them forward, viciously satisfied at the sound of Cas's shoulder slamming into the bedroom door, and jerks away to hobble two steps before making a lunge for the safety of the bed. Panting triumphantly into the shittiest mattress ever invented, he breathes the heady scent of bleach and doesn't even give a shit that tonight, he's sleeping in his boots because now that he's prone, he's not actually sure he can move again. It's been a long fucking day.

"I'm sorry," Cas says with absolutely no awareness how much Dean wants to kill him, dropping down beside him with a tired squeak of springs, like it just can't even bothered to make the usual chalkboard-grating squeal of protest it inflicts on Dean when he makes the mistake of breathing too hard when he sleeps. "I honestly didn't think it wouldn't occur to you that you being the only hope stopping the Apocalypse and that being--well, Grace, specifically my Grace as well as Lucifer's--there wouldn't have been some kind of recognition."

Turning his head, Dean grimaces at the taste of bleach before fixing Cas with a glare that with any kind of luck will kill him.

"It was saying 'hi', that's what you're telling me." Cas nods agreement, like it's the most obvious thing in the entire goddamn world. "You're telling me that all that--" he flops a hand in what fails to be a significant gesture and lets it drop to the mattress with a sad bounce. "The glow, the--the entire fucking camp lit up like night's the new noon and fuck having an actual goddamn sun--that was it saying hi?"

"I told you that it was confused--"

"Hi?"

"It was rather dramatic," Cas concedes before rolling onto his side and tucking am arm neatly under his head, looking at him from a distance measurable in inches. Vaguely, Dean wonders when personal space was something he forgot about. "More a glory unto thee, chosen son of man, hope of
humanity that will light the world for a thousand years." Cas's eyes flicker away before Dean can get any more than an impression of something as bright as the wards were tonight. "And something something something, thou art blessed, but more or less, yes, it was saying hi. You're going to save the world, which makes you very popular among certain segments of the universe that don't want to die hideously or cease existing entirely. I can see why that would surprise you, by which I mean, I can't."

It takes Dean a couple of tries to answer that, tongue fighting him for every goddamn word as the corners of his mouth curve upward no matter how hard he tries to stop them. "Something is seriously wrong with you, you know that?"

"If you could have seen your face--" Cas stops himself with a physical effort before continuing. "I'm sorry. It likes you." His shrug tries to be way more casual than it really is. "You weren't afraid of it."

"I'm not." Weird, confusing, unexpected, crazy, sure, maybe a little fucked up or okay, a lot, yeah, but he can't be scared of anything that bright; he wouldn't even know where to start. He thinks of the scarred, pitted stone and splintered wood of the walls, and wonders how the hell he could have ever thought that's all there was to see.

"I do understand, however," Cas says, sounding amused. "The first time I manifested for your ancestors--actually, literally yours, strangely enough--they prostrated themselves before me and sobbed hysterically for hours. In the rain."

He imagines Cas's expression--whatever the vessel, he's pretty sure that look belongs to Cas and Cas alone--completely unruffled and as calm as a corpse at his own autopsy just barely covering an angelic freak-out of Biblical proportions. "You didn't make a run for it?"

"If I'd been capable of thinking of that, I would have." Cas looks into the distance with a pensive expression. "Hours, Dean. In linear time. In the rain. It was horrific. There was mud. I almost missed the lack of accusations of fornication with their sheep; at least that would have broken the monotony."

Burying his face in the mattress, Dean laughs so hard he can't breathe; faintly, over the sound of his own hiccuping gasps, he can hear Cas doing the same thing and that just makes him laugh harder.
--Day 94--

As many things in his life, this began when Castiel, unambiguously and with full knowledge of the consequences (general if not exact), said, "Yes" to Dean's question: in this case, "Well? You in or what?"

It can be said that free will is at its most essential the opportunity--some might even argue the right--to define self not by what you are but what you choose to be. Say what you will about the quality, advisability, or sanity of the decisions he's made since he first claimed that right, he's never hesitated to make them or accept the consequences that followed. He never felt he had to do with grace, of course, but he would like to see any human born able to do that with some of the ones he's made.

As with many things that involve Dean Winchester and questions, however, the consequences are nothing like he expected. Or even thought might exist.

"Don't disarm," Dean says, again, leveling an impartial glare at them all. "That's an order, by the way. Everyone keeps their weapons this time. We're polite, but we're not gonna be stupid."

He remembers meetings like this, but rarely was he sober or clean enough to truly appreciate the full horror.

"I know," Joe says obediently, again. "I get it."

"You really don't," Dean retorts, rolling his eyes toward the heavens in an unmistakable plea for mercy. "So let's take it from the top."

He should have anticipated something like this, he supposes uncertainly, but for the life of him, he's not sure how. Understanding in theory is one thing, but the reality is unsettling, and not just in the sheer lack of response to each increasingly ridiculous statement or his own horrible sobriety while voluntarily listening to it.

"Remember, this is business, not social hour," Dean continues, one insane word piled on another into sentences that in themselves are correct yet make no sense even as a thought exercise. "They may one day be allies, but they aren't and can't be friends, you get me? We protect them, we don't eat their steak and potatoes and hang with their kids. We're gonna help them and trade with them, but say it with me--"

"This is business," everyone repeats obediently, and Castiel wonders if this is how Dean felt when he first appeared in this world; one moment, all was familiar, and the next, very much not.

An hour past dawn, when Joseph came to do his final check in before leaving to hear the answer from the communities, Dean firmly herded the entire team to join Castiel on the couch, and while there shouldn't have been room, his flat stare encouraged them to defy physics. Which is why Castiel is currently listening to a surreal lecture aimed at Joseph's team with Ana almost in his lap, and he and Mike are acting as a physical barrier between a somewhat ambivalent Joseph and Leah.

(Amanda's bewildered as well; Joseph's been sullen and uncommunicative, Mike confused, and Ana and Leah twice requested a hangover remedy from the mess yesterday. The second time, he understands from Penn, was because the first one didn't work. For some reason, that sounds familiar.)
"If they ask you to disarm, you say 'no','" Dean continues, pinning Joseph to his precarious seat on the edge of the couch with a flat stare. "You don't strip down like this is fucking 'Showgirls' and wait for the dollar bills and vegetables to roll in. Furthermore…"

"Movie," Ana breathes without moving her lips, unaware that's only the most recent source of Castiel's bemusement. "Vegas showgirls, really bad, no actual strippers, but Elizabeth Berkley was--holy shit worth the price of admission--"

Dean turns on them. "What was that?"

"Don't trade sex for potatoes?" Leah asks desperately. She may be the only person in this room who is making sense (though he's now curious about 'Showgirls', more's the pity they don't have a TV or DVD player). "I will not do that."

"For French fries, nothing is off the table," Mike mutters, and it's an effort not to groan.

"You think this is funny, Mike?" Dean demands, coming up to the very welcome barrier of the coffee table and looking in danger of shoving it out of the way at any given moment.

Castiel isn't certain what's more disturbing; the content of the lecture, or Dean's tragic and inexplicable loss of his sense of humor. That was rather funny, possibly because this is Mike and it's probably true.

Dean's wearing a pair of Castiel's sweatpants (Disneyland, very faded blue) with a very large The Who t-shirt (no longer sparkly, once black) with a loose flannel (red like few things can hope to be) and is barefoot, unarmed, and his hair is sticking up in the back. Despite all this, he's swallowed up all the available space in the room (cabin, camp, world perhaps), heels leaving visible indentations in the rug with every determined step and each gesture slicing air as if offended him personally and it must pay.

It's utterly fascinating; Castiel could watch him all day, but only if he could discard the soundtrack that's slowly but surely escalating from 'strange but expected' to outright disturbing with no sign of stopping without intervention. A glance at Joseph confirms that the chances of that happening are diminishing more quickly with every pause he lets slip by.

"Fine, let's start at the beginning," Dean says in exasperation, beginning the endless pacing once again. "You go in that town, they aren't your friends and if you think they won't put a bullet in your head, you're an idiot. You can't trust anyone. We need this agreement, and your job is to make sure we get it. You know what's at stake here: no one wants to starve."

"We have MRE's," Castiel offers into the brief silence, wondering if perhaps Dean forgot (and was concussed at some point, as those can cause personality changes; perhaps he should he have checked this morning?), but Dean ignores him so thoroughly he almost doubts he actually spoke (and is beginning to suspect he doesn't exist). How unexpectedly familiar a feeling that is, but he's not used to that anymore.

Turning his attention back to Joseph, who looks as if he regrets both getting up this morning or any in his life, Dean continues to explain exactly what they'll be doing today. It's definitely words and sentences, but put together they are nothing like what Castiel understood their job entailed or that of anyone else here.

"What's going on?" Leah whispers frantically as Dean begins his explanation of all the ways to say 'no' when told to disarm and how to handle the other mayors (firmly? With intent? What does that mean?). Reminders that Joseph disarmed voluntarily and without prompting, however, are a terrible idea, or so the first hour of this slow and endlessly monotonous nightmare have taught them all.
"Cas?"
"What?" he whispers, half-hidden by Ana's convenient back.

"Your job," Dean states, punctuating the word with so much intensity the air itself seems to be withdrawing from the room in reaction, "is to get us that agreement. Is this getting through?"

Leah looks at Castiel incredulously, and for a moment, he doesn't see Leah but Risa halfway across the room, sandwiched between a riveted Erica and a worshipful Stanley agreeing with Dean's every word, and the unforgiving brown eyes meeting his.

You're useless, and with an eyebrow adding, And very obedient, by the way.

Useless, of course: obedient, now that's insulting.

"Let's conquer them and save ourselves some time," Castiel hears someone say, and in the utter absence of sound that follows he realizes it was him.

Dean stops short, turning on his heel to inflict on Castiel his full and undivided attention. Dean's attention is a world of its own; it has weight, substance, and can crush you entirely beneath it without apology.

"What?" Dean asks softly, looking at him as if he's never seen him before and perhaps regrets doing so now. "You got something to say?"

Somewhere a clock is ticking down the moments to explosion or implosion, dismissal without explanation, or a reminder if he can't be constructive, he should shut up.

"Well?" Dean asks, starting to look bored, possibly already moving on, and very, very familiar.

Useless, yes, obedient, never, but constructive: let's find out.

"I apologize; I misunderstood your intentions," he answers, gently moving a startled Ana into Mike's equally startled lap and slumping back into the couch. "Trade agreements and negotiation, that's what you said, so you must forgive me for not being aware of our eventual goal. Give me a week and your team leaders, and I'll bring Kansas to its knees in your name.

"Two if we sleep," he adds casually into the electrified silence, and crossing his arm, he waits.

"Holy shit," Joseph breathes. "Cas--"

"What the hell," Dean asks quietly, "are you talking about?"

"The ultimate plan, of course. We'll run the unbelievers out of each town I sack to spread the word of your coming," Castiel drones in pointed boredom, perfected over many long meetings much like this, and often in hopes of getting that exact expression on Dean's face--yes, that one, excellent. "The choice is to kneel or be killed, it works very well; I should know, I've done this before. Fear is powerful, and it will do the work when burning them alive for your greater glory won't; trust me, even war grows monotonous and we'll want to wrap this up quickly."

Somewhere pleasant, he hopes, Risa is laughing.

"Cas--" Ana starts worriedly, like she just might consider de-escalation an option that just might work.

"Shut up," Dean says, never looking away from Castiel. "Where did you get that from?"

"I'm sorry, did I miss anything that didn't point to terror as motivation?" he asks. "You don't do that
half-way, Dean; fear is the most dangerous thing in the world, it's a fire set to dry tinder, and we can burn the world alive with it whether we want to or not, so once we light it, we better mean to do just that."

This time, the silence is almost physically painful. Then Dean says, "Keep going."

"It's not about a trade agreement or vegetables, though that would be pleasant, yes, but we can grow food ourselves, provided anyone here understood how things grow," he continues impatiently. "We are dangerous; we hunt that which hunts the people here, and it fears us like it fears nothing and no one else. They know that, every person we meet, it's our stock in trade; the weapons are just accessories. We don't need them; we prove it every time we're not afraid to take them off. Yes, Joseph made the offer first, but no one there didn't guess what it meant that he did without hesitation. Joseph, in that room, where was the door?"

"Behind me, ten feet," Joseph answers quietly. "They gave me choice of seating."

"They made their first mistake before negotiations even began," Castiel says. "The watchers?"

"Line of sight, twenty-five feet, across the table. All the mayors were out of line of fire--"

"Danny was to your right, your strongest hand," Castiel says, pulling up the memory of Joseph's report. "Ana's left isn't bad, and Noak's mayor was right beside her; they, too, underestimated a woman and he sat closer to her than Danny did to you. Get them both, flip the table, use that as defense and tell them to drop their weapons; they wouldn't even have time to get off a shot before you had hostages for their good behavior and to use as human shields on the way to the door. You memorized the route, know what building you were in--they practically gave you a tour of the town on the way there, well done--and passed right by the daycare, a mine of potential hostages if you needed them--"

"Uh, Cas," Dean starts worriedly.

"--and that's only the most obvious; Joseph probably had half a dozen plans in place before they even entered the room and chose his seating to cover all of them. The risk they knew they took in extending the invitation is nothing to the reality of who they sat down with in that room. They had ten armed people that reacted every time Joseph or Ana moved even disarmed, because they were faced with two people who they knew hunted demons, and as you may be aware, they aren't terribly vulnerable to guns," Castiel finishes flatly. "Joseph's job wasn't to convince them to trade with us, they'd be stupid not to, our terms are excellent; it was to convince them we were asking an actual question and they had a choice in their answer."

Dean cocks his head, a strange expression on his face. "Doesn't seem fair, does it? We never threatened them."

"Life's not fair," he answers, aware of Joseph straightening with an arrested expression. "There are compensations in having the ability to keep experiencing it due to your own skill, which is not an advantage many have, and being able to assure others will also have the opportunity to continue doing the same."

"Saving people," Dean says, nodding. "Helping things."

He's reserving the right to consider that mockery; it's been a very long morning. "Joseph, ignore Dean; disarm when they ask you, do what they request of you, follow the rules they set to the letter, because it's a very tiny window we have to earn their trust in the very narrow space they believe they're safe enough to even make the attempt. The day will come when they will know that what you
let them believe wasn't true, they'll realize who they've invited into their lives, and the only thing protecting them from you is yourself, and they have to trust you in that. If you don't have it by then, you never will."

Dean turns his attention to Joseph, cocking his head. "So, just from my own curiosity; what the hell would it have taken for you to tell me I was wrong?"

Joseph, thus called upon, jerks his attention back to Dean with a blank stare.

"All I had left was put a gun to their heads when you see them," he continues, crossing his arms in dissatisfaction. "I didn't think I could hear you say 'Yes, Dean' to that, much less worry for the next few days you might actually do it. I swear to God, if I said jump off that cliff over there, would you just do it?"

"I would," Castiel snaps, glaring at Dean, whose mouth twitches suspiciously. "But I'd go get a rope first, and I'd like to see you stop me."

"You'd tell me to fuck myself first," Dean corrects him with a flickering smile like lightning across a clear sky, there and gone but for the retinal burn. "Remember when you all were training--great stories, thanks," which for some reason make Joseph and Ana look inexplicably alarmed, "the first time you saw what Cas could do? Joseph, tell everyone about the rocks." He grins, all teeth. "You can leave off that part, fine."

Joseph straightens, clearing his throat. "Uh--moving target practice, but we were supposed to avoid hitting anyone, which much harder than you'd think. Kamal's throw was off--"

"He was tired," Castiel murmurs, remembering that. "I should have been watching closer."

"He knew, he was just too pissed to care," Joseph retorts. "He was competing with Amanda--she just never got tired--and that rock went right at James face...." He trails off, shaking his head. "Next thing, James is on the ground, Cas is tossing that fucking rock like we've disappointed every ancestor we had, and Kamal's doing laps around Chitaqua every day after class for a week."

Dean looks at Cas. "Rock dodgeball?"

"It's excellent training to improve reflexes," he offers to Dean's twitching mouth. "And quite entertaining to watch, until the potential for concussion becomes an issue."

"Did that scare you?" Dean asks Joseph, who looks back in genuine surprise. "I mean, when you thought about it later?"

"No," Joseph answers, then sighs. "You're saying we're Cas among the trainees out there?"

"You got it," Dean agrees with an unexpected edge of malice. "And like Cas, you're not going to show them how you can snap their necks before they get a chance to say 'hi' and sign this trade agreement with that in mind. So by the time they find out, they're pretty sure you won't anyway."

"Pretty sure?" Ana echoes uncertainly; yes, he'd like to know the answer to that one, too.

"Ninety-nine percent," Dean assures her. "Not hanging up your towel is dangerous, in case anyone is curious."

Everyone looks at Castiel, and for a long moment, he reconsiders Dean's sanity. "If you hang it up while it's still damp, it doesn't need to be washed as often," he answers. "Doing laundry is tedious enough, there's no reason to increase the number of loads. I apologize if I made you feel I would kill
you for forgetting after your last shower. I wouldn't."

"I'm back to one hundred percent."

"For that, anyway." Dean ducks his head to hide the smirk. "We were wishing Joseph and his team good luck, correct? And not--whatever we were doing just now?"

"Life lesson," Dean explains helpfully. "No one passed but Cas: everyone else, you got studying to do. Seriously, what the fuck, people?"

Joe is studying Dean thoughtfully, earlier worry receding before his eyes, and once again, Castiel wonders how Dean can do that so easily. Trust must be earned, but he know from bitter experience it's impossibly fragile even when given freely: so little can shatter it beyond hope of repair. "So--"

"So, you know what to do and how to do it," Dean tells them. "You don't need me to tell you what that is; if you do, you shouldn't be outside these walls. You sure as fuck should be telling me when I'm wrong about how you should do your job, and I'm taking it personally that you think I'll cry for my hurt feelings if you do. Your orders are, yes, no, or call us later, they aren't afraid, and if anything happens--anything at all--they call us to help. But if they say no, get some potato seed or whatever, because Cas is right, MREs are next up." He grins at them. "What have we learned?"

"You're a dick," Joseph says in resignation as he heaves himself off the couch. "And we're not conquering Kansas today."

"Go forth, and for fuck's sake if you can use the words 'be not afraid', do it," Dean answers, slapping Joseph's shoulder as he passes. Castiel watches them exchange a grin before he squeezes Ana's shoulder, nods at Mike and Leah's tentative smiles as they leave.

When they're gone, Dean circles the coffee table to sit down with a sigh before looking at Castiel. "A week to take Kansas in my name?"

"Two if we slept," Castiel offers, still feeling disoriented. "I was a little distracted wondering when you went insane and how I failed to notice."

"You ever try escalating on the fly?" Dean demands. "That shit's hard."

"I have, and yes, I know. It was convincingly insane." Frowning, he slumps into the cushions. "I shouldn't have interrupted you. I knew what you were trying to do."

"You're just mad you lost the bet," Dean says in amusement. "So you got patrol next three mornings."

Castiel gives him a dark look. "So what I've been doing already while you were ill."

"I'm still recovering," Dean says smugly, then sighs. "It wasn't fair. I knew it'd go down like this. Two mornings, fine."

"What?"

"Joe would have argued with me if he was here alone, but not with his team here. Remember what he said about the negotiations, so many men in the room compared to women?" Dean asks. "Same principle. Joe's team was silent because he's their leader and they follow his lead, but to him, that's a lot of people not arguing with me, plus you. In this case, the 'if not with me against me' thing kicked in, so he went along with the majority." The green eyes grow distant. "Fear's dangerous, Cas, and you can't always see the fire; sometimes, all you got is the smell of smoke."
He looks at Dean in surprise. "I have to remember that one. Expressive, yet not clichéd."

"When I’m good, I'm good," Dean agrees, smiling at him. "So that what it was like when Castiel attended patrol meetings way back in the day? Sorry I missed it, and I mean that."

"I didn't call you 'Scourge of evil' and there was no implication you had sexual congress with quite literally anything that would stay still long enough, so--""}

Dean bursts into laughter, head dropping back on the cushions.

"--not as much, no. For one," he adds honestly, "Dean would stop me much earlier."

"Yeah, his mistake," Dean says cryptically, then gives him a curious look. "Speaking of, why the hell did he make you go to those meetings, anyway?"

"Irony," he answers with a sigh. "When I volunteered to join Dean's team, I didn't realize at the time that Dean had always intended to ask me. This gave him the opportunity to place certain conditions on that, knowing I wouldn't refuse. One of them was that I was always present for any and all meetings regarding our missions as well as the weekly meetings with the team leaders."

"Talk about the hells you negotiate for yourself with an ex-angel," Dean says in mock-wonder. "And you told him what you thought of his plans?"

"Personality, habits, speculated sanity, as well as that of the other team leaders in detail," he answers in remembered satisfaction. "And plans, of course."

"Did he listen?" As if he somehow missed that last meeting that long ago day before Kansas City. Castiel appreciates the attempt at implying that was an exception and not the rule.

"When it was something he felt was in my area of expertise--I believe he called it 'angel crap'--then yes, of course," he answers absently. "Not being human, of course, I couldn't always understand why some course of action was preferable to another, even after multiple explanations. In retrospect, I'm sure it was more frustrating and disappointing to him than it was to me. However, if anyone needed something killed, I could kill it, so the meetings were often previews of coming events."

"You never stopped telling him he was wrong, though."

Castiel thinks of those meetings, trapped in a room with Dean, Risa, and at least three people who wanted to kill him at any given time (usually more): hatred and contempt, revulsion and barely checked disgust, but always fear above all things. Fear is dangerous, he knows that, so if you plan to use it, you don't do it half-way.

"No," he answers, resting his feet on the coffee table. "It was a way to pass the time. Also, it was convenient. Vera's trips to Georgia needed an excuse for her to be out of the camp, and fortunately, when she finished training, Dean assigned her to extended missions. It was simple enough to assure she received the ones that required considerable travel time with no set return date."

"To avoid her much better aim after training?"

"That," he agrees in amusement, "but Dean did understand why she'd be more comfortable on those missions. She also had a talent for getting the information he needed and rarely failed in her assignments. It was a simple matter to arrange."

"I forgot to ask," Dean says suddenly. "Why'd you tell Vera about the other camps anyway?"
"I didn't." Sighing, he tips his head back on the couch. "It was an unfortunate convergence of circumstances. After Debra died, Vera stayed with me during training and for a short time after that—in a completely platonic manner," he adds suspiciously at Dean's innocent look. "Chuck used to accompany the patrol team to the border as our negotiator, but he was terrible at it. When Joseph replaced him, he didn't have any way to pass the reports to the border guards to deliver to those on the Georgia border. Vera overhead us discussing it when he came to ask me what we should do. I had no idea she was even listening."

Dean raises his eyebrows.

"I told you I wasn't used to living with anyone," he answers defensively. "I wasn't better at it then. Vera generally preferred to isolate herself in misery when not in training—which I understood—and Amanda or Risa would have to coax her out to experience fresh air not dusty from training and conversation with someone, since I wasn't very good at that, either."

"Risa?" Dean asks so casually that he might as well have added 'and this is not a casual question, in case you missed it'. "She was one of the team leaders, right?"

"Recently promoted," Castiel says carefully without reference to reason, assuming Dean will make the appropriate connections. "Sometimes, she didn't even have to grit her teeth before speaking to me, which in all honesty put her far ahead of many in the camp."

Dean nods, and Castiel would do a great deal to know what exactly he's thinking.

"In any case, I didn't realize Vera was present, and she heard enough to put together a fairly accurate guess," he continues. "Explaining the whole took less time than trying to deny it, especially since I couldn't make it believable."

"Huh," Dean says, sitting back. "So she offered to take over the Georgia runs?"

"She was adamant when she realized that Chuck and I were going to stop." Cast gives him a rueful look. "I thought it was probable her goal was to settle in Alpha, so it was something of a surprise when she returned with Gloria's letter and a surprisingly thorough report on what she observed. Not that she went into Alpha itself, which also surprised me; her explanation was that I'd ordered her not to, which was possibly the single strangest thing I'd heard since I Fell."

Dean doesn't bother to hide his smile. "She tell you why she wanted to do it?"

"The same reason I wanted to keep in contact in the first place," he answers slowly. "I suppose, in a sense, she was following your philosophy; she wanted more options. Not that either of us believed we'd ever have the chance to use this one."

"And she never told anyone. Besides Jeremy, I mean."

"The trips were not without their dangers; crossing the border is always a risk, and she has to cross into and out of at least one uninfected state each time. For various reasons, the same route couldn't be used each time, and it was inadvisable to cross certain parts of even infected states. One of the reasons I agreed to train Jeremy myself was because Dean had expressed his desire for her to have a partner on her missions, and Jeremy was the best and safest option as well as the only one she would easily accept. However, I think her other reason for insisting I do it was that she worried about who would do it should she be unable to."

Dean gives him a long look. "And if that happened?"

"I would have sent Jeremy to Alpha with a message to Gloria to keep him there," Castiel answers,
staring at the far wall. "Vera's his only family here; without her, he would have no one at all and there would be no reason for him to stay here. In Alpha, he would be safe. Gloria would take him to Elijah, who, much like you, is extremely pliable when it comes to children."

"Jesus, only you," Dean murmurs, then abruptly makes an annoyed sound, and Castiel sees him looking at the eastern window ruefully. "Crap, I miss my watch. Looks like you're gonna be late for the morning lecture to the camp on their assignments on this glorious Apocalyptic day."

"Those are only weekly now and I never used any form of the word 'glory'," he responds absently, reviewing his duties today and what requires his attention or participation this morning: the afternoon he already arranged to his satisfaction. "However, there are a few things I should see to."

Dean grins at him, jerking his head toward the door, but the faint disappointment is impossible to miss. "See you tonight. Have fun."

"Yes," he says as he reluctantly gets to his feet, reminding himself firmly why he can't linger now, "that's what I was thinking, too."

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Castiel is startled by two things on his return to the cabin just after noon: the first being Chuck's sudden, relieved smile at his appearance--not an expression that he thinks he's ever seen on Chuck's face in response to his mere presence--and the second, the closed bedroom door.

From the early days after the fever, the door was rarely if ever closed unless Dean requested it (sometimes very pointedly and with commentary on privacy). He's never denied Dean's accusation that he's paranoid, which in turn has led to Dean admitting, however reluctantly, that perhaps his habit of becoming deathly ill from minor wounds may provide some justification for it. The rule has been relaxed somewhat in response to Dean's increasing good health, but habit is pernicious; it's rare that Dean closes it without a specific reason.

Glancing into the kitchen, he sees the table is still littered with the detritus of lunch (noted: finished, excellent) but the chairs are still pulled away from the table, as if their inhabitants vacated them unexpectedly, and combined with the above....

"Who's with him?" Castiel asks in vague annoyance. Visitors are frequent and to be encouraged, but he wishes they'd remember to add their names to the schedule; it's there for a reason. Especially during lunch: it's still something of a challenge to get Dean to finish a well-balanced meal and distractions don't help.

"Sid," Chuck says immediately, wringing his hands and looking worried above and beyond an unexpected visitor, even Sidney. "He said he had to talk to Dean and Dean told me he'd be a few minutes. I tried to tell him--"

"Did he disarm?"

Chuck winces, and yes, that would be the reason; the schedule is (reluctantly) optional, but that isn't.

Before he can explain, Castiel is already at the door, knowing it would be pointless to blame him for following Dean's orders and reserving the right to do so anyway at a later time. He just remembers the correct method to request entry and knocks to satisfy half of it before opening the door. Two sets of eyes fix on him with surprise, but only Sidney's also reflect hostility. Dean simply looks vaguely amused from his seat on the edge of the bed, one leg swinging absentely.

"Afternoon, Cas," he says, green eyes dancing inexplicably as Castiel scans Sidney. "Miss me?" He jerks his head. "Close the door and sit down. Sid--"
"Dean," Sidney interrupts rigidly, sitting impossibly straight in the chair across from Dean. "This is private."

"Nothing's private from Cas when it comes to the camp," Dean answers easily. "Cas?"

Closing the door on a relieved-looking Chuck, he leans back against it and crosses his arms, smiling at Sidney, pleased to see him stiffen further. "I prefer to stand."

"Suit yourself." Turning his attention back to Sidney, Dean cocks his head. "Okay, so anything else?"

Sidney gives Castiel a venomous look before he shakes his head, lips compressed into a thin, unhappy line. Castiel supposes he could have been less obvious that this discussion was about him, but then again, Sidney isn't known for his grasp of subtlety. The only surprise is that it's taken him this long to approach Dean personally; he expected Sidney to do so as soon as Dean started leaving the cabin regularly.

"All right," Dean says cheerfully, seemingly oblivious to flush rapidly spreading across Sidney's face. "Let me talk to Cas and--"

"Why do you have to clear it with Cas first?" Sidney bursts out angrily, face now resembling that of an overripe tomato. "This is your goddamn camp, right?"

Dean's smile doesn't change. "It's my camp," he agrees mildly, but when Castiel glances at him, the green eyes are watchful. "You got a problem with how I choose to run it?"

"I have a problem with the fact you're not the one running it anymore!" Sidney snaps, lunging to his feet. Castiel stiffens, but Dean flickers a warning glance at him before he's taken more than a step toward them. Sidney glares at Castiel briefly before looking at Dean again. "What the hell is he doing to you?"

"You were doing okay until that part." Dean's smile vanishes, green eyes hard. "Sit the fuck down, Sid."

Sidney obeys instantly, hostility abruptly replaced by uncertainty and the beginnings of fear. "Dean, I didn't mean--"

"I know what you meant," Dean interrupts, voice dangerously even. "Pay attention, Sid: I'm only gonna do this once." Reaching behind him, he pulls out Sidney's gun, weighing it in one hand, and Sidney's eyes widen in almost comical surprise, hand dropping automatically to his empty holster. "You heard what Chuck said about coming in here armed."

"You were doing okay until that part." Dean's smile vanishes, green eyes hard. "Sit the fuck down, Sid."

Sidney licks his lips, eyes fixed on the gun helplessly. "I didn't--"

"I know what you meant," Dean interrupts, voice dangerously even. "Pay attention, Sid: I'm only gonna do this once." Reaching behind him, he pulls out Sidney's gun, weighing it in one hand, and Sidney's eyes widen in almost comical surprise, hand dropping automatically to his empty holster. "You heard what Chuck said about coming in here armed."

Sidney licks his lips, eyes fixed on the gun helplessly. "I didn't--"

"Shut up. Chuck shouldn't have had to remind you; the entire camp got the announcement of the new world order." Dean checks the safety before tossing the gun casually on the pillow beside him, then braces both hands on the edge of the mattress. "Sid, why did you bring a gun into this room against orders?"

The blood drains from Sidney's face in a sickly rush. "I didn't think--"

"That I knew about it? Or did you think I'd let it slide because Cas is the one that gave the order?" Sidney hesitates before shaking his head frantically. "Every order Cas gives in this camp is mine. Do you understand?"
Sidney nods immediately. "Yes, Dean."

"The reason you don't have a new team is that you're a shitty leader," Dean tells him. "That wasn't Cas's decision: it was mine. You almost killed half your team on patrol by sheer incompetence, and today, you got disarmed by a guy who still gets tired from getting up to take a piss and sleeps twelve hours a day and you didn't even notice. Tell me you see the problem here."

Sidney nods again, throat bobbing visibly as he swallows.

"Now, let's talk about what happened in here today." Sidney stills, closing his eyes. "You know the penalty for disobeying orders, I don't need to remind you."

"Expulsion from the camp," Castiel says helpfully at Dean's quick, hopeful glance. "With ten days of rations in MREs, of course."

Sidney licks his lips, peering at Dean's set expression before taking a deep breath. "I understand."

"Good," Dean says. "Then you'll appreciate what I'm about to tell you. I'm gonna give you a choice."

"What?" Sidney blinks, startled.

"Option one: you leave here, go to your cabin and get your shit, grab a ration pack from supply, and leave." Dean pauses, studying Sidney. "Option two: you stay. You'll be confined to your cabin when off-duty for the next month, and Cas will decide what your duties are gonna be, but assume there's gonna be a lot of mowing in your immediate future just to start. After a month, Cas gives me a report on how you're doing, and we'll decide what happens next." Before Sidney can do more than gape, Dean adds, "You show up here at dawn tomorrow, I'll assume you want to stay. You're dismissed."

Sidney swallows, nodding frantically as he starts to his feet.

"Sid," Dean says softly, and Sidney stills, looking up. "This conversation isn't happening again. Next time, I'll just shoot." He jerks his head toward the door. "Go."

Nodding again, he turns toward the door to blink at Castiel warily. Stepping back, Castiel opens the door, watching him hurry past Chuck and waiting for him to vanish outside before saying to Chuck, "You can go," who follows Sidney out immediately.

When he turns around, Dean's looking at him expectantly; it's almost enough to make him forget that when Dean told Sidney he'd shoot him, he meant it. "So? How'd I do?"

"It's your decision," he answers. "Chitaqua is yours, and your orders are final."

Dean jerks his head toward the chair in an invitation just short of an order. Uncertain, Castiel gingerly seats himself, and as Dean fixes him with that relentless green gaze, he feels a flicker of unwilling sympathy for Sidney being the focus of that.

After an endlessly long pause, Dean's mouth twitches. "Thanks for the evaluation."

"I don't..." He rolls his eyes. "It was the right decision. Not that you need my approval, of course."

" Doesn't mean I don't want to hear what you have to say," Dean says, bracing a hand on the mattress behind him. "We'll work on that."

Castiel nods, wondering what that's supposed to mean.
"Less bloodthirsty than I thought you'd go for, though," Dean adds, cocking his head. "Considering your expression when you came in here."

"I liked the last part very much," he confirms, and Dean loses his battle with a grin. "If he'd still been armed when I came in, the temptation to shoot him would have been difficult to resist, but I noticed his holster was empty."

Dean looks as if something is amusing him greatly. "You don't say."

"It's my job," he answers repressively. "I wish you'd had him elaborate on what exactly what it was I was supposedly doing to you to gain your compliance in my authorized coup of the camp, however. Torture would be fairly difficult to hide."

Dean abruptly seems to find the bathroom door inexplicably riveting. "It's a mystery. Anyway--"

"Sidney actually isn't that terrible, at least when it comes to combat." Dean looks back at him attentively, perfectly aware of what he wants to know. "How did you disarm him?"

"It's killing you, wondering if you missed something in training," Dean interprets. "What's bothering you more: that he came in here with a gun, or I got it away from him and he didn't even notice?"

He closes his eyes. "Professional pride may be a factor, yes."

"He's been grounded too long, that's all," Dean answers, giving in gracefully. "I think I get why he fails at leadership--way too easily distracted. I heard him arguing with Chuck and moved the chair to the wall so he'd have to turn his back on me to get it. Between the fight with Chuck, his worry Chuck would go for reinforcements--that being you--and being righteously pissed at you, he wouldn't have noticed me put a gun to his head before I pulled the trigger."

"Why did you disarm him?" Even in his more pessimistic moments regarding Sidney's character, he honestly can't see him attacking Dean.

Dean shrugs, looking pleased with himself. "I wanted to see if I could. And you know, the rule about being armed in here. Why is that again?"

"You attacked Vera with her own knife during the fever, and despite being feverish, dehydrated, and hadn't been able to keep down food for two days, almost managed to cut her throat while reciting an exorcism," he answers practically. "If you need to know why it's in effect now, review the last five minutes for the answer."

"Sid didn't come here to shoot me." Dean cocks his head. "So how long is that rule gonna last anyway?"

"I think it would be prudent that it remain permanent," he admits, ignoring Dean's snort. "But after today, the reason for it will be less pressing."

"Oh?" Dean looks curious, then frowns. "Wait, why are you here anyway? Don't you have--"

"I gave Melanie temporary command for the remainder of the day."

Dean winces. "What do you owe her for that?"

"A bottle of Eldritch Horror," he answers, adding in bewilderment, "I have no idea how that name has spread so quickly or how it became so popular." Dean bites his lip. "Also, possibly my soul: it wasn't my best negotiation. Do you need assistance getting dressed?"
Dean scowls at him. "Hell no, and why?"

"Dress warmly. You'll need your boots," he answers, getting up. "I'll wait for you outside."

Dean slowly gets out of the jeep, looking around the quiet countryside in surprised pleasure. "I knew there was a world outside the camp walls, but you know, my memory since the fever…"

"Unlike your fixation on counting imaginary sheep, this is quite real," Castiel answers from the other side of the jeep. Dean gives him a half-interested look before turning back to take in the orchard of fruit trees surrounding them, a riot of red-brown and yellow leaves rustling softly in the light breeze. "I thought that you might prefer to take your daily exercise here rather than within the walls of the camp. Provided it remains safe to do so and you are accompanied, you can choose to go anywhere within a five mile radius of the camp."

Most of the area immediate to Chitaqua was abandoned before they arrived, but he thinks this must have been a small family farm at one time; the overgrown fields in yellow-browns and fading greens surround the remains of what might have been a farmhouse before it collapsed, but the large barn is still standing, the red and white faded but still easily visible. His explorations ended at the ten mile mark, but he remembers coming here several times soon after they settled in Chitaqua, watching the progression of pink blooms that would one day become fruit if an early or late freeze didn't kill them on the branch.

Despite the growingly erratic pattern of the seasons over the last five years, the weather's finally drifted into an uncertain fall, the crisp air promising winter may arrive in the general vicinity of December. As Dean shivers despite the layers of t-shirt and flannel beneath the coat that was acquired when Castiel sent a team to find Dean suitable clothing, he makes a mental note to plan another excursion soon. And for that matter find someone who either knows how to hang a door or he can motivate to learn how to do it or teach him themselves. Surely it can't be that difficult, he thinks; humans have been building their own shelters for millennia when they graduated from caves.

Dean glances at him wryly over the hood. "Which team drew the short straw for babysitting?"

Sighing, he circles to the rear of the jeep. "It was the first meeting I've conducted where I had to order everyone to disarm beforehand, which may be the only reason all the patrol leaders are still alive. However, as all of them are extremely adept at unarmed combat, the consensus was that whatever team was currently on downtime between patrol assignments would have the privilege."

Dean looks curiously at him as he opens the back of the jeep. "They accepted the compromise with poor grace."

"To sit out here watching me slowly walk in circles?"

"To spend time with their leader," he corrects him. "Who asks them what Joseph, on your orders, has been able to discover about their families and friends. Who asks for their opinions during patrol meetings and not only listens to them, but on occasion takes their advice."

"And traumatizes them with talk of conquering Kansas in my name," Dean adds. "Oh, wait, that was you."

"Who wants to protect them, who wants to protect everyone, and has started with those in this state by offering to teach them how to protect themselves."

Dean shifts uncomfortably. "Right."
"People like that sort of thing," he observes. "Or so I've heard."

Joining him, Dean braces his shoulder against the side of the jeep and crosses his arms. "You weren't surprised. Sid coming by, I mean."

"He doesn't trust me and believes I'm taking advantage of your illness for my personal benefit." What Sidney could possibly think he's getting out of this other than a constant source of low-grade stress is something he has yet to discover. "And that I'm denying him his right to have his own team from spite, which isn't entirely inaccurate, though his incompetence is my primary motivation."

"Interesting. Cas, how much trouble have you had with him that you didn't tell me about?" A quick glance confirms Dean's not pleased with that. "Not like this is my camp or anything."

"If it became a problem, I would have told you," he responds. "Or Vera would have, per her job description as camp spy."

Dean snorts. "It's just, your definition of a problem is probably different from mine, or historically, that of anyone else in the world. Short version: when it gets to the bullet stage? We are way fucking past what I define as a problem. Who else--"

"He hasn't made any attempt on my life," he answers incredulously. "Sidney is annoying, but he's not suicidal. Or homicidal, for that matter."

"Would you turn your back on him?"

He thinks of Dean's expression when he told Sidney, Next time, I'll just shoot. Sidney wasn't the target; he just put himself in convenient range today.

"Yes," he answers with all the certainly he can muster, turning to look at Dean. This isn't just his friend and his leader he's facing, but a man who doesn't need anything but himself to be dangerous.

He's never made the mistake of underestimating the quality of Dean's mind compared to that of his brother; they complemented each other so well working together that it was sometimes difficult to remember how dangerous they were apart. It wasn't John Winchester that made Dean very familiar to both the supernatural and other hunters well before Sam joined him, and it wasn't Dean alone who made them so dangerously adept together.

Dean had five years longer than his counterpart with Sam Winchester, and it shows, more every day. Sam's carefully analytical mind and neatly organized chains of logical thought, his ruthless pursuit of not only 'how' but also 'why', and the willingness to explore all possibilities made him as skilled a hunter as his brother, invaluable as his partner, and unexpectedly, Dean's most influential teacher. Dean's sharp observation skills married to Sam's analysis, intuition chained to Sam's logic, and the curiosity they shared now fused with the need to not only know but understand.

There's little of John Winchester in Dean now, all of it surface, the fading remainder of childhood conditioning; this is the hunter and man that Sam Winchester shaped from their father's own distorted image. He regrets he didn't make the effort to know Sam better here, or wish, impossibly, that he could meet Dean's brother in his world; Dean's stories give tantalizing glimpses of someone almost as impossible as he is.

(And belatedly apologize for judging him for his relationship with Ruby; in retrospect, the attraction is perfectly understandable. He suspects, however, that isn't something he should ever, even by implication, express to Dean. Especially considering his startlingly hostile reaction to Vera when he thought she was Meg, which Dean has yet to explain.)
"He was very--in training, Dean and I felt that Sidney required more personalized instruction," he
starts. "Despite the fact it was for his benefit, he was extremely unhappy being required to do
additional drills after his classmates were dismissed."

Dean nods shortly. "That's it?"

"Not--exactly." He's not certain how to explain, but Dean's expression motivates him to try.
"Millennia of observation of humanity didn't impart as much practical information as you might
assume when it came to human relationships." To his relief, Dean blinks, the tension easing
minutely. "Sidney was involved with one of the other hunters in his class, and apparently, they had
an argument one night, and--"

"You're kidding." Dean cocks his head, the beginnings of a smile playing around his lips. "You were
the rebound?"

"If only." He blows out a breath in remembered annoyance. "What is the correct term when the
motivation for sexual intercourse with someone is revenge against someone else? I asked, but no one
seemed to know."

Dean covers his face, head dropping against the jeep followed by a muffled sound. "Jesus, Cas."

"It's not as if she told me," he says defensively, eyes narrowing at the hiccuping sound emerging
from Dean's general direction. "So I shouldn't have done that, yes, but when I inquired further, it's
inappropriate to ask a potential sexual partner if their motivation for sexual intercourse is revenge, or
ask their motivation at all."

Dean wheezes breathlessly in what may or may not be laughter.

"From what I've been able to discover," he continues stiffly, "I should simply know, I assume from
divine revelation since I can't think of another way. Then I was told a questionnaire was
inappropriate--"

"Oh God," Dean gasps helpfully.

"--and apparently it would break the mood if I requested one be filled out completely before sexual
congress commenced to avoid the potential for such situations. There are so many rules, and most of
them make no sense at all; how on earth did your species make such a mess of something so
incredibly enjoyable, not to mention convenient? It took effort to do this, and worse, it was entirely
voluntary on your part. Nothing in your original design explains it, and your history seems to imply
an unhealthy and frankly ridiculous resentment of anything even remotely pleasurable."

Dean makes inarticulate sounds against the jeep, shoulders shaking as he buries his face against his
arm, which has no effect whatsoever on muffling his laughter. "You had a questionnaire?"

Yes, that would be the part Dean focuses on. "Do tell me when you're done," he says caustically,
waiting for Dean to recover. "I'll wait."

After an inordinate amount of time has passed, Dean finally lifts his head, cheeks bright with color
and green eyes dancing, and Castiel finds himself unable to look away.

"So," Dean pauses for a deep breath, choking back another snicker before continuing, "that happen a
lot?"

It takes him a long moment to remember the subject: Sidney, and unfortunate choices in sexual
partners, yes. "Never again," he answers vaguely as Dean wipes his eyes and grins at him. "That I
"If it did, you'd be the first to know," Dean assures him, but despite the easy grin, Castiel doesn't think he's forgotten the original subject.

"No one, including Sidney, has threatened me or challenged my orders," he says carefully. "Provided they continue to perform their duties adequately, I'm not interested in whether they're particularly enthusiastic about it." Dean cocks his head again, not entirely convinced. "If you trust me enough to run the camp for you, you should trust my judgment on what constitutes a problem while I do it."

"Yeah, throw that in my face." Dean frowns at him. "You get that if you get yourself shot, it's gonna be Joe or Vera and they will, literally, require my soul in payment to take over?"

"I don't think even your soul would be considered adequate compensation." If nothing else, the last few weeks have illustrated how literal Vera was when she said there was no one else who would take responsibility for the camp in Dean's absence. "Come here."

Curious, Dean joins him, gaze flicker down to the back of the jeep before going still. "What--"

"I told you that all our vehicles carry a full arsenal," he answers mildly as Dean almost shoves him aside to catalogue their collection. "However, I took out the usual complement; these are yours. I've checked them all for functionality, and Amanda and I verified all are in working order over the last few days."

"Holy shit." Dean reaches for one of the rifles, checking the salt-load automatically before he stills, looking briefly uncomfortable. "Dude, I saw his closet. Pretty sure functionality was a given."

He thought that might be a problem. "These aren't his," he responds, focusing on the gun in Dean's hand. "I chose them from our inventory in the arsenal for your use. We've always had a large surplus due to the United States' military spending budget and their more is better philosophy, so the military units always had an excess for trade. None of these have been used by anyone before."

Dean's sharp intake of breath tells him he'd been correct in his assumptions, confirmed by the quick glance reflecting nothing but relief and pleasure now.

"Thanks." Setting the rifle down, Dean begins to sort through them with professional curiosity, and Castiel notes the ones he lingers on, marking which he finds unfamiliar. "So where am I putting them when we get back? Not like you have space."

"We'll find somewhere to put them." Perhaps they could build another closet, though construction isn't something he's entirely familiar with, much like doors. Nate's assistance will definitely be needed. "But only after I know you can use all of them."

Dean straightens immediately. "What?"

"You can start today," he adds, tilting his head invitingly to the field just beyond the orchard. "If you don't have other plans."

Dean's eyes follow his, squinting for a moment before he says blankly, "A shooting range. You built me a shooting range?"

"Before I made the decision on rotating the teams who would accompany you, Joseph was winning. He and his team accepted doing this for you as a consolation prize and finished it yesterday." When Dean turns back around, Castiel extends a Smith and Wesson .45; they generally use this gauge or
higher, the weight shouldn't be too taxing at Dean's current strength with multiple targets, and it'll be easier to judge Dean's accuracy with both hands before his right begins to show its current limitations. "There are currently fourteen targets. We can add more when you're ready."

Dean takes it, fingers sliding down the barrel in appreciation. "Cas, uh, right now--"

"You're out of practice and your endurance is far below optimum," he agrees, watching Dean's fingers tighten. "The continued weakness in your right hand still bothers you and you still aren't used to using your left though you have worked to strengthen it, I know. I'll promise to refrain from outright mockery."

"Thanks. That means a lot coming from you." Glancing down at the gun, Dean takes a deep breath before grinning at him. "Let's do this."

From his seat at the base of an apple tree, Castiel watches Dean disappear behind the edge of the orchard to retrieve another weapon from the jeep, flexing his right hand absently before shoving it in his pocket.

He originally planned to allow Dean no more than an hour of practice today, but as they approach the two hour mark, he acknowledges that short of Dean collapsing in feverish exhaustion, he has no intention of doing anything that might interfere with his enjoyment until he's ready to stop himself. He's shown surprising endurance, in any case, which makes him wonder if the story of Sampson and his hair should be updated for a more modern and very literal parable of the hunter and his guns.

His right arm, however, is far weaker than his left, and it's not simply due to the fever and lost muscle tone. He isn't sure yet how much is the result of permanent nerve damage or the fact it's still healing and muscle is still being rebuilt, but the tremor in his hand that begins after even a short period of use is a concern; that Dean can control it is obvious, and sufficient rest between periods of use seems to help, but it's also obvious it's an effort for him to do so, and more of one every time he uses his right hand.

To his surprise, Dean returns from the jeep unarmed and carrying two of the bottles of water Castiel acquired from the mess tucked under his left arm. Joining Castiel by the tree, he sits down to survey the impromptu target range with unhidden satisfaction, then eye the pile of targets at Castiel's left with smug pleasure.

"Not too bad," he allows, handing Castiel one before twisting off the lid off his own and taking a drink. His left hand is showing a considerable increase in manual dexterity, and just as importantly, Dean's starting to use it reflexively when needed. "Might make it more challenging if--"

"--you were wearing a blindfold and the targets were invisible?" Dean conceals his smirk beneath another drink. "You make it look simple."

Dean rolls the bottle absently between his hands, pressing his right palm more firmly to the cool plastic. "Cas, I've seen you shoot. You're--"

"Fast, yes," he interrupts, taking a drink while trying to decide how to explain. "But that's not enough. I have to think about it, and my accuracy suffers because of that. I compensate for it with faster reflexes, but there's a delay."

"You're more the bladed weapon type of guy."

"Only for all my existence," he admits. "Projectile weapons aren't generally a part of the Host's traditional arsenal. It used to annoy Dean very much when he was familiar enough with my abilities
"Holy shit," Dean remarks, taking another drink. "So there's like, _levels_ of vague blur?"

"Apparently," he admits with a sigh. "On the range with Amanda, it was painfully obvious how out of practice I am; she says she can almost tell, which is worrying." Dean tips his head toward the field hopefully, grin widening. "Dean, I can't continue to mock Sidney for not noticing that you disarmed him despite the fact you're still recovering from near death if on the very same day, I'm forced to acknowledge you can also outshoot me."

He gives Castiel a sardonic look that changes into curiosity. "What about after you Fell? Did he--you know--check you again on everything?"

"Just to make sure I retained what I was taught," Castiel answers. "I did, of course, so he focused on helping me adjust to what my body could now tolerate with my speed and strength, then worked until those limits became reflexive. Which is why, I suppose, I don't regularly dislocate anything when in combat." Honesty forces him to add, "Or at least reduces the number."

Dean makes a face before taking another drink. "That was two years ago, though. You got better with the entire human body experience--" Castiel gives him an incredulous look. "You have! Haven't killed yourself yet, so maybe it's time to update your assessment or whatever. I mean, you didn't have a lot of time back then, right? You and Dean started training recruits pretty soon after you got here. So what, you had a month--"

"A week."

Dean visibly startles, gaping at him. "A _week_?"

"By the time I was--" Sane, he supposes uncertainly; Bobby and Dean were extremely unforthcoming regarding those two weeks, "--well, most of the recruits were at Chitaqua, and we needed to evaluate and begin their training.

"A week," Dean repeats flatly. "Let me get this straight: you Fall, get the full human body experience, the--two weeks to--"

"You can say 'go insane'," he offers when Dean seems at a loss. "Your guess is as good as mine, but from what I understand, I was not entirely--rational. That was time we couldn't afford to lose, and so we did the best we could with what time we had."

For a long moment, Dean simply looks at him, green eyes unreadable. "Right. The mission came first." He nods warily. "And one week to learn not to kill yourself before getting back to business. One week of best guess and use whatever you got then--in a _week_--for the rest of your life on earth."

Castiel almost answers that he wasn't convinced at the time he'd live long enough for it to be an issue, but Dean's expression suggests that wouldn't be a good idea. In any case, Dean isn't wrong; he didn't consider the probability that over two years of injuries and age would definitely cause a degradation in his performance and adjustments made, and with Dean here, he can't afford not to know all his weaknesses and how to compensate for them.

(Though age is probably less of a problem: his Father's resurrection and recreation of this body, much like what he did with Dean's, gave only the most superficial attention to its actual age, and Grace held his body in perfect suspension until the moment he put the last of it into what would eventually become the camp wards. Resurrection can be very helpful in considerably extending the time they'll be useful in combat. That's extraordinarily convenient when it comes to fighting an
"You're correct," he says when he becomes aware that Dean's waiting for his answer. "But there's no one that has the experience--specifically with me--to do that kind of assessment. Amanda is my student; she can't be objective, for one, and two, she isn't aware of what I could do as an angel in more than theory. It would help to have a precedent to my situation, but as I might have mentioned before--"

"You're very special, Cas," Dean assures him with syrupy sincerity. "Okay, what about Amy at Alpha?"

Castiel bites back his doubt that two and a half years is long enough for Amy to have relegated their interactions in Alpha to fond nostalgia, though he has fond hopes of armed neutrality being a possibility in some nebulous and not entirely impossible future. Anything is possible.

"And there's that look again," Dean observes, tilting his head slowly to the side.

"What do I look like?"

Dean bites his lip, frowning. "Like Sam when I say I got an idea."

"You mean an idea so insane that he wondered if you'd lost your mind?"

Dean points at him. "That one. Except they weren't insane, they were just--you know, different. Off the beaten path."

He considers that description in light of his current feelings. "That's surprisingly accurate."

"I'm good." Casually switching the bottle to his right hand, he starts to add something before he nearly drops it, fingers reddening as they cling determinedly to the plastic as his entire hand begins to shake. Taking it back in his left, he flattens his right on his knee, staring down at it bitterly as it continues to tremble. "Fuck."

"Let me see," Castiel says quietly. After a long moment, Dean takes a deep breath and extends it. Glancing at Dean for permission, he eases Dean's arm down, turning his hand in place to rest it palm-up on his knee. "Relax it."

With an effort, Dean does just that, and the shaking mutes to a visible tremor.

"Five minutes in, it starts," Dean says quietly, a flicker of bitter anger beneath the calm. "I can control it for five more, maybe, but it needs to rest or--" Before his eyes, it slows to near-invisible motion, barely more than a vibration as Dean tries to control it before giving up again. "Yeah, it's shot for the day."

Spreading Dean's fingers carefully, the tremor briefly slows before Dean makes an effort to relax again. The red, swollen skin along fingers and palm promises blisters in the near future; all his gun calluses are gone and will need to be built again. Following the line of Dean's wrist, he studies the still-healing wound; the scar tissue promises to be thick, but regular stretching should assure there's no loss of flexibility when moving it, and the books Vera acquired have various exercises that he knows Dean performs regularly.

Tracing a finger over the scarring, he glances up at Dean, who shakes his head. Holding Dean's eyes, he presses harder, careful not to cause further damage, and uses Dean's nods--both the certain ones and more importantly, the more hesitant--to get some idea of how much sensation was lost and where. The wrist is fine, as well as the palm, dorsal, and heel, but the fingers are more variable; the
index, middle, and ring still have decreased sensation.

"What did Vera say before she left?" he asks.

Dean grimaces. "Not her field, but it's still healing, so too early to be sure. Three fingers still feel a little muffled," he wiggles them, confirming Castiel's observation, "but she was pretty sure that would go away. Be careful working it because it's still healing and everything." He flexes his hand and winces, hand twitching involuntarily as the muscles visibly knot beneath the thin skin. "Sorry, cramps."

"So worst case scenario is right now." He shifts his grip until he can rub a thumb against Dean's palm. Dean winces again, but nods hopefully when Castiel pauses for permission. Gently, he traces the knotted muscles with a finger to locate the problem areas before beginning to massage them away, concentrating his attention on the tight tendons and soothing the overworked muscles with care. "I think--today, at least--this is the result of overuse. The shape of the butt of a gun stretches and works the muscles differently than the balls you've been using for exercise. The largest of them is foam; it can be cut into a more appropriate shape for you to use to help your muscles adapt between your visits to the range. I should have done it earlier; you haven't needed to use that one for some time."

Dean nods, but his eyes are half-closed, tension running out of his shoulders, which Castiel assumes means he's doing an acceptable job.

"Doing too much while you're healing could make it worse. There's no reason to believe you'll be significantly limited with most of handguns when it's fully healed," he continues, carefully working toward the heel of Dean's hand and feeling the remaining tension slowly leaking away. "Your accuracy with your right hand is almost unsettlingly good despite how long it's been since you practiced and its current weakness, so the goal is to increase its strength and the length of time you have before the tremor begins. I suggest limiting its use to handguns only for now. With your left, concentrate on increasing your accuracy with the rifles and shotguns as quickly as possible. While it's currently acceptable, there's always room for improvement, and it's not reflexive yet for you to use your left; you still have to think before you shoot."

"Like you--oh, right there." Dean closes his eyes with a soft moan when he obediently concentrates his attention on the dorsal.

Taking a steadying breath, Castiel wonders incredulously what his Father was thinking during the design stage; human bodies are remarkably resistant to understanding context when reacting to stimulus. Especially, he reflects resentfully as Dean makes a quiet noise that he chooses not to identify for his own sanity, when the stimulus is sexually unavailable. Surely some kind of override should have been installed to deal with circumstances like this, especially when the random element of sexuality is a factor, and usually depressingly so.

Much like the platypus and Fibonacci's sequence, he sometimes suspects his Father's sense of humor was involved far too closely in the details of human Creation.

"Better?" he asks, closing his eyes briefly in appalled horror at the sound of his own voice and hoping desperately that Dean's too distracted to notice. With an effort, he makes himself let go at Dean's dreamy nod, opening eyes gone vague and soft before slumping back against the trunk of the tree behind him with an audible sigh of heartfelt satisfaction. With no effort whatsoever, he can think of a dozen ways to assure Dean looks like that several times a day, even taking into account time needed for camp duties, regular meals, Dean's current strength, and his corresponding need for more sleep.
"Thanks," Dean says huskily, as content as Castiel's ever seen him. "You're good at that."

"Massage is a useful skill," he answers as neutrally as possible, which has the effect of making Dean smirk but not less attractive; then again, he has yet to witness a moment that Dean isn't and is starting to suspect he never will. "It was common after difficult or extended missions to have muscle spasms due to overuse."

Dean rolls his eyes. "I'm sure that's where you got in your practice time."

Remembering Dean's horror at his own appearance in the bathroom mirror, he wonders suddenly if he would be more satisfied with it now. While still underweight, he's made a great deal of progress in regaining what he lost, and the bruised hollows beneath his eyes have lightened, sharp cheekbones no longer threatening to cut through skin like paper, and the dark hair is long enough now to offset the thinness of his face. The results of the side effects of the various medications they used during the weeks of the fever have long since vanished, and while the continuing pallor is still in evidence, direct sunlight is still the exception, not the rule. Currently sheened in a light sweat and flushed from exertion, lips curved in a pleased smile, Dean no longer seems so terrifyingly fragile, as if he could shatter on a breath.

Reaching up to scratch the back of his head, Dean's eyes narrow at his attention. "What? Dude, you see me every day. You gotta be used to me looking like crap."

"You don't." Tilting his head, he tries to decide how Dean would react to seeing himself. The improvement in his health is striking, but what's seen in the reflection of the mirror is rarely if ever what's actually there. "No one would mistake you for the walking dead, if that's what you mean."

Dean makes a face. "Thanks."

"I do appreciate the aesthetics of human appearance," he continues as Dean picks up his almost empty bottle and finishes the remainder, the earlier contentment now edged with something unhappy. "It isn't a source of perpetual misery to look at you."

Dean leans an elbow on his knee, the easier to bestow on Castiel the entirety of his incredulity. "That's your pick-up line? 'You're not that bad, so let's have sex'?"

"I wasn't--"

"Thanks, Cas," Dean interrupts, looking into the distance with a resigned expression. "That makes me feel a lot better."

Castiel regards him for a few long moments. "How long can you keep this up?"

"For as long as you're falling for it."

He really should teach Dean chess. The pieces are large and easily visible in motion. "In general, when I ask someone if they want to have sex, it should be assumed I find them attractive," he answers, watching Dean's mouth tremble on a smile. "We live under the constant threat of imminent death. Our time, you might say, is rather limited, and we're very motivated to make the most of it."

Before Dean can respond to that, he adds, "And you're extremely attractive and a pleasure to observe for an extended period of time. It's simply questionable whether you could stay awake long enough to indulge in anything more interactive than observation, which I doubt." Though he would have no objections to testing that thoroughly.

Dean cocks his head. "Tell me you don't talk a lot during sex."
"Interestingly enough, I've found that it's the one time that I can be assured of an answer to any question I ask," he answers, watching in fascination as Dean's cheeks darken with new color. "Usually at length and often in considerable detail, provided I offer the proper motivation."

The color deepens appreciably before Dean abruptly frowns, looking into the middle distance and shifting in place. "So while we're here, this would probably be a good time to...." Abruptly, he unfolds himself, getting to his feet and stumbling in his haste before catching himself against the trunk of the tree. Reaching down, he scoops up his empty water bottle almost eagerly. "I'm gonna get more water. You want some?"

"Was that segue supposed to be subtle?" he asks curiously, extending his own bottle.

"That's a good question. Let me get back to you after I've thought about it." He pushes off the tree, grabbing the bottle before continuing on what is unmistakably a retreat toward the jeep with equally unsubtle speed.

Twisting around, Castiel watches him vanish into the orchard, wondering what Dean could possibly consider an uncomfortable conversation at this point. Dean's never shown any Puritanical inclinations regarding sex before; his counterpart certainly had no inhibitions discussing it with Castiel well before it was anything other than a theoretical exercise, and in extraordinarily graphic detail. Though now that he thinks about it, Dean was often drunk during those discussions.

Leaning back against the tree, he closes his eyes, lulled by the peace and quiet of the clearing, broken only by the faint sound of the branches moving in the occasional breeze. It's been a very long time since he went outside Chitaqua's walls for anything other than necessity or a specific purpose. He supposes this would qualify as purpose--Dean needed somewhere to regain his skills without the entirety of the camp in constant observation and nowhere in Chitaqua would that be possible, no matter how many orders Castiel issued to that effect--but the choice of location outside the camp was his own. It was the first place he thought of when Joseph asked him where they would build Dean's range, despite the fact there were several places closer to the safety of the wards and a few with more than sufficient space. It's only advantage is that it has the closest proximity to the local patrol route, which Joseph accepted with a nod and without mentioning he never actually protested Castiel's choice.

Joseph also attempted--with some success--not to smile through his rather protracted explanation of his reasons as they toured the orchard and the overgrown field (now mowed) where the targets would go. He's almost certain at some point he mentioned the advisability of sufficient shade should it become too hot, and not once did Joseph glance up at the perpetually overcast sky or mention the season is now technically fall. Joseph did, however, comment that it must be very lovely during the spring when the apple trees begin to bloom, observing it would be a very pleasant place for Dean to take his daily exercise as well as practice his marksmanship.

It would be, yes: Castiel told him of the unusual variety of flora and pointed out where the wild honeysuckle would drape itself across the branches of the trees, wild strawberry vines weaving throughout the high grass in ropes of verdant green dotted with splashes of vivid red, and how the air was redolent with the smell of mint after it rained.

Joseph nodded again. "He'll like it, Cas, I promise."

"Of course he will," he answered, frowning at the faint tremble in Joseph's voice. "He will have a superlative range where he may practice in peace without feeling he's being stalked or judged by his subordinates."

"Yeah," Joseph agreed, shifting his rifle. "That would be the reason."
"Good," he said suspiciously. "Do you have any questions?"

"Not a one," Joseph assured him. "Just want to mention we'll avoid the strawberry fields."

"That isn't a concern," he said, pointing toward the far less florally-inspired field west of the orchard. "You'll be mowing that one."

"Right," Joseph said, surveying the waves of uninteresting beige grass critically. "Be a nice view of the sunset from the orchard when we're done."

That's what he thought as well; it was pleasant to have his supposition confirmed.

"Finally decided to stop hiding behind those wards of yours, huh?"

Going still, Castiel opens his eyes to the sight of a man standing several feet away, a gun trained on his head. While very tall, the man's heavy frame is gaunt from probable malnutrition, wide shoulders bony beneath a ragged beige t-shirt. A thatch of stringy red hair surrounds a square face, freckles vivid against the yellow-white skin stretched tight over his cheekbones and prominent chin, brown eyes sunken into black circles and thin lips curled into a bloodless sneer. It's not a particularly attractive package, but what it contains is even less so.

As if he were waiting for acknowledgement first, Castiel hears him click the safety. "Stay where you are, Castiel."

Measuring the distance between them at a glance, he keeps his hands resting on his knees, watching the sneer split into a yellow-toothed grin, and the brown eyes flickering briefly to black.

"Long time no see. Now throw me your weapons." At Castiel's hesitation, he snorts. "Come on, Cas. No way you can get me before I get off a shot, and then where will your little friend over by the jeep be?" He can feel the blood drain from his face, and the demon smiles in satisfaction. "That knife, too. I know you're carrying it, so don't even try."

Taking a steadying breath—if Dean were dead, the demon wouldn't bother using him as a threat—he removes his gun, tossing it half the distance between them and noting the demon's lack of reaction before reaching behind him to get the second one, throwing it just short of the first. Pulling up his knee as slowly as he can, he reaches into his boot for Ruby's knife, palming the hilt and evaluating the risk.

If Dean's still alive—and he is, he must be, he will be—there's no margin of error, and it's very rare to succeed with a demon on the first try with a knife, especially one ready for just that. Throwing it to the right and behind the guns, he watches the demon's eyes snap to see where it lands before his posture shifts from blatant threat to overly confident amusement.

"So I hear Dean's alive after all," the demon says conversationally, waving his gun in an erratic circle. Castiel draws in a sharp breath, adrenaline hitting him hard enough to make him nauseous as the demon thrusts his head forward like a particularly dim and malnourished bull, staring at him with malicious glee. "Don't tell me--you resurrected him from salted ashes in Chitaqua! It's a miracle of Biblical proportions!"

Even through the blood pounding in his ears, he manages to answer. "I don't know what--"

"Just one question." He pauses for a melodramatic moment of badly manufactured curiosity, eyes widening to provide unneeded emphasis, and scratches his temple with the barrel of his gun before seeming to think better of it. "How the hell did you get Dean's merry band of psychopaths to go along with that bullshit?"
In general, he's learned that when in doubt, say nothing at all. In this case, it's also necessary, as he has no idea what he's talking about.

"Why you thought anyone would believe that bullshit..." Shaking his head, the demon throws out both arms in an uneven arc of manufactured astonishment, and abruptly, Castiel's right ear is ringing as splintered pieces of wood rain down over his shoulder from the trunk of the tree behind him.

Tipping his head up, Castiel looks incredulously at the bullet buried in the trunk of the tree, then back at the startled demon, who hastily takes aim again.

"Don't move," the demon grinds between his teeth, confidence replaced with something not unlike incipient panic, the barrel wobblingly dangerously. "You understand me?"

Years in Hell tend to erode the memories of how to control and coordinate a physical body, and it takes time and experience for a demon to learn to do so while actively suppressing the personality of the original owner. Trying to look at harmless as possible, Castiel wonders if it's possible that he's being held hostage by a demon who has never actually used a firearm before today while wearing one.

Fixing his gaze on the erratic movements of the barrel as it dips upward briefly before beginning a leisurely journey toward his hips then darting back to his head, he thinks it's also possible that if he isn't careful, he may well be killed by accident.

By an amateur: he wonders if this is what embarrassment feels like. "What did you do with him?"

"Who?" The demon cocks his head, eyes flickering black in bewilderment before comprehension sets in. "Oh, the guy by the jeep?" He smirks. "Chitaqua's standards are slipping, Cas. He didn't even hear me coming up behind him."

For a blissful moment, Castiel indulges himself in the unlikely fantasy that Dean did the sensible thing and returned to the camp for reinforcements, which is as likely as this particular demon being able to approach Dean from behind without him noticing. Which means Dean's currently watching Castiel being held at gunpoint by a demon with poor motor control and an odd inability to get to the point of his visit.

Embarrassment with a potential understanding of the concept of humiliation: it's been a far more productive day than he expected.

"Don't worry, sunshine," the demon continues, smacking his thin lips unattractively. "Little headache, no worse for wear when he wakes up. Why the hell did you pick him up, anyway? You run through everyone who'd fuck you in Chitaqua?"

So they've met: that narrows it down considerably. Familiar with Chitaqua's hunters in general but doesn't recognize Dean Winchester on sight, and if he got this close to Chitaqua, he's been there before. Knows the exact distance necessary to offset Castiel's speed but has no skill with firearms and abysmal conversational skills.

"Jeffrey."

Looking into the black-filmed eyes, Castiel smiles slowly at Jeffrey's reflexive flinch.

"The last time I saw you, you were on your knees begging for me to finish the exorcism." Jeffrey blinks, taking an involuntary step back. "You can't possibly hold a grudge after all this time. I did let you go, as I promised. And all parts were fully intact, for the most part."
Jeffrey swallows, throat bobbing visibly. "You think anything you could do to me compares to Hell?"

"Your sobbing was very convincing." Jeffrey shivers, eyes dropping briefly. "I could always provide another demonstration for your edification."

Jeffrey bares his teeth in blatant threat; it's far less convincing than his sobbing.

"Standards must be slipping in Hell. Is recruitment going so badly for my Brother that those who fail him as dramatically as you did are permitted to try again?" Jeffrey glares at him, finger trembling on the trigger. "If you shoot this time, Jeffrey, you'd better kill me. You aren't fast enough to get off a second shot before I snap your spine and rip it from your still-writhing body."

Jeffrey licks his lips wetly, and Castiel can see the barrel begin to tremble. "You're lucky I'm here with instructions to talk first."

"Rip his spine from his still-writhing body?" a familiar voice murmurs against his ear before he can make the mistake of asking Jeffrey if he understands what 'convincing' means and how telling him he won't kill him doesn't qualify when one wants to appear genuinely threatening. "Sorry I'm late for the party," Dean continues quietly, one warm hand resting on the back of his neck. "I miss anything?"

Castiel shakes his head minutely: if only he had.

"It was like a shitty Halloween remake; he hit every twig in the orchard," Dean adds in disgust. "I didn't want him to see my face, so I went with it. Found that marker I left in the jeep and decided to see how well those sigils of your work on demons. Looks like they do."

"Breathtakingly lucky," Castiel says blankly, which has the unintended consequence of making Jeffrey relax, the barrel steadying at this proof of sincerity. "If you're here to talk, then please get to the point."

"Will this invisible thing work for you if I do it while he's looking right at you?" Dean asks him quietly as Jeffrey begins to expound on something that Castiel can't bother himself to listen to. As carefully as he can, he shakes his head in response to Dean's question. "Right. Why make this easy? Okay, let's find out what he's doing here."

"Cas?" Jeffrey interrupts petulantly. "You listening to me?"

"Riveted," Castiel assures him as Dean shifting impatiently behind him and in range of Jeffrey's increasingly terrible control of that gun. "I've always been partial to monologues, especially ones without pause. Just because you don't need to breathe doesn't mean punctuation shouldn't be respected."

Dean snorts quietly. "Is this guy Lucifer's A-game?"

That's a very good question. "Who are you working for now?" Jeffrey's mouth, already open to continue his speech, gapes wider. "Who would risk my Brother's wrath to protect you? For that matter, why?"

Jeffrey glares at him, throat bobbing as he swallows again. "Even now, you angels stick together, huh?"

"Even now, Lucifer would like to slow roast me over a non-metaphorical fire," Cas answers. "So no. Who sent you?"
"Let's just say someone who's interested in what you're up to these days." He cocks his head, smirking. "You think that barrier was gonna last forever? Took a little time, but I got through it. You don't got a lot of time left before it falls, and then whatcha gonna do?"

"He talking about the wards?" Dean murmurs as Castiel tries to remember if there was any sign of the camp wards weakening the last time he checked. From here, the connection is muted, but they don't feel any different. "You wanna take him back and question him or--"

"Cas? Hey!" Jeffrey's voice cuts through Dean's unsettling suggestion, and Castiel remembers again that incompetent or not, he's holding a weapon and Dean may be invisible, but he's still in range of each erratic movement. "Anyone ever tell you the voices in your head aren't real?"

"At least they're interesting," he says, feeling Dean's breath released in a quiet snicker. "So far, you're not. If you have a point, please get to it so we can get to the exorcism part of this afternoon."

Jeffrey raises his eyebrows, surprised. "What, no interrogation?"

"Only on Thursdays and when the subject is interesting enough for me to care."

Something flashes in Jeffrey's eyes, there and gone, before he smirks, waving the gun. "So far, you're not. If you have a point, please get to it so we can get to the exorcism part of this afternoon."

A high, sharp sound cuts him off, followed almost immediately by a sense of something scraping a burning line just below his shoulder. Over the ringing in his ears, he hears Dean's startled shout almost drowned out by Jeffrey's shrill yelp of surprise. Frowning, he glances down and sees a tear in his jacket surrounded by a rapidly growing stain and realizes Jeffrey, against all the laws of competence and physics (but perfectly in line with Murphy's), has successfully shot him.

By accident. In front of Dean. All things considered, he supposes it was almost inevitable.

"….Cas? You okay? Nod if you're okay!" Dean is saying frantically, and he nods, taking a deep breath at the belated burst of pain radiating outward in nauseating waves before he can control it. "Son of a--you know what? I don't care what the fuck he has to say. Two minutes, Cas. Be ready."

Trying to focus enough to stop Dean before he does something incredibly stupid (failed on concept), he hears as if from a distance Jeffrey saying, in the least convincingly threatening voice he's ever heard, "…kill you, but doesn't mean we can't have some fun first, right? You gonna listen now, Cas?"

"I'm listening," he grinds out, hideously aware of the ominous silence in Dean's absence and unable to look around without risking directing Jeffrey's attention--as well as his poor grasp of how to use a firearm--in Dean's general direction. "What do you want?"

Jeffrey smiles at him with idiotic confidence, as if he has no idea that his time alive is now less than two minutes to account for the potential that blood loss will slow him down. As soon as he's sure of Dean's location.

"Someone likes you, Cas. You got a lot in common with them. They don't want this ending with Lucifer's victory, either, so they want to make you an offer. You wanna hear it or go see if your Brother likes you fried or boiled?"

From the corner of his eye, Castiel detects motion a few trees away and identifies the shape as Dean, head cocked and gun trained unwaveringly on Jeffrey's head as he inches into the clearing.

"Lucifer already won the Apocalypse." If Jeffrey were slightly more competent with that gun, this
would be a great deal more certain. "Or did your new master miss the news?"

Jeffrey's expression grows uncertain, along with his aim. "How'd you do it?"

"What?"

"Don't fuck around with me!" Jeffrey's expression darkens. "No one on this world has the power to stop the Apocalypse with Dean Winchester dead. So how the hell did you do it?"

"I didn't," Castiel answers honestly, aware Dean's listening as well. "What makes you think--"

"You're old, Cas," Jeffrey says softly. "Oldest thing alive on this plane, older than time. You been trying to break prophecy since this began. If there was a way to do it--"

"There's not. Even as an angel, I was never that powerful."

"You're not an angel no more." The flick of the safety echoes through the clearing. "And there's a lot of kinds of power. Lucifer may think this is how it's supposed to go, but if he'd bothered to step foot on this plane since Dean Winchester died, he'd know just like everyone else." Almost imperceptibly, the gun begins to tremble. "What the hell did you do, Castiel?"

From the corner of his eye, he sees Dean takes another step, foot grazing the hilt of Ruby's knife, half-buried in the grass. He stills, but the tiny movement catches Jeffrey's attention, and Dean drops into a crouch just in time to miss the wild shot that goes through the air somewhere in the vicinity of where his throat had been, but his eyes and gun never leave Jeffrey, flipping the safety and pulling the trigger.

Pushing off the tree, Castiel lunges forward at the sound of a gun discharging, catching Jeffrey at the knees as he starts to turn back and hitting the ground hard enough to jar an entire new spectrum of pain out of his arm. Fighting back the lurch of his stomach, he realizes from the spread of bright red across Jeffrey's chest that Dean's aim under pressure is, as always, flawless.

"Cas," he hears Dean saying, but he ignores him, flipping Jeffrey on his stomach and setting his knee in the center of his back, the rush of adrenaline making the world almost painfully clear despite the continuing blood loss. "Cas, are you--"

"You should know that policy on the care and handling of demons has changed at Chitaqua, along with its leadership," Castiel snarls to a screaming Jeffrey, pinning one of Jeffrey's wrists to the ground with his one knee as he reaches for his other knife, and really, Jeffrey should know better than to think he wouldn't keep at least one weapon. He's not sure Jeffrey can hear him over his own breathless howls; for a demon, he's surprisingly vulnerable to pain. Tangling his fingers in Jeffrey's hair, he jerks his head to the side so he can watch before setting his knife against the back of his hand and sketching the beginnings of a sigil, aware of the moment Jeffrey realizes what it is and goes blissfully silent. Stopping before adding the final line, he looks at Jeffrey. "You know what this does? Answer yes or no."

Jeffrey makes an incoherent sound, eyes fixed in dawning horror at the incomplete sigil, and Castiel tightens his grip on his hair in encouragement. "Yeah," he says, voice raw. "Cas--"

"I've learned a great deal since the last time you enjoyed Chitaqua's hospitality," he says over the sound of Jeffrey's choked sobs. "You can keep that body alive indefinitely and this takes advantage of that. It's been a very long time since I've had time to enjoy putting that knowledge to use."

Jeffrey's visible eye darts to Castiel in helpless terror. "Please--"
"When I grow bored with your limited charms, I'll skin what remains of you and hang you from Chitaqua's walls and watch you slowly rot with each turn of the season, knowing you are still trapped within." He tightens his hold, watching Jeffrey's face contort in agony and leans closer, thinking of that bullet that just missed Dean; he could have died, here and now, because he let his attention lapse. "I'm not certain how it compares to Hell; considering your expertise on the subject, I'll be sure to inquire before your tongue is too rotted to talk."

"Cas."

He stills, suddenly remembering where he is and who's standing only feet away, listening to this. Swallowing, he pulls the knife away from Jeffrey's hand, the symbol incomplete, aware of Jeffrey's muffled sobs of relief.

"Chitaqua says that Dean Winchester is alive because that is my order," he says to Jeffrey's profile, tear tracks visible in the dirt. "Who sent you?"

Jeffrey sucks in a shaky breath. "Not until you hear the terms--"

"Your master's plans don't interest me. You're right about this much; I was created before Time itself, and on this plane, I'm the oldest being in existence. If your master wishes to fight Lucifer, tell him he's welcome to do so, but I've grown to enjoy this world, and I intend to keep it."

He hears Dean's approach and glances up to see Dean give him an encouraging nod before returning his attention to Jeffrey, gun trained on the back of his head.

"There are many kinds of power," Castiel continues doggedly. "Grace would be useful, but its limits are inarguable. I could--"

"Open Purgatory," Dean mumbles, sounding oddly muffled.

"--open Purgatory to gain the power to do it." He glares at Dean, who smirks back, unrepentant. "Can you remember that or should I carve it into your back for future reference?"

"Listen. Deal...." Castiel shoves his face into the dirt with a satisfying crunch that with any luck is his nose. Jeffrey howls into the ground, fighting weakly until Castiel loosens his hold. "Tell you whatever you want...." Turning his head, he looks up at Castiel hopefully, face smeared in blood and dirt. "Not. Here."

He hears Dean catch his breath.

"Tell your master that I defied both the Host and Lucifer when they tried to bring me to heel," Castiel says, leaning forward to breathe the words in Jeffrey's ear. "His offer is refused. I kneel for no one and nothing."

"You'll burn for all eternity," Jeffrey whines, then twists abruptly in place and nearly throws Castiel off when one hand slams into his shoulder over the bullet wound. Pain shoots through him so strongly that for a moment, he wonders if he'll black out. "Hell's where you're going either way."

"So I keep hearing," Black circles dancing in front of his eyes, he slams Jeffrey's arm back down and hears his wrist snap like dry kindling. Dean abruptly drops to his knees beside him with a curse, grabbing his arm just below the wound, but when he looks at him, Dean's staring at Jeffrey's hand with an expression he can't interpret. "But I'm not there yet."

"You're gonna bleed out if we don't get this over with," Dean mutters, letting him go, which is almost immediately followed by the sound of something ripping. "Cas, what can he do with your
blood? Anything?"

Castiel frowns, looking down at the bloodstained fingers clenched into a tight fist on the grass. "You said not here. Where?" Jeffrey moans weakly. "Jeffrey, where? I won't ask again."

Jeffrey whimpers, spitting out a mouthful of blood and dirt before saying, "Chitaqua. Nothing can get in there. I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"I've changed my mind," Castiel says breathlessly, the throbbing in his shoulder increasing by the moment. "I was going to let you go in the hopes that your master would kill you for incompetence, but I think I'd rather do it myself." Reaching out blindly, he feels Dean place Ruby's knife in his hand before shifting his balance, flipping Jeffrey so he can see it and draw the correct conclusions. "I'm glad to say we won't meet again."

"No!"

Jeffrey's motions become more panicked under him, mouth opening in a round O before dark, greasy smoke begins to pour out. Despite the growing dizziness, Castiel holds him there until he feels the body beneath him go limp. The brown eyes open again for a dazed moment, a human soul looks back at him, bewildered, too dazed with pain to be afraid as his body begins to respond to the damage to it, including the shredding of his heart from Dean's shot.

To survive for over two years in an infected zone, escaping Croatoan and starvation and everything that hunted humans in this state, only to die like this, far from the home he fought so long to keep, the people that he knows... If there's a kindness to be found, it's that he won't survive long enough to realize what happened to him, and the same can be said for those who know him, if the demon didn't slaughter them for the sheer pleasure of it.

"Don't be afraid," Castiel hears himself breathe, pressing a hand to the man's forehead, skin tacky with drying blood and meeting the cloudy brown eyes, the beginnings of growing pain and fear. The reapers are gone and so is the Host, but while the gates may be closed, Heaven is still there. "My Father's fields are vast, and a place has been prepared for you since the moment of your birth; you don't remember now, you can't, but you will. Your work here is done; go there so you can rest."

Swallowing, he sees his hand beginning to shake; he would do anything for Grace to give him comfort, but all he has are his words. "The Host lays claim to every soul on earth without exception, and we will not be denied our right to even one. Your soul is safe, I promise you; now go to your rest."

He can't see a human soul leave at the moment of death, not anymore, but to his surprise, the sense of passing somehow remains; pain and confusion and fear vanish on a breeze of warmth and surprise and dawning hope as the man's eyes fall closed, expression one of peace so vast he can almost feel it himself.

For a moment, he thinks he feels something else as well—a touch, ephemeral as gauze, as bright as the first light of Creation whispering through him—but then it's gone.

When he looks around, he and Dean are alone in the clearing with the husk that once contained the infinite in all its potential, stripped of life before its time by what was left of a human soul when a demon rose from the rack. It's obscene, this; it has never, can never be anything else.

"Cas?"

Blinking, the world abruptly tilts sideways, pain spiraling through him strongly enough to nearly black out. Swaying, he can't find his balance and nearly falls before Dean catches him, guiding him
carefully to the ground. Staring up at the churning grey sky wavering in and out of focus, he feels Dean slicing away the arm of his jacket from around the bullet wound, then something being wrapped tightly around his arm; looking over, he thinks it might be strips of Dean's flannel overshirt.

"We need to get back and get Alicia to look at that," Dean is saying, sounding angry about something, but what, he's not sure, and he can't think clearly enough to reassure him. "Fuck, should have stopped before--Cas?" Something comes in sharp contact with his face, and Castiel blinks, focusing on Dean. "You with me?"

"Yes." Distantly, he wonders why he feels like this. The wound wasn't nearly that bad; he's fought through far worse, and he can't suppress it at all. That's new. "It--" Hurts, yes, much like mountains are somewhat big; another wave of pain engulfs him, and he tastes blood as he stops the scream in his throat. Hearing that would upset Dean, he thinks vaguely, and that would doubtless be very stressing to his health.

"Fuck," Dean hisses, verifying that precaution failed as he wraps another strip of torn cloth around his arm. Reaching down, he follows Castiel's hip to the waist of his jeans and dips his fingers into the pocket, pulling out the keys with a too-loud jangle. "Hold still. I'm gonna go get the jeep--"

"I can--" Just speaking sets off another shock of pain far too powerful to even breathe, much less scream.

"You move, I'll fucking kill you," Dean says savagely, getting to his feet and wiping a blood-streaked hand across his forehead. "Don't fucking move. Stay awake, Cas. I'll be right back."

It's easier to agree than argue, and in any case, he isn't feeling particularly enthusiastic about a fight and Dean is already running.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Due to a slight miscalculation in word count when I was dividing it into chapters, this story has twelve chapters, not eleven. Because apparently I can't do math.

--Day 94, continued--

Castiel wakes up with a start, vaguely aware of something very wrong.

Frowning, he begins to move and freezes at the dull throbbing emanating from his right arm beneath the heavy gloss coating every movement as well as clear thought. Turning his head, he looks at the neat bandage peeking out from beneath the faded green sleeve of his t-shirt, then at a tray nearby, where two empty needles are lying along with a small pile of bloody gauze and a glimpse of metal instruments beneath. That they're related is probable, but at the moment how eludes him.

That's unsettling, he reflects uncertainly as he starts to sit up, ignoring the wave of dizziness but his arm doesn't quite want to hold his weight, the throbbing increasing dramatically. Before he can do more than catch his breath, a hand touches his chin, reassurance and warning both; Vera always did that when she wanted to avoid startling him when she was treating him, but he's almost certain that's not Vera.

"There we go," he hears a familiar voice murmur. "Cas, it's a hospital bed; it inclines. Just relax and I'll raise it for you."

Castiel squints, waiting impatiently for his vision to clear, as the bed, with a low metal groan and the sound of protesting gears, begins to rise. By the time he's semi-upright, the infirmary comes into almost painful focus, but panic is immediately eased by the sight of Alicia's head popping into his line of sight, brown hair pulled back in a loose ponytail and expression worried.

"You tracking yet?" she asks, peering at him hopefully. He nods, willing to indulge in reckless optimism in the hope it might eventually be true. "Sorry, I thought I had a little more time before you woke up. How are you feeling? Still fuzzy?"

"I'm fine," he says automatically, making the connection from the needles: morphine, that explains it. "How much did you give me?"

"Vera left me instructions," she assures him, still looking worried. He closes his eyes, feeling the glaze beginning to burn off, and the events at the ad-hoc shooting range slam into him all at once. Before he can do more than try to sit up again, Alicia shoves him back down with more strength than he would have expected and unexpected care for his injured arm. "She said your reaction was shitty on the come-down. In order: you're in the infirmary, your shoulder's fine, Dean's fine, he'll be back in a few and he said to tell you to practice your human skills, this is a test and you'd better pass or you have to do it again." He just avoids a sigh: Dean probably smirked when he said it, too. "I have another local for your arm if you don't want another hit."

He licks his lips, nodding quickly; the dull heat is blooming into pain at an exponential rate. Alicia circles the bed, reaching out to rest a hand on the top of his shoulder briefly, but even that light touch
is almost too much. He swallows at the push of the needle followed by another flare of pain.

"That bullet hit a nerve or five, I think." Stepping back, she meets his eyes. "Thirty seconds, Cas."

It feels like longer, but eventually, a spreading chill washes down his arm, the pain slipping beneath it more with every second that passes until it's an undifferentiated mass of vague numbness and residual throbbing.

"Better?" she asks with a tentative smile that widens into relief when he nods. "She left me her notes on the right doses to give you, but if you want to check--"

"She kept accurate records," he interrupts, trying and failing to work out how Alicia could have gotten them. It's very obvious, he's sure. "Where's Dean?"

"He's fine," Alicia answers soothingly, scooping up the used needles and debris and depositing them in the trash before stripping off her gloves and adding them as well. Grabbing a stool, she returns to the other side of the bed and sits down. "Bullet took a downward angle and the scenic route, but it's just a very deep graze, that's all. Don't worry; Dean watched me while I checked you and stitched you up." Her expression is suddenly eerily reminiscent of Vera's. "Follow your doctor's instructions--hey, that's my new title, who needs medical school when you got EMT training back when?--and it should heal fine and my report will mention you were a good patient." Castiel nods, scanning her for any potential injuries or any restrictions in movement that indicate deep bruising. She frowns at him and glances down at herself. "What?"

"Did I hurt…." Too late, he cuts off the words; opiates never fail to utterly wreck his focus. "I apologize--"

"I'm fine," Alicia interrupts in a strange voice. "Cyn nearly gave me a black eye when I was setting her ankle, and that was after I shot her up. You were mostly unconscious."

Mostly. "How long--"

"It's just after seven Chitaqua time," she says, crossing her legs and settling in her seat. "Sarah's team went to get the body and we did a clean burn at dusk after I checked it over. He wasn't carrying ID, no surprise, but Chuck got a picture of him, in case…." She trails off, mouth tight. "If we get that trade agreement, maybe we can get the word out, find out who he was, if he had family."

Castiel nods, groping for another topic, then realizes he forgot ask something. "That bullet was fired from close range. How--"

"Right, what the hell was that? Was he trying to hit you or the tree?" She raises her eyebrows at his lack of surprise. "Don't tell me: didn't even mean to shoot. Always the amateurs. Anyway, Kat examined the body for any other weapons before they brought it to me and nothing. His gun didn't even have a full clip. It's like…."

"He counted on being disarmed and brought here for questioning."

"That's what I thought." Alicia nods grimly before abruptly balancing a foot against the bed, boot brushing his hip when he starts to get up. "Not so fast, Cas."

"The morphine has been sufficiently metabolized--"

"Yeah, and one, you need a sling before you leave--"

Castiel grits his teeth impatiently. "Then give me one."
"--and two, there was dried blood smeared on those bullets still in the clip and in the barrel of the gun. I sampled and confirmed what it was before bagging it. Sarah's team escorted Zoe and Kat to get the two out of the tree so I could compare; there were still traces on it, too. That shit stuck, which is different, gotta tell you." He stills at Alicia's serious expression. "What would demon blood do to you now?"

He's not sure what he expected to hear, but it wasn't that. "As I've never been shot with something coated with it, I don't know." He looks at his bandaged arm suspiciously, hazy memories of the jeep ride back and arriving at the infirmary glazed with agony beginning to surface, with a vague sense of Dean's voice asking him questions and not hesitating to shout them if he didn't answer.

"Cas, I've seen you keep fighting in the field while bleeding out from claw wounds an inch deep," she says. "Dean said you passed out when he was getting you to the jeep. Andy and Matt carried you in and said you were in and out--and in case this needs saying, not quietly--and you were out cold when your shoulder hit the bed. I can guess what hits your threshold, and this shouldn't even make the vague frown stage."

"We could hypothesize then that demon blood causes a great deal of pain." Alicia looks at him incredulously. "I assume you cleaned the wound thoroughly."

"Oh yeah," she confirms. "Dean's going to handle observation tonight--God knows he has more experience than I do--but I'll be by to check those stitches in the morning and we'll trade off for the next few days, see if anything else shows up."

"That's unnecessary," he answers, but Alicia's raised eyebrows indicate dissatisfaction with that answer. "Nothing."

Alicia looks at him for several long moments. "Yeah, okay. Let me find a sling, I saw one--" She starts to get up, mouth tight. "In the closet, give me a second."

Bewildered, he watches her almost stalk to the other side of the infirmary, opening cabinet after cabinet with unnecessary force, a barely audible litany of mumbled words following her until she pauses to grab something off one of the half-empty shelves. Returning with wad of faded black material trailing frayed straps, she tosses it on his lap, expression set.

"You want to wait for Dean to get back to help you get it on?" she asks acidly, dropping on the stool and crossing her arms across her chest.

"I suppose." He gingerly picks it up, taking the time to smooth it out against his knees and study the clasps for wear, aware of Alicia's glare and failing to understand what inspired it. "Or I could do it myself, if you could--"

"You heard the part about Vera telling me how to treat you if you're injured?" she bursts out. Startled, he identifies the hurt beneath the anger. "She and Dean called me in before she left to talk about--if anything happened. She left her records with Dean, told me to get them if I needed them."

"Dean has my medical records?" To think he told Vera--sober and clean, no less--she could do as she liked if she insisted on treating him.

"Yeah," she says flatly.

This is going well. "You're upset."

"You think?" Alicia's eyes narrow. "Look, you want to wait for Vera, fine, but if something happens and I need to treat you--"
"What--"

"--you might also remember this isn't my first time treating you, just first officially," she finishes on a breath, and yes, he does remember that. "I need to know what's going on with you to do that. Specifically that."

"The demon blood?" The faint, uncomfortable throb from his arm--despite the local--combined with Alicia's pointed stare at the bandage, confirms his supposition. Especially since that now that the morphine has worn off, he realizes the pain isn't actually in his arm, and more importantly, it's getting stronger. "I don't know. It may be affecting the overlap between my physical body and my true form. Which is why--I passed out?" He does remember that, yes.

"A couple of times," she tells him grudgingly. "So it--hurts your true form? Wait, is that why you're getting twitchy?" She's on her feet and circling the bed, reaching out automatically but pausing before she touches the bandage. "You shouldn't even be able to feel your arm right now, Cas."

"That would be because, technically speaking, the nerves are just a convenient method of conveyance," he answers distractedly, gritting his teeth as the throb blossoms into active pain. He should have realized something like this was possible after his success with the branding iron and holy oil: how typical. "I wonder why--" Another flare, very sharp, not unlike molten lava, "--no one thought to try this before?"

Alicia hovers beside him, looking longingly between him and their drug supply, but a flood of pain drowns everything out in endless waves for some time. Eventually--slowly--it begins to subside, eventually retreating into something almost bearable. He hopes desperately he's at least being quiet during this; humans find screaming both unpleasant and highly unsettling, and doubtless Alicia can hear it outside even through the closed door of the infirmary.

"….should have fucking purified it; Joe's got about a dozen or so rituals," Alicia is saying angrily, and he's belatedly aware of not only her continued presence but her hand pressed firmly to his other shoulder, fingers curving tightly over the bone and squeezing rhythmically. "Deep breath, Cas; that color is shit on anyone. You tracking yet? Want me to send someone to get Dean now?"

"No." Yes, very much, now. There's absolutely nothing he can do, which is immaterial; he wants Dean. "No. I think….it's wearing off." To his surprise, it actually is. Concentrating, he can feel the slow diminishment like endlessly receding waves. If it's been doing this since he was wounded…. "How much morphine did you give me?"

"A lot," she confirms, frowning at him before grabbing her stool and dragging it right beside the bed. "No worries there. We may starve to death, but we can do it in a group morphine haze for weeks from what we got from the military. Want to try that now?"

He shakes his head, though actually yes, he would, very much. "It was always a trade priority."

Dean's comments on living standards in Chitaqua have merit, but Castiel could have told him that in some things, they didn't compromise. One of those was the best possible medical care they could accomplish in the camp's conditions and they were well supplied with every opiate in existence. "Gotta love Darryl," Alicia says acidly, a flicker of something darker in her voice. "Stoned to his balls and hands like a goddamn rock. Look at me, I wanna check your pupils. It'll make me feel better."

While the camp's doctor wasn't one of Castiel's favorite people, he worked as a surgeon before the Croatoan epidemic killed his wife and children as well as most of the hospital where it was being contained, and he was very good at his job. His endless demands from the military were the reason
Vera was able to keep Dean alive and find a successful treatment for the infection from among their stock. That the doctor was also a morphine addict was a bonus; it assured he was both professionally and personally motivated to assure they never ran out.

"No morphine," he says finally, trying not to wince. "I need to be conscious to study it."

"The pain?" she says doubtfully.

"New pain," he explains. "Very new and unsettling--"

"And painful," she interrupts, as if she thinks that part is unclear. "Made it through a local and you look like a vivisection might be more fun."

"And new," he replies doggedly. "If this is to become a regular occurrence in the field, I'd like to know more about it than 'new' and 'painful'."

"For the record, I disapprove of pain in all its forms. And so I shall explain." Belatedly, he realizes Alicia is flipping through a folder distractedly, pen between her teeth, before making a triumphant sound. Taking out a sheet, she leans over, bracing it on the bed and makes a note at the top before beginning to write. "Patient is saying no to morphine despite agonizing pain and did not deny a vivisection would have been better. Doctor's note: may be the first time in Chitaqua's history, and maybe the world's. Doctor is pissed, and will tell Dean all about it, in detail."

"What," he asks in bewilderment, "are you doing?"

"Updating your records," she answers, pen hovering over the paper hopefully. "Okay, would you call this an allergy, a sensitivity, or an interaction?"

"I'm not sure." Now he's curious. "Let me see."

"Would Vera be okay with that?" she asks before sliding the stool up to the head of the bed and bracing the folder on her knee so he can read over her shoulder. "This is the cheat sheet," she confides, tilting it so he can see Vera's meticulous print marching across the three pages and half of the fourth before Alicia's handwriting begins. "Well, page five of cheat sheets in the cheat folder. I'm supposed to make my notes here because if I touch her records, she'll kill me. The first two pages are where to find anything and what to do if you get injured with list of common injuries. Which is, must say, an impressive goddamn list. I didn't even know you could dislocate that," she adds, flipping to the page and looking at what is a truly appalling list before flipping back to her notes. "Commonly, even."

Fascinated, Castiel scans up the page and starts when he was brought into the infirmary--somewhat conscious, somewhat not, that sounds right--and then--

"I didn't whimper," he says stiffly.

"Gasped, maybe," Alicia allows, going back up and marking out the word before sketching 'gasped' just above it. "Better?"

"No." There are an uncomfortable number of morphine shots--general anesthesia was a risk even when their doctor was still alive, something he only did when there was no other option, and Vera never attempted it with him at all--as well as the (comparatively) more reasonable locals. His pain tolerance is extremely high, and when learning to use this body, it was among the easiest--and least ambiguous--to identify and isolate, making repressing it easy (if only that worked with lust; the human body is baffling in its inconsistencies). None of what he's reading, however, makes him less uneasy regarding the time between Dean putting him in the jeep and when he woke up; that is a great
deal of missing time and exposure to many people with an unknown number of injuries. Surely if any were serious, they'd be here with him and Alicia would be sitting at a safe minimum ten foot distance. "I didn't--did you use restraints?"

"When we were working on you?" she asks in bewilderment. "Uh, no. Not that we have any you wouldn't tear through without noticing. I put you on a fentanyl drip to twilight you while we worked--Darryl taught me that much and Dean could keep watch while I worked when I told him what to look for--but that was for pain control. It seemed to be working." Her expression darkens as Castiel winces, the throbbing beginning to return. "So that's why you were knocked out; demon's blood was hitting your pain threshold like the fist of a sadistic demon. We probably made it worse messing around in there and keeping you out of it in the process."

Castiel closes his eyes as the throbbing increases, trying to brace himself and perhaps continue not to scream; it's a worthy goal.

"Starting again?" He doesn't hear anything after that, breathing shallowly for the endless time it takes to pass as the waves build to an agonizing climax before their slow recession; even so, he can feel Alicia's hand come to rest on his shoulder, long fingers reassuring in their presence, the passing seconds marked by each tight squeeze. Eventually, the vague, indistinct sound of her voice penetrates as well, slowly forming words he can almost understand.

Even so, it's definitely better than the last time. If it was once worse--much worse--it's probable it was safe to be around him if he was repeatedly being rendered unconscious by dint of overwhelming pain.

What horrific good fortune; anything less, he might have accidentally killed her and several other people while insensible.

When he opens his eyes, Alicia's looking at him, mouth tight. "Better?" He nods, and she lets go, making another note. "Five minutes from when I first asked to now. Last one was about five and a half minutes or so, and ten, twelve minutes between them hitting you. Marking the time now."

"Thank you." He peers down at her notes again; he may be able to use them for more exact calculations later. With any luck, Jeffrey's bullets were an experiment. As Jeffrey was already gone before it became disabling, whoever designed it may assume it didn't work. He isn't that lucky, of course; this will happen again, at the worst possible time, and without a doubt will involve half a dozen bullets and all in difficult to reach places requiring extensive digging about.

Watching her reading over her notes, he remembers something else. "Why were you so upset?"

"Huh?"

He hesitates. "When you thought--I was concealing information about the demon blood from you."

She looks up, an odd expression crosses her face. "That." Capping the pen, she slides it behind her ear, focusing on something over his shoulder. "You know Darryl was a dick to everyone except the team leaders, right?"

He didn't, actually. "No, but what does that have to do with--"

"I mean--" She sighs, closing the folder. "Look, I get why you didn't tell Dean about Darryl discovering all new plane of dickitude with you, but for the record; Darryl was a sociopath on his best days, which is saying something. But most of us in the medical profession act like professionals."
"I understand." He is getting better interpreting humans; that is a genuine surprise. "Is this--does this have anything to do with Dean?"

She shakes her head, then hesitates. "Until Vera told me why she had records on you, I thought--it's stupid, I know. Even if exposure wasn't a problem, I was the only one who knew what to look for in the hospitals and the library besides Vera, and she was busy keeping Dean alive. Between runs to the cities and sterilizing everything before handing it over, it wasn't like there was time." She blows out a breath. "It's stupid, I get that."

"It had nothing to do with your ethics," he says truthfully. "Or you personally."

"I know," she assures him. "Just--until Vera gets back, I'm the camp doctor, and one without a morphine addiction or a not-so-secret sadistic streak. She wouldn't have told Dean to let me see her records if she didn't trust me, and Dean wouldn't have let me look if he didn't. You know that."

He does. "If it helps," he answers guiltily, "I never told Vera anything when I was sober, which is why she tended to question me when I wasn't. That's how I learned to deal with Dean when he was injured and refused to see Darryl."

She grins maliciously. "Darryl threw fits about Dean going to you first if you could handle it. And your all-access pass to the infirmary's stock. Had to double his dose to calm down every time, it was great. Never did overdose, but can't have everything."

They pass the time reading through Vera's years of carefully documented (appallingly detailed) records, with Alicia pausing every so often to remark, "I had no idea elbows did that", and "Hey, is that how you got that that weird scar by your--" "That was utterly terrifying and I don't want to talk about it." "So I guess some guy things just come with the body. Talk about nature versus nurture in action."

Half-way through their joint appreciation of Vera's professional version of 'no one can be this stupid' regarding a particularly uncomfortable splinter (very large, rather jagged) he forgot about for two days, he feels the warning throb returns.

"Mark the time." As she pulls the pen out and flips open the folder, he tries to concentrate enough to examine the sensation, comparing it to when he used his full range of vision in the city and if this using similar pathways. Interesting, what the human nervous system is capable of interpreting from his true form; truly, the human body is a marvel of flexibility and versatility and rises to challenges with exceptional results. Why exposure to demon blood via an open wound is agonizingly painful beyond anything he's experienced in this form is a mystery: vector, how the wound was created in his true form for the blood to then affect, or perhaps it wounds on contact, how fascinating that will be to consider in a few minutes; right now, all he wants is for it to stop.

To his surprise, through the haze of pain, he feels Alicia's fingers slide through his, squeezing his left hand tightly.

"Four minutes, forty-five seconds tops," she says clearly, tightening her grip when he tries to pull away. "Stop that; I'll keep count. A bottle of Eldritch Horror if I win?"

He nods tightly, squeezing back as carefully as he can, and makes a note to discover how on earth everyone seems to know that name now. "Have you kept up with your knives?"

"Yeah," she answers softly. "Every week, me and Amanda go a few rounds. How about I catch you up? Did you know that double knife master's dance is set to the beat of a waltz in triple time? Mind? Blown. I knew it felt familiar when you were teaching it to me."
It's an hour before midnight when he tentatively decides that the worst of it is over. According to Alicia's notes and the laws of diminishing returns, it's either worked entirely out of his system or he has a fifteen second period coming up in an hour or so, and he thinks he can handle that in the cabin.

"I think I should--"

Alicia swings a leg up on the bed as he starts to move, shaking her head. "Down, boy. You're not going anywhere yet."

"I prefer to go home," he argues, then almost loses his train of thought when he realizes what he said. Home, not the cabin: that's also new. It seems to be a day for it. "I don't need to stay the night, I promise you. If something happens, I'll send Dean for you immediately." Her eyes flicker to the clock on the far wall, then back at him, and it belatedly occurs to him that he has no idea where Dean is and Alicia didn't ever actually get around to telling him. "Alicia?"

"I thought he'd be back by now," she admits uncomfortably. "Look, those are my orders, okay?"

"What--" Alicia makes a face. "Why?"

"You are not to leave alone or in the company of anyone else, and if anyone shows up who says Dean's down with that, I'm to shoot until I'm out of bullets," she recites, then looks at him earnestly. "He made me repeat that twice, by the way."

He fails to articulate a response. Any response at all.

"Dean's coming back to get you himself when he's done," she adds. "In case that wasn't clear. I've been thinking about how I'd hold the infirmary against a hostile kidnapping force with a number greater than I have bullets, and I have some definitely workable ideas. Though I'd kill for a trapdoor to the roof, do it sniper-style. We should add one, just in case."

He just manages not to ask her to elaborate, but it's difficult. Her patrol reports often contain riveting potential tactical exercises, which was surprising, to say the least. During training, Alicia never demonstrated any interest, much less aptitude, in anything but the mechanics of her job and in that was only the most average of students (at least, until she picked up a short blade and fell in love). That he missed it isn't a surprise, but he wondered why Erica didn't take advantage of having someone with this kind of mind on her team; she was competent, but imagination wasn't something she possessed in excessive quantities. It only occurs to him now that it's probable Erica didn't know, and possibly because Alicia didn't either.

"Anyway, Dean said…" She pauses, frowning briefly before her expression brightens. "Technically, he didn't say I couldn't tell you what he was doing; implication is another word for plausible deniability, am I right?"

He nods, again.

"My team's on watch tonight," she says. "He's questioning everyone who's been on watch or local patrol for the last couple of days, and he wants you here until he's done."

"Why?"

"What are the chances it was pure luck a demon found you and Dean alone on your first joint outing from the camp in over a month?" she asks rhetorically. "After three months of supernatural silence on the Kansas front? One who thinks Dean's dead and we're engaged in a mass conspiracy to conceal it?"
There is that, yes. "If he concealed himself--"

"We should have seen something," she answers. "Today, he had to be in view of the gate to see you leave before following you, and sure, there's a couple of blind spots, but he'd have to have passed in view to get to 'em. And I don't buy he sat there for days doing nothing else; demons don't have that kind of patience. He's been visible at least twice and they all know exactly where to watch."

He examines her expression. "There's something else."

She hesitates, frown deepening. "Here's the thing. Only Amanda and her team knew you were taking Dean out today, and in case you're curious, them, me, and my team are the only ones who know you came back injured. I went with my team to give them their instructions while Dean and Amanda relieved the watch and in case you're curious, Dean didn't waste words on the how fucked they were. I overheard one of the watch say they didn't see Dean in the jeep, just you."

"They panicked," he answers, well able to imagine what effect Dean would have had on the watch. "They probably didn't even realize who was in the jeep--or remembered anyone left today, most likely--and thought that might be mitigating." Alicia stares at him, eyes having widened more with each word. "What?"

"Cas, I don't think it's possible for anyone to be that stupid," she says slowly. "This is science. That level would require like, I don't know, someone to tell them to inhale and exhale to enjoy the living and breathing experience." She shakes her head in wonder before settling back with a malicious smile. "Screwing around while on duty when they should be watching: what's the penalty for that again? Mowing's kind of slow with winter coming; how about a swimming pool? Olympic size? For training, of course. And maybe carrying the water to it every day forever?"

"I'll imagine something new just for them," he answers distractedly, annoyed he didn't supervise them more carefully and discover the potential for this kind of problem. "I should have been paying more attention during the watch shifts. The monotony encourages sloth."

In the back of his mind, he makes a note to look into shortening the shifts and expanding the rotation schedule despite the low number of personnel available; that would permit assigning patrol to one without breaking Dean's rule regarding necessary downtime between assignments. Mentally calling up the current schedule, he considers how to rearrange it; it's a far more productive use of his time than wondering why Dean doesn't want him--

"Cas?" Alicia says worriedly, reaching for her pen. "Is it--"

"Why can't I be there while he's questioning the watch?" he asks before he can stop himself.

She blinks, looking surprised. "You're kidding, right? This is Dean Winchester we're talking about here. For one, he's ripping them a new one for--"

The door opens, and Alicia breaks off mid-sentence, spinning the stool around, hand going to her hip before she grins in relief at the sight of Dean. Dean, on the other hand, looks startled, eyes fixed on Alicia's hand dropping from her gun.

"Took you long enough," she says, hopping off the stool and handing Dean the folder before turning back around to look at Castiel. "So the demon blood thing--"

"I'll explain," Castiel says stiffly, and Dean's eyes flicker from the folder in his hand to Castiel in uncoconcealed bemusement. "Alicia, I'll schedule your team for an additional two days off duty." She nods, starting for the door, reminding him of something he forgot. "Alicia?" He waits for her to turn
around. "Thank you. I'll see you in the morning so you can check your work. And could you write a report on how one person would defend the infirmary with two clips of bullets and three knives? With and without a trap door for roof access."

She grins at him, surprised and pleased. "You got it. I'm up an hour before dawn, so I'll be by half an hour after that, if that's okay. I'll bring breakfast." Looking at Dean, she adds, "Want me to send Matt to help you out? I'll take his place on watch until he gets back."

"Yeah, thanks. Tell him to wait outside." As she goes out the door, shutting it behind her, Dean glances at the folder blankly as he makes his way to the stool, scanning the page Alicia helpfully left on top. "So the demon blood thing--"

"Can I leave now?" he interrupts, sitting up far too quickly and immediately regretting it: blood loss, of course. He forgot. When his vision clears, Dean is in front of him, one hand on his uninjured shoulder and looking worried. "I'm fine."

"I can tell by the way you just almost went face first onto the floor," Dean answers, green eyes dark. "Should I get Alicia back here?"

"It was hardly..." He stops, waiting for his vision to clear entirely. "I want to go home. Now."

"That's why I'm here." Dean's worried expression intensifies. "We're just waiting for Matt, and before you ask why, refer to five seconds ago. You know...." More carefully, Castiel swings his legs off the bed, deliberately dislodging Dean's hand as he fixes his gaze on the door in the hope that Matt will appear by a hitherto unknown ability to teleport. Stranger things have happened, today in fact. "Cas, what the hell is up with you?"

"Nothing," he says shortly, ignoring the hurt in Dean's voice with an effort. "I want to rest--"

"Yeah, crap, I forgot to grab the sheets from the laundry." Dean groans, dropping back on the stool. "I'll ask Matt to run get 'em after we get you home."

Castiel wonders what on earth sheets have to do with anything, though that reminds him he left at least one load in the washer today and it will need to be rewash before drying or will have an unpleasant odor. "You've had several hours. Surely you had time before now to indulge your sybaritic urges."

"Clean sheets aren't sybaritic," Dean argues, then looks pained. "God, I know what that word means; fuck helping Sam study for the SAT's."

"Dean--"

"The watch took more time than I thought, sorry about that," Dean interrupts casually. "Amanda reminded me it was getting late and to wrap this up, my bad. I needed to get my feelings about this clusterfuck out, and turns out, I had a lot of feelings. Who knew?" He searches Dean's face but there's no indication he's being evasive. "They're on every shitty duty you can think of with for a while, by the way, in addition to whatever I come up with."

"Yes, I was...." There's something about Dean's expression that reminds him of this afternoon when they were talking about Sidney as well as Alicia's very straightforward recitation of Dean's orders. "Duty on watch is monotonous. I should have been more attentive."

It's a mistake; Dean's expression doesn't change, but the temperature in the room seems to drop alarmingly. "You're making excuses for them?"
"Of course not." He wishes he could blame the last shot of morphine, but sadly, it's several hours past a plausible high. "I'm simply admitting my responsibility for their lack of discipline--"

"Right now, they all swear they didn't know it was us in the jeep."

Castiel nods, not surprised. "I thought as much. Alicia said they claimed they didn't see you in the jeep earlier."

"Yeah, weird: and now every damn one of them swears they didn't say anything like that." Dean raises an eyebrow. "Should have gotten Amanda to separate them; they had plenty of time to get their stories straight and work out a game plan while I was checking on you. Good thing their plan started with trying to imply Alicia's lying for the fuck of it; I might have bought it otherwise and they'd be more fucked than they are now."

"Why would they...." He's not sure where to start. "Alicia said only her team and Amanda's knew I was injured."

"Once Alicia said you'd be okay, I told them myself," Dean says evenly. "Then my feelings, and like I said, took some time to get 'em all out there."

"I want to question them myself."

"No."

He stiffens. "You told Alicia to keep me here until you were done."

"Well, one, I didn't know how you'd feel when you woke up," Dean answers reasonably. "Two, this time, it's my job to traumatize the troops. Separation of duties: also fun, won't lie about that."

"And you didn't want me there."

Lying the folder down on the edge of the bed, Dean sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "You couldn't be there, Cas, not for this."

"Will you tell me the reason?" he asks, fighting to keep his voice steady. "If I've done something that makes you doubt--"

"It's not you." Dean takes a deep breath. "Like you said this morning, can't do shit half-way. Time to pony up and get shit done."

Every so often, Castiel is reminded forcibly even telepathy was often at a loss when it came to understanding Dean. "Is there any possibility this conversation will make more sense if I'm high? I can get the morphine now."

Dean scowls. "Look, there's this--thing. I should have mentioned this before, and I was going to--this afternoon, in fact--and then Jeffrey happened. The thing with Sid--"

"What does Sidney have to do with why I can't question the watch?"

"He doesn't," Dean says, sounding like he's forcing the words between his teeth. "Look, this isn't easy, so cut me some slack, okay?"

He nods slowly; Dean does look strangely uncomfortable. "Sid."

"Sid," Dean agrees in relief. "This afternoon, he was sulking like a goddamn three year old, yeah, but whatever. Right up until you showed up and he got--."
"Hostile." Dean nods, mouth tightening briefly. "Yes, I know. He thinks that I'm--"

"Personal gain, yeah, that." Dean cocks his head. "Stupid question, but--Cas, you ever wonder what that meant?"

"No," he answers honestly. "Sidney's resentment is of long standing, as I told you, and his lack of a team simply gives him more reason, in his view. Why--"

"Yeah, that actually....." Dean reaches up, rubbing the bridge of his nose again. "Jesus, this is harder than I thought."

"I don't understand what Sidney's inexplicable feelings of resentment have to do with anything."

"They're not inexplicable, just fucked up because of your history." Dean finally looks up, meeting his eyes. "He thinks you're fucking me."

Dean's obvious waiting for something, but Castiel's too startled to decipher what it might be.

"You sleep fourteen hours out of every twenty-four on average," he says finally, baffled. "Even when you're conscious, any strenuous activity is.....Dean?" Dean's worried stare begins to dissolve before he abruptly slumps forward to bury his face in the mattress. Castiel blinks down at him; despite being muffled by the thin mattress, the laughter is unmistakable. "Dean?"

Dean waves a hand helplessly, which Castiel assumes means he needs time. Rescuing the folder before the vibrations of the bed send it to the floor, he flips through it, but it's almost impossible to concentrate with Dean convulsing only inches away. When he finally lifts his head, face the color of a ripe tomato, Castiel keeps his gaze on the second page despite the fact he can't read a single word.

"Sorry," Dean says, sounding so sincerely contrite that Castiel sets the folder aside, turning his attention back to Dean. "It's--never mind. Look--"

"Why would he think we were having sex?" he interrupts before Dean can continue.

"Yeah, that...." Dean's mouth quirks. "Because everyone else does and Sid is one with being part of the crowd."

"They think--" Dean nods firmly. "You're not joking."

"Nope." Dean relaxes on the stool, looking inexplicably amused. "You can't do anything half-way, can you? It's either debauchery twenty-four/seven or practicing for the gold medal in professional straight-edge celibacy. Seriously, what's up with that?"

For the second (third?) time today, Castiel fails in finding a response.

"Pop question; before now, what was your longest dry spell? My math says twelve hours on the outside when it was voluntary and you didn't have a mission interrupting your social life."

"That's an exaggeration." Though he reflects uneasily, possibly not by very much.

"I'll give you that one," Dean allows, cocking his head. "How about Dean's?"

"I don't know."

"I'm pretty sure you can guess. Since he never slept in that cabin, he would either be sleeping with whoever he was fucking or on your couch. Dude, you probably can tell me to the minute, since that's how long he kicked you off your own couch and fucked with the daily orgy schedule."
Under the weight of Dean's certainty, he nods reluctant agreement. "Six days. Five days, eighteen hours, and sixteen minutes to be more accurate. I could tell you the seconds, but--" He stops at Dean's widening grin. "You find this amusing."

"Welcome to the Apocalypse," he answers philosophically, leaning an elbow on the bed. "Look, it sounds crazy, right? I know, but--"

"Gossip doesn't need anything but supposition and boredom to fuel it," he says in resignation. "Yes, I know; I should have thought of that."

"I'd love to know how," Dean says sincerely.

"It's a very small camp," he says, wondering resentfully why on earth everyone couldn't find enough fodder with Laura and Gary's deeply uncomfortable attachment to mass exhibitionism. At least the mess is now a sex-free zone, something Castiel never thought would need to be made an order. "It's a pleasant way to pass the time, granted, but--"

"But all this time, you never heard anything about this, right?"

He pauses. "No."

"Including from Amanda who knows all and tells us all about it, in detail?"

No, he didn't. "No."

"Because the camp is far more interested in Zoe's incense fuckery and Kyle's official dry spell than the amazing coinciding events of me moving in with you and you embracing a lifestyle of less orgies, more mapmaking, and quietly taking notes during patrol meetings?" Dean asks. "Meetings that historically you treated like an opportunity for performance art sarcasm, by the way? And that was just before the fever."

Castiel closes his eyes. "Oh."

"After seeing you in action this morning, the last one was probably pretty much all anyone needed," Dean adds in unmistakable amusement. "Congratulations, Cas; you accidentally ended up living in monogamous bliss with your leader on the strength of being a good subordinate and are running the camp for me because of my feelings."

"I've never been in a relationship with anyone," he hears himself say helplessly, which may or may not be applicable, yet must be said. Opening his eyes, he sees Dean grinning at him, and yes, that's definitely amusement.

"I lived with a woman and her kid in the suburbs for a while," Dean offers, cocking his head. "That's almost like the end of the world. Little League moms…."

"Dean didn't like men."

Dean shuts his eyes, looking dangerously close to breaking into another bout of uncontrolled hilarity. "…and your toaster's in the mail, missed that one, no idea how. Adding it now."

"You aren't upset about this."

Dean stills, smile freezing, and once again, he's subject to searching green eyes. "Are you?"

"I have no idea what you're asking," he says finally, frustrated with Dean's rapid change of mood.
"Other than apparently I make worse deals than you do, and I would have thought that impossible."

Dean's expression shatters, but at least he manages to choke back his laughter this time, eyes watering with the effort. "You have no idea how familiar this conversation is."

"Because you had it before." Dean's eyes widen in belated alarm. "How long have you known about this?"

"A couple of weeks," he admits. "But--"

"And you're only telling me now?" He searches backward through his memory. "You weren't yet enthusiastic regarding visitors then, so it was Ana, Brad, Amanda, Joseph, Vera, or Chuck. Brad and Ana weren't that comfortable with you yet, Amanda wouldn't without speaking to Vera first, Joseph is a possibility, but he'd speak to Vera first as well, and knowing Vera, she'd insist on doing it herself and use her position as your doctor to explain it was to avoid excess stress to your health."

"Why not Chuck?" Dean asks straight-faced before he snickers. "Yeah, I can't see it either. Nice job, Sherlock. It was Vera." Resting his head on his hand, he sighs. "I told her I'd talk to you about it. Which I am."

"Two weeks later."

"I wasn't hiding it from you," which isn't quite true, if the way Dean's eyes flicker away are any indication. "The subject didn't come up, for one, and I didn't really know how to tell you, for another."

He's willing to admit it might be somewhat difficult to introduce. "What I don't understand is why she didn't tell me."

Dean straightens. "Uh, listen--"

"Why she'd tell you--not that she owes me, of course, and I certainly haven't… but I could have stopped it--"

"On a guess," Dean interrupts, voice rising, "she would've if she thought she could trust how I'd react when you told me."

"I don't understand."

Dean blows out a breath. "Look, what happened today with Sid--"

"He wasn't and isn't an assassin!" Dean flinches, and Castiel has to fight down the spurt of inexplicable guilt: Luke will never cease to taint everything in his life. "Dean--"

"If he was, would you tell me or would you think you needed to prove it first?" His voice breaks on the last word, expression darkening abruptly. "You think you can take care of yourself, and I get it, you outclass everyone here. You outclassed that demon today, and he still could have killed you by accident."

There's no excuse for what happened today; he isn't sure how he could have forgotten. "I made a mistake. It won't happen again."

"Yeah, you let your guard down because maybe for the first time since I met you and living life instead of watching for ways it could kill you. And me." Dean's expression hardens. "I'm okay with you doing that."
"I'm not, when the risk--"

"The risk is that you spend one fucking day, one fucking hour, not hating that you survived Falling!" Dean snaps, abruptly coming off the stool. "You can't do that, no one can, when you're waiting for it to shoot you in the back!" Startled, he stares up at Dean. "Jesus Christ, what part of this isn't getting through? What happened today was as much my fault as yours; I told you I'd watch your back and I fucked up first time I was tested. It won't happen again."

"How could you have known--"

"I'm a hunter," Dean interrupts, green eyes flat. "I heard him coming, but he was ten feet away before I realized it wasn't you because the direction was wrong. That's basic shit; I had a goddamn arsenal in front of me and…." He closes his eyes, dropping back onto the stool. "You were right; I forgot my right was down for the count until it was too late. I need to work on that."

He swallows. "It wasn't your fault."

"I watched you get shot by a demon with shitty aim because I forgot to reach for a gun with my left hand," Dean says, looking at him. "The only reason we were even there today was because I've been a dick about being too sick to do shit and you decided to surprise me." His expression softens, mouth quirking unexpectedly. "Hippo porn, my own personal arsenal, and my own shooting range with a nice view: anyone ever tell you that you kick ass when it comes to presents?"

"No. I've never really…." He isn't sure what to say to that. "You could have been killed today."

"You almost were killed today," Dean says, meeting his eyes. "Last part of today was shitty, yeah, but before that was great; we're definitely doing that again. The part where you looked like, just maybe, you were having fun."

"I was." It was the right response; Dean relaxes on the stool. "However--"

"No," Dean interrupts. "There's no 'however', no 'but', no 'next time I'll remember fun is wrong'. This, Cas, is your life; you've tried everything else--and then some--so why not try living it?"

"What do you think I've been doing?"

"Your job," he answers succinctly. "Dean, and now me."

He sucks in a breath.

"It's the shittiest thing to be grateful for," Dean continues bleakly. "I'm just your goddamn job, but if I wasn't, you'd be dead."

"You're not," he whispers. "I don't think of you as my job."

The set look vanishes, replaced with a slow, satisfied smile. "I was hoping you'd say that. So what's it gonna be: ready to try the living thing? I'm in, what about you?"

Castiel stares at him, throat tight. "You want to save me."

"As soon as I figure out how," Dean agrees. "Until then, I'll settle for you wanting to save yourself. I'll give you every reason in the world to do it, but you gotta meet me halfway here. The only thing you got to risk is disappointment, and--seriously, is it better not to give a shit about anything at all?"

"It's easier," Castiel tells the door, aware of Dean's abrupt stillness beside him, the beginnings of--
yes, that would be disappointment. It won't last, he knows that, because this is Dean Winchester and nothing can ever be simple or easy. This conversation has happened in many forms before this, and there's no chance it won't happen again. "I'm going to disappoint you, no matter how hard I try to do otherwise."

"I'll take my chances," Dean says. "Question is, are you willing to risk me disappointing you?"

"What?"

"I will," Dean adds with a shrug. "It's a thing people do. Shitty, but you gotta roll with it. We call it life." He tilts his head toward the door as he starts to his feet. "Wanna get out of here?"

He almost agrees, then realizes he almost forgot how this conversation began. "The rumor."

"That." Dean gives the door a longing look before reluctantly seating himself again. "Yeah, about that. I took care of it, no problem."

"You did." Dean seems to find the wall very interesting. "So you explained it wasn't true and someone might eventually believe it?" He tries and fails to imagine a scenario to provide sufficient evidence with even a marginal chance of success, much less one not utterly depressing to even contemplate.

"Yeah, that wasn't gonna work," Dean agrees. "So I confirmed it instead."

At a tentative knock on the door, he nearly knocks over the stool on his way to the door. "That's Matt," he says, already reaching for the doorknob. "So you wanna--"

"I want to go home." That much he's certain of right now. Perhaps the only thing.

"Awesome," he says enthusiastically, opening the door to reveal startled Matt. "Give us a second. Cas, where're your--never mind." Dean picks up the bottle of painkillers Alicia left on the tray and tucks them into his pocket before coming up to his left side. "Let's get out of here."

Dean spends an inordinate of time making the bed before returning to the living room and pulling Castiel to his feet. Only belatedly does he realize why Dean insisted he take two of the pills as soon as they arrived at the cabin; he's sitting on the neatly-made bed, blankets pulled back invitingly, before he realizes what Dean has in mind.

"Dean--"

"Cas, you sleep on your right side, where you currently have a bullet graze with added demon blood," Dean reminds him, pushing him down ruthlessly onto the mattress with a long squeal of miserable springs; he can relate. "I need to check it every few hours, you need sleep, and dude, you're not winning this so why the fuck even try?"

Castiel blinks at him.

"Also, Alicia will be wondering why the hell I exiled you to the couch when she shows up in the morning," Dean adds, nudging him over until he can sit down beside him on the bed. "I already got a shitty reputation when it comes to relationships here; don't wanna add 'makes injured boyfriend sleep on the couch' to it."

After a moment of staring at him, Castiel reaches back and braces a pillow against the headboard before sitting up, ignoring Dean's scowl as well as the throb of muted pain from his arm. "This
would be an excellent time for an explanation."

"I like morning."

"I like now," he answers firmly, just remembering not to cross his arms. "Whenever you're ready."

Dean makes a face but settles onto the bed. "The watch changed their story, but it's not like either one would have made this okay. Cas, their job is to watch; that doesn't take special skills. It needs eyes to see things happening in front of them, and if they can't do that without you riding their asses, then they're not just useless, they're a danger to everyone in the camp."

Reluctantly, he nods his agreement.

"So that's out of the way." Dean takes a deep breath. "Cas, if what Alicia heard was supposed to be their first defense, they were assuming I'd be less pissed because they thought you were alone when you left."

"Yes, I thought as much," he agrees, and Dean's expression darkens; for no reason at all, he finds himself thinking again of the way that Dean told Sidney that he'd shoot him. "Dean?"

"I'd be pissed if it happened to anyone in the camp," Dean says evenly. "But if they've got a fucking rating system, might as well make sure you're at the top while they learn the value of all life."

"Yes, I understand," he says, feeling as if he's missing something important. "Except now I'd like an explanation of why it's been two weeks since Vera told you and in that time you made no effort to disabuse the camp of their misconception. And tonight you confirmed it."

"Besides the fact they wouldn't believe it?"

"That's not an answer."

"It's actually the only answer I need," Dean answers, bracing a hand on the mattress behind him. "They wouldn't believe it, it's been too long, so best case scenario is I'm okay with fucking you, living with you, making you do my job while I'm sick, but I draw the line at admitting to anyone I'm taking it up the ass." Dean shrugs at his expression. "Something someone said: it got to me."

He nods slowly, feeling very much as if he's standing on exceedingly fragile ice and the sun is very close to rising.

"You don't hide anything," Dean continues. "Best case scenario, they think you're doing it now for me, because I'm ashamed of it. Of you. And you're willing to go along with it, and no one Cas--no one--is worth that."

"I don't care what anyone thinks of me."

"I care," Dean answers flatly. He's still absorbing that when he adds, "I waited two weeks, fine, but I haven't just been--look, I needed to think, and--Cas, no one wonders why the hell after two years of the artist formerly known as Dean Winchester, shoot-on-sight demon-torturing control freak came back from Kansas City a whole new person. Cas, it's only been three months; someone should have at least wondered, but no one ever questioned it, and Vera would have said something if that ever came up."

She would have, that much is true. "There were mitigating circumstances."

"Lots of 'em," Dean agrees, eyes distant. "Except one thing. The first time I was here, Dean
handcuffed me and he would have killed me if I'd answered his question wrong. That was why after Chuck outed me, both of you couldn't risk anyone knowing the truth. It didn't matter what I told them, they would have killed me just for looking like him. You couldn't even risk Alicia helping Vera out during the fever, because she would know something was off on sight." Castiel nods. "But all this time, no one ever--even once, after two weeks missing--thought maybe someone should do a physical check? Just to be sure? Never asked you?"

He shakes his head. "No, they didn't, but--"

"Even with the stunning coincidence that with a two year history of sleeping with anyone who'd say yes, I stopped? If I were the paranoid kind, I'd wonder if maybe removing clothing was the deal breaker there."

Castiel slumps back against the pillow.

"No one wondered, though, because you answered both questions without a word," Dean finishes. "You're the only person in this camp since Kansas City that has personally verified that I have all the right scars in all the right places, and the reason I'm not banging my way across the camp anymore."

"Vera knows it's not true."

"Vera trusts you," Dean answers quietly. "And I'm pretty sure that's the only reason she bought any of it."

He swallows. "She said something."

"That she didn't hate me," Dean answers with a trace of amusement. "Don't worry about it, we were bonding. Look, I could be wrong, but I think it helped. No one asked why I put you in charge of the camp or was taking your advice after two years of ignoring you in patrol meetings." He pause, something unreadable in his expression. "After today, it's fact; no one's gonna question your orders, no one's gonna think you're not doing exactly what I want you to do, and no one--no one--is gonna think they can try and put a bullet in your head in this camp without me hunting them down no matter where they hide. Not after what the watch is gonna be telling everyone about what went down tonight.

"Turns out I do like you that much," Dean adds ruefully, expression lightening unexpectedly. "And still got a couple of chapters of hippo porn you haven't translated, which yeah, was a factor, not gonna lie here--"

"Dean."

Dean makes a face. "Look, I get this sucks for you, all right?"

Castiel reviews the conversation to this moment and decides to let Dean elucidate. "It does?"

"Yeah." Dean blows out a breath. "Look, this--thing, whatever--it doesn't mean you have to keep trying for expert level celibacy or anything."

Castiel tilts his head, wondering if Dean is aware of the meaning of the words currently emerging from his mouth.

"I thought about this," Dean explains.

"For two weeks." Far, far too much time, if this is going where he suspects it is.
Dean nods firmly, green eyes darting toward the lamp. "Look, whatever you want to do--whenever you want! I mean, the celibacy kick's gotta end sometime...." A complex series of expressions cross Dean's face before he adds, not casually at all, "So don't let this stop you."

This discussion would benefit from Dean eschewing euphemisms, for both their sakes. "You mean the fact that you confirmed we were in a relationship tonight shouldn't stop me from having sex with other members of the camp."

Dean winces but--amazingly--that seems to be exactly what he meant. "Yeah."

"Or several people," he adds, watching Dean's face and wishing he could appreciate the novelty of having a better grasp of human at this moment than someone born to it and currently avoiding meeting his eyes. It's less surprising, however, when he considers this is Dean, self-knowledge isn't his strongest area of expertise, and this isn't about sex, though it would be infinitely simpler if it were. "After something just short of a very stable three month relationship, during which time occurred a fever that nearly killed you, you giving me command of the camp so you can recover in peace, and what was probably a genuinely terrifying interview between you and the watch because on an excursion from the camp I was injured, I am free to cheat on you with your--and apparently my--subordinates with a clear conscience."

He wonders if Dean thinks that expression is supposed to reflect 'agreement' or even 'vague neutrality'.

"While you're still sick," he continues, more for his own amusement than anything else. "Is the cabin acceptable or would you prefer I--"

"Fuck you," Dean snaps at him, crossing his arms defensively. "Come on, that's not what I meant. You can--"

"Sneak in and out of various cabins after dusk?" he offers, curious if Dean during all his very extensive thinking at some point actually made a plan for this. It's unlikely; if he's right, the full horror of what he's suggesting is only now dawning on him. "While you're still weak from the fever and need comfort and support."

Dean frowns uneasily. "When you put it like that, yeah, it sounds shitty--"

"You mean an accurate summary of your--whatever this is?" he asks. "And you, of course, are so breathtakingly stupid that you don't notice my regular absences."

"Or they'll assume--you can tell them--I'm okay with it!" Dean answers hotly, and oh God, he's sincere. "It's not like you'd actually be cheating on me, Jesus!"

He takes a deep breath; perhaps he should try something else.

"Dean, you instruct the local patrol regularly now." Dean nods. "Some I used to have sex with on a semi-regular basis."

Dean nods again, apparently oblivious to the connection. "Right. So?"

"Do you honestly think you can instruct the patrol with your usual enjoyment of their company if you know I was fucking at least one of them an hour earlier? Or several of them?"

"How would I know--"

"Take as a given that you'd guess." He'd know. This is Dean, and he's very good at that.
Dean's expression goes through a variety of permutations, all of which suggest that this would not end well for anyone. "I could--"

"You might be able to," he interrupts, giving up. "I can't."

Dean's eyes widen, and Castiel entertains a brief fantasy of throttling him.

"I've never promised anyone monogamy, and I have never been involved with anyone who expected it of me," he says, deciding to give Dean a reason he can deal with, as the most obvious continues to elude him entirely. "Because if I made such a promise, I would never break it. If I made anyone that promise, I wouldn't want to."

He can almost see the counterarguments in Dean's face, the most important being that he never actually made that promise, and so nothing would be broken. He doesn't use any of them.

"Even if--even if I could," he adds more thoughtfully, "I won't do that to you. It's one thing for everyone to think that you're infatuated enough to let me do this. It's another that you're so infatuated with me that you would do that and overlook blatant infidelity as well. It may not be real, but how you will feel knowing what everyone here must think--"

"You think I care what anyone thinks?"

"Yes, but in this case, whether you care or not is immaterial; I care, and I won't do it."

There's no way to mistake the guilty relief; it would help a great deal if Dean would admit he was relieved, but he supposes narrowly avoiding Dean attempting to prove how open-minded he is regarding Castiel's sex life is really enough of a victory. Another week of thinking and it's possible he may have gotten to that.

"Cas…"

"I don't care," he says honestly, quietly resenting sexuality once again for making life so much more complicated than it needed to be. This would be so much easier if Dean were attracted to him and they could simply have sex. No strange discussion, Dean would be in a far better mood on a regular basis, and he wouldn't be cultivating what is becoming a very questionable relationship with running water.

Dean peers at him uncertainly. "You're sure?"

"Absolutely certain," Castiel answers with perfect truth. "However, I would like to know exactly what you told the watch. I'm sorry I missed it."

For a moment, Dean hesitates, then grins at him, perfectly easy again, and Castiel breathes a careful sigh of relief. His skill at interpreting humans is rapidly approaching expertise; this has indeed been a very productive day. "Where do you want me to start?"
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

There will be about a three day delay for Chapter 11 next week, since I received an assignment at work that has to be completed by next Monday. Assume Chapter 11 will be posted next Tuesday or Wednesday, and I apologize for the delay. I was hoping to have a perfect posting record.

--Day 95--

Castiel awakens at dawn for long enough for Alicia and Dean to check his arm and Dean to convince him to take more opiates before his mind clears enough to remember that he doesn't want them. It's therefore just past noon before he's fully aware of his surroundings. Despite his care, he still stumbles into the bedside table, which alerts an obnoxiously solicitous Dean to materialize if by magic before he can steady himself, offering all manner of services, not limited to assistance in the bathroom.

("I'm trying to show my appreciation for all you did for me, Cas," he says, eyes wide and unsettlingly anticipatory. "Sponge bath or ice? I'm here for you.")

Maneuvered onto the couch, he watches in resignation as Dean happily drops a tray in front of him with far, far more food than he has any interest in looking at, much less actually eating. He considers reminding Dean that meals are supposed to be consumed at a table, but that would require moving again, which is even less desirable than eating.

"You're enjoying this," he observes, which has the effect of making Dean's grin widen. Picking up the spoon, he sets himself to completing breakfast.

"Alicia will be by again later to check on your really terrible wound--"

"It's hardly more than a graze."

Dean ignores him. "--and you're on limited duty for one week, because I can order you to do that." After a moment, he adds reluctantly, "Yeah, just a graze, fine. I checked it this morning when I changed the bandages."

"You did." He does remember that Alicia was mostly present in an observational capacity.

Dean shrugs, eyes drifting toward the doorway. "Dude, when it comes to bullet wounds, I've probably seen more than Alicia has."

"You didn't--"

"--have to?" Dean picks up one of the pieces of toast and takes a bite. "Did it anyway."

Not sure how to answer that, Castiel grimly applies himself to his meal as Dean entertains himself with one of the journals--which, he can't tell--and notes that despite the exertions yesterday, he looks surprisingly well, if slightly tired.
At his third surreptitious appraisal, Dean catches him at it, toast halfway in his mouth, and quickly chews and swallows it before saying, "Got up, checked your mortal wound, ate breakfast, took my nap, had lunch and everything. No fever, no ice baths, it's all good."

"Patrol this morning?"

"...and took care of patrol, even though I won the bet yesterday." Dean rolls his eyes. "I'm fine." Before Castiel can inquire further, he adds, "Keep eating and I'll catch you up on last night and what Amanda told me this morning."

With a sigh, he gets another spoonful of soup as Dean makes a production of watching, foot braced on the edge of the coffee table, then his expression suddenly turns serious.

"So open secret: the watch has a gambling problem," he says finally, looking vaguely disgruntled. "Amanda's still questioning them, but she's pretty sure they're telling the truth about that after five hours on the practice field with her starting an hour before dawn and Alicia's tender mercies in the infirmary after. There's a floating craps game that's been running straight for about a week and among the stakes was Spam, which counts as meat these days."

He winces. "It's not food, however."

"No argument there. She confiscated the cans--along with some socks, a pair of boots, two guns--"

"Gambling weapons is a second degree offense," Castiel interrupts, straightening, which for some reason makes Dean grin. "Did you discipline them yet?"

"Restriction to their cabins when off-duty with extra training from dawn until noon for the foreseeable future," Dean answers with huge enjoyment. "I told them you'd be adding to that when you were feeling better while I thought a little more on the subject. Anticipation, Cas. They didn't piss themselves, but it was close." The grin fades. "You believe 'em?"

"The Spam was a deciding factor," Castiel answers after a bite's worth of consideration. "As I told you last night, I doubt they even remembered our jeep leaving the camp, and panicked when they realized--"

"I was in the jeep." Dean's expression darkens, and Castiel is abruptly reminded of what else he and Dean discussed last night. "Still pretty pissed about that." In an abrupt switch of mood, he gives Castiel a curious look. "Jeffrey's been here before?"

He nods, taking another bite before answering. "The wards make Chitaqua difficult to find if someone hasn't been keyed in or isn't aware of Chitaqua's location, and by that I mean, physically driven here while fully conscious and been within the wards. Otherwise, it's nearly impossible to locate even if they know the location or use a map."

"Really?" Dean rests his chin on one hand. "Why?"

"It's in the nature of anything powerful to conceal itself, and the more powerful something is, the more it conceals itself," he answers. "Much like the proverbial forest, the closer you are to the trees, the less able you are to see the forest."

Dean makes a face; yes, he didn't think that quite fit.

"In the case of the camp wards, they also have the advantage using Grace, which is enough like Creation that it blends into the background of the living world. Demons don't like Grace by instinct and avoid it, but that doesn't mean they recognize that's what's affecting them; demons don't like
many things. Conscious recognition that something is affecting them doesn't help, either, unless they can suppress the fight/flight response, which is much harder than you may think, and for demons, is also sometimes the only warning they have for something that's dangerous to them."

"Huh." Dean cocks his head. "What about for humans?"

"The amount of Grace within the wards also has a very slight warping effect on perceptions the closer anyone is to Chitaqua, along with a very mild compulsion to stay away from it, which also follows; Grace is dangerous, as you know, and it's not a power any being other than an angel can safely harness. Or would want to, to be honest."

"I remember our suicidal environmentalist." Dean cocks his head, eyes narrowing speculatively. "Range about five miles or so?"

"Yes, that's why I suggested that as the limit of your solitary explorations around the camp. Jeffrey was well within that, but you observed him; how did he seem to you?"

"Twitchy," Dean agrees reluctantly. "More than even a demon who doesn't know guns facing off against you would be. That was the wards doing it?"

"Jeffrey was never the brightest of the bright, but directly challenging me without any intention of killing me is a new low." He takes another bite at Dean's significant look. "He did come to talk, and the gun was only for show; he never meant to use it as more than a threat."

"Even with demon blood on the bullets?" Dean asks skeptically.

"Probably his master's idea, whoever that might be," Castiel admits. "And not a terrible one: if he was aware Jeffrey wasn't familiar with guns, he wanted to experiment with something that might disable me even if he only managed a graze. It was an extremely good bet, as it turned out."

Dean grimaces, taking a sip from his almost empty cup of coffee. "So you're saying no one can find Chitaqua unless they're either keyed in or a former demon visitor?"

"It's possible," Castiel says after another bite. "It's simply extraordinarily difficult. The effects are almost entirely on the subconscious level; once anyone is within five miles of Chitaqua, it's almost impossible to consciously notice that they're being affected. It's like paranoia; it's very difficult to prove to yourself that they're not out to get you. Human instincts exist for a reason, and after five years in an Apocalypse, you might say that they have made a very necessary comeback in the human psyche. Even if someone, demon or human, made it in view of our walls, they wouldn't be in any condition to be subtle about it."

Dean's jaw tightens "So the watch definitely missed him."

"If he came this close..." Castiel hesitates, pushing aside his own responsibility for their lack of discipline for the moment. "We were there two hours before he showed himself; if he was there all that time, he would have recognized you. My best guess--and this is a guess--is he concealed himself near the camp entrance, saw us leave, and waited until the watch went to finish their craps game before following us."

"Amanda found his car hidden just off the road, about a quarter mile from the crossroad that led to the farm," Dean says grimly. "Tank was nearly empty, but that doesn't mean much. Amanda made a list of the nearest towns, and we'll send a team to check with them for anyone missing."

Castiel nods, looking at his three-quarters finished plate before taking a deep breath and taking another bite. When he looks up, Dean's expression is more troubled, not less. "There's something
"Yeah, I think." Dean finishes his cup with a frown and stares down at it for a moment. "Amanda didn't think Jeffrey could see who was in the jeep from any of the most likely place he was waiting, and glare would have been working against him after noon. Joe's team just finished that range day before yesterday, which is probably why he knew to go there, and you were there with them at least once, right?"

"The first time and to approve it when they were done," Castiel answers. "If he was waiting for me, he wouldn't risk it with the team there. Unlike me, two stayed on watch the entire time."

Dean makes a face, which he ignores.

"You think he was looking for me?"

"Yeah, that makes sense," Dean answers slowly, playing with his cup. "I mean, it all makes sense, except the part where he wanted you to bring him back to Chitaqua. There's stupid and then there's suicidal."

Castiel forces himself to finish the last bite before pushing his empty plate aside. "He said the barrier was weakening."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking." Dean cocks his head. "Is something going on with the wards?"

Closing his eyes, Castiel follows his sense of the wards, trying to decide if there's been any radical change to them. While his awareness of them is constant, connected by the Grace that was once within him, without physical contact it's extremely limited, rather like the hum of a car with the engine running.

Opening his eyes, he looks at Dean again. "They don't feel any different, but without contact, what I can sense is very limited."

Dean nods, getting to his feet and starting to gather up the empty dishes. "Grab your boots and we'll go check."

It doesn't take long; a touch confirms all is as it was. Stepping back, Castiel shakes his head. "Nothing has changed."

"Time for my walk anyway," Dean says, jerking his chin in the opposite direction of the camp. "You count as supervised, right?"

"I thought my mortal wound would be of concern." Falling into step with him, he lets the silence stretch, content to wait for Dean to decide how he wants to approach the subject.

"Okay, give me ballpark," Dean says finally. "What are the odds that Kansas--for no reason at all--is actually the only place where the monsters are gone? I mean, the border guards are obviously not our best source of information here, but we know that this--whatever it is--isn't happening everywhere, so--"

"You want to know if it's possible the barrier he spoke of--if it exists at all--is somehow related to Kansas being a dead zone for supernatural activity," he interprets.

He's rewarded by a combination of scowl and reluctant nod. "It sounds crazy, I get that, but--"
"It's not crazy," he corrects Dean, shifting his arm in the sling, aware of a bone-deep ache that will eventually bloom into pain. He can tolerate it, but it won't be particularly pleasant to do so. "Anything--and I do mean anything--is possible, and as I told you, wards are very flexible. Conceivably, given unlimited power and time, a ward could be created to protect a discrete area for any length of time from anything and everything in existence."

Dean nods, head bent as he kicks a stone from their path with unnecessary force. "Next thing you tell me is, practically speaking here, probably not happening."

"It'd be faster and easier to simply kill every supernatural being on this planet with a rusty knife and a distinct lack of self-preservation."

"Yeah, that's where I figured this was going." Sighing, Dean kicks another rock. "What about a god or an angel--in theory, okay?"

"No," he answers; this is one of the things that's very, very hard to explain without sufficient context. "In this case, however, it's not the power required, but…."

"But?"

"The point," he says slowly. "Why would they build a barrier?"

"To protect their worshippers? I don't know," Dean answers impatiently. "Why not?"

"The fundamental difference between humans and everything else in Creation could be the existence of that question," Castiel says, glancing at Dean. "Even 'why' isn't one anything but humans ask with any regularity or potential for use other than in the most basic self-preservation sense. Dean, if gods required shelter--they don't, but if they did--they would still be in caves to this day. The cave works, it provides all they need, so there's no reason to build a hut."

Dean blinks at him slowly. "So they wouldn't think of it?"

"Innovation is a human characteristic; gods--and angels--have near-infinite power and infinite knowledge, which is a handicap when it comes to creativity. In this scenario, they might improve the cave if there was a reason--rain got them wet, for example--but they wouldn't build a house, they'd just--move the rock around, I'm not sure, it's hypothetical."

"They wouldn't think of it?" Dean repeats incredulously.

"You seem to be unclear on the two major characteristics that separate humanity from everything--and I do mean everything--in Creation," he observes. "Free will and imagination: they come together. Skyscrapers, for example."

Dean blinks slowly. "You lost me."

"You keep creating bigger ones, and it's not for storage space," he answers. "You just look at them and think 'I wonder if I can make it taller' or what would happen using alternate materials or perhaps taller but in a different place with an interesting view, I have no idea; you just do it. The Spring Temple Buddha, Circus Maximus, the pyramids, the Taj Mahal, Mount Rushmore: only three of those had a practical function other than simply to exist for the sake of existence."

"You mean they're useless?"

"No, of course not: their use is to exist, of course." He can't help but smile in the face of Dean's scowl. "It's--take as a given, a god or angel wouldn't think of skyscrapers or statues--for that matter,
they had no concept of art and seemed to labor under the impression it's something humans do for them. It was absurd."

Dean blinks at him. "Uh, but--"

"As I was saying," he says, reluctantly returning to the subject, "humans are unique. You are sentient and sapient, but you're also mortal and lack both infinite knowledge of all things and unlimited power. Therefore, when faced with a problem, you can't simply snap it away or use your infinite knowledge to solve it; more often than not, the solution doesn't exist until you think of it, and often even if a solution exists, you tend to want a better one. A god wouldn't think of creating a barrier to protect their worshippers; they can simply destroy whatever is threatening their followers if they wish to do so, so what would be the point of creating a supernatural barrier?"

"You got me there," Dean says blankly. "No idea."

"They wouldn't," he clarifies. "If someone--a human, of course, let's not pretend anyone else has had a new idea since time began--suggested creating a barrier against all supernatural entities and also had a reason it needed to exist and the god in question had no alternates gleaned from infinite knowledge, they might build one if the human in question could tell them what they had in mind." Dean's expression remains blank. "Does that make sense?"

"They wouldn't think of it," Dean says firmly. "Got it. So excluding gods and angels--who are gone anyway, except Lucifer--could something like that be made now?"

"It's not difficult to create a ward that could encompass an entire state--in theory, anyway," Castiel explains, turning the idea over in his mind; he can think of several possible methods and forms that could be used. "Kansas has a clearly defined boundary--"

"It does?"

"Political boundaries are perfectly acceptable, and the state of Kansas is defined by those," he explains. "Constructing a prototype using those would simply be a matter of knowing what you're doing. It's the power that's the problem."

"Just throwing this out there for comparison, the wards here: what about the power in them? Would that be enough?"

"Yes, easily, but there are two differences: for one, the wards here are passive until breached, which wouldn't be the case for an entire state border, which would be under constant stress from everything outside this state trying to get back in both physically and potentially metaphysically to cover summonings or incorporeal beings; for another, they're invested in a physical structure, the wall itself, and anchored into the earth beneath it. That makes it easy for the power to hide itself, and as I said, Grace blends into Creation almost seamlessly. In the case of a completely incorporeal barrier based on a political boundary, it wouldn't just require a great deal of power to do it; it would require getting that power, and nothing I can think of--short of opening Purgatory, that is--would raise that much power all at once."

"So you'd have to do whatever it is several times to get enough? Why would that be a problem?"

"The structure of a ward to protect all of Kansas--just the structure--would require enormous power just to create," he explains. "And more to give it functionality as a barrier. While gathering that power, it would be noticeable until it was invested in the structure of the ward. Further all of the ways I can think of to gather it quickly are also obsolete, and therefore very, very noticeable to things who like that sort of thing." He does wonder, unwillingly, if at least part of Castiel's descent into
godhood was caused by the necessity of protecting that power and himself as well; investing the power in himself as a god would be the one guaranteed method of protecting it as well as safely using it. He might not, Castiel admits reluctantly, have entirely grasped what gaining that much power would require. "Until the power is invested, it would be very noticeable as well as extremely attractive, and protecting it would require using some part of it while gathering more."

Dean takes a deep breath. "When you say the ways are obscene...."

"The best and easiest way would be human sacrifice," he says reluctantly. "And several times. That's the other reason gaining the power would be difficult; most require specific types of humans, which limits the number available, they're ridiculously complicated and any error will neutralize them and require starting over, they're relatively simple to unmake if you arrive before they're complete, and to work, they must be completed all at once."

"All or nothing," Dean says, trying to look neutral, but the green eyes are shadowed with memories he doesn't quite remember. "You have to finish it to get the power."

"Yes. This subject could benefit from being dropped immediately. "When I said it would be easier with a rusty spoon, I meant it; to get enough for wards that large would take a very long time, and not least because you would also constantly be using some of that power to fight everything that could sense it while you were doing it."

Slapping Cas's shoulder, Dean shakes his head before urging him back into motion. "You're the expert. Okay, the barrier: let's remember one, this isn't you we're talking about," Castiel frowns at that, wondering what that has to do with anything, "and two, Jeffrey wasn't the best the rack has to offer Hell when it comes to smarts. Assuming he wasn't lying--"

"He wasn't." That much, he's sure of. "He believed what he was saying, in any case."

Dean glances at him. "You met him before, right."

Castiel hesitates, aware of the question Dean has been careful not to ask. "He was among a group of demons brought to Chitaqua for interrogation a little over two years ago. He didn't know anything, none of them did, so it didn't take long."

"They were working for Lucifer?"

"They were involved with a group of Luciferites in Michigan," he answers very carefully. Dean's eyebrows jump. "Apparently 'Satanist' was too secular for Lucifer's followers to embrace, and so they chose a name that both looks and sounds ridiculous to assure no one would mistake them for people with any grasp of sanity or linguistic aesthetics."

"What's wrong with 'Lucites'?" Dean demands. "Keep going."

"There was a rumor that group was in possession of the Colt, but by the time we tracked them down, all were willingly possessed by demons," he answers. "There were six; Jeffrey was the only one allowed to leave when we verified he didn't have any information."

"You and Dean interrogated them," Dean asks, eyes fixed on the ground before them. "No one else."

He nods, forcing himself to say, "Yes," at Dean's quick glance.

"That symbol..." Dean hesitates, eyebrows drawing together. "The one you were drawing on Jeffrey's hand. What did it do?"
Castiel licks his lips before saying, "It would seal him within that body: not only would he be unable to leave it voluntarily, but it would also made it impossible for him to be exorcised from it or killed while within in."

"Even if he cut off his hand?"

"It's written into his form, not just the physical body." Dean's eyes flicker to Castiel's left hand. "Like those, yes. That symbol is very ancient, but the same principle governs why I could use the branding iron to mark my true form." Studying Dean's frown, he wonders if this might solve the mystery of how this Dean knew of it. "Have you seen it before?"

"No." Dean's frown deepens, and to his ear, there's a faintly uncertain edge to his voice. "At least--maybe I've seen the pieces in it before, I don't know. How do you break it?"

"Unmake it," he answers promptly. "It's very simple. Cut across it or burn a single point: anything that disrupts the pattern."

"And if that part of their body was gone--or rotted away?"

He swallows, keeping his voice even. "Redrawing it again anywhere on the body recreates it, making it part of the original. Disrupting that will then have the same effect as disrupting the original symbol."

"Contamination," Dean says with forced brightness, looking at him for his nod of confirmation. "The gift that keeps on giving."

"Yes."

"And as long as it's on there, they're stuck in a body that won't die, am I getting this? No matter what you do to it, it can't die."

"Demons can't heal their bodies, only keep them whole with a kind of stasis that delays when injuries appear--that being after they've left the body," he answers. "This breaks the manifestation of injuries, but keeps the body still living."

"Off the top of my head," Dean continues, voice painfully neutral, "I can't think of any good reason to use it when you got 'em in a devil's trap for interrogation, so interrogation's done and run out of ideas for torture--" He breaks off, eyes fixed on the ground. "Tell me that thing has any other possible use other than extending the party for the fuck of it."

"There are other uses," he says, not looking at Dean. "But that is one of the more common, yes."

"Who's idea was it to use it?" Dean demands, stopping to face him. "And before you answer that, check your memories on what my favorite ways to pass the time in Hell were when I got off the rack. That thing just made possible about half my top fifty on earth."

"It was mine." He rubs his shoulder absently as Dean's eyes fix on him, green eyes flat. "It's very old and hasn't been used in a very long time, which--"

"You told him how it could be used, yeah, but you asked if I'd seen it before," Dean interrupts. "He already knew about it and part of what it did; that's why you asked. You were wondering if I knew, too, and how we found out about it."

Castiel grits his teeth at the bitterness in Dean's voice. "It's ancient, even by my standards; as far as I'm aware, it hasn't been used since before Rome was founded. He asked me what it was used for
then and why it fell out of use."

Dean’s expression doesn’t change. "Give me the history lesson already."

"There was a time when the number of hunters were still far too few and villages were spread far apart and had few protections against the supernatural. Angels couldn’t be everywhere at once, and there are limits to what they—we could do to help. Within the purview of my garrison, one village was subject to a series of vicious attacks, and they wouldn’t survive another."

"You used it then."

"I joined the battle, and afterward, the walls of the local temple were hung with the bodies of the demons who survived," he answers. "They hung there for a year and a day while their human bodies rotted around them as a warning. Hell may be worse in terms of pain, but torture doesn’t have to involve pain to be effective. Demons were human once, and to be forced to exist in a rotting corpse….” He trails off, rubbing his shoulder more urgently; the ache seems to be growing stronger. "It worked; after a year and a day, I returned to the village, cut them down, unmade the sigils, and executed them, as was my right as a member of the Host. The temple and the village were not attacked again."

Dean hesitates, licking his lips uncertainly. "And what about the people stuck in there with the demons?"

"I sent them to my Father's fields for their rest after the symbol was drawn," he answers stiffly, ignoring Dean's wince. "It can't restrain a human soul, and it was a simple matter to free them once the demon was trapped."

"And here? When you hung them from the walls?"

"The wards are formed of Grace; when we hung them on the walls, they sensed the demon within the human body and reacted; the symbol kept the body from dying, but it couldn't keep the human souls trapped in the body. My Grace broke the binding between the body and soul, freeing it immediately." He stops, wondering why he feels the need to explain himself. "I don't know how Dean found the symbol, but it was my choice to tell him how it could be used. Is that sufficient?"

Dean kicks a rock out of his way, shoulders hunching defensively. "Cas--"

"You want to know if I enjoyed it?" Before Dean can answer, he turns, starting back toward the suddenly far too distant camp. "We should return."

"Cas, don't--crap, wait." Dean jogs up beside him, looking annoyed. "Look, I didn't--"

"Why does that matter so much to you?" he asks bitterly, tucking his hands in the pockets of his jacket, chilled despite the short time they’ve been outside. "Would the act be more or less repulsive to you if I did?"

"I don't know," Dean offers after a few moments of silence, eyes fixed on the ground. "He asked you to do it."

"It was my choice to say yes." The throbbing in his shoulder increases, and it's an effort not to reach up again when Dean's looking at him. "There was no one else who could help him. I don't expect you to understand, but at the time, it was necessary."

"It always is." After another kicked rock, Dean sighs. "Look, I get it, I wasn't here, and not like I can judge."
Castiel doesn't answer, eyeing the distant cabins; surely they should be closer by now.

"Look, it bothers me," Dean says quietly. "The prime suspect isn't available, so you get the brunt of it."

"I deserve the blame as much as Dean does," Castiel answers flatly. "What judgment you aren't expressing because you weren't here applies equally to us both."

"You didn't enjoy it." There's no doubt in Dean's voice. "I never thought you did. But he did, and you can't tell me he didn't."

"I didn't ask."

"Cas--" Dean abruptly darts in front of him to grab his left arm, a consideration he wouldn't have expected. "Look at me."

Reluctantly, he looks up to meet Dean's eyes.

"Did you ever wonder…" Dean hesitates, searching his face. "Did you ever think maybe he wanted you to? That maybe that was the reason he asked you to help?"

He opens his mouth, but the automatic denial hovers on his tongue, unspoken.

"Forget it," Dean says suddenly, a faintly coaxing note in his voice, edged in something that might be an apology. "It's not your responsibility to answer for him, just yourself. It's a dick move to make you. Sorry."

He nods shortly. "As you wish."

"So back to the original subject," Dean says, tilting his head back toward the cabins and falling in step beside him again. This will be revisited in some form in the future, of course; he never expected anything he's done to be forgiven, much less forgotten. "The barrier--"

"Yes, the barrier," Castiel interrupts sharply. "In theory, possible, in reality, hilariously unlikely to the point of myth--"

"Yeah, glad it amuses you," Dean says agreeably. "Feel better?"

"--except this is a demon and demons aren't creative, and he less than most," Castiel continues, wishing the cabins were closer. "The fact that that there hasn't been anything but humans in this state since your arrival is a point in its favor."

"And brownies," Dean interjects, looking annoyed.

"They've been on earth so long I doubt they know their origin anymore," he admits. "In any case, while I'm sure there are other explanations, I haven't thought of any that fit the circumstances, and this one--this one fits all of them."

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Dean gives him a querying look. "Wanna fill me in?"

"Assuming that you weren't actually brought here by accident--if I were amoral but practical, and had reason to want you to survive your acclimation to this world, keeping things that would kill you very quickly far, far away would be among my priorities."

"You mean if endgame was taking his place."
"Yes; Chitaqua's population is small, and you would have much to learn before you could lead it, and Chitaqua's soldiers would be subject to your learning curve as well." He pauses, looking at Dean uncertainly; it won't be long at all before Dean won't need his assistance with Chitaqua. He could easily take back command now, in fact; all Dean would need from him is history and, in the future, his experience in combat. He supposes that's a good thing. "But that also assumes whoever did this knew you'd decide to take Dean Winchester's identity here, or at least command of his militia."

"I think we can safely assume I was brought here to stop the Apocalypse," Dean says wryly. "There's amazing coincidence, and then there's hitting here just in time for Lucifer to think he won and then resetting everything." He frowns. "Except for the part where bringing me here and keeping me here could kill me."

Castiel nods; he's been thinking about that. "Any being who could have brought you here would have known of the danger and that protection is automatic. However, if a way was found that didn't involve a god or an angel, it's almost guaranteed that they wouldn't know about that."

Dean stops short. "Wait, you said that was impossible."

"You're here; that is fact," he answers impatiently. "The Host is gone and all the gods are gone: that is also fact. When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth, and you are definitely here, so obviously, it's possible."

"How Sherlock Holmes of you," Dean observes. "I know your feelings on morphine, but you ever try the seven percent solution?"

"Of course," he answers. "However, as I told you, IV drug use had limited appeal. A Study in Scarlet was educational on several levels."

"Sign of Four," Dean corrects him absently before making a face. "Not that--"

"You read most of the books in Sam's box," Castiel says, not hiding his amusement from Dean's glare. "Of course you did. How else would you review his homework?"

Dean's glare takes on a wary edge. "Let's get back to the barrier," he says repressively. "I guess just keeping me here when I came the first time wouldn't work if the idea was to trick Lucifer."

"A good supposition," he agrees, relaxing despite himself. "Technically speaking, the Apocalypse wasn't won as long as you were here and alive, and since he and Zachariah had no intention of killing you, it was necessary for Lucifer to see you leave this plane." He pauses; it's also likely that Dean's place in his own timeline was significant. After his world won the Apocalypse, of course: unfortunately, that method isn't transferrable to this one. "It also created a fairly obvious timestamp for when you should be returned. All that was needed was a single moment without a living Dean Winchester for Lucifer to win; he wouldn't, of course, expect a reset to occur, so he even if he sensed it, he might not have recognized what it was."

"I'd love to know how they got the 'where'," Dean says. "Good thing it was right in front of you, or you'd have been killed by those demons before you even knew I was still around."

"Nonsense," Castiel answers irritably, not resisting the impulse to rub his shoulder this time. It hurts, and it's annoying. "I wasn't in Chitaqua that time; your leaving, unlike your first arrival here, wasn't masked by the wards or Zachariah."

Dean frowns at him. "What does that have to do with anything?"

He sighs. "I knew you weren't in danger from Lucifer; he wouldn't risk killing you and upsetting the
timeline, and even if he so forgot himself, Zachariah would have assured his good behavior before your arrival."

Dean nods tightly. "Zachariah made a deal with Lucifer here."

"He couldn't risk your life just for a lesson; he wanted to win the Apocalypse. Lucifer killing you here would interfere with causality in both worlds as well as prophecy, which to an angel is sacrosanct. Lucifer has poor impulse control and at our last meeting was showing signs of growing megalomania; Zachariah couldn't afford to bring you here without a guarantee of your safety."

"Even Lucifer winning is better than humans doing it themselves," Dean says bitterly, energetically kicking another rock from his path. "Who saw that coming?"

"Lucifer isn't the only one whose pride rules him. The Host is no different: better to run in Lucifer's wake than to stay and admit humanity's claim to earth." Giving Dean's set face a glance, he returns to the original subject. "In any case, when Zachariah used Grace to return you to your own time after Dean's death, I sensed your departure and so felt free to follow my own inclinations."

For some reason, Dean looks surprised. "You would have come back for me?"

"Of course," he answers impatiently. "Dean's decision was to die if he couldn't defeat Lucifer, and he had that right; it was his life and his choice what to do with it. You hadn't expressed a preference to die for nothing, so it was within my rights to save your life, if I could."

Dean regards him for a few minutes, eyes flickering to his left hand then back up. "When--when Dean shot that guy when I got here the first time--"

"He had Croatoan, already advanced in second stage," Castiel says reassuringly, though the connection eludes him. The workings of Dean's mind never cease to baffle him sometimes. "He was already experiencing disordered thought and was a danger to those around him. It's likely he didn't even realize he'd been infected. If he'd recognized the signs before Dean did, he probably would have killed himself. It's possible he was distracted--"

"You came outside after me, though," Dean interrupts, green eyes unreadable. "Before you knew anyone was infected."

Castiel nods slowly. "Yes, I did."

"Yeah." Dean looks as if he wants to add something to that, then blinks, glancing up just as Castiel feels wetness on his face. Following Dean's gaze, he surveys the churning grey sky in surprise; he didn't realize it was noticeably darker than it was when they first came out. As if it was waiting for their attention, a flash of lightning cuts across the sky, thunder following only seconds behind. "Come on," Dean says, hand resting on his left shoulder to urge him faster. "Looks like we're finally getting some rain. Should have cut this short earlier; you shoulder's been bothering you the last fifteen minutes. I should have reminded you to take something before we left."

"I've had worse," Castiel answers, matching Dean's accelerated pace as another drop plops wetly on his arm followed by another on his cheek.

"Doesn't mean you can't do something about it." Dean shoves his hands in the pockets of his jacket again, and Castiel notes in approval that even for this walk, he armed himself without prompting, gun riding his right hip in easy reach. Dean catches his glance, following it to his holster, and rolls his eyes. "Shut up."

"I didn't say anything."
"You were thinking it." Dean's eyes flicker down to Castiel's gun. "You know, first time I met you, never would have pinged you for someone with a gun fetish."

"Generally I don't wear them when I'm engaged in sexual congress except by request." Dean's mouth twitches as he hoped. "Why?"

"Just noticed is all." He gives Castiel a professional once-over, taking in the jeans, flannel shirt, t-shirt, and jacket, lingering on the gunbelt. "I mean--less guru-wear, more freaky survivalist these days."

"For one, I haven't had occasion for the former," Castiel answers, fighting a smile at Dean's sour look. "For another, I'm trying to set a good example for you, and as you know, habit is pernicious."

Dean's eyes narrow.

"My speed generally gave me an advantage as well," he continues. "As long as a weapon is within five feet of me, the delay is negligible; it still takes less time for me to acquire it than it does for you to get yours. Dean drilled me until we were sure, and obviously, I took advantage of that whenever possible."

"Where was your gun that day when I busted into your cabin?"

"Ten and a half inches from my hand, behind me, beneath an extremely colorful pillow," he answers. "I was wearing one knife as well. Not that you were a threat, of course."

Dean nods, kicking his third rock out of his way, and he realizes what the connection must be.

"It was in my left hand when I came outside." Dean's head jerks up, startled but not surprised; of course, Dean noticed very early that he concealed his dexterity with his left hand. "Dean was to be trusted--once he'd verified your identity--but his team and the team leaders, not so much."

"You would've shot them?"

"I don't carry a gun because it's decorative, and if I'm holding it, it's because I plan to use it. Dean taught me that, too." He tilts his head, wondering what Dean's thinking. "He trusted them too much, and I couldn't risk surprise would delay his response should any of them threaten you."

Before Dean can respond to that, the sky abruptly opens up, and Dean's hand closes over his arm as he says, "Time to run."

They reach the steps of the porch only mostly-soaked, and Dean pauses to let Castiel precede him up the stairs before following him inside. For once, he doesn't even seem to resent the beaded curtain, and Castiel reminds himself to speak to someone about acquiring a door. Dean has always, always preferred privacy as well as exclusivity when it comes to his sexual partners and a door would definitely show.....

Scraping wet hair from his face, he almost stumbles at the reminder of what Dean told him yesterday night.

"Sit down," Dean says, pointing at the couch. "I'll grab you a couple of painkillers. And some towels," he adds, wiping his face impatiently.

As Dean disappears into the bedroom, he strips off his jacket (and after a moment of thought, takes it outside to the porch) and drops onto the couch. The camp's conclusions, while erroneous, are
perfectly understandable in retrospect, and Dean's reasons for confirming their suppositions were perfectly logical, though he suspects the choice of time and place was more a matter of impulse. Dean knew of this for two weeks and did nothing to stop the rumor in that time, nor instructed Vera to do so. He doesn't doubt Dean's assurances that he had every intention of telling him, but he does wonder how much longer he would have waited if he hadn't confirmed it to the watch (and by extension the entire camp) last night.

Dean's reasons were perfectly logical (and his conclusions regarding the rumor's usefulness in confirming his identity are probably correct), but he doesn't think the ones Dean gave him are the only ones.

"Here," Dean says as a towel drops onto his head. Scrubbing his hair relatively dry, he automatically folds the towel and sets it aside, staring in dissatisfaction at the strands obscuring his vision before shoving them back, tucking them behind his ears. Not for the first time, he wonders what happened to the scissors; he's almost certain at one time they were in the small bathroom cabinet. Glancing at Dean on the couch beside him, he gets a glimpse of something he can't quite define on his face before he smirks, holding out two pills and a glass. "Take 'em."

Sighing, he takes them as Dean settles into a corner of the couch with a sigh, giving the impression of someone for whom all is working exactly as planned as a roll of thunder shivers through the cabin. Frowning, Dean's eyes flicker to the doorway, eyes darting downward to check for imminent water, then to Castiel. "You seriously lived in Kansas for two years without a door?"

"There's a--thing in the utility closet, back left corner," he answers vaguely; he's still not sure what it's called, mostly because he forgot to ask when Dean gave it to him after their first month in Chitaqua. "It's rolled up in its original box. There are tacks on the top shelf to hold it."

Dean gives him a long look. "This is sad shit, for the record." With a deep sigh, he goes to the utility closet, and Castiel wishes very much Dean would consider wearing several more layers--perhaps a parka or some kind of snowsuit--instead of traipsing about in a damp t-shirt beneath an open flannel overshirt and jeans that someone obviously sadistic chose for their extremely complimentary fit.

"You know," Dean says, coming back out with the box, a faded picture of beige fabric on something like a porch still visible on one side, toolbox hanging from one hand, "I don't know if you know this, but you can hang this up for good with the parts that come with it."

"I have no idea how to do that," he admits, turning and bracing an elbow on the arm of the couch to watch. "Tacks worked very well."

Crouching, Dean removes the roll and then upends the box, dumping out a bag of plastic wrapped pieces with a jaundiced look. "Seriously, Cas."

"Bobby taught me how to repair a roof if it was leaking and how to caulk things that need caulking," he explains as Dean tears open the plastic and spreads out the pieces. "I can also paint exterior walls and tile floors." At Dean's curious look, he adds, "The kitchen floor caught on fire and we needed to replace it."

Dean cocks his head, nodding. "Set the floor on fire while learning how to cook?" He blinks, startled, and Dean grins. "Bobby had gas burners, too. The first few times I saw you cooking here, you kept them low and watched them like you expected them to attack you if you looked away. You still do."
"I turned them too high and the grease was unexpectedly volatile." Dean snickers quietly as he rummages through the tool box, pulling out a hammer and a screwdriver as well as the case of bits for it. "I won enough the next week to replace the stove, the flooring, and the damaged countertops; in return, he taught me how to do the repairs and gave me that tool box and the tools within as a reward for successfully not destroying his house."

"Got all the basics in here," Dean agrees, getting two pieces of metal and after a moment of consideration, a selection of the longer screws. "Get over here. Your job is to hold things and give 'em to me when I ask for them."

"And read the directions?" Castiel asks as he crouches beside Dean and notices the folded piece of paper beneath the screws and assorted paraphernalia.

Dean rolls his eyes as he gets to his feet. "Don't need 'em."

Castiel pretends that his suggestions at each point of failure are not from the instructions that he memorized before replacing them beneath the screws. Dean, in turn, pretends each suggestion was what he was going to attempt next if Castiel didn't keep interrupting him.

They will definitely need someone else to install the door for them, and preferably, at a time when Dean is nowhere near the cabin and has no idea it's happening. When asked, Castiel will tell him in all truthfulness it was supposed to be a surprise.

When they're finally done, Castiel acquires another painkiller (or two) and retreats to the couch. Dean, however, celebrates his (their) success by rolling and unrolling the fabric using the attached cord that loops between the plastic device attached to the left side of the frame (the directions call it an Exterior Solar Shade) and a matching device attached to the side of the doorway. It's very soothing and set to the rhythm of the thunder outside, as the storm, as if to make up for nearly five months of cloudy anticipation, shows no sign of stopping in the near future.

"I think I can handle the door," Dean says in satisfaction as he joins Castiel on the couch, and Castiel makes a mental note to speak to Nate at the very next opportunity. Reaching for the glass of water—and chewing both pills—he forces himself not to linger on the view of Dean's flushed face, happy smile, and the fact his t-shirt is riding several inches above the waist of jeans and revealing several inches of pale golden skin.

He supposes it's typical of his life that his first relationship is somewhat imaginary, entirely chaste, and with someone he certainly would have at least attempted to seduce if he wasn't Dean. Sexuality can be very annoying, true, but happily, he's learned that a dearth of options often introduces a surprising amount of flexibility.

Setting his empty glass on the coffee table, something else occurs to him; in the eyes of the camp, Dean's choice to engage in a sexual relationship with him has reaped an unexpected number of advantages for Dean both professionally and personally.

He managed to get Castiel to take up both the duties he abandoned almost two years before as well as the ones he took in Dean's absence, voluntarily and without hesitation, be clean and sober while he did it, and discard any and all other sexual partners, thereby eliminating all other potential distractions. In addition, Castiel not only voluntarily mapped most of the state (with color coding for road viability and population centers, among other considerations), engaged in a massive overhaul of the camp's living conditions, reorganized the patrol routes both local and statewide, refreshed the training of both Amanda and Mark as well as his own, and assisted with the extension of Chitaqua's duties throughout the state, but also voluntarily perform regular household tasks, including laundry,
cooking, and cleaning of their living space.

All of it, he realizes in dawning shock, done of his own free will. Some of it, he remembers, he even suggested to Dean himself.

And in the eyes of the camp, all Dean needed to do to bring him to heel after over two years of recalcitrance was offer regular sex, and not even that during his fever and the weeks afterward as he began to recover.

There is nothing about this that isn't utterly appalling, not least of which is sex at no time was actually a means of motivation.

"I underestimated you," Castiel says slowly, meeting Dean's surprised eyes. "You have improved substantially in your deals; Crowley would loathe you."

Dean's quizzical expression melts into smug satisfaction as he follows the train of Castiel's thoughts. "Yeah, and get this one; I'm also fucking amazing in the sack. Not that anyone doubted me or anything." His grin widens. "Vera kept me updated."

"Of course she did." Vera's antipathy couldn't survive long when pitted against Dean now, and only a small part of it was Dean's conscious efforts with her, as well as Joseph and Alicia and everyone else he has met here. However, he has to admit that he didn't expect it to reach the stage of exchanging gossip, though in retrospect, he can't imagine why. "You will inform me if we end up married at some point? When it's happening, if at all possible, but within twenty-four hours seems a more realistic goal."

Dean rolls his eyes.

"Considering that twice now I've been placed in charge of Chitaqua without being informed first, and I just discovered I'm in a relationship with you almost three months after the fact--"

"I just found out myself!" Dean protests. "--two weeks ago."

Dean's eyes narrow. "I'm the current Apocalypse stopper. Those camps in the south. You need me to keep going?"

"I hope we wake up wearing rings with no memory of how it occurred," Castiel answers viciously, pleased to see Dean's smirk fade. "And matching tattoos. Applied during an obscure but ridiculously simple binding ritual and unbreakable for the length of our existence."

"You realize you just basically told the universe what to do next, right?" Dean demands, looking unnerved. "Better be some fucking awesome wedding presents and a cake, that's all I'm saying." Then, "A binding ritual? That's fucked up, Cas."

"I also forgot to thank you," Castiel continues, uncomfortably aware that while the universe doesn't work like that, evidence is beginning to suggest the universe may have forgotten that. "I wouldn't have thought of threatening Jeffrey with opening Purgatory."

"Just trying to make it believable," Dean offers with almost palpable sincerity, which tells him that he simply thought it was funny. "Not that you didn't sound kind of convincingly egomaniacl, so go you." He gives Castiel an earnest look. "Compliment. Really."

"It wasn't."
"Actually," Dean says slowly, looking thoughtful, "it was. Jeffrey was convinced, anyway. He also thinks you figured out how to stop the Apocalypse. Think Lucifer will think that when he finally checks in?"

"Lucifer knows that's impossible for anyone to do but you." At Dean's raised eyebrow, he blows out an annoyed breath. "I'm not sure what he'll think happened, and I'm not looking forward to when he starts searching for the answer."

"Jeffrey's boss thinks you did."

"His master is an idiot if he thought that Jeffrey was a competent tool to use--"

"Yeah, think that was on purpose?"

Startled, he looks at Dean. "What do you mean?"

Dean shrugs. "Just saying, would you send someone who wasn't expendable after you of all people? Without any backup? Who couldn't even use a gun?"

"His master expected me to kill him?" Dean shrugs again. "Then why did Jeffrey want me to bring him here first?"

"That part might have been Jeffrey's idea," Dean points out. "His boss, on the other hand, may have just wanted to let you know you had a potential ally. What you did with Jeffrey after was up to you." He smirks. "And you're a merciful megalomaniac bent on world conquest after opening Purgatory."

"In some quarters--those being almost exclusively in Hell--that actually improves my reputation," he admits wryly, tipping his head back to rest on the back of the couch. "Promiscuity, drug addiction, disobedience, and an excellent track record in dealing death to all who stand against me: delusions of grandeur on earth are to be expected, even lauded. It was only a matter of time, really."

"Why'd you let him go?" Dean asks. Despite the easy curiosity in his voice, it's not a casual question. "I was pretty sure you were going to kill him the minute I gave you Ruby's knife."

He would have, if he hadn't been distracted by pleasant thoughts of torturing Jeffrey to death for the bullet that almost killed Dean. He might have enjoyed doing it with the memory of how close Dean came to dying in that clearing still fresh in his mind.

"How did you put it--what are you going to believe--"

"--what you know happened in Kansas City or your own eyes?" Dean finishes for him, starting to grin.

"In this case, I did both at once I verified that Dean was dead and on my order Chitaqua continued to pretend he is alive," Castiel confirms, wondering how many demons would know Dean Winchester for absolute certainty on sight and also be able to discard the absolute certainty that Lucifer killed him in Kansas City. In Hell, it's been decades since Dean Winchester was last seen by any demon, and memory can be erratic at best. "Provided Lucifer doesn't manifest to verify your existence with his own eyes--not to mention finding you to do so--Hell echoing what Lucifer believes is true may buy us more time."

"Right now, I'm more interested in why Jeffrey wanted to get in Chitaqua so badly," Dean says quietly. "I could see his face when you had him down and got your blood on him; that's exactly what he was trying to get. Think that was Plan B if the demon blood worked?"
"It's possible," he answers. "It wouldn't work, of course--"

"It's only keyed to Dean's--my blood?" He nods. "Why not yours?"

"Because my blood won't work for a human," he answers patiently. "When I said I could be considered a different species, I was only being somewhat facetious. The difference, in this case, is due to the requirements of ritual magic; generally, when it specifies human blood, it means literal human blood. I can pass them and in addition, as long as I'm in contact with someone, I can bring them into Chitaqua without adding them to the key. That's the only way a demon can get inside the camp, in fact; they can't be added to the key at all."

Dean cocks his head. "That the wards or the Grace?"

"Wards are flexible; Grace--is more selective," Castiel answers. "I shaped it to a purpose--to create the wards--but that didn't change its nature, simply how it manifests. It would allow you to key someone in, provided you did it yourself with your blood and they used their own blood to draw my true name, but that's in the design and added by me deliberately; anyone else who tried to do it would fail and nothing would happen. A demon would be killed the moment they touched the wards, no trying needed."

Dean sits back, eyes distant. "When you were surprised I could--that I knew your Grace was in the wards, it wasn't just because I'm human, was it?"

"I was very surprised you could sense mine, yes, but humans are sensitive to it sometimes, and you would be familiar with mine specifically. That no one else in Chitaqua--except Chuck--is aware of what is in them would normally stretch the odds considerably, but not unduly."

"Including Lucifer, even though his Grace is in 'em?"

"I haven't tested this with Lucifer standing outside Chitaqua," he admits.

"Because it's Grace, and it blends," Dean says, nodding. "Not like your totally not living at all Grace is hiding itself from him specifically, right?"

"Dean--"

"You're telling me no one knows or even guesses, including Lucifer, whose Grace is in the wards, because Grace just blends really well?" Dean asks gloatingly. "Except for me, who gets a meet-and-greet? You really want to go with that?"

"I know what you're asking, and I don't know." Dean raises his eyebrows in an eloquent expression of 'bullshit'. "I told you; it's not as if angels generally create wards with Grace. Or ever, as far as I know."

"You said you never told anyone what they were," Dean says softly. "Because it'd scare them, right? Even if it was for their protection."

"The fact I was summoning Lucifer might have also been of concern."

"Shoot into a crowd, you can't control the bullet once you fire; that's why Lucifer poked holes in reality," Dean continues, green eyes dark. "It follows directions, so you gotta tell it what you want it to do. When you were making the wards, you were worried about people being scared of it. Of you, he doesn't say, but he doesn't have to. "Any chance your Grace--you know, that can't think but can say 'hi, nice to meet you'--might have--"
"I don't know," Castiel snaps, unnerved. "If you think I need the reminder that I didn't know what I was doing, it's unneeded; I'm very aware of my limitations!"

Dean's eyes widen. "Cas--"

"All I had to work with were Bobby's original design and the very little Grace that was within the wards," he interrupts bitterly. "It was all I could think to do that it might work, and it did. It's not as if I can tell the difference!"

Dean frowns. "What difference?"

Castiel licks his lips. "Between his and mine. What's within the wards now is more than I could have possibly contained within me as a member of the Host, and I know exactly how much I placed within them. Yet all of it responds to me as if it were; if there's a difference, I can't sense it."

Dean stares at him for a long time, green eyes dark.

"I knew there was a risk," Castiel says quietly. "For all I know, if Lucifer came here, he might be able to not only sense his Grace within the wards, but command it as well, making the wards effectively useless for their primary purpose. I still chose to do it, and the responsibility is mine."

"Okay," Dean says finally, still staring at him. "I want to go back to the part before you almost apologized for making the camp's wards because I have no idea where the hell that came from."

"I wasn't apologizing, I was simply explaining why….

Dean tips his head sideways, crosses his arms, and waits, expression reflecting exaggerated patience.

"It bothers me," he admits. "That I don't know everything about how they work or how they respond."

"That happens with new ideas," Dean says, looking at him searchingly. "You know, if at first you don't succeed, try try again, or if you succeed, hope for the best and--yeah, never mind. Look, did it bother you they did the light up greeting thing? You didn't expect that."

"No, of course not. They were…." Happy is really the only appropriate descriptor, he supposes: extremely so. "It was pleasant."

"I wasn't afraid of them."

He nods uncertainly.

"If I hadn't asked you about them…” he trails off, looking as uncertain as Castiel feels. "I kind of put you on the spot there. I mean, I made you promise to answer my questions if you could."

Startled, Castiel realizes what Dean has been trying to ask him. "No, I thought--I was glad he told you, actually. Though in retrospect, I should have asked you more about that conversation."

Dean shrugs, but his smile is still uncertain. "I told you the gist on what he knew about the wards."

"I never told anyone about them but the most basic information required, and with as little honesty as I could get away with," he admits ruefully. "After you arrived, however, I sometimes thought you--"

"I'd get the joke."

"Lucifer is just an angel," Castiel says softly. "An archangel whose petulance began a war that
started almost when time began, a war that humanity had no idea it was even fighting and couldn't possibly hope to win. He has the power of Creation at his fingertips and could conquer or destroy the world with a thought, but he's just an angel like any other. In a ring of holy fire, he's as trapped as the least of the Host; when he's banished, he must leave; to claim his vessel, he must gain their consent; and when summoned by his true name by a Brother--"

"--he's gotta come to heel," Dean finishes for him, smiling at him. "And you did it just because you could."

"And for his Grace," Castiel corrects him. "But that was a factor as well."

"The Georgia thing is looking better by the day," Dean says, slumping back in his seat. "Between Jeffrey and Lucifer and everything else, I am really liking the idea of you being a little harder to track down, especially if someone's sending demons looking for you."

A peal of thunder startles them both; glancing outside, Castiel notes the rain is not showing any sign of abating anytime soon and remembers something he's been meaning to do.

"I left something on the shelf in the closet where the holy water is located," he says. "Third down, far left. Could you get it for me?"

Leaning his head back against the couch, he looks up again when Dean's footsteps indicate he's returned to the living room. Sitting forward, he waits for Dean to kneel on the other side of the coffee table and place the folded case on the scratched and faded wood with a baffled expression. Turning it around, Castiel opens it and begins to remove the pieces.

"Chess?"

Castiel looks up, amused at Dean's dubious expression. "I found this in one of Sam's boxes. It contained material that dated from after you began hunting together, so...."

Dean sighs noisily. "Sam tried to teach me," he admits reluctantly. "Threw the board at me after the third lesson."

"So you know how to play."

Dean scowls but pushes his hand aside, unfolding the case so the board on the exterior is visible and begins setting up the pieces. "I remember the moves," he says grudgingly. "Doesn't mean I'm any good at it."

"You have the advantage of me," he says, watching Dean set up the board. "I've watched humans play this game for millennia in its various forms, but this will be the first time I've actually played it with anyone. I've always been curious as to why humanity seems to enjoy it so much."

"Huh." Sitting back on his heels, he frowns at the board before reaching for a pawn. "White move first, I remember that part." Dean moves it two spaces before turning his attention back to Castiel. "Didn't invent strip chess along with strip Risk the last couple of years?"

"There was no one I wanted to play it with before," Castiel answers absently, searching his memories of the countless games he's seen. It's very different to observe the moves and the strategies being used as opposed to playing it himself. He moves the pawn to mirror Dean's. "Your move."

Dean belatedly looks down at the board, finger resting on the top as he considers his move. "So you're bad at poker?" He nods. "Why? Didn't Dean teach you?"
"He did, but as he was already extremely proficient at the game, it seemed a better use of my time to learn something he didn't. Even now, I can't ever seem to win, even when statistically, I should have. Even when I was sober."

Moving another pawn, he braces an elbow on the coffee table and gives Castiel a thoughtful look. "Interesting."

Castiel tilts his head. "Dean, I assure you, my level of sobriety has no effect on my ability to play the game."

"That's because you didn't know how to play." Dean makes another move, grinning at him. "You ready to learn?"

"You're going to teach me how to play it correctly?" He's not at all opposed to this.

"Yeah. We're going right back to basics; I'm gonna teach you the right way to cheat," Dean corrects him gleefully. "Then we're gonna wipe the floor with the camp." He glances down at the board, then at Castiel. "Your move."
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

In my defense, we had unexpected rain and random bouts of flooding in the city. It's been a very odd week. I apologize for the delay.

--Day 97--

Dean does not, it must be said, take further confinement well.

"God, I miss shitty diner food," drifts from the kitchen in the despairing voice of one surveying a nuclear holocaust in progress. The sound of the pantry door closing--gently, Dean's pain is too deep for violence--is followed by the slow, dragging footsteps of a miscreant whose journey ends with a hangman's noose, or in this case, a miserable slump in the far corner of the couch in a blue t-shirt and mismatched socks, which Castiel has to work very hard to ignore.

(Alicia explained on the last laundry day that the disappearance of individual socks is something of a common hazard of dryers ("My mom told me dryer elves," she said wisely from her seat on the dryer, heels banging cheerfully against the metal. "Is that possible?" "I have no idea," he told her, looking suspiciously at the quickly rotating laundry). It seems her theory bears investigation; he knows all the socks had their appropriate mates when he put them in the dryer yesterday.)

Dean sighs--a full-body effort requiring the use of at least three more lungs than he actually has--and says, "There's nothing to eat."

"There is one five pound bag of brown rice and three of white, one ten pound bag of sugar, two one pound boxes of pasta--spaghetti--eight cans of carrots, six of chicken, two of collard greens, five of corn--two white and three yellow--two of green beans, nine of green peas, and five of spinach in the pantry," he replies without looking up. "In addition, we have two loaves of bread, one--"

"Shut up."

Castiel never claimed he was taking Dean's confinement any better.

Sighing again--that is incredibly annoying--Dean reaches for one of the latest patrol reports with a despondency more suited to reading a casualty list or, perhaps, the terrifying day Castiel thought he was out of single-malt whiskey (he was very high) before remembering in relief there was more under the couch (three bottles, in fact). He could use some now, he reflects grimly as Dean reaches for his cup, starting to take a drink before noticing it's empty. "Out of coffee," he breathes in the hopeless tones of a martyr between the third and fourth turn of the rack. "Of course we are."

"I made a fresh pot ten minutes ago," Castiel answers composedly, consulting Hippofucker's Guide to the Sex Swamp (DeanTM) and making a correction in his translation before looking at him with weaponized sympathy. "Would you like me to get you some?"

Dean's fingers tighten around the body of the mug, knuckles briefly going white; in his mind, it's probably already airborne, flying toward Castiel's head. "I'm fine."
Setting down the cup—with force this time, Castiel notes—Dean returns to the report, shoulders slumping further as he re-reads the number of times they had to stop and push the jeep out of the mud and a detailed description of each individual event. As it turns out, patrolling in a rainstorm the likes of which haven't been seen since one Noah (of Ark fame), is even more boring than usual when visibility reaches six inches or less.

"You know," Dean says suddenly, "we should have sent them to the south, not east."

Pausing in his translation, Castiel searches for context (none) and makes a (wild) guess. "Vera and Jeremy?"

"Yeah," Dean answers slowly, dragging out the single syllable until he runs out of breath (Whatever their actual number, Dean's lungs seem remarkably healthy, and Castiel tries very hard to remember that Dean contracting pneumonia would be terrible indeed), as if Castiel's lack of telepathy is a grievance he has yet to entirely forgive. "South's a military passthrough, and it's not like the military's using it these days. Less traffic."

He tries and fails to connect the concept of 'traffic' to I-70 hosting a maximum of three legally credentialed vehicles per week.

"The military directly supervises the border guards on the military passthroughs," he answers, viciously adding a slight lilt to indicate his personal satisfaction with the world and all that's in it, not limited to his current activities, the rain falling outside, and Dean's tragic level of boredom after two days of contumaciously rejecting every suggestion of constructive activity Castiel could devise. "Their scheduled inspections of those stations are frequent and the unscheduled ones even more so, and the logs are validated daily. Joseph acquired the border patrol routes as well as the duty roster for all ten states they will potentially need to cross; using the east checkpoint assures—"

"—minimal exposure to the military, I know." Dean flips the page of the report, scanning it as if it's undergone a radical change since his last read or has anything at all to do with the subject at hand. "So instead, ten day minimum travel time in at least two uninfected states, probably on the best farm roads the country has to offer."

"Vera's been doing this for two years and knows better than either of us the safest and most efficient method of travel," Castiel says absently, frowning at the page uncertainly. Potential bestiality expressed in hieroglyphs is only moments away from being confirmed or—he would say denied, but that symbol doesn't translate to 'hug' no matter how much he wants it to. Some things would benefit when lost to translation, he reflects; a pity this isn't one of them. "Before we declare her journey an unqualified failure, perhaps we should wait until that actually happens."

Dean's glare suggests rationality is not welcome here, which is as unsurprising as the inevitable horror of how this epic journey down the Nile will come to an end. "You just got an answer for everything, don't you?"

"Yes," he answers distractedly, forcing himself to accept that word indeed, does not mean hug. "Why?"

The silence that follows that statement would be ominous if he could bring himself to care, but if that is indeed not a hug, he has some serious reservations about the logistics of this obscene act against nature. Height alone….

"What if they get caught in a blizzard on the way back?" Dean says challengingly. "Got an answer for that?"
"It's forty-eight degrees Fahrenheit." Though the wind chill and presence of water probably reduces that to something closer to thirty-nine, he supposes, reading his notes carefully to assure he didn't--by some very welcome chance--make a mistake. It's possible. "And raining."

In his peripheral vision, he sees Dean turn to survey the rain-soaked evening as if the weather itself only adds to the unbearable burden that is his life. "Okay, I give up; what the hell is up with the weather?"

Perhaps the author thought that word meant 'hug': he was not, it must be said, a shining example of intellectual profundity. Feeling optimistic, he continues to the next sentence. "What about it?"

Though the logistics of hugging a hippo are--

"Where's the snow?"

He squints at the page, frowning; the author's grasp of size seems questionable. Adult hippos are much larger than--

"Cas?"

What if that's not an adult hippo?

"Cas!"

He jerks his gaze from the page only a moment before he passes the outer boundary of plausible deniability. Closing his eyes, he breathes a sigh of relief before smiling in the face of Dean's hateful glare. "What?"

Dean's expression dissolves into confusion, eyes darting to the open book curiously. "What were you--"

"The formation of snow crystals requires an atmospheric temperature at or below zero degrees Celsius," he says, closing the book discreetly. "At this moment, there's no method available for me to verify the current temperature in the atmosphere anywhere in the world, much less search it for crystalized water, so while probability suggests snow is at this moment somewhere on earth, the only answer possible as to its current location that can be considered entirely true is 'not here now'."

Dean blinks slowly.

"Did that answer your question?" he asks politely, surreptitiously shifting his notes to the couch beside him along with the book and covering them with a convenient pillow. "Why are you asking about snow?"

"Because I'm gonna teach you how to make a snow angel," Dean answers, murderously sincere. "Gotta wait until the snow's nice and deep though, so when I push you off the roof to make it, you just might survive."

"You realize," he says evenly, bracing a foot on the coffee table, "the weather is not my fault. Nor Alicia restricting you to the camp out of concern for your potential lung function."

"I don't care," Dean retorts. "I've been here since August and this is the first time it's been other than 'cloudy' and now 'really wet'. What's with that?"

"Global warming."

Dean stares at him. "You just can't help yourself, can you?"
"Not when you continue to give me such obvious opportunities." Bracing both feet on the coffee table, he sighs and dislikes himself for it. "I was being somewhat truthful, however. Do you want the long version or the short?"

Dean rolls his eyes. "Short."

"Cataclysmic environmental change."

"Long."

"Weather is complicated, and I could spend the next five hundred years explaining how nature maintains a very delicate balance that assures that the entire planet is only rarely plunged into an ice age--"

"Shorter than that."

He reminds himself that he likes Dean, at least most of the time. "It's a side effect of living in an Apocalypse."

"It breaks the weather?" Dean asks, as if it's the most ridiculous thing he's ever heard.

He likes Dean, he reminds himself again. "In your world, do you remember the increase of natural disasters as well as supernatural activity before you defeated Lucifer?" Grudgingly, Dean nods. "Normally, everything in the ecosystem is relatively balanced and can deal with the occasional disaster. Some, if not most of them, might be considered more along the lines of features, not bugs."

Dean sighs. "Forest fires?"

"As an example, an excellent one," he says approvingly, which only succeeds in inexplicably making Dean scowl. "Nature is change and adapts to it; that's its entire function. Change, adapt, exist: the first two are mandatory to carry out the third. However, at this moment, it's reacting to a series of natural disasters that are--for lack of a better word--not of natural origin and its attention--so to speak--is rather lacking."

"Even Creation's falling down on the job," is Dean's verdict, looking pensively out the window again with a sigh. "I really wanted to have a snowman contest."

"A tragedy for the ages." Dean doesn't answer that with anything but the ghost of a glare. "Console yourself that when snow does come, it will doubtless be in the form of a blizzard to make up for its tardiness. Possibly a very extended winter will follow."

"So a new ice age isn't off the table," Dean says with gloomy triumph. "Saw that coming a mile away."

He blinks. "I didn't say--"

"We lose to Lucifer, we all die immediately; we defeat him, we all die slowly and really fucking cold," Dean continues as he slumps into the cushions again with a disconsolate expression. "Fighting with sticks and rocks against buffalo or mammoths or whatever as a reward for winning the Apocalypse."

"Dean," he tries again. "I don't think--"

"Live in caves, sleep with one eye open for demons and mammoths," Dean says, warming to the topic. "Telling our grandkids about the internet and electricity--not that they'll believe us--"
"Please stop talking," Castiel interrupts desperately, starting to reach for his translation again (even that may be an improvement on this), and then pauses, considering a world without electricity or running water, which are the only things that makes human excretory system less than utterly horrifying.

Before his mind’s eye stretches a vast, frozen wasteland dotted with buffalo and mammoths (possibly ridden by demons?), tiny humans running despairingly away with their small spears and rocks and not a single adequate firearm to protect them, huddled around substandard fires in poorly ventilated caves in questionable sanitary conditions, sharing an oral history of skyscrapers and the internet and prime time TV and possibly--and why this didn't this occur to him before--books.

Who will have time to write them between their desperate fight to survive and running from megafauna? In growing horror, he wonders if their tiny fires are being fed by the collected works of Shakespeare and Catullus and Stephen King. Children may be born, he realizes, who won't read Harry Potter.

"Better figure out how to kill a mammoth with a rock," Dean advises him in cheerful despair, head dropping onto back of the couch and staring up at the ceiling as he heaves yet another sigh. Before he even realizes what he's doing, Castiel echoes it. "Look on the bright side. Maybe the entire global warming thing ends this in a worldwide desert."

"Even oversized sandworms excreting recreational substances couldn't make me high enough to deal with that." Dean turns his head to give him a vaguely curious look. "Dune, Frank Herbert. They consumed the waste of the native sandworms to achieve--"

"So, we could be eating sandworm shit instead of freezing to death. Thanks, Cas."

Castiel closes his eyes, but that just means he has no distraction from the image that brings to mind. "Where are the dice?"

After a protracted search through the kitchen, Dean returns to tumble a worn pair of dice onto the coffee table, giving him an odd look. "You want to play craps?"

"Not really, but it's preferable to listening a narrative of our deaths by hypothermia or megafauna." Castiel pushes the coffee table back enough to place a pillow on the floor and seat himself. Extending the other pillow, he smiles hopefully. "Do you know how to play?"

"Can you?" Dean asks doubtfully as he takes the pillow.

He shrugs. "I know the principles of every form of gambling ever created. It's not as if it's particularly complicated."

"So speaks someone who's never been to Vegas." Dean rolls his eyes as he drops the pillow on the floor and sits down. "So, we gonna make this interesting?"

"You mean bet?" he asks, plucking the dice from the coffee table. Dean sighs noisily. "If you wish. What are you willing to lose?"

Dean raises an eyebrow. "You can't play poker, but you think you can beat me at craps? Really?"

"Do you know what they used to call craps?" Castiel asks, rolling the dice over his palm with a clink of ivory. "'Game of God'."
"Gambling's a sin," Dean intones solemnly. "What kind of angel gamble, Cas?"

"Honi soit qui mal y pense," he quotes, which almost coaxes out a smile before Dean ruthlessly represses the impulse. "It could be applied to all those who condemn pleasure."

"Evil to he who evil thinks'?" Dean shrugs, but the smile hovers closer. "Personal motto?"

"Six hundred and sixty-six years of knights pledged to the Order of the Garter can't be wrong." He pauses for Dean's mouth to twitch. "Does that satisfy the definition of irony, I wonder?"

"I'm in." Dean smirks at him. "You take morning patrol reports, incoming and outgoing, and I get to sleep in."

"Done," he agrees. "Pie."

"What?"

"I want to try pie." He begins to regret the impulse at Dean's sudden attention. "Pie has sugar, and it seems to be a very common preference among dessert items, though well below ice cream, from what I understand. However, the lack of available cows is a problem."

"We could do ice cream." Dean's face goes through a series of inexplicable contortions before settling on surprised. "I got a militia and a real lack of standards on how I use them for personal gain. Dude, I can find a cow."

Considering who he's talking to, that's very possible. "You like pie better."

"Yeah, so?"

"It's a feature of your conversation when food is the topic, which you seem to find endlessly fascinating to explore." He should have just told him ice cream. "I'm curious."

"Curious." Dean leans an elbow on the coffee table, far too interested for Castiel's peace of mind. "Dean never got you any pie?"

"I've had pie," he answers determinedly and Dean's eyebrows jump. "Just not at a time--you said you wanted me to try and find food I like. Why are you arguing about my choice of stakes?"

"Because pie isn't a stake; it's a necessity," Dean argues, staring at him intently, and he wonders when pie became such a dangerous topic. "Dude, you're not betting access to pie. You want pie, we'll get you some fucking pie, no dice required, got it?"

He nods warily. "All right."

"Good." Relaxing again, Dean cocks his head. "So stakes?"

"I can't think of anything else." Nothing he thinks is appropriate for a casual game of dice between friends who don't have sex, at least. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Jesus, okay. Let's make this interesting," Dean crosses his arms challengingly. "One time offer, and pay attention, Cas, because no one gets this. One favor--one--of your choice, call it in at any time. How's that?"

"You're joking."

Dean flashes a grin. "I'm really not."
"You're serious." Dean nods. "Anything I want?"

"Anything," Dean confirms, grin widening. "Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it. Street rules, single roll, playing for the pass line, shooter on the come out," he recites, rolling the dice expertly and watching in satisfaction as Dean's grin fades. "Point is hard six."

Dean watches him pick up the dice before looking at him. "You're literally a craps player."

"What else would I be?" he asks curiously, rolling the dice and watching as they settle on a matched set of three. "As you know, I'm terrible at poker."

"…pass line and the shooter makes seven on the come out." Scooping up the four and three, Castiel passes the dice to Dean, who takes them with a blank look. "That's three favors."

"Yeah," Dean says, looking at the dice suspiciously. "It is."

"Come out is snake eyes on the don't pass," Cas says, surveying the dice affectionately before looking at Dean, who scoops up the dice for his second examination. "Six favors."

Rolling them in his hand, Dean examines them with an expertise not unmixed with desperation before giving him a glare.

Castiel smiles slowly. "Your roll."

"What. The. Fuck?"

"That's ten favors," Castiel confirms, scooping up the five and six from the coffee table. "Do you want to try for eleven?"

"Give me the dice," Dean demands, almost snatching them from him and rolling them in his hand suspiciously before letting them drop to the table and observing how they fall. "This is bullshit."

"You've checked them three times," Castiel tells him in amusement, leaning back against the couch. "There's nothing wrong with the dice."

"There's something wrong," Dean answers hotly, letting them fall again before looking at him accusingly. "You're cheating."

"So are you," he answers, ignoring Dean's unconvincing show of innocence. "Who do you think taught me to play?" That was a mistake; the green eyes narrow dangerously, and he files away another example of the times that Dean doesn't want to hear what he learned from his counterpart. Eventually, he hopes to be able to work out for himself which ones are safe to mention and which should be spoken of only under threat of death. Picking up the dice, he says, "Let's try something else. Tell me what to roll for point."

Crossing his arms, Dean sits back, looking mutinous. "You're fucking with me, right?"

He rattles the dice enticingly; gamblers often find it difficult to leave the table, he's noticed. Especially poker players. "Are you in or not?"

Dean glares at him, but after a second, he nods shortly. "Snake eyes." Castiel rolls the dice, not bothering to watch how they land in favor of enjoying Dean's expression darken. "Boxcars."
Another roll, six and six. "Yo." Five and six, easy. "Give me the goddamn dice."

"I don't cheat," he tells the top of Dean's head as he examines the dice again. "I don't need to."

Dean's head snaps up.

"Five." Taking back the dice, he closes his eyes and throws. They tumble in a cheerful clink of ivory across the wood surface before coming to a reluctant stop, the silence broken by Dean's sharply indrawn breath. Opening his eyes, he meets Dean's. "Game of God."

"You're doing it." Dean straightens in dawning interest. "Angel thing?"

"Apocalypse thing," he corrects him. "Though yes, that, too."

"Okay, so what are you doing? Something to the dice, the table, the--Grace somewhere?" Dean squints at the table as if suspecting it of housing surreptitious Grace for gambling purposes.

"Probability." Dean blinks, looking confused. "I'm manipulating probability."

Dean looks between Castiel and the dice in his hand, then the coffee table, before sitting back, a thoughtful look on his face.

"You know," he says slowly. "I never asked you and I really should have, since you'd know: is luck real?"

"Yes," he answers positively, extending his hand for the dice. "Hard eight."

They both watch as the dice rattle lazily across the surface of the coffee table before coming up with two fours. A smile begins to stretch across Dean's face before he shakes his head and sits back, looking at Castiel.

"Tell me."

"Gambling is the art of chance, which is--among very limited minds--an explicit denial of the will of God," he explains to an unexpectedly rapt audience of one. "To call upon luck was thought to be a form of idolatry; to privilege chaos over order, or evil over good, to put it in the simplest and least accurate terms."

"The more you know," Dean answers in mock-wonder. "Keep going."

"Luck is chaos, in a sense; its function is to disrupt order and facilitate change. You might also simply call it random chance. What is living must change or it's not living; in very broad terms, luck is a part of that. Otherwise humanity would still lack sentience and fear the presence of fire."

"No pie," Dean agrees. "So everything's luck?"

"Everything is subject to chance," he corrects. "Luck is a part of that, yes, but alone, its effect is generally very small; it's spread very thin, you might say, which renders it effectively neutral in the short term and simply a part of the progression of Creation in the long term."

Dean thinks about that. "The more complex something is, the less luck has any effect on it?" Pleased, he nods. "This wouldn't work on poker, would it? Too much shit going on for luck to work with."

"Blackjack, perhaps," he answers, surprised by Dean's insight. "The simpler the game, the fewer the factors involved, the better it works."
"Factors. You mean other players, right?" Dean shrugs at Castiel's start. "Luck influences everything, you said, but you can't manipulate the luck of everything, right? Or anyone. That's why I won a few times when we were playing earlier."

"Or I could have been trying to throw you off."

"You want to throw me off, don't do a six play run," Dean tells him smugly. "It's just your luck you're manipulating? Tell me I'm right, I'm on a roll here."

"You are." Dean grins widely. "How did you guess?"

"If you could manipulate the luck of the dice--do dice have luck? Never mind, that's too weird--then you could do it to cards, too, so poker should be easy," Dean answers. "But you said simple games and mentioned Blackjack. Card game, complicated, but also a game that you can play with only one other person, the dealer. So it's other people that are the problem. Why?"

Castiel tilts his head. "You tell me."

"You can win at craps, but you can't make anyone play against you. Ace-deuce," Dean answers, meeting his eyes, rolling the dice and almost immediately covering them with his hand. "You can increase the probability of getting what you want when you roll, but you can't fuck with what I get." Lifting his hand, he shows Castiel the dice: one and two. "Or how I cheat."

He thought Dean would understand. "Exactly."

"Game of God," Dean agrees in satisfaction. "You said it was an Apocalypse thing and an angel thing; what'd you mean by that? Angels are lucky?"

"Angels have Grace and can effectively manipulate all the forces of Creation," he answers. "They could manipulate probability easily, but remaking the fabric of reality would be equally easy. Which as you know, they're not above doing."

"Stupid question, yeah." Dean grins ruefully. "Why destroy a mountain by hitting with a hammer when you've got a bomb?"

"I can think of several reasons," he answers, and Dean's grin fades into thoughtfulness. "A chisel isn't nearly as noticeable and could get the job done eventually--immortality and the ability to manipulate time does help with long term projects--but subtlety isn't a characteristic of angels."

"Suddenly," Dean says slowly, "I don't think all this was just to stop me talking about the weather."

"It wasn't. Seven." Picking up the dice, Castiel rolls them, watching Dean's expression. "Manipulation of probability. All things being equal--in a scrubbed universe in which the surface of the table, the wear on the dice, and the airflow were constants--the results would still be random because a human threw the dice. All things living embody change, and change requires chaos to exist. Hard eight." Dean doesn't bother looking at the dice, green eyes fixed on him. "Angels are chaos incarnate, but we don't change. Strictly speaking, we may not count as living."

"Now you're just fucking with me."

"I didn't make the rules, I only enforced them." Dean rolls his eyes. "Think of it as another form of balance. My Father's absence unsettled that balance in Heaven, and so it was on Earth, and so it was in Hell. The Apocalypse is the dramatic and impossible to miss--it lacks subtlety. Soft ten."

"How long," Dean says, glancing at the dice briefly, "can you keep that up?"
"More importantly, why am I doing it at all? It was useful, but only if I was careful, if I was subtle, because any legitimate casino would have blacklisted us immediately if I wasn't, drawing attention neither Dean nor I could afford. Street craps is often played with filed dice, so I had to be careful to confine my activities to reputable floating craps games in some truly questionable basements and backrooms. However, when I had Grace, neither of those were applicable. When I had Grace, why did Dean teach me craps so I could manipulate the games well enough to keep us in ammunition, execrable diner food, and remodel Bobby's kitchen?"

Dean opens his mouth, then hesitates. "You were using a hammer on a mountain. The Host would notice you using Grace, but not luck; it's too small."

"Exactly. Boxcars," he says, watching the dice turn up two sixes. "It's almost monotonous, isn't it? Almost as if there's no random element at all, which is impossible, because angels do in fact count as living. We don't change because of divine obedience, not because we can't. I should fail to roll the number I specify, because this game--more than any other--is the application of luck. It's nothing but chaos. Hard ten."

Dean stares at the dice: two fives. "Not so small anymore."

"Very small," he corrects Dean. "But very dramatic."

Dean reaches for the dice before he freezes, gazing at Castiel incredulously. "Hold on. Are you predicting how the Apocalypse is fucking with the world with craps?"

"That's exactly what I'm doing." Castiel grins, plucking the dice from under his hand. "Luck is very small, but as it goes, so goes all things."

"Craps."

"Weather and natural disasters are all well and good," he continues, enjoying Dean's shock. "But you may have noticed we lack a reliable way to track world events with any kind of accuracy. My Grace is in the wards, so I have no access to the whole of Creation itself to do a diagnostic. Manipulation of Creation is inherent to my being, however, and unlike remaking reality or time travel, luck doesn't require power; it requires I exist."

"Because angels are lucky, and seriously, you're predicting the Apocalypse with craps?"

"I thought about using solitaire instead," he muses. "But it's very boring."

"You..." Dean's shakes his head, sitting back again. "Okay, but if angels are lucky, then how can you tell if you're more lucky?" He makes a face. "Tell me that made sense."

"Angels are lucky," he counters. "Mortals are different. Dean--and I understand if the irony kills you, I'm in danger of apoplexy on a daily basis--there's a reason humans weren't given access to the forces of Creation in their entirety to exercise your own ability to create. What you would do with it isn't the question; it's more what you wouldn't, and I'm proving that right now. Technicalities on what I am aside, right now luck is being consciously, deliberately manipulated by a mortal on this plane, something that gets the undivided attention from the forces of Creation under normal circumstances, and trust me, I'm not being subtle about it. And yet."

Dean starts to look alarmed. "What would happen if it noticed? Smite you or something?"

"Nothing so dire. It simply stops letting me do it. When it notices, that is. Soft eight, again, three and five." He rolls the dice, unsurprised to watch it come up with a three and five. "It will, eventually, cut me off. It just depends on how long it takes it to notice with all the other demands on its time to try
and maintain balance."

"Remember where you used to at least pretend Creation wasn't alive and had a personality?"

"Remember when craps was a game of chance and not a monotonous exercise in deciding which of eleven numbers I would like to see next?" he asks Dean's glare. "If it's any consolation, even I didn't realize what it meant that I could still do this after I Fell. The first time, I thought I was just very stoned."

"How'd you find out?" Dean asks, widening his eyes in mock-sincerity. "Strip craps?"

"Who would top. I like to win." Dean bursts out laughing. "It shouldn't have surprised me as much as it did: everything I retained was random and either so specialized it was of limited practical use or utterly useless even as a clever party trick. And sometimes caused migraines."

"Or nearly killed you," Dean points out with grim satisfaction, just in case Castiel might have forgotten. "So let me guess; the longer you can go, the worse it's getting out there?"

"Short version: yes."

Dean licks his lips, looking away uncomfortably before meeting Castiel's eyes. "Even if we stopped it now--right now--the balance thing, that would still be a problem."

"Creation would balance itself eventually, and you would adapt," he answers carefully, but the grim resignation in Dean's eyes hurts to witness. "You've watched far too many terrible science fiction movies. You aren't doomed to rocks and megafauna for another ten thousand years before you reinvent the wheel. Humanity passes points in their development that they can't easily fall behind, not without a concerted effort. Trust me when I say, humanity has tested this extensively and noticeably failed to do much damage to their long-term development as a species. At very worst, you may have to rediscover Enlightenment and the Romantic period, which yes, does seem cruel, but you might be fortunate enough to get another Mary Shelley, and I'd suffer any number of terribly underthought philosophical concepts for Frankenstein."

"Gave me nightmares," Dean says absently, still looking troubled. "Weirdly enough, though, that would be better than some of the alternatives." He shakes his head, grimness folded away if not forgotten. "So your favor: you want it now or saving it for a rainy day?" He smirks. "Metaphorically speaking."

Castiel makes himself match Dean's light tone; it's the least he can do for him. "I'm not holding you to the stakes, Dean. And it was more than one favor, if I remember correctly."

"You place your bets, you take your chances," Dean counters. "I knew something was going on, but I kept playing to figure out how you were doing it. Eleven favors: now or later?"

Castiel opens his mouth to argue, but instead what comes out is, "One favor, and I can tell you now."

"That's what I thought." Dean makes a show of bracing himself. "What is it?"

"I understand this may take time," he answers carefully. "Since I don't know all that is required, and you probably do, I'll accept it being available to me at a later date. There's no time limit, since I know you're good for it."

"Got it; you can wait," Dean says, nodding with barely leashed impatience. "Now what--"

"--especially since we don't have any milk, or available cows from which to acquire it."
"Ice cream."
"No," he disagrees. "I want a milkshake."
"Why--" Dean stops, blinking. "That's your 'Winning the Apocalypse' snack."
"You remember that?"
"It was a depressing conversation," Dean answers. "So don't want to risk not getting it after all?"
"More I want to take advantage of all the aspects of an open favor while I can," he replies. "This way, I can have you make it. Chocolate, with sprinkles on top."

Dean stares at him for a long moment, and slowly, one corner of his mouth begins to curve upward.
"You got it."
"I can wait for us to find a convenient cow," he says, smiling back. "I understand it may be some time, however."

"Oh ye of little faith. You want a milkshake?" Dean nods firmly. "You get a milkshake. We'll find a goddamn cow--"

A series of rapid knocks on the doorframe outside interrupts them, and Castiel blinks in surprise when Joseph's wet head pokes between the shade and the doorway. "Hey. Got a minute"

"Back already?" Dean says in surprise, getting to his feet. They only left three days ago to get the answer from the communities, and Joseph's sober expression isn't encouraging. Reaching for the cord to roll up the shade, Dean smiles at them, but Castiel doesn't miss the look on Dean's face before he composes it for Joseph's benefit. "Get in here."

Disappointment seems like such a small risk until it happens, Castiel reflects as the team comes inside, dripping water all over the immaculately clean floor but thankfully avoiding the rug, which is already becoming dusty due to the rain. It's not as if he's not used to it, and so is Dean, but once--just once--he wants not to be.

Please, he thinks to no one at all in the eternity between Dean lowering the shade and turning to face Joseph, it's not so much to ask. Just this one thing.

"So how'd it go?" Dean asks, gaze flickering over the wet faces of each member of the team before coming back to Joseph.

"Not too bad," he answers, pushing his wet hair back. "So how's it going? We miss anything?"

"Joe," Dean starts in annoyance before he stills, searching Joseph's face again, and Castiel's unaware he's standing up as Dean's shoulders straighten, eyes narrowing. "You son of a bitch."

"You owe me this one," Joseph answers, carefully maintained façade breaking as he gestures to Ana, who drops a thick stack of paper on the coffee table. "All terms were accepted in full, signed by all the mayors and cosigned by the leader of the trade alliance herself, and by the way, Alison of Ichabod sends her regards and looks forward to meeting you." Joseph's grin widens at Dean's expression. "We got 'em."

Dean stares at the stack for a minute, then jerks his attention back to Joseph. "Do they have any cows?"
"Herds of them." Joseph's voice is almost gloating. "Ask me how many hamburgers we're getting. Ask."

"I love hamburgers," Dean agrees, turning to look at Castiel, green eyes filled with all the light in the world. "But I'm really looking forward to the milk. What about you, Cas?"

Castiel nods blankly.

"Game of God," he adds smugly before returning his attention to Joseph and Ana. "Okay, details: lose the coats and sit down already. Cas, grab something to write with. Who wants coffee?"

--Day 98--

Castiel doesn't remember anything as disorienting as the day after Joseph and his team returned.

Dean made the announcement an hour after dawn, standing in front of their cabin in unlaced boots sunk two full inches in mud, wearing nothing but jeans, a thin, long-sleeve t-shirt, and the flannel Castiel hastily threw over him before Dean dragged him down the steps, shouting the news over the pounding rain to sleepy, water-logged camp members who, much like Dean at that moment, effectively went incurably insane.

The events are somewhat hazy after that.

(There shouting, screaming, definitely hugging, far more than he thinks there were people to do it, which explains the muddy handprints on his back but not the ones on his ass, which Dean didn't find at all amusing. He supposes it's his lack of interest in food that makes the reaction of the camp such a surprise, though contemplating the MREs does increase his appreciation of canned green beans and tomato soup tremendously. Though not Spam: nothing can do that.)

In the six short hours between Joe's arrival and Castiel forcibly pushing Dean into bed the night before, Dean not only listened to Joseph's report and questioned his entire team, read through the relevant sections of the trade agreement and made notes, but apparently planned out exactly how to complete everything they needed to do in Chitaqua in a single day. Soaked to the skin and flushed with laughter (and somewhat dazed after Joseph nearly lifts him off his feet in an enthusiastic hug), Dean sent everyone to breakfast with an order to report back in an hour for their new duty assignments.

The lists provided by the five towns are compared to their current inventory, Chuck directing Kamal and Penn to do a full examination of their supplies. Castiel, having memorized the entire agreement the night before and not unwillingly captive to Dean's need of his memory, sends Mira, Sean, Mike, and Matt to do the same with their armory as well as the still-growing surplus from the military outposts that now require two cabins. Chuck's wish lists are unearthed and copies printed, the team leaders (all currently in Chitaqua due to the storm) nearly smothering Dean with attention and offering to help in any way they can.

It's nearly ten when Castiel surfaces enough to realize the cabin is quiet, empty of everyone but him and Dean. Frowning, he looks down at the last half-page of notes he obediently made during the team meeting, wondering vaguely when it ended and why he's still sitting here with a half-cup of coffee grown cold.

Looking up, he sees Dean sitting on the floor across from him, head in one hand as he dreamily re-reads his copy of the agreement, more specifically the list of items being requested that might be available in one of the cities. Unsurprisingly, despite the long, active day, Dean has yet to indicate he
plans to go to bed. After careful observation over the last week, it's clear that Dean's nearly recovered and provided he's sensible (he snorts before he can stop himself) and not pushing himself excessively, there's no reason for him not to be considered well enough to take up his duties in full.

"James," Dean says abruptly.

Startled, he frowns. "What?"

Dean reluctantly tears his eyes away from the page detailing the available livestock. "The supply run to see what we can get from the towns' list. We need two more teams anyway, so let's get one started now. Your short list had James on it, and Amanda thinks a month on Kyle's team is punishment enough for anyone just to get experience."

"I don't have a short list," he answers in bewilderment.

Dean grins at him. "You do, you just don't know it. Vera said something about how you reorganized patrol in my feverish absence and it got me thinking that you had more than one reason for not letting the patrol leaders pick their own teams." He smirks. "Though pissing them off was probably a plus."

"I can't say it was a deterrent," he admits, putting down his pencil. "Kyle's helpless rage was often the most entertaining part of my day."

"So Kyle: he's a good leader, even if he's a dick, so no reason not to give him Cyn back unless you wanted James on there to learn from Kyle, see if he could do the job." Dean cocks his head. "Well?"

He pauses, turning that over in his mind. "When Vera was unavailable, James was sometimes sent on extended missions for Dean, and I remembered his performance was satisfactory. As he's never been on regular patrol and Kyle's team had an available opening, it seemed a good idea to take advantage of the current lack of activity and give more members of the camp the opportunity to work on patrol."

"Good call," Dean says approvingly. "So we need to do a supply run and we need two new teams; give it to James and see how he handles it, and kill one and a half birds with one stone."

Castiel locates the patrol notebook beneath the coffee table and opens it to the appropriate page. "Who do you want on his team?"

"What about Nate and Zack?" Dean asks, thinking. "They're on mess this week, right?"

"Yes, but from what I understand, their survival was very much in question before you distracted everyone with the announcement." He makes a note of it, wondering if he should give Dean the notebook now and explain the organization or wait, though worryingly, Dean's not shown any particular talent for the details of organization or any desire to learn despite Castiel's repeated attempts. He'll learn, he supposes uncertainly, spreading a hand over the page protectively; it's an excellent system, though Chuck's mention of spreadsheets has made him very curious. "That leaves one more to assign."

"What about Cyn?" Dean asks. "She's cleared for duty by now, right?"

"Alicia cleared her," Castiel answers after a brief hesitation.

Dean makes a face, but his attention is obviously elsewhere. "Cyn was on patrol before I got here, right?" Castiel nods obediently. "Give her to James for his team; that gives 'em two people with patrol experience."
"And for Kyle's team--"

"I think we hit the bottom of the barrel," Dean continues, reaching out to flip back several pages and craning his neck to read the list of Chitaqua members with experience on patrol before shaking his head. "Everyone we got left hasn't been out of this camp except for supply runs since that first statewide survey you did--"

"We did," Castiel corrects him absently, remembering. That night, working with Dean until dawn to create a workable plan to check the entirety of the state in only five days, was a rare bright spot during those first two weeks when nothing else made sense. For the first time since he was placed in charge of the camp, it wasn't quite so overwhelming, so impossible to understand, even if Dean knew even less than he did.

A sound from Dean interrupts his thoughts. "What?"

Dean has an odd look on his face. "Dude, I remember that night, and trust me, I didn't do that much."

"The model was based on your suggestions and was solid," Castiel says in surprise. "I based the patrol districts off of it, with slight boundary changes to encompass the current population as we understand it. You didn't recognize it?"

"No," he answers, sitting back. "I didn't think to ask where you got it."

"That would be you" he answers, feeling a smile tugging at his mouth at Dean's startled expression. "You created it."

"We did," Dean answers, smiling back, and for a moment, Castiel almost forgets about tomorrow. "So, about James--if he pulls this off, anyway--how do you want to work him in? We're losing Amanda and Mark, so what about their teams?"

"Amanda wishes Sean to succeed her," Castiel answers automatically. "Mark already recommended Daniel as his replacement. All three teams will need new members, but that can wait until your return."

"Dude, you can--" Dean breaks off for a surprised yawn, looking annoyed.

"You should go to bed." Dean rolls his eyes as Castiel pulls the agreement from under Dean's hand. "You need to conserve your strength while you can. Your meeting with Ichabod's mayor, as well as with their trade partners, will be more tiring than you think."

"We're not leaving after noon," Dean argues mutinously. "Don't wanna look too eager."

"After Joseph brought his team back in a storm where visibility was sometimes reduced to six inches, I can see how that would be a concern," he answers, closing the patrol notebook with a sense of finality. "I'll--"

"Cas," Dean starts, something very worrying his voice. "Look, we haven't talked about--"

"--put these away," he interrupts quickly, starting to get up.

"Sit down." Castiel jerks his head up at the implicit order to see Dean grinning at him unrepentantly. "You know the easiest way to get your attention is give you an order? Even ones you're okay with, there's a second where you want to say no just on principle."

"Habit." Reluctantly, he sits back down. "I think we covered everything regarding your absence."
"I think," Dean says slowly, resting an elbow on the coffee table, "that there's a couple of things you've spent pretty much all evening pretending didn't bother you. Not your best work, but--"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Maybe the fact that you're the only one that didn't say anything about me going to Ichabod during the meeting earlier." Before he can deny it—which would be pointless, but that's never stopped him before—Dean snorts. "Cas, I saw your face when Joe mentioned it."

"It was a surprise."

"Joe had no idea how close he was to having a pencil through the eye," Dean says in amusement. "So?"

"What was I supposed to say?" he asks, opening the patrol notebook and retrieving his pencil; he's found it's very soothing to have something to do during unwelcome conversations and the maps are too far away to acquire easily.

"Give an opinion, maybe. Since it's pretty obvious you don't think I should go."

There's a brief, frustrated silence before Dean says, "Cas, put that down and look at me. You can be as anal as you want later, okay?"

Reluctantly, he closes the notebook again, marking his place with the pencil before giving Dean his full attention.

"I'm sorry," Dean says, startling him; the sincerity is unmistakable. "I should have talked to you about it first. Joe mentioned it this morning and I meant to talk to you about it before the meeting--"

"You have no obligation to discuss your decisions with me first," he says before Dean can continue. "Is there anything else?"

"Yeah, okay." Dean hesitates, frowning at him. "So you aren't pissed and that's not the reason why you didn't say anything at the meeting?"

"Due to my historical behavior at such meetings--a mild example of which you witnessed less than a week ago--I generally prefer to limit my interactions to observation."

Dean's frown deepens. "But you're pissed."

"I'm not--"

"Cas, you're about to snap that pencil," Dean points out, and Castiel looks down to see the pencil beginning to crack. "You're pissed, so let's talk about it." He pauses, looking pained. "Jesus, I'm quoting Sam now."

"What do you want me to tell you that you don't already know?" Castiel asks brittlely, forcing himself to drop the pencil before it breaks entirely. "You know the danger of being outside Chitaqua's wards alone--"

"Yeah, I get that, but--"

"The agreement was not conditional on your physical presence, only your signature on the copy of the agreement that Joseph brought back with him," Castiel continues without any expectation of convincing Dean. "You don't have to go."
"I do have to go," Dean counters. "These people made an agreement with us, and I think they deserve to see the guy who signed off on it."

"If one of Lucifer's followers should see you--"

"Cas, Jeffrey confirmed what they all seem to think--somehow, you're doing this," Dean interrupts. "You said it yourself and Jeffrey confirmed it; Lucifer thinks this is part of the goddamn prophecy. If Lucifer has any followers in Kansas, ask yourself, why would they still be here if they think Dean's dead?" Dean shakes his head in frustration. "Cas, if we're gonna do anything--if we even have a hope of trying--I gotta do this. If I'm gonna recruit--"

"This isn't a recruitment."

"This is how it starts, how I get people to--you think we can just put up a sign come one come all, join up but never actually see the guy you're signing up to fight for? Who the hell would trust someone they've never actually seen?" Dean sighs, rubbing a hand against the back of his neck. "Cas, I can't stay locked up here forever. And don't say," he adds before Castiel can open his mouth, "that I'm not locked up because I get field trips anywhere I want as long as they're deserted and I'm not alone."

Castiel stills. "Do you feel that I'm--"

"I think," Dean says slowly, reaching for Castiel's pencil and tapping it against the coffee table, "it hasn't been an issue because I've been sick, and now--I get it, paranoid is a way of life here. Gotta end sometime, Cas: might as well be now." He searches Castiel's face for a moment. "Is this about you staying here? That wasn't to piss you off, Cas." He tries a smile, faintly teasing. "Not because I don't like you."

"You need me here if you're not," he answers flatly. "I did, in fact, understand that much."

Dean winces. "Another thing we should have talked about, I know. I'm sorry. Next time--"

"As I said," he interrupts, "you don't have to clear your decisions with me."

"You want the pencil back?" Dean asks solicitously, extending it. "Might feel better if you break it and throw the pieces at me."

"I'm not angry," he grinds out between his teeth. "This conversation is pointless. You'd already made your decision before the meeting, so I see no reason to offer my opinions after the fact."

"Take the fucking pencil, Cas."

"It doesn't matter if I agree with you or not, in any case," Castiel answers doggedly. "It's your decision to make."

Dean starts to answer, then sits back. "Wait. Are we even having the same conversation? Since when does your opinion not matter?"

To his surprise, the words are far more difficult to say than he expected. "You've demonstrated that you're ready to take up your duties as Chitaqua's leader." Dean goes still, lips parting as if to speak, but he doesn't. "I'll help you, of course, in any way you need, but you know enough now that only experience can teach you the rest."

"So you won't even tell me what you think?" Dean asks, looking confused.
"If you're uncertain regarding a decision, of course I'll offer my opinion if you ask," he explains carefully.

"If I ask?" Dean echoes. "Since when do I need to ask?"

"Dean--"

"Why?" Dean bursts out, coming up on his knees. "What the hell did I do to make you think--I forgot to talk to you about this, my bad, I'm still new at this. You have the right to be pissed! What I don't get is why you--..." He trails off. "Hold up. Is this about what happened with Joe's team before they left? That why you didn't say anything during the meeting?"

"No--"

"Because I was fine with that," he continues. "It was fun. You couldn't see Joe's face, but dude, it was--"

"It wasn't real. What you were doing, I knew it was deliberate, but I still--"

"Did your thing," Dean interrupts. "I know, I was there. What does that have to do with--"

"It wasn't real," he repeats as evenly as he can. "It would have bothered you if you believed anything you were saying."

"If I ever believe what I was saying that day, get some holy water and start an exorcism," Dean answers, a flicker of amusement in his voice, "because obviously a demon's involved. Cas, come on--"

"And when it's actually something you do believe is the right decision?" Dean's amusement vanishes. "Will you be so complacent?"

"What do you think I'm gonna do?"

"You don't understand," he says, frustrated. "It's not you, it's--"

"Him," Dean says with unexpected bitterness, dropping back on his heels. "Historical behavior. You mean what went down at those meeting with him there."

"It's me," Looking up, he meets Dean's eyes. "You said it yourself; it's on principle. I spent most of my mortal life on earth doing nothing but opposing everything simply because I could."

"Your mortal life is two years and change," Dean argues. "And I was exaggerating! You don't actually do that!"

"I do do that!" he snaps. "What happened with Joseph's team--"

"Was exactly what you were supposed to do!" Dean says incredulously. "Say what no one else will, tell people what they don't want to hear, make them listen--"

"No one listened," he says before he can stop himself.

"You mean he wouldn't." Dean slumps, staring at the coffee table for a long moment. "You said you knew the difference, Cas. I'm not him."

"It's not about Dean--"
"It's always about him," Dean says softly, green eyes dark. "It was, is, and will always fucking be about him. I get it, Cas."

"It's about you," he says. "History doesn't improve on repetition. I don't want…" Two years of endless arguments, protracted silences, wary truces broken almost before they began flash through his mind on endless repeat; he can't risk it happening, not again, not when this time he has so much to lose, more than he ever imagined he'd have. "We can discuss this in more detail when you return. I can verify James' suitability in your absence, but adding new team members to the existing teams can be postponed for now."

Dean doesn't answer for a long moment. "So you're gonna handle everything until I get back?"

"Yes."

"Uh huh." Dean licks his lips. "And when I get back…"

"As I said, it can wait until your return."

"It really can't," Dean says, expression unreadable. "What are we gonna be talking about when I get back?"

Castiel takes a deep breath, focusing on the patrol notebook. "You're well enough now not to need me. The team leaders know their jobs, the camp runs with minimal supervision...it's as good a time as any for you to--when you return--"

"You're quitting."

He frowns. "I'm not quitting."

"When I get back, you're quitting," Dean repeats flatly. "Is that what you're telling me?"

"This arrangement was temporary due to your illness."

"It wasn't." Dean winces, frowning at the coffee table. "So maybe we should have talked about this before."

This conversation would benefit from—something. Context perhaps. "What?"

"The part where you had to do everything, yes, that was definitely temporary," Dean assures him. "I think I can pull my own weight now, not a problem." He pauses, fixing his gaze on the wall behind Castiel's shoulder. "I just thought the weight would be---there'd be two of those."

"Two weights?"

Dean sighs. "Believe it or not, that was actually my best try yet. You see why I was putting this off?"

"Yes," he agrees a little flatly. "Perhaps you should discard analogies for now."

"Right. Give me a minute." Dean stares at nothing for a few moments before nodding to himself and looking up. "Okay, first thing; this is probably my fault. I thought maybe you wouldn't notice for a little while longer, give me more time, which yeah, that's on me, but it wasn't like you were miserable or anything. A warning would have been nice, just saying."

"Dean."

"I said give me a minute!" Huffing a breath, Dean scowls before taking a deep breath and looking at
him again. "Don't quit."

"I'm not quitting."

"You're quitting," Dean counters. "You just don't know it because you didn't know it was actually your job."

"Dean, you will have to be specific. What job?"

"What's the word for someone who does your job when you're not there and helps you do it when you are?" Dean asks. "And takes over when you're--you know, dying? But permanently."

English, Castiel reflects, doesn't have a word for something not unlike a coup, but possibly in reverse. "Second in command?"

Dean points at him. "That"

"Of Chitaqua?"

"And the war," Dean adds. "Which gonna point out, you thinking we can win? Kind of makes it half your responsibility anyway, just saying. Come on, what's the problem? It's basically what you've been doing all this time. Same job, new title. So, what do you think?"

Castiel stares at him.

"Look, I get the timing is--"

"How long," Castiel says as calmly as he can, "have you been thinking about this?"

Dean bites his lip. "Since I told Vera to announce it to the camp when I was--you know, between fevers. You were there."

He closes his eyes.

"Look, I should have asked you about this before, but not like you asked me if I was ready yet," Dean continues relentlessly. "Or even told me about it! I don't think you got room to talk here!"

Opening his eyes, Castiel stares at him in disbelief. "I can't imagine what that must be like."

"Funny," Dean answers, eyes narrowing in challenge. "By the way, why today?"

Castiel blinks, startled. "What--"

"Not yesterday, not last week, but today you decided I was ready," Dean says, resting his chin on his hand. "Not even this morning: you were arguing with me about the priority list, for fuck's sake! The meeting with the team leaders and I said I was going to Ichabod--that was it, wasn't it? The argument we didn't have in front of everyone in the room because you decided the easiest way to avoid repeating history is opting out."

He hesitates. "Something like that, yes."

"Because you were pissed I was leaving and didn't talk to you about it?"

"Of course not--"

"I make one mistake," Dean says angrily, "and you're done with me? Jesus, he got more time than
that before you wrote him off!"

"I'm not!" The anger he might have expected, but the hurt beneath it he didn't. "There are--there are other reasons."

"History repeating itself," Dean says suddenly, anger vanishing. "Like how Dean's team leaders thought you were a dangerous influence on him."

Castiel sucks in a breath.

"And Luke tried to kill you because of it."

"That was--"

"A long time ago," Dean interrupts, looking at him with an expression he can't quite read. "You keep saying that, like that means something. It was two years and it was this afternoon, too. You, the team leaders, Dean Winchester, and history repeating all over again in this room. All new cast, but you--"

"I don't think the team leaders have any intention of killing me," Castiel says immediately. "Obviously. I appointed some of them myself."

The following silence stretches infinitely, or so it seems, and Castiel wonders uneasily how long this will last. "Dean," he says finally, "I think--"

"Yeah," Dean says, focusing on him abruptly; Castiel can't look away. "Look, you and me, we got off to a shitty start. The barn, the wings, trying to blow out my eardrums, the fucking Host, and that's just the first time we first met, not the most recent--but we got past that, right?" The pause lasts long enough for Castiel to realize he's supposed to nod. "Good. We moved on, got to know each other, so--I mean, it works. Time, whatever, some things start bad but they don't have to stay that way. People change. You know that."

"I know that," he agrees. "I feel we've--what you said, yes."

"But that's nothing, right? Not compared to how you and humanity got started." Castiel freezes, unable to hide it from that penetrating stare. "So that's it."

"Yeah," Dean says, focusing on him abruptly; Castiel can't look away. "Look, you and me, we got off to a shitty start. The barn, the wings, trying to blow out my eardrums, the fucking Host, and that's just the first time we first met, not the most recent--but we got past that, right?" The pause lasts long enough for Castiel to realize he's supposed to nod. "Good. We moved on, got to know each other, so--I mean, it works. Time, whatever, some things start bad but they don't have to stay that way. People change. You know that."

"All your existence, you loved humanity as your Father's favorite Creation," Dean says, never looking away. "You rebelled against the Host, you helped Dean build those camps so humanity could fight back, you Fell, even though by then you didn't believe you could win, all because humanity was worth fighting for. You taught them everything you knew so they could fight, and what does humanity do? They were scared of you. They hated you. And then the fuckers tried to kill you."

"I don't--" Swallowing, he tries again. "I don't blame humanity for what Luke did."

"It was a long time ago," Dean agrees, resting an elbow on the coffee table. "That was then and this is now, or a few months ago; Dean was gone, the camp needed a leader, Vera shows up on your doorstep, and suddenly it's all let's forgive and forget that murder shit, time to move on and by the way, keep us alive." Castiel has no idea what Dean's seeing on his face, but for some reason, it makes him start to smile. "You didn't know what you were doing, but did they care? They were happy to obey any order you gave, because you've all hugged it out, water under the bridge, it was a long time ago so forget the last two years of your life here, just keep them alive."
"That's not--"

"Luke and the team leaders, that was fucked up, but it's not like the Host wasn't after you for years," Dean continues, bracing both elbows on the coffee table. "The fear thing sucked, but you were an angel and 'be not afraid' was your catchphrase for a reason. Mortality--yeah, that blew, but eventually, you got used to it. But all of it together--"

"This is ridiculous."

"--that's a lot to deal with. And for two years you went on missions, but that wasn't enough for Dean, the team leaders hated you, period, and half the camp didn't even notice you did anything but get high and have epic sex parties and were scared of you just because of what you were--"

"It wasn't their fault," Castiel gets out in a rush of words. "I know that."

"But then Dean's gone, and humanity, after fucking you over, expected you to save them? That was bullshit."

"I didn't--"

"Only question I got is why you didn't kill everyone here--God knows after all that, you probably wanted to."

"I never wanted that!" Castiel shouts before he can stop himself, half on his knees. "How dare you--"

"I know," Dean answers, tipping his head back to regard him thoughtfully. "But you're still kind of pissed at them."

"I don't blame the camp for what Luke did--"

"Humanity."

Castiel drops back onto the floor with a thump.

"The first step," Dean says, head in hand, "is admitting you have a problem, and that your problem is the same one that everyone on earth has. Someone tried to kill you; that would piss anyone off. You got the extra special edition: it was because you weren't human, and just like the human they thought you weren't, you hated the fuckers and threw all their kind in the bargain."

It takes several seconds for Castiel to find his voice. "I never--"

"Just admit it," Dean advises him, rolling his eyes. "You're pissed, you've been pissed for two years, you're not over it, you're not sure you even want to be, and by the way, humanity can fuck itself. No one, Cas--no one--wouldn't be pissed about that, and you're not a fucking martyr."

Unexpectedly, his voice soften. "And you don't have to be.

Castiel opens his mouth but nothing comes out.

"So let's get this out of the way: on behalf of humanity, I'm sorry--"

"Really?"

"--for all our sins against you, great and small," Dean continues, meeting Castiel's eyes. "For we knew exactly what we were doing, we do this shit to each other all the time, and there's no way could you have seen it coming, not like this."
Picking up the pencil Dean discarded, Castiel stares at the faint, almost-invisible crack in the smooth yellow surface. "It wasn't like that."

Dean sighs. "Cas, I don't forgive humanity for some of the shit they pull; let's be real here. It's not like don't I wake up some days thinking the end of world would at least end humanity's bullshit. Hatred—if only, that'd be easy, then it wouldn't matter, that doesn't keep you up at night." He hesitates. "Disappointment, though, that's different; that shit eats at you every day."

"I don't..." He stops, frustrated, and tries a different tack. "You think I judge humanity considering what my own kind have done to you?"

"Your kind..." Dean chokes back a startled laugh, grinning at him. "Newsflash, Castiel Gabriel Singer of Chitaqua: we are your kind. You may not be human, Cas, but you do people just fine, including hating most of 'em. People do that," he adds with a smirk. "And you're a fucking prodigy at that."

"I don't hate Vera or Jeremy," he says, transferring his gaze from the pencil to Dean. "Or you. I think."

Dean's smirk widens. "What about Joe?" he asks mockingly, widening his eyes in elaborately crafted shock. "He's awesome!"

"Of course not--"

"And Chuck? Amanda and your nightly playdates in ass-kicking? Alicia, who likes things with blades as much as you do? Ana, who promised to find a DVD player and a copy of Showgirls on the down low to show you next chance she gets?"

"How did you--"

"Gossip," Dean answers promptly. "Makes the world go around."

Castiel rolls his eyes, slumping back against the couch. "As I said, I don't hate humanity."

"No, you don't hate them," Dean corrects him. "Humanity, on the other hand, was scared of you, avoided you, which hurt your feelings, don't pretend it didn't--"

He straightens, offended. "Oh please."

"--hated you, and then they tried to kill you," Dean finishes, smile fading into something more serious. "I get it, Cas. What you saw that night with Luke: that was the worst of us. But that's not all we are; we're more than that."

Castiel blinks. "What did you say?"


"You," Castiel breathes, mouth dry.

"Okay, yeah," Dean agrees, a small, surprised smile curving one corner of his mouth. "I'm human. And what I am--"

"--is what you all are. What I saw that night was the worst of you." Dean nods encouragingly, green eyes certain. "And what I see tonight is the best."
Dean rolls his eyes, but a flush creeps steadily across his cheeks. "If that works for you, sure, why not? Wouldn't say the best, but--"

"--there will be better?" he offers helplessly.

"I wouldn't go that far," Dean protests, the hot color spreading further as he adds, "I'm not the best of us, Cas."

Castiel nods wisely. "He said something like that as well."

Dean frowns. "What? Who?"

"Never mind," he answers, staring at Dean in fascination. "Please keep going."

After a suspicious look, (being Dean) he does just that. "Look, if fucking Luke gets a starring role in examples of humanity--and can't lie here, we got a lot of those--Vera should get equal billing, you get what I'm saying? Amanda should be up there. Joe should get an honorable mention at least."

"Surely a pantheon of the best humanity has to offer," he says unevenly; it feels like something is lodged in his throat.

"We have a lot of those, too," Dean offers. "In this camp, even. Even the ones--that was then, Cas. Just because they were dicks to you back then, doesn't mean they--" He breaks off, making a face. "Look, even the worst of us--"

"--can be the best," Castiel finishes for him, swallowing frantically; what is that? "Sometimes, it simply takes time for them to find that out for themselves."

"Yeah," Dean says slowly, green eyes starting to narrow. "Cas, you wanna catch me up here?"

Heroically, he fights down the obstruction to say, "Can you elaborate?"

"I don't know, maybe that you've heard this before or something?" Dean asks suspiciously.

This time, it's impossible to stop it; when he opens his mouth again, laughter pours out between in great, heady bursts, effervescent bubbles of hilarity filling his chest again with every gasped breath. Dean's shock doesn't help; dropping his head to his arms, he laughs until his chest aches and he can't get a full breath and doesn't particularly care. It feels like a muscle held too tightly for far too long is finally loosening; it hurts, of course, but two years is a very long time and it's probably very stiff by now.

Not wrong yet, drifts smugly through his mind, a whisper of laughter beneath it.

No, Castiel thinks shakily; no, not at all. I'm sitting in the presence of the proof.

"...Cas?" The frantic edge to Dean's voice is enough to give him some modicum of control, even though nothing can erase the smile, even in the face of Dean's worried scowl. "What the hell is up with you?"

"Just--for my own curiosity," Castiel begins, swallowing down another burst of laughter at Dean's expression. "If you were being pursued by a mob intent on murdering you because your ideas were revolutionary for your time, you'd be saying the exact same thing as your last words, wouldn't you?"

"Uh." Dean makes a face, eyebrows drawing sharply together. "No, I'd kill their asses first. After, over a beer, sure."
That's an excellent plan," he answers thoughtfully. "I wish I'd thought of that. In my defense, it probably wouldn't have been allowed, but--"

"What?" Dean straightens in alarm. "Are we gonna be fighting a mob someday? Did you see that in the future or something when you were an angel and forget to tell me?"

"I'm certain, given the opportunity, you could inspire any number of angry mobs to stalk you to your potential death," he answers honestly. "It's a surprisingly common occurrence when faced with people who not only want to change the world, but actually start doing it."

"When," Dean grits out between clenched teeth, "and where? Give me date, time, and place--"

"Two thousand, one hundred, and thirty five years ago, late at night, and in the Grove of the Furies," he recites obediently, just because he can. "And not you, in case that needs to be said."

Never before this moment has Castiel appreciated his reflexes so much; the table is cleared of projectiles before Dean opens his mouth.

"You would have liked him," he continues, safely storing notebook, pencil, and both cups safely at his side. "He never gave up on anything, including himself." His mother did, but now, perhaps far better than then, he understands why. "Though he did take the option of entreating divine revenge of Diana, but truly, it was fully justified. They were even given an opportunity to gain absolution first, but slaughtering the gods' representative in their own consecrated temple before the Senate went into session…." He shakes his head.

"Slaughtered in--" Dean's confusion dissipates, incredulity taking its place. "Wait, Diana, temple, the Senate, slaughter--Rome? Ancient Rome, Julius Caesar, all that, that's what you're talking about?"

He smiles. "He was a little before Caesar's time, but yes."

"How'd you know him?"

"I was ordered to carry Diana's judgment to him," he answers, remembering that night in the Grove. "He recognized what I was and he asked me...."

"What?" Dean prompts him gently.

"His country betrayed him, his friends deserted him, his supporters were murdered, his work destroyed, and a group of his own countrymen were pursuing him into the Grove of the Furies to kill him," he says softly. "Yet he stood there before me as his murderers searched the Grove for him, and the only thing he asked was that I promise to remember that humanity was not just the men who pursued him." He looks at Dean. "That you're more."

"I like him now," Dean says, equally soft. "They killed him?"

"Of course not. He was a Roman," he answers. "His life was his own from the moment of his birth; he'd never allow the vermin who hunted him to take it from him. I stayed with him until his shade passed to the Reapers. By the time I allowed them to find his body, he was beyond their reach."

They cut off his head so he'd have no mouth in which to place a coin for Charon, threw his body intact into the Tiber, hoping to doom his shade to haunt the banks of the Styx and Acheron when it was unable to pay the fare to cross them. As if the petty actions of small men could matter: Charon welcomed him gladly, for to host such a man within the shelter of her barge was all the payment she required. "His request for divine vengeance was granted," he says abruptly, aware of Dean watching him. "Rome would fall to despotism in less than two centuries: the Republic became the Empire before being destroyed in its entirety. Latin isn't even a living language anymore." Dean blinks at
"Gods have a very different frame of reference when it comes to the concept of 'timely' revenge," he explains. "A minute or a millennia seem to...."

"Yeah, immortality probably does that," Dean agrees, a thread of amusement in his voice. "You okay?"

"I've just been very thoroughly schooled by a man whose been dead for over two millennia," he answers honestly. "I need a moment to regain my perspective."

"Take your time," Dean says soothingly. "Just one question--why were you carrying Diana's judgment anyway?"

"It was in my job description," he answers, almost smiling at Dean's surprise. "Angels aren't called Messengers for nothing. We had privileges in any consecrated temple or holy place, not just those dedicated to our Father. It was often far less stressful for the gods to petition us for assistance than negotiate with each other; that could take eons, and I do mean that literally."

"I had no idea," Dean says, looking intrigued.

"I'll tell you the entire story one night, if you wish," he interrupts reluctantly in the face of Dean's interest. "You were right. About me. I'm still--ambivalent regarding humanity."

Dean blinks at him. "Right, I knew that. Except not 'ambivalent'; you're pissed."

"--angry as hell and not taking it anymore."

"And it's not fair, I know that."

"Disappointed." Castiel lets out a breath, nodding agreement. "And that's fair, Cas, don't let anyone tell you different. What happened sucked, and you don't have to forgive humanity for that." He cocks his head. "But...you could do it anyway."

"I told you, I know--"

"There's no way you could," Dean counters. "Your world was inside these walls, always has been, from the moment you Fell. All the people you knew were a step from crazy at best, because that was an advantage when Dean was recruiting. That was then, and this is now, two years later, and people change, but you're still using the same playbook."

"It kept me alive," he answers and regrets it at Dean's flinch. "Though in comparison to the population living here, it was only a very small number who were actively interested in my death."

"When your world's the size of a camp, it probably felt like more," Dean says quietly. "When it could be anyone, it might as well have been everyone." After a moment, he adds, "If you're not ready to give humanity another chance yet--and I don't blame you for that--if that's the reason you don't want the job, I respect that."

Castiel starts to answer, then hesitates. "You do."

"Doesn't mean I won't work on changing your mind," Dean admits. "And I will, but it doesn't have to be now."

"All right."
"But--just hear me out--why not now, try it out, just to see what happens?" Dean asks in a rush, leaning forward. "I'll be in Ichabod for a few days, you'll be here, and hey, you have some free time, so maybe listen to some reports, make sure James isn't the new Sid and kills his team on a bridge, anything comes up, you handle it. You know, exactly what you've been doing before and what you were going to do anyway while I was gone, same old same old, no surprises here."

Castiel nods at Dean's hopeful pause. "And?"

"Pay attention," he says immediately. "Note the sheer lack of people who want to kill you when you give them their orders. Some of 'em even like you, and I bet you didn't notice that either, but weird thing, people respond well to someone who isn't actively trying to piss them off all the time." Dean sits back with a shrug, elaborately nonchalant. "Get out your playbook, dust it off, and check your interpretations. Dude, even the Bible gets regular updates in translation: why not your Humans And Their Fucked Up Ways? What, the playbook's more sacred than your dad's own words?"

Castiel raises an eyebrow at Dean's triumphant smile. "Perhaps in the future, you could consider some changes to your recruitment speech if this is the one you plan to use."

"I'm preaching to the won't admit he's already converted," Dean answers smugly. "Weird, how that wasn't a no."

It wasn't.

Dean rests an elbow on the coffee table. "What are you willing to lose?"

"What?"

"Single roll, all or nothing, winner takes all," Dean answers. "Here's point; I go to Ichabod, you do exactly what you've been doing basically since I got here, and you realize that yeah, humanity might not be so bad; alea iacta est."

"'The die is cast'?"

"When I get back, you tell me how I rolled." Dean grins at him. "Rubicon's just a river, Cas; all you risk crossing is getting your feet wet."

"And if you win?"

"You say yes," Dean answers promptly. "And this: you promise me that if you don't like something I'm doing, you tell me, in front of the entire camp if you think you have to. Argue, fight it out, I don't care: I may disagree with you and do it anyway if I think I'm right, but that doesn't mean I don't want to know if I'm wrong and why."

"You'll grow to resent it if my opinion constantly differs from yours."

"I'll get over it." Dean's expression is serious. "Here's what you get in return; I'll listen, always, even if I don't agree. And I won't hold it against you either way: even when you're right. So, what do you think?"

Castiel swallows. "It's not the worst offer I've ever heard. However," he continues, ignoring Dean's smug expression, "you haven't told me what happens if you're wrong."

"I'm not," Dean answers cheerfully. "Well?"

"Yes." He'd do far more than this for Dean's smile, offered to him and him alone.
"Okay, now that that's out of the way--Rome, the guy with his people speech before he got mobbed? You got a name for me?" Dean asks suddenly.

"Gaius Sempronius Gracchus," he answers in surprise. "Why?"

"Okay, so--wait, you want coffee before you start? Give me the cups." He frowns as Castiel stares at him. "What?"

"You're leaving in fourteen hours," he says, the list of things Dean needs to accomplish scrolling through his mind in appalling repetition. "You want me to tell you tonight?"

"Why not?" Dean asks, already half-over the coffee table in a distracting stretch of limbs, t-shirt riding up to reveal several inches of his bare back, jeans making an inspiring attempt to escape down his hips. With a triumphant sound, he grabs their cups from the floor and looks up at Castiel from only inches away, cheeks flushed with exertion. "Cas?"

Castiel thinks, blankly: this conversation would have been much shorter if you'd done that much earlier. "As you wish."

"Cool." As Dean straightens, cups in hand--and regretfully straightening his shirt with a lack of self-consciousness that makes him wonder uneasily if Dean has entirely grasped that he's living with someone who isn't his brother--Castiel manages to remember what they were talking about.

"Why do you want to know about Gaius?" he asks, deciding against mentioning it at this time; he doesn't want Dean to be uncomfortable, after all.

"Two thousand something years ago, he did half the work for me tonight," Dean answers on his way to the kitchen. "I'd like to know more about the guy who's getting half the credit."

--Day 100--

"Cas?"

Jerked awake by the unexpected noise, Castiel blinks uncertainly into the gloom of the living room, surrounded by the too-familiar silence of an empty cabin in a tiny camp at the end of the world. For some reason (for no reason), he expected--

(the sound of someone else breathing a room away; the shrill squeal of springs of the mattress as he rolls over in bed; the low, muffled sounds of distress from a nightmare or fever; the unhappy groan that punctuates the moment he awakens to a new morning)

Closing his eyes again, he fights down panic, the sound of his own too-rapid breathing filling his ears: a monotonous day stretches before him, the endless drag of time broken into discrete units and filled with anything, everything he can find to do, sex and drugs, chemical euphoria and the long, slow crash before it begins all over again. His existence stretches to the beginning of time, but since he Fell, he learned the meaning of forever; it's mortality, the march of linear time where seconds last years and days eons and never seems to end.

It's another morning, much like the one before and will be exactly like the next; there's no reason to get up and he can't remember why he thought there was.

(there's no sound of someone who is very cranky in the morning and requires coffee before interaction can commence; there's no one who requires a rigorously researched breakfast that covers the four food groups and is low in unnecessary carbohydrates; there's no reason to verify that the
The contents of the pantry are adequate or if something is lacking before preparing lunch; there's no day to look forward to, filled with work and people and an endless list of things to do; there's no reason to shower, get dressed; there's no reason to get up.

"Cas? Are you--crap!" Something drops heavily to the floor, and Castiel sits up to see Alicia scowling at the fabric shade covering the doorway. "Sorry," she says, letting go of the cord. "I was trying to lower it slowly, be subtle. That didn't work."

Glancing out the window, he takes in the drizzling rain outside and then Alicia, braided hair damp as she takes off her jacket and looks around before shrugging and shoving it between the shade and the doorway to drop it on the porch and sitting down on the floor to remove her muddy boots. He appreciates the thought; cleaning drying mud from the floor is breathtakingly tedious, but if he doesn't do it immediately, it will spread.

Looking around, Castiel takes in the cabin carefully. The room is clean and organized according to maximum comfort and efficient use of space (though the rug, he reflects unhappily, is becoming dingy since he can't take it outside to clean it; perhaps he should have asked James to acquire a vacuum yesterday?), there are no empty bottles, full ashtrays, unwashed plates, piles of laundry, or a lingering scent of anything but wet and rain and perhaps the lemon-based cleaning product he acquired from Chuck because he and Dean were both becoming nauseated from the smell of bleach and ammonia (though not together; he did learn that much, thankfully before turning the bathroom into an impromptu gas chamber).

He's very sober, relatively clean, and on the coffee table is today's schedule, which includes a discussion with Chuck about the use of spreadsheets but not (he thinks), a dawn meeting with Alicia.

Setting her boots outside as well, Alicia turns to face him with a bright grin, obscenely awake and almost crackling with energy. "Good morning, Cas."

"Good morning."

"Good morning." Dean's having his first breakfast in Ichabod and this is the first full day of his trial period as--he shies away from the word warily--what Dean said. "How are you?"

"Terrorized the watch with Matt--he's in charge of them today, fine, but reinforcement never hurt anyone, am I right?" Her grin fades, replaced by concern. "You okay? You looked...weird there for a minute."

"I didn't sleep well," he answers, not entirely untruthfully. Dean's strict schedule was uncannily effective in regulating his sleep patterns, but last night he found it difficult to fall asleep and woke intermittently throughout the night. Maybe that explains it. "Have you ever woken up and--forgot several months of your life for several very long moments?"

"Once I dreamed I baked a cake," she says thoughtfully. "Looked for it for thirty minutes after I woke up, too. I was so pissed...it was chocolate, too."

Drawing up his knees, he looks at her curiously. "Does that happen often?"

"Not often, but it's weird when it does," she answers, leaning her elbows on the armchair on the other side of the coffee table. "You ever have those weird dreams that last like, years? Then you wake up and you're hours feeling like you should be seventy or married to a sea plumber?"

"What's a sea plumber?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," she sighs. "But we had a lot of tadpoles and one's name was Scott."
“Anything like that ever happen to you?”

It’s a complicated question; REM sleep is a requirement to maintain the health of the human brain, his body is human, so he must dream. "I never remember what I dream. This morning was--strange."

"Huh." She cocks her head. "First time Dean's been gone for the night, am I right? Since you two…you know." He nods uncertainly, not sure of the relevance. "You get used to them being around. When they're not, it can be--" She makes an incomprehensible gesture. "Weird. Like something's missing."

That makes sense. "Oh."

"It's a thing," she assures him, straightening. "What you need is coffee, and a lot of it. Can't go wrong with caffeine and sugar, I always say."

"Yes," he agrees. "I can--"

"I'll make it," she says brightly, already on her way to the kitchen, and belated, he notices a bag hanging over one flannel-covered arm. Flipping on the light, she looks around in approval before spotting the pantry. "So--here we go. You want me to make breakfast while you shower?"

"Yes, thank you--" He stops short, glancing at the open notebook. "Alicia, why are you here?"

"Check your stitches, so just toss the bandage when you get out, it needs air anyway," she calls from the kitchen, and he hears her make a satisfied sound as she opens the pantry door. "Take your time," she adds, studying the contents speculatively. "I got an idea."

When he returns, Alicia is turning off the burner beneath the frying pan with a triumphant expression. "Get some coffee and sit down," she says over her shoulder as she takes a drink from her own cup. "I'll be one more second."

Obediently, he does so, looking in approval at the neatly set table, though the position of the fork on the right side is a variation he wasn't aware of. As he sits down, Alicia places a plate in the middle of the table, stacked with several slices of toasted bread and adds a smaller bowl of fruit before crouching to roll up his sleeve and give the stitches a fast, professional once-over.

"Any vivisection-like pain?" He shakes his head and she nods in approval, straightening. "Good. I'll bandage it after we eat. This is French toast, Chitaqua-style," she adds, stabbing a fork into the top two slices before dropping them on his plate, sprinkling them with sugar and adding a spoonful of fruit. "Only legit use of powdered eggs in history. I used creamer for the milk and added the syrup from the fruit to the egg for flavor since we don't have vanilla."

Castiel blinks down at his plate before carefully cutting off a corner with his fork and taking a bite. To his surprise, the flavor isn't offensive, and the texture of the bread is different from whatever she did to it.

"Add sugar as needed," she advises him, adding several spoons to hers and a layer of fruit before taking an enormous bite. "Sugar--"

"--makes everything better," he finishes for her, adding another spoonful and taking a larger bite this time. This is very good; the fruit combines very well with the bread. "I wonder if Dean would like this."

"He does. A lot." When he looks up, startled, Alicia grins at him unselfconsciously. "I'll give you the
recipe. So what's on the agenda for today?"

Castiel regards her thoughtfully. "Alicia--"

"Thinking thoughts before two cups of coffee never did anything for anyone," Alicia tells him sympathetically, finishing off her first two pieces and getting two more. "Can't trust 'em. Eat, Cas, my feelings are in the process of getting very hurt by the lack of fake enthusiasm."

"This is very good," he answers defensively, taking another bite to prove it. "Did Dean tell you to--"

"No, of course not," she interrupts before folding half a piece of toast onto her fork and stuffing the entirety into her mouth. Unblinking, Castiel watches her engage in several seconds of enthusiastic chewing (no sign of choking to death) before successfully swallowing (how did she do that?). "Give me something to do."

He pauses, fork halfway to his mouth.

"Bored," she says, finishing the second half of the toast; it's impossible to look away. "And kind of hiding, fine."

"Hiding?"

"Matt's on Watch-terrorizing duty today," she explains. "You know who isn't?"

He finishes the bite and waits; that's what's known as a rhetorical question.

"Everyone, but also, Andy. And you know who's not on patrol right now due to flooding or something?"

He shakes his head and cuts off another (larger) piece of toast.

"Kat," she pronounces despairingly. "Amber and Brenda are on watch today--that's why I'm not on duty, they're my roommates, conflict of interest, or don't want to be shivved in the ass while I sleep, you know?" He nods as he swallows. "Right. So Andy and Kat need somewhere to hang out--their roommates are all home, fuck the rain--look, Andy's team, okay?" He nods again, cutting off another piece of toast with the side of his fork. "When I said, sure, here's fine for you two crazy kids, I didn't know in a few short weeks, we'd be All Rain, All the Time."

"Hang out?" he asks as she pauses to get another piece of toast (and breathe, he thinks).

"Fuck on Brenda's bed," she answers prosaically, dividing the toast and consuming half in a single, mournful bite.

"Brenda's bed?"

"What she doesn't know--and Andy launders carefully after--won't hurt anyone," she assures him, folding the second half. "But see, that's not the problem. The problem is, they won't until I leave. Imagine it, Cas: three people in the living room making awkward conversation while two of them stare at each other like...."

He shares her shudder as they both finish the last of the toast.

"Andy usually shows up first--hang out, he says," she adds after swallowing, looking at him pitifully over both their empty plates. "Talk about his feelings, he means. All his feelings, and....you can't make me go back there, and it's here or the infirmary, and that's just depressing."
He almost asks why, then remembers: all the patrols are grounded until the rain ends, and other than those in Ichabod with Dean, everyone is in the camp. And very few, he knows from experience, have Kat and Andy's inexplicable inhibitions regarding the presence of others in the same cabin. Or the same room, for that matter.

"I'll be handing out condoms all day," she mutters glumly in confirmation of why even the infirmary is dangerous territory, glaring at her plate before looking at him appealingly. "Weren't those nice stitches? Not even gonna scar, can tell you that right now, I do excellent work."

"You do," he agrees, picking up their plates and taking them to the sink. "Did you happen to go by the mess--"

"That's where I got the powdered eggs this morning for the French toast bribery," she confirms, bringing him the empty fruit bowl and the silverware before leaning against the counter. "Why?"

"Did you see James by any chance?" he asks, turning on the water. It's at least an hour before patrol goes off duty and morning reports here, but he suspects James got very little sleep last night.

"Yeah, he and his team were there." She tilts her head. "Oh, I forgot; this is his first day on local, right?"

"Yes."

"Up at hour before duty?" Alicia shudders delicately. "He'll learn the five minute rule just like the rest of us." At his querying look, she elaborates. "One minute to resign yourself to morning, one to dress, one for coffee, teeth-brushing, and hating everything, one to eat anything that isn't actually decomposing, and a leisurely minute to get from your cabin to here. Fifteen seconds at a sprint, if you have to open a can, and me, I can eat and run. Multitask, only way to travel, I always say."

He regards her blankly as he turns off the water. "You like mornings."

"I like mornings," she agrees. "I deeply resent having to do anything during them, as is my way. Dishtowel?"

"What?"

"Where's the dishtowel?" she asks, already circling around him and ducking to open the door under the sink and peer inside. "Never mind, found it."

"You're--"

"Being useful because Andy's even more a morning person than I am, and his feelings are twenty-four seven," she says, dishtowel in hand. "Feelings, Cas. All the feelings. Her hair gets like, six of them. Long walks on the beach, puppies, and green tea—things she likes," she adds at his mystified expression. "Green bell peppers, not red, and her smile just...." Alicia shuts her eyes tightly and extends a hand, snapping her fingers impatiently. "Dishes, Cas. Give me dishes."

"I'm sorry," he says sincerely, turning off the water and reaching for a plate. "I thought perhaps humans only did that on television."

"Lifetime Channel?" She nods wisely. "That shit fucks you up. Like one minute you're fine, and two hours later, you're crying over the phone because you forgot you don't have a long lost sister to reunite with and heal the twenty-year breach in the family in time for Christmas."

"I saw that movie." There'd been some kind of tragic misunderstanding during their adolescence that
could have been easily avoided if Phyllis had simply opened her sister's bedroom door to discover she was watching Showtime's late-night line-up and not fucking Phyllis's crush, Billy, a star football player who did nothing but smile with far, far too many teeth.

"Everyone saw that movie," Alicia tells him as he hands her the first plate. "They're all that movie, no matter which one you actually see. You worried about James?"

He hesitates, remembering when James showed up last night with half the items on the initial list and a stoic expression, apologizing that he didn't find them all while his team hovered supportively nearby (or at least, those that weren't Cynthia, who simply glared at Castiel. He made a note to tell her Kyle's efforts are far superior and encourage her to ask for his assistance if she has any desire for improvement).

This told Castiel two very important things: one, James seems to have gained his team's confidence (again, those not Cynthia) and is extraordinarily competent; and two, perhaps he should have been more clear before James left that the time limit and list of items were a convenience, not a test, and no, he didn't think anyone would be able to acquire one hundred items in less than twelve hours.

Despite Castiel's efforts at validation--acquiring only fifty items in less than twelve hours on his first mission with his new team being an impressive achievement--James and his teammates (exception: Cynthia, who radiated hostility at all and sundry) seemed less than reassured when they left.

"How did he seem this morning?"

"Nervous," she answers promptly, rocking her hand. "Staring at breakfast like it might kill him, but since Penn's cooking...."

Yes, he suspected as much. "His team?"

Alicia makes a face as she takes the frying pan. "Zack and Nate were--worse, honestly. No worries, though: Mira stopped by for breakfast and is talking them down. Just nerves: he'll be fine."

"Good," he replies, aware of her deliberate exclusion and content to simply wait. As the silence stretches over three plates and one fork, he considers possible topics of conversation in the meantime. "So the weather--"

"Rainy, wet, may need an Ark, yeah," she interrupts, snatching the bowl from his hand and drying it industriously. "You know, I just realized; you can't run patrol and take notes. Sure, your memory, but you really wanna transcribe all that when I'm right here with very willing and eager hands that know what a pencil is and how best to use it?"

He shakes his head on cue.

"That's what I thought," she says in satisfaction. "You know, James survived Kyle; kid's got nerves of steel or something."

He nods, handing her the last plate before draining the sink. "More coffee?"

"Yeah, thanks." Putting it away, she drapes the damp cloth over the faucet before turning to lean back against the counter. "He did a good job yesterday, right?"

"Yes," he answers as he carefully pours two cups. "I must not have been as encouraging as I'd hoped."

Taking the cup, she raises both eyebrows in acknowledgement, frowning at nothing.
"Perhaps my people skills need work," he adds casually as he adds cream and sugar to his cup. "As you'll be observing….

"You know, that's a good idea," she says thoughtfully, taking a sip from her own cup and frowning before making her way to the table and reaching for the sugar. "And after, I can confirm that your people skills? Definitely aren't the problem." She grins at him over her cup before taking a drink. "I'm trying to be subtle. How'm I doing?"

"Very good." He takes a drink of coffee. "I'm looking forward to hearing your observations."
Chapter 12

--Day 104--

It's almost midnight by the time they arrive at Chitaqua, and Dean's pleased to see that the watch waits for a visual verification--that being Dean leaning out the driver's side window to wave--before opening the gate. Wards or not, he's not getting over Jeffrey the stupidest demon anytime soon, and gambling for spam isn't happening again. He wonders what Cas assigned them in addition to what Dean did and reminds himself to ask; their terrified attention tells him it was pretty traumatic and therefore awesome.

(Seeing Jody's smug wave, he adds in 'being under the sadistic fist of Alicia's team' as a contributing factor.)

As they follow the dirt road to the garage--much less muddy than he expected, and on a glance, possibly due to having been sanded recently--Dean reflects on his first mission (the brownie thing was so not a mission) in satisfaction. While his reasons for wanting to go without Cas's supervision didn't have anything to do with being able to actually drive (Cas really, really likes to drive), it was definitely nice to say he was driving and not get any argument.

(That the only two times he's driven with Cas were when Cas was literally unconscious is a pretty good indicator of how likely it is that he will ever, even by accident, win that argument with him. That there will always be one he's already accepted. Cas really, really likes to drive.)

Putting the jeep into park once they're inside the garage, he glances over at his passengers to take in their (shitty) attempts to not look like they wonder where he got his driver's license and why on earth he got it.

Because it's the Apocalypse, it stopped raining yesterday, he's in a military-grade SUV with a million roads, and traffic is kind of absolutely non-existent: hell fucking yes he's gonna fulfill a dream and test the performance envelope of an SUV on every surface he can drive on. There was almost no skidding, after all.

"Home sweet home," Dean says cheerfully, giving them permission to exit the jeep as fast as their shaky legs can carry them. Pocketing the keys--this one is totally his now--he climbs out and shuts the door, giving the engine a friendly pat as he follows them outside.

"Joe," he says as he emerges into the rapidly cooling night and falling into step beside him. "Tomorrow afternoon, I need you and your team. Amanda--"

He starts to look around, but she materializes beside him, blonde ponytail swinging, and it's only his steel nerves and four days of exposure that stop him from jumping. He didn't even bother arguing when Amanda showed up with Joe's team the morning before they left with a duffle bag and a smile, thereby avoiding Cas actually telling him she was either his bodyguard or watchdog or--this being Cas--both at once. Which Dean plans to use as proof positive that obviously, Cas should take the job because look how well it's working.

He's not sorry about it, either. Watching her and Cas work out together wasn't exactly a good get-to-know-you time even before the fever, and she being Vera's roommate, he didn't fool himself then on where her primary loyalty was gonna lie no matter how well she hid it (she did, gotta give her that much).

She's a hunter, like he is, and like him, family's important. What Dean Winchester didn't know about that night at Cas's cabin probably didn't matter to her nearly as much as the fact it happened at all.
Four members of her family were going with him to Ichabod, no Cas in sight, and he suspects as much as anything, were among her reasons to want to come along.

"Brief Kamal before the meeting tomorrow afternoon and bring him along," he tells her. "I'm sending him with you and Mark to help you out."

"Who's taking Mark's team?" she asks.

"Cas said Damiel, so he'll put her on local for a couple of weeks to shake her out. Not like we got a lot of choice," he adds a little grimly. Amanda nods, making a face. "Penn'll probably make their fourth, so there goes the only person in this goddamn camp who can cook."

Joe groans. "Any chance the meeting includes breakfast?"

"You want Cas's interpretation of oatmeal?" Actually, Cas's oatmeal's gotten amazing since he learned the sugar rule applies to more than coffee, but he doesn't see any reason to share. "Dude, eat powdered eggs for me. Oh, and everyone got their reports? I'm not covering for you with Cas if you don't have 'em."

There's a chorus of sighs, the resignation in like manna to his soul. Joe gives him sour look. "You don't have to do them."

"It's my camp," Dean points out smugly.

"You're really that good in the sack?" Amanda asks curiously, and Joe stumbles, choking back a laugh. Ahead of them, Leah and Mike become really fascinated with the sky and Ana's looking at the ground like she's never seen anything like it. "You're lucky Zoe thinks you walk on water, or she'd be shanking you forever for Cas closing the house of carnal delights. She's still sulking."

"She still trying to Maharishi it away?" Joe asks Amanda. "She's been asking about my incense supply again, and I can't deal with another week of that."

"Nah, she can't get the one percent with Christina on regular patrol." Joe sighs in heartfelt relief while Dean looks between them, trying frantically to think of a way to find out what's going on when Amanda catches his eye and grins. "You don't remember? Cas found transcendental meditation but didn't like the meditation part, so--"

"That's what she was doing on Thursdays?" Dean asks.

"Can't prove it, but noticeably she stopped when her supply of incense ran out," Amanda says, looking at Mike. "Mike, you were there for Cas's enlightenment period, right? How'd that work again?"

"I don't remember a thing," he admits with a deep sigh. " Fucking amazing."

"I liked his crystal sexual healing phase via Kellie," Leah offers to more laughter.

Amanda groans. "Only person high enough not to mind listening to her endless goddamn sheep stories over. And. Over."


Startled, Dean looks at Leah, but Joe says, "Remember when we were still in training and Cas wanted to evaluate how we'd fight when we were stoned? Last man standing got a week's worth of weed?"
"We must be prepared for any eventuality," Leah intones solemnly, pulling off a pretty credible Cas at his most expressionless. "Including our enemies getting us high before they kill us."

"Could happen," Dean offers, and gets an approving smile from Amanda and a cuff on the shoulder from Joe. "So who won?"

"Sean did undergrad at Berkeley. In a folk band. His blood's probably still half THC. Even Cas was impressed." Squeezing Dean's shoulder as they reach the outer edge of the cabins, she says, "Okay, gotta get writing, so let's split this up--who wants to cover Dean fainting--"

"I did not," Dean protests, coming to a dead stop.

"--on our soon to be range because he was up all the night before playing poker with Joe and Alison?"

Joe looks alarmed. "Why are you throwing me under the bus?"

"I wonder if it's got anything to do with someone getting exclusive access to the results of Cas's still and didn't share?" Mike asks rhetorically, crossing his arms, and abruptly, Dean's surrounded by vultures. An entire militia of fucking vultures. "I saw the bottles, Joe."

"You're kidding." Amanda rounds on Joe. "Oh, you're going down--"

"Ana didn't share, either!" Joe says desperately, and uselessly, as it turns out; when Amanda looks at Ana, Ana tilts her head and crosses her arms before smiling slowly, tongue tracing her lower lip and gaining the entirety of Amanda's attention.

"Sorry," Ana offers into the pregnant silence, giving Amanda the slowest once-over in the history of once-overs. "How about I make it up to you?"

"You're fucking with me," Joe explodes. Blue eyes wide, Amanda nods vaguely, and as Ana tosses Joe a satisfied smirk, Dean realizes he and Joe are fucked. Throwing a glance at a worried but determined looking Leah, he decides that won't help anyone except maybe Amanda's sex life if Leah swings that way, and right at this moment he's not counting on it.

"Two bottles and twenty-four hours before Cas asks for reports," Dean offers desperately. "Deal?"

"Three by tomorrow night, and we'll swear you took a nap every afternoon and went to bed before ten," Amanda promises, and watching the near-synchronized nods, Dean accepts he's been had and shakes her hand. "Awesome. My cabin tomorrow night, everyone's invited."

"I'm gonna get you for this," Dean says pleasantly. "You'll never see it coming."

"Your leadership qualities never fail to inspire me," Amanda answers, waving at everyone as they all start toward their own cabins--or in the case of Amanda, not really subtly toward Ana's--a chorus of 'Good nights' and fading laughter drifting pleasantly on the chilly night air.

Making his way to the dimly lit cabin he calls home, Dean stops fighting the smile, already anticipating coffee and Cas's inquiry about the reports and how he'll derail him. Chess or hippo porn: it's a toss-up. He knows Cas has translated farther than he says he has.

Circling the cabin, Dean breaks into a jog, taking the steps two at a time and stops short, wondering for a moment if he's at the wrong cabin; that's a door. Startled, he reaches for the doorknob warily
and turns it, blinking as it opens, spilling warm yellow light over the porch like an actual goddamn place that non-crazy people live.

Grinning, he emerges into the dimly lit living room, mouth open to congratulate Cas on his improving human skills (though no lie, he kinda was looking forward to doing it himself) and is immediately engulfed a small cloud of dissipating smoke of unmistakable origin.

Mouth still half-open, Dean takes in the party in progress going on in front of him, and everything comes to a screeching halt.

A party of four, he notes in the part of his mind not inexplicably frozen, and everyone's still dressed and looking more high than post-orgasmic. Like that, he's back, blinking around the room and wondering what the hell just happened.

Closing the door--no response, so this has been going on a while--Dean searches the room and finds Cas almost immediately. Going to the bedroom door, he tosses his duffle bag inside the room before picking his way across the floor, a minefield of all the necessities of the stoned: three empty jugs of water, six empty bows, (beans, maybe?), a worn canister of raw oatmeal sitting in a ring of flakes and worryingly half-empty, and--here he fights back the most inappropriate smile ever--an empty pot of coffee placed for its own protection well away from the rest of Chitaqua Stoner Society.

Fighting down a smile, he comes to a stop to stare down at the current president for life and this time, nothing can stop him from grinning.

Cas is sprawled on his back in the boneless contentment of the unmistakable weed variety, head resting on a painfully multi-neon pillow of obviously psychedelic origin and bare feet resting on the couch, and currently riveted by the antics of the smoke winding from his joint like it's a revelation in progress.

Skimming down the faded beige shirt rucked up around his ribs to the sagging waist of his jeans (no guru-wear here, check), Dean cocks his head and does a visual check of the surrounding three feet, trying to guess where Cas hid his gun and pauses at the dark space beneath the couch where a glint of metal is just barely visible. Knife might be under the pillow, he speculates, dropping into a crouch by Cas's hip and plucking the joint from his hand, waiting patiently for Cas to frown and the small ice age required for him to finally track the smoke trail to Dean.

"Honey," Dean says when Cas finally gets to his face. "I'm home."

Cas's unblinking stare would be so much creepier if his pupils weren't blown to hell. "I Love Lucy," Cas tells him seriously. "Desi Arnaz in his role as Ricky Ricardo is attributed credit for that line in popular culture, utilized when he would return to the dwelling he shared with Lucille Ball who--"

"Infinite knowledge of the universe or basic cable?" he asks, pulling the joint out of reach when Cas looks like he might eventually want to try and get it back. "I missed half of season two of Dr. Sexy and never did find out what happened with that nurse."

"Basic cable," Cas admits eventually, eyes drifting toward the joint and narrowing hilariously in an effort to rediscover telekinesis. Failing, he sighs, reluctantly turning his attention back to Dean and smiles. "I was about to greet you. You're early."

"Yeah, it's a riot in here." He gives the quiet room a once over, inhabitants currently in various stages of not-moving, before returning his gaze to Cas, who just looks confused. Giving up, Dean drops onto the floor, giving Cas back his joint and checking on Cas's partners in crime. James, slumped against the couch a couple of feet away, black hair wilting a little from its usual cheerful afro around
his dark brown face, stares back in a way that suggests he's trying for 'terrified worry' but is way too stoned to remember exactly why. "How's it going?"

"Good," James offers after an extended pause, and with a nearly Herculean effort, almost manages to straighten. "You? Sir?"

Dean grins back and carefully doesn't think about how James is about ten years his junior. "Awesome. Nate?"

Currently draped across the couch, dark brown hair plastered to his forehead and usually pale cheeks flushed bright red, Nate moves a couple of fingers in what Dean assumes is probably a wave. Mira, whose curly brown hair, only a little darker than her skin, is fighting to swallow her face, is tucked into the far corner and waves absently while she continues what he's pretty sure is a conversation with Nate's boots in her lap.

Taking a deep breath, he turns back to Cas, trying to project disapproval at this kind of business in a serious fucking militia and just manages not to burst into laughter.

"So, special occasion?" He waits patiently for Cas to take another drag--priorities, right--before Cas tips his head back on the pillow to consider the question like Dean asked him something unbelievably complicated, or--he's watching smoke trails, right. "Cas?"

"Oh," Cas looks at his joint longingly, torn between conflicting loyalties. "We're celebrating James's fourth day of successfully leading the local patrol team without causing the death of his team members, the destruction of Chitaqua, or the world to end with only a single accident. I checked."

Right. Dean looks at James as encouraging as he can. "Keep doing that," because God knows, practical advice never hurt anyone. "Good job."

James nods enthusiastically--oh yeah, he's got this leader shit down--before beginning to squint, tilting his head far enough that they're about three seconds from James becoming one with the floor.

"Yes, sir," he says, and rights himself just before the point of no return, much to Dean's secret regret.

Surveying the room again, Dean figures this could take a while and decides to leave them to it; Cas can clean up in the morning. Climbing to his feet, he says, "So I'm gonna--"

Cas's hand snaps out so fast Dean almost loses his balance; he didn't even see Cas switch his joint from right to left to slide a hand around the back of his calf, and even through a layer of denim, somehow, he can feel the slow stroke of Cas's thumb just above the edge of his boot.

"Where," Cas says curiously, "are you going?"

Dean looks down at the deceptively casual hold and wonders if he's actually willing to ruin a pair of perfectly good boots just to prove a point, especially since he's not sure what point he'd be proving.

"Stoned people are only awesome when you're one of them," he says, almost stumbling when Cas tries an experimental pull. "Gonna get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

"I made you French toast, Chitaqua-style. We decided to shorten it to Chitaqua toast, however," Cas says earnestly, tugging Dean a step closer. "It's in the refrigerator."

"You and the Stoners cooked?" A glance confirms the kitchen's intact, so.

"Alicia." Cas watches his own hand on Dean's leg intently. "She said you liked it. A lot."
He takes a moment: Alicia talking about Dean (him?) to Castiel, or at least, about his (their?) preference for French toast. That is a lot of levels of weird in a single sentence just on concept.

"Alicia taught you how to make French toast?"

"Chitaqua toast."

"Chitaqua toast. When?"

"Breakfast," Cas tells him, tipping his head back to look at Dean. "Did you know you can get used to someone breathing and miss it?"

Bed can wait. "Cas," he says slowly, because he's curious, "why was Alicia here for breakfast?"

"Andy has feelings that wouldn't have sex on Brenda's bed, which is a secret." Cas turns his head to survey the room suspiciously. "A secret."

Dean takes a moment to verify the room remains comatose before turning his attention back to Cas. "They'll keep their mouths shut," he says soothingly. "So what else did you two talk about?"

"Many things," Cas says vaguely, then seems to remember he's wasting weed and takes another drag. "It was very quiet. I forgot what that was like."

"Because someone--wasn't breathing?" That's kind of all he's got here.

"I don't like it anymore," Cas adds, plucking at Dean's jeans curiously. "It's much better now."

Well, there are five people breathing here, so yeah. "Good?"

"I'll be able to sleep." Fingers curving around his leg again, and Dean almost loses his train of thought as Cas grins up at him. "We'll have coffee first, however. And Chitaqua toast."

There's an art to following stoned logic--Cas logic is more like knowing magic--but some things stick with you. Dean spent three very salutary days navigating the meanderings of a very high Cas between joints and shots and he's not gonna feel bad about that. "You missed me breathing?"

"Very much."

"Very much." Dean's still absorbing that--he can honestly say no one's ever felt that way about his breathing before, it's--something--when Cas's hand slowly slides up to rest behind his knee. Looking down, he stills as Cas's gaze starts a leisurely journey up the entire length of his body before the blue eyes meet his, mouth curving in a slow smile. "Stay. I'll make more coffee."

Before he remembers how words work--or what they are--he gets an impression of motion from the corner of his eye, but it's already too late; Cas's foot catches him behind the knee, hands closing on his hips, and Dean lands on his knees, mostly upright, and wondering dazedly about the use and abuse of stoned combat.

Tipping his head back, Cas looks up at him from inches away. "Stay with me."

"Yeah," he breathes. "Okay."

"Excellent." Looking pleased with himself, Cas gives his hip a friendly squeeze and lies back down, reaching for his joint with his free hand and leaving Dean to verify that yeah, he's almost sitting in Cas's lap and what the hell just happened?

"What," he asks, startled by the husky quality of his own voice and hurriedly clearing his throat. "What are you doing?"
Cas smiles at him from behind a lazy trail of smoke, derailing Dean's initial panicked assessment of the best way to get out of this (moving, maybe?), and takes another drag before offering him the joint. "I told you. I missed you."

He shakes his head, wondering if this could be explained by an unusually strong contact high. "No, I'm good."

Pouting, Cas lazily turns toward James, who pitches forward in an eager combination of lunge and crawl before landing stomach down and taking the joint from Cas with a grateful smile; from the way he's clutching that thing, he's not giving it back. As the (extremely stoned) brown eyes fix on him, he tries an encouraging smile.

"So James," he starts as James rolls onto his back as lithe as a cat and pauses, eyes narrowing at Cas's sudden, focused attention, blue eyes warming in unmistakable appreciation.

Yeah, no; he's been making an effort not to look like he's about to dry fuck his presumed boyfriend in the middle of the living room while he's high, the plausible deniability measureable in about one inch, but fuck that shit, his knees hurt. Dropping his full weight on Cas's hips, he ignores the sudden catch of breath from Cas and reaches over to tap James's cheek, waiting until he's sure he's got his attention.

"So three days on patrol, huh? Anything interesting happen?"

"Didn't kill my team," James answers earnestly, nodding so hard that Dean catches himself nodding right along with him. "And haven't hit a tree in two days."

"It wasn't as if it were an attractive or fruit-bearing tree," Cas tells him reassuringly, squeezing Dean's hip again as if for emphasis. "Carya ovata, the shagbark hickory in English. It's extremely common hardwood native to the entire northern United States. I've never liked them," he adds darkly. "It's an unpleasant tree with far, far too many leaves. And very muddy."

Dean maps the local route in his head and finds the scene of the crime. "That goddamn pothole. No one remembers a small meteor hitting around here anytime recently, but if there's another explanation for that thing, he'd love to hear it. "Everyone okay?"

"Fine," Nate offers unexpectedly, sounding muffled, and Dean glances up to see him rolling his head in their general direction and now missing a boot, currently in Mira's triumphant possession. To his surprise, she actually looks up from stroking it to say with heartfelt sincerity, "I always hated trees anyway. They suck."

James sighs loudly enough to shake the house, and this time, Dean is watching when Cas neatly removes the joint from James's limp fingers just before he drops it in an almost-blur, depositing it in the nearby ashtray despite the full half-inch left, and then giving Dean the most stoned significant look in history, mouthing 'leafy' at him, before looking at James again.

Okay, yeah, no idea here.

"Fucking trees, they're--" James blinks slowly for a long moment, obviously searching for the just right word, and Dean genuinely can't wait to hear it. "Green, sir."

"They're like that," he agrees, and James tips his head back to look at him hopefully. "How's the SUV?"

"I made sure Sheila checked it thoroughly, and she assured me the damage was extremely minor. Insignificant. Miniscule. Irrelevant," Cas recites with growing enthusiasm before frowning, eyes
traveling toward the empty bowls and settling on them in despair. "We need more beans. I wouldn't let them have your Chitaqua toast."

Mira makes the saddest sound he's ever heard. "He said you might want toast with your coffee. I want Chitaqua toast and coffee."

"You can have beans," Cas tells her firmly.

"Can I have sugar on them?" she asks hopefully.

To Dean's horror, Cas nods enthusiastically before looking at James and saying, "She would like beans, James. And sugar. For you are very competent and are very good at finding things, and you should remember that. Fifty, even."

James beams at Cas upside down before lifting his head to look around--God help them, he's looking for the beans and sugar--but from the way his eyes won't focus, Dean suspects this is gonna take a while. Glancing at Mira--cuddling Nate's boot, check--and Nate--breathing, check--he turns his full attention back to Cas, planting a hand on the floor just above his shoulder and leans over to stare into his eyes. "What. Is. Going. On?"

"Sugar makes everything better," quoth Cas in bewilderment.

"Not. That." Though when Cas is down, there's a very important food conversation in their future. "Why--"

"It was an accident," Cas tells him urgently. "I verified it personally."

"The SUV?" Stoned logic, he reminds himself, but Cas's genuine worry inspires him to try. Leafy, muddy, too many leaves, tree...oh. "He couldn't see the pothole because the tree grows over the road there and it was raining," he tries: too many leaves, on really fucking long branches, got it. Cas nods encouragingly. "Road was muddy, so he slid into it, and lost control?" Cas smiles up at him like Dean's a goddamn genius. "And hit the tree."

"An accident," Cas agrees. "James is very competent."

"And this couldn't wait until morning?"

Cas makes a face, reaching up and tapping Dean's nose. "You're early."

"What--"

The sound of someone ostentatiously clearing their throat cuts across the room like a knife through stoned as fuck butter. Turning his head in reluctant acknowledgement of the inevitable, Dean sees Joe leaning against the now-open door, arms crossed, face solemn, and giving the impression the only reason he's not laughing his ass off is that Dean's still armed.

"I hope I wasn't interrupting anything," he offers after a pregnant pause, and Dean's gonna fucking kill him like, now. "We were hanging out at Leah's, and she asked me to collect Mira before I went to bed. Liz said she was over here."

"Your interruption is forgiven," Cas tells him magnanimously, inclining his head toward Mira. As Joe pushes off the door, he adds graciously, "She may keep Nate's boot, of course."

"Good to know. You want me to--" he gestures toward James and Nate. "Get them out of your hair?"
"Please." Cas looks up at Dean, thumbs sliding over his hips distractingly. "We're rather busy at the moment."

Dean smiles at Joe and hates everything, everything. "Thanks. I owe you."

"Anytime," Joe answers brightly, offering James a hand up before nudging Nate to his feet and only contemplating Mira's complete lack of working limbs before crouching to scoop her into his arms. She drapes an arm over Joe's shoulder, and Dean watches with vicious satisfaction as the steel-reinforced heel of Nate's boot slams into Joe's back as she waves frantically. "Night! Use protection!" and everyone--including Cas--laughs like that's the best fucking thing ever.

Dean keeps smiling though--he may not be able to stop--as they make their way out the door and Nate and James take a long moment to stare at it before Joe gently reaches to close it behind them.

As soon as he's sure they're gone, he turns on Cas. "What. The. Fuck--"

"Tolerance to cannabis vanishes with surprising speed without regular use," Cas says in a rush, fingers flexing distractingly on Dean's hips to punctuate every word. "Including mine, apparently, but by the time I noticed, it was far too late and I forgot to care. It doesn't work anymore. I should have remembered that." Frown deepening, he adds, "I assure you, I had no intention of violating your fragile heterosexual sensibilities--"

"My what?"

"--by engaging in perfectly chaste physical contact, but it will be at least an hour before the effects dissipate enough to think clearly, so I--"

"Tripped me and then felt me up for a greater good?" he asks incredulously. "Why?"

Cas rolls his eyes. "That was merely a very pleasant bonus. I have to assume you managed to achieve one hundred miles per hour on the--"

"Cas!"

"You left me here in charge of a new team that required encouragement and positive interaction to validate them!" he snaps, and Dean blinks at the novel experience of seeing Cas genuinely unnerved. "This may be a surprise to you, but I know only three ways to accomplish that, and this was the one that didn't risk alcohol poisoning or sex with three people I'm not particularly attracted to at this time." His eyes narrow accusingly. "If you'd stayed below ninety, you would have arrived after one, they'd be unconscious, and I'd be out of weed and therefore recovered enough to explain."

Dean stares down at him and tries to hold on to anger, but-- "You got them stoned to--" God, he thinks in horror; this actually makes sense, "--be supportive?"

Cas nods, eyes closing in honest to God relief, and just like that, Dean loses any motivation to stay pissed. "None of them have any experience in patrol except James, and they felt inadequate in their new duties. Despite my best efforts while sober, they didn't seem encouraged by my assurance they would improve with time."

Dean would give a timeshare on his soul to the next available demon to hear that conversation. "So you took the dimebag solution." Cas nods hopefully. "Makes sense." "I thought so as well," Cas says warmly, and Dean adds another point to his leadership skills when it comes to validating his people's efforts. Even if they're kind of terrible, he can honestly agree that the sober version was probably a lot worse. "Nate has a very worrying propensity to drink alone in the dark or engage in regrettable sexual experiences with melodramatic results come morning." Dean
can't tell if Cas knows that by experience or rumor and just stops himself from commenting, wondering distractedly what the hell is wrong with him. "James is prone to bouts of melancholia," he continues, and Dean gratefully focuses on Cas enumerating all the reasons he'd employed the better living through chemistry methodology of interpersonal communication. "And Mira is--"

Dean sits back in surprise, vaguely aware Cas cut himself off mid-word. Mira. "Mira's not on James' team."

"She is now." Something in Cas's voice gets his attention before he adds, "Zack left with Sean, stating he was extremely tired, but as they were headed in the direction of the garage--"

"Why would they go to the garage?" Dean asks in bewilderment, and contact high's really the only excuse he's got when Cas's mouth twitches. "In the garage? I was just…." He really, really needs to stop talking.

"The height of the workbench could be considered ideal," Cas offers thoughtfully after an endless eon of hideously awkward silence. "Zack's not usually that quiet. Or Sean, for that matter."

It dawns on him that everyone—literally—in this camp is having sex but him. And Cas, he remembers, and suddenly feels a lot better. So before the garage sex segue, they were talking about--

"So what happened with Cyn?"

"In my capacity as your proxy in Chitaqua, I replaced her with Mira. While Mira doesn't have Cynthia's experience, she's competent, intelligent, and extremely motivated--"

"That's fine," Dean interrupts, wondering if maybe this should wait until morning. "So you putting Cyn back on Kyle's team?"

"Robert says it's called Meatloaf Nightmare, and it's not even meat," Cas says, eyes unfocusing. "I sampled it, and truly, it's an abomination, even more than I am."

"You're not…." Stoned people, Dean reminds himself firmly. "So that was dinner tonight?"

Cas blinks, frowning at him. "I don't like food. That was Robert's dinner, and it was…"

"Shitty," Dean agrees. "So why'd you go to the mess?"

"To talk to Robert," Cas answers reasonably. "He starts tomorrow."

There's no sense of accomplishment quite like deciphering Cas successfully. "On Kyle's team?" Cas nods slowly. "Think he'll do a good job?"

"Kyle and Jane are no longer involved," Cas answers, gaze flickering to the air just above Dean's head before narrowing curiously.

And back to square one. Or not: Jane lives with Cyn. "And Cyn?"

"Very unhappy," Cas confirms, following the whatever to the rug, where he stares at it--Dean confirms, nothing there--and shakes his head. "At length."

"I bet. What'd she say?"

"She is more experienced, I think," Cas answers, frowning up at him. "It was causing problems in any case."
He didn't think Cyn was stupid, but he may have to revise that. "She said that to you?"

"Of course not." Cas's expression darkens, something unfamiliar flickering his eyes. "No one told me anything. Though to be perfectly fair, they might not have known. There was no way to tell."

He doesn't--repeat doesn't--feel bad about those three days rolling Cas's joints and lining up his shots, though in retrospect he probably could have handled that better. He remembers being frustrated--questioning Cas was an adventure, and picking out the answer took time he didn't think he had--but he also knew Cas genuinely wanted to help and tried his best.

Dean was early, Cas didn't mean to be high when he got here, he wanted to talk to him, and it was something that couldn't wait until morning.

"So who was Cyn talking to? James?" he asks casually.

"And his team. And Kyle, far too much," Cas adds, attention wandering back to the rug. "Sheila is certain the accident wasn't her fault, but I replaced her anyway."

Chuck said: We had a lot of accidents on patrol.

Dean switches gears so abruptly black spots dance before his eyes.

"Sheila knew what to look for?" He has no idea how the fuck his voice sounds that calm. "You're sure?"

"Yes," Cas says distractedly, running the tips of his fingers over the rug. "It was indeed an accident this time and all is well."

"Good job," Dean says mechanically. "I'm glad you checked."

"It was a long time ago." Cas licks his lips, and Dean goes cold. "I didn't have much time, and it was very dark. How could I be sure if I didn't check?"

"No way you could." Dean resists to the urge to shake him, or calmly get up, go out the door, drag Cyn out of her cabin, and put a gun to her head before he asks her one question and hope to God he can believe her answer. "No one told you."

"It's supposed to make it easier," Cas breathes, looking up at him appealingly, and Dean's slammed back in time: three months, same room, and Cas looking at him just like this. "It doesn't work anymore."

Dean reaches for his limp hand on the rug, startled by how cold his fingers are. Warming them helplessly between his palms, he takes a deep breath.

"Nothing works forever. Not when it's something like this." Cas nods tiredly, closing his eyes. "You ready to talk about it?"

Cas laughs softly. "You're too early. I needed to relax. I made Chitaqua toast and coffee."

So they could talk about it, yeah: stupid question. "You don't have to."

"No. It was a long time ago, and it was very dark," Cas answers, opening his eyes. "What if I was wrong?"

Chuck said: There are two stories of what happened, the official and the unofficial. Then there's the
Here's a truth Chuck didn't know: Cas knew that morning.

"It's only seems short when only observing it. A drop in time, but it's so long," Cas says tonelessly, looking up at Dean. "It's forever in here. Rome was built and destroyed an hour after dawn and there were still more to come."

Dean can barely feel his own fingers anymore; Cas's are like ice. All day. He knew all day. "How'd you find out?"

"All around the fence," Cas answers, eyes focusing on Dean's hands. "It was only the beginning of the third week, it was reflex training. It wasn't terribly interesting. Vera was very clumsy, Joseph fell over Kamal's feet. Amanda nearly broke her wrist; I caught her before she hurt herself. It was only a sprain, easy to fix."

Another truth: all of them knew it.

This camp, there weren't any secrets, and he doesn't think the assassination squad was going for subtle that day; they didn't need to be, not anymore. They were watching Cas, watching Vera--no, think like Cas's class did and still does, it was all of them. Vera had to be terrified, but she walked out there anyway--how did she do that, how could even stay on her feet--and Joe was clumsy but Kamal wasn't, he was former Nepalese military; they were covering for her, helping her stay sane. Amanda was showing signs of going after one of them--after four days of Amanda's company, he's thinking probably all of them--and Cas had to stop her from getting herself killed. Only two full weeks of training under her belt, she might have already been a hunter, but she wasn't ready for them, not then.

"She brought me lunch anyway," he says, gaze drifting away. "It was revolting. She laughed at me the entire time." His eyes narrow. "It was like a chain saw and I didn't even have a hangover."

Dean has to give her credit; it's not like it's easy to laugh on cue when your instructor's throwing up lunch and pretending everything's fine while all of you are living the longest day of your life.

"And after training?" Dean makes himself ask; he's not sure how long it's been silent. Cas was right; it's forever in here.

"She was very sad, no visitors today," Cas says idly, eyes glazed. "We preferred to isolate ourselves in misery. I wasn't very good at conversation, but she didn't mind; she was good enough for both of us. I was used to it by then."

Alone in this goddamn cabin on the south edge of the camp counting down the hours until dusk and beyond, no lights at all: the only cabin close enough was the one Dean didn't live in and he was on a mission anyway. Alone, because they were the targets, limit the casualties; that class only had two weeks of training under their belt and they weren't ready, not then.

Cas needed to be able to hear everything; it was the only warning they'd have. Vera didn't mind talking, as much as he needed her to; he knew her voice, he could tune it out while he listened. It couldn't be too quiet, she had to keep talking; they couldn't know they were waiting.

All day, they watched that class, watched Cas, didn't hide it, didn't care who knew.

"Jesus, they were stupid," Dean breathes to himself, and it's not until Cas stills that he realizes he said that out loud.

Cas smiles. "They thought it would be easy, I suppose: two windows and a door, all in line of sight. I
taught them better than that."

Dean looks at the windows, the door, then at the chair where Cas was sitting that night, watching them taking their sweet time to get into position. "You're kidding."

"The night was pleasantly cool, so she thought we should open the windows," Cas continues, smile softening into something more genuine. "She told me to stop laughing when she borrowed my jacket."

And fuck you, Vera said with a fucking pane of glass. Come and get me already.

"I couldn't stop," Cas admits. "But it was far too loud for her to hear me by then."

Dean stiffens; that's when the shooting started. "And after? When they checked…they didn't, did they?"

"Why would they?" Cas answers reasonably, and for a moment, the blue eyes go on forever. "I told you; I couldn't stop laughing."

Dean hunts down two blankets, wrapping Cas up in them before going to make coffee. While he waits, he finds a wrapped plate of Chitaqua toast in the refrigerator--an entire loaf of bread of Chitaqua toast, Cas just might be turning into a stress cook, good to know--and does a fast and dirty clean-up of the living room, dumping the dishes in the sink to deal with tomorrow.

Carrying two cups of coffee and a plate of four pieces of Chitaqua toast (and sugar), Dean sits down on the couch and hands Cas one cup before putting the rest on the coffee table. He thinks Cas looks a little more cognizant of his surroundings, but on a guess, a buffer here can't do anything but help. He can deal with doing some translation.

"Cyn and Kyle--they were on the same team before," he says casually, watching Cas sip from his cup carefully and smile approval of the cream and sugar content.

"Risa's team," Cas answers, then sighs. "I liked her very much. Or I would have if I liked anybody. She wasn't afraid."

Well, yeah; she wasn't a potential murderer who listened to Cas laughing after a barrage of gunfire that should have killed him. He hopes they heard it in their dreams every goddamn night.

"And Risa replaced Luke."

Cas hesitates, but the sudden tension says everything: Luke's name or Cyn's, same goddamn reaction. Chuck said the teams weren't involved, just their leaders, but that doesn't mean anything, not when Cas knows how to lie.

"Was Cyn there that night?"

"No," Cas answers after a long, nerve-shattering moment. "I didn't see her that night."

He thinks of the list Chuck made for him, all speculation and guesswork, because the only person that knows never told. Not the teams, Chuck said; they weren't there. But it was dark that night, so Cas wanted to be sure that this accident was indeed an accident. Just in case he made a mistake.

"Did she know what they were going to do?" Dean asks, tightening his grip on Cas's hand, as much for warmth as anything else. "Did she?"
"I don't know--"

"Guess."

Cas licks his lips, and Dean can see him working to focus. "She lived with Stanley from when they were in training together."

Jesus Christ. "You should've told me."

"That's not proof--"

"Not just that," he interrupts. "About what actually happened that night."

Cas stares up at him, and there's nothing stoned now about the steady blue gaze. "It's been two years and people change."

"You wanna go with that?" Dean asks softly, and Cas looks away.

"Fine, I'm not moving on yet, so think back to the time when you were executing people in the middle of the camp as an example of why you shouldn't join the Dean's holy assassination squad, let's start there."

"I'm sure Chuck was thorough when relating the details," Cas answers. "I'll have to speak to him if he forgot to mention that Dean didn't know about it."

"Because you didn't tell him," he answers. "Consequences of your own fucked-up actions, why should fucking Dean Winchester have to deal with those, right? His fucking recruits, but can't be his fault--"

"It wasn't his fault," Cas interrupts, looking at him. "It was mine."

Dean stares down at him. "What?"

"I trained them," he says. "It had to be me. I thought--I couldn't be sure. Not then."

"The first class," Dean breathes, feeling it finally come together: the accidents. Cas did notice; he just wasn't sure. It wasn't angel crap, and he thought he didn't understand humans. "You knew something was wrong even before they went after Vera."

Cas nods shortly, taking another drink. "Nothing I could prove, even to myself. Not that I made any effort to do so; once they were Dean's, my work was done. Our mission was to destroy Lucifer; to accomplish that, Dean must be protected at all costs, and I couldn't do it, not anymore. So I taught them to do it for me."

"You told them to assassinate people," Dean says flatly. "Tell me you actually had a lesson called 'How to Assassinate People For Dean Winchester', because I gotta hear about this."

Cas's blank expression cracks around the edges. "I don’t know."

"Because it's bullshit," Dean says. "When did you find out about what they were doing?"

"The way they watched the new arrivals," he answers finally, blue eyes distant. "To be perfectly accurate, all my time wasn't yet occupied with drug use and sexual congress; Dean's mission schedule kept us both out of the camp a great deal. The team leaders seemed to have become comfortable with their jobs in the camp during our absences, and there was nothing obviously wrong. They hated me, but that was much like the sun rising; I would have been uneasy otherwise."

"Then the new people showed up."
"Paranoia could be considered a survival trait here," Cas answers softly, mouth twisting, a parody of a smile. "It's so common it barely bears mention, so it was noticeable in its absence. They weren't looking for threats among the new arrivals; the new arrivals were assumed to be threats. They were simply waiting for them to prove it."

Dean licks his lips. "Chuck said there was no way to know how many--"

"Attrition is impossible to ascertain if you don't know what to look for, especially with our mission schedules and the activity on patrol," Cas says in the same soft voice. "Written reports were non-existent: a death on patrol was reported to Dean along with the circumstances, in case it was significant to future missions. I can only remember what I'm there to witness. Notes are not adequate in substitution."

"That's why you made them write reports." The more you know. Looking for what's absent is harder than what's there, but Cas had practice doing just that. All that detail that Cas didn't want to discourage; this is the reason.

"Dean's journal--I looked when he was otherwise occupied--gave me enough information to see a pattern," Cas says slowly, obviously trying to be as clear as possible. "I hadn't yet gotten any farther than that when Debra died, and I realized that Vera wouldn't survive the week."

"Because she threatened to kill Dean," he says, seeing Cas frown as he loses the thread. Cas looks up, licking his lips and nodding. "So you got her to stay with you." Dean studies Cas's face for a minute. "You told her why. That's why she didn't tell you to fuck yourself."

"I told her," he agrees, eyes unfocusing again. "She--there was a price for it. She wanted to fight, they all did, so I'd finish what I began and teach them what they needed to know. My explanation on why that was a terrible idea wasn't convincing and I was even sober."

"Because it's bullshit, Cas; you aren't responsible for your first students here being crazy." Bracing a hand on the back of the couch beside Cas's head, Dean leans forward. "Look at me, Cas, and actually listen this time. You aren't responsible for what they did."

"I made them my weapons in Dean's defense," he argues; of course he'd be able to focus now so he can argue. "What they did is exactly what I taught them to do."

"Out of that entire first class, what, thirteen--"

"Twenty-one," Cas says, very focused, and guess what, Chuck, something else you didn't know; there were twenty-one. That he saw. Because it was dark.

Dean takes a deep breath. "It wasn't just the team leaders."

"The last three died in Kansas City with Dean."

"The last three you saw," Dean says flatly. "It was dark, Cas. You aren't sure, are you?"

"Sure enough," Cas says very quietly. "Or they would be dead."

Dean looks at Cas's calm expression and thinks of Chuck; everyone knew, he said. They guessed. Because he told them what they needed to know to get it right. Because Cas's count was only to twenty-one. Jesus Christ.

"Cas, you taught them, but newsflash--that's all you did. You aren't responsible for what they did with it."
Cas's expression is totally unreadable, and Dean realizes he's practically in Cas's face and belatedly sits back, taking a deep breath, wondering uncomfortably if maybe he should have saved this for a time when Cas was way less stoned.

"If I were human, maybe I would have--"

"Seen this coming? Dean didn't." He just barely manages not to grin at Cas's surprise, like this isn't obvious. "Cas, humans are shitty at being human. Not like anyone would notice you being as bad at it as we are. Kind of reassuring," he adds honestly. "We have to get through learning to shit in a toilet, puberty, and fucking high school, and a guy who Fell two years ago waltzes in and pulls it off on his first try? That's bullshit."

Considering the current population of Chitaqua--Joe's disturbingly close relationship with his still; Dungeons and Dragons Wednesdays that involves shitty homemade capes and God help them all, Dean swears Kim wore the saddest wizard hat ever; Amanda's totally not-secret collection of *Anne of Green Gables* paperbacks and the reading club that meets once a week to discuss it, whatever the hell that means; and Ana's thing for explosives, which he's made an effort to avoid ever thinking about after that one visit to her cabin--Cas still reigns as most fucked up off them all, but the competition for second is pretty close.

Shaking himself, Dean looks back at Cas and realizes Cas is studying him with an expression he gets from him a lot, even if he has no fucking clue what it means. "What?"

"You said when you came back, we would talk, and you would respect whatever decision I came to regarding your request. Though you reserved the right to argue."

Dean rewinds; he's pretty sure they're actually in the middle of a conversation that's kind of important. "Uh--"

"Your argument moved me and I agree with all of it, even the parts that implied I'm terrible at most of what I do. Apparently that's acceptable for some reason that wasn't entirely clear but I assume was supposed to be encouraging."

"Uh." Really got to work on words here. "Cas, I didn't say--"

"I could repeat your entire soliloquy if you require verification." Dean's never hated Cas's fucking memory more. "I can't become more competent as an angel, and I would rather strap myself to the rack in Hell and disembowel myself for eternity than be a more acceptable member of the Host--"

"Dude, join the club; imagine being Zachariah." Cas's eyes narrow. "Sorry."

"I know how to kill almost anything in existence," he says, looking up at Dean. "I have a perfect memory and carry the entire history of all Creation within in. Chuck taught me how to create Excel spreadsheets this week and the principles of database creation, as well as how to type accurately. My speed is three hundred and fifty-eight words a minute on the standard QWERTY keyboard."

Dean blinks, wondering what the hell. "That's--good?"

"I can burn out a keyboard in extended use if I go over that speed," Cas explains, which Dean assumes means that's pretty fast. "We need to get something better. I know the names, histories, and personalities of everyone here, up to and including their social security numbers and credit scores at the time of their recruitment."

"Jesus, that's creepy."
"I'm also accurate with any weapon in our arsenal up to five thousand feet with either hand."

Dean opens and shuts his mouth: holy shit. "Curve of the earth--"

"I can calculate that in the time it takes to pull the trigger."

Dean doesn't know what he's feeling right now. "Huh."

"I like coffee and reading," Cas recites. "I enjoy the challenge of making accurate maps, driving, translating terrible epic poetry, and my five year goal is to defeat Lucifer and learn to fly a single engine aircraft."

"Wait." Dean sits back. "Are we doing a job interview?"

"You didn't seem to know that's a prerequisite to being offered a job," Cas agrees, leaning his head against the back of the couch, like Dean's just being weird, which what? "So I did it for you. Are those sufficient credentials for being your second in command?"

Why the hell didn't he assume this wouldn't be weird as fuck? It's Cas. "Yeah, they're good. Especially the shooting thing--I really want to see that."

"I'll arrange a demonstration at your leisure."

"Good." That was way too easy--weird, but easy. "So--"

"You haven't told me, however, why I should accept your offer."

Again, it's Cas. "What?"

"Benefits, compensation, hours, vacation, sick days," Cas starts counting it off on his fingers, "stock options, yearly bonuses, the key to the executive bathroom--"

"Who'd you interview with and why?" Dean demands.

"JP Morgan Chase, a skinwalker was killing their employees in possible belated reaction to the economic meltdown in 2008," Cas answers, serious expression cracking. "You might not know this, but not having any practical understanding of economics seems to be an advantage to being a stockbroker. My bonus paid for many, many illegal arms shipments across the border."

Of course it did. "You got the 'walker?"

"After I was finished building multiple dummy accounts for Dean's aliases and funding them, yes. You can also be a successful banker without any practical knowledge of money as well. Humanity is very strange."

"Preach it," Dean answers. "So you want the benefits package? Saving the world, how's that?"

"And a regular supply of coffee," Cas says finally, looking at Dean so expectantly that he realizes he's supposed to nod. "Excellent. I accept your offer."

Dean debates asking for a full second. "Okay, gotta know; what decided you?"

"You need someone to do this." Cas hesitates. "I can learn to be who you need me to be."

"I'm okay with who you are now. At that, you're the best there is."
Cas nods slowly, and Dean thinks maybe it's time for something a little less traumatic, for both of them.

"How about a round of chess while you finish coming down?" Cas looks briefly torn, and Dean congratulates himself on avoiding having to explain why he didn't bring everyone's reports. "Then I'll tell you all about what happened in Ichabod, how's that?"

"Did you enjoy yourself?" Cas asks, and it's not tentative, exactly, but something like that. It takes a second, but then he remembers when Cas took him to Kansas City.

"Yeah." He thinks about trying to explain, then decides that maybe this is the kind of thing you have to see to understand. He's working on how to make that happen. "I did."

End Notes

So as of now, It's the Stars That Lie is my longest completed fic, beating Jus Ad Bellum which held the record since roughly 2002. Down to Agincourt is my longest series by word count.

The third book in the series will be out in four to six weeks, and you can blame bronchitis; I lost about a week of work and will lose part of this week for antibiotics, which means my workload will be ridic when I go back. I have no idea right now what it is going to look like, but a minimum of four weeks to catch up is what I'm definitely looking at.

Thank you for reading and I'll see you in six weeks, where we will explore new places, meet new people, and perhaps--just perhaps--discover at least part of what happened to Dean during that fever and why. This is Maybe, what might be and could be and no one born can see it, not yet. The price of free will and freedom from prophecy is that anything can happen, and it's already started, but this is Maybe; how it ends is and will always be a choice. Are you in?

Works inspired by this one

Harry Takes the Field by bratfarrar, De Profundis by MollyC, Book covers for Down to Agincourt by bratfarrar, Strawberries and Honeysuckle by ab-insula-Avalonia (AurumCalendula), Patrol Report: Phil, 5 of 7 by Speary, The Great Snuggie War by AgentFreeWill, Castiel of Chitaqua by ab-insula-Avalonia (AurumCalendula), 'Where are you going?' by ab-insula-Avalonia (AurumCalendula), Food, Not So Glorious Food by least common variant, The Orchard by aerialiste, Endverse!Cas by LapfulofMisha, In the Low Lamp Light by passingsunlight

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