'Cause I'm Having A Good Time

by Mnemmy

Summary

When Jake Jensen was first loaned to the Losers, Cougar took one look at him and the way he bounced around and figured the brass had sent them another green tech to slap the enthusiasm out of.

Cougar has never been happier to be proven wrong.

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If you have any questions or concerns about the tags, please message me on tumblr and I will answer to the best of my ability.

Notes
This story was betaed by my dear friend katty who is kind enough to put up with me flailing about these characters regularly.

A few quick notes:
- This story begins years before the movie takes place, so the boys' military ranks have been played with a bit.
- Each chapter represents a jump in time.
- Dialogue when characters are using ASL is going to be both italicized and bracketed by apostrophes in order to distinguish it from character thoughts or dialogue that could be overheard.
- Dialogue in a language other than ASL or English will have hover text translating it. (Except for "Si" because that's pretty basic.)
- I'll have warnings and triggers in the ends notes at each chapter.

Title taken from Don't Stop Me Now by Queen

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter 1

When Specialist Jake Jensen was first loaned to the Losers, Cougar took one look at him and the way he bounced around and figured the brass had sent them another green tech to slap the enthusiasm out of. The man was six feet of vibrant smiles and good humor and too much energy. He asked a million and one questions without waiting for answers, or went on to figure the answer out himself as soon as the question passed his lips, and most perplexing of all he seemed genuinely happy to meet them. He chattered non-stop, only shutting up when someone else was speaking to him. If he wasn't talking to someone, he was talking to one of the three laptops he'd brought along on the mission. Why he would need three of the things Cougar didn't know, the techs they usually got only used one and didn't talk to them.

The entire time they spent traveling from base to their drop off point Jensen had kept up varying levels of noise. Louder if he was talking to someone, quieter if he was concentrating on doing... whatever it was techs were supposed to do that was so important that the brass kept shoving nerds at them. Cougar knew he wasn't being entirely fair to the tech but he'd been listening to a rundown of edible plants and insects of the jungle they were in, complete with scientific names and approximate nutritional value, for nearly two hours by that point. Before that Jensen had spent the entire flight muttering, arguing, and even cackling to himself.

Their transportation officer, Sergeant Wilkes, was at the front of the line cutting through thick undergrowth while the others carried his gear and passed the cuttings back to get them out of the way. Cougar brought up the rear and kept an eye out for trouble. The sun was angling towards a horizon they couldn't see through the dense foliage and Cougar knew he'd have to watch out for more than just drug runners as it got dark. Everyone was tired and sweating, they itched in places no one should itch, and Jensen was still unfailingly cheerful.

Jensen was in the middle of tossing a handful of branches and leaves to the side and commenting on a species of beetle he'd spotted when Captain Roque finally lost what little patience he'd had. He rushed the tech and pinned Jensen against a tree before drawing his second favorite knife.

"You don't need a tongue to type, boy." Roque said, leaning close and holding the knife an inch from Jensen's face. "I'd suggest you learn to hold yours if you want to keep it."

Jensen nodded, keeping his hands loose and by his sides. The look on his face was hard to read, a mix of assessment, wariness, and possibly disappointment. There was something else in there too, but Cougar didn't know him well enough to guess what it might be. When Roque released him, Jensen simply brushed his clothes off and went back to work without a word, seemingly unfazed by what had happened. Less than a minute later the silence was broken.

"Uh, guys? Th-
"The fuck did I just say, Jensen? You want to lose your tongue?" Roque snapped.

"No, but-" Jensen said.

"Then shut the fuck up!" Roque snarled.

"But there's a-" Jensen said.

"I don't fucking care! Shut up!" Roque yelled, brandishing his knife once again. Cougar met Lieutenant Colonel Clay's eye on the other side of Roque. Clay looked concerned, understandable
considering Roque couldn't afford another write up this year. And the tech probably didn't deserve to be carved up, either.

Flicking his gaze to the side Cougar caught sight of Jensen's expression. Furious and mutinous. Jensen raised his hands and for one moment Cougar was sure that Jensen was about to strangle their 2iC. But instead Jensen spread his hands further apart, before moving one hand to his face and making an odd horizontal stroking gesture. It was when Jensen lowered his hand and placed it in his other hand that Cougar realized Jensen was signing the message he'd wanted to deliver. Cougar paid close attention and was able to figure it out when Jensen repeated the message.

'Big cat in tree.'

Shit.

Drawing the small tranquilizer gun he brought for wildlife, Cougar bit out a "Where?" and began scanning the trees. Jensen came up beside Cougar and leaned close as he pointed his own arm in the right direction. Using Jensen's arm to sight, Cougar quickly spotted the jaguar lurking in the tree roughly fifty yards from their position and eyeing the group hungrily. A dart to the shoulder had the cat hissing and fleeing in the opposite direction.

"Outstanding." Clay said tiredly. "Now if we could avoid further interruptions, we're almost at the site we'll be making camp at. Corporal Alvarez, you'll have first watch." Cougar nodded, knowing it made sense. As the person carrying the least he'd be the freshest for sentry duty. It was also a mild dig at the fact that someone who wasn't the designated scout had spotted a threat that Cougar hadn't, but that was to be expected.

Hours later, with the sun having long since set, Cougar was standing in the shadows a few feet from camp and ready for his shift on watch to be over so he could eat. He heard the crunch of footsteps and tensed before spotting Clay and Jensen.

"Alright, Specialist, while I appreciate that you spotted the cat that was planning on trying to eat us, I have to say I'm not too fond of you butting heads with my second in command like that." Clay told the tech.

"Permission to speak freely, Lieutenant Colonel?" Jensen asked. Clay eyed the tech carefully for a moment.

"Permission granted." Clay said.

"All I was doing was talking." Jensen said reasonably, arms at his sides and palms visible, basic non-threatening body language. "Not loudly, I know how to pitch my voice to carry and how to keep it from alerting the entire jungle to where we are. I've done the math and tested it so that when I babble like that it's roughly the equivalent of having a radio on in the background. My tendency to talk is something that is mentioned in my file. The same file that any COs or 2iCs would be shown if I were loaned to their team. So either he didn't read my file or he forgot everything in it pretty quickly. My point however is that on a scale of distractions, chatter is usually pretty low. If it bothers him to the point where instead of asking me to stop, or just telling me to shut up, he instead jumps immediately to threatening people with knives, it is a cause for concern. His temper has the potential to get people hurt, if not killed." Jensen paused and sighed, rubbing one hand on the back
of his neck. Jensen was clearly nervous and trying to gather his thoughts, a wise move since he was critiquing the team's 2iC. Not that Cougar could find fault with what Jensen was saying. Cougar respected Roque as a teammate, but he also knew that the man needed to get control of his temper if he wanted to stay in the army. Jensen took a deep breath to settle himself and began speaking reasonably, but firmly.

"My first tour had me participating in firefights that lasted upwards of forty-eight hours in some cases. I would assume that after a decade or more of service he would have experienced similar circumstances - if not worse. If simple chatter is enough to provoke that reaction then how is he able to pay attention during combat? There's a lot more distractions in a firefight than there are cleaning up decimated shrubbery. Chatter should be nothing compared to that. And the fact that I broke silence to try and warn everyone of danger and he refused to so much as let me actually give warning of a threat? Does not inspire confidence." He said before squaring his shoulders and adopting a posture just shy of parade rest.

"Am I annoying with how much I talk? Yes. This is such a well established fact that it's in my Spec Ops file. They don't even have the right birthday listed in that file. Supposedly for security reasons. Do I deserve to have someone with obvious rage issues, who is likely a borderline psychopath or sociopath, wave knives at me for being myself? No. My chatter might take some getting used to, but it's not an actual danger to anyone. Not like Captain Roque is proving to be. I did not at any point set out to antagonize him. And I'm not going to let you try and pin his actions and choices on me. Understood, sir?" Jensen finished, standing resolute in front of Clay and clearly unwilling to be cowed by a superior officer when he is not at fault. Cougar could feel his grudging respect for the man grow. In his own experience it was always important to let Clay know that there was only a certain amount of bullshit that would be tolerated.

Clay stared at Jensen, assessing him for weaknesses that would allow him to keep this incident under wraps without having to attempt disciplining Roque. Eventually Clay nodded and dismissed Jensen to go back and finish his dinner. Clay stayed behind and glared off in to the underbrush for a few minutes before he came closer to Cougar.

"Heard all that, huh?" Clay asked. Cougar nodded. "When I got his file I'd kind of been hoping he'd fit in with the team. He's got the same mix of commendations and black marks as any of us. He's been promoted for bravery several times only to get demoted for insubordination, usually when his COs were making a bad call. Or because of pranks." Clay sighed. "He's Loser material, but based on what's happening with Roque..."

"Roque needs to learn there are more than just bullies and victims in life." Cougar pointed out. No one was quite sure what Roque's background was, but the man always seemed to lump people in to one of two categories: bully or victim. When Cougar was first assigned under Clay it had taken several months of careful circling around each other before Roque was forced to see that Cougar would not play his game. Roque remained wary of Cougar to this day, but it was tempered with respect for a team mate. New members would not be as lucky. If Roque didn't learn to control his temper then there was only so much interference Clay could provide before the Brass decided he deserved a Big Chicken Dinner.

"Jensen's got a write-up for punching a superior officer." Clay said. "Officially it was a misunderstanding, but rumor is that the guy is an asshole of the highest order and Jensen was the only one who wasn't afraid of whatever the guy might cook up for retaliation."

"Sounds like Jensen could knock sense in to Roque, no?" Cougar pointed out.

"Maybe." Clay sighed. "Alright, head on back, I've got next shift."
"Hiding from Roque more like." Cougar said.

"I liked you better when you were too traumatized to talk. There was a lot less sass." Clay grumbled.

Cougar snorted and walked back to camp. Once there he grabbed an MRE and took a spot in camp where he could keep an eye on, and out for, Jensen. Jensen kept typing away and muttering under his breath, by all appearances completely absorbed in whatever was happening on his screen and oblivious to everything outside of it. Just as Cougar was finishing his meal, he spotted Roque glaring at Jensen and shuffled a little closer to the tech. The movement caught Roque's eye and Cougar shook his head minutely. Now was not the time to start a pissing match. Roque glowered and stormed off to the tent he shared with Wilkes. The second the zipper was done Jensen turned to Cougar and smiled.

'Thank you'. Jensen signed. Cougar raised a brow in question. 'For translation earlier. And for just now'. Okay, maybe Jensen wasn't as oblivious as Cougar had thought.

'You're welcome'. Cougar signed back. His signing was rusty with disuse, it had been years since someone had tried to converse with him this way.

'Lucky at least one person understood ASL'. Jensen frowned and shifted a bit. Cougar figured he knew what was coming and braced for Jensen to ask why someone with perfectly good hearing would know ASL. 'Not to be nosy but do you know any other languages?' Cougar blinked in surprise. 'Sorry. I just like languages. It is nice how every culture and people have come up with ways to communicate.'

'I know J-A-P-A-N-E-S-E.' Cougar signed, spelling out the name of the language as he wasn't sure what the sign for it was. He'd picked up Japanese as a teenager, though he certainly wasn't about to tell anyone that his secret love for Final Fantasy games or Studio Ghibli films prompted him to start learning it.

'Me too!' Jensen signs, smiling widely. 'I learned so I could read comics and watch cartoons, but still.' At Cougar's smirk Jensen flushed slightly and signed, 'Shut up there is great storytelling to be found. Not all quality content is made in the west.' Jensen's computer chose that moment to beep softly and his attention snapped to it instantly. The smile drained from his face as a worried frown grew. He looked up at Cougar. "Is Clay on watch?" Cougar nodded. "Shit. He needs to see this."

"Tell Roque." Cougar suggested.

"If he kills me in a fit of pique before I can tell him about the fucking tank rolling in to the compound we were sent to find it won't do anyone any good." Jensen countered and rushed off with his laptop to find Clay. Cougar had to concede that the man had a point.

Several hours later, after a hastily thrown together plan, the Losers infiltrated the drug lord's compound to take out the guy they were sent there for. They detoured just long enough for Jensen to grab all the data he could, including evidence that someone had leaked the mission they were on. They were in and out before dawn, and boarding a transport home by the time the bodies were found. Squashed in between Wilkes and Jensen in the back of the transport, Cougar couldn't help but be amused when he saw Jensen's screen. Roque was apparently about to become a subscriber to
several knitting and gardening magazines, as well as the recipient of a collection of anger management books. When Jensen caught Cougar looking he grinned and winked. Cougar smirked, and found himself hoping Jensen would get loaned to their team more often.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Second chapter up!

With the exception of the word "Si" I have made all the Spanish hover text. If I've done it right then all you need to do to follow along is mouse over those pieces and you should get a translation popping up.

EDIT: Forgot to mention that the CID is the Criminal Investigation Command. They investigate felonies and serious violations of military law.

On a Saturday two months later Cougar found himself speeding down a deserted road, trying to outrun the frustration and defeat that burned in him after a mission that had gone wrong in more ways than he was willing to count. The latest loaner tech for the Losers, Private Andrews, had fallen apart during combat. His senseless gibbering had been loud enough to alert the enemy to his position and the drug runners arranged for him to make friends with a few grenades. Clay took a few bullet grazes in the process of collecting Andrews' corpse, as the late tech was still in possession of the data they had been sent to retrieve. Roque ended up with a concussion and bruises after Wilkes gave him a love tap with their humvee. Cougar himself came out of the mess sporting dark purple ligature marks on his neck after a scouting team got the drop on him. If it hadn't been for the knife up his sleeve, Cougar doubted that he would have come out of that fight whole. And those were just the things that absolutely had to go in to their mission reports.

Hitting a dip in the road, Cougar could hear this keychain knock against the rest of his keys. The sound comforted him, made it a bit easier to keep breathing past the tightness in his throat that was not caused by an attempted strangulation. The keychain was a hard plastic card protector holding a gas card that had long since been used up. The card had been a gift from Dr. Bandyopadhyay, the only army shrink to have gotten Cougar to actually open up about what happened when he had been a POW.

She'd been the only shrink who actually cared about how Cougar was doing because he was a person, not because he was a trauma case that could further her career. She'd taught him the importance of healthy coping and processing of trauma, and how to manage his PTSD. She'd encouraged him to try a wide variety of different activities to help him process things until they eventually hit upon driving. Something about driving on long stretches of road without another person for miles helped settle Cougar's thoughts and emotions. Concentrating on controlling the car allowed his frustrations and worries to simmer in the back of his mind until they were coherent enough for Cougar to actually deal with them. Cleaning his guns brought a similar peace of mind, though to a lesser degree.

When she had chosen to leave and take over her old mentor's practice, Dr. Bandyopadhyay had made sure to seek Cougar out and present him with the gas card. Cougar had recognized the gesture for what it was, a friend silently urging Cougar to take care of himself and do what was best for his own health. Cougar spared a moment to wish she was still his shrink instead of the asshole he had now who only seemed to care if Cougar could still serve or not.

Turning his attention back to the road, Cougar slowed enough to be able to safely take the turn that
pointed him in the direction of the city. Cougar knew he had to start heading back at some point but he wasn't sure if he was ready or if he would take another circuit through the woods.

Part way down the road Cougar spotted someone walking. A hiker, maybe? Or possibly someone who lived in one of the cabins in these woods. He hadn't seen any broken down cars, but there were a few small unpaved paths that led to cabins. At that distance all Cougar could really make out was that they were walking oddly. Maybe he would offer them a lift in to the city. Or maybe he'd drive right past and wallow in frustration and despair. Cougar rolled his eyes at himself. *Dios Mío. Así dramático.*

As Cougar drew closer he realized that the person was limping and seemed to be using a makeshift crutch of some sort. At that point Cougar knew he was definitely going to pull over, if only to see if he could help them. But the closer Cougar got, the more worried he became. The biggest tip off that something was horribly wrong was when he got close enough to see that the person was shirtless, but their torso was so mottled with bruises and blood that Cougar had assumed they had a patterned shirt on. Cougar slowed his car down and began to pull up behind the person. As he pulled the parking brake the person turned around and Cougar felt horror turn his insides to ice. Jensen stood before him, leaning heavily on a tree branch, covered in blood and bruises, and breathing shallowly. Cougar hurried out to help him only to be yelled at.

"Stop!" Jensen yelled hoarsely. "Don't come any closer! I'm not falling for any tricks!"

"Tricks?" Cougar asked, completely confused.

"You don't think I'm dumb enough to fall for this, do you? I finally escape and another soldier that I've served with just happens to be driving along the same stretch of road? You think I'm going to believe it's all just a fucking coincidence?" Jensen sneered, late afternoon sun glinting off of cracked glasses that sat crooked on his swollen nose. "I'm not fucking falling for it, you're not getting the evidence and it doesn't matter if you kill me because it'll be released anyhow."

"I-" Cougar felt his jaw drop with shock. He had no idea what Jensen was talking about, but he knew that Jensen needed a hospital. And apparently some protection. "I don't know what you're talking about, I thought you were a hiker until I got close enough to see the blood." Cougar said. He looked Jensen up and down trying to catalogue the other man's injuries. Cracked ribs at the very least, possibly some contusions, he likely needed stitches for areas where his skin had broken, and- "Madre de Dios." The reason Jensen needed a tree branch to walk was obvious now. His right leg was caught in a bear trap. The whole rusted thing was bound in place with a what had probably been a shirt at one point. "Jensen. Jensen por favor. Let me bring you to a hospital."

"I'm not going anywhere with y-"

"PLEASE! Any hospital! You can choose! Just let me help you!" Cougar pleaded. Jensen swayed where he was standing but seemed to be considering it. Cougar reached behind for his sidearm and unholstered it. Jensen tensed until Cougar placed it on the ground and slid it to him before raising his hands in the air. "Hold me at gun point if you have to, just let me get you somewhere safe."

"Fine." Jensen bit out, crouching awkwardly to grab the gun and grunting in pain when he jostled his injuries. "We're going to the VA hospital. Get in the car."

Cougar ran back to the car and got in. He threw the passenger side door open to make it easier for Jensen and then slid the passenger seat back so Jensen had room to make himself as close to comfortable as possible. As soon as Jensen had buckled himself in Cougar released the parking brake and shifted the car in to drive, heading right for the city.
Cougar knew he was probably going too fast, but Jensen's breathing was getting worse and Cougar was worried about punctured or collapsed lungs or Jensen bleeding out because of the goddamned bear trap. Jensen kept the gun trained on Cougar for the whole ride, hand shaking, but kept his finger off the trigger so he did not shoot anyone accidentally. They were in sight of the hospital when Jensen lowered the gun. Cougar spared a glance at him and saw that Jensen was grey in the face and seemed seconds from passing out. Cougar swung them in to the emergency entrance and was calling for help as soon as he had the door open. By the time a stretcher was brought out, Jensen had lost consciousness. Cougar took the gun from Jensen's limp hand while he was loaded on to the stretcher.

The next hour was a blur of Cougar giving as much information as he could to the doctors while Jensen went for x-rays, scans, and was eventually rushed in to surgery. When Cougar had a moment he stepped outside and called Clay.


"Where are you?" Clay asked. The sound of movement filtered through the phone, followed by keys jangling.

"VA hospital. Not for me. Found Jensen in a bad way." Cougar said.

"I'm on my way." Clay said, hanging up. Cougar spared a moment to be thankful that his CO knew him well enough to know what he was asking without Cougar actually having to ask.

Forty minutes later Clay entered the waiting room. He had a folder in one hand and was speaking to a nurse. Once the nurse walked away with the folder he made his way over to Cougar.

"So apparently Jensen went AWOL three days ago." Clay said. Cougar stiffened in surprise. Clay sat next to him heavily, groaning as half-healed stitches pulled. "He just didn't come in one day, no one had seen or heard from him since he'd left base the night before. His Commanding Officer was playing it off as Jensen being irresponsible and flaky, but that's actually counter to most of the guy's service record."

"I was out driving. Saw what I thought was a hitchhiker. It was Jensen, bloody and bruised. Trying to get back to civilization." Cougar said. Clay looked at him searchingly before nodding.

"Did he manage to say anything to indicate what happened to him?" Clay asked.

"Si." Cougar said, nodding. "He said he wasn't falling for any tricks. Too much of a coincidence for him to escape and run in to another soldier he's served with. Said I wasn't getting the evidence and refused to let me drive him to a hospital until I gave him a gun and told him to point it at me and choose a hospital."

"Fuuuuck." Clay breathed. He sagged back in the cheap plastic chair and scrubbed his hands over his face. A doctor in scrubs with a clipboard entered the waiting room and approached them.

"Mr. Alvarez?" at Cougar's nod the doctor continued, "I'm Dr. Bennett. Mr. Jensen is being brought to a recovery room right now, he'll need to stay in hospital for at least a few days. Mr. Jensen's files don't have an emergency contact or any kind of legal proxy listed. Are you aware of anyone close to him who could make decisions for him or should we contact his Commanding Officer?"

"Don't contact his CO." Clay said, sitting up properly. At the doctor's suspicious expression Clay
added, "Lieutenant Colonel Franklin Clay, Specialist Jensen has served under me previously. He went missing a few days ago and what we're finding so far is that his current CO may have had a hand in Jensen reaching the state he's currently in. I'll make some calls and see what I can dig up, maybe get some MPs to stand guard, but for now don't let anyone but me or Alvarez near him."

"I'll alert hospital security." Dr. Bennett said worriedly.

"Can we know his condition?" Cougar asked softly.

"Of course." Dr. Bennett said, flipping through the papers on his clipboard. "Mr. Jensen has a concussion, several cracked ribs, roughly 50% of his body is covered in bruises, and he's lost enough blood that we had to give him a transfusion. The, uh, bear trap did not cut too deep as it was heavily rusted and was unable to close properly. We're concerned about the possibility of infection and have started him on a course of antibiotics. X-rays indicated he had a pneumothorax before he went in to surgery, and unfortunately this graduated to a collapsed lung while we were cleaning his various wounds and stitching them closed. We've fixed his lung but he'll need to stay intubated for a few days to give it time to heal."

"Can we see him?" Cougar asked, hands clenched tight after listening to the list of injuries Jensen had.

"He's still coming out of anesthesia, but you could sit with him. Might be good for him to wake to a friendly face. Only one at a time, though." Dr. Bennett said, smiling kindly. "They'll move him from recovery to a proper room soon, I'll make sure Nurse Higgins at the front desk knows that you're allowed access to his room," he said before leaving.

"Cougar, you go. Keep an eye on our boy while I get the ball rolling on figuring out what happened." Clay said. At Cougar's raised brow he added, "You know damn well I want him for our team. And clearly his current one isn't taking good care of him. We get enough good points helping Jensen with whatever it is he found, we might be able to convince the brass that he belongs with us." Clay clapped Cougar on the shoulder before standing and heading for the hospital exit. Cougar took a moment, breathing deeply to settle himself, before he headed for the front desk. It was always a good idea to appear calm and collected when asking nurses for information. If his Tia Juanita's stories of break room gossip were to be believed, upsetting even one nurse was a sure way of having every nurse keeping a suspicious eye on you.

It was two hours later that Jensen woke from his anesthesia. He came to slowly, blinking and squinting at the ceiling before looking around and spotting Cougar. Jensen squinted at Cougar before recognition and memory kicked in. He jolted in bed, pointed an accusatory finger at Cougar and made some kind of panicked honk before he realized that there was a tube in his throat and stared at it cross-eyed.

"Cálmate." Cougar said, keeping his voice soft. "You're in the VA hospital, comprende?" Jensen stilled and nodded slowly. "I called Clay. He is working on finding out what happened. There is enough suspicion because of how you were found that they placed MPs at your door to protect you." Jensen relaxed slightly at Cougar's words. "We will have questions for you, but not today. It is late now, and you need rest. Is there anyone you wish us to contact? To let them know you are safe?" Cougar asked. Jensen frowned for a moment before lifting his hands. He stretched his fingers before curling them, seeming to be working stiffness from them. When he seemed satisfied..."
with their mobility he signed,

'Not yet. Wait for things to settle some.'

Cougar nodded, and settled in his chair. Jensen spent a few minutes squinting at him curiously before nodding off with his hands resting on his chest.

The next day Cougar arrived at the hospital early with coffee and a breakfast sandwich and found Clay already outside Jensen's room along with two CID agents.

"This is Agent Ford and Agent DeSousa. They're investigating what happened to Jensen. They want to talk to him but he's still got that tube in his throat, and between the concussion and his swollen face keeping him from wearing glasses he can't write legibly." Clay said upon Cougar joining them.

"He signed fine when he woke last night." Cougar pointed out, blowing on his coffee to cool it.

"We don't understand sign language, though." Agent Ford groused.

Cougar sighed, sipped his coffee, and waited to see if one of them was intelligent.

"Corporal Alvarez, do you understand ASL well enough to translate for Specialist Jensen?" Agent DeSousa politely asked.

"Sí." Cougar said, nodding slowly.

"Would you be willing to translate for him while we conduct an interview?" DeSousa asked. "I'll set up a camera to record the interview and have another translator go over it to verify what was said at a later date."

"Sí." Cougar said before he turned and opened the door to Jensen's room. Jensen blinked blearily at him from where he was propped up with pillows at the raised end of his bed, but seemed to recognize the shape of Cougar's hat and waved to him. Cougar waved back and grabbed a chair on the left side of Jensen's bed. "¿Cómo estás?" he asked. Jensen smiled as much as the breathing tube would let him and gave Cougar a thumbs up.

While Cougar placed his breakfast on the night stand next to Jensen's bed, Agent DeSousa set up a small camera to record the interview.

"Alright Specialist Jensen, Corporal Alvarez has agreed to translate for you. We'd like to ask you a few questions," Agent Ford said. "On Thursday you failed to report to base and did not call your CO or XO to inform them of a reason for your absence. Why was that?"

Jensen raised one bruised eyebrow and managed to imply that he did not think highly of Agent Ford's presumed intelligence. He raised his hands and began signing his response.

"He did not report on Thursday because on Wednesday his XO and two teammates grabbed him in the parking lot behind his apartment building." Cougar translated.

"What reason would they have to grab you?" Agent Ford demanded. Agent DeSousa shot him a glare, clearly his behavior so far was less than professional.
"He says he was just getting to that before he was rudely interrupted." Cougar translated, resisting the urge to grin. Even hooked up to tubes, oxygen, and IVs Jensen refused to take other peoples' shit. "Sergeant Major Wallace told him while they held him captive that someone working with Agent Fei had called while he was getting lunch on Wednesday to arrange a meeting. Jensen had initially contacted Fei to arrange protection for himself from his team in exchange for providing her with evidence for an investigation that she is heading. When the member of Fei's team called, it was Corporal Eichel who answered. Eichel does voices. He mimics voices perfectly. He also has a habit of picking up the phones of others and pretending to be them. Eichel told Wallace that Jensen knew what was going on, had contacted a CID agent, and had proof. They grabbed him that night."

"Agent Ford," DeSousa said, interrupting Ford before he could interrupt Jensen again, "Would you please contact Agent Fei regarding her investigation and let her know that Specialist Jensen is at the hospital. If this is related to her investigation then she should be present for this interview."

Agent Ford glared at DeSousa before nodding and stalking from the room. Once he had left, Agent DeSousa gently asked, "Are you able to continue answering questions or would you prefer to rest a bit before Agent Fei arrives?"

Jensen thought it over carefully before he signed 'Rest' and sagged back against his pillows. Cougar took the liberty of lowering the end of Jensen's bed slightly so the tech could be more comfortable. Jensen gave a weak thumbs up before he curled his hands on his chest and closed his eyes.

"I'm going to have a word with the MPs outside." DeSousa said softly as he turned off the camera and left.

Clay sat in the chair opposite from Cougar while he finally ate his breakfast sandwich and looked over Jensen's sleeping form carefully. Having been cleaned by hospital staff since Cougar last saw him, it was easier to see the extent of the damage that had been done to Jensen. An ache settled in Cougar's chest as he took in the mass of swollen red, purple, and blue bruises that covered Jensen's face, just turning yellow and green at the edges. More bruises peeked out from under the collar and sleeves of his hospital gown, and the stark white of bandages across his ribs showed through the thin material. His wrists were deep purple and scabbed over in places. Cougar knew from experience that those meant Jensen had been restrained with his wrists over his head as he was beaten.

"They really worked him over, huh?" Clay said, after nearly an hour of silence. Cougar watched Clay from under his hat and settled more firmly in his chair. Clay sighed. "He'd have every reason to walk away from the army after this. But if he sticks around, I'll fight to make him a Loser." Clay said reassuringly. Cougar raised an eyebrow. "Oh don't even. I know what your protective face looks like, Cougar. The number of small animals you've smuggled out of combat zones has made sure of that. Hell, that's how we found out Wilkes is allergic to porcupines, of all things." Cougar smirked at the memory of their teammate sneezing so hard he needed to sit down. If Cougar were the type to feel the need to defend himself, he would point out that leaving a domesticated Brazilian porcupine behind in the compound of a Venezuelan drug lord that was rigged to blow would have been cruel.

"Roque?" Cougar questioned after a few minutes of silence. Given the tension that had been there the last time he and Jensen worked together it was certainly a valid concern.

"Roque is gonna act like an old cat faced with a new puppy. He'll piss and moan and eventually adjust." Clay said. Cougar doubted it, but resolved to keep an eye on Jensen and step in if it looked like Roque was going to go too far. Clay grew pensive for a moment before speaking again, "I know it's a bit of a long shot but I hope they're able to find the place he was held in fast enough to get good evidence from it."
"¿Qué?" Cougar asked, puzzled.

"Before you got here those two agents were talking to Jensen and trying to get directions from him." Clay explained. "They used the details you gave the MPs last night about where you found him as a starting point, gave him a map and a marker and asked him to backtrack. It's a very general idea of the route he took through the woods, but it narrows down the search area. Hopefully, anyways. Concussed with a face too swollen for glasses is probably not the most reliable state to draw directions in."

Roughly twenty minutes later Jensen started waking up. He squinted in the light of the room until he spotted Cougar and Clay and gave a pleased hum that echoed through his breathing tube. Cougar couldn't help chuckling when Jensen aimed a cross eyed glare at the tube poking out of his mouth. They were not alone for much longer before the door opened. Agent DeSousa walked in followed by a stern looking, middle aged Asian woman with a CID badge and an undeniable air of authority that had Cougar subtly shifting in to a position that involved less slouching. She strode forward and nodded at Jensen's groggy form before pinning Clay with a look.

"Lieutenant Colonel Clay?" She asked.

"Yes ma'am." He confirmed.

"Agent Fei with the CID. I'll be taking over Specialist Jensen's case as it is connected with an investigation that I am conducting. Is this young man Corporal Alvarez?" She said, brisk and professional.

"Sí." Cougar said, blinking a bit at being referred to as young.

"Are you willing to continue translating his ASL for us?" She asked.

"Sí." He answered.

"Do you both understand that anything pertaining to this investigation is not to be discussed outside of this room?" She asked. When both Clay and Cougar agreed she continued, "Then if you would please help Specialist Jensen sit up a bit so he can answer some questions, that would be appreciated."

Cougar got up and carefully fiddled with the bed controls until Jensen was in a sitting position. Jensen began flexing his fingers and wrists, checking the motions and monitoring for twinges that might affect his ASL use. Agent DeSousa turned the camera back on and stood out of the way.

"Specialist Jensen, prior to this past Wednesday you had been collecting evidence that Major Urquhart, Captain Gustin, Sergeant Major Wallace, Corporal Eichel, and Private Smith were part of a conspiracy to sell military weapons to known gangs within the United States. Do you still have the evidence?" Fei asked.

"He says he does," Cougar translates, "and that in the event of his disappearance or death he arranged to have access to the evidence delivered directly to you."

"How?" She asked.

"Copies of it were stored on a secure server that was updated with every new find. Access to this server requires pre-authorized laptops that were stored in lock boxes in banks across the country. He has a computer program set up that requires him to check in every seven days. If he does not, the program removes his own laptop’s ability to edit files on the server and then waits another three days. If he does not check in the program begins sending a series of small anonymous deliveries to
you at your office. In the memo part of the item receipt would be messages. One fifth of them are coded directions to find the banks and lockboxes. In half of the other packages it is hinted that the key for decoding the messages is the inscription on the inside of your wedding ring. "Cougar finished, wide eyed at the amount of planning and forethought Jensen had given to a worst case scenario. Jensen began signing again, "He says... I'm not translating that." Cougar said flatly. Jensen shook with silent laughter.

"What did he say?" Fei asked.

"He said Clay can keep his judgmental eyebrows to himself." Cougar said. Clay sat up in surprise when everyone turned to look at him. "And now he says that it's not paranoia if they're actually after him." Clay crossed his arms and managed to look both annoyed and mildly chastised at the same time.

"If we can get back to the issue at hand." Fei said, though the corner of her mouth was quirked with amusement. "Early Wednesday morning I received a message from you saying you had found something new." Jensen sobered immediately and began signing.

"He says he found a series of photos and videos from two years ago. General Freeman had tried to investigate. They took his daughter and-" Cougar broke off in shock. What Jensen was signing had him fighting bile rising in his throat.

"And what?" Fei asked.

"Torture." Cougar spat, disgusted. "Prolonged rape and torture. And then murder."

A shocked silence blanketed the room after that. Alyx Freeman had been seventeen when she disappeared two years ago. Cougar could feel the rage and disgust for Jensen's team building with every second.

"You found proof of this?" Agent Fei asked, voice tight. Jensen nodded.

"Why would they keep evidence like that, though?" Clay questioned.

"A reminder." Fei said with a grimace. "A General is too visible of a figure to abduct, but teenage girls get taken all the time. They would have sent some of the photos or a video clip to General Freeman, no doubt that had something to do with the depression he sank in to around that time. Freeman has three other daughters. If they got to one, they could get to the others. Any time it looked like he might push the issue they could slip him another picture or a video. They're not the first group to use that kind of tactic."

"Jesus Christ." DeSousa said, voice rough with shock. Everyone in the room wore expressions of horror and disgust on their faces. Jensen sat in his bed with his hands in his lap, picking at his hospital wristband. Cougar could not imagine what it must feel like to know that the team you worked with and trusted to have your back were capable of such disgusting behavior. That Jensen continued to work with them and acted like nothing was wrong while he gathered evidence against them was a testament to his strength and perseverance.

"What would you need to access this evidence?" Agent Fei asked, gently.

"He says he needs a laptop. His would be fastest, only a few minutes to connect to the server. With a new laptop it would take a few hours to set up proper permission for the server." Cougar translated. He felt it necessary to point out, "He would also need someone to read the screen for him right now. His face is too swollen for glasses to fit."
"Where is your laptop right now, Jensen?" Fei asked.

"They took them." Cougar translated, noting Jensen's signing was becoming sluggish and choppy. Él debe estar agotado. "They had already robbed his apartment by the time he got home that night. They had them in the room where they held him, trying to get him to lead them to the server. He had to leave the laptops behind when he escaped."

"We'll wait until you've healed enough to wear glasses. If we haven't recovered your laptops by then we'll give you a computer to work with. We'll also keep MPs by your door until we've made arrests." Agent Fei said decisively, before turning her attention to Clay and Cougar. "At the moment I would suggest keeping Jensen's location quiet. They might not know he made it back to the city. If they think he's hiding somewhere and that we don't know who the players are or what happened to him it gives us an advantage."

"Hurry up and wait." Clay said, drily.

"I'm sure you'll all manage to occupy your time." Agent Fei said. Jensen began signing a little forlornly.

"Jensen says he really hopes you find his laptops. He's got homework on there he needs to finish." Cougar translated.

"You have homework?" DeSousa asked.

"The type of work the three of us do leads to a lot of injury and downtime. Or we get stuck with hurry up and wait stuff. Somewhere along the way our handlers decided that higher education was the answer to free time. Most of us are in at least one online class at any given time. Some people go for degrees, others just take stuff they think might be useful. Like language classes." Clay explained.

"Given the fact that Specialist Jensen seems to be falling asleep right now, I would say this interview is over." Agent Fei said wryly. Cougar looked over and saw that Jensen was having trouble keeping his eyes open, but making a good effort. He reached over and lowered the end of Jensen's bed so he would be more comfortable.

"You just like pressing the buttons." Clay whispered, teasing.

Cougar decided maturity was for weekdays and stuck his tongue out at Clay, who snorted. Cougar grabbed his empty coffee cup and the trash from his breakfast before following the others as they filed out of the room. Before shutting the door, Cougar dimmed to lights to give Jensen's damaged eyes a rest.

"I know this is a difficult request to make, but I would ask you not to visit Jensen too often." Agent Fei said. "His former teammates will likely be looking for odd behavior among people Jensen would consider allies. The occasional visit is okay, but if they notice healthy people who recently served with Jensen suddenly making a lot of trips to the VA hospital rather than the army base's medical centre, they might come snooping."

"You keep near him for today," Clay suggested to Cougar, "I'll drop by in two days on Tuesday. You come by on Thursday, and so on until this thing's resolved."

Cougar did not like the idea of not being able to check on Jensen, but he knew that Agent Fei was speaking the truth. To keep Jensen safe, he and Clay would keep their distance. He nodded his agreement.
As a sniper, Cougar knew how to wait. Much of his career had been spent waiting; for orders, for targets, for the right time. Cougar knew how to make waiting more bearable. So it came as a complete surprise how frustrating it was to wait for Thursday to come around.

By Tuesday evening he'd taken to flipping through his grandmother's recipe book, wondering if he should bring something for Jensen when he visited. Everyone knew that hospital food was horrible. Cougar wasn't sure if Jensen would be free of the breathing tube by then or not, Cougar hadn't had to deal with a collapsed lung before.

On Wednesday afternoon Clay took a sudden interest in learning to climb as well as Cougar could. In between all the cursing, panting, and falling off the obstacle course, Clay told Cougar about his visit to Jensen. The breathing tube was scheduled to be removed Thursday morning. Normally they would have implanted a temporary chest tube just under his armpit, but his cracked ribs had made that option too precarious. The concussion had healed, and the swelling in Jensen's face had gone down enough that he could wear glasses and write. The CID had managed to find the cabin Jensen had been held at. Better yet, Jensen's laptops had been left behind. The agents had them brought to Jensen's hospital room, cutting short Clay's visit. Upon laying eyes on his precious laptops, Jensen had apparently thrown his arms in the air and honked excitedly through the tube in his throat.

Considering that Jensen had been able to connect to satellites in the middle of a jungle, Cougar was not surprised to arrive on base Thursday morning to find the rumor mill buzzing about an entire team being cuffed and carted off by CID. Cougar was also not surprised to walk in to the Losers' offices and find Roque vehemently protesting Jensen joining the team.

"He's an annoying, useless shit with no respect for authority-

"That 'useless shit' helped the CID gather evidence for an important investigation. He's also proven to be someone who can keep up with us as a team. And every person on this team has issues with authority. I haven't kept leadership because you're all perfect soldiers who follow orders, I'm in charge because I'm good at herding cats!" Clay said sternly. "We've got the opportunity to have one of the best techs in the entire army as a permanent part of our team and I'm not going to let that pass by just because you don't know how to play nice! Now get out of my way I have a meeting to get to." Roque glared at Clay before moving aside. Clay nodded at Cougar and Wilkes on his way out.

"Can't believe this shit." Roque muttered while Cougar sat on the edge of his own desk and crossed his arms.

"The guy wasn't so bad." Wilkes said, earning a sharp look from Roque. "Yeah he talked a lot, but if you tune him out it's more like having a radio on in the background." Cougar recalled Jensen's talk with Clay that first mission and fought a grin.

"The fuck kind of radio have you been listening to, Wilkes?" Roque asked.

"Okay, I'm not gonna stand here and let you blow shit at me for not hating a person. I'll be at the motor pool." Wilkes said, shaking his head as he left.

Roque fumed and prowled the office before turning to Cougar.

"You knew, didn't you?" He accused. "About whatever the fuck it is that kid's got himself mixed in
that makes Clay want him on the team." Cougar nodded. "And what? You agree with him?"
Cougar nodded again. Roque turned and kept moving, radiating anger. "If that kid keeps talking
away when he's with us I'll cut his fucking tongue out."

"No." Cougar said, carefully watching Roque. The demolitions expert stilled and fixed his glare on
Cougar.

"The fuck do you mean, 'no'?" Roque demanded.

"No. You are not going to hurt Jensen. I won't let you." Cougar said, drawing himself up and
meeting Roque's eyes defiantly.

"Really?" Roque said, smirking cruelly. "You think you'd be able to stop me if I really wanted to
hurt him? Mister Don't-Involve-Me is gonna stand up for the geek?"

"Sí." Cougar said, coolly.

The tension in the room grew as the two men sized each other up. Cougar breathed deeply,
steadying himself for the coming fight. He knew Roque was going to try and prove his physical
superiority, and in a fair fight he would have the advantage. Cougar was average height, but Roque
had four inches and nearly fifty pounds of muscle on Cougar's lean build. But Cougar had been
small growing up, small enough that his Tia Juanita had worried, and taught him how to take down
someone twice his size hard and fast, and to use every dirty trick without regret. Years in the army
only made him better at it.

Roque rushed him, drawing a knife and swinging in one smooth motion. Cougar shifted out of the
path of Roque's move and swung his fist, jabbing powerfully with his left hand at the juncture near
Roque's armpit where his tricep and shoulder muscles attached to his torso. Roque grunted with
pain and his knife slipped from numb fingers. Catching the knife quickly with his right hand,
Cougar threw a punch with the hand holding the blade. As Roque stumbled back from the punch,
the wound opened on his face, a line of red above his right brow and a matching flick below his

"I was patient before, but no more. If you hurt or attack a teammate I will finish this fight for good.
¿Comprende?" Cougar threatened. Roque nodded, seeming to realize that Cougar should not be
messed with. "Bien. Now get the med kit, you need stitches."

While they waited for the local anesthetic to kick in so Cougar could begin stitching the wound
closed, Cougar caught Roque staring at him, looking more wary than he had when Cougar was
wielding a knife with his blood on it.

"Why are you helping?" Roque asked quietly. Cougar deliberated how to answer him for a few
moments while he threaded the suture needle.

"Mi abuelo." Cougar said as he moved the gauze Roque was holding away from his eye and began
stitching. "He told me 'Be kind, once. If someone takes advantage of that, then you have their
measure. But if you lead with negativity, no one will accept kindness when you mean it. Or offer it
when you need it.'"

"I don't exactly fit in the 'deserving kindness' description your grandfather set up there." Roque
grumbled.

"No. But that is where Dr. Bandyopadhyay takes over." Cougar said, moving on to stitch the cut
underneath Roque's eye. "She told me, when I needed to hear it most, that everyone deserves a
second chance. What we do with that second chance is up to us, but we need to be given the opportunity first."

"Makes sense." Roque conceded. Cougar tied off the last stitch and cut the thread before stripping off the nitrile gloves.

"You are my teammate. I have respect for you and your skills. But as a person I found you lacking. Perhaps you should use your second chance to try and make friends with your team." Cougar suggested, packing up the med kit. "You know how to bandage and care for that wound?"

"Yeah, I got it from here." Roque said, still wary, but no hostility in his bearing.

"I'll be at the range, then." Cougar said.
He was nearly out the door when he heard a quiet, gruff "Thanks."

As Cougar was packing up his rifle to head for lunch, Clay showed up.

"Do I want to know why Roque has a bunch of stitches in his face?" Clay asked.

"I explained to him that Jensen is to be a teammate, not a target." Cougar replied. Clay squinted dubiously at Cougar while he finished packing up.

"Okay then," he sighed, "since the arrests have been made we don't exactly need to skulk around about visiting Jensen anymore. Though I still wouldn't exactly advertise where he is or how involved he was. And Agent Fei said something about keeping what we know quiet until the trial is over and done with."

Cougar nodded, understanding what his CO was trying to say. Clay left, and Cougar checked his rifle in before heading off base.

Pushing open the door to Jensen's room, the first thing Cougar sees is curls.

"Oh!" The owner of the curls said, moving aside. "Sorry about that, didn't realize I was blocking the door!" Cougar found himself staring at one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen. Tall, with curves like a fertility statue, brown skin and a liberal sprinkling of freckles. Kind eyes watched him move in to the room before turning to Jensen. "I'm gonna get going, please stay out of trouble, Jake."

"Oh come on, Mish! This is me we're talking about!" Jensen said, grinning widely.

"Exactly!" The woman laughed before waving goodbye and closing the door behind her.

"Now that I can wear glasses again I can see the look of awe on your face, Cougar. You can say it, my friend is awesome." Jensen teased.
"She is... vibrant." Cougar agreed.

"Yeah. Michelle's just back from her honeymoon and rocking the wedded bliss glow. Happy is a
good look on her." Jensen said, smiling as he leaned back against his pillows and pushing his
glasses higher up his nose. They were a different pair, tinted round lenses set in thin metal frames
where the other pair had been a blocky black plastic monstrosity. It was easier to see Jensen's eyes
with these, they stood out a bright blue that contrasted with the fading greens and purples of his
bruises. His face looked like someone used it as a painter's palette, splotches of colour everywhere,
but at least it had healed enough to look like a face again.

"Now, Michelle is a wonderful friend, but she occasionally does things she thinks are for my own
good, but aren't. Like putting my laptop on the other side of the room. Now you," Jensen says, eyes
bright with good humor and mischief, "I am sure are the type of sympathetic, caring badass who
would be willing to help a bedbound geek reach his laptop. I'd hate to injure myself trying to get it
back."

Cougar shook his head.

"But, but, but!" Jensen said, and then pouted. Complete with Bambi eyes and sticking out his lower
lip.

"No." Cougar said, and held out the bag he'd brought with him.

"Ooooo! You brought me something?" Jensen asked as he took the bag. Cougar could tell when the
smell reached his nose because Jensen stiffened like a pointer dog before upending the bag in his
lap. "Fooooooorrrrrrrrrrrr!!!" He said reverently, before tearing the wrapper off one of the burritos and
cramming as much of it in to his mouth at he could. Cougar snorted, and walked to the end of
Jensen's bed so he could examine the medical charts there.

"So," Jensen said after inhaling the first burrito, "Agent Fei said a bunch of arrests were made. She
wasn't sure if they'd gotten everyone, but the people most likely to come after me are headed for
Leavenworth."

"There is gossip all over base about it." Cougar offered.

"Doctors say I'll be released in a few days, but they recommend a week of recovery at home and
some physio baby steps. Probably a good idea to avail myself of a therapist or two. If I'm patching
up my body, might as well root around in my head, too. Barring infections or complications I'm
probably looking at five or six weeks till I'm field ready, physically. It'd be good to make sure I
don't get twitchy being near teammates, considering what happened. Oh! Speaking of teammates.
A couple of Generals popped in and said Clay requested having me permanently assigned to your
team. Is he touched in the head?"

"No." Cougar said, shaking his head. "He was impressed. Not only the mission you did with us, but
your plans concerning your former team."

"Oh." Jensen said, seeming touched. "Well. I wouldn't mind working with you guys. Though
Roque concerns me."

"He will not hurt you." Cougar promised. "He has been given a very good reason not to."

"That is both ominous and reassuring. Kudos." Jensen said before grinning. "Hey, want to hear
something funny? Those Generals? They came in to say something about 'yadda, yadda, bravery',
something about enduring torture and betrayal, 'blah, blah, commendations', and then they gave me
a promotion. To Corporal."

Cougar dropped Jensen's chart and stood there, dumbfounded. Specialist and Corporal were both E-4 pay grade. The difference between the two was that Corporal was a non-commissioned officer rank. The lowest NCO rank. If the Generals knew Jensen was about to join the Losers, and knew the ranks of the small team, then the promotion was nothing more than back-patting bullshit.

"Oh-Em-Gee. You have the best 'I'm Offended On Your Behalf' face that I've ever seen." Jensen cackled, wincing when his movements jostled his injuries. Cougar smiled as he returned the chart to its proper place before sitting himself down in the chair closest to Jensen's bed.

"Eat." Cougar encouraged. Jensen needed no further reminder and attacked the rest of the burritos.

As Cougar watched on while Jensen made a mess of his meal, he couldn't help but think that having Jensen as a teammate was sure to be an adventure in itself.
Chapter 3

Jensen's fifth month on the team coincided with Clay somehow being promoted to Colonel. Clay insisted it was due to hard work and good leadership. Jensen pointed out that the military had an automatic promotion system in place. Whatever the reason, the Losers had jumped at the least cause for celebration and hit up their favorite bar.

Cougar woke the next morning with an aching head, sore balls, and a girl snoring in to his hair in an apartment that was not his. After checking that the girl – Rosie? Rosalyn? He knew it was something flowery – was okay, if a bit hungover, Cougar called a cab and pulled on his clothes from last night. Looking at the time on his phone he knew he would not have enough time to go home and change, if he hurried he would just be on time for this morning's meeting.

In the cab, Cougar rested his aching head against the back of the passenger seat and did his best to recall the previous night. He knew that Wilkes had gotten in to a drinking contest with a female truck driver early on, and had been dragged out of the bar by his belt by that same woman. Jensen had spent a good portion of the evening chatting up three girls, only to be turned down gently when they left the bar. Unfazed, Jensen had then gotten talking to Roque. While Cougar had not been able to listen in, it had seemed that Jensen had been trying to convince Roque of something, which most likely meant there were explosions in the near future. Their conversation had proved enough of a distraction that Clay had been able to wander off with a woman none of them had vetted. Knowing Clay's taste in women, the three remaining Losers had opted to get drunk on the off chance that it would be their last night alive. Somewhere along the way, Cougar had ended up going home with a girl. No clue what became of Jensen or Roque.

After arriving on base, Cougar hurried to his desk hoping that his spare pair of BDUs was still in his desk and hadn't magically become a new set of rags for Wilkes. Finding them in the bottom drawer of his desk, Cougar pulled them on over his jeans to Roque's amused snort before following the Captain out the door and to the meeting room. Cougar sat on Jensen's left, nodding a greeting before the meeting began.

"Alright everyone, let's get this- wait. Where's Alvarez?" Their current handler, General Coleman, asked.

"He's... right... here?" Jensen said, very obviously confused as he pointed at Cougar with both hands.

"Oh." Coleman said. "Didn't spot him without the hat." he muttered.

"Where is your hat?" Clay asked, blinking blearily at Cougar over his sunglasses and clearly much more hungover than the rest of them.
"Obviously he sent it to the Mad Hattery for maintenance and upgrades." Jensen said. "Are you gonna have them install one of those bunny portals magicians use?"

Cougar shook his head, grinning. He had learned two hats ago to leave it behind before going drinking with the team.

"Oh." Clay said, pushing his sunglasses up and sipping his coffee. *Probablemente todavía borracho*, Cougar thought.

Coleman shook his head at their antics and launched in to the explanation about the process of selecting new classes that they had all heard multiple times. A few minutes in, Jensen leaned in to whisper something, most likely a comment on the alcohol fumes wafting off of Clay, but suddenly froze and leaned back. Cougar glanced at Jensen, concerned, but saw only amusement on his teammate's face.

Cougar leaned back in his chair and tried to puzzle out what the source of Jensen's amusement was. Did he have a hickey? In his rush this morning he hadn't stopped to check his appearance, let alone shower– oh. He still reeked of sex. As he felt his face heat, Cougar only hoped that his skin tone would hide enough of his blush to keep the rest of the team from noticing. He was going to have to deal with Jensen's teasing as it was.

Coleman eventually wrapped up what he was saying and passed around the usual information packets. He informed them that there would be a briefing tomorrow for a mission before he dismissed them. The second he was gone, Roque stood up.

"Alright, Losers! Time for PT!" he ordered. A chorus of groans rose from the team. "Get up! Get moving! We've got jobs to do and we need to be in shape to do them!"

Cougar stood and was collecting his packet when he felt the sleeve of his t-shirt lift. Turning to see what the cause was, he found Jensen lifting the fabric until he could draw on Cougar's bicep with one finger. Jensen drew two circles, placing a dot in each before letting Cougar's sleeve fall back in to place. Smirking, Jensen patted Cougar on the arm and then went to speak with Roque. Cougar stood there, confused not only by Jensen's actions, but by the familiarity of them.

The memory came to him slowly. A warm day, sun beating down on the school playground. His cousin Javier drawing the same pattern while repeating a rhyme, "Circle, circle, Dot, dot, – Now you've got the cootie shot!"

Cougar burst out laughing, startling Wilkes out of his nap. He turned and found Jensen grinning at him, clearly very pleased with himself. Cougar smiled and shook his head at Jensen, earning a wink.

"Do I want to know?" Clay asked, clutching his coffee like it could save him from last night's bad decisions.

"Just a little discussion about the importance of vaccines in halting the spread of diseases." Jensen said. Cougar snorted, and wondered if there would ever be a time Jensen did not have a smartass remark ready to go.

The team stowed their packets in their desks before heading for the locker rooms to change for PT.
Roque was right about making sure they were all in good shape, not that any of them would actually admit it. And it was always amusing watching Clay's hungover ass try to keep up.

Cougar was the last one to leave the locker room, having been the only one wearing two pairs of pants. The others had already begun their warm up stretches. Though Cougar was not entirely certain that Clay hadn't passed out in the middle of one of his floor stretches.

"Clay, if you're napping on the field..." Roque warned.

"M'up." Clay mumbled. "Swear it."

"The real way to test how awake his is, is to tell him about the classes you're picking and see if he gets worried or not." Jensen suggested, eyes bright with amusement. Cougar wondered if this had anything to do with the talking they did last night.

"Roque's just picked language classes after he picked up that Chemistry degree." Clay said, trying to rub his temples without removing his sunglasses.

"Actually, Jensen and I got talking at the bar last night and he gave me a good idea. If I take my chemistry degree further and dig in to metallurgy I'll have a better knowledge base to work with when I plan to blow shit up. And if I combine that with a blacksmith apprenticeship I could make my own knives with custom alloys." Roque said.

"He'll be a new and improved Roque!" Jensen said, helping Clay pull himself up. "Twice as stabby and three times the boom!"

"Outstanding." Clay groaned, bracing his hands on his knees in the traditional 'I-might-puke' pose.

"Can we go back to when you two hated each other?" Wilkes asked. "I'm a lot more terrified of what you two might do together than I ever was of what you might have done to each other."

Jensen and Roque's relationship had initially been very rocky, but about four weeks after Jensen had joined the team he had gotten very bored and started offering to proofread any assignments any of them had. Roque had dumped a seven page essay for his Russian Literature class on Jensen's desk to shut him up. Jensen had spent the entire day pouring over it and the next morning he had sat himself on Roque's desk to go over possible edits and arguments. They bickered over the paper for three days until they'd covered every possible angle. Roque got a perfect grade on it, and Jensen earned Roque's patience. To a certain degree, anyway.

"If you ladies are done gossiping, start running before I decide to chase you." Roque growled.

"That's a terrible motivation, Roque." Jensen chirped, bouncing up and down in anticipation of running. "You gotta sweeten the deal a little. Give us something to look forward to. Like: if Clay finishes one lap around the track by the time I finish three, I'll do everyone's paperwork for the next mission."

"What's in that for you?" Wilkes asked.

"If Clay wins, you guys will be in good moods. If I win, I only have to do my paperwork. Either way I'll get to watch my CO puke before 10 am." Jensen said.

"Sounds about right." Clay said, wobbling over to the starting area, Jensen bouncing along right beside him.

Cougar walked with Wilkes and Roque to stand next to the starting area. If a race was being
offered, especially one with such an enticing reward, then they would watch and make sure no one cheated.

"No tripping, no touching each other, no spitting or throwing things, no clothes pulling and you have to end the race still wearing all the clothes you started with." Wilkes said, before muttering, "And fuck you very much, Jensen, for making that last one a necessary warning."

Cougar snickered, remembering the part he had played in the now infamous Fort Bragg Streaking Incident. Grabbing an opponent's clothing was a time honoured cheating maneuver. It was not his fault that Jensen had been wearing very old clothes that tore easily. At least Jensen's boxers had held up, or they likely would have gotten in to a lot more trouble than they had.

"Just fucking run already!" Roque barked.

Jensen took off like a shot, all his energy focused on propelling himself forward as fast as he could. Clay started after him at a much more subdued and nauseous pace. Cougar did not hold out much hope of Clay winning. Clay might have had only one third the distance to travel, but Jensen was fast.

It had taken nearly seven weeks before Jensen's doctors had cleared him fit to resume his duties. Before that they had strictly limited his exercise to his physiotherapy sessions and, once his cracked ribs had healed, weight lifting. The first time Jensen had joined the team in their PT he had blown right past all of them and had not stopped until he was shaky legged and dripping sweat.

Cougar had been impressed. In the two years since he'd joined the team Cougar had consistently held the spot of being the fastest, but Jensen managed to outrun him roughly sixty percent of the time. The times that Cougar beat out Jensen were often on courses that required a lot of turning. Cougar's ability to take sharper corners meant that, where Jensen slowed down to avoid crashing in to things, Cougar could keep going. Jensen always took his defeats with good humor and looked on them as opportunities to learn better. He had gone so far as to ask Cougar for advice to improve his running. Cougar ended up introducing Jensen to parkour. They have since been informed that parkour is best left on the obstacle course, and is under no circumstances to be used to access rooftops or the offices of the brass.

Honestly the live goose thing was Jensen's idea. Cougar had just happened to know where to find one. And there was no real evidence that it had been them, anyways.

Cougar turned his attention back to the field in time to see Clay being passed by Jensen for the first time; just a bit more than a third of the way around the track. Jensen was really leaning in to his run, movements smooth and strong and showing no signs of fatigue despite the hints of sweat darkening Jensen's grey shirt just under his arms.

Clay seemed to come out of his hangover enough to actually start running, giving Cougar the tiniest bit of hope that Clay might actually win if he held his new pace. Given the state of enforced inactivity Jensen had been in, one of the first things everyone had learned about him was that he typed fast. It was immediately followed by the fact that he could run out of things to do when not on a mission; which preceded them learning about his potential for mischief. It had taken some trial and error, but the Losers had just about found a balance between missions, class work, and carefully monitored mischief that not only kept Jensen from vibrating out of his skin, but had the rest of them becoming more involved in each other's lives than they had been.

That was not to say things were perfect. Roque was still an ornery bastard who went looking for fights and had trouble backing down from perceived challenges. Wilkes had a tendency to disrespect other people's possessions, and still dithered about full commitment to the team some
days. Clay was caught halfway between wanting to be a good soldier and advance his career, and being a good leader who listened to his men and made the right choices.

Cougar still had plenty of bad days; days when interacting with anyone was more than he thought he could take, but being by himself made it too easy for his nightmares to haunt him while he was awake. Jensen had days where he was so tightly wound that he talked until people were glad to see him leave. Days where he would spend most of his time exercising until he was drenched in sweat, then sit quietly at his computer and write code until the hollow look left his eyes. They were all still fucked up messes with too many issues to fit in a regular Ops team, but it was starting to look like they could all be fucked up messes together.

Out on the track Jensen had passed Clay a second time. Jensen's shirt was dark with sweat under the armpits and around his collar; his face had turned red with exertion. Clay was still running, but his steps had become a bit heavier and he seemed to be swallowing after every few breaths.


"Rules don't say he can't puke. As long as he crosses the finish line before Jensen, I'd say let him puke anywhere he wants." Roque said,

"For ninety words per minute typing I hope Clay can keep it together long enough to get across the line." Wilkes said before grinning. "Remember when Clay thought he had found a way to keep Jensen busy, typing up that backlog of reports as a favor to Coleman?"

"And then Jensen finished all of it in two days and Clay had to hide the reports for another week to keep Coleman from thinking we weren't getting enough work." Roque finished, amusement colouring his voice.

Clay was roughly forty feet from the finish line by then. His run had morphed in to a high speed stagger that was painful to look at. Jensen was about sixty-five feet from the finish line and approaching fast. If Clay could just hold the pace he had set for forty more feet he would win.

At twenty feet from the line Clay had just a fifteen foot lead on Jensen.

Ten feet to go and it looked like Clay was going to win.

Five feet from the finish line and Clay's knees hit the ground as he threw up on the field. Jensen swerved sharply to avoid the mess before he flew over the finish line to the synchronized groans of Wilkes and Roque.

It took a moment for Jensen to slow down enough to be able to turn around. Clay was still on the ground heaving sickly. Wilkes had gone to fetch a hose, and Roque had carefully approached Clay from a safe angle in order to critique Clay's ability to keep his hangover in check.

Cougar couldn't help noticing that Jensen's shirt was sticking to his skin, turned dark gray at the armpits and in a V on his chest and back from sweat. Jensen's red, sweaty face was shining in the morning sun, and his hair suck up in damp blond spikes. Even though his chest was heaving as he panted hard from running, Jensen was smiling. A great big beaming smile that had his eyes crinkling and made it seem as though there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

If it made him that happy, Cougar figured there wasn't anything wrong with Jensen winning the occasional bet.
Sixty-five hours later, Cougar found himself wishing he could rewind time. He'd even be willing to help clean up Clay's puke if he could just go back to a less shitty situation.

Three hours ago their assault on a Russian gun running operation had gone south in a hurry. These guys were operating low-tech; the compound had no internet, meaning there had been nothing Jensen could hack to give them more information. That had made them solely reliant on the intel that had been provided for them, which had been a pile of horrifically inaccurate shit, and led to Cougar's current predicament: trying to infiltrate an unmapped compound in the dead of night to rescue eighty percent of his team.

Cougar quietly made his way down a dark corridor, keeping his steps as soft and silent as he was able. Catching the faint echo of a scream, he made his way down the hall and turned left, following renewed screams. At the end of that hallway he used a knife to check around the corner; two guards in front of a door that had light shining under it. One guard looked queasy, possibly his first encounter with torture. Second guard looked bored, possibly a mentor to the rookie.

Breathing steadily, Cougar took aim around the corner. The bored guard went down first, more likely to react in time to raise an alarm. The queasy one went next, dead before the first body had begun to fall. Textbook headshots, one point four seconds.

Cougar crept forward, keeping close to the wall opposite the door. Whoever was on the other side of that door seemed to have not been heard the silenced gun fire, or the fall of bodies, over the sound of their captive screaming.

A break in the screams had Cougar pause, waiting to see if his actions had been noticed after all.

"You think you are big man?" A rough, thickly accented voice taunts.

"Well," Jensen's ragged voice comes floating through the door, "statistically speaking I am above average in height, build, and IQ."

The sound of electricity crackling was followed by a pained shout from Jensen.

"We will see how much your 'above average' qualities help you, now won't we?" The voice sneered.

"Well if a demonstration is what you want then I could help you with that. Let's start with a little math. You're standing two feet in front of me while I'm strapped to a chair. Your henchmen behind me are posed in a classic flanking maneuver intended to intimidate me in this six by six room. There's about a foot of space between them at the shoulder. Given my strapped in state you are all approximately two feet taller than me-"

Cougar opened fire, cutting blindly through the wall with his bullets. The muffled sound of bodies falling to the floor could be heard as he walked to the door, opening it in time for Jensen to resume speaking.

"–and that is how you inform friendly snipers of enemy positions by disguising it as a smart-assed math problem." he finished, grinning.

'What made you so sure I was here?' Cougar signed after cutting Jensen free.

'Blood under the door and no noise.' Jensen signed back.
Cougar huffed and smiled as Jensen stood slowly, testing his limbs and stretching to feel out any injuries that could slow them down.

'Shaky,' Jensen signed, 'but stable. Bruises, scratches, electric burns. More worried about W-I-L-K-E-S. They had him first. Foot looked bad.'

Cougar nodded. Having an idea of what shape the team might be in when they got to them would let them plan for the more difficult possibilities.

'Remember the way from where they had you?' Cougar signed.

Jensen nodded. Cougar passed Jensen his handgun, silencer still on. Taking the SR-25 from where it was slung across his back, Cougar made sure the weapon was ready to use and had a silencer of its own screwed on. While Cougar had been doing that, Jensen had dragged the bodies of the guards in to the room.

'Buy us a few seconds. They will not notice blood in a dark hallway, but they will notice dead people.' Jensen signed.

Cougar squinted at Jensen.

'Yes there is a story there.' Jensen signed, rolling his eyes.

Cougar grinned and nodded at the doorway, indicating Jensen should lead. Jensen flipped off the lights and stood for a moment to let his eyes adjust. He carefully peered out of the doorway, checking that the coast was still clear, before he slipped out and headed left. Cougar followed on his heels, closing the door behind him.

Jensen led them down several hallways to a staircase. They followed it two floors down to the basement and turned left. They were padding quietly down a windowless hallway when Jensen froze. The sounds of footsteps could be heard. At the next corner there was a faint brightness, light reflected off the walls from guard flashlights. Faint talking could be heard, unintelligible murmurings from that distance.

Cougar looked around for a place to hide, as killing their way through the compound was not an option if they wanted to rescue their team with minimal damage. He tried the handle on a door; locked. A second door yielded the same result. A faint click had Cougar turning to see the source. Jensen had the door to a small closet opened. It would be a bit of a squeeze, but it was manageable. Jensen waved Cougar in first, following him inside and closing the door before releasing the handle very slowly to avoid making too much noise.

Cougar reached inside one of the pockets of his tac vest and took one of the one point five inch mini glow sticks Jensen had a habit of sneaking in to everyone's packs. It would provide enough light to sign by, but not enough to be spotted under the door if Cougar placed it on a shelf.

Jensen turned around with a tight look on his face. There was a faint trembling in his limbs and he was breathing very slowly and deeply, both trying to calm himself and keep from being overheard. His eyes kept darting around the room, but always returned to the bottom of the door. Cougar was beginning to worry that the electrical torture Jensen had endured may have had worse consequences than either of them had thought.

The sound of boots in the hallways had Jensen freezing. As the steps drew closer he shuffled to the side until he was standing between the door and Cougar. He reached out with one hand and covered Cougar's mouth. Cougar frowned at Jensen; he was not known for making noise. Jensen
shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut, tightening his grip on Cougar's face slightly. Cougar wasn't sure Jensen was even breathing at this point.

The steps came closer, and Cougar tightened his grip on his rifle. His world narrowed down to just a few points. The sweat beading on Jensen's pale forehead, Jensen's cold hand covering his mouth, humid air from Cougar's every exhale bouncing off the back of Jensen's hand, his heart trying to speed up while Cougar was determined to keep his pulse down.

The steps drew level with the door. Light bounced through the crack at the bottom. Cougar noticed for the first time that Jensen didn't have his boots. The guards must have taken them.

The steps continued past the door. The light faded until only the small glow stick was illuminating the closet. The steps echoed around another corner and out of ear shot.

Jensen exhaled and opened his eyes. Cougar could see residual panic in them, but it was fading with each deep breath Jensen took. Cougar rested one hand on Jensen's wrist and squeezed lightly. Jensen blinked and released his grip on Cougar's face.

'Sorry.' he signed.

'It's okay.' Cougar signed back. They all had things that brought back bad memories. Cougar was hardly in a position to judge.

They slipped back out in to the hallway and continued further in to the basement. It did not take much longer for them to find the room the others were held in.

After taking down the guards with a few silent shots, Jensen slipped in to the room. A moment later he came back out, face pale.

'W-I-L-K-E-S needs help.' he signed, taking up a guard position outside the door.

Cougar slipped in to the dark room, cracking a few more mini glow sticks to help him see.

"Shit. Someone actually used those things on a mission. Jensen'll never shut up about them now." Roque rasped.

Wilkes was lying on the floor, head resting on Roque's thigh. He was pale and sweating, eyes unfocused.

"It's his foot." Clay whispered.

Wilkes' foot was wrapped in Clay's jacket, blood soaking through it. Cougar handed the glow sticks to Clay and Roque before setting aside his rifle and taking a pair of nitrile gloves from another pocket of his tac vest. Once the gloves were on he peeled back the makeshift bandage. Half of Wilkes' foot was missing. Shot off from the ragged look of the wound.

Cougar did what he could, disinfecting the wound and applying a field dressing that would have to do until they could get back to their safe house. Around the field dressing he wrapped first Roque's clean jacket, then Clay's bloody one. He used his own belt to both hold the jackets in place and act as a makeshift tourniquet to try and keep Wilkes from bleeding out.

Once Cougar had done as much as he was able to, they stood Wilkes up and had Roque and Clay support him under each arm. The three of them shambled out of the room. Jensen took point to find their way out, and Cougar brought up the rear to keep an eye on, and out for, all of them.
After a tense two hours involving dodging patrols, stealing a car, dodging pursuit, and Clay's shitty driving, the Losers finally got back to the safe house. Cougar began scrubbing up to get a better patch job done on Wilkes' foot. Jensen scrambled to set up as close to a sterile operating environment as he could. Roque kept hold of Wilkes and Clay went to get hold of Coleman to relay what happened and request extraction. Clay came back when Wilkes was already on the table, numb from the knee down, and Cougar was peeling back the field dressing. Wilkes' foot looked even worse under proper lighting. All of his toes were gone, along with the front half of his foot. There were powder burns on the skin, the muscles were shredded and there were bone fragments everywhere. If Wilkes survived blood loss, and if he didn't get an infection he'd get to keep his heel and not much else.

"Can he make it seventeen hours till extraction?" Clay asked.

"No." Cougar answered.

"There's a hospital forty minutes from here." Jensen said, settled in front of his laptops and typing quickly. "They're small, see a lot of hunting accidents. By the time you get there I can have them waiting for an Alexander Andreivich and his hunting buddy Gustav, bringing in Alex's poor nephew Yuri. Just don't let Wilkes answer any questions, he's the only one aside from Cougar who doesn't speak Russian."

"Get on it. Cougar, we need Yuri here to have another field dressing." Clay ordered.

"He has lost a lot of blood." Cougar pointed out.

"Can you do a live transfusion while I type? I'm O negative." Jensen offered, scooting closer as soon as Cougar nodded.

Cougar hooked up the transfusion, then redressed Wilkes' foot. Once that was done he removed anything identifying Wilkes as military from his person. Wilkes started to rouse a bit and was able to follow Cougar's explanation of the plan. By the time Cougar unhooked the transfusion, Clay and Roque came back dressed more like they had been hunting in the cold and helped Cougar get Wilkes changed in to a similar getup.

"Okay, I'm adding in that Gustav has emergency medical training. Not much, but enough to explain the decent dressing and transfusion needle mark if they ask about it." Jensen said. "I just need to enter the IDs in to a few databases and we're good."

"What about ID cards?" Roque asked.

"In the front pocket of my duffle." Jensen said, still typing.

"You just happen to have ready-made IDs for us?" Clay asked incredulously as he headed for Jensen's duffle.

"I had almost two months of not enough to distract me while you guys got to go on missions and I had to play long distance tech support. So I made a few fake IDs for common areas we might be sent to. And then I kept making more after I healed up. There's about 30 of them for each of us, and I usually bring four or five along on missions. It's weirdly soothing to know I can provide us with an 'oh shit' button. Because it sucks to not have that button when you need it." Jensen said.
"We'll give thanks to Jensen's highly tuned sense of paranoia when we get back. Come on." Roque said, indicating to Clay to help him get Wilkes up and out to the car.

"Cougar, you and Jensen hold down the fort while we get Wilkes taken care of." Clay ordered, pocketing the appropriate cards.

Clay and Roque set off with Wilkes bundled in the back seat. Cougar cleaned up the makeshift operation table and then set himself to cleaning his guns to decompress from the very stressful evening. Jensen continued typing away, occasionally reaching up to rub at his ears.

After the eighteenth time Jensen rubbed his ears, Cougar took a closer look. The skin around Jensen's ears was red; too red to not be an injury.

"Hey!" Jensen squawked when Cougar suddenly grabbed his head. He hissed painfully when Cougar moved his glasses out of the way. Jensen's glasses had been stuck to his skin. Cougar realized that the metal frames had conducted the electricity from the stun gun the Russians had been torturing him with.

"Okay I don't know what you just did but as soon as you moved my glasses my temples and ears started hurting. Why, Cougs? I thought we were buddies." Jensen complained.

"Tu glasses were stuck to your skin. You need to have these burns treated." Cougar said, moving to wash his hands again. He wasn't about to get toxic residue from his guns inside Jensen's wounds.

"Huh. I need to see, though... Give me five minutes, okay? I'm almost done, then the others will be safe enough that I can be sorta blind." Jensen said, turning back to his laptops.

Once Jensen was willing to submit to treatment, Cougar quickly cleaned the burns before applying salve and covering them with bandages. Cougar spared a moment to be glad that the small rubber cushions on the nose pads and temple tips had saved Jensen at least some pain.

"You should rest." Cougar said as he packed up the med kit a second time.

"Cougar, you mounted a one-man rescue in an unmapped building in the middle of Russia in shit weather. And then you did an awesome job of keeping Wilkes alive. You totally deserve a good long nap." Jensen argued.

"I was not tortured, I did not give blood." Cougar pointed out. "I also took uppers before I came to get all of you."

"And fucking even more with your system by taking downers for a few hours of sleep would be rude." Jensen concluded. "Fine. I'll give that whole sleep thing a shot. Could be fun."

Cougar grinned and went back to cleaning his guns while Jensen chose to bed down on the couch. Jensen spent a good ten minutes shuffling in to a more comfortable position on the couch before falling asleep with his hands on his chest. It was a habit Cougar had come to notice as he and Jensen would bunk in the same room, or share the same tent, when their options for sleeping arrangements were cramped. Jensen, no matter the position he slept in, kept his hands at chest height. Cougar had considered asking about it, but decided not to since Jensen was kind enough not to make an issue out of Cougar's tendency to sleep cuddle anything within three feet of him. Where most soldiers would heckle Cougar for it, Jensen has simply made a 'sleeper hold' joke and then spent several days researching touch starvation and PTSD.

Cougar finished cleaning his own guns and went on to checking everyone else's weapons. Two hours later he was sure that all of their remaining firearms were in good condition, so he washed
his hands and changed his clothes. He promised himself a proper shower at the next available
topportunity. Maybe when they got back stateside he would treat himself to a long bath and watch
Spirited Away.

Cougar was distracted from his planning by Jensen suddenly stiffening in his sleep. Jensen was
frowning, and his breathing was becoming distressed. His hands curled in to fists where they lay on
his chest. A nightmare, probably.

Cougar was wondering if there was a safe way to wake Jensen when he very suddenly jolted away,
both hands flying to his mouth to keep any sound from escaping. Jensen stared at the room for a
few minutes, confusion and fear evident in his gaze. When his eyes landed on Cougar he frowned
before seeming to realize where and when he was. Jensen relaxed, stopped holding his hands over
his mouth, and started breathing again. After taking a few moments to just lay there and breathe, he
got up and shuffled off to the bathroom.

Cougar was glad to be alone right then, a number of things were suddenly becoming painfully
clear. Jensen kept his hands on his chest so that he would have them ready to silence himself. In
the closet back in the compound, Jensen had covered Cougar's mouth because he had been afraid.
At some point Jensen must have experienced something, something unofficial that would not get
written in his military files because according to the military it never happened. Whatever it was he
had faced, Jensen had come away from it linking silence to fear and danger.

Guilt burned in Cougar's chest. Jensen had likely known that if he slept he would have nightmares.
But he had bunked down anyways because Cougar had asked him to. It did not help matters that
when Jensen came out of the bathroom he had a fake smile in place and started looking for reasons
to stay away.

"I see all the weapons have been cleaned. That's good, always a good idea to have clean weapons.
Wouldn't want the bad guys to think we were weapon slobs. Or even regular slobs. I'm not the
poster child for the neatest apartment or anything but I try to keep mine clean-ish at least. First of
all if we get shipped off suddenly I won't come back to an apartment full of molding laundry.
Secondly it's actually really distracting when you think you might die and your last thought it
gonna be 'God help whoever cleans out my place, it is a sty'!" Jensen rambled nervously.

"What story?" Cougar asked, hoping the distraction would calm Jensen down and give him
something to focus on.

"Story?" Jensen asked, blinking in confusion.

"Earlier. You signed 'Yes there is a story there'." Cougar prompted, signing as he quoted Jensen.
"What story?"

"Oh!" Jensen said, lighting up with enthusiasm. "It's an awesome story! So, remember Michelle?
You bumped in to her at the hospital a few months back. At one point we were roomies, we rented
a duplex together. I came home from my first tour and it was really late at night, so I just snuck up
to my room and tried not to make too much noise. In the morning I got up and when I went in the
hallway I noticed two things: first was that she'd repainted the walls; a lovely deep mauve, or so I
was told. Looked like purple with grey in it to me. Second was what looked like bloodstains.
Apparently there had been a Halloween party three weeks before and someone got fake blood
everywhere and that shit stains and Mish just hadn't had the time to paint over the fake bloodstains.

"But I didn't know any of that, all I knew was that there was this huge red stain on the floor and
about halfway up the wall. So I freaked out and wondered how I had missed it. After Mish calmed
me down I realized that mid-to-dark toned wall, plus blood stain, plus dead of night and no light
source, equals nasty surprise for me and a good laugh for Michelle." Jensen explained.

From there he launched in to a retelling of their efforts to remove the stain, which led to a prank war that somehow followed him back to base and resulted in the Fort Bragg Furby Trebuchet legend that Cougar had only heard third or fourth accounts of. The more Jensen talked, the more he relaxed, and the fake smile was soon replaced with a real one. By the time Clay and Roque texted them to pack up the safe house and be ready for extraction, the stress was gone from Jensen's frame. Cougar noticed that he himself felt a bit lighter as well. Where Jensen had taken comfort in sharing good memories, Cougar had gotten comfort from having someone nearby who did not demand Cougar interact with them. Cougar's presence had been all that was necessary.

As they packed up the team's gear and set it by the door, Cougar found himself hoping Jensen would be with the Losers for a long time. Typically the team was usually a last stop before a discharge, honorable or otherwise. Because of this, Cougar usually would not bother forming attachments to new members until they had been with the team for a year or so. Often it had happened that new additions could not handle the stress, or they were too far gone to be helped by a last chance team. Roque had been straddling that line nearly the entire time Cougar had known him; his behavior had improved in recent months, but Cougar did not think that punching people with knives was a viable solution in most cases. In Jensen's case however, Cougar was surprised to find that he'd become attached without noticing.

Looking over at Jensen, Cougar could not help smiling. Jensen was packing away his computers and ad-libbing opera while he worked. Catching Cougar's gaze, Jensen just grinned and kept at it. Cougar shook his head and reached for the next half-packed duffle bag. Cougar could not, and would not, force someone to stay with the army if it was not working out well for them. To stay or go at any time would be Jensen's own choice. But that was not going to stop him from hoping Jensen would stick around. And if Cougar occasionally went out of his way to make the tech's life a little easier, well, that was just what friends did, wasn't it?

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings:

Near the beginning of the chapter there is a non graphic description of Clay vomiting.

Towards the end of the chapter there is a description of an injury Wilkes received. Part of his foot was shot off. It mentions blood, muscle damage, and bone.

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I feel the need to mention that, while there is a form of automatic promotion within the army, Clay did actually earn his promotion. Jensen was just doing everyone a favor by sassing Clay before he could get too big of a head.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

If I were going to title my chapters, this one would be called "You Need To Be A Level 4 Friend Before You Unlock My Tragic Backstory".

Trigger warnings in the end notes.

The month after the failed mission that cost the team Wilkes had been a busy one. The first week and a half had been filled with meetings; Generals and CIA personnel going over everything with a fine toothed comb and endless questions. What had gone wrong? Did the team use the intel provided? Why had Sergeant Wilkes lost three quarters of his foot? Could any of them have prevented this from happening? Why was he taken to a hospital? Why had Corporal Alvarez not phoned in the loss of his team? Why had he gone against policy and staged a rescue attempt? How could we possibly shove blame for this fuckup on the shoulders of anyone who wasn't actually responsible?

In the end it had been revealed that a minor leak of intelligence had led to the Russians expecting American military interference. When the Losers had arrived in town with military regulation haircuts they had had easy to spot. The only reason they had not been attacked before their attempted assault was that Cougar's hat and Jensen's ridiculous scarf had been enough to cause the Russians to doubt that they were military. Rather than go on the offensive, the gun runners had chosen to let the Losers walk right in to an ambush.

At the final meeting concerning that mission, General Coleman gave the team instructions to grow some kind of facial hair and choose civilian haircuts. Jensen's eyes had lit up with excitement, causing Coleman to hastily amend the new rule with a prohibition on hair colours other than blond, ginger, brunet, or black. Cougar had since then amused himself by picturing the looks on the faces of the brass if Jensen had shown up the next day with green hair. As it was, most of the team was glad to stop shaving every day, and Jensen had immediately swapped his GI glasses with the round lenses Cougar had seen him wear off base as soon as they had left the meeting.

The next three weeks had been filled with visits to their individual therapists. Apparently the brass was under the impression that therapy was a magical trauma cure-all and that healing could be accelerated through increased visits and over prescribing medication. In between appointments, the Losers spent time visiting Wilkes in the base medical centre. Jensen had taken to doing his homework in Wilkes' room to keep the injured man company. When Cougar walked in one day to find that Wilkes 'happened' to have been selected to test a new type of prosthesis he was not in the least bit surprised.

Once Wilkes was approved for the trial, he was moved to a hospital in a different state. The Losers had held an impromptu going away party. Several of Wilkes' friends from the motor pool had joined in, and things had gotten out of hand. Wheelchair races were now banned, not that they had been permitted before, and the closest pizzeria to base was now instructing their drivers to leave deliveries at the base entrance rather than set foot on base. Amazingly, it had been Clay and Roque who had started the trouble. Jensen had dragged Cougar along to witness the ensuing chaos and
After Wilkes had left, and everyone's dosages had been checked, they were assigned their first replacement transportation officer. Specialist Hershel had lasted one mission with the Losers before getting on his knees and begging Coleman for a transfer. In hindsight, making him bunk with Roque had probably not been the best way to break in a new teammate.

The second replacement, Sergeant Harley, had muttered racist remarks, completely ignored Roque, and had called Cougar a wetback to his face. Before they even went on one mission with the man he was found hogtied, his duct taped mouth stuffed with dirty socks, and he had been locked inside a broken industrial dryer on base for sixteen hours. Cougar and Roque both had air tight alibis for the time of his abduction as they had been meeting with their respective therapists. Clay had been in a meeting with Coleman, complaining about Harley. Jensen had left base to grab lunch for the group, he had signed out at the front gate twenty minutes prior, but had returned late smelling of fresh laundry. Harley had chosen to leave the military rather than be a Loser. The next day, Roque had shown up with a bakery box and placed it on Jensen's desk.

"Bakery fucked up my order and gave 'em to me free. I don't eat shit this sweet." Roque had said.

"Always happy to lend a hand." Jensen had said, beaming. The smile had turned giddy when he had opened the box and found half a dozen brightly coloured cupcakes. At the end of the day Jensen had sent Cougar home with half of the cupcakes, insisting that the sniper was too skinny. "Winter's almost here, if we get sent to Russia again you'll freeze! How are you gonna save all our asses then, huh?"

The next day Clay and Cougar had gone to pick up lunch for the team. Clay had sat in the passenger seat of Cougar's truck, seeming to be working up to something. Eventually he mused aloud,

"It's kind of surprising. Out of all of us Jensen is the last one I would have expected to retaliate physically. Figured he'd rain down digital doom, or whatever the fuck it is he does."

"We don't know that he did it." Cougar pointed out. There were no finger prints on the duct tape or the dryer, Harley wasn't talking, and the loan security camera in the laundry room had been broken for a week. While Cougar knew Jensen had been the one to confront Harley, he also had nothing to back up the claim, which suited him just fine as he would not want to get his friend in trouble.

"Right." Clay said, rolling his eyes. "If Jensen did it, then he used a method I would not have expected from him."

"If Jensen did it," Cougar said, keeping his voice low, "then I imagine he would have chosen such a method precisely because it is so far removed from his M.O. that it disqualifies him as a suspect."

Clay sat in his seat and stared at Cougar for a moment. His expression then became equal parts shrewd and amused.

"You seem pretty certain that that would be his thought process." Clay said. "You know, if Jensen was responsible."

"I am studying for a Master's in Criminology." Cougar pointed out.

Clay snorted and smiled before turning to look out the window. Cougar was glad the subject was being dropped. Jensen had only done what he had felt necessary to defend his friends. Additionally, Cougar was not certain if having a person with an eidetic memory proofread his criminology
papers counted as aiding and abetting.

Hopefully the next person they got would be someone they would want to keep around for a while.


Three weeks later, Cougar wished he could take back that thought. After a mission with a loaner transportation officer, the Losers had arrived back at base to the news that General Coleman had found a candidate for their team.

Sergeant Linwood "Pooch" Porteous had met the team with good grace, and a hearty hug from Jensen. Porteous had apparently gone through Q course with Jensen, and they had served under Major McGibbons together for a few months after that. Porteous remained relaxed around Clay, and did not seem offended in the least by Roque's threatening demeanor. But as soon as he and Cougar had locked eyes the man had stiffened ever so slightly, and he had become cautious.

The team picked up on it, but seeing as neither of them were openly hostile they elected to pretend everything was fine. Porteous had been welcomed to the team with good cheer. Their first mission with the man had demonstrated that he was skilled as not only a driver, but a heavy weapons expert as well. Added to that, his mechanical skills had served them well and he had drawn Jensen in to a discussion on Roombas, and how best to modify one to make it useable during a zombie apocalypse. The cheerful chatter between the two had kept the team relaxed enough that everyone had slept well and was able to function at peak performance during the mission.

In the aftermath of that unexpectedly successful first mission, the Losers were sent on another mission immediately with no down time. And then another mission after that. It seemed that the brass had decided the team was on a lucky streak and were going to milk it for all it was worth.

After the fourth mission in three weeks without once setting foot on American soil, the team began to get grouchy. Never mind that they had all done their time in the main unit of the army and had gone on deployment for months or years, the Losers had gotten accustomed to a system and were pissed that things were being changed.

Jensen bemoaned all the tv shows he was missing, while Roque and Clay made noises about finding dive bars and women with low standards and the next available opportunity. Porteous mentioned missing his wife, Jolene, and told tales of the strong and beautiful nurse who cooked like a team of angels. Descriptions of her chicken pot pie were given in an effort to comfort the team after four weeks of nothing but MREs began to take their toll on everyone's digestion.

By the time they did get brought home, everyone had come to accept Porteous as a member of the team. Everyone, that is, except Cougar. He and Porteous were still wary of each other. Nobody on the team knew, but they had met before, years ago. The circumstances of their first meeting hung over them both and kept them from interacting with each other aside from what was necessary.

Cougar had hoped that, when they got back stateside, he would get some time away from Porteous, enough to deal with what had happened and find a way to put it behind them. Cougar did get distance, but it seemed to be at the cost of Jensen. Cougar had not thought about how it would affect his friendship with Jensen if he avoided Porteous. He also had not realized exactly how much time he spent with the tech until Jensen had begun spending half of it with Porteous. And it was actually half, Jensen had clearly picked up on the tension between the two men and made sure to remain neutral by dividing his time nearly equally between them. Cougar knew he was going to
have to deal with Porteous, preferably before their next mission, but he did not know how to approach it without making it seem like a confrontation, so he was avoiding Porteous as much as humanly possible.

At the beginning of their second week stateside, Jensen was helping Cougar go over an assignment that was due the next day. Jensen was fidgeting more than usual; knowing Jensen fairly well by this point, Cougar could tell Jensen was working himself up to discuss a topic that he was worried would garner a negative reaction. Moments earlier Cougar had responded to a question from Jensen with the fact that he kept no contact with his family, save for an aunt and his youngest sister. Figuring that Jensen was working up to asking him why, Cougar was planning how to gently let Jensen know it was too personal a question.

"So is there a reason you and Pooch avoid sharing the same space?" Jensen asked, scratching behind his ear with a pen. Cougar choked on his coffee. "Or is this a thing I shouldn't be asking about because it's nosy and rude?" Jensen babbled. "Because I like the guy, I served in the same unit with him for a few months and we got along fine, played some awesome pranks, and he seems like a really sweet normal dude who just happens to refer to himself in the third person and calls COs out on their bullshit, but I don't necessarily know him and if you know something that I don't that has you avoiding him then maybe I should know it too. Or get a hint. Oh god. He's in to anthropomorphic Nazi horse porn, isn't he?"

"¿QUÉ?" Cougar sputtered. "I can totally understand not wanting to be around someone who fetishizes fascist furries, man." Jensen said, nodding understandingly and reaching out to squeeze Cougar shoulder. "It's not that." Cougar said, wracking his brain for a reasonable excuse. One that could cover the truth without being an actual lie. "Not everyone is comfortable with snipers. You know this. The way the army and the Company uses us makes mental instability very common. And according to rumor I am one of the best. According to other rumors I am also a mute psychic were-cougar who died in Afghanistan but wanted to avenge my platoon so badly Satan resurrected me and declared that each life I take is another year I get to live."

"That sounds like an awesome plot. Can I use that for next year's NaNoWriMo?" Jensen asked, awed and excited. "Sí." Cougar said, checking to make sure he had not spilled coffee on his project. "I will talk to Porteous soon, see if I can clear the air."

"Okay." Jensen said, bouncing nervously in his chair. "Thanks. I. Well. I just think it'd be nice if my friends got along." he finished, looking down at his lap while his ears burned.

"Sí. It would be." Cougar agreed. Jensen relaxed and smiled brightly at Cougar before turning his attention back to Cougar's assignment. It was moments like this that made Cougar wonder if Jensen was perhaps younger than his file suggested. Jensen had told Cougar that he had signed up on his eighteenth birthday, and with his service record it should put him around twenty or twenty-one years old. But when it came to social interactions that held importance, Jensen seemed much
younger and less sure of himself. Cougar knew it was not shyness, Jensen was often eager to meet new people and make new friends, managing to strike up conversations with everyone from wait staff to Generals. Whatever the source of this insecurity, Cougar did not like being responsible for it rearing its head. He would speak to Porteous before the end of the day.

Two hours later, Cougar came back from PT to find that Jensen was missing.

"Kid usually just follows the sound of Clay cursing when his computer goes belly up." Roque groused.

"Has anyone tried calling his cell?" Porteous asked.

"On it." Cougar said, phone already in hand and ringing. After four rings the answering machine picked up. "Jensen, Clay broke his computer again. Please call back." Cougar said when prompted for a message.

"I did not break my computer. My computer broke itself." Clay insisted.

"If we have Jensen put a block on your computer so you can't download shitty soap operas would your computer crash less?" Roque shot back.

"Have we considered the possibility that he's in the bathroom?" Porteous asked, breaking up the fight before it really began.

"We've been looking for him for twenty minutes. He's not in the offices, he's not as his therapist, he's not with the other techs, and if he had gone to the medical centre they would have called me by now." Clay said.

"Is it possible he's just not near his phone?" Porteous asked, concern creeping in to his voice.

"Standing around isn't going to help us find him. Pooch, check if he wandered over to the motor pool and is sticking his head inside something he shouldn't." Roque ordered. "Cougar, he wasn't doing PT while you were there and you didn't pass him on the way back?" Cougar shook his head. "Then stay here and see if he wanders back in. Clay and I will go pick up lunch, maybe his fresh food radar will draw him in."

"What was the last thing any of us saw him doing?" Porteous asked.

"Hour and a half ago he finished editing my paper and went to work on his own." Cougar said.

"Last I saw him he was sitting down to proofread Cougar's paper." Roque said.

"About thirty minutes ago I passed him in the hallway outside these offices. He was heading to pick up some mail." Clay said.

"Does anyone remember if he's got a grudge against someone as is planning a prank right now?" Porteous asked.

"Oh hell, if he's starting a prank war we're all going to be shipped to Siberia." Clay groaned, following Roque out the door to pick up lunch.

Cougar and Porteous were left in the office, staring awkwardly at each other. The silence stretched between them, slowly becoming oppressive the longer neither of them said anything.
"So." Porteous said, breaking the silence. "I'm just gonna... the motor pool... expensive equipment and possibly unsupervised Jensen." Porteous had slowly been backing up as he spoke, pointing over his shoulder at the door and avoiding Cougar's eyes. His posture was deliberately non-threatening in a way that made Cougar realize he had missed something: Porteous was just as afraid of a possible confrontation with Cougar, as Cougar was of a possible confrontation with Porteous. Hoping he was reading things right, Cougar called out,

"Porteous." The bald man froze and looked at Cougar nervously. "I would like to speak with you later. To put things to rest, si?"

Porteous blinked and stood up straighter. He looked at Cougar searchingly, and slowly began to relax.

"That sounds good." Porteous said, tentatively. "Some time after lunch, okay? Provided we find Jensen."

"Si." Cougar agreed, smiling.

Pooch nodded and left, looking much more at ease. Perhaps in this situation neither of them were the bad guys. Cougar shook his head at himself, it seemed that no matter how old he got he consistently sucked at communicating properly. As a child Cougar had thought he would have all the answers by the time he was eighteen; at twenty-three he was beginning to think there was no such thing. Adulthood had simply meant he had left the tutorial stage and entered hard mode.

Cougar was going to blame the video game metaphor on Jensen, and not the three hour study break he had spent playing Final Fantasy XI the previous night.

As Cougar made his way over to the coffee machine to brew a fresh pot, he thought about maybe letting Jensen know that Cougar enjoyed that particular game series. Typically Cougar preferred to keep his geekier habits to himself, but with Jensen there was a very high chance that he would ask to play with Cougar and not simply attempt to tease him. It could be fun to have a companion to level with, and Cougar could admit to being curious if having to use the in-game chat function would make Jensen less verbose.

Thinking about Jensen brought Cougar back to the current problem. Despite what most would think, Jensen was dependable and not prone to disappearing on base in the middle of the day. Jensen kept his cell on him at all times and should have called back by now. There were no appointments or meetings scheduled for today, no reason for his to have gone missing.

Cougar recalled Clay saying Jensen had gone to pick up mail. Jensen did not have any family, or at least none that he spoke of, so it was odd for him to receive anything. He usually had packages sent to his home, unless he thought there was a high likelihood of the team being deployed when it was delivered. Still, it could not have been anything dangerous as their mail was screened for explosives and, after the anthrax scares last year, dangerous compounds.

In his distracted state, Cougar managed to knock the canister over and spill coffee grounds everywhere. Growling at his own clumsiness, Cougar went in search of their supply closet and broom.

Entering the closet, Cougar began shuffling through the cramped space and nearly tripped over a pair of boots poking out from between two shelving units. Attempting to nudge the boots out of the way, Cougar found they wouldn't budge, and on closer inspection it became clear that it was because the person wearing them could not move any further in to the tiny, cramped space he was in. Crouching slightly to get a better look, Cougar found that Jensen had wedged himself in to the
space between the shelving units. Jensen's face was pale, his eyes and nose were rimmed with red, and he kept one hand tightly covering his mouth. It took a moment for Jensen to register Cougar's presence, but when he did he tensed even further and his eyes widened with fear. Jensen began trembling and closed his eyes. He looked like he was bracing for a hit.

“Jensen?” Cougar said, softly. Jensen flinched and turned his head away, always keeping his hand over his mouth. “¿Qué está pasando?” (What is going on?) Jensen's breathing took on a faster, more panicked rate while his eyes squeezed tighter in an effort to stop tears from falling. A low, pained moan escaped before he could cut it off. Realizing that hovering in front of Jensen was probably not helping the situation, Cougar sat down in front of his friend and gently placed a hand on his knee, softly calling again. “Jensen, I can't help if I don't know what happened.”

Jensen's eyes snapped open and scanned the room. Once he determined that they were indeed locked in a closet together, Jensen extended the arm he'd kept down by his side until now. He brought his clenched fist up and pressed it to Cougar's chest, pushing lightly. It took a few seconds for Cougar to realize that Jensen meant to pass the crumpled letter in his hand to Cougar. Once he'd managed to pry it from Jensen's hand, Jensen took his hand back and brought it to clamp down on his other hand keeping his mouth covered before curling in on himself and resting his head on his knees while he shook.

Cougar carefully unfolded the letter and found that the blue ink scrawled across the page had been blurred slightly in several areas. A detached part of his mind identified them as dried tear stains, and Cougar felt his sense of dread grow as he began to read.

Dear Jake,

This letter is long overdue. And I'm sorry for that, too. I'm sorry for a lot of things, and it's time I own up to all of it.

I'm sorry for the shitty childhood we had. I know I'm not responsible for our parents' actions, but I am responsible for my own and looking back I know I made things a lot worse for you than they had to be. I know I was horribly unfair and downright cruel to you growing up, and you didn't deserve it.

One of the earliest memories that I have is being six and hiding in a closet with you, you were just two at the time, and I kept a hand clamped on your mouth in case you started to cry because we couldn't afford to be heard. Not when Mom was in that mood, or when Dad had come home with another bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag. I remember trying so hard to keep my little brother quiet and safe, and I lay awake at night now wondering how the fuck I ended up so falling so far from that point.

I always focused on trying to hide, trying to get away until things cooled down, but we both know I wasn't always successful. And the biggest failure I ever felt as a child was the first time you took a beating in my place. It was supposed to be me, Jake. He said he was going to beat me and you just... You stood up to him. You were five and you did something I'd never even dreamed of doing. And he beat you bloody for it. And I didn't have a mark on me. I thought you'd hate me because of that. I wanted you to hate me because I didn't stand up to him for you. Not once. But you didn't hate me. You were more worried about if I was okay than anything else. And I couldn't take it.

That's when I started pushing you away. I didn't really know why at the time, but I'm starting to realize that I was hoping that if I pushed you away, if I hurt you enough in a
different way than our parents did, then you'd stop standing up to them. You'd stop distracting them when it looked like it was going to be my turn to get hurt. If I pushed you away and made you think I didn't care, then maybe you'd stop caring and stop putting yourself in harm's way for my sake.

So I called you names. Dumbass, Idiot, Nerd, Faggot, Shit-stain. If I didn't call you one of those I called you Jacob instead of Jake because I knew you hated it; that's what Mom and Dad always called you. I bullied you, and mocked you, and dismissed you, and gave your toys away to my friends because I knew it was cruel. Only you never hated me. You looked out for me even though I was horrible to you and it made me hate you. I hated that you could still smile and look happy at school when our home life was hell. I hated that you still acted like a dorky kid who thought his sister was the coolest person ever. And I hated that you still, no matter what, refused to let either of our parents target me.

None of it was your fault, Jake. I know I said the exact opposite in high school, but none of it was your fault. Not our shitty parents, and not my shitty behavior. You didn't deserve any of it. You deserved so much better than what you got. And I sure as hell don't deserve you as a brother. You've never once missed sending a birthday or Christmas or any other damn holiday card, and it's always arrived on time. You even sent a very lovely wedding gift last summer. I don't know how you even found out Donny and I were getting married. I don't even know if you have a phone, let alone what the number might be. This letter is the first time since you left home when you were 17 that I've even tried to correspond with you.

I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry for letting my anger at our home situation get the better of me. I'm sorry for pushing you away. I'm sorry for siding with our abusers. I'm sorry for taking away your support system by doing that. I'm sorry for hating you. I'm sorry for not talking to you, for not listening. I'm sorry for ignoring you and constantly telling you to shut up. I'm sorry for all of it. And I'm not looking for forgiveness. I'd say I don't want it, but I'm trying to be honest with you, Jake. So I will say that I don't think I could handle you forgiving me, because I don't deserve it and I won't ever forgive myself.

I know you're probably wondering why. Why now, why after all these years, why break the silence, why apologize and not ask for forgiveness? And I have a very good reason.

I'm pregnant.

I'm pregnant and I haven't even told my husband yet. I'm pregnant and terrified because there's a potential life growing inside me. I'm terrified because the last time I tried looking out for someone smaller and younger than me, I made their life a living hell and buried all the reasons for doing so under a thick layer of denial. I'm terrified of turning in to our parents, since I've already proven once that I'm capable of it.

I need you Jake. I need you to be part of this kid's life. I need to you keep an eye on him or her. I need you to do this, and if you ever, ever, suspect that Donny and I are becoming abusive in any way, shape, or form, you take this baby. You take them away from us and you make sure he or she or they grow up loved and happy and safe. Don't let them grow up the way we did, hiding in closets and muffling our tears because we're terrified of being heard.
Cougar lowered the tear-stained letter slowly with a shaking hand and took a deep breath to calm himself. His eyes burned as he blinked away unshed tears. Ignoring the horror, rage, and disgust roiling inside him, Cougar turned to look at Jensen. He was still curled up protectively, both hands covering his mouth and nose to quiet the sobs that wrack his body and force tears from eyes that are closed tight.

“Jensen.” Cougar whispered. When he received no response he tried a different approach. “Jake, look at me.” Blue eyes rimmed in red peek out from behind Jensen's lenses. “It's going to be okay. You're safe right now.” Small whimpers start to escape from Jensen as he shakes and Cougar carefully reaches out with both hands and rests them on Jensen's arms. “It’s okay. Come here.”

It took several minutes of careful cajoling for Cougar to get Jensen out of his hiding spot. Once Jensen was out from between the shelving units he looked so sad, so afraid and shaken that Cougar slowly leaned forward and brought his arms around Jensen, enveloping him in a hug, hoping like hell he was not screwing up by touching Jensen in the first place. Strong arms snapped around Cougar's torso and for one moment he worried that Jensen was trying to crush him, but then Jensen buried his face in Cougar's chest and let himself cry.

While Jensen was sobbing in to his chest, Cougar took out his phone and shot a text off to Clay.

[To: Clay Oct/23/02 12:58 pm]

Found Jensen. He's ill. Need to take him home.

[From: Clay Oct/23/02 12:59 pm]

shit. okay then. dont catch whatever hes got

That taken care of, Cougar sent a message to Porteous.

[To: Porteous Oct/23/02 13:00 pm]

Need extraction. Get Jensen off base, no questions.

[From: Porteous Oct/23/02 13:00 pm]

Send location and I can be there. ETA 5 minutes

It took Porteous seven minutes to show up, but that allowed Jensen to push through his breakdown enough that he was not openly sobbing. It was still clear that something bad had happened, between the pale face, the red eyes and nose, and the thousand yard stare it would have been
impossible to miss.

"Jay?" Porteous asked, cautiously.

Jensen did not respond, not so much as a blink.

"He is ill, and needs to get off base." Cougar said.

When Porteous nodded, Cougar grabbed Jensen's wrist gently and pulled him along as they left. Porteous had a jeep idling outside. They loaded Jensen in the back and Cougar rummaged through a bag he had packed with props. Cougar tucked a blanket around Jensen and placed a clean thermometer in the tech's mouth.

"Ah." Porteous said from the front seat. "He's 'ill'."

"Si." Cougar responded, double checking that he had Jensen's wallet and IDs and that Jensen was buckled in.

The guard at the entrance waved them through with a soup recommendation after a brief glance at Jensen. Once they were on the road, Cougar gave Porteous directions to his apartment building. Cougar had not yet been to Jensen's apartment, and so was unsure of what condition it was in; after an episode like what he had just been through Jensen would likely need a comfortable, well-lit environment. And it afforded Cougar a better opportunity to keep an eye on Jensen.

After they arrived at Cougar's building, Porteous helped guide Jensen out of the truck. A quick trip up the elevator and down the hall brought them to Cougar's apartment door.

"Have you got him from here?" Porteous asked, looking at Jensen with concern.

"Si. It is shock, not catatonia." Cougar said. Porteous looked understanding and nodded slowly before speaking again.

"Alright. Let me know if you guys need anything. And Jolene's a nurse, so she could help too. If she doesn't know something she probably knows where to find out."

"Thank you, Porteous." Cougar said.

"No problem, man." Porteous said, turning to leave. Cougar had only gotten the top lock undone when Porteous called out, "Hey, I know we haven't had a chance to talk yet, might have to put that off for a bit, but my friends call me Pooch." he said, sounding hopeful.

"Thank you, Pooch." Cougar said, smiling.

Pooch grinned and headed back down the hallway. Cougar got his door open and guided Jensen inside. Cougar got Jensen settled on the couch, close enough to the window for him to benefit from the breeze when Cougar cracked it open and see the suet feeder Cougar hung for birds in the colder months.

Once Jensen was sitting, Cougar set a plastic cup of cold water near him as well as a box of tissues. Cougar then retreated to the kitchen. Jensen would come out of his head when he was ready to, no amount of hovering would make it go faster. Still, Cougar was thankful that his kitchen had a breakfast bar instead of an enclosed wall. He would be able to see any changes in Jensen, and Jensen would be able to see that he was not alone in a strange place.

Removing his BDU jacket, Cougar then opened the fridge door before crossing to the sink to wash
his hands. As he scrubbed up he contemplated the ingredients he could see through the open door. He decided on enchiladas; tasty, but gentle enough on a stomach that might be touchy after a period of stress.

As Cougar worked he whistled to himself, a half remembered tune from afternoons spent in the kitchen with his abuela. Cougar kept an eye on Jensen as he prepared the meal, noting small changes in the other's man's posture as he slowly came back to himself. By the time the enchiladas were in the oven, Jensen was taking in his surroundings. His posture was still subdued, but he was not curled in on himself or tense. When Cougar switched from cooking to washing what he'd used to prepare food, Jensen relaxed more and finally started sipping the water Cougar had left near him.

Cougar continued tidying up, eventually carrying his BDU jacket to the closet near the front door. He retrieved Jensen's letter from a pocket before hanging it up, then removed his combat boots and socks, slipping on the goofy Totoro slippers his little sister Fernanda had sent him. Normally he would have left them hidden in the closet when company was over, but since he suspected Jensen would get a kick out of them he made an exception.

Cougar seemed to make a lot of exceptions when it came to Jensen.

When Cougar rounded the couch and Jensen turned to look at him, Jensen froze when he spotted the slippers.

"There is about fifteen more minutes before the food is ready, you could take a shower if you wanted." Cougar offered.

Jensen looked up at Cougar, blue eyes wide behind round lenses as he nodded. Cougar led Jensen to the bathroom, pointed out where he kept the towels, and closed the door behind him. Cougar next went to his room and sought out the largest clothes he had. Jensen might only be two and a half inches taller than Cougar, but he was a good deal broader. Eventually Cougar settled on a pair of his sweatpants and an old shirt an ex-boyfriend had left behind when he dumped Cougar for going in to Spec Ops.

He quickly placed the substitute clothes on the bathroom counter and removed Jensen's BDU set, as well as his socks and undershirt. The whole lot, along with some dirty BDUs Cougar had yet to wash, went in to Cougar's washing machine. He would run the load after they had eaten. The oven timer went off just as Cougar finished changing in to his own set of sweats and a t-shirt with the sleeves ripped off.

Cougar had divided the enchiladas between two plates by the time Jensen emerged from the bathroom. The hair he had been letting grow out of its usual high and tight cut was sticking out in damp, fluffy spikes, and his face was pink from the heat of the shower. Cougar swallowed to keep his jaw from dropping. No con un compañero de equipo, he reminded himself. (Not with a teammate)

Cougar showed Jensen the plates and nodded to the couch. Jensen sat and accepted the plate Cougar handed him.

"You're, um. You're quiet." Jensen said softly. "Well. Okay. You're always pretty quiet, even when you actually say stuff. But usually your body language gives me at least a little to work with. Right now you're quiet all over." he rambled.

"Jake." Cougar said gently. Jensen stilled and watched Cougar out of the corner of his eye. "I am giving you time."
Jensen's face crumpled slowly and he swallowed before nodding. He started eating, picking disinterestedly at his food in between bites until he seemed to realize how hungry he was. The enchiladas disappeared at an astonishing rate after that.

Once they had eaten, Cougar put their plates to soak and went to start the laundry. When he came back, Jensen had gotten up and was watching the birds flit around on the suet feeder. Cougar watched Jensen for a moment, wondering how or even if he should be the one to start the conversation. He did not speak of his own family due to the pain those memories caused, and he wondered if the looming conversation would do more harm than good.

After mulling it over, Cougar considered the possibility that what Jensen needed was to know that there would be no judgment from Cougar. Cougar himself had not been abused, at least not physically or purposefully, but he had been very close with someone who had.

"Earlier today," Cougar began softly, "I mentioned that I do not keep contact with my family. I was the third child my parents had, and the first boy. Anna was oldest, then Belicia, then me; all born one year after another. When I was two mi madre had twins, Diego and Estrella. And then eight years after that, Fernanda was born."

"Did. Did your parents name you all in alphabetical order?" Jensen asked, sounding incredulous as he turned to look at Cougar. Cougar nodded. "My full name is Jacob James Jensen." he blurted out.

"Mi padre is named Juan, and his twin sister is Juanita." Cougar offered, smiling.

Jensen huffed out a laugh that was quickly followed by a second. Soon he was giggling, just a bit hysterically. His face had gone pink again, and there were tears rolling down his face while he laughed. He stumbled to the couch and giggled to himself while Cougar slowly came closer.

Cougar sat on the couch next to Jensen and watched with good humor while Jensen laughed helplessly. Eventually Jensen calmed down and signed an apology to Cougar for the interruption. Cougar smiled and shook his head, signing 'No need' before picking up where he had left off.

"I only keep contact with Fernanda now. She sent me my slippers last Christmas." Cougar said, nodding his head at the stuffed Totoros engulfing his feet.

"She has good taste." Jensen said, reaching out to gently kick the closest Totoro.

"She knows how much I like Ghibli movies." Cougar said, stifling a laugh when Jensen looked at him with big excited eyes. "She was only seven when I joined the army, and has mostly been raised by our Tia Juanita and our abuela. Our mother was very busy running a beauty salon. Starting at the age of twelve I began working there to earn spending money. Eventually I progressed from sweeping floors to doing manicures, and earned more money because of this. Money that I never spent." Cougar paused there, trying to find a way to describe what had happened when he was seventeen without outing himself, or anyone else.

"When I got to be fifteen or so my cousin Javier found out that I had just saved everything. I told him I was saving for college to get him to stop asking to borrow some. My best friend at the time, Carmen, was not in a good place with her family." Atenuación, Cougar thought. Carmen had been born Kevin, and her highly transphobic parents would have sent her to conversion therapy or an ex-gay camp if they had ever found out.

"We came up with a plan, Carmen got a part time job and I took more hours at the salon. We told our parents we wanted to save for college and maybe a car. Two years later we pooled our savings and found that we had nearly seventy-five thousand dollars. We got Carmen a fake ID and papers
and someone in a different state willing to shelter her. She left a note for her parents and was on a train before noon that day.

"When her parents found out they were furious." Carmen's parents destroyed the note before reporting her missing to the police. "Police were involved in searching for her." Cougar had delivered a handwritten copy of Carmen's note to the lead detective and explained that they were worried her parents would omit the note when they called the police. It had detailed the mental and emotional abuse she had suffered and included a confession about her being trans. "I was honest about my involvement in her disappearance, but led them to believe that I did not know where she was going or what her new identity was." It had helped that the lead detective had a non-binary cousin and made sure not to ask too many questions of Cougar. "When the dust settled my parents were very displeased with me."

"You helped someone out of a shitty situation and your parents were displeased?" Jensen asked, disgust lacing his voice.

"I squandered my college fund. Never mind that it had all been my money to begin with, they were upset that I might not go to a good law school." Cougar explained.

"You wanted to be a lawyer?" Jensen asked.

"No. They wanted me to be a lawyer. I wanted to write crime thriller novels. That is why I started taking criminology courses." Cougar said. "I told them as much, it did not go well. To their minds I 'lost' an entire college fund, betrayed some of their closest church friends, and then said I wished to be a penniless bum all my life."

"Ah. Good old parental expectations that don't account for their kids being people and not chess pieces." Jensen said.

"After Carmen left, my family said some things." Cougar faltered, his throat tightening with remembered hurt. Juan had yelled at him, saying no woman would want such a foolish man for a husband; especially one who hung around perverts like Carmen. Cougar had slipped, admitted he was pansexual, and that Carmen's gender had never been a deciding factor in their relationship. Silence had hung in the kitchen as his family realized that their Carlos was a queer, and his first relationship had been with someone they all thought of as a boy. Diego had signed 'Good to know I am not the most defective son any more' and had left the kitchen, pocketing his hearing aids.

"Hurtful things?" Jensen asked. Cougar could only nod, too caught up in the painful memory of his brother's betrayal and dismissal. "Okay. What were the repercussions of this?" Jensen asked gently, letting his shoulder brush against Cougar's. Cougar leaned in to the touch and took strength from it.

"I was told to be ready to move out as soon as I was eighteen, and that I was no longer a member of their family." Cougar whispered. Jensen draped his arm across Cougar's shoulders and passed him the tissue box he had set out earlier. Cougar dabbed at the tears that had escaped and swallowed. "The next three months were bad. I was a pariah in my own home. Only Juanita and my grandparents would speak to me. Mi abuelo convinced my parents to sign the early enlistment forms. I shipped off to basic five months before I turned eighteen. I have not been home since. I write to my grandparents and Juanita, through them I started writing to Fernanda." Cougar finished.

"I don't know what's worse. Having a family that openly hates you, or having one that loves you until you stand up for your principles." Jensen said.

"Maybe they're equally shitty in different ways." Cougar suggested.
"Yeah." Jensen agreed, sighing. After a few moments of silence he took a deep breath. "So a lot of what was in Jessica's letter- THE LETTER!" Jensen suddenly tensed.

"I picked it up, it's in my room on the dresser." Cougar hurried to say.

"Oh thank fuck." Jensen said, slumped back against the couch.

"Didn't think you wanted anyone else to find it." Cougar said.

"Yeah, no." Jensen scrubbed a hand over his face. "So Jessica's letter had the basic facts in it. Lifelong childhood abuse, just trying to survive and get out where they couldn't reach me. It missed a few things though.

"I did hate her. I loved Jess, I still do, but I'm also REALLY fucking angry at her. I knew what she was doing, pushing me away. Her poker face is shit. She'd always have this downturned corner on her mouth when she felt guilty. Guilt never sat well. There was a rumor in high school about her being anorexic because she was so skinny and never ate, but the truth is that her stomach doesn't accept food when she's loaded with guilt.

"High school is when our father lost his job. I joined every sports team I could to get out of the house, and when that failed the sports covered up the bruises. He got a new one, but it wasn't as good, didn't have the same benefits." Jensen paused, licking his lips. He held out his right hand. "I've got partial numbness in my pinky and ring finger on this hand because he broke my arm and refused to take me to a doctor because it wouldn't be completely covered under his new insurance. A teacher noticed I was trying to take notes left handed and asked to see my dominant hand. She screamed at the swelling and bruising and sent me to the nurse. They had to re-break the bone to set it properly. I know you've caught me whacking my hand against things and it's because on some days it feels like my fingers have fallen asleep and they stay that way for hours some times.

"I didn't want to go in to the system." Jensen said, spitting the last word like it was something vile. "The foster system is a crapshoot at the best of times and the place we lived in most of the foster parents were doing it for money, not because they actually cared. So I waited, and I planned. And when I was seventeen, and Jessica was in her last year of college and gearing up to head for Harvard Law on a full ride, I left. I walked to the bus stop I always took, got on the bus, let it take me to the train station instead of school.

"I hopped a few states, picked up under the table jobs and learned from an old shady fucker who 'liked the cut of my jib' how to make fake IDs and pickpocket. I stole some coding and programming books from a store and set up a system to keep tabs on my parents and Jessica. I wanted to know where they were so I'd be able to avoid them. Eventually I met Michelle and she let me crash at her place till I turned eighteen.

"At one point I noticed a pattern that meant my sister's grades were falling. So I sent her a Christmas present with a note. 'Merry Christmas from your brother.' It was so fucking tempting to add 'Don't flunk I'm not coming back for you if you have to move back in with those fuckheads', but I didn't. Her grades went back up almost right after she would have gotten it. So I kept sending stuff." Jensen paused, stoking the scruff growing on his face and staring off in to space.

"When I turned eighteen I just." He laughed, a rough humorless sound. "I walked in to a police station two states over from where I lived and said 'Hi! I ran away from my abusive parents last year. I'd like to clear up the missing person's case they opened. And under no circumstance do I want them to know where I am because I don't want them to find me, I left for a reason.' and the cop just fucking blinked at me and squeaked. Apparently I caught someone on their first day.
"So I got that cleared away, then I got my GED and hopped right in to the army. Fuckers can't find me if I'm half a planet away, right?" Jensen finished.

"But then Jess sent you that letter." Cougar said.

"Yeah. And all that carefully sorted, organized, boxed up, shelved, and stored mess just fucking exploded in my head. So I checked out for a bit. Because there's fear in there, I'm fucking terrified of becoming my father, or my mother, and I'm terrified of them finding me; on purpose or by accident. Pain, because getting beaten from age one to age seventeen does not, in fact, tickle. And there was anger. I wasn't ready for all the anger that was in there." Jensen said, confusion and disgust in his voice. "And it had me wondering if maybe this is what it was like for my father, to be so angry you just want to hurt something, anything, just to make it feel the way you do. Which just made me cycle right back to fear because thinking I might take after my dad is my worst nightmare, Cougs. I'm so fucking scared of just turning in to a horrible human being who heaps cruelty on innocent kids and doesn't care." Jensen's voice broke, and the tears that had been building spill over while Jensen covered his mouth again.

Cougar shifted so he could get his arms around Jensen. Jensen clung to him, shaking and crying and making heart wrenching sounds of grief and distress. Cougar swore that if he ever met Jensen's parents he would make them understand what it is to be terrorized. Maybe he would set Roque on them, the man had a sadistic streak and stomach for torture that none of the others did. If he knew they were child abusers Roque would probably jump at the chance.

It took a long time for Jensen to stop crying. When he did, Cougar made sure he washed his face and blew his nose before setting them both down to watch Ghibli movies for the rest of the afternoon. While Cougar made dinner in the evening, Jensen toyed around on Cougar's computer and did something that made it run faster. Jensen offered to design Cougar a better system, and Cougar agreed, on condition of Jensen joining him in-game.

They went to bed that night at around nine o'clock, both of them exhausted from the unexpectedly emotional day. Cougar's queen sized bed was a tight fit for the both of them, but they had bunked next to each other in smaller spaces on missions. Jensen fell asleep quickly, but Cougar lay there in the dark, watching Jensen and thinking. If Jensen wanted to work things out with his sister, Cougar would stick with him. Jensen had gone too long without a support system, but Cougar would be there from now on. And maybe, if Jensen's feeling up to it, they could try visiting Fernanda.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter deals with past child abuse, no explicit descriptions. It also mentions transphobia, conversion therapy and ex-gay camps.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

New chapter! Sorry for the delay, there were some things going on that prevented me from having time to work on this chapter. I'll go in to more detail in the end notes, after the trigger warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two and a half months passed before Jensen was able to speak with his sister.

Jensen had called Jessica the day after her letter arrived. Their conversation had been filled with strained silences, but they had been polite to each other. Cougar had been sitting back-to-back with Jensen while the call took place, the physical contact helping to ground the younger man and remind him that he was not alone. Jensen had agreed to call Jessica when he was able to, and that he would visit when he next had leave.

Cougar finally sat down with Pooch to talk things out and found the conversation to be much less stressful than either of them had hoped. Going in knowing that neither of them wanted to antagonize the other meant they were able to set the past aside and move on to being friends very quickly. Soon after, care packages began arriving for the Losers, courtesy of Jolene. Upon finding cookies in his own package, Jensen offered to set up secure video calls for the couple.

Pooch took it upon himself after that to teach both Jensen and Cougar the basics of ‘un-fucking’ a car. Mornings spent hovering over a wide variety of malfunctioning cars and trucks helped to cement the growing friendships between the three men. Jensen seemed to rejoice in the lack of tension between Pooch and Cougar, and soon gave both of them a crash course in computer technology and his own system setups. When the dust cleared, both men knew not only how to protect their personal machines from viruses and malware while browsing the web, but could access the emergency protocols on Jensen's own laptops if Jensen himself was not available.

Not to be outdone, Cougar made sure to drag Jensen and Pooch to the range more often. Pooch's trigger discipline improved, along with his reload time. Jensen's aim continued to be the worst on the team. Not bad, exactly, but not on par with everyone else's range records. This frustrated Cougar to no end since he had seen Jensen make textbook perfect shots in the field. Cougar eventually realizes that the difference was one of choice. If Jensen missed in the field he could get hurt, his team could get hurt, so he did not have a choice about missing. Cougar learned to be content with Jensen's aim on the range, and once the pressure was off Jensen brought up his range score just enough to piss off Jensen's original instructor.

Roque and Clay never said anything about the sudden one-eighty in Cougar and Pooch's relationship. Clay could occasionally be found smiling at the banter between the three of them, fondness softening his gruff features. Roque developed a new routine of sparring with the junior members of the team once or twice a week. Unlike the others, Roque never hung around after he was done, instead moving on to completing the rest of his PT; Cougar supposed that a two hour spar with three men counted as socializing in Roque's books.

All told, the team was coming together nicely. They still had their rough patches, sometimes it seemed they were made entirely of rough patches, but things were good. It made working right
through Christmas and New Years tolerable, if not actually pleasant.

Missions kept the team busy, and did their individual coursework. They might have some leeway when it came to due dates courtesy of their tendency to be frequently deployed with no warning, but it was still necessary for them to get their work done. Often they tried to work ahead, as there was no telling when they would get new orders.

Throughout all of this, Jensen had begun texting his sister semi-regularly. Cougar was not sure if this development was beneficial or detrimental to Jensen's wellbeing. Jensen would erase and rewrite most of his texts ten times until he settled on something that was not sarcastic, sardonic, biting, or otherwise incendiary. Several times Cougar had found Jensen staring at the closet he had hidden in, looking anxious. On those days, Cougar always made sure to lure Jensen back to Cougar's apartment, or follow Jensen to his own home. Jensen returned the favor often enough when Cougar's nightmare's struck. They eventually began keeping a change of clothes at each others' places, just to avoid wearing the same clothing two or three days in a row. Jensen bought a small hat stand around Christmas and placed it on his dresser in the exact spot Cougar usually left his hat at night.

When Clay announced on the third of January that leave had been approved for the whole team, Jensen had looked ill at the news. He recovered quickly, joining in with Pooch's enthusiasm for time not spent on base or getting shot at, but Cougar had seen the flash of panic in Jensen's eyes. Cougar recalled the promise to visit Jessica, and knew Jensen was worried about facing the sister he had not seen in three and a half years.

Pooch soon rushed off to call Jolene, while Clay and Roque argued about which warm beach full of women and alcohol they should visit. Cougar turned to Jensen and found the man staring at his cell phone, a blank text message open. Cougar walked up and stood next to Jensen, brushing shoulders with the taller man until he looked up.

"We go there today, enjoy the Friday night off. Tomorrow we meet her, Saturday brunch. Sunday we can be in Mazatlán." Cougar suggested.

"I. But. I said I'd visit." Jensen said, blinking in confusion and clearly not processing information properly.

"Si. And you will. But you are not obligated to stay for your entire leave." Cougar pointed out.

"What if things go bad?" Jensen whispered.

"Then we only wasted an hour or two." Cougar said.

"And if things go well?" Jensen asked, looking less pale and more curious.

"Then we spend as much time with her as possible before going to Mazatlán." Cougar said.

"Why Mazatlán?" Jensen asked.

"Your Spanish sucks and you can't surf." Cougar said, earning a bright laugh from Jensen.

"I'll call Jessica tonight, then. She should be okay for a Saturday brunch." Jensen took a deep breath. He was calming from the initial panic and shifting in to work mode to process information and make plans. "Yeah. Your idea is solid. She's in her last year of law school and probably only has time for us on one day."

"It is also for you." Cougar said softly.
"Huh?" Jensen grunted.

"The last time she saw you, you were seventeen. Her opinion of you may not have updated much over the years. You are a man now, you have a life. Is there room in it for her? Sí. But that does not obligate you to make your life centered around her. You are a busy person, and she must be made aware that you are there for her, but not at her beck and call." Cougar elaborated.

"I. Shit. I didn't even think about that." Jensen said. He took off his glasses and scrubbed a hand over his face before blowing out a defeated sigh. "I'm gonna fuck up, aren't I? I'm either gonna alienate her or end up entertaining some new fucked up type of abuse."

"Jake. That will not happen. I will be with you the whole time to keep an eye on things." Cougar said, gently reassuring his friend.

Jensen took a few deep breaths before putting his glasses back on and sitting at his desk. He pulled his favorite laptop close and started looking for hotels in Cambridge. Cougar slid his wallet over to Jensen,

"I'll take hotels," he said.

"I've got flights and meals, then." Jensen agreed.

"You two going the same way?" Pooch asked as he came back in to the room.

"Mexico!" Jensen crowed, leaving out the stopover in Massachusetts. "Cougs is gonna teach me to surf."

"White boy needs all the help he can get with the ladies, I guess." Roque joked.

"Excuse you, I manage just fine!" Jensen said, mock offended.

"You manage just fine to drive them away." Clay retorted. "Here's hoping Cougar improves your game the way he improved your shooting. God knows you need the help!"

Jensen stuck his tongue out and kept working on getting their arrangements taken care of, but Cougar could see that the tense line of his shoulders had eased. Cougar leaned close under the pretense of reading over Jensen's shoulder.

"Don't book a hotel in Mazatlán." he said, voice low so only Jensen could hear him. Jensen stilled for a fraction of a second before nodding.

"Alrighty, we're all booked and ready for an awesome vacation!" Jensen said, pitching his voice just loud enough to carry. The other Losers waved them off with well wishes for their vacation.

They headed first to Jensen's place to begin packing and close up the apartment while they were gone. Cougar double checked the clothes Jensen packed to ensure that he brought mostly light weight clothing that breathed well. Considering how often they were sent to hot countries, Jensen never bothered unpacking his sunscreen. When Jensen made to pack a white button down shirt and a preppy cardigan, Cougar could not stop himself from raising an eyebrow in question. Jensen shuffled nervously before looking away.

"I thought. Maybe. Make a good impression?" he asked. Cougar felt his gaze soften, and he stepped forward to take the items from Jensen. He lay them carefully on the bed before turning to his friend.
"Is it worth having her in your life if she does not like you for who you are?" Cougar asked as gently as he could.

Jensen's face fell. He sat on the bed, wrinkling the clothes Cougar had just set aside to keep safe. Cougar sat next to him and waited, hoping he had not messed up somehow. After a few minutes of silence, Jensen leaned sideways and rested his head on Cougar's shoulder, eyes closed.

"No." Jensen said, quietly. "She deserves to know what she's signing up for, having me as a brother. And I deserve a sister who loves me as I am."

Cougar slung an arm around Jensen's shoulder and squeezed. It was difficult to learn to demand respect from people whose approval you also desperately wanted. Cougar had learned that the hard way, and lost most of his family in the process. It only got harder as an adult, because it felt as though they should already know this.

"Bien." Cougar said, gently chafing Jensen's arm.

They sat quietly for another moment before Jensen heaved a sigh and got up. He returned the slightly wrinkled garments to his closet and came back with a dark purple hoodie that had writing on the front that boldly stated 'There are 10 types of people. Those who understand binary, and those who don't.' Cougar smirked and nodded in approval.

Once Jensen was packed and the perishables in his kitchen either frozen or thrown out, they headed to Cougar's place. Cougar packed quickly and efficiently, boxed up the fresh ingredients in his fridge to give to the single mother who lived two doors down, and was ready to head for the air port within forty minutes. They took a cab to the air port, and the uniforms they had not changed out of garnered them a degree of preferential treatment that made their check in process both smooth and fast.

By the time they checked in to their hotel in Cambridge, Massachusetts, it was early evening. By mutual unspoken agreement they decided an early bed time was the best choice. Jensen called Jessica and explained the narrow window of time in which they could meet, and Jessica agreed to be waiting for them at a cafe close to campus for brunch the next day. Cougar checked all the doors and windows while the siblings spoke, turning out the light and catapulting in to his own bed when Jensen had hung up.

"Everybody thinks you're so suave and mature all the time, but you're just as bad as me. You're just sneakier about it is all." Jensen accused.

"¡Si!" Cougar agreed, grinning in to the dark.

"Hey, Cougs?" Jensen asked, voice growing thick as he drifted off.

"Mmhmm?" Cougar hummed, feeling himself sink in to the mattress.

"Why did you ask me not to book a hotel in Mazatlán?" Jensen asked.

"Mis abuelos tienen una hacienda allí. It was converted for tourists, but there is a private living space for the owners. Mis abuelos promised to will it to me, so mi familia don't visit it any more. Es un lugar seguro para relajarse en vacaciones." Cougar said.

"Did you know you switch between Spanish and English a lot when you're tired?" Jensen asked, amusement clear in his voice.

"Do you remember the time in Germany where you ordered coffee in Swedish, corrected yourself
in Norwegian, and then started cursing in Hungarian because you fucked up?" Cougar shot back.

"That poor waiter was so confused." Jensen said, reminiscing. "Do you think if I presented it as a tactical training tool I could get Clay hooked on tabletop strategy games?"

"Only if you let him win the first four. Ve a dormir." Cougar mumbled, drifting off.

The next morning, Cougar woke to the smell of coffee and room service breakfast. The trays with covered plates were on the small table, untouched. Jensen's bed was empty, and the bathroom door closed. Cougar slowly got up and made his way over to the food. Just as he sat down, the bathroom door flew open and a freshly cleaned Jensen emerged.

"I was hoping the delicious stench of breakfast would wake you. It was either that or tickling you awake, and you, my friend, are a kicker." Jensen babbled. "This is amazing, I can read your mind. Right now you're thinking 'Jensen, sit down and eat', aren't you?" Cougar nodded as he poured himself a cup of coffee. Jensen sat opposite Cougar and pulled one of the covered plates towards him.

After clearing their plates and setting the tray outside their door, Cougar headed for the bathroom. He and Jensen stood at the sink, brushing their teeth and engaging in a good natured elbow war for space. Cougar was contemplating a shower when Jensen broke the silence.

"Should I shave?" he asked, frowning at the beard on his face.

"Why?" Cougar asked.

"Well, at first the beard was fun, but it gets really itchy sometimes. Also it was pretty cool to learn that I fit the facial hair requirements to become a lumberjack. I've been clean shaven since I was seventeen, thanks to military regulations. But there's something about this beard that I'm not quite comfortable with." Jensen admitted.

"It makes you look like an adult." Cougar pointed out.

"That.... might be it. I'm sure you've noticed that a lot of what I do kind of relies on people underestimating me. If I'm just a geek with a penchant for pranks then nobody thinks I might be trying to track where our orders come from, which of the brass are dirty, or diverting funds from our targets' accounts to help their victims." Jensen said.

"You said you were coding a video game!" Cougar blurted out, shocked.

"On one of my laptops I was." Jensen protested, voice innocent.

"Dios mi ayudame." Cougar said, bending over to rest his head on the bathroom counter.

"Guess you don't wanna know what I do with the illegal bribe money I've found, huh?" Jensen asked.

"No. And before we go to Mazatlán you should shave off some of it. Pick a style that would only work if you were rich. Or fifty." Cougar said, straightening.

"Ah. The 'I was hoping this would make me distinguished, but instead it brings out the dork in my
"Si." Cougar agreed. "But leave it for now. Looking like an adult when your sister sees you will be a good reminder that years have passed and you have grown."

"That is an excellent point. Alright, I'm gonna get out and leave you to wash your filthy, filthy self." Jensen said as he exited the bathroom.

"Look up directions to the cafe!" Cougar called as he turned on the water.

Online directions being what they were, Cougar and Jensen arrived ten minutes late despite leaving early. They walked in to the clean, well lit cafe and scanned the area. Cougar knew that Jensen had spotted Jessica when he stiffened and stood up straight. Cougar reached out and squeezed Jensen's shoulder.

"Usted no está solo." Cougar said. The soft reminder made Jensen relax a little and nod before walking in the direction of Jessica's booth. Cougar followed him closely, but stopped about two feet from the booth to give the siblings a measure of privacy.

Jessica looked like any other college student in a clean hoodie and jeans. She had earbuds in that connected to a battered CD player. Her long blonde hair was pulled back in a high ponytail, keeping it out of the way while she focused on the book in her hands. Jensen knocked gently on the table to get her attention, and she jumped at the disturbance. She looked at Jensen with wary confusion and was pulling out her ear buds when recognition set in. Her jaw dropped as her eyes darted around Jensen's face, her hand frozen in the air with one ear bud clutched in it.

"Jake?" she whispered. When Jensen nodded, tears filled her eyes. "You got so big." she said, quietly and mournfully.

Jensen turned to Cougar and jerked his head slightly towards the booth. Jensen slid in to the booth across from Jessica, and Cougar slid in next to him. Jessica looked at Cougar in confusion, finally lowering the hand that held her ear bud.

"Jess, this is my best friend Cougar. He's here for moral support and the simple fact that if I'm going to be involved in your life so will he." Jensen said. Cougar tipped his hat at Jessica in greeting. When Jessica continued to stare at him mutely, Jensen bit out "Yes, I have friends now. It's amazing how easy it is to make them when I'm not terrified of bringing people home."

Jessica jumped and turned away from Cougar, her fair face flushing with guilt and embarrassment. Cougar discreetly slid closer to Jensen until their shoulders were touching.

"Cálmate." Cougar whispered. Jensen closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Cougar knew Jensen was still struggling with nearly fifteen years of repressed anger, but throwing all of it at Jessica during their first meeting would not help anyone.

"I'm sorry." Jensen said.

"I'm sorry, too." Jessica said. "I don't know what. I guess I." She heaved out a frustrated sigh. "I think part of me was still expecting you to be the kid who left home. Or for you to just not show up at all. But you're here. You came, and you're all grown up, and you don't just have a friend, you have a best friend. And you look a lot healthier than the last time I saw you."

"Who would have thought two months of homelessness and seven months of living under an
assumed identity would do someone so much good." Jensen joked. There was no humor in his eyes, but the bite had left his words. Cougar was willing to count that as progress.

Before the siblings could get any further, a waiter approached their table.

"Hi! Is everyone ready to order or do you need more time?" the waiter asked, overly cheerful not just compared to the mood at the table, but for the whole cafe.

In unison, the three of them look at the untouched menus on the table.

"We might need a minute." Jensen said, scanning the menu quickly and attempting to indicate non-verbally to the waiter that the table needed privacy.

"Sure thing." the waiter said, looking between Jensen and Jessica. "Hey Jessy, isn't this your brother?"

"Uh, yeah. It's Jake. Jake, you remember Mikey Walker, he was in your year at school." Jessica said.

"Yeah. Mikey." Jensen said as he nodded curtly, clearly less than enthusiastic about the lingering waiter.

"Holy crap, man." Mikey said, not picking up on any social cues whatsoever. "Big Jake really lived up to his nickname!"

The atmosphere at the table immediately changed. Jensen glared at Mikey as his ears went red, the first sign of embarrassment before the flush spread to his neck and chest. Jessica turned red and look out the window next to her, clearly feeling awkward. Cougar had to resist the urge to punch Mikey in the face for making this more difficult than it needed to be.

"I'll have a French Vanilla latte and a croissant. Jess will have a sandwich of her choice and a refill of the Americano in front of her. Cougar will have a mocha, extra whipped cream, and two of the brownies I saw in the display case." Jensen ordered, voice cool and clipped in a way that would make Clay ship him to officer training if he ever heard it.

"Cougar?" Mikey asked, confused by the unconventional name.

Cougar slowly tilted his head back to let the waiter see his face, and leveled his coldest glare at the man from under the shadow of his brim. Mikey paled significantly and backed up a step. "Right. Mocha extra whip and a brownie!"

"Two brownies." Jensen corrected. "And don't forget Jess' sandwich."

"My usual, please." Jessica asked, quietly.

Mikey backed away from the table, nodding quickly. Jensen smirked at the waiter's retreating form while Cougar looked back down at the table and got rid of his glare. Out of the corner of his eye, Cougar could see Jessica staring at him with wide eyes.

"That doesn't count as misappropriation of military resources, does it?" Jensen asked. "I mean, the answer should be obvious, but remember when Jolene visited Pooch and he came in with a hickey? Coleman called her up and told her not to damage military property!"

Cougar nodded, he remembered the incident. Pooch had introduced Jensen and Cougar to his wife shortly before being dragged off base by her for a romantic weekend. When Pooch had returned
the following Monday, his neck had been marked by a small, dark bruise. As soon as Jensen had found out about Coleman's reaction to the hickey, he set up a bizarre protest. Using Coleman's own argument, that a hickey was a form of bruise, Jensen extrapolated that bruises counted as damage to military property. With that logic, Jensen convinced half the base to fill out incident reports for every bruise, shaving nick, and paper cut for the next two weeks. Even Clay and Roque had gotten involved. Coleman had capitulated and issued an apology to Jolene.

"I don't think a glare counts as a military resource, Jake." Jessica said, smiling gently. Belatedly, Cougar realized that the purpose of Jensen's joke had been to put Jessica at ease. Clearly he did not want Jessica to feel uncomfortable around Cougar, which was a problem they had run in to before when civilians encountered Cougar. He was too quiet, too still, depended too much on body language to communicate when he was not in a place where he felt both safe and comfortable.

"I don't know, it's more effective than the last laser targeting system we were given." Jensen said.

Jessica smiled a little at the joke. Silence fell across the table again, though not as awkward as the previous ones had been. The siblings observed each other for a few moments, seeming to catalogue the changes that had taken place. Jessica slowly grew more somber, and seemed on the verge of saying something when Jensen spoke up.

"So, how's Donny?" he asked.

"He's good." she said. "Working today. He, um, he's got an offer from a good firm in New Hampshire. So I've been looking in the same area for a firm that deals with what I specialize in, though I'm hoping for a spot in the DA's office."

"That's good." Jensen said. "Or I hope it's good. I don't know fuck all about law. I can recommend a good CID agent, though."

"Ford." Cougar joked.

"Oh. My. God." Jensen groaned. "That guy was such an asshole. I did some digging, don't raise that eyebrow at me Cougar, you know what I'm like. I wanted to know why the hell he was being such a cockmunch. Turns out he had been denied a promotion; for a number of reasons, one of which was that he was too passive when interviewing people during cases."

"So he tried to fix it by fucking up even worse." Cougar summed up.

"Yeah. Agent Fei booted his ass off the case and had him investigated for possible connections to Urquhart. Being that antagonistic to the main informant was seen as a huge red flag. He turned out to be clean. And idiot, but clean." Jensen said. When he saw the curious look on Jessica's face, he elaborated, "There was a thing, most of it's classified, but my old team was bad and tried to kill me. Jessica's jaw dropped. "Don't worry, Cougs here picked me up when I was hitch hiking and helped me with the bear trap. I joined his team after that, and everything since has been sunshine and live geese trapped in offices."

Cougar nodded in agreement. Jensen's summation had left out most of the facts, but at no point had there been an actual lie. It was all presented in an incredibly confusing way, but Cougar knew that was the point. Spying Mikey coming towards the table with their orders, Cougar felt he could safely assume that Jensen was delaying more serious talk until they could be reasonably sure that there would be no interruptions.

"Here we are," Mikey said as he began distributing their orders, "an Americano for Jessy, along with her sandwich. A French Vanilla latte and crescent roll for Big Jake." Jensen narrowed his eyes
at Mikey while Jessica quickly busied herself clearing her CD player and novel off the table. "And a mocha, extra whip, with two brownies for, um, Cougar. If you guys need anything else, just let me know." Mikey said as he backed away.

Jensen pulled his croissant closer and began pinching off small pieces, which told Cougar more than enough about his friend's emotional state. Jensen only ever picked at his food when he was distressed. Something about the nickname Big Jake must hold bad memories for him. Jensen leaned close to Cougar and whispered,

"Puberty is awkward for everyone, but more for some than others. But it takes a real asshole to mock a person for it all the way in to adulthood."

With that tidbit of information, Cougar was able to put the pieces together. Perhaps not in exact order, but close enough. A nickname like Big Jake would mean Jensen had been larger in some way than the other boys at school, add that to Jensen's obvious discomfort and Cougar doubted it had to do with Jensen being tall. Cougar could remember quite clearly how viciously his *hermanita* Belicia had been taunted for weighing twelve pounds more than a popular cheerleader in her grade. It had been even worse for Estrella, with people assuming her hearing aid and rounded cheeks meant she was deaf, dumb, and fat. In a wonderful example of double standards, Diego had only been teased about his hearing aid.

"Does Donny know?" Jensen asked, turning back to Jessica. "About the baby, us meeting, and our childhood." Jessica shook her head. "Well you should sit down with him real soon. From what you said you're due in April. He's gonna notice when you start growing." Jessica's face grew red, her expression angry.

"You think I don't know that? You think any of this is easy?" Jessica hissed. She opened her mouth to continue, but was cut off by Jensen.

"Your letter triggered a panic attack. I was on base at the time. Cougar found me in a closet, reliving every childhood memory I have of hiding in dark spaces. It was a hell of a thing to have to explain to the guy who has seen me through *fire fights* that a letter made me check out mentally. So no, I don't think any of it is easy. But I do think it's necessary, and putting it off it only going to make things worse." Jensen said.

Jessica stared at him, face pale and eyes wet.

"You need to tell Danny. Or divorce him if you don't care enough about him to let him know that the next eighteen years of his life are about to change drastically. You also need to see a doctor or a midwife, whatever your insurance will cover. A therapist would be a good idea, too," Jensen said.

"A therapist?!!" Jessica hissed. "I'm not crazy!"

"Never said you were." Jensen replied, coolly. Jessica sat back and blink at him in surprise. "I have a therapist. So does Cougar. The army requires us to see them for our own health. In your case I would aim for a specialist who helps abuse victims." Jensen leaned forward, getting as close as he could to Jessica. "If you don't want to turn in to Mom and Dad, talk to someone who is trained to recognize abuse, and will be around more often than I can to keep an eye on things. My job takes me around the world, often without notice. I'm going to help you as much as I can, but I can't restructure the entire army to be closer to you. I have a life, Jess. There is room for you and your family in it. But I cannot, and will not, make my life revolve around you. Last time I did, I stayed in a violently abusive home for an extra three years just to be sure you'd be off at law school instead of taking my place at home." Jensen leaned back, letting his back hit the padded booth as his hands dropped to his lap.
"What?" Jessica asked, voice shaking.

"I started planning my escape when I was thirteen. I thought you going off to college would mean I could safely leave. By the time you were packed, I had everything ready. Then I found out you'd be coming home for holidays and summers. So I stayed until I heard you were all but guaranteed a full ride to Harvard." Jensen explained, voice calm. What Jessica could not see were the tightly clenched fists in Jensen's lap. Cougar surreptitiously slid one foot over and knocked his boot against Jensen's. Jensen tapped Cougar's boot in response and unclenched his fists, flexing cramped fingers under the table.

"What we went through, Jess? It fucked us up. And trust me when I say that life gets a lot easier if you admit it and let people help you get past it. Because getting over it is not guaranteed." Jensen said before popping some of the pinched off bits of croissant in his mouth.

Jensen eating seemed to remind Jessica of her own food. She tucked in to her sandwich, likely glad to have something that would stall further conversation until she had had a chance to process what had already been said. Cougar sipped his mocha, enjoying the sweetness on his tongue and he went over what had already happened. The siblings were at least clearing the air between them. Jensen was telling Jessica things that she needed to hear, and so far she seemed to be listening to him.

Next to him, Jensen had finished the pinched off pieces of croissant and had begun dunking the intact half in to his latte. Cougar set down his mocha and picked up a brownie, daintily nibbling on it while he watched the siblings discreetly. Jessica had finished her sandwich and was reaching for her coffee, but stopped halfway.

"I'm gonna have to stop drinking these aren't I?" she asked.

"Or at least cut down." Jensen said.

Jessica bit her lip as she let her hand rest on the table, still halfway reaching for her coffee.

"There's a pair of med students in the apartment beside us." Jessica said, softly. "I can hear them study out loud through the wall of our bedroom sometimes. One of them wants to be a pediatrician. There's a lot of hard to pronounce things that can happen to babies, apparently." she finished, voice wavering at the end.

Jensen slid his free hand across the table and took hold of the hand Jessica had extended towards her coffee. Jessica gave him a watery smile before sighing and trying to blink away the tears before they fell. Cougar could not read the look on Jensen's face. It was sad, yes, but... almost haunted as well.

"You'll be okay." Jensen said softly. "You're young and smart and healthy. You can learn to be better than our parents were. I'll be there to help when I can, and probably drag Cougar in to help, too. And if Donny tries to run out on you we'll hobble him."

Cougar nodded in agreement and smiled when Jessica's eyes flicked towards him. Her expression turned to surprise, and Cougar tilted his head up enough to meet her eyes and did his best to look as kind and supportive as he could. Jessica smiled at him and whispered a quiet "Thank you". Cougar nodded at her and sipped his coffee.

"If you're due in April, then we've got about three and a half months to work with for getting things ready for the little one." Jensen mused. "And probably another six months after that to work on our relationship and our selves so we don't break the kid. It's not going to be easy, but we can do it if we're both willing to put in the effort."
"I'm sorry Donny's not here for this." Jessica admitted quietly. "You'd like him. You're both very pragmatic."

"Oh, trust me. The calm is about seventy percent fake. I spent the months leading up to this freaking out in a major way. Cougar had to help put me back together every time. I'm too exhausted to freak out now." Jensen said, taking a deep drink from his latte and getting foam in his mustache.

"Well, up until then the beard made you look very grown up." Jessica joked, laughing a little.

Jensen stuck his tongue out and crossed his eyes to make Jessica laugh before grabbing a napkin to wipe off the foam.

"We'll try to meet Donny, but we can't be sure exactly when that will be. Maybe we can try to coordinate a video call of some sort, we'll have to figure out a time that's good for everyone and what kind of tech you guys have access to." Jensen said.

"Well, if you guys have time tomorrow, maybe-" Jessica trailed off when Jensen shook his head.

"We've got a flight to catch at seven tomorrow morning." he explained.

"That's a short leave." Jessica said, concerned.

"We're not going back, we're going on vacation. Occasionally it's nice to visit a warm country without getting shot at." Jensen said.

"Oh. Well it sounds like you two deserve a quiet vacation, so I hope it goes well." Jessica said, clearly trying to move past her initial disappointment.

"We could. Um. Postcards? Or pictures. We exchanged emails." Jensen offers.

"Yeah. That'd be- yeah." Jessica agreed, nodding her head quickly and looking hopeful.

The siblings sat there, smiling at each other and looking much more comfortable than Cougar had been hoping for at their first meeting. Their relationship still needed a lot of work, and would for a long time, but Cougar was confident that things would work out. He planned to be there to see them succeed.

Ten hours late, Cougar was beginning to think Jensen might not live to see his sister's child born.

"I just can't decide." Jensen mused, standing in front of the hotel bathroom mirror and stroking his beard. "Maybe that goatee thing with the chin strap that's getting popular?"

"If you don't decide soon I am going to knock you out and shave you myself." Cougar muttered.

"Cougs, I respect that you are a many-talented man, but when it comes to facial hair I would like to point out that I actually have more to work with than you do. Jensen said, grinning cheekily.

It was not untrue. Cougar had stopped shaving along with the rest of the Losers and had soon been confronted with the fact that his cheeks only grew a few wisps of hair. He was, however, able to grow a rather nice mustache and goatee.
"Pick something easy to maintain in the field. We don't have much time for fussy shaving, and if you fuck up and have a tan line on your fair you'll never live it down." Cougar said.

"Good points. Nix the chin strap, and maybe the mustache because it was not fun having foam in mine and I'm not giving up lattes, man. You can't ask me to do that." Jensen babbled.

Cougar was beginning to recognize it as Jensen's post-mission type of babble, the one he used to decompress from the stress of the mission. Cougar left him to it, opting to check over their bags, passports, and IDs, but kept one ear on Jensen's babble out of habit.

An hour later, Cougar was sitting in bed reading when Jensen finally left the washroom. Jensen's cheeks were clean shaven, along with his neck and most of his jaw. What had been a full beard was now a neat goatee with no mustache, and a pair of sideburns that extended down past his ear, but ended before his jaw; too long to be sideburns, but not long enough or wide enough to be mutton chops. Jensen looked ridiculous. It was perfect.

"Alright." Jensen said, flopping on to his bed and scooting under the covers. "Goodnight. Sleep tight. Don't let the unspeakable horrors of darkness lurking under your bed bite." he said, flipping off his light and rolling over.

Cougar calmly bookmarked his page and set his book aside. As he rolled to the side to turn off his light, he mentally repeated 'It's a joke, don't fall for it, don't fucking fall for it' to himself.

Still, just before he turned off the light, Cougar could not help glancing at the dark space under his bed. He turned the light off and tucked himself under his covers. Everyone knew unspeakable darkness horrors were powerless against bed sheets.

Cougar settled down to sleep and made a mental note to put salt in Jensen's coffee the next day. Not much, just enough for Jensen to know something was off, but not be able to pinpoint what.

They arrived in Mazatlán around one in the afternoon, after an eight hour flight from Boston. Clearing customs and getting to the hacienda took a further two hours. The family that kept the hacienda running was distantly related to Cougar by marriage, and insisted on feeding the both of them. Sra. Cervantes took a particular shine to Jensen and began gently mothering him throughout the meal, which Jensen accepted with a kind of confused awe that spoke of having never received positive parental attention. This, of course, only encouraged Sra. Cervantes to serve them third and fourth helpings.

Full of food and energy, and eager to move around after the long flight, they swapped their pants for swim trunks and headed for the beach after dinner. Tourist season was tapering off, meaning there was not too much crowding. With the sun shining down on them, and the ocean stretching before them, Cougar felt himself finally begin to relax. Grinning at Jensen, Cougar took off running towards the surf, knowing Jensen was running right behind him, determined to catch up.

The next morning, Cougar stumbled out of his room and walked right in to Jensen. Cougar's jaw
dropped as his eyes went wide at the sight of his shirtless friend. The broad shoulders, the muscular chest and abs, the well defined arms that Cougar had come to be familiar with after knowing the man for over a year had all been graced by a light, golden tan. *And about a billion freckles.*

"Shut the fuck up." Jensen said, smiling as he reached out and tapped under Cougar's jaw to get him to stop gaping. "I'm half Irish. That basically makes me half freckle."

"I thought you had gotten a sunburn yesterday." Cougar managed. There was a tightness and warmth in his belly that Cougar was choosing to interpret as amusement and the urge to laugh.

"I got a little pink, yeah. I put aloe lotion on before bed. It's not sore, but some of my back is a bit tender." Jensen admitted. "Do you think you could?" he asked, holding up a tube of sunscreen.

"Si." Cougar said, accepting the tube.

Jensen nodded and began turning around, but froze. Before Cougar could ask is something was wrong, Jensen appeared to steel himself and turned. Cougar poured some lotion in to his hand and pocketed the tube before rubbing his palms together to distribute and warm the product.

Cougar applied the sunscreen to Jensen's back, working quickly and resisting the urge to linger anywhere. As he worked, he noticed an odd pattern to Jensen's skin. Initially Cougar assumed it was from a patchy application job the day before, but he soon realized it did not fit any kind of pattern that self-applied sunscreen would have. Some of the pale marks were thinner than others, some were stripes, some were half moons, some were jagged lines. They reminded Cougar of some of the childhood scars he had from falling off his bicycle. Or the roof that one time. Scars that were so old they blended in with the skin around them until he tanned.

The words from Jessica's letter floated through Cougar's mind, 'he beat you bloody for it'. Cougar saw red, and felt pure, blinding hatred for Jake's parents roll through him. It took too long for him to regain control of his breathing and steady his hands. Jake's shoulders had begun to tense, and Cougar did the only thing he could think of to diffuse the situation: he dug his fingers in to Jake's sides and tickled him.

Jake yelped and danced away from Cougar, laughing.

"I don't think I've seen such a pale gringo *not* turn in to a lobster after a few hours in the sun." Cougar joked.

"Superior pasty genetics, my friend." Jake replied, grinning. "I'm gonna throw on a shirt and then we'll grab some breakfast, okay?" Cougar nodded, and Jake bounced over to his own room, humming.

Cougar made a beeline for the bathroom, locking the door behind him. He needed a moment, just a moment, to clear his head. Jake had scars. Cougar needed to come to terms with them, and fast, because he refused to make Jake feel uncomfortable or ashamed in any way.

But it made him so angry. People, people Jake should have been able to rely on to keep him safe, hurt him. They hurt Cougar's Jake, and it pissed him off. And there was nothing Cougar could do about it other than resolve not to let anyone hurt Jake ever again. Which he knew would be impossible in their profession, but at least Cougar could kill anyone who lay a violent finger on Jake from this point forward. It was not enough, but it was all Cougar would get.

Cougar washed the excess lotion from his hands before splashing water on his face. He unlocked and opened the door just before Jake could knock, and flicked water from his hands in Jake's face.
Jake sputtered and laughed and cleaned his glasses on Cougar's shirt as they went off to breakfast.

Their vacation passed by faster than Cougar wanted it to. The first few days were spent surfing in the early mornings, before the beaches got crowded. Jake picked it up fast enough, though there had been a good hour where he had insisted on launching himself off his board for no reason besides the fact that he could.

After the grew too populated, they would head in to the city and explore. They found market stalls with handmade goods and small shops with souvenirs for family and friends. They ate at cafes and small restaurants, and Jake delighted in trying new things with every meal. He embraced every new sight and sound, and most smells and tastes, with bright enthusiasm that made Cougar want to travel the world with his friend, just to experience it through Jake's eyes.

Their afternoons were spent either at the hacienda or at popular tourist locations. One afternoon had been devoted to try to convince people they ran tours. Jake's accent improved enough that he could almost pass for local, provided the person he was talking to did not speak Spanish since Jake's skill with the actual language still left much to be desired. Jake took a ridiculous number of photos with his digital camera and emailed the best looking ones to Jessica and Jolene. The worst looking and goofiest ones got sent to Pooch.

On their second to last night, Cougar brought Jake to one of his favorite clubs in the city. They danced with women and drank like fish, and Jake used his exceptionally bad Spanish to flirt with two girls who eventually took him home with them. Cougar had laughed at the delighted look on Jensen's face, and had quickly stopped laughing when his dance partner had stuck her hand down his pants.

The next morning saw Cougar nursing a slight hangover and wondering why people kept leaving hickey's on the insides of his thighs. He enjoyed it, but he wondered what it was that tipped his bed partners off that it would be a good idea to start sucking and biting as his thighs. ¿Estaban con sabor? Cougar rolled his eyes at himself. If that was how his brain was working, maybe he should just start drinking again.

Jake wobbled in through the door just then and threw himself down on the couch next to, meaning half draped over, Cougar. He groaned about hangovers being stupid, but worth it.

"Did they teach you any new Spanish?" Cougar whispered, smirking.

"Pechos." Jake replied, miming grabbing a pair of tits.

Cougar burst out laughing, which set Jake off, and soon they were slumped on the couch giggling breathlessly.

"I was surprised that you managed to get two. You usually have issues getting only one. Did the language barrier help?" Cougar teased.

"I sabotage myself." Jake sighed.

"¿Qué?"

"In the military there's this attitude that, if you don't want to fuck a million girls, then you're not a 'real man'. Whatever the fuck that is. Or you're... whatever the newest derogatory term for queer is, I'm too hungover to remember." Jake said, removing his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. "So I ask girls to talk or dance and then I buy the a drink and ask if they've ever wanted to throw a drink
in someone's face and storm out of a bar. So it looks like I'm trying to pick up, but I'm not. I mean, I like sex, and I definitely like girls, but sometimes it's such a fucking hassle? Or I'd rather have someone who knew me, someone I was in a relationship with. But most girls aren't gonna get with a Spec Ops guy, and those that are don't want to settle for the baby geek. But in the military you can't say 'I prefer making love with a committed partner', you can only say 'I'm married' or 'I'll have the extra large tits with a side order of pussy, served over the fading memory of the last time I treated a woman like an actual person'. If you say anything else you get people asking questions that set you up for a DADT talk." Jake finished.

Cougar sat in silence, mulling over what Jake had said. An idea slowly formed, and when it had substance enough, he shared it.

"What if you tried 'My best friend is much better with women than I am so none of them notice me next to him'?' Cougar suggested.

"Wait, what?" Jake asked, confused.

"You start flirting with a girl, I come along and 'steal' the girl, you go home to pretend to nurse your pride." Cougar explained.

"And you get to go home with a hot chica." Jake added.

"Half the time, when you see me leave the bar with a girl, she's too drunk to take care of herself and I just walk her home to make sure she gets in safe and sobers up before going to bed." Cougar admitted.

"Oh man. That is so sweet!" Jake said before frowning. "If I'm calling you sweet I might not be hungover so much as still drunk."

"Hair of the dog?" Cougar suggested.

"Please." Jake agreed.

They heaved themselves off the couch and headed for the tequila stash in Cougar's room. While Cougar was pouring them each a shot, Jake reached out and ran his fingers through Cougar's hair.

"Soft." Jake said. At Cougar's raised eyebrow, Jake shrugged. "Was just curious. My hair grows out mostly straight, and the only curly hair I have experience with is Michelle's." Cougar nodded in understanding as he passed a shot to Jake. "You gonna let it grow long? You could pull off the pirate cowboy look."

Cougar laughed and shrugged.

"Hadn't planned on anything. Mostly seeing how long it takes for someone to get pissed." he admitted. "Kept it long when I was younger, though."

"Little curly haired Carlos running around, getting in to trouble." Jake mused, downing his shot.

"Jumping off roofs." Cougar agreed.

"There's a story there." Jake said, grinning.

Cougar grinned, and settled in to swap stories with Jake.
Trigger warnings: non-graphic references to past child abuse. Mentions of past fat phobia towards an OC. Mentions of past ableism towards and OC. Mild description of scars incurred from past child abuse.

So. This chapter is up late, and it's my washing machine's fault. It's been breaking on and off until we got a new pump. The new pump fixed things, but there's a clogging issue that meant we needed to pull out the machine, open it up, clean out the inside, put it back together, push it back, and re-balance the machine in between every load. This process usually took about an hour. So I was doing that about 3 times a day for the last two weeks up until Wednesday. Something happened, there was a slamming sound, and then the machine started belching smoke. I am, officially, out of my depth. And exhausted. Chapter is up late because I didn't have time to write much until my washing machine kindly broke. Also I write my chapters in a notebook before I type them up, because it's too easy to fall in to a wikipedia spiral otherwise, so I've basically written 16.5k words in the space of about 30 hours. My fingers are going to fall off.
As always, trigger warnings in the end notes.

The Losers were shipped off to Pakistan in April. There was a warlord who needed to be taken down, one responsible for taking prisoners and selling them in to slavery - civilian and military prisoners alike. Cougar in particular felt hard pressed to take down this target, before the man could ruin any more lives. In some ways Cougar was almost eager to end the man's life. He felt he could be forgiven for it considering something similar had nearly happened to him when he had been a POW in Afghanistan. After nearly a month of imprisonment, they had gotten bored with torturing him for answers he did not have. If it had not been for one lazy guard, Cougar would have been sent to a slave market in the morning. It had been a lucky escape, not the least because he had not been through Q course or SERE before he had been a POW. It was that escape that lead to him being offered a chance to train for Spec Ops. After seeing pictures of the warlord's operation, Cougar was reminded all over again of just how lucky his escape had been.

They were already in the field when they got word that their orders had changed, they were to bring the target in alive. To the surprise of exactly no one, the team was not happy with that development. Cougar's nightmares had already made an appearance before then, and they struck in full force after the change in their orders. Cougar had just about stopped sleeping altogether, and began compulsively cleaning his rifle at every chance in an attempt to calm himself. Clay had asked him to take it easy at one point, worried that they would run out of gun oil before they even launched their attack. After that, Jensen had taken to shadowing Cougar, eventually convincing him to nap for twenty minutes several times a day while Jensen kept watch; kept babbling and typing away to let Cougar know things were fine. After they managed to capture the guy, those twenty minute naps became the only sleep Cougar got.

The team reluctantly handed the warlord over at a post the U.S. military would never admit existed. They were prepared to write it off as a shit mission, knowing the guy would make a deal of some kind and walk free or receive amnesty or a new life in exchange for information. Before they could walk away, however, they received new orders: guard the warlord. Apparently, just about every person at that post had a personal reason to hate the man.

If it hadn't been for Jensen, who had babbled and flailed his hands very quickly after they were given the news, Cougar would have shot the warlord right there and then. But Jensen had been smart. He had babbled and bitched about the new orders and used that to cover his use of ASL.

'Don't do it. Have plan.'

Jensen's plan had involved Cougar remaining ignorant of it, and for him to spend as much time in full view of as many people and security cameras as he could. Cougar trusted Jensen to keep his word, and so did his best to remain in public areas as often as possible. He established a routine that was flexible around his guard duty schedule, he let himself become predictable even though it made most of his self preservation instincts scream.

After two weeks of babysitting a man the whole team wanted dead, two weeks of nightmares and
next to no sleep, Cougar nearly sighed with relief when the Losers were assigned a new mission. They were to take down the first of the compounds that the warlord had revealed. The night before they set out, Jensen packed a small parcel with his third favorite laptop and his entire stash of candy. He asked Cougar to sneak out after lights out to the jeep Pooch had been working on that afternoon and place it on the floor behind the driver's seat. The Losers left at first light, itching for a good fight, and rained hell down on another compound full of prisoners about to be made in to slaves. Pooch earned Cougar's eternal gratitude by hot wiring every car in the compound that still worked so that the prisoners would have a means of leaving the compound without having to walk for miles with no supplies. When the team returned to the post two days after they had left, it was to the news that the warlord had mysteriously committed suicide. The ranking officials in charge of that outpost had been mad enough to spit nails until Jensen handed them all the hard drives from the compound they had just ransacked. It would take more work to get the information off the hard drives than it would to ask the warlord for information, but seeing as the hard drives were not responsible for slavery, gun running, or other acts of terrorism, it was regarded as an improvement by all.

As they boarded a transport headed for home, Cougar noticed Jensen and Pooch shaking hands with a large, intimidating looking man. Most would probably assume that Pooch and Jensen were saying goodbye to a friend they had made. Then again, most people could not recognize one of Jensen's laptops on sight. There could only be one reason why Pooch and Jensen would be shaking hands with someone holding the laptop Jensen had asked Cougar to stash in a jeep just before they conveniently left base and had a solid alibi for a hated warlord's supposed suicide.

When Jensen got inside the transport, Cougar signed a small 'Thank you' to him. Jensen winked and sat himself down next to Cougar for the long ride home.

Cougar was not sure when he had fallen asleep, but he woke to find himself covered in a blanket and half draped over Jensen. The air inside the transport was cold, and people were walking around and moving things. There was a heavy, wet hissing sound that Cougar could not place, his brain still too fogged with sleep.

"Is he awake yet?" came Roque's voice. "We're almost done unloading all the gear."

"Roque, if you want to be the one to wake up our sleep deprived sniper, then please let me get some popcorn before you do it." Clay said.

"Fuck you, Clay." Roque shot back.

"As far as the Pooch is concerned, we should let the guy sleep. It's the first time he's gotten more than an hour's sleep in a row in, what? Three? Three and a half weeks? If napping on Jensen is what it takes for him to get some decent shut-eye, then I hope Jay's been comfortable for the last... fourteen hours, because Cougs needs the rest."

"When the fuck did people start calling that little psycho 'Cougs'?" Roque asked.

"It was back when Cougar had only a little more hair than Pooch does now." Jensen said, trying to keep his voice low to avoid disturbing Cougar.

"Fuck you, Jensen! Male pattern baldness is not a thing to be joked about!" Pooch said, laughter in
his voice.

Cougar snorted and peeled himself off Jensen as he sat up straight. He heard the others make various remarks about his return to consciousness, and he grunted and waved vaguely in their direction as he scrubbed a hand over his face. He felt Jensen reach over and unhook him where he was still buckled in to the safety harness of the transport. Cougar stumbled as he stood up, and felt Jensen grab his sleeve to help guide him.

"Jensen," Clay called, "get him to the meeting room near our offices. Coleman wants to debrief us ASAP so we don't have to get called in tomorrow."

"Sure thing, Colonel!" Jensen said, cheerfully. "Alrighty, Cougs. Now would be a good time to open your eyes, because there is running that needs to be done."

Cougar reluctantly opened his eyes and noticed that it was the middle of the night, and Fort Bragg was being rained on, very heavily.

"Mierda." he swore.

"Yup." Jensen said, popping the 'p'. He held out the blanket Cougar had been under a moment ago. "Let's get going, it's not raining as hard as it was five minutes ago, and I don't wanna be out there if it picks up again."

They held the blanket over their heads as they ran through the rain. The downpour was severe enough that they got lost simply because they had trouble seeing the buildings. They finally found the one they were looking for and pushed in through the door, nearly falling on their faces when their wet boots hit the polished tile floor.

"Transport almost didn't land." Jensen said as they lowered the sodden blanket. "Coleman had to bitch them out himself and they still almost took us someplace else. Might have been a good idea, considering we almost crashed at one point."

Cougar simply stood there, dripping wet with a look of disgust on his face.

"I know, right? Come on, let's get some coffee going while I print out the team's mission reports. We'll be heroes."

Cougar followed Jensen to the meeting room and made his way over to the coffee pot in the corner. Behind him, Jensen fussed with his laptop bag and made distressed cooing noises when he realized one of his laptops was slightly damp. Cougar started a fresh pot of coffee just as the printer shrieked to life in all its unholy glory.

"I swear the day they replace this thing I'm going to kidnap it and take it to the range. We'll give it a proper sendoff, Office Space style." Jensen muttered.

Cougar snorted, believing Jensen completely, and went about setting out cups for everyone's coffee, as well as sugar and milk. By the time the rest of the team showed up, dripping wet, the coffee was ready and Jensen was organizing the mission reports he had filled out during the flight while Cougar had been drooling on him.

"What the fuck kind of weather is this?" Roque spat as he heaved himself in to a chair.

"Fuckin' flowers better be worth it." Pooch muttered, taking the coffee Cougar offered him with a brief smile as he sat down.
"The fuck?" Roque asked.

"I'm gonna second that. Thank you, Cougar." Clay said, accepting his coffee. "Flowers?"

"April showers bring May flowers." Pooch prompted.

"Yeah, yeah. 'But what do May flowers bring'." Clay said, following the old rhyme.

"Pilgrims!" Jensen said, earning a room full of raised eyebrows. A moment of confused silence passed before Pooch spoke.

"Was that a goddamned history pun, Jensen?" he asked.

"May flowers. The Mayflower." Roque groaned as he face palmed.

"Oh god." Clay said, shaking his head at the grinning tech.

"Nobody appreciates my genius." Jensen said, sniffing dramatically. "Now I'm wondering if I should pass these out or not." he said, shuffling the printed sheets in his hands.

"And what, exactly, are those?" Clay asked.

"Just a stack of mission reports I took the liberty of filling out for the whole team. But, since you guys are all dicks, I could just shred them and leave you to fend for yourselves." Jensen said."

"Let's not be hasty now." Pooch said, sitting forward with Clay and Roque. "I'm sure there's some kind of agreement we can all come to."

"I'll take a nice, big IOU from the team." Jensen said, grinning.

The Losers paused. A favor to Jensen was not guaranteed to be anywhere near as pleasant as a favor from him. The others discreetly glanced at Cougar, hoping for a hint that Jensen was not planning anything that would get them on another shit list. Cougar thought it over and realized that it was April; Jessica had most likely had her baby by now, and Jensen would want to visit. Cougar gave an almost imperceptible nod to the team to let them know it was most likely safe.


"You have very little to worry about." Jensen said as he passed out the completed paperwork.

"Outstanding." Clay said, grinning as he checked it over.

The team looked over the printed pages and added their signatures to the reports. Cougar collected all the reports and affixed a paperclip to them before placing each in their individual folders. By the time General Coleman finally showed, everyone's papers were neatly organized and waiting to be picked up, and the team was chatting quietly. The sight of the Losers behaving themselves had Coleman pausing in the doorway, squinting at them suspiciously.

"Dude, we're all wet, and not in a good way. Let's get this meeting done!" Jensen said, flipping a pen around on his fingers impatiently.

"Alright." Coleman said, relaxing at the disrespect. "If we get this done fast enough, you might be out of here before Stegler finds out you're back."

Everyone groaned and sat up straighter. Agent Stegler was a handler from the CIA who seemed to have taken a shine to the team. He was always lurking in meetings with Coleman, or trying to get
one of them alone somewhere to ham-handedly hint that the CIA would like to hire them. None of the team was interested, not even Roque, but Stegler wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. In the last four months Clay had already refused five missions that were distinctly Company Ops; the kind that would lead to the Losers becoming Company enforcers, little better than hired thugs. Cougar had a hunch that Jensen had tracked all of them back to Stegler, and discreetly kept Clay informed about where the orders were coming from.

"Mission reports are already done." Clay said, nodding to the neat stack of folders Cougar had placed at the head of the table.

"That's... efficient, but disturbing if I'm being honest." Coleman admitted. "We'll just go over the mission quickly and see if there was anything anyone could have done differently, and then I'll let you boys go."

Three hours later, the debriefing ended and the team was given back their phones. They headed for their offices to find their spare rain gear and a change of dry clothes in the hopes that they would not get soaked on their way home.

Jensen had turned his phone back on as soon as they were in the office, likely hoping for word from his sister. Their relationship had become less strained since their meeting, but they were both still feeling out their boundaries with each other. Cougar saw his friend frown at the phone screen.

"A bunch of messages, but they're all from today." he muttered before calling his voicemail.

Cougar watched as Jensen grew tenser and more panicked with each successive message he listened to. Eventually he sat down at his desk and pulled out a laptop. When Jensen started cursing under his breath, Cougar stopped packing his own things and went closer to investigate.

"Jake? Háblame." he said.

"Jess went in to labor ten hours ago. Doctors say it could go on for a while. She's in labor, Cougs. Women die in labor. I'm trying to find a way to get to Cambridge, but flights are grounded because of the weather." Jensen said, voice growing shakier with each word. "I said I'd be there for her, Cougs. I said I'd be there to help, but I can't get there because of the stupid fucking weather. I'm gonna miss it."

"Jake, breathe." Cougar ordered. "Breathe in, hold it. Bien. Now let it out slow. Now in again. Bien. Now pack up what clothes you have here, find us a route around any closed roads, and find us a truck stop we can shower at."

"I've been awake for almost thirty hours at this point, Cougar. I can't do a twelve hour drive right now." Jensen admitted mournfully.

"I slept on the plane, I'm good to drive. Now pack. I will clear our leave with Clay." Cougar said, squeezing Jensen's shoulder.

Cougar went to his own desk and grabbed the change of clothes he kept for impromptu bar nights. Bag in hand, he made his way to where Clay, Roque, and Pooch were all changing in to dry clothes. He cleared his throat quietly before speaking.
BOSS?

"Yeah?" Clay asked as he turned around. The smile faded from his face when he saw Cougar's expression. "What's wrong?"

"Jensen and I need leave." Cougar stated.

"Gonna need a little more to go on than that." Clay said, looking concerned.

"Family emergency." Cougar said.

"Jensen's got family?" Roque asked, shocked. He looked across the room at the tech who was packing a bag while reading something on his laptop screen. They all knew the expression on Jensen's face, it was the one he wore when he was memorizing something he thought he would need to recall perfectly.

"Sister." Cougar explained. "They were estranged, but got back in touch recently. Things are still... tentative. We need leave because he is about to become an uncle."

"Oh shit!" Pooch said, voice soft with awe.

"Go." Clay said. "I'll work something out. Get out of here."

"Take these." Roque said, handing over a bottle of caffeine pills he had confiscated from Jensen a month ago. "No way you're flying in this weather, so you'd better be alert while you drive."

"Gracias." Cougar said, turning to leave. Jensen had finished packing and was waiting. He sketched a quick salute to the team before darting out the door.

They had almost cleared the building when they ran in to Stegler.

"Corporal Alvarez." Stegler said, looking entirely too pleased. "And Corporal Jensen. Lovely to meet you boys down here." he was cut off by Jensen grabbing his shoulders and moving him out of the way.

"No time, Sanchez." he said, jogging for the door.

"It's Stegler." the agent said to their retreating backs.

"I'm well aware." Jensen muttered as he opened the door and stepped out in to the pouring rain.

They opted to take Cougar's truck. It might not be as fuel efficient as Jensen's car, but it would be more comfortable for the long journey. Cougar got them pointed north on the I-95 while Jensen texted the team to let them know Stegler was on his way. They settled in for the long journey, Jensen nervously bouncing his legs and fiddling with the radio. After about three hours, exhaustion finally caught up with him and he drifted off in his seat, hands gripping his seat belt at chest height.

When they were about two hours from Cambridge, Cougar pulled in to a truck stop that offered showers and woke Jake. They washed up and changed clothes, and Jake called Donny's phone to leave a message about how close they were while Cougar put gas in the truck and got them
something to eat. When they pulled up to the hospital, Donny was waiting for them.

"Thanks for coming," he said. There were deep circles under his hazel eyes, and his usually well-groomed ginger hair was sticking up in every direction. "There's still not much progress, but the doctor's saying that's normal. She's in room six fifteen, it's this way."

"No." Jake said. "Donny, dude, you're dead on your feet right now. Grab a cup of coffee and go sit and breathe for a few minutes."

"I'll go with." Cougar offered. "Jake will text as soon as there is any change. Give him a few moments with his sister."

"Thanks." Jake said sincerely as he squeezed Cougar's shoulder. He took off inside the hospital, leaving Cougar with the stumbling civilian.

"Venga conmigo," Cougar said, grabbing Donny's elbow to steady him.

"What?" Donny asked.

"Help me find the cafeteria." Cougar said, wondering if the man was always this scatterbrained or if it was the exhaustion. "I just drove twelve hours right after a mission. I need coffee."

"Yeah. Yeah, that sounds. Coffee sounds good." Donny said, blinking dazedly as he followed Cougar.

Cougar led them to the small cafeteria and had Donny sit down under the pretense of saving them seats. Cougar made sure to take long enough getting their coffees that Donny was slumped over on the table, fast asleep, by the time he got back. Cougar sat across from Donny and set the coffees down before pulling out his phone. He set the notifications to vibrate before settling more comfortably in his chair. If he happened to nap, the vibrations would wake him without disturbing Donny, or anyone else in the cafeteria.

Cougar still did not know Donny very well. He knew Donny was clean of any potential illegal activities or unsavory connections, he'd been there when Jake had checked. Donald Nathan Alexander came from an upper middle class family in Vermont, had used a track scholarship to attend Harvard, where he had fallen for Jess and set out to woo her as respectfully as possible by all accounts.

Donny had taken the news about the pregnancy well; he had been ecstatic to learn about his impending fatherhood, and hurt to find out that Jess had kept it from him for so long. He had agreed with Jake that therapy was a necessity, and had managed to find a friend of his parents who could give them a reduced rate and work with their insurance. Donny had even taken several appointments himself to deal with his own emotions regarding the things Jess had hidden, and to get more information on what Jess might be going through as an abuse survivor and how he could help. He was determinedly well-adjusted, and everything Jake had been hoping his sister would find in a partner.

Looking over the sleeping man, Cougar was struck by how young he looked. It was an odd thing to think about given that Donny and Jess were older than Cougar by roughly two years. Cougar had only just turned twenty-four in December, but seeing Donny asleep in front of him left Cougar feeling ancient. An aching tiredness settled in his bones as he wondered what his life would have been like had he not been disowned by his family. Would he have married young? Would he be a father by now? Certainly he would have fewer scars and nightmares.
Cougar shook his head in an attempt to rid himself of those thoughts. He recalled Dr.
Bandyopadhyay saying that depressing thoughts struck most easily when a person was tired. For all
that Cougar had slept on the flight back to base, he was not fully recovered from the sleep
depression of the last mission. He had a life, he reminded himself, a good one. Yes, it could be
better in some ways, but he was happier than he had been in years. He had a good team, good
friends. He had Jake.

Cougar shifted in his chair and rested his chin against his chest. He would nap while he could,
since he had the feeling that he was going to be very busy soon enough. There was a new life
waiting to be born, and it was sure to bring a joyful chaos with it.

Three hours later Cougar's phone went off in his hand, waking him instantly. The text from Jake
was gibberish, meaning there was no time to type properly. Cougar leaned over and shook Donny
awake.

"Your coffee is cold. Drink it anyways and get upstairs." Cougar ordered.

Donny's face paled, but he grabbed the cold drink and downed it anyways. Cougar finished his
own and tossed the empty cups away before herding Donny upstairs. They found the appropriate
delivery room, and Cougar all but shoved Donny through the door. Cougar elected to stay outside,
remembering how crowded things could get from when his uncle's first child had been born.

Cougar waited in the hall, listening carefully. The doctors were telling Jess to push. She was crying
and insisting she couldn't do it, exhaustion evident in her voice.

"You can do it, honey. You're already almost there!" Donny urged gently.

"You can do anything, Jessy. You always could, as long as you decided it was possible,
remember?" Jake's voice came through, thick with emotion. "The only thing that ever stood in your
way was you. And this kid deserves better than that. Now come on!"

Jess screamed through gritted teeth, and then stopped. In the sudden silence Cougar could hear a
wet squelching noise. People were murmuring, and then the sharp cries of a newborn filled the air.
Joyful cheers followed it, and Cougar felt himself smile.

"It's a girl! Jess, we've got a baby girl!" Donny said, the wavering of his voice telling Cougar that
the new father was crying.

More murmurings filled Cougar's ears as doctors and nurses worked in the delivery room, what
they were saying was indistinct but positive judging by the tone. Then someone said "Here comes
the placenta!", and another wet noise followed that had Cougar wincing. A strange sigh came
through the wall, followed by the sound of a body hitting the floor.

"Little girl, as soon as you're old enough to appreciate it, I am going to tell you about the time your
daddy fainted in your delivery room." Jake said, making Cougar grin.

"I love that man, but if he'd still been holding her when he dropped I'd have killed him." Jess said,
her voice rough with the exertions of a twenty-five hour labor.

Cougar laughed quietly and pulled out his phone, shooting a quick text to let Jake know he was
stepping outside for a few minutes. Once he was out of the hospital, Cougar found a sun warmed bench to sit on and texted Pooch to let him know that things were alright, knowing that the bald man would relay the news to Roque and Clay. He only sent along basic information, knowing that Jake would later follow up with an almost excruciatingly detailed email.

Cougar fiddled with his phone for a moment, trying to decide if he should send the text he wanted to. He thought about the family in the delivery room, and how much they had needed to overcome just to get to this point. They had risked making their relationship worse just on the chance that they could grow closer after being apart for years. They were learning to be a family, in many ways for the first time.

Cougar sent the text.

[To: Fernanda Alvarez Apr/28/03 16:48 pm]

Hola.

Cougar's phone rang thirty-two seconds later.

"Hola?" he answered.

"Carlos?" Fernanda whispered. Her voice was deeper than he remembered it being. Then again, he had left home when she was barely seven, and usually only had holiday and birthday messages on his answering machine to go by. Calling her was risky, if their parents checked her phone bill and saw his name she would get in a lot of trouble, so most of their calls were through a payphone.

"Sí." he said, swallowing in the hopes that it would clear the sudden tightness in his throat.

"Dios mío." Fernanda breathed. Cougar could hear her moving around, a door being closed and possibly locked before she spoke again. "How are you? Are you okay? Did something happen?"

"No, no. Nothing is wrong. I just..." Cougar trailed off, fighting tears and feeling a bit stupid. "I miss you."

"I miss you too." she said, sounding just as emotional as Cougar. "Did you get my latest letter?"

"No. Lo siento." Cougar said, regretfully. "We just got back from overseas during the night and there was no time to check the mail before we had to get to the hospital."

"Hospital? Carlos, I thought you said nothing was wrong!" Fernanda said, distress bleeding in to her voice. Cougar could almost picture her, frowning with that little crease between her brows, so much like their mother.

"Nothing is wrong, Nanda." Cougar said, the old nickname rolling off his tongue easily despite how long it had been since he'd called her that. "Mi amigo, Jake, his sister had a baby. We drove twelve hours to come see her and got here just in time for the birth." Cougar's breath catches when he thinks about it. In the rush it had all been about looking after Jake, and then Donny, but now that it was done Cougar was blown away by what had happened. So much could have gone wrong at any point in time, but somehow it had all come together in time for Jake to be there for his sister.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Fernanda said, bringing Cougar's attention back to the call.
"Was there something important in the letter?" Cougar asked.

"Sí. I don't live at home anymore." Fernanda said.

"¿Qué?" Cougar asked, feeling as though he had been dumped in ice. If their parents had thrown Fernanda out, if they had found out about the letters...

"I moved in to the spare room in nuestros abuelos home. They are closer to the high school with their new condo. Abuelo is still in the hospital after his knee surgeries, but he should be out sometime next week. They said I am welcome to stay when I turn eighteen if I do not want to live with Mamá and Papá. So, if you wanted to, you could call their landline. Or visit, maybe." Fernanda trailed off, sounding just as shy as she had when she was five and went everywhere half-hiding behind someone's pant leg. Something in Cougar's chest squeezed painfully, and he closed his eyes against both the memories and the tears.

"Sí. I will call more. And I would like to visit. I don't know when I will have time, but I want to see you Nanda."

"Bien. We've all missed you, Carlos. And you could bring your Jake if you want, we want to meet the gringo Sra. Cervantes took such a shine to," Fernanda said, making Cougar laugh. Fernanda paused for a moment before hesitantly saying, "Diego and Estrella are graduating college in June." Cougar sucked in a sharp breath.

"Fernanda." he said, not even knowing what he wanted it to mean.

"Estrella wanted to invite you to the ceremony. She said she was tired of this feud and wanted her brother back." she said softly. Cougar wiped a hand over his face, smearing tears across his cheeks and almost knocking his hat off. "Diego was his usual stupid self. I think he is bitter because Estrella spoke more fondly of you than she has of him in years. You are missed, Carlos. Not all of the family wanted you gone."

"But none wanted me to stay badly enough to say something." Cougar bit out. The old anger and disappointment at his family was rearing its head again.

"It is possible for very smart people to do very stupid things, Carlos. But, unlike the time you jumped off the roof, it can take years for people to admit that they made a mistake." Fernanda said. "What were you even doing on the roof, anyways? No one will tell me."

"Diego lost his Frisbee up there and started crying. I climbed up and tossed it down." Cougar said, trying not to get pulled in to the memory.

"And then jumped off the roof instead of climbing down?" Fernanda asked.

"I was twelve and thought jumping in to the pool would be the fastest way down. I was not expecting to belly flop." Cougar admitted ruefully. Fernanda hissed in sympathy. "I need to go, need to get back."

"I need to get back to my homework, but don't be afraid to call. I will always have time for you, Carlos." Fernanda said.

"Sí. Give my love to nuestros abuelos. Te amo, Nanda." Cougar said.

"Te amo, Carlos. Adiós," Fernanda said before hanging up.

Cougar pocketed his phone and carefully wiped his hands over his face to rid himself of any stray
tears. Jake might notice that something was wrong, but most people would not, and Jake knew better than to ask about it in front of others. Cougar took a moment to breathe, to feel the sun on his skin and to find his balance before he stood from the bench and made his way back in to the hospital.

Jess had been moved to a new room by the time Cougar got back. When Cougar found it and carefully entered, he was not expecting to find what he did. Jake was sitting next to Jess' bed, holding a bundle of soft pink blankets that contained a very tiny newborn baby. Jake looked up at Cougar, tears running down his face, and smiled.

"She's perfect." he whispered.

"She's so tiny." Donny said.

"She didn't feel tiny on the way out." Jess deadpanned.

"Congratulations." Cougar said to Jess. "She's beautiful."

"Thank you." Jess said, smiling at him from where she lay propped against her pillows. She was clearly exhausted, but had a glow of accomplishment that only a new mother could. "Jake told me what it took for you guys to get here. Thank you. Not just for driving all that way, but for taking care of Jake, and of Donny." she said, smiling at her husband who was sitting on the other side of her bed and holding an ice pack to his head.

"It was no trouble." Cougar said softly as he walked closer to Jake and looked at the tiny baby resting in Jake's arms. Jake was staring at her in awe, holding her securely in his large arms with one hand cupping her head so very gently. Something in Cougar's chest felt like it was melting.

"Would you like to hold her?" Jess asked.

"Uh." Cougar said, expressing his panic eloquently.

"Hey." Jake said as he looked up at Cougar, calmer than he had been when Cougar first walked in. "You'll do fine. Have you held a baby before?" he asked as he carefully stood up, cradling the tiny, precious bundle more carefully than he handled his own laptops.

"Si. El hermano de mi madre tuvo un bebé cuando tenía dieciséis años." Cougar admitted.

"Then it's been a few years, but it's okay." Jake said, voice soothing as he stepped closer to Cougar. "It's not the kind of thing you forget how to do. Like riding a bike, but with less crashing in to stop signs."

"There's a story there." Cougar said, nervously eyeing the baby who still slept soundly.

"First time I rode a bike I was seventeen. I did not get very far." Jake said. "Now come on, bring your arms up. That's good, Cougs. Support her head. Perfect. You're a natural." Jake said, stepping back once Cougar was holding the baby.

Cougar held still once she was settled in his arms, not wanting to disturb her. He started to relax a little when she did not immediately start wailing the way his cousin always had after being
handled. She shifted in his arms a little and yawned before snuggling deeper in to Cougar's arms. Cougar felt tears prick his eyes again, and sniffl ed a little.

"I'm gonna grab us some coffee." Donny said quietly. "Jake, you know his order?"

"Yeah, I'll come with you." Jake said, smiling at Cougar and the baby with an achingly soft look on his face. He gently smoothed one hand down the baby's blanket, brushing Cougar's arm, before heading for the door with Donny.

"Thank you." Jess said quietly after the men had left. At Cougar's raised eyebrow she elaborated. "For looking after Jake. He's been through a lot, more than I think he'll ever admit. He's a strong person, and he's been able to deal with it, but... It's good to know that someone is there who cares enough to make sure he's okay. God knows I fucked up when I tried."

"You were young. Trying to survive a bad situation. You made mistakes, and you are working to make sure you don't make them a second time." Cougar said. "What happened was bad, what you did was bad, no one denies this. But your willingness to apologize, correct yourself, and the effort you put in to prevent it from happening again are no less important."

"Thanks." Jess choked out, eyes brimming with tears. She sniffl ed a few times and gave Cougar a wobbly smiled. Cougar smiled back, and turned his attention to her daughter to give Jess a moment to collect herself. A few minutes later, Jess spoke up,

"Donny and I, we were talking a few days ago about what to do if something happens to us. What kind of precautions to have in place. Jake is our first choice for legal guardian. We talked to him about it before you got here and he said that if the worst happens, he'll leave the army to take her in."

Cougar felt himself frown at the idea of Jake leaving. It wasn't that he did not think Jake would do a good job of raising her, but surely there was someone else that they knew who did not have such a dangerous job. Someone who did not have a team relying on them.

"We know that Jake's job is not what anyone would call safe, but he's the only one we know who would make sure she grows up being not just taken care of, but loved. Now, given how close the two of you are, how much Jake trusts you, we were wondering if you wouldn't mind being our second choice."

Cougar blinked at her in shock.

"I know we don't know each other well, and I'm not asking for an answer right away, but there's no one Jake trusts more than you. No one else who would understand how important it is for her to be happy and safe." Jess said.

"I will need to think on this." Cougar said. Something so important could not be decided on a whim. It was a child's life, not a chocolate bar.

"That's understandable." Jess said, smiling at him. After a moment of silence she spoke again, "Jake said you guys don't have a place to stay this time."

"Slipped our minds." Cougar admitted.

"I'll probably be in here for a day or two, and Donny plans to stay with me as much as he can. You and Jake could crash at our place." she offered.

"That would be very kind." Cougar said.
"Fair warning, there might be a bit of a mess in the kitchen. Donny was making lunch when my contractions hit. He dropped everything, literally." Jess said, smiling.

"I'll make Jake clean it up." Cougar said, earning a laugh.

The door to Jess' hospital room opened, and Donny came inside followed by Jake, holding three cups of coffee and a small milk carton.

"One of those coffees better be for me." Jess said.

"Sorry. Caffeine and nursing don't mix, Jess." Jake said, passing her the milk carton. Jess grumbled as she accepted it.

"Could I, um?" Donny said to Cougar, looking at the baby in his arms.

"Of course." Cougar said, passing her over carefully. His arms and chest felt cool without the bundle of warm blankets to hold.

"So I was thinking that Cougar and I should head out, leave you three to bond. We'll get our stuff to your place and check in with our team. A nap might be a good idea as well. And we'll come back tomorrow with something that isn't hospital food. Because anything that makes MREs look tasty by comparison is frightening." Jake said.

"Sounds good." Jess said, hiding a yawn behind her hand. "Donny gave you the keys?"

"And directions." Jake said, removing Donny's cup from the cardboard holder and placing it far enough from the bed that Jess could not reach it.

"We'll see you guys tomorrow." Donny said, not looking up from where he was watching his daughter sleep, expression doting.

Cougar smiled, waved goodbye to the couple, and followed Jake out. He waited until they were in the truck before speaking.

"Usted tiene algo planeado, ¿no?"

"They had a baby shower already, so they should be okay for actual baby supplies, but baby proofing? Not always covered. We'll check the apartment over, then you can nap while I send the guys an update. It'd be a good idea to check how big their freezer is, too." Jake said.

"Freezer?" Cougar asked, confused. Baby proofing he understood, in theory at least, but the size of their freezer was an odd point.

"New baby and last semester of law school means not much time for anything. If I have to I'll get them a big freezer and fill it with enough premade meals to hold them and the tiny one for a few months. Should take some of the strain off them." Jake explained.

"Bueno idea." Cougar said, impressed.

"Now, I don't want to presume anything but-"

"I will do the cooking. We have too much to do to risk you melting their cookware." Cougar said.

"That happened one time." Jake argued.

"You had to buy a new stove top." Cougar pointed out.
"And I like to think I've learned my lesson about cooking and gaming at the same time." Jake said as he pulled out of the their parking space. "And anyways, I wouldn't be much good in the kitchen right now, it requires more manual dexterity than I can promise. On a related note, when we get in could you take a look at my right hand? I think Jess broke my pinky when she squeezed it during the delivery."

The apartment was small and clean, apart from the two half-made sandwiches scattered on the kitchen floor and the ingredients left out on the counter. Jake cleaned the mess up carefully while Cougar took stock of the contents of Jess and Donny's fridge. While he checked Jake's hand, the pinky of which did seem to have a hairline fracture that needed to be taped, Cougar asked about any allergies he should be aware of when he did the grocery shopping. Shortly thereafter he left to buy a truly ridiculous amount of food while Jake composed an email to their team. By the time Cougar returned, Jake had assembled most of the baby furniture, and was on the phone with Pooch discussing second hand freezer units.

Jake eventually found a freezer unit he could repair easily enough for a very good price and arranged to pick it up very early the next day. Clay had only managed to get them four days of leave, meaning they would need to work quickly. Cougar focused on getting dough prepared that would need to chill overnight in the fridge, and well as preparing other ingredients to expedite the cooking he would be doing. Jake pitched in where he was able to with his fingers taped, and by evening the fridge was stocked full of chopped, minced, diced, pureed, or marinating food.

They decided to bunk on the futon in the living room, as they both felt it would be too odd to try and sleep in Jess and Donny's bed. They turned in early, hoping to get an early start the next day.

Cougar had been expecting nightmares, he knew that a few hours of uninterrupted sleep did not mean his mind had suddenly healed. What he had not expected was that it would be Jake's nightmares that woke him. In the middle of the night Cougar was woken by Jake bolting to the bathroom, barely making it inside before heaving in to the toilet.

Cougar made his way over to the bathroom and leaned against the doorframe before sliding down, making sure that Jake did not feel trapped or boxed in. When Jake was done being sick he sat back, looking miserable. The silence stretched between them as Jake caught his breath.

"Nightmares suck." Jake said eventually.

Cougar nodded in agreement. Jake reached up on to the counter for the mouth wash and proceeded to rinse out his mouth, spitting in to the toilet. When he was done and had flushed again, Jake crawled over to Cougar and settled next to him, their sides touching.

"I dreamed that I woke up and went to get some water. When I tried to leave the kitchen I suddenly was in the hallway of that duplex Michelle and I used to rent. Those fucking fake blood stains bleeding through the newest coat of paint. I got lost in that hallway, there was always just more hallway after every corner, until suddenly there wasn't. There was a door. And past that door was a room where everyone I care about just... wasn't breathing. Cold to the touch. No pulse." Jake shivered.

There were a lot of things Cougar could have said at that moment, but he chose to wrap an arm around Jake's shoulders and pull his friend closer. Jake went willingly, curling himself around
Cougar and making himself smaller. For all Jake's love of words, he responded best to touch when he needed comfort.

In the morning, they picked themselves off the bathroom floor where they had dozed off, and went to work. Cougar was able to get several meals worth of food cooking while Jake went to pick up the freezer. They got it up the stairs with minimum fuss, it weighed less than some of the packs they've had to carry in the field, and Jake got Pooch on the phone to walk him through the repairs. They spent the day cooking and repairing things in the apartment, and after Jake had dropped off some food for Jess and Donny at the hospital he went through the entire apartment to baby proof it.

Their last day of leave was also the day that Donny and Jess were meant to get back from the hospital. Cougar woke to find Jake missing. Fearing that Jake had another nightmare, Cougar got up and went looking for him. Jake was in the kitchen, standing at the sink. On the counters around him were a collection of bottles of different kinds of alcohol. Half of them were empty, and Jake was currently emptying another one in to the sink.

A floorboard squeaked under Cougar's foot as he stepped forward, Jake flinched and spun around. He stared at Cougar, eyes wide and frightened. Cougar stepped forward slowly and reached for a new bottle. He opened it, and wordlessly started pouring its contents down the drain. Jake's face crumpled and his shoulders slumped before he grabbed Cougar in a one-armed hug.

"I couldn't leave them there. I tried, and I know they're not my parents, but I couldn't do it Cougs. I couldn't." Jake whispered in to Cougar's shoulder. Cougar could feel Jake trembling against him, and wrapped his free arm tighter around Jake's torso.

"Entiendo." Cougar whispered.

Together, they poured out the rest of the bottles and opened all the windows to get rid of the smell.

Donny and Jess got to their apartment around eight that morning. There was confusion in their eyes when they spotted the freezer, and tears when they opened it to find dozens of meticulously organized and labeled Tupperware full of food. Their daughter, who had finally been named Bethany Andrea Jensen-Alexander, spent most of her time asleep, though she did seem inclined to wiggle and grunt contentedly when people pressed kisses to her face.

Jake and Cougar were on the road by nine, stocked with snacks and books and much better prepared for a twelve hour journey than they had been on the trip up. Jake took first shift behind the wheel, singing along with the radio, Cougar beside him in the passenger seat. The highway before them was free of traffic, and the breeze coming through the open windows was invigorating. Cougar allowed himself to bask in the feeling of having helped people without shedding blood. He looked over at Jake and found his friend grinning as he butchered the notes to a pop song. Cougar grinned, his life may not be perfect, but he wouldn't trade it for anyone else's.

Chapter End Notes
Fun fact: I listen to video game soundtracks when I work. They're designed to sound pretty, set the mood, but not be distracting. The only problem is that sometimes the music would get unexpectedly epic. So I had to resist the urge to randomly have viking warriors burst in during tender moments.

Potential triggers:

Mentions of past torture. (vague)

Reference to slavery.

Conspiracy to commit murder.

Jake begins panicking when he thinks he won't be able to be there for his sister when he finds out she's in labor.

Some slightly depressing thoughts on Cougar's part, because he's tired and is confronted with someone living a normal life. Auditory descriptions of child birth. (Cougar is out in the hall for the delivery, he doesn't want to crowd the room needlessly.)

Summary of a nightmare Jake has.

Reference to alcoholism. (Jake finds a small liquor collection and panics before dumping it in the sink. Jess and Donny are not alcoholics, Jake just has very bad memories about how babies and booze don't mix.)
In late June, Jake and Cougar went back to Cambridge to watch Jess and Donny graduate. They sat in the audience holding Beth, because she actually stayed quiet for them, and took photos of the couple as they walked across the stage one after another. They awkwardly made quiet small talk with a few of Donny's relatives, some of whom were distinctly less than pleasant towards Jake. Apparently, after Beth was born, Donny decided to change his own last name to Jensen-Alexander. His reasoning being that the name was shared by his wife and daughter, and there was no reason not to change his to match. Rather than applaud him for rejecting societal notions of male ownership in marriage, some of the more traditional family members took offense and decided that Jake was somehow to blame for this. Jake laughed most of it off, and told the worst offender that the most hilarious part was that they all actually thought their opinions mattered to him.

After the ceremony, Jake and Cougar spent the rest of the day watching Beth so that her parents could pack up their apartment in preparation for the move to Concord, New Hampshire. Jake took just as many pictures of them babysitting Beth as he had of his sister's graduation. When they got back to Fort Bragg, he showed off the pictures to Clay and Pooch, and conveniently left the camera where Roque would find it and flip through it at his own pace without a fuss.

Three days after they got back, Clay called Cougar in to his office.

"While you and Jensen were gone we had a bit of trouble sorting some paperwork out. See, normally it's a Sergeant's job to make sure his unit has everything in order. That the team is well trained, ready for deployment, able to use all of their equipment properly, and that any changes or damage to equipment are recorded and reported. So I asked Pooch, the only Sergeant on the team, where his paperwork was. Turns out that Pooch has not been the one taking care of all that crap. It's your signature on all the forms. I did a bit of digging and it seems that you've been doing Pooch and Wilkes' jobs for them. Since about six months after you joined the team, in fact." Clay said, eyebrow raised.

"Wilkes was disorganized. We almost left with broken gear three times because he did not sign his paperwork." Cougar said in his defense.

"I don't doubt that. What I'm trying to get at here is that you've been doing the job of a Sergeant for over three years now. I think it's high time you had the rank to match." Clay said.

Cougar felt his jaw drop. Was Clay truly saying what Cougar thought he was saying?

"You fit all of the qualifications, Cougar. And there's a PLDC course starting next week." Clay
said, taking paperwork and a pamphlet out of his desk drawer, the pamphlet read Primary Leadership Development Course. Cougar took them when Clay passed them over. "There's a spot open, as far as I'm concerned it's yours. I've already told Coleman about this; you're not being transferred anywhere, you're just getting the recognition you deserve for the work you've been doing."

"Thank you, Colonel." Clay said, biting down on a smile.

"Dismissed, Sergeant." Clay said, smiling warmly.

Cougar grinned, and only just stopped himself from bounding out of the room Jensen-style. Knowing exactly who he wanted to tell first, Cougar made his way over to his best friend's desk. Jensen was typing away with a concentration that meant he was either doing something very good, or something very bad. A glance at the screen showed Cougar that one of Donny's ruder relatives was about to be issued a new driver's license under the name Fuckface McGee.

"I have to go away for a month." Cougar said. Jensen's hands spasmed on the keyboard and he turned to look at Cougar in fear and betrayal. Cougar handed Jensen the pamphlet, and saw him relax the moment it sank in.

"Oh my god. Cougar. You dick! I thought you were getting loaned out or something." Jensen said, leaning back in his chair and rubbing his chest as though trying to calm his heart manually. Jensen pushed away from his desk and stood before enveloping Cougar in a hug. Cougar let himself bask in the warmth and affection of a good Jensen hug. "When do you leave?" Jensen asked, voice soft and a bit vulnerable.

"Next week." Cougar said just as quietly.

"Sergeant Cougar." Jensen mused as he pulled back, hands lingering on Cougar's shoulders. Cougar snorted,

"Sergeant Alvarez." he corrected.

"As long as I still don't have to share a tent with Roque, I'll call you Sergeant Snugglepants von Deathboom if you ask me to." Jensen joked, a small flash of uncertainty in his eyes.

"Call me anything other than Cougar, or Carlos, and I'll duct tape you to Roque after feeding you both Pooch's chili." Cougar threatened, smiling to reassure Jensen that a change in rank was not a change in friends.

"Oh god. Not Pooch's chili. Anything but Pooch's chili." Jensen said, relaxing while he shuddered theatrically.

"Every time I walk in to a room I hear you badmouthing my chili." Pooch said as he entered the office. Jensen dropped his hands from Cougaer's shoulders and leaned his hip against his desk.

"You don't know how to use spices properly. It's an affront to spice. Frank Herbert could eat that chili and go 'You know what? Maybe the spice shouldn't flow'." Jensen said.

"Your weak-ass white boy taste buds just can't appreciate real food." Pooch argued good naturedly.

"Spices are meant to be additives. Not main ingredients." Cougar said, smirking.

"Oh well fuck you too, Cougar." Pooch said, laughing.
"That's 'fuck you, Sergeant Alvarez' to you." Cougar shot back.

"Wait, wait. I missed a step somewhere. The Pooch is lost now." Pooch said.

"Cougs is heading to the PLDC next week." Jensen said.

"Shiiiit. Nice job, Cougs. This call for a bar night?" Pooch asked.

"Oh hell yeah." Jensen said, grinning wickedly. Cougar knew that grin, that grin meant trouble.

When Cougar headed off to the Primary Leadership Development Course the next Monday he had only just recovered from the hangover. Truthfully he was glad to be away from base as it meant he would not have to listen to the speculation about where all the tarantulas had come from. He was not sure he would be able to maintain a poker face all day.

A month later, Cougar got back to find the team gone on a mission. The course had been hard work, but Cougar had given it every ounce of effort he had, earning top marks in most aspects. Though he had not been the only Green Beret in the course, Cougar had been the only sniper, as well as being the only one to have completed SERE. A few had grumbled about Cougar having it easy, but they shut up after a member of Cougar's former platoon had called him by his nickname. Cougar was looking forward to telling Jensen about overhearing someone hiss "but were-cougars aren't real".

Finding the offices empty upon his return, Cougar took the opportunity to rearrange the contents of everyone's desk drawers; just to fuck with them, not because he missed them all. Inside Jensen's desk he mostly found candy, which he helped himself to, and a small terrarium with a single tarantula inside that was hooked up to some kind of live cricket dispenser, which Cougar placed back exactly where he had found it before getting the fuck out of the office.

Deciding that if the mice were away then the cat should play, Cougar made a quick stop at his apartment to change his clothes before heading for the queer club furthest from base. He spent a few enjoyable hours dancing and flirting, drinking and grinding with a wide variety of people, enjoying the momentary freedom to do so without repercussion. Close to midnight, Cougar ended up squeezing in to a bathroom stall with one of the club's drag queens, sinking happily to his knees to swallow her cock down after rolling a flavored condom on to her length. When Miss Cinnamon Sweetcheeks was done returning the favor, her inch long stiletto nails making it the most precarious handjob Cougar had ever received, she kissed his cheek and left, leaving behind a stain of bright pink lip gloss on his skin. Deeming the night well spent, Cougar went home to scrub the glitter and lip gloss off and treat himself to a long soak in a hot bath.

Cougar lay back in his bath, submerging as much of himself as he was able to. His knees poked out of the water, leg hairs slowly drying as his skin cooled, while he let his torso float in the hot water. He kept his head tilted back in the water so that only his mouth and nose stuck out. Submerged in this way, Cougar could only really hear his own breathing and feel his heartbeat in his chest. It was meditative, and something Dr. Bandyopadhyay had suggested when traditional meditation did not work for Cougar; it had been too much like the breathing exercises he used while sniping, he needed something more sense oriented, something that anchored him inside his body. The baths worked beautifully, but only if Cougar was calm enough to relax.
It had been a relief to visit the club that night; to be in an environment where he did not have to hide his appreciation of, and attraction to, anyone who was not strictly female. Sometimes Cougar wished that he could be open with his team, his friends, about his sexual orientation, but with DADT in place it was too big of a risk. Cougar was tired of losing people to prejudice.

He did not think that any of the were homophobic per se, he had even overheard Jake and Pooch discussing the same-sex marriage laws that were being considered in some states and both had seemed to support the idea. But that did not guarantee that none of them would react badly to the news that one of their own was pansexual. Roque would probably write it off as a horny soldier needing a helping hand, never mind that Cougar had not once slept with another military person. Roque liked things simple and straightforward, and would stick to the best answer that would permit simplicity while also allowing him to ignore anything that did not affect the team's performance in the field. Clay would forever be on the fence about reporting Cougar as long as DADT was in place. Clay still struggled between wanting to climb the ranks versus being a good leader to his team. He wanted to do the best for the band of misfits that were as much family as team these days, but Clay had grown up in a military family and was often compared to the legacies left behind by his father and grandfather. Every achievement was overshadowed, and every failure brought the ghost of disappointment from men Clay had looked up to, but had never really gotten to know. Cougar would rather stay closeted than risk what he had now, because even if it did not get him kicked out it would almost certainly fuck up the team.

Cougar took a deep, steady breath after reaching that decision and focused his attention on his senses to begin the process of blanking his mind so that he could relax. He was mostly warm except where parts of him poked out of the water. His butt was a little cool from resting on the bottom of the tub. He could hear himself breathing slow and deep, and could smell the bath soap he had added, a rich scent that edged almost to menthol but stayed gentle and clean smelling. A gift from Jake last Christmas. Cougar brought his hands to his thighs and felt his fingers brush tiny bubbles away from his skin. He trailed his fingers up his thighs, across his hips and on to his stomach, focusing on the sensation of the bubbles being disturbed, and then listening underwater to the hiss when the bubbles broke the water surface. He felt the last of the tension in his back leave, and finally drifted.

He was not sure how long he had been in the bath when a vibration from his phone knocked loudly against the side of the tub. Cougar sighed deeply, knowing that his bath was most likely at an end. He shifted to sit up, wet hair plastering against the back of his neck as it drained of water. Reaching over the edge of the tub, Cougar wiped his dripping hand off on his towel before grabbing his phone.

[From: Lord Of The Dance Aug/02/03 2:37 am]

Missed you on this mission. Sorry if I woke you. Gertrude says you're back.

Cougar rolled his eyes at Jake's latest change to the contact information in Cougar's phone.

[To: Jake Aug/02/03 2:38 am]

Was not sleeping. Gertrude?
Long legs, black hair, big eyes. Compulsively grooms her mandibles if someone moves her terrarium.

Cougar snorted, of course the spider had a name.

Come over. No arguments.

k

Three minutes later, Cougar was toweling his hair when there was a knock at the door. Cougar frowned, he lived thirty minutes from base. If Jake was already at his door then he had to have texted from the parking lot. Whatever mission the team had been on must have been a bad one.

Cougar opened the door after checking through the peep hole that it was actually Jake. Just because nobody had come seeking revenge yet did not mean nobody would, and people always blamed the one who followed the orders, and not the ones who gave them. Jake stood on the other side of Cougar's door, looking tired and washed out in the hallways lights. Cougar opened the door to him.

"Hey. How'd the PLDC go?" Jake asked, voice just as bright and cheerful as ever despite his appearance.

"Good." Cougar answered, moving aside to let Jake in.

As soon as the door was closed, Jake turned and enveloped Cougar in a hug. Cougar locked his door one-handed before returning the embrace. There was a faint tremor in Jake's arms, would have been unnoticeable if Cougar were less familiar with Jake's hugs. Cougar rubbed his hands up and down Jake's back and pressed closer. The contact steadied his friend, and Jake blew out a shaky breath before stepping back.

"Bad mission." Jake said. "Absolutely shit sniper was loaned to us."

"Oh?" Cougar prompted, leading Jake further in to the apartment.

"Waaay too serious. Very keen on the whole scary lone sniper image, but didn't pull it off half as well as I've seen you do when you were stoned out of your gourd and giggling to yourself that one time. Where the hell were we?" Jake rambled.

"Oman." Cougar answered. He barely remembered that mission thanks to everything he had been dosed with.

"Right, right. So, yeah. Not a good start, because you know how we are. The only ones allowed to take themselves seriously are Clay and Roque. So. Grumpy fucking sniper acting like he was better
than all of us. No sense of humor. Dissed my boxers. He dissed my Kirby boxers, Cougs! And then he tried to sell the team to the rogue Honduran General we may or may not have been sent to take down." Jake said.

"Hijo de puta!" Cougar spat, going cold inside. He'd come so close to losing his friends and he hadn't even known it. And the reason why did nothing to help. There were enough challenges in their line of work to begin with, they did not need assholes defecting on them and selling them out. Whoever this other sniper was, he was as good as dead, Cougar would make sure of it!

"Yeah, I know." Jake said, sinking on to Cougar's couch. "I really like those boxers, too. But I did get a pretty sweet piece while we were over there." he said before reaching for his back holster.

Cougar whistled when he saw the gun. It was a large silver revolver; a solid, heavy looking gun that had the words COLT ANACONDA 44 MAGNUM etched in to the barrel.

"Thanks. I got it off a Honduran General." Jake said. "So. Pooch is down with a broken leg, Clay has a broken hand and a dislocated elbow, Roque is rocking one hell of a concussion, and I am sporting the ever fashionable cracked ribs. Oh! And one broken toe! So we have a few weeks of leave, because that mission was possibly the most spectacular fuckup any of us have ever seen. Like, even Stegler couldn't find something positive to say other than 'Mission accomplished and the team survived'. Though I feel I should mention that we failed to bring back our loaner sniper. I wonder if there's a fee for that, like if you total a rental car."

Cougar sat next to Jake, leaning in to his side. This close Cougar could smell the antiseptic and chemical scent he associated with the base's medical centre. Jake had already been checked over, but Cougar would still keep a watchful eye on his friend.

"How long do we have?" Cougar asked.

"Two weeks of leave with liberty, then another two of extremely light duty since we'll all still be achy breaky." Jake said. "Though Roque, in his incredibly concussed state, suggested we all rent a cabin for a week so we can all hang out and really become friends without being shot at or drunk. His words, not mine. Why did no one tell me Roque is so nice when he's concussed?"

"Hm." Cougar said, Roque must have been hit very hard for him to get like that.

"Pooch has already said he needs a week alone with Jolene, so if any kind of cabin things were to happen we would need to decide what order to do them in. I'm leaning towards getting the fuck away from everyone for a week before I have to see them again." Jake said.

Cougar raised an eyebrow at that, Jake was not usually one to want distance from his friends. Cougar was beginning to wonder just how badly the mission had gone that Jake felt the need to hide from everyone. Jake fidgeted under Cougar's scrutiny.

"At some point on the mission I might have lost my temper. The others are kind of looking at me in a 'just how long before he snaps' sort of way. It's making me twitchy. And I'm twitchy enough without that. The past month has not been the easiest since Clay apparently takes your absence to mean he can up the number of black ops we do. And this latest one just... I don't think I like guns very much after it." Jake finished, pressing his lips together like he wished he could seal his mouth shut right then.

Cougar looked at the way Jake was clutching the gun in his lap with bruised hands, like he was torn between breaking it and using it. Cougar put an arm around Jake's shoulders, squeezing slightly until Jake started to relax.
"Sometimes I do, too." Cougar admitted softly. Jake turned to face him, eyes wide and questioning.

Cougar shrugged, "They have uses, good points, but much of what we see them being used for makes me wish we still used arrows instead of bullets."

"Well now I'm imagining the team in costumes from Robin Hood. Gotta say, the tights do great things for your thighs." Jake joked, relaxing further in to Cougar's side.

Cougar snorted and shook his head, smiling. Jake suppressed a yawn next to him.

"When was the last time you slept?" Cougar asked.

"Shortly before the last time I ate." Jake said evasively.

"There is soup in the freezer. We are going to eat, and then we are going to bed." Cougar decided.

"That sounds like an excellent plan." Jake said.

In the morning, which started a good bit closer to noon for them than usual, Cougar dragged Jake out to pick up groceries. Cougar was picking out lemons for a syrup recipe he wanted to try when Pooch texted.

[From: Pooch Aug/02/03 11:52 am]

Just got out of med center with Clay and Roque. Jolene picking me up soon. Have you seen Jensen?

[To: Pooch Aug/02/03 11:53 am]

He's here. Showed up last night. Mentioned leave and something about a cabin before we go back.

Cougar bagged his chosen lemons while waiting for Pooch's reply. Jake came back from the meat section with a few good cuts of beef, some steaks, and a pack of ground pork.

"Pork's got a milder flavor than beef. Thought it'd suit some of those catchall meat filling and sauce mixes you like to make. The flavors can come through better if they aren't all duking it out on out tongues," Jensen said.

"Bueno idea." Cougar said as he nodded in approval. Switching meat types might be the solution to fixing that one sauce he was constantly dissatisfied with. cougar's phone buzzed in his pocket. "Pooch texted. They are out of medical," he said as he reached for his phone. Jake winced and took off towards the frozen section.

[From: Pooch Aug/02/03 11:58 am]
That idea's being put off until we can be sure no one will kill anyone else. How's J doing?

Cougar frowned at Pooch's text. ¿Qué carajo pasó en esa misión?

[To: Pooch Aug/02/03 11:59 am]

Ribs slowing him. Determined to be positive. Ran when I said you texted.

[From: Pooch Aug/02/03 12:00 pm]

While you were at PLDC the team argued a lot. Clay made some bad choices. J stood up to him and got reprimanded. Everybody is mad at everybody else. Tried to mediate but I'm not you. We all need a fucking break from each other.

Cougar was puzzling over the text when Jake came back and dropped ice cream and frozen vegetables in the cart. When Cougar looked up, Jake was staring worriedly at Cougar's phone.

"Pooch says everyone hates each other too much to rent a cabin now. Some other time, maybe." Cougar said. Jake relaxed a bit and shot Cougar a tired smile.

"That's probably for the best." Jake said. "We missing anything else?"

"Flour."

"I'll grab it." Jake said, turning around immediately.

When Cougar looked back at his phone, there was one last text from Pooch.

[From: Pooch Aug/02/03 12:06 pm]

Jolene's here. I'll call in a few days to talk about what happened. You know how J is. Only keeps the stuff that hurts to himself.

Cougar shoved his phone in his pocket and pushed his cart to the next aisle of vegetables. He would wait until he had more information before he acted, rushing off to beat the rest of the team should only be done if he was completely certain they deserved it. He took out his list and checked if there was anything else he needed to send Jake for. Grocery shopping had been a chore until they started teaming up for it. Cougar could take his time picking out the best fruits and vegetables while Jake ran all over the store getting everything else, his lack of a cart making it easy for him to find and grab what they wanted quickly.

Jake soon returned, carrying not only a large sack of flour, but sugar, salt, and a few other baking ingredients. He carefully arranged them in the cart, making sure that nothing was being crushed.

"Good sales." Jake said by way of explanation. "And you were running a bit low on this stuff before you left. Anything else? Oh! Eggs and dairy! Be right back."
Cougar smiled and bagged the last of the vegetables he wanted before heading to the cash registers. As he waited in line, Cougar idly browsed the news stand. Most of the magazines were full of the usual inane celebrity gossip, and the newspapers were not all that better. One small article had Cougar pausing, a faint sense of alarm running through him. He grabbed the paper and read the small blurb on the front page.

**Rogue Honduran General Found Dead**

For the last four months Honduras has seen unrest within its borders thanks to General Celso Beckeles. Beckeles, once a loyal and prominent General of the Military of Honduras went rogue approximately four months ago, followed by nearly ten percent of the enlisted forces.

No details were given of why Beckeles had suddenly left, only that he had made threats about staging a coup to overthrow Honduran President Ricardo Maduro. The last four months have been marked by a series of disappearances, mostly family or friends of key people involved in the struggle for power, though at the time of this writing it is still unclear as to whether these people are simply missing or dead. When asked what action they were taking to resolve the problem, Honduran military officials could only state that they were taking steps to prevent an all-out war.

Late last night however, General Beckeles was found dead in the remote villa he had retreated to. Officials have declined to comment at the present time, though inside sources say that Beckeles had been beaten to death along with two guards and an unknown man who is at this time suspected to have been a prostitute.

(For more on General Beckeles and Honduras' turbulent military history, turn to page A8)

Cougar returned the paper to the stand and pushed his cart up in line. Jake found him just as he was placing his items on the conveyor belt. Jake packed the groceries while Cougar paid, and jokingly patted the cart like he wanted Cougar to hop in like a little kid. Cougar snorted and shook his head, smiling fondly.

Cougar waited until they were done unpacking back at his apartment before he mentioned anything.

"Newspaper at the store had an interesting article." he began. Jake turned to him, expression curious. "Honduran General found dead." Jake froze, eyes darting as though he was searching for an opening to escape through. "He was with two guards and, according to the story, a male prostitute."

Jake burst out laughing, clapping one hand over his heart as he doubled over. Cougar found himself smiling indulgently as his best friend gradually collapsed on the floor, laughing hysterically.

"Oh my god." Jake gasped. "Oh my g- Oh. My, God! Fuck. My ribs! He would hate that so much! It's perfect! Now I'm glad they stripped us."
"They stripped you?" Cougar asked, trying to gauge how concerned he should be.

"Just to our boxers. If there had only been one or two of us they probably would have had us in the buff, but with four guys and one defector it would have turned in to a real sausage party." Jake said, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes.

Cougar looked at Jake, took in the way that laughter had brightened his face and how much more relaxed he was. Cougar would give Jake time to think over what had happened in Honduras. He was well acquainted with how frustrating it could be to have people asking questions you were not yet ready to answer.

It was on their third day of leave that Pooch called. Cougar was at Jake's apartment, clearing off shelf space so that Jake could install a new terrarium for Gertrude that he had gone to pick up.

"Hola." Cougar said.

"Hey Cougs. Can you talk?" Pooch asked, voice low.

"Si. Jake is out." Cougar said.

"Out?!" Pooch said, sounding panicked.

"He's getting a new terrarium for Gertrude." Cougar explained slowly and he wiped the shelf down with a damp rag.

"Ger- Oh my god. That fucking spider. You said 'He's out' and the first thing that popped up in my head is that fight I overheard between him and Clay. Fuck." Pooch said.

"Háblame." Cougar said, confused.

"I'll start at the beginning. It's the only way to make sense of it." Pooch said. "So you shipped off to the PLDC. That afternoon Stegler comes around. Now, none of us thought anything about it because the guy's always hanging around. But after we all left Clay to deal with him, we come back to find that we've got a mission. Jay says he'll get working on intel, and Clay says there's no time because we're leaving ASAP, go pack your gear.

"You weren't even gone twelve hours and suddenly we're on a supposed 'priority mission' for the Company. Now, none of us have much of a problem with getting our hands dirty, we wouldn't have made it this far if we did, but these missions, man." Pooch fell silent, gathering his thoughts. "Jay got in a fight with Clay during the third one. I wasn't supposed to hear it, but nature was calling and I was mad enough at Clay to use the bushes behind his tent. Jay said that every mission Stegler was sending us on was only barely a Company mission. That we were doing the work of thugs, being enforcers for an invisible bully. Clay told him to shut up and get back to work."

Cougar sucked in a sharp breath. Jake had been with the Losers for well over a year and not once had Clay snapped at the tech to stop talking. Clay always maintained that it was more important that Jake's work got done, not how it got done.

"Yeah. And you can guess how well that went over with Jake. He got real quiet and then said 'I signed up for Spec Ops for a reason, because I wanted to make the world a better place whether or
not politics wanted it to be one. I did not sign up to be a bully or a henchman. Keep going the way you are and you're gonna have to find a new tech.' and then he walked out and went back to our tent." Pooch said.

Cougar was silent for a moment, struggling to control his temper. When he was able to he asked, "How many missions happened while I was gone?"

"Nine." Pooch answered.

"Dios mío." Cougar swore.

"The last one was the longest, took almost a week. Jay barely had time to set that spider of his up before we shipped off after you left. I'm surprised it's still alive since we didn't set foot on base until we came back from the eighth mission." Pooch said.

"Why would Clay do this?" Cougar asked, peering in to Gertrude's small terrarium. The spider seemed to be fine, though Cougar did not really know enough about tarantulas to be sure.

"No one's sure. Jake did as much digging as he could, see if maybe the Company had something over Clay, but nothing panned out. Nearest we can figure is that Clay doesn't want to stay a Colonel for the rest of his career. What I do know is that Jay said that if Clay kept it up, Jay would leave. This was around mission five or six and nobody was happy with anybody. Clay got right in Jay's face and said no one would take him, that he ended up on the team for a reason and nobody wants to work with a guy who couldn't even cut it as a Loser."

"Jay just laughed in Clay's face and said that his contract was coming to an end in less than a year, all he'd have to do is not re-up. Then he said something about how after a bear trap incident he was given the choice of leaving the army or joining the Losers, and he picked the Losers because he liked that Clay listened to his team. Jay got real quiet and serious and told Clay that if he didn't pull his head out of his ass before you got back it wouldn't just be Jay walking away from the team. And he's got a point, man. The kind of stuff we were doing gave most of us nightmares. If Clay doesn't clean up his act, you might have to choose between life in a psych ward or eating your gun." Pooch said, voice growing thick. He coughed and sniffed before speaking again,

"I don't want to lose this team, but the way things are going it's gonna self destruct. I just. I don't want to have to go to anyone's funeral knowing that they're being put in the ground because the guy who we're supposed to trust and follow stopped giving a shit about us."

Cougar sat on the floor of Jake's living room, pushing his back to the wall in an effort to feel something stable. What had Clay done? What had Stegler said to him? What could possibly be worth turning his team against him?

"Our eighth mission got scrapped. We were in the field, got told we had new orders. Jay dug deeper in to the intel, just stopped sleeping and started taking those uppers we get issued for emergencies so he could work on it until he had answers. We were sent to take out the family of someone who was about to expose some dirty dealings on the part of the Company. They wanted us to kill kids, Cougs. I mean, we've served in places that used child soldiers, and we've defended ourselves against them when we had no other choice. It's not something any of us will ever really forgive ourselves for, but with time and therapy we can at least come to terms with it. But this? This was a family, ordinary white collar middle class right here in the US, and they wanted us to kill a six-year-old boy, a nine-year-old girl, and a pregnant woman. Just to shut up one guy who was going to file a report about the CIA misappropriating military resources for their own ends."

"Jake anonymously sent an edited copy of our orders to the guy. He took out all references to our
team, anything that could identify us as being the ones who received the orders. After that he told Clay about it. Not just sending the files, but what our real target there was. Clay listened, at last, and got us the hell out of there. We were back at Bragg for maybe six hours, just long enough for Coleman to give us an assignment. He knew Stegler was gonna come by and wonder why we bailed on that mission, so he got us out of the country with the first mostly legitimate op he found. Tossed us the shittiest fucking loaner sniper we've ever had and told us to get gone so he could handle Stegler.

"And then that went to shit, too." Cougar sighed. His heart ached knowing that his team had gone through all of this at all, and worse that they had to go through it without him.

"Bad intel, no time, shitty enough signal that Jay could only barely work with, and a sniper with a stick up his ass." Pooch listed.

"Sniper who sold you out." Cougar said.

"Yeah. And then, well. You don't get in to Spec Ops unless you can do the job. You don't last as long as we have unless you're tough, strong, and fully capable of unleashing hell just by yourself. And Jake, man. He's got that goofy kid persona, he's usually so innocent or sweet or just seems to be full of sass that it's hard to imagine him really getting angry and wrecking shit. But he just snapped. They'd been playing Russian Roulette with me and him and the gun went off pointed at my leg. I screamed, 'cause that fucking hurt, and our loaner sniper was handing out our personal information and mentions that he overhead me and Jay talking about Jay's niece. I don't remember a whole lot about it, I was tied to a chair screaming at the time, but it got really loud and there was a lot of movement and people getting hit. The next thing I can really recall is being picked up by Clay and Roque and everyone around us was dead. Jay was- fuck, he was covered in blood, the arms of the chair he'd been tied to were still stuck in the ropes around his forearms, and he was still smashing in the skull of that sniper even though the dude was definitely dead." Pooch choked out, falling silent.

"Everyone has their limit. Jake just reached his." Cougar said softly when he was able to speak.

"See, I know that. It's fucking scary to see it happen, but I know that's what happened. And you know that, because you're practical and have had enough therapy to make anyone else terrifyingly well-adjusted. And Jake definitely knows that because he'd been hinting for three weeks prior that enough was enough, and then walked around calmly while covered head to toe in blood from four guys wearing only his Kirby boxers. But Clay and Roque just..." Pooch trailed off.

"Jake likes to be underestimated. Roque and Clay have yet to realize this." Cougar said.

"No shit." Pooch said, snorting humorlessly. "So yeah. That's the last month in a nutshell. And I did some thinking over the past couple days and I gotta say that if you or Jay walk off the team after this, then I don't think I'll stick around either. With the skills I already have and the courses I've taken I am, at most, one semester of full school away from getting a solid engineering degree. I can finish that up using my combat pay and then get a good job designing cars or space rockets or some shit. I know we had our awkward shit in the beginning, but as soon as we got past that you and Jay have been family to me in everything but blood. I'm not staying on a team that forces my brothers out."

"Jake signed up on his birthday, so his contract comes up in June. Clay has until next year to fix this, or we all walk away." Cougar said, realizing as he spoke that he was admitting to the fact that if Jake left then Cougar would follow.

"Here's hoping things work out for the best." Pooch said. In the silence that followed, a question
"What was Roque doing during all of this?" he asked.

"He was kind of on the fence, like he didn't know who was right or wrong. Out of all of us he's got the least problem with wetwork, so his main thing was about how divided the team was. He was mad at Jay at first for standing up to Clay about where the orders were coming from, but by the time Jay threatened to leave he was shifting towards being mad at Clay for fucking up the team. Let me tell you, Roque gets real fucking grumpy when he's in between warring teammates." Pooch said.

Cougar heaved a sigh and scrubbed a hand over his face. Un desastre, he thought.

"How is your leg? Jake said it was broken." he asked eventually.

"It broke where the bullet hit my femur, but not badly. Doctors say I'll make a full recovery, at the worst I'll have a new way of knowing if it's gonna rain or not." Pooch joked.

Cougar snorted, most of the team had some kind of old injury that pained them when the weather grew cold and damp. Roque had some issue with his right shoulder that had led to Jake showing him how to heat sand over a fire before stuffing it in a spare sock as a makeshift hot pack. Clay had a pin in his hip from falling off a mechanical bull about two months after Cougar first joined the team. Cougar himself has some issue with his left elbow, a combination of repeated small injuries and having to support his weight on it so often while sniping.

"You'll finally be part of the club, you mean?" Cougar joked.

"Yeah, after me it'll just be Jay who doesn't ache when it's cold out." Pooch laughed.

"Jake has issues with old injuries." Cougar said.

"Really? I never hear him complain about them." Pooch said, voice growing concerned.

"You've seen him start shaking his hand out, si? Like he is trying to shake something off of it. And then he sometimes smashes it in to walls or equipment on purpose. Old break that healed oddly causes some of his fingers to go numb in cold weather. Like they fell asleep, but worse. And his leg aches sometimes where the bear trap damaged muscle and cracked bone." Cougar said.

"Okay, what is this goddamned bear trap incident I keep hearing about? I asked Roque and he had no clue what I was talking about." Pooch asked.

"Roque does not know the story, he has never asked. And it is not my story to tell." Cougar said.

"Alright, I'll ask Jay about it at some point. How'd the PLDC go?" Pooch asked. Cougar opened his mouth to answer, but was interrupted by the sound of a door opening on Pooch's end of the call. "Just a sec. Yeah, baby?"

"Don't you 'yeah, baby' me, Linwood. You need rest." came Jolene's voice. Cougar could not have stopped his grin if he tried.

"I will. I'm even lying down right now. But I needed to call Cougar. I wouldn't have been able to rest if I didn't." Pooch argued.

"You would not be able to rest if you didn't have a phone call with a man who is notorious for not speaking?" Jolene asked. Cougar could perfectly picture the disbelieving eyebrow she had to have.
"Cougs wasn't around for the last month! He was doing a training course and missed all the shit that went down with the team! He needs to be up to date on all the team drama. This is vital social information that could affect the whole team!" Pooch protested.

"Sounds more like gossip to me." Jolene said. Cougar started laughing quietly.

"He's Jake's best friend! The last month was really hard, and Cougs needs to know what went down so he can be there for Jake!" Pooch said.

"And have you caught Cougar up on everything important?" Jolene asked.

"Well... Yes." Pooch admitted. Cougar could hear the pout that Pooch had to be wearing.

"Then I think it's time for you to say goodbye to your friend and take that nap you said you were going to. Jolene said.

"Goodbye Cougs." Pooch said forlornly. Cougar laughed right in his ear, and kept laughing when Pooch cursed him out and hung up.

Cougar pocketed his phone as he stood. He went back to dusting the shelf that would house Gertrude as he mulled over the conversation. Russian Roulette would certainly explain Jake's newfound aversion to guns, as well as the slight flinch he gave at metallic clicking noises. Cougar made a mental note to himself to take a closer look at the Colt that Jake had brought back. If Jake was going to keep it, Cougar would make sure that it worked properly and that Jake could use it to the best of his ability.

That afternoon, after Gertrude was safely transferred to her new home and they were playing Final Fantasy XI, Cougar broached the subject with Jake.

"Pooch called." Cougar said while he was selling junk in his Ranger's inventory.

"How is the Poochman?" Jake asked distractedly as he swapped new gear on to his Monk.

"Healing well. He told me some of what happened with Clay while I was gone." Cougar said gently. Jake turned to stare at Cougar with wide eyes. "The team is family, for most of us, and just like with biological family we are not obligated to stay if it only makes us miserable."

"I know." Jake said quietly, hunching his shoulders as he turned back to his laptop. "I was gonna tell you, so you wouldn't walk in blind when we got back, but I know that your military career is important to you. I mean, you just got promoted to Sergeant! You should get to enjoy that for a bit before having to deal with the team falling apart."

"Jake," Cougar said, nudging his friend, "if Clay's stupidity causes me, or anyone else, to have a psychotic break then I will not be able to enjoy my rank anyway."
"That is a good point." Jake admitted, relaxing.

"Besides, letting me know that Clay had the team pull off nine missions in four weeks allows me to change our plans for our leave." Cougar said.

"Change how? Wait, I'm getting ahead of myself here. We had plans for our leave?" Jake asked.

"I was going to suggest heading to Mazatlán for the second week," Cougar began, watching Jake's expression become torn, "but I think you have been stuck on a plane too many times in the last month for that to be enjoyable." Jake relaxed, looking both apologetic and grateful.

"Yeah, I have seen too many planes for that to be fun for the immediate future." Jake agreed.

"In place of visiting Mazatlán, would you like to accompany me while I visit *mi abuelos* for the first time in nearly eight years?" Cougar asked.

"Holy shit!" Jake blurted out, staring at Cougar. "I mean, yes. If you're comfortable with that, then yeah."

*Bien. I will call them tonight and see if we will be welcome next week." Cougar said.

"Do you want me to make myself scarce when that happens?" Jake asked.

Cougar hesitated to respond. There were a few details about why he was disowned that Jake still did not know. If they were to visit, Cougar would first need to secure promises from his *abuelos* and Fernanda that they would not mention these things to Jake.

"I can just take a long shower while you talk to them. Just knock on the door when you're done." Jake suggested. Cougar relaxed and nodded, that arrangement would work nicely. "Awesome. I mean, you've backed off a few times when Jess and I were talking, so I figure it might be a good idea to return the favor."

*Gracias." Cougar said.

*De nada." Jake said, nudging Cougar's shoulder with his own. "Now, if you're done fussing with your inventory..."

"Organization is important." Cougar insisted yet again. Jake flopped back on the couch cushions behind him and sighed dramatically as he settled in to wait for Cougar.

In the evening, once Jake had gone in for his shower, Cougar dialed his *abuelos*' number. Despite knowing he was now welcome to call them, he could not help the feelings of fear and worry curdling in his stomach. The phone rang twice before someone picked up.

*Hola?" said his *abuela*, Sra. Torres.

*Hola abuela." Cougar said, his throat tight with nerves.

"Carlos?" Sra. Torres asked, voice hopeful.

*Sí, abuela. Cómo estás?" Cougar asked.
"Bien. Y tú?" Sra. Torres asked.

"Bien. I have some leave, tiempo de vacaciones. Would it be okay to come visit?" Cougar asked as he resisted the urge to fidget nervously.

"Sí! Of course you are welcome to visit! Will you be staying with us? We have a futon." Sra. Torres said.

"No, lo siento. I will be traveling with mi amigo, Jake. We will get a hotel." Cougar said.

"Are you sure, Carlos? We could make room." Sra. Torres offered. Part of Cougar wanted to accept, but he knew how necessary it was to have a place to retreat to at the end of the day.

"I am sure. A hotel will be best. Jake is a fellow soldier, and soldiers do not always sleep well in unfamiliar places." Cougar said.

"Oh. Your friend, he is from your team?" Sra. Torres asked.

"Sí. He knows some of why I left home, but not everything." Cougar said.

"Can you explain what he knows so that we do not spill secrets that need to be kept?" Sra. Torres asked. Cougar's shoulders slumped with relief. He had been worried that he would need to argue in favor of secrecy, worried that his abuelos would not understand.

"As far as he knows I was disowned for giving my college fund to a female friend to help her escape an abusive home." Cougar explained.

"Almost the whole truth, just with the bigotry taken out." Sra. Torres said. "Bien. I will make sure that your abuelo and Fernanda know what is happening. It will be good to see you, Carlos. We have missed you."

"You will see me soon." Cougar said softly.

"Sí." Sra. Torres said. "Now, you take care of yourself, miyo."

"I will, abuela. Adiós." Cougar said.

"Te amo, Carlos. Adiós." Sra. Torres said before hanging up.

Cougar took a deep breath to steady himself as he pocketed his phone. No backing out now, he was going home.

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No backing out, he reminded himself when he was sitting in his truck peering at the building his abuelos lived in.

"Not trying to rush anyone, it's plenty fun sitting in the truck, but I would like to mention that the chocolates we made specifically to bring them are likely to melt in this heat." Jake said, keeping his voice soft and supportive.

Cougar closed his eyes and breathed carefully out his nose. He knew he was being a bit unreasonable, but his nerves simply would not listen to reason.
"I would also like to point out that your grandfather is just as nervous to see you as you are to see him." Jake said reasonably.

Cougar turned to look at Jake, sitting on the other side of his truck bench, sweating in the Texas heat. He raised an eyebrow at his friend in question.

"You said they'd be on the third floor, right side of the building. If you look up that way there's an older Latino gentleman peeking out through the curtains of that big window." Jake pointed out.

Cougar carefully turned to face the building once more, this time letting his eyes wander up from the front door and over to a window where his abuelo was, in fact, peeking out behind the curtains. When they locked eyes, Sr. Torres smiled and nodded before waving awkwardly. Cougar returned the gestures with an equal amount of awkwardness.

"Well, the family resemblance is certainly there. And don't even think of elbowing me in the ribs, they're still cracked, remember?" Jake said.

Cougar rolled his eyes fondly and said, "He's Spanish Romani, not Latino. Bisabuelos came from Spain."

"My bad, I'll do my best to remember that." Jake said sincerely.

Cougar finally unbuckled his seat belt and pulled the keys from the ignition. Jake grinned and grabbed the Tupperware of chocolates from the cooler before exiting the truck. It was a short walk to the front door, where they buzzed the Torres' condo to be let in.

Fernanda was waiting in the hall for them. Taller than Cougar remembered, having grown from a girl of seven to a fourteen-year-old in Cougar's absence. Much like Cougar, she took after the Torres side of the family and was thin, with sharper features than the siblings who took after the Alvarez side.

Fernanda took one look at Cougar and burst in to tears. Cougar felt his heart drop in to his stomach, wondering what it was that she saw that could cause such a reaction. A large, warm hand settled in the middle of Cougar's back and gently propelled him forward. Before Cougar could think of anything to say to Fernanda, she flung herself in to his arms and began sobbing in to his shoulder. From the doorway, Sra. Torres looked on with watery eyes.

"Carlos! Dios mio, Carlos you're here! You're-" Fernanda cut off when she started crying again.

"Nanda." Cougar breathed, realizing that his hermanita was crying because she was happy to see him. He blinked away tears and hugged her tighter to him.

With his eyes blurring, Cougar could only just make out the shape of Jake stepping around Cougar and Fernanda and politely approaching Sra. Torres. He handed her the Tupperware and politely introduced himself before being invited in.

When they were alone in the hallway, Fernanda finally relaxed her grip on Cougar. She looked at him, eyes darting over his face as though searching for the seventeen-year-old boy he used to be.

"You look so much older than I remember." she whispered.

"It has been eight years." Cougar pointed out.

"I know that, and I expected you to be different, but... You always looked like Javier, growing up. A little thinner, a little sharper in the face, but still similar. But now... You have old eyes. Like
"abuelo." Fernanda said, frowning with worry.

Cougar had to resist the urge to flinch. The Torres family had left Spain after The First World War to escape European racism towards the Romani. Sr. Torres had been the first in his family born in the US, and had just reached legal age when World War Two started. He had signed up to fight, and carried the scars of that war the way Cougar carried his time in Afghanistan. In his letters to Cougar over the years, the older man had begun confessing some of the horrors he had witnessed. If Fernanda could see the damage in Cougar's eyes, there was no way his abuelo would miss it.

"Fernanda! Let him get inside before you pick at him!" Sra. Torres called. Fernanda jumped, realizing they were still in the hallway in full view of their gossipy neighbor's door. She grabbed Cougar's wrist and pulled him in to the condo.

"I'm not 'picking' at him! I'm making sure the estúpido army is taking good care of him! Look at him, abuela, he's too thin! And they let him get old!" Fernanda hollered.

"If he is old, then what am I?" Sra. Torres asked, walking out of the kitchen with Jake trailing behind her.

"Uh..." Fernanda hesitated, knowing she was on thin ice.

"Vintage?" Jake suggested, politely. Cougar smirked.

"Sí!" Fernanda said. "Vintage! Everything vintage is coming back in style these days, abuela."

"I can see why you're friends with him, Carlito." Sra. Torres said dryly, drawing Cougar in to a hug.

Cougar could not help remembering the last time his abuela had hugged him the day he shipped off for basic training. She had seemed so much larger than she was, so strong, and now Cougar found himself concerned about hugging her too tightly in return. Her arms shook slightly, old age creeping up and weakening her muscles gradually. Sra. Torres stepped back and took Cougar's face in her hands.

"Oh, miyo. You have grown so much." she whispered.

"No, he shrank." Fernanda teased.

"No, you grew." Cougar shot back. Fernanda stuck her tongue out at him.

"Tu abuelo is in the living room." Sra. Torres said. "He's been very excited to see you."

"I will speak with him." Cougar said softly. Jake raised his eyebrows in question, and Cougar shook his head slightly. He would do this on his own.

Entering the living room, Cougar found his abuelo standing by the window, still. The only sign of nerves being the white knuckles where he gripped his cane.

"Abuelo?" Cougar called as he stepped closer.

Sr. Torres turned and smiled at Cougar. He met Cougar's approach, standing just as straight and proud as he had when he fought for Cougar to be allowed to enlist. He gripped Cougar in a tight hug, arms almost as strong as they had been all those years ago.

"Oh miyo. Let me get a look at you." he said, stepping back. He looked Cougar up and down,
gripping Cougar's shoulders firmly. When he met Cougar's eyes, Cougar was shocked to see tears in his eyes. While Sr. Torres had been an affectionate man, he had always been reserved when it came to displaying his emotions. "Lo siento, Carlos." he whispered.

"¿Por qué?" Cougar asked just as quietly.

"I never meant for you to be gone so long. When I fought for you to enlist I only wanted to get you away from how your family was treating you, and they would not let you come live with us. I wanted you to have time to grow and become a man without them weighing you down. I never meant for you to stay away. I knew it would be hard on you, but I prayed you would not suffer as I had. I never wanted you to suffer. Lo siento, Carlito. Lo siento, mi nieto." Sr. Torres said, pulling Cougar in to a hug again as he whispered apologies and shook with tears.

"I needed to go. It was the right thing to do. I don't regret it. I do not suffer." Cougar whispered, clinging to his abuelo.

"You do, Carlito. I can see it." Sr. Torres insisted.

"I'm fine." Cougar said.

"Carlito, before I had my knee replaced I insisted I was fine. When I finally got it done, I found that I had been unaware of how much pain I was in, simply because I was used to it. I only noticed the absence of suffering." Sr. Torres whispered. Something in Cougar's chest tightened painfully, and tears filled his eyes. He rested his forehead on his abuelo's shoulder, just as he had many times over as a child, and let his tears fall.

Later, when their tears had tried and they had moved on to commiserating about the quality of rations, Fernanda came to get them for lunch.

They devoured the empanadas Sra. Torres had prepared, at a speed that had Cougar's abuela asking if the army was feeding them enough. For desert, Fernanda brought out the chocolates they had brought with them.

"And you said you made these?" Sra. Torres asked Jake as she served out a few chocolates for everybody.

"Oh, no. Cougs made them, I just helped where I was least likely to mess up. I'm a disaster in the kitchen if it's anything fancier than a one pan meal." Jake protested.

"Cougs?" Fernanda asked.

"Short for Cougar." Jake said, blithely unaware that Cougar's family did not know of his nickname.

"Cougar?" Sra. Torres asked with one eyebrow raised.

"Does everybody call you that in the army?" Fernanda asked.

"Sí." Cougar answered.

"How did you get a nickname like that?" Fernanda asked. Cougar and Jake both froze.

"Well..." Jake said, glancing over at Cougar while he prayed that his friend would find something to say other than 'he's really quiet and tends to jump off of high things and break peoples necks'.
"See, cougars are the largest species of cat that can purr. And Cougs here snores. But, like, a quiet snore. It's soothing, really."

A wheezing sound distracted everyone, and they turned to look at Sr. Torres. The old man shook, took a deep breath, and began laughing. Sra. Torres started to laugh as well, followed by Cougar, then Jake and Fernanda.

"That was possibly the worst lie I've ever heard." Fernanda said when they had calmed. "But, really, how did you get the nickname?"

"It's classified," Jake said with a straight face.

"You expect me to believe that?" Sra. Torres said.

"The events that resulted in me being called 'Cougar' are classified." Cougar admitted. It was not entirely true, but there was enough truth to it that they could hide behind the excuse.

Fernanda shook her head and dropped the subject. She picked up one of the chocolates on her plate and took a bite. Everyone around the table followed suit. Pleased hums rose from everyone as they tasted the sweet morsels.

"Estos son deliciosos!" Sra. Torres said.

"What's the crunchy bit? It's good. Is it nuts?" Fernanda asked.

"Guess." Cougar said, smiling as he looked at Jake. They had deliberated for days over what to add to the chocolates before they settled on this. It was healthy, and full of protein, but an unusual ingredient.

"Not peanuts. Walnuts? Maybe almonds?" Fernanda guessed.


Sr. Torres popped two chocolates in his mouth and chewed them. When he had swallowed, he announced "Saltamontes."

"Carlos would not feed us grasshoppers, abuelo." Fernanda scoffed.

"Es saltamontes." Cougar said, enjoying the way her head snapped to look at him in betrayal. Sra. Torres took another chocolate.

"Es bueno. Un buen sabor." She said, earning a betrayed look as well.

"How can you eat bugs." Fernanda asked in quiet horror.

"We've passed SERE, and at least these ones are cooked and covered in chocolate. It's a step up from what we usually get in the field, honestly. Remember that time Wilkes got us lost and we had to survive for three days on rats and roots?" Jake said.

Cougar nodded, the rats hadn't been so bad, but the root vegetables had been scrawny and tasted bad despite being edible.

"What's SERE?" Fernanda asked, while Sra. Torres mouthed 'rats and roots' in disbelief and Sr. Torres nodded in understanding.

"It's kind of a survival course, but for people who are more likely to become prisoners of war."
Jake explained. "There's different levels, depending on how likely you are to get caught and what kind of info you're trusted with. And that's about all I can say without needing to see your security clearance."

"There's a lot of classified stuff you two deal with." Fernanda said, expression shrewd.

"My military file has the wrong birthday in it for the safety of myself, my parents, my sister, and anyone I may have known at any point in my life." Jake said.

"What on earth do you do that requires that much secrecy?!!" Fernanda asked.

"That's classified." Jake said cheekily.

Fernanda heaved a disgusted grunt that had Cougar laughing. He had missed watching his hermanita be teased. And he was glad that she and Jake were getting along well enough to banter in such a way. He hoped that there would be many more opportunities to witness his family, old and new, getting along. Cougar sat at his abuelos' table with Fernanda on his left and Jake on his right and felt a wonderful sense of contentment that had eluded him for years. Not since before he had come out to his family had he felt so at peace. This is what home should feel like, he thought, and smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Potential triggers:

Mentions of spiders
Mentions of torture
Mentions of violent deaths
Mentions of racism in Europe

Characters consume delicious chocolates that happen to contain properly cooked grasshoppers.

A note about Cougar: In the comics he is Mexican, and from what I can tell this is true in the movie as well. The actor who plays Cougar, Óscar Jaenada, is Spanish and of Romani descent, so I changed some of Cougar's ancestry to include this. My headcanon thus far is that Sr. Torres was born in the US, and married his Mexican childhood sweetheart (Sra. Torres) after returning from war. If anyone reading this is Romani, or is familiar with Romani culture has anything they would like to see reflected in this fic, please message me either here or on my tumblr and I will see if I can work it in to later chapters.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to Kim, as her mishap as a certain establishment is the only reason I know that The Crab Story is even possible. I haven't seen or spoken to her in almost a decade, but dear god I hope she learned an important lesson from that.

Trigger warnings in the end notes.

On their first day back after, Cougar dropped Jensen off at the base med centre for an appointment to make sure his ribs were healing well. From there Cougar immediately went towards the team offices, intending to knock some sense in to Clay, literally if need be. On his way there, he nearly ran right in to Roque.

"Cougar." Roque said, looking at him assessingly. "Guess you heard about what went down?"

Cougar nodded once in response.

"I'm on my way to go pull Clay's head out of his ass, care to join me?" Roque offered.

Cougar grinned menacingly as he nodded again. They entered the team offices, making their way to Clay's private office. Roque knocked politely on the closed door.

"Busy, come back later." Clay said, voice muffled by the door.

"Too fucking bad." Roque snarled, throwing the door open hard enough that it slammed in to the wall.

Clay looked at them with wide eyes, the receiver of his desk phone dangling from his good hand, half way to his ear. Cougar prowled in to Clay's office a step behind Roque, keeping his hat low and face blank. Cougar took a vicious pleasure from the way Clay eyed them both nervously.

"Hang up the fucking phone. We're gonna talk about that goddamned bullshit you tried to pull last month while we were a man short." Roque announced.

Clay fidgeted in his chair as he placed the phone receiver back in its cradle. He opened his mouth, likely to defend himself, but was cut off before he could speak.

"You got one chance to explain what the fuck it is you thought you were doing." Roque said.

"Or you'll what?" Clay shot back, bristling visibly.

"We'll get Jensen to figure out how to make you talk." Roque said, surprising Cougar with the show of faith.

"That's not exactly a threat, Roque." Clay said.

"You don't know him." Cougar said, his quiet statement carrying more weight than the loud
posturing of the larger men. When he had their attention he continued, "He is just as dangerous as I am, only he chooses to hide in plain sight by appearing harmless. He watches everything, everyone, and figures out how they work. Talk to us, and it will be simple, fast. Leave this to Jensen and he will make you beg to confess, and will refuse to listen to you out of spite."

"We may be thinking about entirely different Jensens." Clay said dismissively.

"You know, this is part of the goddamned problem. It's like you shut off the part of your brain that actually knows your team. Jensen isn't the harmless puppy you think he is. Last mission we were on we literally saw him snap and beat four people to death. I don't know what the fuck Stegler said, what he promised, but if you think it's worth more that the team we've got here then you are easily the dumbest motherfucker I have ever met." Roque said.

"I am still your Commanding Officer, Captain Roque, and you had better remember that." Clay said, his expression turning ugly.

"Not for long." Cougar said quietly.

"Nobody's gonna take guys who couldn't make it as Losers." Clay began.

"There is a world beyond the military. All we need to do to access it is let our contracts expire." Cougar explained, keeping his voice neutral. Clay was a stubborn bastard on his best days, pushing him too hard when he was already in a foul mood would do more harm than good. "Jensen's contract comes up next June. Mine and Pooch's come up next August. You have until May to fix this, or we all walk."

"You know," Roque began, his voice dangerously calm, "for a long time now my choices have basically been to either stick with the military, where you're the only CO with a conscience who can stand me, or to go mercenary. I've stuck it out with you for over a decade because I know I'm not a good guy. I like killing too much to be a good guy, I like hurting people too much. I figured that as long as I was on your team I could at least be a bad guy who does good things. But the way things stand now? If you're not gonna be my Jiminy Cricket then there is No. Fucking. Point. I can get a hell of a lot better pay as an ex-Ops merc than I do as a guy who'll never make it past Captain. Given my track record, the army will be plenty happy to let me out of my contract early."

"Maybe if you losers leave I'll finally have a team that doesn't hold me back." Clay bit out, expression cold.

Cougar smirked, ignoring the sharp hurt Clay's words caused. He tipped his hat and left Clay's office, Roque on his heels. Fuck it, Clay deserved whatever Jensen cooked up.

"Sad, stupid bastard." Roque muttered as they left the team's office. Cougar nodded in agreement.

They grabbed coffee and snacks before heading for the base med center. Roque went to find Pooch at his physiotherapy session, and Cougar took off in search of Jensen. Cougar found him just as he was exiting his doctor's office, and began herding him out of the building and over to the benches a short distance from the med center where Roque was waiting with Pooch.

"We need a plan of attack." Roque said as soon as Cougar and Jensen were close enough that the conversation would not carry.

"Against? Sorry if the Pooch isn't on the same psychic wavelength as all of you, but the Pooch needs to know what, exactly, he's supposed to be attacking when he's got a broken leg." Pooch said mulishly. Physiotherapy never failed to make him grouchy.
"Clay." Cougar said. Jensen's head snapped up from where he was kneeling to examine the cast on Pooch's leg.

"We talked to him. It didn't go well. We gave him the option to just fucking tell us his side of things, but he's chosen to be an idiot instead. We mentioned that we could all just leave if he didn't fix this shit, and he said that he'd probably be happier with a team that didn't 'hold him back'." Roque summarized.

"Oh, no. Nah man. The Pooch did not sign up for any of this shit. Fuckin' COs with superiority complexes and daddy issues. Fuck this, man." Pooch said, rooting around in the bag of pastries Roque had bought.

"Jensen?" Cougar said softly. When Jensen met his eyes he asked, "What would be the cruelest way of making Clay realize his errors without doing permanent damage?"

Jensen sat back in the grass beside the bench Pooch was stretched out on. He tilted his head back and blanked his face as his eyes stared off in to the sky, unseeing. It was equally terrifying and fascinating when Jensen did this. Cougar knew that Jensen was calling up every memory, every scrap and morsel of information he had ever learned about Clay. Every piece of their CO that Jensen had ever seen or heard was being pulled out of his eidetic memory and weighed for relevance and importance. Once sorted, Jensen would calculate what weak point they should hit, how hard, and for how long. Jensen could reduce a person, a complex being made of idiosyncrasies, down to a math problem.

"Oh, man." Pooch muttered. When Roque looked at him in question, he elaborated. "Last time I saw Jensen get like that was just after he punched our old CO. Dude said some disgusting things about the sister of someone on the team, thinking no one would stand up to him since he was in charge. Jensen clocked him one, then spent a few weeks ruining the guy's life. Team got a new CO after the guy had a nervous breakdown. That CO decided to break the team up bit by bit a few months later."

"The CIA handler we had before Stegler met a similar fate." Cougar said.

"I thought old Flaherty decided to retire." Roque said.

"He did. With some incentive." Cougar said.

"Can't say I'm upset. Stegler's annoying as fuck, but at least he hasn't tried sending people to seduce us." Roque said.

"Sedu- seriously?!" Pooch said.

"Yeah. Jensen and Cougar spotted what was happening because they're both paranoid fucks. Clay was sleeping with three of the agents sent after him, my new neighbor was an agent, Wilkes was actually too oblivious to make contact with his, and these two run background checks on everyone they meet more than twice. We got proof and sent it to Coleman just a bit before Wilkes had to leave the team. Flaherty very suddenly retired last February and we got stuck with Stegler." Roque said.

"I never met Flaherty." Pooch said.

"You did not miss anything worthwhile." Cougar said, thinking on how many execution missions Flaherty had come to the team with, always acting like they should be grateful that he was asking them to do the Company's dirty work.
"If Stegler ever finds out that Jensen can wreck people like that..." Pooch trailed off.

"He'd come in his pants and then try to kidnap me." Jensen said, tuning back in to the conversation. "Okay, what we need to do is give Clay exactly what he thinks he wants."

"That's the solution you came up with?" Roque questioned. Cougar had to admit that it was not quite what he had expected.

"He thinks that instead of friends and family he wants a team of cool, professional soldiers. If we give him that, reduce him to nothing but a CO we don't care about, just someone we have to follow and report to, he'll crack." Jensen explained.

"Do any of us even know how to be professional soldiers anymore?" Pooch asked.

"Look, we'll wait till Clay leaves the office before going in, then when he comes back we'll all stand at attention." Jensen said.

"Your plan is to salute Clay until he breaks?" Roque asked.

"My plan is to slowly but surely close Clay off from the team. Salute when he walks in, but out of obligation, not respect. Be indifferent to him as a person. Stop talking when he enters the room. It'll take a few months, but it'll work." Jensen insisted.

"Why am I getting flashbacks to high school?" Pooch asked.

"Because it's based on that. Clay never went to a normal high school. He was schooled almost entirely on army bases. He doesn't know how bad high school can be for an unpopular kid." Jensen said.

"So your plan is for us to be popular high schoolers?" Roque asked.

"Mean popular high schoolers." Jensen emphasized.

"Fourteen-year-old me is so jealous of me right now." Pooch said.

Jensen grinned at them, clearly please with himself. Cougar glanced at Roque, who shrugged. It seemed they were going to be bitchy high schoolers.

That afternoon, the team sat in their offices and were concentrating on catching up in their classes when Clay came back from a late lunch. As soon as he entered the room, Jensen was out of his seat and standing at attention. The other Losers followed suit, with Pooch taking the longest due to his crutches. Clay eyed all of them suspiciously as he walked through the room. He hesitated in front of Jensen for a moment before asking,

"Jensen?"

"Sir! Yes, sir!" Jensen responded, voice neutral, impersonal in a way none of them had heard before.

"What are you doing?" Clay asked, expression growing apprehensive.

"Sir! Army regulations state that enlisted personnel are to stand at attention when their commanding officer enters the room, sir!" Jensen explained monotonously.
"Right... That's. Okay then." Clay said, fumbling for a response. Cougar began to wonder when the last time Clay had been given the treatment his rank demanded by his own team was.

Clay awkwardly backed away and headed for his office, turning and looking at all of them oddly before he closed his door. As soon as Clay's door closed, Jensen relaxed and made a beeline for Pooch, helping the bald man get settled back in his chair. When Roque opened his mouth, Jensen shook his head and began signing,

'Get on your computer.'

Roque looked to Cougar for translation, and Cougar pressed a finger to his lips for silence before patting his computer monitor with his other hand. Everyone settled themselves at their desks and waited for Jensen. After a few minutes of typing, a window popped up on Cougar's screen. Judging by the way Roque and Pooch sat up straighter, they had something similar happening on their computers. Pink text began filling the window.

JJ: Chat client I've been working on. Connects to a private server I have. I'll show you all how to access it yourselves later.

Red text appeared next.

WR: Why the fuck is it pink?

JJ: Pink was a boy color before WW2. Hitler started using it to identify gays the way yellow stars identified Jews. Don't be Hitler, Roque. And everyone has a different color. Roque = red, Cougar = green, Pooch = yellow, Clay = brown.

PP: Brown?

PP: J, why are my initials PP?

JJ: Pooch Porteous. Would you rather I went with Linwood?

PP: No.

WR: I always forget your first name is Linwood.

PP: You take that shit to your grave, Roque.

Roque held his hands up and shrugged at Pooch, backing off from the name debate.

CA: I do not think Clay is used to having his team recognize his rank.

WR: I stopped saluting him 12 years ago.

PP: I think this is going to be a lot more amusing than I had anticipated.
JJ: The important part is to keep it up. I know that we all typically just brush off hurts and keep moving on but in this case it's important to keep at it. He needs to not just break, but show that he's willing to change. Otherwise we'll be right back here in 5 years.

PP: Okay.

WR: Operation Bitchy Teenager is A-Go.

Possibly the absolute craziest part of Jensen's plan was how well it worked. The weeks that the Losers spent recovering from their injuries saw Clay getting shunned in increasingly personal ways. The team took to eating in the Chow Hall or outside, leaving Clay alone in the offices. If Clay's office door was open they would use Jensen's chat program to communicate, or spoke in languages that Clay did not understand under the guise of practicing for the sake of fluency. Cougar and Jensen began communicating almost solely through ASL or body language; on one occasion Cougar managed to relay his lunch order to Jensen without a single word spoke, signed, or typed.

Clay became increasingly grumpy throughout those weeks, and the more he passed through the ranks of the Losers standing at attention the more tense he became. When Pooch's cast came off and he and Jensen were cleared for light PT, nobody told Clay. The CO just walked in to the office and did a double take at the now cast free Porteous, looking momentarily wounded before turning his back on them and marching in to his office.

Cougar was the one to have the most contact with Clay. As team medic he needed to check that Clay was healing properly and make sure that Clay did the necessary exercises to rebuild hand strength once his cast came off. Those meeting were kept brief, and any additional instructions that Cougar had were often sent along via email rather than actually speaking to Clay. With each successive meeting, Clay became more sullen and put out by the lack of anything even resembling communication from Cougar.

The meeting for their first mission once everyone had recovered resulted in a stroke of genius on Pooch's part. When Clay entered the room, everyone stood at attention until Clay snapped at them to stand down. When Coleman arrived, everyone stayed seated and greeted the General cheerfully. It sent a clear message to Clay that their sudden adherence to regulations had nothing to do with rank or respect, and everything to do with how he had been treating them.

The team continued to slowly wall Clay off from them. The division in rank was only the first step, next came excluding him from bar nights. The team sparred together, ate together, shared tents, and chased each other around during PT. They even started taking turns bringing lunches for the group. Jensen's fried rice became something of a comfort food for them, while Cougar's squash flower soup had Jolene calling for the recipe after Pooch had raved to her about it.

It took four and a half months for Clay to break. The team was walking back to their offices after PT, sweaty and laughing and shoving each other playfully, when they heard indistinct shouting,
followed by the sound of a punch. They sped up and got to their office just in time to catch Stegler leaving with a bloody nose.

"Medical is in the building west of here, Stippler." Jensen said.

"Stegler." Stegler said, voice nasal as he pinched the bridge of his nose to stem the flow of blood.

"Close enough." Jensen said, walking past Stegler without a backwards glance.

The team followed, and found Clay in their office picking up dropped paperwork. He looked up when the team entered before dropping his gaze back to the scattered papers. Jensen knelt down and began helping him, very obviously snooping with the way he was reading the pages.

"New team?" Jensen asked quietly.

"No." Clay answered. "Stegler's offered a new team to me, but... I'd rather be a Loser."

"Then fucking act like it." Jensen said, handing the pages to Clay.

Cougar closed the door to their offices and leaned against it, crossing his arms over his chest.

"You ready to give us a why, now?" Roque asked.

"After that mission in Pakistan, Stegler started hinting that he could get us jobs where we wouldn't need to babysit human rights violators. And then, after the bar night for Cougar's promotion, he said that we could fast track the team's access to those kinds of jobs if we did a little extra credit dirty work." Clay explained as he got up and tossed the files in the closest garbage can.

"So your solution to a fucked up situation that gave Cougar nightmares was to put the rest of us in a fucked up situation that gave us nightmares?" Pooch asked incredulously.

"I thought it would help the team in the long run." Clay said tiredly.

"Had us attacking *civilians* because you thought it was best for the team." Jensen said flatly as he sat down at his desk.

"I called that mission before anything happened." Clay said.

"And the missions before it? Where we were taking out military or quasi-government people, most of whom were going to expose Company bullshit? Or the one where we infiltrated a compound to set demolition charges so we could blow it sky high, but under no circumstances were we to rescue any of the prisoners in the compound? What about those, Clay? How are those missions, those deaths, not enough for you to realize that being Stegler's lapdog still means you're wearing a goddamned leash." Roque said.

"More like a shock collar with a bell on it." Jensen muttered.

"Okay, time out." Pooch said, holding up his hands. "While I do appreciate finally having an answer as to what the fuck you were thinking, this is in danger of becoming a big old blame session. So how about you do some apologizing, we do some forgiving, and then we all move forward with the promise of this never happening again. It's been, what, five months of bullshit already? Six if you count the month Cougs was at PLDC."

"No." Jensen said, not looking up from his computers.

"What?" Pooch asked.
"Clay needs to apologize, he definitely needs to do that, but we don't need to forgive him.
Forgiveness needs to be earned, otherwise it loses value. So when Clay has apologized, and that
includes admitting what he did wrong and why it was wrong, and proven that he won't do it again
and that he deserves to be forgiven, then I'll forgive him." Jensen said simply.

"He is right." Cougar said, speaking for the first time since the confrontation began. "Prove you
have learned from this in order to earn our forgiveness."

"Alright." Clay agreed quietly.

Over the next five months, Clay began taking the extra time to check in with the whole team when
they got new orders. All missions from Stegler were vetted by the entire team, and Jensen would
often short himself on sleep to double and triple check their intel. Coleman helped by keeping them
busy with more courses, and an increased number of missions that were actually sanctioned. With
every positive change that Clay made, the team gradually stopped shutting him out. By the time
Beth's first birthday came around, things were almost back to the way they had been.

Jake and Cougar visited the Jensen-Alexanders for two days in New Hampshire for Beth's birthday.
Beth had begun learning baby sign language, and was overjoyed to be able to talk to her Uncle Jake
and Tio Cougar in person instead of through video chat. They made the trip to Texas afterwards to
spend time with Cougar's grandparents and Fernanda. When they got back at the beginning of May,
they were no longer speaking to each other. They refused to sit near each other in the Chow Hall,
or share the same tent on missions. They made sure that it did not affect their ability to do their
jobs, but it worried their team nonetheless. Nothing the other Losers said or did managed to shed a
light on what had happened to create a rift between two men who had been inseparable for three
years.

Three weeks in to the feud, Cougar found himself sitting across from Jensen in the meeting room.
Coleman was running late, leaving the Losers waiting. Cougar glared at the tech, who continued to
ignore him in favor of his laptop. Roque rolled his eyes at them, while Pooch discreetly watched
them with worried eyes. Clay took a swig of Pepto-Bismol straight from the bottle.

"I'd apologize for my lateness if it weren't for the fact that I'm pretty sure that Heckle and Jeckle
over there are the reason for it." Coleman said as he entered the room. The finger he used to point
at Cougar and Jensen was stained a deep pink, along with the rest of his hand.

"Couldn't have been them." Clay said, frowning at the pink appendage.

"Can you name another set of people who have both the skills and the sense of mischief required to
rig the air vents in the most populated buildings on base to slowly dispense sparkle dust over a
period of two hours? Or somehow rig the base showers to spit fruit scented water that stains human
skin?" Coleman asked, waving his stained hand for emphasis.

"No, but it still wasn't them. They haven't spoken to each other in three weeks." Roque said.
"You're shitting me." Coleman blurted out. "Why?"

"No one knows, neither of them are talking about it." Clay said, massaging his temples.

"First time in his life he's kept his fat mouth shut." Cougar muttered.

"Pooch, could you tell Cougar that if maybe he actually spoke every so often then it wouldn't be up to me to say all the important shit for him." Jensen snapped.

"The Pooch is not getting between you two." Pooch said.

"Jensen runs his mouth all the time. What could he have possibly said that would piss you off this badly?" Roque asked.

"He told my sister the crab story." Cougar said.

"Oh shit." Clay said, squeezing his eyes shut as his face turned red.

"You have a sister?" Roque asked.

"No. None of us have families. It says so in our files. In fact, none of us were ever children, we all emerged fully formed from a lab. Except Roque, whose origin is closer to that of Athena, but instead of popping out of Zeus' head he carved his way out of Ares' nutsack and emerged fully grown and covered in gore. But, if Cougar did have a sister, then yes I would totally tell her the crab story." Jensen said.

"She doesn't need to know that shit, she's fifteen!" Cougar hissed.

"Exactly! She's fifteen! She needs to know what can happen so she doesn't have to rely on inaccurate, outdated information!" Jensen insisted.

"What... is the crab story?" Pooch asked, looking like he was very prepared to regret asking.

"Back before you joined the team, maybe a month or two after Jensen came on board, we took Clay to the seediest strip club any of us had ever seen and got Clay a lap dance for his birthday. Clay ended up with a crab in his eye. And I don't mean any kind of crustacean." Roque explained while Clay sank down in his chair and took another swig of Pepto-Bismol.

"Why would you share that story with someone's fifteen-year-old sister?" Coleman asked, aghast.

"Because she's fifteen. Because all of her friends are fifteen. Because all of the boys they know and like are fifteen. Because I was barely twenty-one when that went down and I had never heard about it even being a possibility. Because Roque and Clay are getting close to forty and neither of them had heard of that happening either. Because knowledge is power, and we should all want the people we care about to be powerful enough to take care of themselves. Because at her age half her information about sex comes from high school gossip, and seventy percent of that is either exaggerated boasting from boys or exaggerated slut shaming from girls. Because I don't want to leave the development of part of a young girl's identity in the hands of the Orange, Texas sex ed teacher. So I told her the crab story. And then I gave her a USB stick with everything I've ever learned about sex, vicariously or not, and a shit ton of reference literature. I'm not encouraging her to have or abstain from anything, I'm encouraging her to use her brain and decide for herself what's best for her." Jensen said.

It took every ounce of Cougar's will not to soften his glare at the wounded, earnest look on Jensen's face.
"Right. That... So neither of you are responsible for over half the base personnel being pink and sparkly right now?" Coleman asked, clearly uncomfortable with the subject at hand.

Jensen and Cougar glared at each other.

"Okay... On to the mission, then. You'll be heading to Siberia-" Coleman said, before being cut off by a chorus of groans.

Cougar and Jensen spent the entire meeting alternating between glaring at each other and ignoring each other. Then they spent the entire transport ride doing more of the same, rebuffing all attempts from the team to get them to talk. After they were dropped off the team hiked through the Siberian snow to a cave they planned on making camp in. As soon as Cougar dropped his pack, he turned towards Jensen and his friend met him half way, hugging him tightly and laughing.

"What the fuck?" Roque demanded. Jensen turned to their Captain and grinned, keeping one arm slung around Cougar's shoulders.

"Pro tip: If you want to pull off a prank, and everybody knows that you're the only one who could pull it off, set things up in such a way that you could not possibly have been the one to do it."

Jensen said.

"What?" Pooch said.

"That made no sense." Clay said.

"If the only two people who could pull off a prank hate each other too much to work together..."

Cougar prompted.

"Then there's no way that any pranks that happen while they're arguing could be their fault." Pooch finished.

"You motherfuckers played us!" Roque accused.

"Well, it wouldn't have been very believable if we hated each other except when surrounded by the team, which is almost always." Jensen pointed out.

"You could have included the team in your plan." Clay said. Cougar felt a moment of pride that Clay had learned so well from his mistakes.

"Colonel. Do you really want to see what would happen if the entire Losers team got involved in a large scale prank?" Jensen asked slowly.

"No- well. Kind of?" Clay admitted.

"Okay. Next time we've got something big planned we'll tap you guys in." Jensen said.

"Apparently we've already been shipped off to Siberia, so no reason not to." Pooch said. "Hey, does this mean Jensen didn't tell Cougar's sister the crab story?"

"I did, but the argument only lasted a day." Jensen admitted.
"What ended it?" Pooch asked.

"Went to a diner for lunch, found three friends of mi hermanita in the washroom. One was insisting that birth control pills prevent STDs." Cougar said.

"I got a text telling me to come to the bathroom. I found Cougar looming over three teenage boys who were backed in to the corner of the room. We held an impromptu sex ed class in the diner bathroom, and I ended up getting all their emails so I could send them copies of the information I gave Cougs' sis." Jensen elaborated.

"Oh sweet Jesus!" Clay said, laughing.

"Fuckin' hell." Roque said, shaking his head.

"Does this mean you'll be sleeping next to Cougs again? Don't get me wrong, I love the guy, but the sleep cuddling makes me miss Jolene." Pooch said as the team began making camp inside the cave.

"We're in Siberia. Fuck yeah I'll cuddle with him. Bring on the extra body heat!" Jensen said.

Cougar rolled his eyes and set their bed rolls next to each other.

The next day saw Cougar waiting on a mountain side for their target to show at the compound half a mile away. Cougar spent nearly fourteen hours freezing his ass off until Jensen managed to work through their target's communications system and found recent messages indicating that their target was going to wait for an oncoming storm to pass before he showed. By the time they got Cougar back to the cave, he was so cold and stiff that Jensen had to apply hot packs to Cougar's hands before attempting to pry them from his rifle.

"This is some bullshit. It's May! Why the fuck is it so cold?" Roque griped.

"Did you miss the part where we're in Siberia?" Jensen asked, pushing a heated MRE in to Cougar's hands and setting a water bottle next to the sniper's knee.

"We're all gonna freeze our fucking nuts off." Roque said. The team was used to this by now, it was how the Captain relieved pressure.

"I hope not. Jolene and I were thinking of trying for kids in a few years." Pooch said. Jensen's hand tightened painfully on Cougar's shoulder for a second.

"Shit, Poochman. That's great!" Jensen said brightly, patting Cougar's shoulder in apology.

"Well, it's a ways off still. Jolene's got her career to focus on right now, she's hoping to make head nurse before we have any kids. I'd like to make sure we've got a good nest egg saved up before then, just in case." Pooch admitted. Even though he was talking about why children weren't feasible at present he still had a small, pleased smile on his face about the idea of having children at all.

"They will be lucky to have you as a father." Cougar said softly.

Pooch's grin was blinding.
By the time Cougar finished his MRE and the water Jensen gave him, it was time to turn in. Not wanting to freeze his ass off the way he had the night before, despite huddling next to his friend for warmth, Cougar grabbed his bedroll and unzipped it completely. Then he did the same with Jensen's bedroll, earning an undignified squawk from the man as he was already inside it. Cougar zipped both bags together and crawled in next to Jensen.

"Do I want to know?" Clay asked, looking at them from where he had settled in to take first watch.

"I am not freezing *mi cojones* off just because you're insecure in your heterosexuality." Cougar bit out, burrowing deeper in to the rapidly warming bedrolls.

"Think of his *cojones*, Clay. They're probably still numb from the fourteen hours he spent in a sniper blind that is much colder than the cave you've spent the whole day in." Jensen mumbled sleepily.

Cougar settled down to sleep and hoped that Clay would drop the subject. Admittedly, this would have been more easily accomplished if Pooch had not joined them the next night.

"If there's room for one more in there I'm willing to pile my bag on top of us all." Pooch offered.

"Might be a bit of a squeeze, but yeah." Jensen said, pulling Cougar closer to him.

Pooch was half way inside the bag when Clay noticed.

"Oh, come on! Do I need to assign sleeping arrangements?"

"Relax, Clay. The Pooch has this covered." Pooch said as he settled himself in the bag. Pooch cleared his throat, looked at Cougar and Jensen, and very formally said, "No homo."

Roque's snort could be heard from the other side of the cave.

"No homo? None at all?" Jensen asked, eyes dancing with mischief.

"Nope." Pooch said.

"What about two percent homo?" Jensen asked.

"No, and we're out of skim homo as well." Pooch said, clearly trying not to laugh.

"I Can't Believe It's Not Homo." Clay muttered. Roque was shaking with silent laughter by that point.

"You know, I wanna go with 'soy homo' next but I'm pretty sure that means something different in Spanish." Jensen said.

Cougar began laughing, which set Jensen off. By the time Pooch joined in, the laughter had devolved in to helpless giggling, exacerbated by the fact that they were all lying down.

"Oh fuck it, just go to sleep." Clay said, grinning.

It took a few more minutes for them to calm down, but when they did Cougar fell asleep quickly
Their fourth day in Siberia was much more exciting than the first three. The compound they were staking out launched an attack against the team and managed to capture all of them. Their jailors were treated to a three hour rendition of Monty Python's *Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life* courtesy of Jensen, though Pooch did occasionally join in for the whistling parts.

Their torturer finally arrived, swaggering in to the cell they were all in and smirking at the shackles chaining all of them to the wall.

"So. You American piece of shits think you can do whatever you want. You think you can go wherever and interfere with what the people are doing." he said in heavily accented English. At this point Cougar, and most of the Losers, were resisting the urge to roll their eyes. Of course they would get the guy who would try to monologue them to death.

"We will see how cocky you all feel after I am through with you. In this room you all will bleed. You will scream and cry for your mothers. Because I? Am your worst nightmare." the torturer said.

The Losers were all visibly biting back scathing critiques of their torturer, with the exception of Jensen. Jensen looked their torturer right in the eye with his best terrified puppy face and whimpered one word:

"Dad?"

The torturer startled and froze, staring at Jensen in what Cougar was willing to bet was horror. The momentary distraction was all Jensen needed to kick out and hit the torturer in both knees, breaking them audibly. The torturer stumbled, the fell backwards, mute with shock. He landed close enough to Cougar that the sniper was able to reach out and snap the stunned man's neck using his feet.

"That was disturbing, but well done." Clay said as Jensen reached out with a bare foot to wrestle the keys off the dead man's belt.

"Well, you know me. No point in letting trauma go to waste just sitting on a mental shelf, collecting nightmares. Might as well use it if it's gonna be taking up brain space anyways." Jensen quipped. Cougar made a note to check that Jensen was okay later. If he was being flippant about exposing his childhood abuse to the team in such a way, then the last three weeks of limited contact may have unsettled him more than he had let on.

"First we need to arm ourselves, then we'll see about raising some hell before getting the fuck out of here." Clay said.

"I would think the first thing we need to do is get out of these chains." Roque said dryly.

"I'm workin' on it." Jensen mumbled as he assessed how he was shackled to the wall. Jensen scooted his butt forward until he was hanging from his wrists and then rolled himself backwards to bring his legs in the air. Folded in half like that, he managed to get the foot holding the keys up to one of his hands and started figuring out which key fit his shackles. After a few minutes of work, the shackles opened with a quiet click.

"Outstanding." Clay said, grinning widely.
From there it was quick work to get the rest of the team free. A search of their would-be torturer's corpse produced a few knives, one of which was actually Roque's. They slipped out of their cell, Jensen criticizing the lack of guards in ASL, and snuck through the building until they found their gear. After killing the guards that were betting the Losers' gear in a poker game, the team split up in order to plant charges throughout the compound.

They maintained radio silence for the most part, though Pooch did call in that he found and killed their original target, and regrouped near the southern exit. Roque detonated a few cars on the opposite side of the compound, and the explosion drew guards away from the exit. Once the team was a safe distance away, Roque detonated the rest of the explosives they had set, and tossed the detonator away.

The Losers marched back to the cave and searched it for gear they had hidden that had not been grabbed by their abductors. While the team packed up, Jensen made the call to secure their extraction. They quickly wolfed down MREs, both for the nourishment and the heat, and drank water before heading back out in to the snow.

Their extraction chopper landed while they were crossing a large field, choosing for some reason to land at the far end of the field rather than closer to them. The team grumbled, but moved faster as they were all eager to get out of there. Two-thirds of the way across the field, Roque slipped and landed hard. Clay, Pooch, and Jensen turned back to see what had happened while Cougar waited to see if Roque would need help getting up. When Roque made to push himself up, an odd creaking noise could be heard.

"Hey, guys?" Jensen said, sounding very nervous all of a sudden. "What if the reason the chopper landed on the other side of a field is that this isn't a field?"

"If it's not a field, then why is it clear? It'd be wooded or show signs of human interference." Pooch said.

"Not if it's a lake." Jensen said, making Cougar's blood run cold.

Siberia or not, if they were on a frozen lake then Roque's fall could have cracked the ice. Cougar struggled to recall what he had learned about treading on thin ice. Something about weight distribution.

The creaking noise under Roque got worse, and Cougar cursed the snow for keeping him from seeing what was happening to the ice underneath it. Roque looked back and met Cougar's eye, looking terrified. Jensen, Clay, and Pooch all backed away slowly before setting their gear down. Clay started looking through his pack for rope, and managed to find some. He tossed one end to Roque, and between Clay and Pooch they dragged him off of the cracked ice before anything broke.

Cougar heaved a sigh of relief. He looked over at Jensen, confused as to why his friend was still looking so worried. Cougar looked down at the cracked ice, small amounts of water leaking through it. It occurred to him slowly that with Roque gone, Cougar was the heaviest thing near the cracked ice.

The creaking sound started up again, drawing closer. Cougar looked up at Jensen, not knowing how to communicate his predicament.

"Cougar?" Jensen said, voice worried. Clay and Pooch finally looked up from where they had been
checking Roque over.

The ice beneath Cougar's feet shifted and groaned.

"COUGAR!" Jake screamed as the ice gave way.

Cougar sank fast, barely having time to suck in a breath before he was plunged in to the freezing water. Something struck the back of his head, and his world went dark.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings:

Mentions of not good very bad things done on black ops missions.
Mentions of past child abuse and associated trauma.
Mentions of venereal diseases.
Mentions of teenage boys.
Cougar woke slowly, a gradual return to awareness that had him laying still in the hopes that he would drift back to sleep before he woke fully. He still felt so tired. His head had an odd fuzzy ache like he needed more sleep, though it hurt more towards the back of his skull, almost as if something had hit his head. He felt a little cold as well, and tried to remember if he was in a safe house or at home. If he was in his own bed he should have a much thicker comforter on him to keep him nice and toasty. Jake always teased him about being a blanket thief if the blankets were too thin.

Jake...

A flash of memory came to Cougar, Jake screaming his name as the ice collapsed under his feet. Cougar jolted awake, gasping. The sudden movement made him realize how sore his body was, and the gasp caused sharp pain in his throat and chest, making him cough. His chest heaved with every pain filled cough, and Cougar could feel phlegm collecting in the back of his throat.

Cougar barely heard the footsteps approaching his bed over the sound of his coughing. He blinked and saw Jake grabbing Kleenex from the night stand next to his bed. Jake sat on Cougar's left and put the tissues in Cougar's right hand before guiding his hand up to cover his mouth. Once Cougar had his mouth covered, Jake leaned forward and slid his arms under Cougar's body.

"Just gonna get you up." Jake said as he lifted Cougar into a sitting position before holding him close. "Alright. Bring up all that nasty gunk before you choke on it."

Cougar coughed right in to the tissues, bringing up phlegm and spit. The more he coughed, the more he leaned against Jake, all his energy taken up by the painful coughing fit. Jake kept one arm wrapped around Cougar, stabilizing him, and with the other one he brought his hand up and began rubbing up and down on Cougar's back in large circles.

When Cougar stopped hacking up his lungs, he balled up the mucus filled tissues and slumped more heavily against Jake. Jake took the tissues from Cougar and tossed them away without moving him too much, which Cougar was indescribably thankful for. Cougar felt Jake's hand return to his back and recommence rubbing slow circles while Cougar tried to catch his breath. He felt congested and sore all over and it hurt to breathe.

"Do you remember what happened with the ice?" Jake asked quietly.

Cougar nodded, hoping Jake would feel the motion and not require Cougar to speak.

"Okay. We got you out of the water and in to the chopper pretty quick, but we couldn't save your hat, and then we spent a few hours at the med center of the base we reported back to. They did what they could and stuck us on the first medical transport out of there. You sort of half woke a few times, you were responsive, but you always went back under after a minute or two. Doctors say
you don't have pneumonia, but it was a close call. It's been three days since you were last properly conscious." Jake said, clinging to Cougar's limp body.

Cougar, slowly and with a great deal less coordination than usual, brought his arms around Jake.

"You took a bad knock on the head, but it's mostly cleared up while you've been out of it. And apparently you've got symptoms of another kidney stone, so the doctors are hoping you'll wake up enough so they can get you drinking lots of fluids. So it's mostly just that and a nasty cold left. Which sucks in its own way, but is still better than some other possibilities. And I feel that this is probably an unnecessary warning but I seriously do not recommend spelunking in frozen lakes ever again." Jake said, his voice wavering as he finished.

Cougar did his best to squeeze Jake tightly, but he was fading fast, his energy all used up with his coughing fit. Jake seemed to understand, and helped Cougar drink a cup of water and lay back down, taking extra care to support Cougar's head with one large hand until he could get a pillow under it. Jake tucked the sheets around Cougar and rested one hand on Cougar's chest, right over his heart.

"Get some rest." Jake said quietly.

It was only as Cougar was drifting off that he realized that Jake was wearing hospital clothes as well.

When Cougar woke hours later, it was to Pooch gently shaking him.

"Hey man, sorry to interrupt your beauty sleep. Just need to know if you feel bad enough to want to stay in the hospital." he said quietly.

Cougar tried to speak, but after the first syllable he gave up with a wince.

"Thumbs down with your left hand if you want to stay, thumbs up with your right if you want us to get you out of here." Pooch said.

Cougar gave a thumbs up. He felt horrible, but it was easier to deal with now that he was expecting it. He also trusted his team and knew they would not remove him from medical care if Cougar actually needed to stay.

"Okay. Remember last year when we talked about the team renting a cabin? Well instead of a cabin, all of you are coming with me to Pennsylvania. Jolene's a nurse, so if something goes wrong with you or Jay she'll be able to help." Pooch said.

Cougar frowned. It took him a moment to remember that when Jake had helped him earlier, Jake had been wearing hospital clothes.

"Jay didn't tell you?" Pooch asked. Cougar shook his head and Pooch sighed. "That kid never pays attention to his own health if something's up with you. Okay, so. You went under the ice, and Jay went in right after you. Dove in and got you back to the surface. Kid's a strong swimmer, apparently. Clay tossed the rope again, Jay caught it, but the combined weight of the two of you kept breaking the ice. Jay tied the rope to you and got you out of the water so Clay, Roque and I could pull you to safety. Jay spent, at most, five minutes more than you in the water. His
temperature did some funny things for a day or two, first too low, then too high. Fever gave him some hallucinations, he spent a bit of time yesterday screaming for someone named Jeremy. He's been pretty quiet since his fever broke around lunch yesterday, and only really spoke to us this morning when he told us you woke during the night. He also lost a bit of skin on his hands and wrists where they got stuck to the ice but it's all superficial stuff. He's doing better than you so far, he's already been released, but he outweighs you by almost forty pounds so his body wasn't as easily affected by the cold. Though if you ask him he'll pass it off as good Swedish genetics.”

Cougar smiled, remembering Jake's comments about 'superior pasty genetics' on their first trip to Mazatlán.

"I'm gonna give the others the okay to start the paperwork for getting you out of here." Pooch said.

Cougar nodded, and once Pooch had left the room he began stretching his arms and legs. Several days of unconsciousness always seemed to result in his muscles being stiff. They would need the warm up if they were to support him well enough that he could be released, and between the cold and the kidney stone it would be quite the challenge. By the time Pooch came back with a wheelchair, a change of clothes, and a very disapproving doctor, Cougar was sitting up in bed and doing a very good impression of looking better than he was feeling.

Jake, having been discharged much earlier, had gotten Roque to take him to both his and Cougar's apartments in order to pack bags for the trip and feed Gertrude. Everyone was ready and waiting, so after Cougar was loaded in to the van next to Jake, Pooch got them pointed in the direction of Springfield, Pennsylvania. Jake and Cougar spent most of the drive sleeping on each other and still managed to need a nap after they hauled their bags in to the Porteous' duplex.

Jolene was still at work when they arrived, so Pooch was the one to figure out the sleeping arrangements. Roque and Clay were given the pull out chairs in the office, while Cougar and Jake were deemed less likely to kill each other in their sleep and were thus awarded the pull out bed in the living room. After the Losers had each taken a shower, Cougar was given as much water as his stomach could comfortably hold and both he and Jake were dosed with more prescription cough syrup, Cougar and Jake crawled in to what had quickly been dubbed 'the sick bed' and fell fast asleep.

Their first two days in the Porteous' home consisted mainly of Jake and Cougar recovering. This involved a lot of cough syrup, Kleenex, soup, sleep, and Cougar drinking more water than he was comfortable with. Before dawn on their third day, Cougar finally passed the kidney stone, and in the morning felt well enough to go with Jake so they could join everyone for breakfast at the kitchen table.

"Well, look who's finally up." Roque said and Cougar and Jake took the empty seats the others had left for them.

"You do not get to comment on our tardiness, Roque." Jake said groggily.

"Oh?" Roque prompted.

"Your butt is responsible for us being sick. Except for Cougar's kidney stone, that's his job's fault." Jake said, voice nasal from both his cold and the fact that he wasn't awake yet.
"Okay, this one I want to hear." Clay said, folding up his newspaper.

"Roque's butt was what cracked the ice in the first place. Ergo, his butt is responsible for our colds." Jake explained.

"What happened was an accident-" Pooch began.

"I have shared a tent with a sleeping Roque. His ass is devious, and obviously plotting everyone's demise with no input from the rest of him." Jake insisted.

"How much cough syrup have you had?" Pooch asked, squinting at Jake.

"Today? None. What does that have to do with anything? You know what? Don't answer that. I just remembered that your chili is in league with Roque's ass to end us all. The treachery knows no bounds." Jake rambled as he served himself and Cougar waffles with butter and jam. Cougar responded in kind by making sure they both got heaping spoonfuls from the bowl of bacon and cheese scrambled eggs. "Oh man, this stuff is way too good to be Pooch's doing. Jolene, don't lie; you're actually the avatar for some kind of hearth, healing, and food based goddess, aren't you?"

"Sadly, no." Jolene said, laughing and shaking her head. "If Roque's butt is responsible for the cold you two have, how is Cougar's job responsible for a kidney stone?" she asked, causing the team to pause. There was no way to really describe sniping as anything other than professional murder, and most civilians did not react well to it.

"Well, along with being our medic, Cougar is also a trained sniper. And since that makes him really sneaky and he's got those keen eyes and ears he usually gets a lot of scouting jobs. Odds are he'll need to be crouched and hidden for a long time before he can relay information back to us. Part of remaining hidden means he can't eat a lot or drink a lot, because a trip to find a friendly bush could give away his position." Jake explained.

"Oh, so dehydration is a common problem for him on missions?" Jolene asked, apparently more concerned with Cougar's health than the blood on his hands.

"Yeah. I've started packing pemmican and mixing one in to his MREs to keep his weight up if he's only getting one meal a day, but the dehydration is harder to fix." Jake said, frowning as he took another bite of his waffle.

Cougar took a moment to try and process the fact that Jake had been tampering with his food for an unknown amount of time. He wondered if Jake's tampering was the reason why Cougar had been getting less light headed and fatigued on missions over the past year.

"Coconut water is just as good as any sports drink for replacing electrolytes that he'd lose if he's dehydrated, and has less preservatives and chemicals. But really, unless he's able to walk around hooked up to a bag of fluids there isn't much of an option if that's what's causing his dehydration." Jolene said.

"Coconut water. I'll have to look in to that." Jake said.

"If you want, I can write it down. Make a list of things that could help." Jolene offered.

"Nah, just tell me. I'll remember it." Jake said.

"Are you sure about that, Jensen?" Clay asked, eyebrow raised.

"I've got an eidetic memory. I can't forget things." Jake huffed.
"If you remember everything, why do you keep forgetting Stegler's name?" Roque asked.

Jake put on his most innocent expression, all he was missing was a halo and wings to complete the picture. By this point the Losers knew better than to believe it.

"You son of a bitch!" Pooch crowed. "You're doing it on purpose! You know he's starting to twitch when you get his name wrong?"

"Well if he'd drop the attempts to recruit or corrupt the team and started working with Coleman, he'd be a lot more tolerable." Jake grumbled, shoveling more eggs in to his mouth.

"Linwood! Do not refer to the mothers of your friends as bitches!" Jolene scolded.

"Shit, sorry Jay." Pooch said contritely.

"Uh. So last I check it's just Cougs who knows this but I actually ran away from home at seventeen in order to escape my violently abusive family. I've gotten back in touch with my sister, but things can still be iffy since there's a lot of stuff in our past that we're in the process of working through. But, uh, bitch is actually one of the more flattering descriptors that can accurately be applied to my mother." Jake said before stuffing half a waffle in his mouth.

"What? Really?" Pooch asked, looking concerned. Jolene looked shocked and Clay wore an expression that said he was analyzing his own past behavior to try and figure out if he had fucked up somewhere. Roque was looking at Jake like the tech might explode at any second.

Jake made vague hums and grunts before pointing at his conveniently full mouth.

"He ran at seventeen, lived under a false identity until he turned eighteen. Enlisted on his birthday right after closing his missing persons file with the police." Cougar summed up. Jake nodded and pointed at Cougar as though to corroborate what he had said.

"A little bit like Linwood, then." Jolene said softly. When Jake raised an eyebrow, Pooch spoke up.

"I ended up in the foster system at twelve when my parents passed. At sixteen I said 'fuck this' and took off. I went and found my grandparents, they'd been denied custody because grandpa had a stroke. I lived in the apartment over their garage and took mechanic courses and did a test to get my GED. Decided the army would give me a better education than anything I could get a scholarship for, so I signed up two months before I turned nineteen."

"Nobody really gets in to Spec Ops unless they've got some kind of damage. Some little twist in them that makes it possible to do the job." Clay said quietly. When Jolene turned to him, he continued, "I'm from a military family. Since I was little everything was always about routine and rules. If it wasn't about those then it was about the Clay Legacy. I actually have no idea what civilian life is like."

"You can't all have had rough beginnings." Jolene said, clearly hoping for someone to have had a happier beginning in life.

"Grew up in a rough neighborhood, half my family was in a gang. Ended up getting in a fight with this guy and killing him in self defense. I was in the right, but he was white and had rich parents. It was a choice between army or jail." Roque said.

"Good family, good childhood. Started working part time at twelve to save money for college. Got disowned for giving all of it to my girlfriend so she could get a new ID and get away from her abusive parents." Cougar said, hoping the heaviness in his heart did not show on his face.
Silence descended upon the table, old ghosts they had each buried rearing their heads once more.

"So, if the only job you've ever had has been the military, then you have no experience in customer service." Jake said to Clay, breaking the mood.

"Oh shit." Pooch said, grinning.

"That would explain so damned much." Roque said, grinning.

"Well what experience to you have?" Clay asked indignantly.

"I was a short order cook and a waiter at a shitty greasy spoon diner that only served hangover food." Roque said.

"I did under the table work at a diner and some odd jobs at a mechanic's shop." Pooch said.

"Couple of under the table jobs here and there until I learned to make a solid fake ID. After that I got a gig at a hair salon, they started me on sweeping floors and eventually showed me how to cut hair. They would have sent me to beauty school after a year or two if I hadn't decided I wanted to take my interest in computers further. I also picked up a second job at a small delicatessen and butcher shop, mostly slicing meats." Jake said before chuckling. "Next time we get leave and we aren't all beat up we should set Clay up with a fake ID and put him to work in a deli. I wanna see if he handles customers returning meat because there's bits of his coworker's thumb in it as well as he handles getting shot at."

"That happens?!" Clay asked, aghast.

"Yeah. Word of advice, though? Don't keep the bit of thumb in a baggie in the fridge. Your coworker won't appreciate having it returned to them." Jake said.

"Gee, I wonder why?" Roque said dryly.

"I can't be the only one on the team with no customer service experience. What did Cougar do before he signed up?" Clay complained.

"Nail technician at the salon mi madre owns."

"Nail technician?" Clay asked, bewildered.

"You mean to tell me that the scariest sniper in the army, the number three shot in the US, the guy who can glare Generals into submission, is a manicurist?" Roque asked.

Cougar glared at Roque, which only served to make the man snort dismissively.

"Somehow that glare is a lot less terrifying all of a sudden." Clay said, smirking.

"And why would the job he had before joining the army suddenly change your opinions of him?" Jolene asked pointedly.

"Well, maybe it has something to do with the fact that he's still sick and hasn't brushed his hair in two days." Clay mused.

"Or maybe it's the fact that he's a fucking manicurist." Roque said.

"You may want to rethink making fun of Cougar." Jake warned.
"Why? What's he gonna do? Paint our nails?" Roque taunted.

And just like that, Cougar knew exactly what his revenge would be. He smiled nastily at Clay and Roque and went back to eating his breakfast.

"Well, I warned you. Or at least voiced a token protest. Kind of interested in seeing how he'll arrange for you to have your asses bitten by this." Jake said before following Cougar's lead and focusing on his food.

"We're so scared." Roque deadpanned, rolling his eyes.

Cougar and Jake spent the next few days carefully gathering the materials for Cougar's revenge. They enlisted Jolene's help since she knew the area better and could facilitate their efforts under the guise of showing them around Springfield. Clay and Roque were utterly oblivious to their plotting, while Pooch looked worried any time he caught the three of them scheming.

"Linwood, stop lurking in the doorway." Jolene said on their seventh day in Springfield. "I don't know what had you so worried."

"Last time these two played a prank, they turned over half the base personnel pink and sparkly." Pooch said, inching in to the bathroom they had convened in. Cougar had finally decided to get his hair cut for the first time since the team had been given the go ahead to adopt more civilian appearances.

"I must admit that was one of our better ones." Jake said as he combed through Cougar's wet hair and snipped off a few inches. When Cougar fidgeted, he patted Cougar's arm, softly saying, "Just to the shoulder, right?" and waited for Cougar's nod before he continued.

"How do you turn people pink and sparkly?" Jolene asked, smiling mischievously.

"Certain types of clubs use a sparkle dust to signal that it's really fucking late, congrats on partying the entire night. We got hold of some of that and put it in the air vents. The vent system's designed to circulate air slowly and continuously, so by the time anyone noticed that there was something coming out of the vents, everyone was already covered. Now, the tricky part was rigging the showers. We had to install stuff two weeks ahead of time, both because of mission timing and to throw suspicion off. But we basically had a setup where we made dispensers for Kool-Aid powder. These dispensers required a signal to activate, once they receive the signal they wait for the shower taps to be turned on, and six seconds later the dispenser released powder in to the pipes. Kool-Aid stains human skin." Jake explained absently as he worked on Cougar's hair.

"So people got sparkly, tried to wash it off, and ended up pink, too." Pooch summed up. "That is devious."

"Gracias." Cougar said.

"We'd been batting the ideas for both pranks around for a while, Cougs was the one who thought of combining them." Jake said proudly. "Alright, have a look at that, Cougs, see if you like the length and cut."

Cougar was standing before Jake had finished speaking, crawling through grass for three days to
lay in wait for a target was no problem, but sitting still for a haircut had always made him twitchy.
Leaning over the bathroom counter, Cougar ran his hands through his hair, testing different ways to
part it and seeing how it moved. Jake had taken off about three inches of length, so Cougar's damp
curls just brushed his bare shoulders. The ends were a little shorter closer to his face, but it could
all still fit if he tied it back in a ponytail.

"Bueno." Cougar said, pleased.

"Awesome!" Jake said, grabbing the broom and sweeping up the hair from the floor. "Alright, we'll
skedaddle so you can shower off those hair clippings sticking to you." he said as he followed
Pooch and Jolene out of the bathroom.

Cougar grinned as he pulled down his pajama bottoms and boxer briefs before stepping in to the
tub. While he scrubbed himself clean, he thought over his plan to get back at Clay and Roque. If
Pooch could be convinced to take Clay and Roque out drinking, it would speed things up nicely.
Cougar just needed a few hours where the Losers' CO and XO were unlikely to wake if moved,
then Cougar could exact the first part of his revenge.

When Cougar was done cleaning up, he put on fresh clothes and began toweling his hair dry as he
went in search of his team. He followed the sounds of good natured arguing to the kitchen.

"No, it's nice or some shit like that that you guys offered to wait for Cougs and I to be off our
medication before having a bar night, but don't. Go out, take Pooch, have some fun. Since neither
of us are contagious we actually figured we'd go see my sister. Rent a car, drive six hours, crash in
their guest room and offer free babysitting in exchange for being housed and fed for a few days." Jake said.

"What medicine are the two of you on?" Clay asked.

"Cough syrup with codeine in it. The cough and sore throat just won't go away, all the other
symptoms are gone. Also, Cougar only passed that stone four days ago so I don't think imbibing a
bunch of alcohol is the best idea seeing as alcohol dehydrates." Jake said as Cougar entered the
kitchen.

"That cough syrup is just nasty." Roque said.

"It's not so bad. Better than the generic cough medicine." Jake said.

"In effectiveness, yeah. But it tastes awful!" Pooch argued.

"No, it tastes like bananas." Jake said.

"That is not what bananas taste like." Cougar said.

"It's not what Cavendish bananas taste like, but it is a very good imitation of what Gros Michel
bananas taste like. And Gros Michel was the type of banana that was in use when they came up
with that flavoring. They just haven't updated it since the banana plague happened." Jake said.

Everyone in the kitchen stared at Jake, confused and a little worried. Jake sighed and elaborated,

"Prior to the fifties, the Gros Michel was the type of banana that was imported in the US and
Canada. During the fifties, there was a plague that affected a large number of banana species,
including the Gros Michel. In order to keep trade going they had to find a different species of
banana. The Cavendish banana is larger and a lot blander in flavor, but it was the next best option
that was immune to the plague. So while we have these horrible banana wannabes in our kitchens,
banana flavoring has remained blessedly untouched by time."

"If those old bananas were wiped out, then how do you know that the flavoring is still accurate?" Roque asked, frowning like he couldn't believe he was having a serious conversation about bananas.

"They weren't wiped out, they became endangered, but it's still possible to get some. They're harder to find than regular bananas, but my grandparents used to get some during the summer months when they would look after me and Jess while our parents were at work. They used to make ice cream and muffins out of them." Jake said, sounding a little sad. Cougar knew that Jake had loved his grandparents very much and would have run to them when he left home had they still been alive by that time. Sadly, old age had caught up to them before Jake had gotten away.

"Well, you have fun with your historically accurate banana flavor. I'll be over here appreciating the cherry flavored cough syrup." Pooch said.

"Okay, I feel compelled to point out that cherry cough syrup does not taste like cherries." Jake said.

"Then what does it taste like?" Clay asked, amused.

"It tastes like Satan used a cherry ring pop as a butt plug, then melted it down and sold it as medicine flavoring." Jake said.

"God help me, I agreed with him." Roque groaned while the rest of the team stared oddly at Jake.

"Right. Okay." Clay said, slowly and very put upon. "So, bar night?"

"Bar night." Roque agreed.

"Dibs on being the designated driver. Mostly because I'd like to be able to go back to the local bars." Pooch said.

"Do you boys have a problem with getting banned from bars?" Jolene asked.

"Uh." Pooch responded, watching his wife carefully for signs that he was about to be in trouble.

"No, but that's because we usually go to military bars so they're pretty well prepared for whatever we can throw at them." Jake said. "Though there was that one place in Oman with the table dancing goat that gave us a run for our money. Don't trust their absinthe, it's got more than just alcohol in it. Cougs had some and he didn't come down from it for two days."

"Are we sure it was the absinthe?" Clay asked. "I had a bit and I was fine."

"You had half a glass, same as Roque. Cougar had about four times that much and he weighs less than either of you. Also you and Roque both got a little weird after that. And it can't have been the vodka, whiskey, or tequila because Pooch and I had plenty of those and we were just fine." Jake said. "Also, ever since then if Cougar smells absinthe he gets this look on his face like his liver is screaming."

Cougar nodded in agreement. Ever since Oman he could not stand the smell of absinthe. It was by no means the only culprit behind the incredibly intoxicated state he had been in for that mission, Cougar had vague memories of a chemical lab explosion and a marijuana farm catching fire, but from what he could remember the absinthe had certainly been an instigator.

"Thank god I didn't know any of you in nursing school. I don't think any of us would have
survived." Jolene said shaking her head.

"Okay, so bar night tonight. No way is that happening on an empty stomach. Who's cooking?" Pooch asked.

"I'd be happy to make up a friend rice if you guys want." Jake offered.

"Por favor." Cougar said, smiling.

"We'll get out of your hair, then." Clay said, following Roque out of the kitchen.

"I'm gonna see if I can go own them in Mario Kart." Pooch said.

"Have fun, and remember that blue shells are your friend!" Jake said, turning to Jolene. "Do you guys have a wok?"

"Yeah, it's kept with the canning pot under the sink." Jolene said, showing Jake where they were kept.

Cougar grabbed the bag of uncooked rice from where he had seen Jolene place it a few days before and made sure it was in easy reach on the counter. Jake handed Cougar a pot large enough for Cougar to quadruple the usual serving size. Cougar put in nine cups of water and four cups of rice before placing it on a back burner and keeping an eye out for when it boiled. Jake handed Cougar an entire bag of frozen mixed vegetables, and Cougar began snapping the frozen vegetables in to smaller pieces and placing them in a large bowl.

"You guys have this down to a system." Jolene remarked.

"This is one of the few things I cook well enough to get requests for. Cougar's usually the culinary wizard in our duo." Jake said, chopping three small, white onions in to small pieces. "He's seen me make this often enough that he could probably do this himself."


"That actually does wonderful things for my ego." Jake said, smiling and bumping Cougar's shoulder.

The rice had begun to boil, so Cougar set it to simmer, stirred the rice, and placed the lid on the pot.

Jake chopped up a few cloves of garlic to go with the onions and set both of those aside in a bowl before looking in the fridge for eggs and meat. He came back with a pack of ground pork and four eggs. Jake cracked the eggs in to a bowl and mixed them thoroughly before mashing up the ground pork so the consistency was even and adding black pepper and a few red chili flakes to the meat.

"Not typical of the recipe, but it adds nice flavor." Jake said to Jolene.

"And unlike Linwood, you only added enough for flavor." she said, smirking.

"I was not joking about his chili trying to kill us. Clay even thought it was too much and he's basically burnt his taste buds off with a life of crappy food and MREs." Jake said.

Once the rice was done cooking, Cougar turned off the burner and filled the bowl of frozen vegetables with hot water to defrost them. While he was straining the water out, Jake put a small amount of oil in the wok and got it heating over medium heat. He added the onions and garlic and
pushed them around with a wooden spatula. Once they had softened, he added the meat and started cooking it, mixing frequently. Once the meat was almost all cooked, Cougar passed him the strained, defrosted vegetables. Those went in to the wok and got mixed in with the cooking meat.

"If I wasn't feeding six people, it'd be two or three cups of veggies, one onion, less garlic, about a quarter the meat I put in, and one quarter the amount of rice Cougar's made." Jake explained to Jolene. "Also this recipe is pretty good for transforming meat. If you have meat from a previous meal, just chop it up in really small bits and add it just before the rice, instead of just after the onions."

"Sounds like a good way of spicing up leftovers. With Linwood away so often I end up eating the same meals for three days sometimes." Jolene said.

"Same here if Cougar doesn't feed me. I've only got a handful of recipes I do well, but it gets boring eating the same things over and over. Recipes like this are good for taking something I'm tired of and making it interesting again." Jake said.

The meat and vegetables were done cooking, so Jake moved them to one side of the wok and dumped in the eggs, scrambling them as they cooked and slowly incorporating them in to the vegetables and meat already in the wok. Once that was done, Cougar took the pot of rice and began tipping the contents in to the wok while Jake stirred. After putting the empty pot down, Cougar grabbed the soy sauce and started shaking it over the wok while Jake stirred it in.

"And voila, we have fried rice. Let's get the others to set the table before they break something playing Mario Kart." Jake said. The sound of yelling could be heard from the living room, followed by several suspicious thumps and the sound of breaking glass. Jake snapped his fingers and said, "Damn, still need to work on timing that part."

At two in the morning, Cougar and Jake were sitting in bed, playing Final Fantasy XI on their laptops when Pooch came in to the living room. They each pulled out an ear bud and turned their attention to him.

"You guys might want to see this." Pooch said, grinning.

They logged out of the game and followed Pooch to the office, where Clay and Roque were sleeping in the pull out chairs fully clothed.

"Their boots are on." Jake said, grinning evilly.

"What do their boots have to do with anything? Jolene asked, keeping her voice low due to the late hour.

"Army thing. 'Boots off for safety'. If you fall asleep with your boots on then it's open season for pranks while you're out of it." Jake explained. "I'll go get the stuff." he said, leaving the room.

Cougar took the foot stool out of the corner of the room and brought it closer to where Clay was sleeping. As soon as Jake returned with the kit, Cougar opened it and took out the cuticle pusher.

"Jake, I will need you to pay attention so you can prepare the other nails while I work, si?" Cougar whispered.
"Okay." Jake said, settling behind Cougar and watching over his shoulder while he sanitized Clay's hand with rubbing alcohol, pushed back the cuticle on Clay's index finger, then scraped off the dead skin. He lightly filed the nail bed and free edge, brushed off the dust before applying nail dehydrator and primer, then Cougar glued on a nail tip.

"Do that on all their nails, even the toes. Do not get dehydrator or primer on their skin. Do not put tips on the toes." Cougar instructed.

"Got it." Jake said, grabbing supplies and getting to work on Clay's other hand.

Once Cougar had prepared all the nails on Clay's right hand, he applied a thin layer of clear acrylic to the nail beds and used it to blend the nail tips in with the nail beds. Once that was dry, there he applied gel to the nail, cured it in the portable LED lamp Jolene had borrowed from a friend. Then he showed Jake how to shape the cured nails with a file, and had Jake do that while he moved on to Clay's other hand. On Clay's feet he only used acrylic, as he intended for Clay and Roque to have to deal with having those nails on for months.

After Cougar had gotten the base work done on Clay and Roque, he went in with coloured gels and began making patterns and designs. For Clay's nails, Cougar went with soft pastel shapes, and for Roque he did an imitation of Van Gogh's Starry Night. On their toes he did pastel rainbow swirls with acrylic. He capped their nails in clear gel, and their toes in clear acrylic, before getting Jake's help filing and shaping them again, brushing off the dust, and applying a hard gel top coat. After wiping down the nails and applying cuticle oil, Cougar and Jake put Clay and Roque's socks and boots back on, cleaned up after themselves, and left the room.

"I'm tempted to ask you to do my nails the next time you boys visit, but I need to keep them short at the hospital." Jolene said.

"Toes are an option, no?" Cougar said, smiling.

"Do we wait for them to wake, or do we head for Jess' place now and let them scream at us over a phone?" Jake asked, grinning widely.

"Well, I talked to a few friends I have in the area who go to salons. They passed Franklin and William's pictures around so the local salons know not to help them if they try to go there to get the nails removed." Jolene said mischievously.

"Nail technician solidarity." Jake said.

"It is nearly five am, we would miss most of the traffic." Cougar pointed out.

"And we were planning on leaving around seven am anyways. Alright, looks like we're going to New Hampshire!" Jake said, bouncing off to go get packed.

They arrived at Jess and Donny's house shortly after eleven am. Jess was at work at the Concord DA's office, so Donny invited them inside as his firm let him work from home most days. Beth squealed happily when they entered the kitchen.

"Baja baby!" Jake said, making his way to her. Once he was holding her she proceeded to grab his goatee and gurgle. "How's my girl doing, huh? How's Baja baby?"
"She missed you guys." Donny said, smiling fondly.

"Of course she did! Hey, Baja! Look who's there! It's your Tio Cougar!" Jake said, pointing Beth in Cougar direction.

Beth looked confused for a moment before signing 'Hat'.

Cougar shook his head and signed back, 'No hat'. His hat was currently sitting at the bottom of a lake in Siberia and would need to be replaced.

Beth extended her arms towards Cougar, and Jake passed her over. Once Cougar was holding her, she gently patted his face.

"I think she's trying to comfort you." Donny said. "She does that sometimes if Jess or I have had hard days or are feeling very emotional."

"Awwww." Jake cooed looking at Beth with that special expression of wonder he only got when she was involved.

Cougar pressed a soft kiss to Beth's face and was surprised when he got one in return.

"Oh, she's been learning to give kisses, too. Still a little shaky on walking, but she can manage a few steps." Donny said.

Jakes eyes were wet when he reached out and rubbed Beth's back gently. Cougar knew he was probably in a similar state.

"I'll get some lunch going for us and we can catch up, okay?" Donny asked.

Jake nodded absently, still staring at Beth. His hand kept brushing softly against Cougar's arm as he rubbed Beth's back.

"She's growing up so fast." Jake whispered.

Cougar tilted his head in question.

"Sorry. I know I can't be here every minute of every day, but. I just. I don't want to miss it. I don't want her only memories of me to be vague because I'm never around." Jake said.

"We drop by almost every leave." Cougar said softly.

"I know. And it's good that we also use our leave to go places and have vacations and stuff. I just worry." Jake said, pursing his lips. "And she's not going to really remember most of this anyways, she's too young."

"When she is old enough to remember more, we can make our stays longer. Provided Jess and Donny are okay with it." Cougar suggested.

The soft smile Jake gave him made Cougar's heart roll over in his chest. No con un compañero de equipo, he reminded himself, y no con alguien que sitúe por encima. Cougar's phone rang just then, Pooch's ringtone. Cougar turned his hip towards Jake.

"I'll get that." Jake said, digging in to Cougar's pocket for his phone. When he answered the phone, his eyebrows shot up to his hairline just before he grinned evilly and switched the phone to speaker mode.
"-the fuck?! How am I supposed to pee with these? How am I supposed to wipe my own ass? How am I supposed to do anything with fucking Starry Night claws coming out of my fingers?" came Roque's voice, muffled in the way that suggested he was not speaking directly in to the phone, but instead was in the same room as it.

"I don't even know how these things are staying on. I try to twist them off and it feels like my finger nails are gonna go with 'em." Clay grumbled.

"I'm gonna kill him. Them." Roque said.

"Them?" Clay asked

"You really think Cougar did this without help? Where that skinny Mexican ass goes, Jensen follows." Roque said.

"Alright, let's go find them, then." Clay said.

"Have fun driving to New Hampshire." came Pooch's voice, much louder, most likely the one holding the phone in order to broadcast the conversation.

"What?" Clay and Roque said in sync.

"Don't you remember? Jay and Cougs are off to visit Jay's sister and niece." Pooch's smug voice said.

"What are you doing with that phone?" Clay asked.

Scuffling sounds could be heard down the line. Several thumps and grunts later, Clay's voice came through,

"Alvarez, you had better get the fuck back here-"

"Whoa, hey there Colonel. Mind not swearing in front of my niece?" Jake interrupted.

"Oh for the love of god. Get your asses back here and take these damned nails off us!" Roque said.

"No." Cougar said, grinning.

"The fuck do you mean, 'no'?" Roque growled.

"He means 'No, I'm not going to help the two guys who spent four days belittling me because I have a skill set that their Cro-Magnon brains have labeled feminine as if that somehow makes things worthy of derision'. He also means 'When you figure out how to take your boots off with those long ass nails, you may want to check your toes'." Jake said, hanging up once he was done speaking. "I wonder how long it will take them to figure out how to use phones with their nails like that."

Cougar threw his head back and laughed.

When Jess got home that evening, Jake was dancing Beth around the living room singing along with The Temptations' *The Way You Do The Things You Do*. 
"Donny is in his office, getting ahead on work." Cougar told her.

"I'll go see him in a minute." she said, taking a moment to smile and watch her brother and daughter dance around. "He's looking good. Lighter, somehow."

"Our jobs can weigh on the soul, at times. Coming to visit is important, reminds us why we fight." Cougar said.

"I'm glad you come visit with him, you know." Jess said, surprising Cougar. "I don't know what kind of family you have or don't have, but Jake helps you, just as much as you help him. And if being here makes it easier for Jake to keep going, then I hope it does the same for you, even a little bit."

"It helps." Cougar said, reaching out and wrapping one arm around Jess. She had not been overly fond of physical contact in the beginning of their acquaintance, but with time, therapy, and familiarity, she had begun to welcome physical reassurance the way Jake did.

"I've wanted to ask for a long time now, and if it's too personal just say so, but could I know if you keep contact with your family?" Jess asked.

"I keep in touch with a few members, but most of mi familia disowned me many years ago."

"And there's nothing you can do to get them to welcome you back?" Jess asked, frowning sadly.

"No. And I am not sure I would want to do so." Cougar admitted. When Jess looked at him in question, he elaborated, "No one is obligated to misery. And no one is obligated to surround themselves with people who make them miserable. If a relationship is toxic, whether friend or family or lover, it is better to be rid of it and be happy than to stay and slowly die inside. I am happier now than I have been since I was much younger. My team, Jake, your family, and the few members of mi familia that I still speak to all have a hand in this. I would not trade this for a family that threw me away once already."

"And one man's trash is another man's treasure. And I'm going to stop there before I get tempted to work 'family jewels' in there somewhere and accidentally call someone I care about a testicle." Jake said, making Jess laugh and Cougar grin. "Baja has noticed you're home, Jess." he said, holding Beth out to Jess.

"Oh my god." Jess groaned. "You've been calling her that for months, how did I not figure that out before?"

"You and Cougar and most people have common sense. I have uncommon sense." Jake explained.

"That makes about as much sense as anything else, I guess." Jess said, smiling and bouncing Beth a bit.

"Now that you're back, I may hit the hay early. We've been up since yesterday." Jake said.

"Busy night?" Jess asked slyly.
"We played a very good prank on our CO and XO. They had it coming, too." Jake said.

"Okay, sleep well. Oh! We haven't gotten around to getting a second bed in the guest room yet." Jess said.

"Jess, rest assured that Cougar and I have had sleeping arrangements much more cramped than a queen sized bed. I can't disclose much info about it, but fairly recently we actually zipped our sleeping bags together and squeezed the both of us and Pooch inside. It was necessary to keep from freezing our tender bits off." Jake said.

"That... doesn't sound comfortable in the least bit." Jess said.

"Nah, don't worry. It was really warm and snuggly despite Cougar's pointy elbows." Jake said, heading off down the hall.

"You gonna nap too?" Jess asked, turning to Cougar.

"Probably a good idea." Cougar admitted. "There is a plate of leftovers in the microwave."

"Thank you. Sleep well." Jess said, taking Beth and heading in the direction of Donny's office.

Cougar padded down the hall and pushed open the door of the guest room. He was immediately assaulted by a pair of pajama pants that wrapped around his head. He laughed quietly and pulled them away from his face, flipping the legs over his shoulder like a scarf to get a laugh from Jake.

"Excellent fashion statement, Cougs." Jake said, grinning as he pulled on a tank top. His dog tags poked through the thin material in a way that had Cougar averting his eyes before he tried to see what else could show through the material.

Cougar grinned at his friend and got changed, crawling under the covers while Jake set out water bottles for them and looked for their cough syrup.

"Can only find mine right now, but it's the same prescription. We can just share. Promise I don't have cooties for you to catch." Jake said, offering Cougar a spoon.

"You vaccinated me against them a few years ago, did you not?" Cougar said, grinning.

Jake's face lit up at the memory while he poured out cough syrup for Cougar before measure out a dose for himself.

"That is an excellent point, my friend." Jake said, setting aside their spoons and his glasses before crawling over Cougar to reach his side of the bed. "Good night, sleep tight, the unspeakable horrors of darkness are on strike."

"Good to know." Cougar said, laughing as he turned off the light and settled down to sleep.

In the very early hours of the morning, Cougar woke. He wasn't sure what woke him, if anything, but he scanned the room to be sure. The only thing out of place was a shadow on the wall. Cougar rolled over to see Jake sitting up in bed, staring out the window blankly.

The last time Cougar had seen Jake look that way had been at the end of April, after Beth's first
birthday. He had drunk a few glasses of whiskey after everyone had gone to bed, before forcing himself to throw it all up. Cougar had found him half hiding between the toilet and tub, and staring off in to the distance. Jake had been unable to sleep until they had been on the plane heading for Texas.

"Jake?" Cougar whispered, hoping his friend was not so deep in his own head that he wouldn't hear Cougar.

"Hm?" Jake mumbled absently.

"Jake, qué está pasando?" (what is going on?) Cougar asked.

"My brain won't let me sleep." Jake said quietly.

After a few minutes of silence, he lay back down and stared as the ceiling. Cougar kept quiet, sometimes Jake needed to think before he spoke.

"There's this quote. It's by John Quincy Adams. The quote is: 'I am a warrior so that my son may be a merchant so that his son may be a poet'. And it's just repeating in my head over and over and over." Jake said. "And, I know that my therapists have said that my brain hyper focuses and obsesses over things because that's its way of coping with trauma, but it's really fucking annoying.

"So right now that quote is stuck in my head, and. Well." Jake exhaled carefully out his nose and closed his eyes. "I don't have a son." he said quietly. "But I do have a niece. And I swear to god I will do whatever I have to, kill whoever I have to, steal whatever I need to, I don't fucking care. As long as she gets to have a good life? It'd be worth anything. I don't have a long list of people I really and truly care about. It's a defense mechanism, keep people at arms distance and they'll have trouble hurting you. You do it too, in your own way. But for the people I do care about? I'd burn the world down to get back at anyone who hurt them, and that scares me. I'm scared of what I'm capable of some days." Jake said. When he opened his eyes and turned his head to look at Cougar, his eyelashes were wet.

"That fear you have? It means you are a good person." Cougar whispered, resting his hand over Jake's heart. "If you did not fear your ability to destroy, it would mean there was nothing in you that valued creation."

"You know, you're on that list, Cougs." Jake said, voice thick. "Anything happens to you and I can't make any guarantees."

"You are on my list too, Jake." Cougar said quietly.

Jake turned and wrapped his arms around Cougar as much as he could while they were both lying down. Cougar held Jake tightly, wishing he could offer the younger man more in the way of comfort. Their jobs were too dangerous, too unpredictable for any promises to hold weight. So instead, Cougar held Jake close until they both fell back to sleep.

In the morning, while Jake was in the shower, Cougar wandered the hallway, looking at the different framed photos in the hall. There always seemed to be new ones every visit. As he passed the kitchen, he overheard Beth's delighted squeal and backed up so that he could look in. Beth was in her high chair, ignoring the spoon of food her mother held out in favor of smiling toothlessly at
"Oh, so you're this morning's distraction." Jess said quietly, smiling when she spoke.

"Lo siento." Cougar said, stepping in to the kitchen. He passed a gentle hand over Beth's head smiling when she grinned at him. "Is she getting teeth?"

"Yeah. She's gotten a bit of a late start on them, but she has five very sharp teeth right now." Jess said.

It was Beth's adoring gaze that brought the memory of the day she was born back to Cougar. He was in a different place now than he had been when Jess had asked, he was just as attached to Beth as Jake was now. There was no reason to put it off.

"Do you remember the offer you made when Beth was born?" Cougar asked.

"Offer? Oh! The legal guardianship?" Jess asked, blinking at the sudden change in subject.

"Si. If you would still have me, I would be glad to be Beth's guardian, should the worst happen." Cougar said. If anything happened to Jess or Donny, Jake would leave the military. Cougar knew now that if Jake left, for any reason, Cougar would not stay. All this did was make it official, though Cougar did make a mental note to look into having his will altered. Just in case.

"Yeah! Definitely! I mean, if you're sure you're up for this. We've actually got the paperwork in Donny's office, we can take care of this while you guys are still here. If you're comfortable with that, that is." Jess rambled.

"Si. It will be good to make sure that Baja is protected." Cougar said, smiling down at the little girl who was chewing on her fist.

Jess stood and wrapped Cougar in a tight hug, whispering a heartfelt "Thank you."

Cougar hugged her back, realizing that Jake had been right when he had said that Cougar held people at a distance out of a misguided attempt at self preservation. It felt good to close that distance. It felt good to let people in.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings:

Uh... non-consensual manicures?

Also, brief mentions of unhappy childhoods and coping with trauma.

Nail references:

Clay's nails
Roque's nails
their toes
So this chapter almost didn't get posted because on Monday night our building got hit by lightning and it fried our modem. We live in a fairly old building, so old the wiring is made of aluminium instead of copper, so there's absolutely no electrical protection if you don't have surge protectors to plug your stuff in to. We, luckily, almost always use surge protectors. Our neighbors are not so lucky. Above us the guy lost a computer, a tv, and his modem. Beside us a lady lost two phones and her tv. Dude below us lost his ipad and tv.

So we got the new modem, but our router is acting up. At the time I'm posting this I've had net access for all of 30 minutes because we have to enact an internet timeshare of sorts. Really hoping we get something figured out soon.
Cougar walked in to General Coleman's office at nine o'clock sharp wearing his newest, cleanest set of BDUs. His hair was neatly tied back and he had left his cowboy hat behind in exchange for the more formal green beret. He saluted Coleman, and waited for the General to tell him to take a seat.

"Please state your name and rank, for the record." Coleman asked, after switching on a recorder.

"Carlos Alvarez, Sergeant." Cougar said.

"Sergeant Alvarez, you are here to discuss the events that lead up to the attack on the night of September 7th, 2005. Please begin with your first known interaction with Private David Warrick." Coleman said.

"My unit was in Afghanistan in March of 2005." Cougar began. They had been sent to do a series of targeted strikes to make things easier for regular troops to go in and clean up after them. "We were stationed at the same base as Private Warrick and his platoon." For the most part the team made efforts to get along with the regular troops when they were stationed anywhere. No sense in shitting where you eat, after all. "On March 29th, I was passing through the outskirts of the base, looking for Corporal Jacob Jensen." Jensen's new therapist had given him a new prescription that had been causing odd side effects. It had worried the whole team, and Cougar had found it necessary to check on his friend regularly just to be sure that Jensen was eating and drinking regularly. "I noticed three men standing in a group, laughing." Not such an unusual sight, and Cougar had initially dismissed the men as irrelevant. "I was about the turn away when I heard a whine. Private Warrick was holding a puppy at arm's length by the scruff of the neck."

"No sign that the dog had done anything that would cause Warrick to grab it that way, possibly to avoid being bitten?" Coleman asked.

"The puppy was smaller than my hat, sir. If a six foot tall man needs to defend himself against a puppy that size, there is no reason to be hanging it five feet in the air by its skin." Cougar said, struggling to keep his tone even. Coleman wasn't his enemy here, this interview was to clear Cougar's name. "The puppy was whining in pain, Warrick and his friends were laughing at it. I began to approach them, intending to ask them to release the puppy politely, or order them to if need be, and then Warrick threw the puppy."

"Threw? Not dropped or let go?" Coleman asked, pursing his lips. Cougar knew, thanks to Jensen, that Warrick and his platoon had left out a lot of details from their reports.

"He pulled his arm back and pitched the puppy through the air like someone would a baseball. The puppy flew thirty feet while Warrick and his friends laughed." Cougar said, swallowing bile.
Taking joy in dispensing cruelty to innocent creatures or children was something that never failed to make Cougar's blood boil. It made him sick with rage and disgust to think he served in the same army as people like Warrick.

"And that's when you..." Coleman seemed to be trying to find a polite way to put it.

"I lost my temper," Cougar said, thinking of the time Jensen had used that to describe how he had snapped and beaten four people to death.

"Yes. You lost your temper. What happened then?" Coleman asked.

"I marched up to Warrick, Paventi, and Sandler and began dressing them down for conduct not befitting members of the US military, as well as needless cruelty to animals. Rather than respecting a superior officer, they attempted to intimidate me, as all three are taller and outweigh me. Warrick moved to grab me, and I intercepted him. That is how the fight broke out." Cougar said, trying to get the facts out without getting pulled back in to the rage that had come over him when he fought Warrick.

"Records state that you broke Warrick's arms in five places, broke his right femur, his nose was crushed, and apparently you elbowed him so hard in the crotch that his pelvis had a contusion. Paventi ended up with just a few cracked ribs. Sandler's skull was cracked, and his right shoulder dislocated. You yourself sustained bruises, a few cracked finger bones, and a partial dislocation of your left elbow that you reset just before Warrick's platoon began fighting you." Coleman said, reading off of the papers in front of him.

"Paventi disengaged and surrendered, Warrick and Sandler continued attacking me. It was just as the fight finished that more of Warrick's platoon showed up and jumped me. I reset my elbow in order to defend myself." Cougar said.

"And was that when Captain Roque showed up and entered the fray?" Coleman said.

"Yes. Captain Roque assisted me until the base MPs were able to break up the fight." Cougar said. "As soon as the MPs reached us, Roque and I stopped fighting and surrendered peacefully."

"Which is corroborated in the reports those MPs filed. Now, you were shipped back stateside after that, dressed down, and sentenced to five days in solitary confinement as well as sixty hours of CAPE. Which is excessive, to say the least." Coleman said, frowning.

"Warrick's father is General Theodore Warrick." Cougar said.

"I recall looking in to that." Coleman said. Cougar knew that Coleman did his best to stick by his men, but he also believed in playing fair. If they had done something wrong, Coleman would see to it that they were reprimanded and fairly punished. He had not taken kindly to General Warrick punishing one of Clay's men, especially considering the long rivalry between the two that had begun with Clay's father. "The sentence was reduced to two days in solitary and twenty hours of CAPE after it was proven that Warrick had instigated the fight. I was told that he and the other two instigators would be dealt with, but according to their records nothing actually happened. What was the next interaction you had with Warrick?"

"On September 7th, 2005, he and seven others broke in to my apartment and tried to kill me." Cougar replied.

"There was absolutely no interaction between you and them after the initial altercation?" Coleman asked.
"No, sir." Cougar said.

"Please describe in your own words what happened." Coleman asked.

"I went to bed early, as I was planning on going apartment hunting the next day. Around twenty-three hundred hours I woke to the sound of my door opening. The only person other than me or my landlord who has a key is Jensen, and he always texts, calls, or knocks before coming inside. I rolled off the bed and grabbed a hidden gun, turned and targeted the intruder's ankles as soon as they opened the bedroom door. They fell, I looked at their face, I did not recognize them. At no point did they make any motion to surrender, instead they pointed their gun at me. I fired first. After that I systematically went through my apartment and took down each attacker." Cougar listed, keeping his voice neutral, factual, when all he wanted to do was scream. He should never have had to take down members of his own military in self defense. His apartment should never have become a warzone. His neighbors should never have been at risk of stray bullets because of the wounded pride of cruel, spoiled brats.

"At any point did any of your attackers surrender?" Coleman asked.

"No." Cougar answered.

"What did you do next?" Coleman asked.

"I called the CID, as infractions by military personnel fall under their jurisdiction. They arrived at the same time as the local police, and kept the Fayetteville PD from shooting me." Cougar said.

"Why would the local cops have shot you?" Coleman asked, concerned.

"Local PD responded to gun fire at a residential address and the only person there was a Latino who was covered in blood splatter." Cougar explained.

Coleman frowned disapprovingly. It was no secret that Coleman held a lot of contempt for racists. Coleman may have been a white man, but he had married a black woman at a time when such unions were only barely legal. The team had developed the habit of sending Mrs. Coleman a gift on their wedding anniversary; partially out of respect and partially an apology for the times that loyalty to his charges had called the General from his bed in the middle of the night.

"Alright, then. I have copies of the statements you gave to the police and the CID. Is there anything you'd like to add to them?" Coleman asked.

"No, sir." Cougar said. If it had only been the Fayetteville PD who had responded, Cougar would have been concerned about his possessions being confiscated and auctioned off. His Tia Juanita had dealt with exactly that problem when the cops had collected items from her home in order to gather investigation for a burglary when Cougar had been thirteen. With the CID in charge of the investigation Cougar had more faith that his possessions would be returned, if they were taken in the first place.

"Then that concludes this interview. Thank you for your time, Sergeant Alvarez." Coleman said, shutting off the recorder. "Now, this is completely off the record but what happened what complete and total bullshit." Coleman spat, sagging back in his chair and looking less like a General and more like an old man than Cougar had seen in a long time.

"I'll look in to what happened with Warrick and his buddies, and why they weren't punished for what happened. Nepotism isn't actually illegal, but I'll see if I can get grounds to have negligence charges filed against General Warrick. If it weren't for him this would be an open and shut case, so
I'm going to need to take steps to protect you and the other Losers from retaliation on his end. This is probably going to mean you boys getting deployed for a while." Coleman sighed before slanting a look at Cougar. "What happened to the puppy this whole thing started over?"

"Pooch found her. Broken bones, bruises. Jensen smuggled her back with us and gave her to Pooch's wife. Ask him about Bailey next time you see him." Cougar said. Bailey had healed quickly under Jolene's care and proven to be an intelligent dog that adored humans.

"I'll make a note of it." Coleman said, smiling for the first time since the meeting had begun. "Okay. Go tell Clay I need to see him."

"Si." Cougar said, standing and heading for the door.

"And find your damned cowboy hat. It's creepy seeing you without it!" Coleman called as Cougar left.

Cougar grinned and shot the General a sloppy salute on his way out. He made his way back to the Losers' offices, exchanged hats, and poked his head in to Clay's office.

"Boss?" he said.

"Cougar! How'd the meeting go?" Clay asked.

"Así así. Coleman will help, but we will need to be deployed a lot." Cougar said.

"Ah, shit." Clay grumbled.

"If you ask nicely, maybe Jensen will download your soaps while we are on mission." Cougar said, rolling his eyes. "Talk to Coleman."

"I will, I will." Clay said, waving Cougar off.

Knowing that Clay would keep Roque updated, Cougar went in search of Jensen and Pooch to warn them about the likelihood of new orders. He found them in the motor pool, huddled over one of the greasiest engines Cougar had ever seen.

"Yo, Cougs! How'd it go?" Jensen asked, eyes wide with concern.

Cougar felt something inside himself relax every time Jensen reacted to his surroundings. The meds Jensen had been on in March had resulted in nightmares and hallucinations coupled with extreme fatigue and a sort of mental numbness that kept Jensen so quiet and still that Cougar still got chills when he thought about how blank and uncaring Jensen had been. Jensen hadn't even been able to care that he was having a bad reaction to his meds until the incident with Warrick. He had skipped his doses after that, and spoken to his therapist about it. The man had immediately canceled the prescription and placed a note in Jensen's file about his reaction to the medication, muttering the entire time about the poor record keeping on the part of Jensen's previous therapist. They were still trying different medications, hoping to find one that Jensen wouldn't react horribly to.

"We're likely to be deployed a lot to keep Warrick from causing problems." Cougar answered.

"Shit. What about your apartment?" Jensen asked.

Cougar shrugged. His lease was up on October first, he needed to be packed and moved by then. If they were deployed too long then there was a chance he'd be homeless.
"Why don't we get your stuff packed and brought to my place, the furniture can go in storage. That way you don't have to worry." Jensen offered.

Cougar nodded. That would take care of most of his worries.

"You can pretty much get internet wherever we go, right?" Pooch asked Jensen.

"Depending on satellite access and weather, yeah. It's not necessarily legal access. But I don't think that particularly bothers anyone who benefits from it." Jensen said.

"Jolene has been looking at houses, so we can get an idea of what we're up against when we decide to get one and start a family. She's been linking me to these realtor websites that have virtual tours. I know it's not the same as visiting the place yourself, but it might give you a better jumping off point." Pooch said.

"He's not moving because of the building, he's moving because of what's going in across the street." Jensen pointed out.

"You've lost the Pooch." Pooch said.

"Condos." Cougar explained.

"You have a deep hatred of condominiums that prevents you from living across the street from them?" Pooch asked.

"No, no. He picked his apartment based on two things: the kitchen and the sightlines. With condos going in across the street, the sightlines are all fucked. He's not gonna be able to sleep with all the openings for attack that those condos bring." Jensen explained.

"Normally I'd say something about paranoia, but-" Pooch started.

"As we have just seen: paranoia does not actually mean people aren't out to get us." Jensen finished.

Cougar nodded his head ruefully.

"Yeah. Guess the virtual tour wouldn't really let you check the sight lines, would it." Pooch said.

"Oh." Jensen said, leaning back slightly and grabbing Pooch and Cougar's sleeves while he stared off in to space. "Wait, wait, wait. I'm getting an idea. Okay, let me check and see if they're up for it, but... You remember Michelle, Cougs?"

Cougar nodded, the memory of curls and a bright smile coming to him readily, accompanied by a few of the stories that Jensen had shared over the course of their friendship.

"One of her friends, Raashmi, is a realtor. I can get a high rez video chat going and have her move the laptop around the different rooms and out the windows and we can ask her to point it in different directions. We'll be able to check out the whole sightlines thing. She's a navy veteran, she'll understand if we ask for a little extra effort on her part." Jensen said, letting go of their sleeves so that he could gesture with his hands as he spoke. Cougar sometimes wondered if Jensen learned ASL just for the chance to actually talk with his hands.

"That could work." Cougar said, cautiously optimistic.

"We'll probably set a few world records that we can't actually lay claim to, but we're all a bit used
"to that." Jensen said. "So before we get shipped off we need to get Cougar's apartment packed up, and I heard Roque grumbling about 'lifting' earlier so you might need to go over his toes again."

Possibly the oddest outcome of Cougar pranking Clay and Roque the previous year had been the way Roque's toenails reacted to the acrylic. It had been fairly common before then that Roque's toenails became ingrown; not severely, but enough to add discomfort and court infection if he was unable to wash his feet for more than a week. The acrylic Cougar had placed on Roque and Clay's toes had been intended to serve as a reminder to not piss Cougar off, one that could be left on for several months, as toenails grew slowly, and easily hidden while on base. When the time had come to remove the acrylic from their toes, Roque had confided in Cougar that he had gone to see his podiatrist about his ingrown toenails, and the podiatrist had been amazed at how well the acrylic nails were keeping Roque's toenails from becoming ingrown. Cougar had redone Roque's toes with clear acrylic, and Roque came back for infilling every two or three months.

"Depending on whether or not Cougar's apartment is still a crime scene, of course." Pooch pointed out.

Jensen pulled his phone from his pocket and spent a moment typing out a text. His phone soon buzzed with a response.

"Cougar's place should be cleared by tonight." Jensen informed them. When Cougar and Pooch both aimed dubious eyebrows at him, he elaborated, "I may have kept in touch with Agent DeSousa from The Bear Trap Incident. I keep my ear to the ground and provide him with 'anonymous tips', and he occasionally provides legal advice. Or, in this case, conveniently places himself on the team investigating what happened with Warrick."

"I don't fucking believe it." Pooch said, shaking his head. "Most socially inept member of the team and you still manage to network like a boss."

"It's my l337 skillz and big blue eyes. They work wonders." Jensen sassed. "Or it's the part where a lot of people dismiss me as some kind of demented puppy. Whatever. It works for me."

"Your brain is a scary place." Pooch muttered.

"You keep mispronouncing 'sexy', Pooch." Jensen said. "It's so sad to think that Jolene has to put up with a man who can't even pronounce 'sexy' right."

"That's real funny, Jay. You're a real fucking comedian." Pooch deadpanned.

"Why thank you, Pooch." Jensen said, grinning.

Cougar cleared his throat to interrupt their little sass-off before it could really get started, they would go on for hours if he didn't.

"Right. I'm gonna go see if I can get hold of Raashmi, you boys behave yourselves." Jensen said, clapping Cougar and Pooch on the back before heading out of the motor pool.

"There's something wrong with that boy." Pooch said, suppressing a smile.

"Or something right." Cougar said.

"Oh, now there's a terrifying thought!" Pooch said, laughing.
Between Jensen, Cougar, and Pooch, they managed to get Cougar's entire apartment packed that night. The next morning they shipped off to Iraq, and from there they were bounced around the globe for nearly two months. New orders would come in at the end of every mission, the Losers would pack up, and they would hop on the next army transport headed that way with remarkably little complaining.

Being in the field together was always both the best and worst time for the Losers. They worked well together, years of teamwork and friendship making it possible for everyone to simply know and do their jobs while also keeping an eye out for each other and covering for each others' weaknesses and dislikes. They were a cohesive unit that could anticipate each others' needs without really even needing to think about it. But, at the same time, they were up to their elbows in blood, mud, shit, and death. Nightmares were a common enough occurrence for all of them that whoever was on watch was likely to have company. Cougar often thought that it was more loyalty to each other that kept the team together, rather than any sort of patriotic feelings or love of their jobs.

It took until late October for them to be brought back stateside. A few too many sleepless nights, too many changes in location keeping them from adjusting to any kind of schedule, led to injuries that should have been easily avoided. Roque had taken damage to his ears after he miscalculated the safe distance from a charge he was detonating, Pooch had managed to bruise all of his fingers working on a greasy engine, and Clay had taken a fall that bruised his back and cracked a few of his ribs. Cougar had strained his left elbow saving Jensen when a step the tech had been on had collapsed under his weight. Cougar was ordered by doctors to wear a brace on his elbow, and Jensen's legs ended up covered in bloody scratches that ran from mid calf almost to his hips thanks to the jagged edges of the wooden steps. The scratches looked bad, but were shallow and would heal fast without much scarring, if any.

Cougar bunked at Jensen's place for three days after they got back, recuperating and arranging times to go over the apartments Raashmi had selected for him to view based on the strict criteria he had given her. The digital walkthroughs she had given him when there had been enough time between missions had been useful for narrowing down his options, but it was always better to see the places in person and be sure that he would not hate the place. The first two apartments had been okay, not really pulling at him to live there; then again, neither had his old apartment.

The third apartment was not one that Cougar had picked, it was a new one that Raashmi had found at the last moment. It was gorgeous. Top floor of the building, high ceilings and large windows that came with thick blinds, meaning Cougar would not have to worry too much about casting a shadow at night. The kitchen was as large as the one in his previous apartment, though it had an island instead of a breakfast bar. The fact that it was overlooking train tracks and a highway noise barrier meant that the rent was lower than expected.

Jensen had insisted they wear their BDUs while viewing the apartments, and the reason for that became apparent when the landlord came to sign the lease. Being an active serving member of the US Army apparently warranted an extra cut on rent. 'Civilian guilt', Jensen had called it. Whatever the cause, Cougar was not about to turn his nose up at an offer that would allow him to have a much nicer apartment for only one hundred dollars more per month than his old place.

Seeing as Cougar had been forbidden from doing any heavy lifting by his doctor, when it came
time for Cougar to move in on the first of November he enlisted the help of his team. Cougar and Clay took care of moving light things, while Jake, Pooch, and Roque got to move every item of furniture, and numerous heavy boxes full of books.

"Did you keep every text book and notebook you ever used or something? Jesus H. Christ these things weigh a ton! Not, like, a literal ton, I mean the hyperbolic ton that people use to indicate that something is too fucking heavy why did you pack your books in to big boxes anyways?" Jake rambled, face pink and shiny after hauling two boxes of books up.

"Jay, all you've got is books. Roque and I just brought a fridge up seven flights of stairs." Pooch pointed out, still panting.

"Well that was a silly thing to do, Pooch. Why didn't you use the elevator?" Jake asked.

"Funny." Pooch snarked.

"No, really Pooch. Why didn't you use the elevator? I took the stairs with the books to leave the elevator free for you and Roque." Jake said.

"There's a fucking elevator?" Roque wheezed.

"Si." Cougar said.

"I told you there was one when we got here." Clay said.

"You told the guy who recently sustained auditory trauma and is probably only just barely following this conversation that there was an elevator in the building." Pooch said flatly.

"Ah. Shit." Clay said, grimacing.

"Okay. Mistake was made. Mistake will be learned from. Mistake will not be repeated at any point in the near future if Clay wants to avoid jokes about his age." Jake said.

"There is nothing wrong with my age." Clay said.

"Your hair is turning grey." Jake said.

Clay twitched like he was resisting trying to find the closest reflective surface to see for himself.

"Moving forward it'll be me and Pooch taking the furniture, since I can hear it when Pooch gives me directions. And we will be using the elevator." Jake said.

"Sounds good." Pooch agreed.

"I have no fucking clue what anyone's talking about, you're all talking too quietly." Roque said.

"We said," Jake began, leaning closer and speaking louder, "that it's really fucking ironic that the two people who know sign language can hear just fine and the guy who can't hear right now knows fuck all."

"Well, shit. ASL would come in handy right now." Roque muttered.

"We'll teach it to you. You'll pick it up fast, it's easier to learn than Russian." Jake said, gently punching Roque's shoulder. "Okay, you focus on boxes, follow Cougar. I'm with Pooch from now on. Got it?"
"Got it, Jensen." Roque said dryly.

Actually using the elevator resulted in the move going much faster, and soon Pooch was heading out to return the rental truck. By the time he had returned, the Losers had pushed Cougar's furniture in to some semblance of order and decided that a celebratory bar night was in order.

"Sounds good. Clay can be our designated driver." Pooch said.

"What? Why me?" Clay asked.

"With the pain meds you're on for your ribs you can't have alcohol anyways. Pooch is usually our DD and deserves a night off now and again, and Roque can't drive while his hearing is busted." Jake listed as he slowly stretched his arms over his head, working out any potential kinks from hauling furniture for several hours.

"And what about you and Cougar?" Clay asked.

"Well, obviously we'll be so busy with the ladies once we get there that there's no guarantee we'll be able to drive you guys home." Jake said, grinning cheekily.

"And driving when you've got pot on you is a bad idea all around." Roque said.

"What?" Jake asked, turning to look at Roque. "How did you-

"Your baggie fell out of your pocket just now." Roque said.

"Oh. Thank god. For a second I was worried you'd developed telepathy." Jake said as he retrieved a small bag from the floor.

"Because that's somehow a more likely option than anything normal." Pooch said.

"Do I want to know why you have pot?" Clay asked.

"It's medicinal." Jake said.

"Sure it is." Pooch teased.

"No, really. You guys remember the trouble I've been having with prescription meds from my therapist. He's prescribed this instead." Jake insisted.

"And what exactly would I need to tell my own therapist to get a prescription like that?" Clay asked, grinning.

"Uh." Jake said, his ears turning red. "Well. There's some shit I went through after I ran away from my parents. I thought I had dealt with it, but over the past few years the nightmares and panic attacks have been resurfacing. I'm not really ready to talk about it outside of therapy yet." he said, slowly growing quieter and fidgeting the more he spoke. "Cougs doesn't even know what it is. He's just had to deal with me being a slow train wreck."

The Losers stood there, staring at Jake in surprise and concern.

"Cougs doesn't even know?" Pooch said, voice barely above a whisper.

Jake shook his head, face turning red with embarrassment. Cougar felt his heart sink in to his
stomach for a moment before sharply reminding himself that Jake was not obligated to share every shitty thing he had ever been through, especially if he was not ready to talk about it.

"Okay." Pooch said carefully. "Well. I hope the therapy is helping."

"It is, it's just that actually dealing with things means confronting them. So all this stuff I kind of suppressed is now actually up and floating around freely in my brain instead of anchored in a tightly locked little mental box. In order to get better, first I had to get worse." Jake said. "But, you know. Jess has been taking her therapy very seriously and she's loads better now. So I figured maybe I'd actually let my therapist do his job. And you what happened when I opened up to him about it?"

"What?" Pooch asked.

"He quit." Jake said.

"What the fuck?" Pooch said.

"Yeah. That's why I got a new therapist. Old one said that he couldn't handle my shit. Which, you know, did wonders for my ability to open up honestly about a series of traumatic events that had begun seriously impacting my ability to enjoy my life. But New Guy actually listens to me. He's all eager to help and actually cares about his patients." Jake said. "So when I was having bad reactions to everything he was prescribing for the anxiety, he wasn't afraid to take actual pharmaceuticals off the table and recommend something else. And it's working so far. I get floaty instead of numb, and the only reaction has been some munchies."

"Well, I'm glad things are improving, at least." Pooch said.

Cougar reached out and gripped Jake's shoulder, squeezing lightly. Jake tossed him a crooked smile.

"We all are." Clay said. "I know we're not exactly a very sharing bunch when it comes to our different damages, but if you need us..."

"I'll talk to Cougs, and then offhandedly mention it at the dinner table in front of you guys several years later." Jake said.

Pooch barked out a laugh, while the rest of the team relaxed.

"To quote the cantankerous old coot who taught me to make fake IDs, 'that's enough touchy-feely crap for today'. Let's go find a bar." Jake said.

"Sounds good to me." Clay said, laughing.

"Why did anybody think it was a good idea to teach you how to make fake IDs? Don't get me wrong, they've come in handy and I'm grateful. But who was it who looked at you and said 'this guy should know how to make fake IDs'?" Pooch asked.

"I was bussing tables at this shitty diner and one of the regulars waited till I was off shift to approach me. Said he liked the cut of my jib and thought I had potential. Showed me how to make fake IDs, pick locks and pockets, cheat at cards, hustle pool... You know, life skills." Jake said. "He's actually still kicking around last I checked. You ever see me talking to a white dude in his seventies with a missing lower left leg, that's my teacher."

"Son of a bitch." Clay swore. "I've seen that guy!"
"Wait, really?" Pooch asked keenly.

"I thought Jensen was taking too long gassing up the truck on a lunch run three years back. Found him chatting with this guy and told Jensen to knock it off and get moving. Old guy was really shaky and apologized, said he thought Jensen was his grandson, but was mistaken. He turned to go and slipped, so I stopped him from falling. Everything I had on me at the time disappeared, and then started popping up again over the next couple of months. I thought I'd gotten pick pocketed, but everything I lost kept turning up again." Clay said.

"Yeah, Gerry doesn't take too kindly to rude people. He dropped by later and split the haul with me. I made sure to take back anything essential or with sentimental value. Gotta say, it was a lot of fun sneaking you your possessions back." Jake said, grinning.

"Is that how Clay's watch ended up in the coffee pot? That's been bugging me for years." Roque said.

"The really tricky one was getting his keys inside the light bulbs in his office ceiling fan." Jake said.

"Dios mio." Cougar said, laughing and shaking his head. He remembered visiting Jake's apartment and finding his friend soaking several light bulbs. He had not asked at the time, uncertain as to whether he even wanted to know.

"Well, I definitely need a drink after that." Clay grumbled.

"No alcohol with your meds." Roque reminded him.

"I'm gonna wait at my truck, if you guys aren't ready to leave in ten I'm going without you." Pooch said.

The team eventually stopped sassing each other long enough to actually make it to the bar and set themselves up at a booth at the back of the room. As the night wore on, they each drifted away from the booth. Pooch went home early in order to call Jolene, while Roque and Clay got involved in a poker game with other questionable characters. Jake had gone to get himself and Cougar new drinks, and when Jake took too long to return, Cougar began scanning the bar for him.

Jake was seated as a table with two ladies, talking animatedly. Cougar carefully examined Jake's body language for any of the usual signs that Jake wanted Cougar to take over and flirt with the girls. Their charade of Cougar cockblocking Jake had been holding up well over the years, and they had the routine down to an art at this point.

Jake caught Cougar watching, and grinned. He turned to the girls at the table and pointed at Cougar, saying something to them. When the girls nodded, Jake waved at Cougar to come over.

"This is the guy I was telling you about, my best friend Cougar." Jake said when Cougar was close. "Cougar, this is Annie and Marina."

"Hola." Cougar said, tipping his hat to the girls as he sat down. Jake slid the drink Cougar had ordered to him and turned his attention to Annie. Cougar took the hint and settled in to be Jake's wingman.

"That's not actually your name, is it?" Marina asked, looking at Cougar and smiling shyly.
"No. Nickname from my first tour that stuck." Cougar explained, smiling.

"Jake was saying you boys are in the army." Annie said, eyeing Jake with intent.

"Yep. Been on the same team for four years now. This guy's saved my butt a bunch of times. See that brace on his elbow? He strained it pretty badly keeping me from falling to my death." Jake said.

"Oh no! What happened?" Marina asked, leaning closer to Cougar.

"It's mostly classified, but I can say that old wooden stairs are not to be trusted if you're carrying a sixty pound pack." Jake said. "I would have fallen on all kind of broken glass and twisted metal scraps if he hadn't grabbed me."

"That's incredible." Marina said softly.

"Only fair." Cougar said. "I would have died last year if Jake had not jumped in to a frozen lake to save me while I was unconscious."

"Oh, well aren't you brave." Annie said, shifting in her seat. From the way Jake sat up straighter, Cougar was willing to bet Annie's feet were no longer on the floor, and had found a much warmer place to rest.

"Well, you know. Not gonna let my buddy drown in a not-as-frozen-as-it-should-have-been lake in the middle of the wilderness." Jake said, blushing. "Besides, our whole friendship is just littered with incidents of us saving each other. He once drove me to the hospital when I had a bear trap stuck around my leg. It's kind of an important part of being on a team, you know? Having each others' backs. I know that at the end of the day, Cougar will look out for me. And he knows that at the end of the day I'm the only one who is gonna remember how much he hates licorice."

"Six years with Clay and Roque and they can't remember that. The only fucking candy I hate and they can't remember it!" Cougar said, earning laughs from the girls.

"It's just shameful. We should put a note in their files. 'Repeated failure to note dietary needs of unit members' or something." Jake said.

"Marina doesn't like licorice either." Annie offered.

Marina wrinkled her nose and smiled, looking at Cougar from under her lashes. Cougar felt a pleasant heat begin in him at her look. It looked like Jake would not be the only one to leave the bar with company.

Over the course of the evening, Cougar and Jake found out that Annie and Marina were college students and roommates. When the hour grew late, they offered to walk the girls home, and the girls readily accepted. Jake held hands with Annie, while Cougar offered his good elbow to Marina. The girls invited them inside, and there was only a passing offer of something to drink before Annie was pulling Jake towards her room.

Inside Marina's room, Cougar kissed Marina softly, waiting for her to signal that she wanted things to go further. She responded enthusiastically, and trailed her hands down his front before gripping his belt. Cougar smiled in to the kiss, and cupped her face gently. He was in no rush, and wanted to be sure that she would enjoy this just as much as he would.
They slowly made their way across Marina's room, kicking off their boots before settling on her bed. Cougar took his time kissing her deeply and trailing smaller, sucking kisses along her jaw and down her throat. He waited until she was gripping his clothes tightly and moving against him before trying to get her shirt off.

As he trailed kisses up her torso, Cougar could hear some suppressed moans coming through the wall.

"Sorry, our rooms are right next to each other. If it gets too noisy or whatever I can turn on my sound system to block it out." Marina whispered.

Cougar shook his head. It was not the first time he and Jake had gone home with a pair of roommates. He would never admit it, but overhearing others satisfied his slight voyeuristic and exhibitionist desires.

Marina carded her fingers through Cougar's hair as he kissed, sucked, and licked his way from the waist of her jeans to the band of her bra. He nosed the soft skin between her breasts before gently cupping them and running his thumbs teasingly over where he could see her nipples poking through the material. Marina gasped softly, tightening her grip in his hair. Cougar leaned down and took the bow of her bra between his teeth, pulling it up before letting it snap back gently.

"Take off your shirt." Marina whispered.

Cougar smiled, and raised himself up so that he was kneeling over her before pulling his shirt off. Marina reached up and trailed her hands up his abs to his pecs, gently stroking the line art of Cougar's tattoo. Cougar placed his left hand on the bed, next to Marina's shoulder, and began leaning down to kiss her when Annie shouted,

"Oh my god! That is not going to fit in me!"

Cougar startled badly and fell off Marina's bed, crashing to the floor on his back. Marina peered over the edge of her bed, wide eyed at what they hearing through the wall.

"I. I'm sorry, that was rude. But holy shit Jake. I thought dicks that size only happened to porn stars."

"No- well, yeah it was kind of rude. But it's not exactly the first time a girl's screamed that at me." Jake said.

"Sorry." Annie squeaked.

"It's okay. One time, I worked at a butcher shop slicing deli meats, and I slept with a coworker and she ended up quitting because she couldn't look at the salamis the same way after that. So your reaction's not too over the top, see?" Jake said soothingly.

Marina's mouth dropped open and she began to look very worried. Cougar was sure her expression was mirrored on his own face.

"I. I guess." Annie said.

"Would it make you more comfortable if I pulled my pants back up?" Jake asked, still keeping his voice soothing.

"Please." Annie said.
"I don't really want to hear this." Marina said, darting over to her sound system.

Cougar lay on the floor, still shocked by what he was hearing.

"There. Now, take whatever time you need to decide how things will go from here. You can call it off completely or decide you just want me to pleasure you. At no point does my dick have to get involved, there are plenty of other things we can do." Jake said.

The music drowned out most of Annie's response, and Cougar finally blinked and stopped staring at the ceiling in mild horror. Marina stepped over to him and straddled his hips.

"This okay?" she asked nervously.

"Si." Cougar said, welcoming the distraction. There were things he did not need to know about his best friend.

It took time for them to work their way back to where they had been, but as the sounds in the other room changed from talking to moaning it got easier. They made it back to Marina's bed, and when Cougar's pants came off he noticed Marina relax when she saw that Cougar's cock was only on the thick side of average. By the time Marina was riding Cougar's cock, it sounded like Annie had changed her mind about Jake's dick. The rhythmic squeaking of the mattress and bed frame were easy enough to ignore as he and Marina were creating similar noises.

In the morning, Cougar woke to the smell of coffee drifting through the open door. He dressed quickly, and walked out to find Jake chatting quietly with Marina. Annie shuffled in to the room moving stiffly, but with a glow of deep satisfaction that had Cougar averting his eyes and praying he would not blush.

After breakfast, Cougar and Jake politely excused themselves, and took a cab back to Cougar's apartment. They spent an hour silently unpacking boxes in the kitchen before Jake heaved a deep sigh and turned to Cougar.

"I got the nickname Big Jake when I was twelve. I was short and skinny, but puberty kicked in just early enough to make things awkward in the changing room. It was something of an open secret with our grade. I mean, a bunch of people referring to one of the smallest boys in the grade as 'Big Jake' caught peoples' interest. By the time I hit thirteen it was just generally assumed that I'd grow up to be a porn star.

"The nickname followed me to high school, where it took off, and it never mattered what team or club I was on, what my grades were like, what my attitude or style was, everybody just knew me as Big Jake and never cared about anything past that. I had a lot of people, boys and girls alike, wanting to see for themselves exactly how big Big Jake was. It wasn't like people were trying to grab my crotch all the time, but I had some towels ripped away from me in the locker rooms, and a few girls offering sex because they wanted the notoriety it would lend. That nickname pisses me off because it narrows who I am down to the size of my dick. And I'm fucking sick of being treated differently because of it." Jake said before leaving the kitchen.

Cougar stood there, blinking in shock before he followed Jake to the bathroom and cautiously knocked on the door.
"Jake?"

"What." came Jake's morose voice through the door.

"Lo siento." Cougar said.

The door opened slightly and Jake squinted at him.

"I did not think this was something we would need to talk about. In my experience, most men do not discuss overhearing each others' bedroom activities. I will admit that the knowledge that you are well endowed startled me, but that had more to do with the manner in which I found out. I have gone to great lengths to avoid seeing my teammates naked, as I have no desire to know what their genitals look like. I am sorry if, in my efforts not to think about or mention it, I have made you feel as though I am judging you for it." Cougar said.

"You're not gonna tell anyone?" Jake asked, voice small and unsure.

"It is none of their business." Cougar said.

Jake opened the door, looking unsure of himself as he stood before Cougar.

"Sorry that you learned too much about my dick." Jake mumbled.

"As long as I do not see it, it is of no importance. Though I do believe I will wait a few days before buying salami." Cougar said, smiling gently.

"Oh, my god." Jake groaned. "How thin were those walls?"

"Thin enough that I fell off the bed when Annie remarked on your size."

"Yeah, I heard the thud." Jake said before grinning mischievously. "You know, if you're gonna avoid salami, you may want to scratch baguettes off your grocery list."

Cougar clapped his hands over his ears and glared at Jake, earning a laugh.

"Sorry, sorry." Jake said, smiling.

Together they made their way back to the kitchen. Before they got there, Cougar felt a tug on his sleeve. Jake pulled him in to a hug, and held Cougar close for longer than usual. Cougar returned the embrace, wordlessly reassuring his friend.

"Thanks." Jake whispered as he pulled back, not letting go of Cougar just yet.

"Por qué?" Cougar asked.

Jake shrugged before saying, "For being you."

Jake gave Cougar one last squeezing hug before letting go and heading to the kitchen, blissfully unaware of how his words made Cougar's heart roll over in his chest. Cougar needed a moment to steady himself before he followed Jake back to the kitchen.

"So, I was thinking. That brick wall over there, in the living room? I've got an idea what would look good there." Jake said as he arranged the cutlery drawer.

"What are you thinking?" Cougar asked.
"Well, every leave we go some place, right? I mean, if it's a short leave we go visit your family, but if it's a long enough leave we see Jess for two days and then go to different cities and countries. And between that and the different bars we've been to around the world with the team, we've kind of amassed an interesting collection of fines, tickets, write ups, and arrests. What if we took those and put them up on that wall? Like a wall of shame, but we don't actually feel any shame for it." Jake said.

"It will be amusing if the others visit and read them." Cougar agreed, stacking plates in a cabinet.

"Don't forget watching them try and figure out which of us did what. We could get a map and put the tickets up near each country we got them in." Jake suggested.

"Will have to be a big map." Cougar said.

"True. I'm tempted to suggest that Fernanda could draw the map for us, but I'm not sure if that's crossing a line somewhere." Jake said.

"I will think on it. We should visit soon anyways, I would like to get my tattoo coloured." Cougar said. Fernanda had proven to be quite the artist and was responsible for designing Cougar's tattoo. She had found a job at a local tattoo shop doing the initial artwork, and was assured an apprenticeship as soon as she turned eighteen.

"I've been thinking about getting some work done, too." Jake confessed.

Cougar turned to look at his friend. Jake had been fascinated by the tattoo process, but had previously balked at the idea of getting any himself.

"Well. I've got a lot of scars, you know? They bug me, sometimes. Not physically, and they aren't very visible, but I can see them pretty easily because I know they're there. If I get some tattoos though, it'd draw my eyes to the ink, instead of to slightly paler skin." Jake said. "I'd just get a few to start with, but if I ever left the military I might go all out and get big pieces done. If I tried that while I still routinely get shot at I'd be kicking myself for messing up something that someone put a lot of work in to."

Cougar had a moment where he could perfectly picture Jake with intricate tattoo sleeves, a slick haircut, and a full beard.

"You could pull off having a lot of tattoos." Cougar said, turning his back to Jake in an effort to hide his blush.

"Thanks!" Jake said brightly, sliding a box of dishes over to Cougar.

They spent the rest of the day unpacking Cougar's apartment. Jake babbled and tossed out suggestions for decorations and furniture setups as they worked. When everything was said and done, they collapsed on to Cougar's couch and watched Howl's Moving Castle while they ate dinner. Watching as Jake fell asleep on the couch, Cougar smiled to himself and relaxed, basking in the happiness he felt.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings:
Animal abuse on the part of OCs.

Assault on the part of OCs.

Mentions of bad reactions to prescription medication.

Mentions of marijuana.

Many mentions of penises.

Mentions of bullying and harassment of a minor. (Spoiler: The nickname Big Jake actually stemmed from Jensen having a huge dick. The nickname haunted him through middle school and high school, and he takes issue with being treated different because of it.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! I spent most of yesterday en route to a friend's city. I am posting this from her computer, which she has been kind enough to lend me.

No Spanish translations this week because I left all my html notes at home. I'm going back and edit them in when I return home on the 12th.

Speaking of the 12th, I won't have an update that day because I am not going to be returning home until then. It'll be difficult to get any quality writing time while I'm visiting because my mother did not raise me to be a shitty guest or friend. So the next update will be on the 19th of June.

Cougar made his way down the dark passage as quietly as he could. He kept his hand tight on the grip of his weapon, ready for anything that might pop out. Ahead of him, he could just make out the shape of Roque, creeping through the shadows on light feet with a dagger in each hand. More than one enemy had fallen to Roque's blades that night.

Turning a corner, Cougar paused when he saw that the passage was blocked off by what seemed to be a large tapestry. He signaled for Roque to check that the room on the other side was the one they were looking for, then checked behind him to make sure that Clay and Pooch were nearby and nothing had dispatched them as silently and skillfully and Roque could. When Roque came back, he affirmed that they were in the correct location. Using hand signals, Cougar indicated that Pooch and Roque were to sweep the room, while he and Clay would cover exits and entrances.

They spread out, covering the room quadrant by quadrant. There were only two other doorways leading in and out of the room, the tapestry covered passage they had used had clearly been meant for servants to be able to come and go as discreetly as possible. Cougar and Clay locked the doors, wrapping rope through the door handles to buy them more time should they be discovered.

"Really hope we're not cutting off escape routes doing that." Clay said, keeping his voice low. The room they were in was large enough and bare enough that they risked their voices echoing if they whispered or spoke too loudly.

"If an escape is needed, better to go through a path we already know." Cougar pointed out, heading for where Pooch and Roque were examining something on a small dais.

"What if the passage gets blocked? Or enemies come from there?" Clay argued, clearly unused to not being the team's leader.

"Kill the enemies, block the passage ourselves, then climb." Cougar answered.

"Climb?" Clay asked.

Cougar pointed up. They were surrounded by thirty foot walls on all sides, and at the top of the walls were ten foot pillars holding the ceiling up. Between those pillars was a lot of empty space
and the faint sound of wind passing through, meaning there was space up there that they could move around in.

"Wow, I wish I hadn't seen that. That's gonna bug me until we're out of here." Clay said.

"Please dial back your paranoia for just a moment while I explain what we've found." Pooch requested. "So, our objective is in that lockbox on the dais. The areas around the dais and the box are booby trapped. Roque's dealing with those, and then he needs to check the box itself."

Cougar looked past Pooch to where Roque was dismantling a trap that looked like it would have sent vicious spikes through the feet of anyone who triggered it. Roque collected some of the mechanisms from the trap and discarded the pieces that would be too large to carry easily. At the next available opportunity, Roque would turn those pieces in to a wide variety of bombs for the team to use. He was generous like that.

Cougar, Pooch, and Clay stood guard around the dais while Roque worked. They kept their eyes on the passage they had come from, as well as the open space close to the ceiling. Keeping an ear out for anything that might be approaching their position, Cougar checked on Roque and found that he had progressed to picking the lock of the lockbox. After a few minutes of work, the lock clicked softly and the top of the box popped up slightly. Roque carefully lifted the lid and reach inside the box.

"What the fuck?" Roque hissed.

"Qué?" Cougar asked.

Everyone gathered to look at the sole contents of the lockbox: a crude drawing of two dragons, one much smaller than the other. In primitive handwriting at the bottom of the page were the words 'I LoVe my DaDDe!' and a crooked heart.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Clay asked.

Just then, the sound of movement came from high above. Turning, Cougar caught sight of a huge dragon knocking out a pillar in order to enter the room. It glided to the floor and took a few thundering steps forward before it reared back, wings spread.

"IT'S A TREASURE TO ME!" the dragon roared.

Pooch burst out laughing.

"Jesus Christ." Clay swore, dropping his pencil on the table so he could bury his face in his hands.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Jensen?" Roque asked, turning to glare at Jensen.

Jensen grinned cheekily at them from behind the makeshift Dungeon Master's screen. Pooch was laughing so hard tears were streaming down his face and he was reduced to high pitched gurgles and wheezes. Cougar was laughing much more quietly, but he still found himself wiping his eyes clear.

"Now, now, Roque. Paternal affection can play a very important role in the development of a young dragon. Don't shame Daddy Dragon for caring for his young. Single fathers everywhere could learn from his devotion." Jensen said.

Pooch wheezed out a breath before gasping helplessly.
"The village needs us to retrieve a magical object someone said was in this abandoned ruin so the town can defend itself against bandits and raiders, and all their directions have led us to a drawing and an angry dragon?" Clay asked, eyeing the makeshift dungeon setup on the table.

It was really an ingenious setup. The squares were drawn on the table top in pencil and could be erased or washed off later. The walls were blocked in using ammo clips, and objects in the room were marked using different rounds of ammunition. Cougar had sketched out all of their characters and taped those sketches to .50 caliber bullets so they could stand up and be moved around on the table. Completing the picture was an origami dragon Jensen had apparently been folding behind the Dungeon Master's screen.

"I would say that listening to rumours and hearsay from villagers who pickle their livers with tavern swill it both the least reliable information source and potentially the best idea," Jensen said cryptically.

Something in the way Jensen spoke had Cougar pausing. He was missing something. The old man in the village had shared rumours of powerful artifact that could defeat the marauding bandits and raiders plaguing the village. His information had turned out to be faulty, but that did not mean they were without hope. There had to be something else that could help them.

"Well, guess it's time to get me some dragon skin boots," Roque said. "I draw my daggers and grin menacingly at the dragon."

"I hit Roque over the head with my mace to knock him out," Cougar said. Pooch stopped laughing and stared at Cougar in shock.

"What?" Roque exclaimed, looking at Cougar in betrayal.

"If you just want to knock him out, you need to roll to attack him. Anything between a twelve and an eighteen will do," Jensen said.

Cougar picked up his twenty sided dice and rolled it. Seventeen.

"Awesome! Roque, you just got bopped on the head. Every few minutes I'm going to ask you to roll to see if you regain consciousness, okay?" Jensen said.

"Can't fucking believed I just got betrayed by a paladin. Thought you guys were supposed to be lawful good." Roque grumbled.

"Law sometimes means doing what is wrong in order to do what is right." Cougar said.

"Shit like that is why people here have trouble trusting tieflings bro," Pooch said.

"People have trouble trusting tieflings because they are racist." Cougar muttered. "I would like to roll diplomacy against the dragon."

"Oooo!" Jensen said, eyes lighting up. "Roll high, Cougs."

Cougar rolled the dice. Natural twenty.

"You definitely have his attention." Jensen said.

"Lo siento, dragon. We came here at the behest of a village not far from here. There were rumors of a powerful artifact that would aid them. They have been plagued by bandits and raiders, evil men who burn their houses and slaughter their people. We do not wish to fight you, nor do we wish
"Did they describe the object?" Jensen asked in the dragon's voice. "My hoard is vast and filled with many wonders."

"They said it would be small, and in a lockbox on a dais. They gave us directions to this room and said that they had seen it here before they were forced to flee." Cougar said.

"Was this a recent incident?" the dragon asked. "Happened some time in the last fifty years?"

"Yes." Cougar answered. "They said they were chased out by a minotaur."

"Oh! I remember them! A few decades back they came up here looking for treasure, trying to start their adventuring careers. They really should have stayed on the first floor, there's nothing but kobolds up there, maybe the occasional goblin. But you know how young adventurers can be, they got excited because nobody was grievously injured and thought they could take on the whole world." the dragon said.

"Do you know where the artifact has gone?" Cougar asks.

"Yes. I use it to keep my nest safe. Too many people attack first when they see dragons. They don't bother checking if the dragon is friendly or if it's just a child. Destructive humans." the dragon said.

"And it wouldn't be possible to borrow the item, would it?" Clay asked.

"I am not going to sacrifice the safety of my son for a village of humans who have proven time and time again that they will attack me." the dragon replied coolly.

"Sorry to interrupt," Pooch said, "but I feel I should ask what happened to the minotaur that was in here. Just seems like something that should be followed up on."

"An excellent question, young wizard." the dragon said. "I ate him. He was getting older, and a high protein diet is necessary for my health. Minotaurs are a good source of iron, too."

"Is iron deficiency a problem for you?" Cougar asked, an idea taking shape in his mind.

"It can be." the dragon admitted. "The creatures in these ruins tend to have iron deficiencies, and it's not like there's a lot of easily available beef in here. I have to hunt pretty far from here in order to get any, because if I take cows from that little village at the bottom of the mountain they'll start sending knights up here to try and kill me. Now humans have good protein, and plenty of iron, but I always feel bad for eating them if they were sent after me because I did something to antagonize them."

"One of the problems faced by the village that sent us is that the bandits keep killing their livestock." Cougar mentioned.

"Oh, that's a damn shame." the dragon said.

"If they had the opportunity, I am sure the townsfolk would be able to raise a few great herds. Given a few years of reprieve from the attacks they would probably have cows to spare." Cougar said.

"I feel for them, I really do, but I just can't give you the artifact. I'm not risking my kid." the dragon said.
"That is not what I am suggesting." Cougar said.

"Oh?" the dragon inquired.

"Cougs, the fuck are you doing?" Pooch whispered.

"Is that in character or out?" Jensen asked.

"Both." Pooch said.

"The dragon can hear you, and he side-eyes you judgingly." Jensen said.

Pooch shuffled in his seat and grumbled.

"I am suggesting an alliance. Our group can serve as intermediaries to negotiate the terms. You protect the village from bandits, you get to eat the bandits. If the bandits have horses, the village can breed the horses and get more. When they have had a few years to recover, they would be able to send along meat to help keep you and your son fed."

"That... could be a mutually beneficial arrangement." the dragon mused. "Though I'm not sure I could eat the bandits fast enough to keep them from spoiling."

"The villagers are well versed in methods of preserving food. They would likely be able to help you with this." Cougar pointed out.

"The dragon looks like he's giving it some thought. Cougs, I'm going to need you to roll a diplomacy check to really convince him. With all of your bonuses, you're going to need to roll a sixteen or higher." Jensen said.

"Please roll high." Pooch said. "I wanna see where this goes."

"This is totally not what I had planned, but like hell am I going to pass up the opportunity." Jensen said, grinning.

Cougar picked up his twenty-sided die and rolled it. Thirteen.

"Aw, no." Jensen said.

There was an air of disappointment around the table, even Roque looked put out by the results.

"Hey, uh. Paladins are a divine class, right? Like a cleric? The god they pray to is pretty important." Clay said.

"I don't know that Avandra would be of any help in this situation." Roque said.

"My cleric prays to Avandra, but I'm pretty sure Cougar's paladin prays to someone else." Clay said.

"He prays to Bahamut." Cougar said.

"And isn't Bahamut a dragon god?" Clay asked.

"Yeah, he is." Jensen said contemplatively.

"So if our paladin here worships Bahamut then maybe the dragon can find out somehow. And since Cougar has such good taste in gods, maybe he gets a small diplomacy bonus." Clay
suggested.

Everyone pause and looked at Jensen to see if Clay's suggestion would have any effect. Jensen sat back and blew out a slow breath. He stroked one hand over his mouth and down his goatee as he thought.

"Pass me your character sheet, Cougs." Jensen said.

Cougar passed over his sheet and watched Jensen skin Cougar's gear list.

"Okay, here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna toss in some extra rules. Non-humans get diplomacy bonuses with other non-humans. So elves get more diplomacy with elves, humans get more with humans, tieflings are kind of reviled by most races so they get more with non-humanoids or orcs and half-orcs. And the same goes for half-orcs. A plus two bonus, write that on all your sheets. And then... everyone gets a tiny symbol of their chosen deity, like a cloak pin or charm they can slip on whatever pendants they're wearing. And that gives another plus two bonus to any NPCs who follow that god, and a plus one to NPCs who follow a god closely associated with your deity of choice. So, congrats Cougar you are a dragon whisperer right now." Jensen said.

Everyone blew out relived sighs and relaxed.

"The dragon magnanimously accepts your offer. Now you guys need to haul your asses and all your treasure back to town and explain the deal you guys made." Jensen said.

"Any chance we could get a small break?" Pooch asked.

"Good idea, my ass is going numb." Clay said.

The team stood from the table, stretching out the various kinks accrued from sitting down for several hours.

"I didn't think this would be fun." Roque admitted.

"I didn't think we'd end up playing this for six days straight." Pooch said.

"Not like there's anything better to do while we're stranded here." Roque pointed out.

"What is Coleman doing with us, anyways?"

"He's working with Stegler to keep us hidden." Jensen said as he stretched.

"What?" Pooch asked.

"Why?" Roque asked.

"Clay's girlfriend that he hasn't introduced us to? Is a high ranking explosives expert. And he cheated on her. So she planted a bomb in his car and now Coleman and Stegler are working double time to find her and hide us because according to her psych profile we're all targets for her if she wants to get to him." Jensen explained.

"Jensen! How the fuck do you know any of that?" Clay demanded.

"Your car blew up and the first thing you did was have a meeting with Coleman. Of course I'm gonna listen in." Jensen scoffed.

"Jensen you're out of line-" Clay started.
"NO!" Jensen shouted, shocking everyone. "You're the reason we're all stuck here! You couldn't keep it in your fucking pants and pissed off someone you knew was volatile because of it! You don't fucking get to lecture me right now! We've been stuck here for over a fucking month, Clay! Not on missions, because the person you disrespected and betrayed has a high enough rank that she could find us if we had actual orders, we're all hiding. Because of you. And I'm doing my damndest to distract everybody as much as I can so we don't all end up at each others' throats, so you don't fucking get to reprimand me for shit!"

"I..." Clay said, before falling silent and looking guilty.

"It's one thing if you want to fuck up your own life and date people who are likely to kill you mid-coitus. But now you've dragged all of us in to it as well. We can't live our lives because you decided to be a dick to someone who actually liked you. You got cold feet because she told you she was actually feeling something for you and instead of just breaking things off, or even fucking explaining that you didn't feel the same way, you slept with someone else and let her find out. It's not funny, it's not gonna get you a pat on the back and a joke about how unreasonable women are. It's disgusting, Clay. Grow the fuck up." Jensen said before turning and leaving the room.

In the silence that followed, everyone turned to Clay and found their CO staring out his own shoes, face burning. Cougar could not tell if it was shame for his own actions, or shame that he had been caught and called out. Cougar carefully gathered up his character's papers and organized them.

"Leave things where they are, we will get back to this tomorrow when everyone has cooled down." Cougar said quietly.

"I think a break is a good idea." Roque said, glaring at Clay.

Pooch caught Cougar's eye and nodded briefly in the direction Jensen had left in. Cougar nodded once, he would go after Jensen and make sure his friend was okay. Pooch would keep an eye on Clay and Roque.

Cougar tracked Jensen to the attic of the house they were in. Jensen had made a project out of sealing all the cracks in the house to keep it from being drafty. Cougar had wondered why Jensen would do that with this safe house, but now that Cougar knew that Jensen had been aware that they were in hiding and would have time to kill it made more sense. Jensen's trips to the small town they were stuck outside of to get renovation and gaming supplies were some of the only contact the team was allowed with the outside world at the moment. Jensen was most often selected for supply and grocery runs because he was able to walk without looking like he had been in the military.

"For once I will be leaving a place better than I found it." Jensen muttered as he applied caulk around a window frame.

"There is something bothering you." Cougar said quietly.

"Yeah, there is. Before we got shipped here to Nowheresville, USA, I was helping a friend deal with some shit. His life's kind of falling down around his ears right now and I've got a point of view of the destruction that other people don't. Sort of been in the same spot myself. But now that we're all stuck here I can't help him. And, well. It just sucks when you can't rely on people you're supposed to be able to." Jensen said, smoothing the line of caulk with a finger he had dipped in water.

"I am sure he knows that you would be there if you could." Cougar said.
"That makes it better, but also worse in some ways." Jensen said. "Like, he knows that I'd be there, but unfortunately there's always the chance that at the drop of a hat, or Clay's pants in this case, I'll just be whisked off somewhere else and take a chance at getting killed."

"That is perhaps the reason why most of us do not have friends outside of the team. Not because we do not want any, but because we would not be able to handle being separated from them so often." Cougar admitted.

"Yeah. That may be the smarter course of action." Jensen said, sitting back on his heels. He spent a few minutes examining the work he had done on the window before sighing. "Wanna go get stoned?"

"Sure." Cougar said.

Cougar was not sure how many hours had passed since their conversation in the attic. He knew they had relocated to Jensen's bedroom, and had smuggled most of the snack food in the safe house with them. They were on their third joint. Or was it their fourth?

"This show is just... It's so awesome." Jake said around a mouthful of preztels.

"Sí." Cougar agreed.

"Hey. If, like. If bending was real, what element would you pick?" Jake asked.

"Hmmm." Cougar said as he contemplated the question. On Jensen's screen, Aang was struggling to master earthbending. "Water."

"Really?" Jake asked.

"Can be used to heal, to fight, to block." Cougar said.

"Good point." Jake said.

"What would you pick?" Cougar asked.

"Earth." Jake said.

"Would have thought you'd pick air." Cougar said.

"Air would probably match my personality, it's what I'd probably actually get if bending were real. But what I'd choose is earth. Something solid and tangible. Grounding." Jake said, grinning.

Cougar laughed at the pun.

"I would choose water, but probably end up with fire." Cougar said.

"You're all kinds of calm on the outside, but on the inside is an inferno of cussing and bitching people out when they're being stupid." Jake said.

"Exactamente." Cougar said, grinning.
A knock on the door had them looking up. Pooch opened the door and reeled back at the smell.

"Jesus. Fucking warn me if you're gonna hot box a room. Goddamn." Pooch said, coughing.

"Poooooch." Jake said, grinning. "What's up?"

"Clay's asking us all to get in the kitchen, think we might actually be getting out of here soon." Pooch said.

"Awesome!" Jake said, closing his laptop and getting off the bed.

Cougar stretched and followed him out of the room. They got to the kitchen and Clay opened his mouth to speak before blinking and shaking his head.

"Why do you two smell like pot?" Clay asked, sounding put upon.

Jensen looked down and toed the floor like a little boy who had done something wrong. When he looked back up there were tears in his ears. "My prescription caught fire." he said sorrowfully and sniffled.

Clay gaped at him while Pooch started laughing. Cougar wrapped one arm around Jake's shoulders to comfort his friend.

"We have been here way too long. Please tell me you have good news." Roque said. For anyone else, Cougar would have described the tone of voice as a whine.

"Uh. Actually, yes." Clay said. "Coleman struck a deal with Stegler. We're gonna get more company missions, but Coleman gets to veto them first. And my ex is now being reassigned to a different base. We can go home tomorrow."

Jake threw his arms around Clay and sobbed. Cougar took a moment to enjoy the deeply confused and panicked look on Clay's face before helping pry Jake off of their CO. Jake clung to Cougar instead, which Cougar certainly was not going to complain about, and Cougar started guiding his friend back to his room. Once there, Jake was distracted easily enough with more episodes of Avatar: The Last Airbender.

In the morning, they packed up and met their transport back to Fort Bragg. They were home within five hours, and everyone was looking forward to having some space from each other. Jake immediately texted his friend to let them know that he was back, and soon had plans to meet them and catch up. Pooch was looking forward to having a video chat with Jolene, and Roque and Clay were making noises about bar hopping. Cougar begged off when they invited him along, saying he just wanted his bed.

As soon as Cougar got home, he showered and changed clothes and took a cab to the queer club at the edge of town that he preferred. As much as he loved bar nights with his team, he still needed the opportunity to dance and grind with people regardless of gender. He ended up sneaking in to another bathroom stall with a bartender who liberally dotted Cougar's thighs with hickeys before sucking Cougar's brain out through his dick. Cougar made a mental note to try rubbing his knuckles over his perineum the next time he masturbated.
Several hours later, Cougar found himself climbing into the back of a couple's SUV. The guy wanted to get fucked while his girlfriend rode his face, and Cougar was happy enough to oblige. He was not sure whether it was the pot he had smoked the day before or too much time spent around both Jake and Pooch, but he spent half the time they were fucking mentally critiquing the shock absorbers of the couples' car. After the three of them had their fun, he turned down a ride home in favor of a few more drinks in the club. The bartender who had blown Cougar earlier called him a cab when he found out he was too drunk to work his phone properly. Cougar got home safely, flopping face down on his bed and falling asleep soon after.

It was five in the morning when Cougar was woken by someone knocking on his apartment door. Fumbling slightly for the gun on his nightstand, Cougar slipped from his bed and quietly padded to his front door. Peering through the peephole, he was surprised to find Jake on the other side, shifting nervously. Cougar tucked his gun in to the waist of his jeans, thankful for once that his drunk self had been too lazy to undress properly before falling asleep.

Opening the door, Cougar was met by the sight of a rather rumpled looking Jake fidgeting in place and wrapping his arms around himself. Cougar could feel his concern grow when Jake did not try to meet Cougar's gaze and kept his eyes on the ground.

"S-Sorry." Jake said, voice a near whisper. "I didn't know where else to go." Cougar shook his head.

"Usted es siempre bienvenido aquí, mi amigo." Cougar said, moving aside to let Jake in.

Leading the way to the kitchen, Cougar kept an eye on his friend. Jake was nervous and unsure of himself, restless in a way that told Cougar he needed to confide in someone. Cougar began making coffee while Jake sat himself on a stool at the breakfast bar. While the smell of percolating coffee began filling the kitchen, Cougar took stock of his friend. Jake's shirt was inside out, his skin was lightly flushed, and his lips were swollen and red as though he had been biting at them.

Remembering that Jake had ducked out as soon as they had returned last night in order to meet with a friend that was going through a hard time and needed support, Cougar wondered if perhaps the friend's issue had not been as straightforward as Jake had thought.

Cougar was brought out of his musings by the beeping of the coffee maker, and poured each of them a cup with plenty of cream and a dollop of honey. They drank in silence for a few minutes until Jake seemed to steel himself before meeting Cougar's gaze.

"So, something happened last night. Something I need to talk about because talking to people is how I process stuff and you're a really good listener and also my best friend and I need to talk to you about what happened because I'm having trouble wrapping my head around it." Jake began. "But. Well. See. The thing is. Okay so I trust you, I trust you a hell of a lot, but I'm not completely, entirely, 100% certain for sure that telling you won't land me in hot water. Because the thing? The one that I need to talk to you about? Could, sort of, in a roundabout sort of way, ruin my military career. So. Yeah. I'm nervous." He said, before taking a large mouthful of coffee in a clear attempt to shut himself up.

"I am good with secrets." Cougar said gently, trying to soothe Jake's skittishness. "And I am not one to betray the trust of a friend."
"Yeah, I- Yeah." Jake said. "You're good at having peoples' backs. And you've had mine even when we didn't really know or like each other yet. Which was good." Jake took a moment to breathe deeply before speaking again. "So last night I kind of slept with my ex-wife's newest ex-husband."

There was a moment of silence in the kitchen while Cougar realized how very unprepared he was for this conversation.

"We are going to need food." Cougar said at last, noting how Jake relaxed slightly at his words. "And we are going to need the couch."

After putting together some quick breakfast quesadillas with Jake's help, they sat on the couch with their food and fresh cups of coffee.

"Ex-wife's newest ex-husband?" Cougar asked, knowing he'd get a back-story to help him understand the situation better.

"Yeah." Jake said, covering his mouth with one hand while he spoke around a mouthful of food. "So. You know I ran from home when I was seventeen. Well I needed a place to stay until I hit eighteen and could enlist, and after hopping a couple of states I met Michelle. She was nineteen when we met, and was willing to put me up for seven months until I could join the army. About three months in we got together. I liked her. A lot. But I always knew that it was a lot more casual for her. She already had one ex-husband at the time, Tyrone. High school sweethearts who found out after six months that they didn't actually like each other outside of a high school context.

"So, we had our thing, and then my birthday came up and I signed up on the day of, and then after I'm done basic and about to head for Advanced Individual Training, she tells me she's pregnant." Cougar nearly choked on his coffee at that news. "Yeah. I freaked a bit. I mean, my experience with parents being what it is, finding out I had the chance to either break the pattern or repeat history had me running in circles. Michelle wanted to keep it, so we agreed to marry to make sure she and the baby would be covered under my army insurance. A quick ceremony at a courthouse and then I went off on my first tour. Didn't even get to go to any doctor's appointments until around the eight month mark. After my first tour I got assigned to a base stateside because they realized how good I was with computers so they wanted me to be a glorified e-mail password retriever. If the whole thing with Michelle hadn't been going on I would have fought that call so hard, man.

"So I managed to be there for the birth. Got to welcome little Jeremy to the world." Jake said, his voice catching oddly. He stopped talking for a moment to stuff his face with a huge bite of food. Cougar could tell that he needed a moment to collect himself. Considering how much he doted on his sister and niece, Cougar knew that if Jake had a child of his own he'd probably have changed the entire team's computer and phone wallpapers to pictures of his kid. Whatever was about to follow could only be painful.

"There have been a lot of changes in medical practices and health standards, but some things just can't be helped. You can take every precaution possible and try to stack the odds in your favor by eliminating as many potential detrimental factors as you can and yet SIDS still affects approximately 2300 families each year. No cause or cure or warning, you just walk in to check on him while he's napping and you notice he's not breathing and his skin is cold." Jake paused there, picking at his quesadilla with a frown that Cougar knew was entirely unrelated to the food. Cougar shifted closer on the couch so that their shoulders touched and felt Jake lean in to him slightly. "It's been a bit more than seven years and it still..." He trailed off.
"It is said that time heals all wounds. But no mention is made of the scars that get left. And we both know that scars can be a source of pain on their own." Cougar said softly as he brought one arm up around Jake's shoulders and pulled the younger man closer to him. Jake sagged against Cougar and sighed.

"For a guy who doesn't talk much, you always know what to say." Jake said, relief evident in his voice as he blinked wet eyes. "You remember when you moved in here, and you guys found out I was talking to my therapist about shit that I thought I had dealt with? I said that even you didn't know what it was. And. Well. It's Jeremy.

"I thought I'd come to terms with what happened, but then Beth was born. That night we spent in Jess and Donny's apartment after she was born, and I had that nightmare? I dreamt I found you, and Jess, and baby Beth, and the rest of the team in Jeremy's nursery. Peaceful and calm, no blood or bruises, but no pulse, not breathing, and cold to the touch. If one of you is injured I get some variation of that dream, but if we're visiting Beth and Jess and Donny... It would get worse. Just... a lot worse. And I found myself not wanting to visit them because of those dreams. I'd try and drink myself to sleep, but then I'd remember how my father was drunk all the time, and I didn't ever want to put Beth through that, so I'd make myself throw up."

"The fever." Cougar said softly as he remembered. At Jake's questioning look, he explained. "After Siberia, Pooch said you had fever dreams where you screamed for someone named Jeremy."

"Yeah." Jake said. "I dreamed I went to dive under the ice, but it froze over too fast and I could see you under the surface. And then you suddenly turned in to Jeremy and it just got really freaky after that. But I've been getting better. At least I'm not trapped in those dreams any more, I can wake up from them as they start. I don't have them as often anymore, either. And I don't freak out around babies as much.

"But, um... yeah. After Jeremy, Michelle and I split since we hadn't really been together since I went to basic. We kept separate rooms when we were married and everything since it was for legal and insurance purposes more than anything. So we split, but kept in touch because we're still friends. And a little bit later I requested a different assignment, which eventually got me sent through Spec Ops training. About six and a half years ago she married a guy called David, but after they got hitched he was weirdly possessive. Like calling her constantly and going through her phone and deleting phone numbers of men she'd been friends with since childhood. So she left, and filed divorce papers and stayed on my pullout bed for a few months and even got a restraining order. Everything happened within about six months. Dude eventually moved because he tried stalking her afterwards and she's a police dispatcher so she got the whole local force badgering the guy for stuff like loitering and seatbelt checks and shit.

"After that Michelle resolved to take it a lot slower, and she and Cheng dated for almost two years before getting married. I was at the wedding, a bridesmaid. Or bridesman, I guess? Whatever, I stood up in a church and got to wear a blue seersucker suit with three girls all in blue seersucker dresses. So, things were going well with them, and Cheng didn't mind that Michelle and I were close. Cheng and I actually have actually become friends. And then about four months ago he asked her if she's thought about having kids or adopting some. And she just packed up and left while he was at work the next day. Cheng got home to an empty house and a note about visiting some relatives in Canada. And then two months ago he got served divorce papers. On grounds of 'irreconcilable differences'. They went back and forth about it for a while, Cheng wanted to figure things out, but you can't keep someone who doesn't want to be kept, you know? And it's pretty clear that Michelle is dealing badly with stuff. Some of it probably has to do with Jeremy, but she was flighty and dithered about commitment when I met her so I think there's unresolved issues there. Anyways, the divorce got finalized yesterday, she just told him to send her clothes and
jewelry to a P.O. Box and keep everything else, so I took Cheng out for drinks because I've been
down a similar road but at least Michelle was talking to me at the time. Now she's just... Hiding and
avoiding everyone. And, well, after a few drinks we talked about getting Cheng a one night stand
rebound type of thing. And then Cheng said it didn't necessarily have to be a female rebound. And
then. Well..." Jake trailed off.

"And then you ended up on my couch pinching your quesadilla to pieces." Cougar finished. Jake
started and realized that he'd slowly been making a small pile of pinched off bits of food on his
plate. He flushed and ate the rest of the intact part of the tortilla before heading to the kitchen
muttering about a fork. Cougar sat back on the couch and took a moment to try and remember if
there had been any signs of the stress Jake must have been under for the past few months. The very
nature of their jobs meant each of the Losers was good at dealing with large amounts of stress.
Added to that, Jake had the habit of only showing people what he wanted them to see, more so if he
cared about their opinions. Cougar resolved to keep a closer eye on his friend, and to make sure
that he knew he could seek advice or help from Cougar without fear of reproach.

"So, uh." Jake began, standing awkwardly in the doorway of the kitchen. "About the whole 'Jake's
pansexual' thing. Is it gonna bother you?" He asked, nervously.

"Would be hypocritical of me if I took issue with your orientation." Cougar stated calmly.

"Oh. Um." Jake blinked rapidly. "Hypocritical?"

"I do not speak with my family because they wanted me to do or be things that I could not. They
wished I would become a lawyer, I wanted to write. They wanted me to marry a girl from school
and have kids, I was not ready or desiring those things. They wanted me to be heterosexual, but my
ability to love another romantically and sexually does not conform to arbitrary notions of a gender
binary." Cougar said. "In other words, you are not the only pansexual in the room." Cougar
smirked at the surprise on Jake's face, but found the smile softening when the tension in Jake's
body visibly left and the hacker slumped against the doorway.

After a moment Jake pushed away from the doorway and sat on the couch before hugging Cougar
tightly.

"Does this mean that we can sometimes talk about boys or go to that queer club at the edge of
town?" Jake asked in a small voice.

Recognizing the question for the overture it was, Cougar grinned and said "Yes, but you cannot
braid my hair." He felt Jake's grin against his neck, and told himself that the warmth building in his
chest was friendship. Just friendship. "Now, for this business with Cheng." Cougar could feel Jake
tense up and begin to pull away. "How do you feel about it?"

"That is honestly not what I expected. Then again the past twenty-four hours have been full of
unexpected surprises." Jake said, pulling out of the hug, but only to slump so that he was half
covering Cougar. "Well it was a good experience, you know? As long as it doesn't make things
awkward then I'd probably be glad for it. Cheng was in a vulnerable spot and he trusted me to
comfort him in a very intimate way. I'm just afraid of fucking things up and losing him as a friend,
I guess."

"Awkwardness is nearly unavoidable." Cougar said. "But if your friendship is strong then it should
only be temporary."

"There's a story there." Jake said, expression shrewd.
"Si." Cougar said, feeling himself smile. "Do you recall when Pooch joined the team? And how uneasy he was near me?"

"Yeah. But after you talked to him, he warmed right up and- Oh. Ohhhh. Oh." Jake said, his eyes round with shock. "Cougs.... He's been married for years!"

"Si. And Jolene was the one who approached me for a threesome six years ago." Cougar said, barely suppressing a laugh when Jake's jaw dropped. "Things were awkward between us until I told him that, while that night is a fond memory for me, it is not something I would want to revisit. Then I congratulated him on marrying Jolene. Once we both realized that neither of us would not be using the event against each other in any way, it became easier to accept and move past it."

"Ah." Jake said contemplatively. "Okay, I think I get it. Don't make it a big deal and it won't be one."

"And make sure Cheng knows it is not a big deal." Cougar said.

"Also a very important part." Jake agreed. "Jesus. All this time I was worried that my orientation was gonna be a problem. Fuck."

"Hindsight is perfect." Cougar said. "Though I do sometimes have issues, wondering if my own sexuality is the cause of some of my problems. But on most days I know better. I have spoken with professors who have studied the bible, as well as the language that was used when it was written. There are many things in there that were not properly translated, and many things that should have been updated. We no longer live in a time where slavery is acceptable, we should not live in one where bigotry is."

"Beautifully said." Jake said, relaxing further in to Cougar's side, leaning back so his head was resting on Cougar's shoulder. "You smell like booze and sex." he whispered after a few seconds.

"I went to the queer club and got laid and drunk." Cougar whispered back.

"Did you have fun?" Jake asked.

"Si." Cougar said.

"Did you use prophylactics?" Jake asked.

"Of course." Cougar said.

"Good." Jake said.

"Would you like a shower?" Cougar offered.

"Can we sleep after?" Jake asked, turning to look at Cougar. Cougar could feel Jake's breath on his face, and had to stop himself from leaning forward to kiss his friend.

"Yes." Cougar said.

Jake heaved himself off the couch and made his way to the bathroom. Cougar made the rounds of his apartment to make sure everything was locked down and safe. Cougar took the time to remind himself that just because two people had matching sexual orientations it did not obligate them to be in a relationship. Jake was his best friend, and a teammate, and a subordinate. Getting involved romantically and sexually was only asking for trouble. They got in plenty of trouble as it was!
He took a turn in the showers once Jake was done, being careful not to knock over Jake's shampoo bottle or Jake's body wash as he reached for his own. He brushed the taste of quesadilla layered over cocktails off his tongue, and made sure to floss before heading for his bedroom. Jake had already turned down the sheets on Cougar's side of the bed, and was waiting, half asleep.

"Do you think I should invite Pooch and Jolene to Beth's next birthday?" Jake asked, slurring his words slightly with sleep. Cougar turned off the overhead light and padded around to his side of the bed.

"Most adults would not know what to do with an invitation to a child's birthday." Cougar cautioned as he climbed in to bed.

"Yeah, but Pooch and Jolene are thinking of having babies. I don't know if they have anyone they're close to that already has kids. If they don't, then they'll be going in blind. It's one thing to hear about tantrums and naps and potty training accidents, it's entirely another to see it for themselves." Jake said.

"Talk to Jess, then invite them for Christmas. They can take our room, we will take the unfinished apartment over the garage." Cougar said.

"They'll be able to hear every trip to the bathroom, every call for an extra glass of water or bedtime story." Jake said.

"Every midnight accident." Cougar mentioned.

"Beth is working on that. She's gotten really close. Her record is two months without a midnight leak." Jake said.

"According to my parents, I was only potty trained by age four. Diego took until he was six. Estrella managed it at five."

"She's doing good, then." Jake said. Much more quietly he added, "Jeremy didn't make it past four months, so this is something I don't have practice with."

"With you as a father, I am sure Jeremy would have mastered the toilet by age three. And then spend the rest of his life getting too distracted by work to remember to actually get up and use the toilet." Cougar said.

"I was running to the toilet and found the door locked. I had to go, so I went." Jake insisted.

"I still do not understand why you thought peeing out of the third floor window was a suitable alternative." Cougar muttered.

"I wasn't going to go in the kitchen sink, that's just nasty, and my boxers would not have stopped the mess." Jake huffed.

"The shrieking drunk man in the alley underneath the window did not stop the mess either." Cougar pointed out.

"No, he did not. But he did make Roque laugh so hard he farted." Jake said.

"That is true." Cougar admitted, grinning.

"Hey, Cougs?" Jake said, shifting closer in the dark.
"Si?" Cougar answered.

"Thanks for always being there. You're the best friend I've ever had." Jake whispered.

"It is the same for me." Cougar whispered back, ignoring the voice in the back of his head that was calling him a liar.

In the dim light peeking through Cougar's blinds he could make out Jake's face as his friend smiled. Jake shuffled close enough to rest his forehead against Cougar's shoulder. Within minutes Jake had fallen asleep, and Cougar continued watching him. In sleep Jake looked so young, as carefree and innocent as he liked to pretend he was during the daytime. It was a view Cougar would not tire of, and something he wished he could give Jake in reality.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings:

- Blending of reality and fiction because they're playing Dungeons & Dragons.
- Recreational drug use.
- Drinking and casual sex.
- Mentions of child death and trauma associated with losing a child.
- Mentions of peeing on a drunk man in an alley.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the huge delay between updates, life got in the way. Also this chapter ended up a LOT longer than I thought it would, and I eventually decided to cut it in half so I could at least get something posted.

Trigger warnings in the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cougar ducked as Jensen reached for him, spinning out of reach before he could be hit or grabbed. Cougar blocked a kick and twisted Jensen's leg, but Jensen moved with the motion and avoided having his leg injured. Using the momentum of Cougar's twist, Jensen spun and brought his elbow up, hitting Cougar in the neck hard enough to stagger him and make him drop Jensen's leg. Cougar was forced to back up a few steps and he shook his head in an effort to reorient himself. He deflected several blows from Jensen, staying light on his feet and keeping himself mobile. Cougar had learned years ago that the trick to sparring with Jensen was to keep the fight moving. If Jensen managed to catch him, Cougar would find himself locked in a hold he would never get out of.

Cougar back flipped a few times to get some distance between him and Jensen, he needed a chance to breathe a bit. Jensen stayed where he was, panting and smiling, his face pink with exertion. Cougar took a moment to look his friend up and down as subtly as he could. It was one of the rare times where Jensen was wearing a shirt tight enough that it was easy to see how well built he was; how muscular and well defined his torso was. It always amused Cougar when one of the others on the team noticed Jensen's build. There was always a moment of surprise before they remembered that, in addition to being a Spec Ops soldier, Jensen enjoyed exercise and physical activity. The sheer amount of CAPE Jensen had to do on a regular basis certainly helped.

From the sidelines, Cougar could just make out Clay's voice complaining about their 'cross country sparring'. It was an accurate enough description. When the team trained together, Cougar and Jensen were always the last to face each other. Their sparring was a delicate dance of speed and distance; the fight would only end when one of them was tired enough to fuck up badly enough that the other could get them pinned. Sparring together had certainly done wonders for their endurance over the years.

Jensen rushed towards Cougar, swinging with his right arm. Cougar ducked the blow, but when he went to move away he found himself restrained. Jensen had reached out with his left hand and grabbed the hem of Cougar's shirt. Cougar twisted and ducked, just managing to wriggle free of his shirt only for Jensen to wrap it around Cougar's torso and pull. Cougar stumbled towards Jensen and soon found himself thrown to the mat. As Jensen made to follow and pin him, Cougar curled his body and brought his legs up in time to clamp his thighs around Jensen's head.

Jensen struggled for a few moments, sweat pouring from his reddening face. Cougar wondered if today would result in another incident where they would have to report to the base medical center after knocking each other out while sparring. Out of the corner of his eye, Cougar could see the rest of the Losers, Pooch looking concerned while Clay and Roque were watching avidly. Odds were that the team's CO and XO had a bet going.
Jensen managed to pry Cougar's thighs apart enough to take a few breaths. After those breaths, he let Cougar's thighs clamp around his neck again, making Cougar wonder just what his friend was planning. Jensen brought his legs up under himself and grabbed Cougar's arms. Jensen carefully leveraged their combined weight until he was able to stand up, taking Cougar with him. Just as Cougar was getting a bad feeling in his stomach, Jensen body slammed the both of them in to the mat.

Cougar lay on the mat, stunned and unable to breathe after the impact. Even though his thighs had fallen open, Jensen's head was still between Cougar's legs. A detached part of Cougar's mind noted that there was a sore spot on Cougar's lower stomach, right where Jensen's chin was. The impact on the floor must have knocked Jensen's chin in to Cougar's stomach, meaning Jensen probably got hit in the throat by Cougar's pubic bone and likely could not breathe either.

Ability to breathe apparently took a backseat to Jensen's desire to win the fight. Jensen heaved himself up and flopped down on Cougar, belatedly manhandling him in to some kind of hold. Cougar tapped out quickly enough, neither of them were in any shape to continue.

"Half the time you guys fight I wonder if you might actually kill each other." Pooch said as he walked over to them, frowning.

Jensen rolled off of Cougar and sprawled across the mat, panting hoarsely.

"You two going to need medical?" Clay asked.

Cougar shook his head, wondering what it meant that it was easier to read Clay's facial expressions when he was looking at Clay upside down. Next to him, Jensen started signing.

'We will be okay. Just need rest and time.'

The other Losers nodded in comprehension, and Cougar was once again glad that he and Jensen had taken the time to teach them ASL. It made life a lot easier when they had ways to communicate that did not involve having to speak. Cougar sometimes wondered if he would get more out of his sessions with his therapist if he was allowed to sign what he wanted to say. Of course, having a therapist who genuinely cared about his health rather than his ability to continue killing would probably help even more.

"Not sure how much time you'll get. I've got a meeting with Coleman this afternoon. We need to stockpile more favors for the next time one of us pisses someone off." Clay said.

"Or the next time someone thinks it'd be a good idea to try and steal one of us." Roque growled.

Cougar was the only one who didn't shoot Jensen a guilty look. Nearly ten months earlier a General by the name of John Scheers had developed the habit of requesting Jensen for his team every other mission. Without their tech, the Losers had soon found other teams requesting their aid one by one until it looked like there was a chance that the team would be dissolved. Jensen had ended up purposely allowing himself to get shot in the chest while he was on loan to one of Scheers' teams just so he could be shipped back. Shortly after that, Pooch 'happened' to dislocate his shoulder at the motor pool, and Cougar managed to either break, crack, or dislocate about half of the bones in both of his hands. The fact that Cougar acquired his injuries in a bar brawl that pitted him and Roque against two teams that had been jockeying to get Cougar reassigned to them was a coincidence, of course.

With everyone suitably in need of healing, they had all crowded around Jensen's hospital bed and hashed out a plan of misdemeanor behavior that would alienate them from other Ops teams. It had
taken four months, and cost Jensen the promotion to Sergeant he had only just earned, but it had worked. They had each been deemed intolerable and impossible to work with by multiple teams, rumors had spread, and no one wanted to work with any of them anymore.

"Coleman says he's got a line on something that'll earn us brownie points. Get us out of here for a bit and hopefully drive home the point that you guys only behave when you're working with me." Clay said.

"Sounds good." Pooch said.

"Too good." Roque said.

"It's a trap." Jensen agreed, voice still hoarse.

"Coleman said it wasn't going to be too dangerous." Clay said, frowning at his team.

"Traps don't always involve life and death." Jensen rasped, slowly sitting up. "Sometimes they involve a home cooked meal and a couple of girls your best friend's grandparents know from church who just 'happen' to be single."

Cougar blew out an audible sigh and used his arm to cover his eyes. That dinner had been awkward. The only saving grace had been that Cougar's abuelos had only done it because they had hoped Cougar would like one of the girls well enough to act as a beard for her. After finding that out, Cougar and Jensen had come out to the girls before sitting down and hashing out a few agreements. Cougar had opted to stick with his carefully crafted man-whore reputation while Jensen had gone on a few dates with one of the girls. The fake relationship lasted a few months, just long enough for the girls to hide their relationship until a few homophobic relatives were done visiting, and for Jensen to top up his 'straight cred' with the team.

"Wait. Isn't that how you met Candi?" Pooch asked.

"Codi. And yeah. She was nice. Kind of a shame we didn't manage to click well enough to make up for how often I'm gone on missions." Jensen said, sticking to the story he and Codi had agreed on.

"Call me crazy, but I don't think Coleman is about to set us all up on dates." Clay said dryly.

"I don't know. He did help us last year when your girlfriend tried to barbecue you. Maybe he thinks you're just not meeting the right kind of girl." Pooch said, grinning.

"You guys are hilarious. Hit the showers already, you all reek." Clay grumbled.

"That's our natural animal stench, Clay. How will we attract mates if we don't stink pretty for them?" Jensen protested.

"Do you actually listen to yourself when you talk?" Roque asked.

"Oh, fuck no. I'm weird enough as it is. You know how bad I'd be if I actually listened to myself?" Jake said.

"Just go fucking shower." Clay groaned.

"Fine." Jensen said, sounding very much like a twelve-year-old who had failed to bargain for a later bed time.
Cougar and Jensen slowly peeled themselves off the mat and followed the others to the showers. Once clean, they went back to their offices and focused on getting their homework done. They had just selected new classes the previous week, and they had all learned the value of getting a head start on their coursework long ago.

When Clay came back from his meeting with Coleman, he looked grim. The team followed their CO to his office and watched him toss a mission packet on to his desk before standing in front of the small window at the back and sighing deeply. Roque's curiosity got the best of him first, and he stepped in to Clay's office and picked up the packet. As he read, Roque's eyebrows climbed towards his hairline.

"What the fuck?" Roque said quietly.

Cougar, Pooch, and Jensen all stepped in to the office. Roque passed the packet to Pooch.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Pooch asked as he read the information. "They're kidding, right? This is some kind of horrible joke?"

"Pooch, man. Share." Jensen said, his hands making grasping motions in the direction of the papers.

Pooch passed the papers to Jensen. Jensen flipped through them quickly before loudly exclaiming,

"They want us to tour high schools and convince people to enlist?!"

"¿QUÉ?" Cougar said, shocked.

"Coleman's bright idea is to take one of the deadliest, most disrespectful and fucked up Black Ops teams in the entire army and put us in front of high schoolers!" Jensen said.

"This is the worst idea anyone has ever had." Roque said flatly.

"Coleman said that if we can prove that we're able to behave on such a long assignment it will go a long way towards proving that we work as a team." Clay said resignedly.

"We've already fucking proved that!" Pooch protested.

"Such a long assignment?" Cougar asked, his attention caught by that detail.

"A five month tour." Clay admitted.

"What the fuck." Roque stated.

"We're starting in Maine. Then we'll be hitting high schools and community colleges down the coast until we hit Dallas." Clay said.

"I'm bringing Gertrude." Jensen said.

"You are not bringing your fucking bug with you, Jensen." Roque growled.

"First off, she's a Mexican red knee tarantula, that makes her an arachnid. Secondly, our itinerary here says we're going to be in Concord, New Hampshire in a few weeks. Jessica's offered to take Gertrude in since I'm gone so often. It won't be for the whole trip," Jensen said. "I'll drive up to meet you guys in Maine since I don't trust whatever transport we'd get to not kill her."

"I can't fucking believe this." Pooch said, voice quiet with shock.
“Yeah, well. You've got four days to get over your disbelief. Coleman's giving all of us a few days off. Everybody needs to report to base for the transport on Sunday at oh eight hundred. If you're not there, find a way to be in Augusta, Maine by nightfall on Sunday.” Clay said.

“Right. Getting drunk for a few days sounds real good right about now.” Roque said.

"Seconded." Pooch said.

"Thirded." Jensen said.

"That is not a word." Pooch argued.

"I've just been sentenced to a five month road trip where I'm expected to behave, interact with teenagers, and somehow avoid launching in to a rant about the pervasive toxic masculinity and disgusting amount of abuse and rape that happens in the military." Jensen snapped.

"Fine. 'Thirded' is a word for the next five months." Pooch acquiesced.

"One in the afternoon right now. What bars are open?" Roque asked.

"That place close to Cougar's. It's a bar and grill, so we can pre-game there and do a bar crawl later if we're up for it." Jensen suggested.

"Sounds good. Everybody get your cars and papers sorted and we'll meet there." Clay said.

Early the next morning, after a raucous night out with the team where they had only just managed to avoid being arrested, Cougar woke to find Jake slipping out of bed. Cougar squinted at the clock, puzzled. When they knew they had a day off it was usually difficult to get Jake to wake before ten in the morning, yet Jake was not only awake before seven, he was up and getting dressed.

"Jake." Cougar called, voice still rough with sleep.

Jake froze and turned to look at Cougar with wide eyes, clearly wary at having been caught doing something. Cougar was not sure he was awake enough to figure out what was going on.

"Sorry if I woke you." Jake said, keeping his voice low in deference to the early hour.

Cougar shrugged before pushing himself in to something resembling an upright position. Jake finished pulling his clothes on and walked over to Cougar's side of the bed, sitting on the edge near Cougar's legs.

"There's something I'm thinking of doing. There's a small window of opportunity that I can use because of this recruitment tour. But. If I decide to go through with it I need to do a lot of planning and research in a very short time to pull it off." Jake admitted after a moment.

"If you want or need me, I am there." Cougar said, reaching out to grip Jake's wrist with one hand, his thumb gently rubbing the soft skin.

"I can't." Jake whispered, his face twisting with emotion. "There's a lot of things I've asked for your help with, but this is something that I'd never forgive myself for. You've got enough nightmares as
"Jake?" Cougar whispered, confused and worried.

"Several months back, Jess called and said she needed to talk about something the next time I was over. Around the same time, one of the monitoring programs I've got set up alerted me to the fact that my parents were breaking their usual patterns of travel and communication. They contacted her, Cougs. They tracked her down and know where she's living, where she's working, who she's married to. They know about Beth." Jake whispered.

Cougar felt himself grow cold at the news. Jake's abusive parents could not be allowed near Beth. They should not be allowed near Jess or Donny either, but those two were at least adults who could defend themselves, physically and psychologically. Beth was too young, too good and innocent, to allow them anywhere near her. Something had to be done about this.

"I did some digging. They've been going back and forth through email. Mom and Dad want to meet their granddaughter. Jess told them that no decisions are being made until she's sat down and talked to me about it. I've been procrastinating us going to visit because of that." Jake admitted quietly. "From the looks of some of the emails Jess and Donny have been sending each other, Donny is really not sure about meeting them or introducing them to Beth, but Jess is considering it. She's thinking that enough time has passed that maybe they've changed."

"Have they?" Cougar asked, mentally dismissing the knowledge that Jake was monitoring his sister's emails. Cougar knew Jake would not invade her privacy lightly, and most likely only began searching through her emails once his program had alerted him to the brewing situation.

"Not from what I can tell. They both retired a few years ago, they're both on some shitty pensions that don't cover enough. Their finances are tight, but they haven't changed their spending habits at all. Most of their money goes to booze, or medication. Mom's still a heroin addict." Jake said.

"Coincidence that two broke abusers are suddenly contacting two successful upper middle class lawyers." Cougar said, his tone pitched to indicate that he did not think it was a coincidence at all.

"My thinking as well. I have a tentative plan for solving this problem, but. It's not nice. It's not good. It's not something a good person would do. But everything in me is saying it's necessary." Jake said. He shifted forward and gripped Cougar's arms before saying tearfully, "I can't ask you to help with this, Cougar. You have enough nightmares as it is, I can't ask you to shoulder this one, too. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to ask." Cougar said softly.

Jake's face crumpled and he allowed Cougar to draw him in close. Jake spent several minutes with his face buried in Cougar's shoulder, shaking and sniffling. Cougar gently rubbed Jake's back to soothe his friend, occasionally carding his fingers through Jake's hair.

When Jake was able to compose himself, they got out of bed and went to Jake's apartment to plan. They opted to leave early, telling the team that the drive would do them good. They rented a car for the trip to Augusta, and spent the trip reviewing and fine tuning their plan.

When they arrived in Augusta, they turned in their rental car and took a taxi to the hotel the team would meet them at. They checked in, making noises about how tired they were and how badly they needed a day or two of rest. They set Gertrude's terrarium up on the desk and made sure the automatic feeder was running. Jake placed a Do Not Disturb sign on the door before closing and locking it, while Cougar rigged their balcony door not to lock. They ordered enough junk food to
last several days and stuffed most of it in the room's mini fridge, packing the rest up to bring with
them. When night fell they dressed to blend in, Jake trading his round lenses for plain square
frames and Cougar replacing his hat with a simple knit beanie, then snuck out of their room and
found a bus to take to the Augusta State Airport.

At the airport they made their way over to the long term parking area and scouted it for a suitable
car to borrow. They searched for one that was dusty enough to indicate that the owner had been
away for a while, but not so dusty that they were taking too big a chance that the owner would
return and find their car gone. Jake used his phone to track the license plates to the DMV, and from
there he cross referenced the owners names with social media accounts to find which ones would
be gone for the next few days. They boosted one that was sufficiently old and unremarkable and
headed for Jake's hometown of Bangor, Maine.

They spent the next day watching the house that Jake had grown up in. Jake's shoulders were tense
the whole time, and when they caught sight of his parents the first time Jake froze and stopped
breathing until Cougar gripped his wrist, rubbing one thumb over Jake's pulse gently. Mr. Jensen
was a large, stern looking man, nearly as tall as Jake, with gin blossoms clearly visible on his face.
Mrs. Jensen had likely been very beautiful in her youth, and clearly was the parent Jake took after
the most appearance-wise, but between the claw-like yellow nails, the three inches of gray roots in
her hair, and the perpetually bitter look on her face, Cougar found himself wondering if people
crossed the street to avoid her. When Mr. and Mrs. Jensen left the house, arguing loudly, Cougar
and Jake snuck in to double check the layout and see what they had to work with. Jake ended up
digging through the closet in his old room and lifted a loose floorboard. There was a small box in
the space under the floor, and Jake took it with him when they left. In the car, Jake opened the box
and showed Cougar its contents: a few Pokémon cards, some CDs, and Polaroids.

"This was all stuff that meant a lot to me, but I wasn't allowed to have any of it. The CDs have
some basic tutorials for game making, programming, and some beginner hacker knowledge. The
Polaroid couldn't be displayed because some of the people in them were out and proud. My
parents used 'faggot' as a slur often enough that I didn't want to risk them seeing me with people
who weren't straight. I didn't have room in my schoolbag for this stuff when I left, not if I didn't
want to get checked. If my schoolbag was really full they used to stop me and check that I wasn't
leaving with clothes or valuables. Never stole a thing, but they always accused me of being capable
of it." Jake whispered. He smiled, a little bitterly, but mostly vindictive. "That may or may not have
been a deciding factor when Gerry offered me that thief's apprenticeship."

"It has certainly proved useful." Cougar said, smirking.

"That it has." Jake said, grinning sharply.

They returned to the house late that night, when they were sure that not only the inhabitants, but
most of the neighborhood would be sleeping. They crept in through the skylight on the roof that
they had unlocked that afternoon. As the quietest one, Cougar crept in to the master bedroom and
placed a small ethanol soaked rag under the nose of Mrs. Jensen. Mr. Jensen had a prescription for
sleeping pills that would ensure he would not wake while they were working.

Once that was done, Jake came in with Mrs. Jensen's heroin stash. They measured out what seemed
to be the amount she regularly took, based on how much was missing from the stash they had
weighed that afternoon. Cougar gently checked Mrs. Jensen's arms for fresh needle marks, and
when he did not find any he move the blanket away from her feet to check her ankles. Finding a
series of fresh injection sites in her right ankle, Cougar accepted the syringe of heroin Jake passed
him, sliding it in to a vein and slowly depressing the plunger.
Jake removed the rag from his mother's nose and circled around to his father's side of the bed. Jake took a cigarette from the pack on Mr. Jensen's side of the bed and lit it, taking a few careful puffs to make sure it caught before sliding the cigarette between his father's stained fingers. Jake kept his father's hand from tilting the cigarette on to the comforter while Cougar cleaned up the drug paraphernalia and rearranged the sheets back over Mrs. Jensen. Jake wiped the ethanol rag lightly over the comforter to make sure it would catch when the cigarette came in contact with it. They placed the heroin back where they found it and left out the skylight barely ten minutes after they had entered.

They drove back to Augusta, wiped the car down and placed it back where they had found it. They caught a very early bus to their hotel and snuck back in to their room. Jake bundled the clothes they had worn in to a bag of dirty gym gear they had brought with them to disguise any faint smells of smoke or dust that might have clung to them. Cougar showered while Jake checked on Gertrude, then Jake showered while Cougar called for room service. They took the junk food they had picked up before they checked in out of the containers and left the empty delivery boxes stacked in plain sight when their breakfast was delivered. They ate in silence when it arrived, resisting the urge to check news sources for any sign of what they had done.

They did their best to settle themselves before the team showed up Sunday afternoon. For the most part they were successful, though Pooch kept shooting Jake questioning looks. By evening, Pooch seemed determined to broach the subject.

"Okay. There's something bugging you, Jay. Spill." Pooch said between poker hands.

"It's nothing." Jake insisted.

"Don't lie. We all know you too well for that. There's something eating at you." Pooch said.

Jake looked around the table and saw that Clay and Roque had been drawn in by the conversation. "It's nothing you guys want to hear. Trust me." he said.

"Jay, come on. You know we're here if you need us." Pooch insisted.

"Well..." Jake said slowly. "See. A couple of weeks back I found this... spot on my hip." Jake paused, and the team leaned closer, growing concerned. "It just felt really good when I rubbed it while I was masturbating. But I haven't been able to find it since."

"Jensen you asshole." Pooch curse as he grimaced and shook his head. Clay and Roque sat back in their chairs and glared at Jake.

"I tried to warn you." Jake said, grinning impishly.

Cougar shook his head in fond exasperation, tilting his head to keep his hat low enough that his smirk was hidden.

"Enough touchy feely crap. Deal the cards, Pooch." Clay said.

Pooch dealt the next hand, muttering the whole time about teammates with sick senses of humor.

The next day they set up at Cony High School and began the torturous process of fielding
questions from teenagers, teachers, and parents. Interest in what they had to say increased when it came out that they were all Green Berets, though a disturbing amount of that was young men asking if they had killed people.

"Well we're not there to serve our enemies tea and cupcakes." Jake said dryly to one boy.

"Oh! I- well. So how many have you killed?" the boy asked.

"This isn't a game of Counter Strike. You don't get bonus points for killing people. Not avatars or digital creatures. Real, flesh and blood people who have mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters. If the idea of ending a life is in any way exciting to you, please stay the fuck away from any and all positions of authority." Jake replied coldly, disgust obvious in his voice.

After that incident it was decided that manning the booth should be done in two hour shifts. This gave the team a reprieve not only from the probing questions of young men interested in way, but also from the teenage girls who had all suddenly discovered an attraction to men in uniforms. Cougar would have thought that Pooch at least would be safe, seeing as he wore his wedding ring openly. That hope was dashed the first time a fifteen year old girl breathily told Pooch that she 'wouldn't tell his wife if he didn't'. Clay and Roque attracted a fair share of unwanted attention as well. Apparently, older guys were 'in' now.

The parents were nearly as bad. Most of the fathers knew someone who had served and asked the Losers if they might know them, as if they had made friends with every person who had enlisted in the army in the past twenty years. The majority of the mothers seemed to be divided between flirting with the Losers or borderline verbally attacking them for not only being associated with the military, but for putting the idea of signing up in their children's heads. There were a few parents of either gender who were either respectful of the team's service or cautiously optimistic about their children joining. Lastly there were the gun ho survivalist wannabes. These families were over enthusiastic about the military, almost uniformly racist, and the most likely to actually enlist. Jake made sure to note the names of anyone who fit in the last group. They would keep an eye out and make sure that another situation like what occurred with Private Warrick would not happen again.

As soon as they had packed up on their last day in Augusta, the Losers found the closest dive bar and did their best to bleach the last four days from their minds with alcohol. Sadly, it only resulted in five very hungover Special Forces soldiers taking a very slow road trip to the next city on their list. They learned their lesson, and when it came time to leave Portland they hot boxed Clay's bathroom to unwind instead.

Their stop after Portland was Concord, New Hampshire. They checked in to the hotel late at night, and set out for the Jensen-Alexander residence first thing the next morning. They had one day of leeway in their schedule at this point, and not a single person on the team was hard hearted enough to deny Jake and Cougar the opportunity to visit.

Pooch followed Jake's careful directions through the suburban streets while Cougar struggled not to laugh at how badly Clay and Roque were hiding how nervous they were. The Losers' CO and 2iC had never actually managed to meet Jake's family, and their insistence that leave was best spent drinking on a beach was finally biting them in the ass. When they pulled up in front of the house, Cougar had just enough time to brace himself before Jake leaned out of his window and gave a very loud Tarzan yell. Everyone in the minivan jumped, but quickly stifled their cursing
when a small, blonde tornado in overalls shot out of the front door shrieking excitedly.

"Uncle Jake! Uncle Jake! Tio Cougar! Tio Cougar!"

"Baja!" Jake said, opening his door in time to get a lap full of excited four and a half year old.

"Uncle Jake you're here!" Beth said, practically climbing Jake in order to throw her small arms around Jake's neck.

"Yeah, Baja. I'm here." Jake said softly, holding her close and pressing kisses to her hair.

"Where's Tio?" Beth asked, looking in the back of the minivan where Clay and Roque awkwardly stared back at her.

"He's in the front." Jake said.

Beth spun around and locked eyes with Pooch. Pooch smiled and waved at Beth, still slightly unsure of himself around the young child who did not always remember him at first. Beth narrowed her eyes and rounded on Jake.

"That's not Tio, that's Uncle Poo!" she said.

Clay and Roque choked on air at Beth's words.

"Poo-ch. Uncle Pooch." Jake said, voice shaking with suppressed laughter.

"But where's Tio!" Beth said, becoming distressed.

"Hola." Cougar said, peeking out from behind his headrest.

Beth turned around and shrieked delightedly when she saw him. She lunged forward, completely trusting Jake to keep her balanced in his lap, and squished Cougar's head against the headrest in her attempt to hug him. Cougar grinned and gently rubbed one of Beth's arms until she released his head.

"Tio Cougar!" Beth yelled excitedly. Cougar felt a familiar warmth flood his chest at Beth's exuberantly affectionate antics.

"Hey, Baja! How about we get out of the car and bring Gertrude in the house so you and your mom and dad can meet her?" Jake suggested.

"Yes!" Beth crowed before leaping from the minivan. She sprawled out on the grass, giggling.

The team emerged from the minivan slowly, unfamiliar with such a mundane, suburban setting. Cougar had to suppress a wince when he saw Jessica on the front porch. She looked like she had been losing sleep, and her smile did not meet her eyes.

"Hey, Jessy! One hairy Mexican here for you. And this time I don't mean Coug- hey. Uh oh. What happened? That's not a good look Jessy. What happened?" Jake said as he approached his sister. "Is it Donny? Is he sick? Did he do something to you? I've got the whole team with me this time, we can make him disappear."

"I'm not sure what it says about me that, instead of being frightened by your willingness to get rid of me should I ever hurt Jess, I'm reassured." Donny said dryly, stepping on to the front porch. "This is probably something you should discuss in private, a family matter. If you give me Gertrude I'll get her set up in my office and get some refreshments for your team."
"Cougs is staying with me." Jake said immediately, looking worried.

"Of course." Jess said softly. "Cougar is family, too."

Donny led the team through the house, pointing them in the direction of the backyard while he went to place Gertrude in his office. Cougar followed Jess and Jake in to the kitchen.

"I got a call a few days ago with some news. I didn't know how to tell you about it. Just blurtting it out over the phone seemed off to me. I'm sorry." Jess said, wringing her hands nervously.

"What's going on?" Jake asked.

"Mom and Dad died." Jess said, her voice breaking. "There was a fire. Dad had been smoking in bed again, and the smoke inhalation kept them from waking up." Jess sniffled, her eyes full of tears.

"Did they suffer?" Jake asked carefully.

"No. The coroners said that the smoke did most of the work, though Mom was apparently pretty close to overdosing. They didn't feel a thing." Jess said, voice wobbling with emotion.

"Good." Jake said, nodding.

"Yeah. I'm glad they didn't suffer." Jess said.

"That too." Jake agreed.

"What?" Jess asked.

"Well, I wouldn't have wished them undue pain and suffering, but I'm not exactly sad that they're dead. Means I don't have to keep watch every time I'm stateside now." Jake explained.

"Jake... our parents are dead." Jess said.

"And. I'm. Glad." Jake replied slowly.

"How can you be glad that our parents died?!" Jess demanded, her voice raising.

"When I was seventeen and ran away? I got to Manhattan and took a shitty job in a diner for money. This guy walked in and offered me an apprenticeship one day, said he thought I had potential. After a few days of working with me, he noticed I had bizarrely good recall skills. I could memorize entire conversations and regurgitate them verbatim to him. So we got my memory tested. It turns out I've got something called an eidetic memory. Anything and everything that I have ever seen, heard, touched, tasted, felt or in some way experienced is locked inside my brain, and unlike other people I can readily access all of it. If I focus, I can recall everything with crystal clear detail, almost like I'm experiencing it all over again. Everything, Jessica. From my first blow job to that time dear old Dad beat me with a studded belt. I remember all of it. So you'll have to forgive me if I'm not shattered that two people who were horribly abusive to us when we were younger than Beth are no longer able to hurt anyone ever again." Jake said, voice cold and factual.

Jessica's face had gone pale with shock. She raised a trembling hand to her mouth and made a whimpering noise. Jake sighed.

"Look. I'm sorry if I'm coming off a bit harsh. But I need you to remember that you asked me, when you first got back in contact with me, to keep an eye out for Beth's safety. So hearing that
there's two less threats to her in the world makes my day." Jake said, voice soft and sincere.

"I didn't think of that." Jess said. "I didn't think of what they'd done, I was just... They contacted me a few months back. Said they wanted to get to know their granddaughter. I wanted to run it by you, see what you thought." Jess swallowed thickly. "I guess I was hoping that if I could change so much, maybe they could as well."

"It's good that you're trying to have faith in people. It's part of making progress." Jake said.

"I almost welcomed violent abusers back in to my life, and in to the lives of my husband and my daughter." Jess snapped.

"No one is perfect." Cougar said quietly. "You were willing to give a second chance to people who had wronged you. Kindness is not a weakness."

"We're all works in progress, Jess. I only started letting my therapist actually help me with some of my most personal issues two years ago. You're doing better than I am so far. I do recommend talking to your therapist about this if you haven't already, though." Jake said, reaching towards Jess slowly.

Jess stepped in close to hug Jake. "You're right." she whispered. "I try to keep things in my own head too much. I've succeeded at letting people in, maybe now I should let them help.

"I'm sure everyone who can help will do so gladly." Jake said, rubbing Jess' back lightly.

"How did you end up in the 'reassuring older sibling' role? That's supposed to be my job." Jess joked weakly.

"I'm a scab. I snuck past the picket line of older siblings out front." Jake quipped, earning a small laugh.

"Age is only one factor that determines a person's ability to provide support and comfort." Cougar said.

"I guess." Jess said while Jake looked at Cougar over the top of her head.

'Story?' Jake mouthed silently.

Cougar nodded once, slowly.

"I'm gonna go splash some water on my face." Jess said, extricating herself from the hug. "I've been a bit of a mess for a few days now, since I got the call. I just. I had hoped..." she trailed off.

"It is not uncommon to wish for reconciliation with people you long thought of as family." Cougar said. "Having the opportunity dangled in front of you, only for it to be snatched away is a difficult thing to deal with."

"That said, I'd like to go on record saying that I'm glad nothing bad happened to the people I care about." Jake said.

"I was going to run it by you before trying to meet them." Jess said. "As bad as things were for me, I know they were a lot worse for you. If any one person was going to get veto power, it would have been the one who was their victim, and mine, for so long."

Jake blinked damp eyes and looked away from Jess. She rose up on her toes and pressed a kiss to
his cheek. She did the same to Cougar before excusing herself from the kitchen. Cougar stepped up to Jake's side as his friend blew out a shaky breath. Jake was staring at his hands, fingers trembling.

"She wanted to mend bridges with them, to start over and have a real relationship. With *them*. And they would have used her the way they used anyone they could. They would have destroyed her, Cougs." Jake whispered furiously.

"They can't hurt anyone else now. *Nos aseguramos de ella.*" Cougar whispered.

"We're all safe now. They can't get to us or hurt any of us anymore." Jake whispered.

"*Se acabó.*" Cougar agreed, reaching out with one hand to rub between Jake's shoulders.

It took a few minutes for Jake to calm down, to relax enough to breathe deeply and let his anger subside. Cougar stayed with Jake until he was breathing evenly and deeply and the others would never be able to tell that he had been trembling with rage only moments ago. Together, they made their way out to the backyard where the Losers had gotten comfortable in the mismatched deck chairs. Pooch had engaged Donny in a discussion about the garden that had Roque and Clay looking out of place and uncomfortable.

"I'm gonna chase Baja around the yard for a bit." Jake said, heading for where Beth was playing.

Cougar opted to sink in to his preferred lawn chair and listen as Donny told Pooch about how Jake and Cougar had torn up the old stone patio and fire pit the last time they were there. A new fire pit had been built, further from the house and garage, angled to shelter its contents from the wind, and away from most of the plant beds. Cougar was always rather touched that Jess and Donny had listened to Jake and Cougar when they had expressed displeasure at how wasteful lawns were.

"Didn't figure you for the type to do gardening, Cougar." Roque said, voice gruff with how out of place he clearly felt in such a domestic setting.

Cougar licked his lips as he considered how best to respond. He got up from his chair and went in to the house, looking for a photo he knew was in the main hallway. He brought it outside and knelt between Roque and Clay's chairs to show them. The photo was from Jess and Donny's first few days in the house. Jess had taken a picture of Jake napping in the backyard with Beth on his chest. The yard had been full of dull green grass, weeds, a few half dead bushes, and the old fire pit.

The backyard had since been redesigned so that the grass only served as a path through the large hexagonal plant beds. The paths were wide enough to get a wheelbarrow or reel mower through without too much difficulty, but the main focus was to actually use the land. Some of the plant beds were vegetable patches, others carried berry bushes. There was an apple tree in the bed at the very centre of the yard, and a pear tree in one closer to the garage. They had consulted with a beekeeper who lived a block away to make sure that all the flowering plants would be good for the local bee population. The wooden fence was covered in moonflowers and honeysuckles. The front yard might look like every other neatly trimmed suburban lawn on the block, but the backyard was full of life and personality even in the cool fall weather they were having.

"It is good sometimes to stop and build." Cougar said quietly. "To remind yourself that you are capable of more than just destruction."

Roque and Clay looked between the photo and the yard as it was now. Slowly, Cougar saw them begin to realize that it was not just a garden, it was a symbol. Putting down roots, both metaphorically and literally, helped both Cougar and Jake remember what they were fighting for. In some instances, what they were fighting to get back to.
While the three of them were ruminating on the symbolism of Jess and Donny's backyard, Jake approached them, walking mostly bent over so that Beth could comfortably hold his hand. Beth seemed curious, but kept ducking behind Jake's legs as they made their way over. As adventurous as Beth could be when she was excited, she could be just as shy when she calmed down. She clearly wanted to come closer, but the fact that Clay and Roque were strangers tempered her enthusiasm, hence the Jake-shaped shield.

"Colonel, Captain." Jake said, nodding to each of them. "Beth here said something very important just now and has asked me to repeat it to you. She noticed that neither of you have smiled since you got here, and she's worried that you aren't enjoying yourselves. If you guys are up for it, she'd like to tell you a joke to brighten your day."

"Of course!" Clay said, instantly charmed by the shy girl peeking out from behind Jake's leg.

"That sounds like just the thing we need." Roque said as gently as he was able to. Cougar had noticed in the past that any time they dealt with children, Roque seemed to make an effort to scowl less and speak more softly than usual. Cougar privately wondered how many children Roque had accidentally frightened before developing that habit.

Beth shuffled out from behind Jake's legs and stood in front of Clay and Roque. She glanced nervously at Cougar and he gave her a wink and a grin. Her courage seemed to bolster, and she drew in a deep breath before asking,

"What kind of lion lives in the lawn?"

Clay and Roque looked at each other, amusement and curiosity in their eyes.

"We don't know. What kind?" Clay asked, turning back to Beth.

"A dandy-lion!" Beth said, smiling shyly.

Clay's jaw dropped and he stared at Beth like she was the most adorable thing he had ever seen. Cougar was familiar with that feeling. Roque started laughing quietly and nodding his head. Jake was grinning proudly in a way that told Cougar that Beth had been the one to come up with the joke.

Seeing that everyone was smiling, even Pooch and Donny, Beth nodded, clearly pleased with herself. She then darted forward and hugged both Roque and Clay before running back to the small sandbox near the garage.

"That," Jess said as she stepped through the back door, "is one of the cutest things I've ever seen her do."

"She is so adorable!" Pooch breathed. Judging by the look on Pooch's face, Cougar could safely assume that if he had spoken any louder his words would have been a delighted squeal.

Donny leaned forward and jokingly whispered, "Get your own!"

"Jolene and I are talkin' about it, man." Pooch said, running one hand over his bald head. "We bought a house a few months back, didn't need a mortgage for it between my combat pay and Jolene's parents meeting us halfway. They weren't able to get us anything when we got married, they were in a tight spot after a work accident. When they heard about us putting the money down for a house now they wanted to help so we wouldn't blow all of our savings. We've still got a good chunk left after renovations and everything. The only things stopping us are our careers. Jolene wants a bit more security, more of an assurance that she'll actually get maternity leave and still
have a job when she gets back. As for me, well. I figure that when we do have a kid I'll just wait out my contract. Give the team time to get used to the idea, and Coleman can find them a decent replacement if he has advance warning. I don't wanna leave anyone in the lurch, but I also don't want my kid to not have a father."

"I think I speak for the whole team when I say that we understand that decision, but we'll hate to see you go." Clay said sincerely.

Cougar, Roque, and Jake nodded in agreement while they tried to wrap their heads around the fact that Pooch would one day leave them. A somber mood began to settle over them, only to be broken by Jake.

"Just so you're aware, when Clay says we'll hate to see you go? It's because you're pretty fugly from the back."

The adults broke out in laughter. Pooch pretended to be offended, and the situation turned from subdued contemplation to lighthearted banter between friends.

The day passed fairly quickly between helping Jess and Donny with the fall garden maintenance and watching after Beth. Jake managed to capture video of Pooch and Cougar dancing with Beth standing on their feet after lunch. In the evening after Beth's bath Cougar and Jake were selected for bedtime story duty, much to the team's amusement. When they were ready to return to their hotel, Donny presented them with three casseroles he had cooked the day before, insisting that they could not spend five months living off of takeout. Jess and Jake took a moment to hold each other close, whispering reassurances to each other that Cougar did his best not to overhear. After pressing a final kiss to Jess’s hair, Jake turned to Donny and jokingly dipped him as they hugged, making everyone laugh. The team departed, and Cougar would swear that everyone seemed lighter for having visited.

Fortified by the visit and the casseroles, the rest of their stay in Concord flew by with minimal trouble. They made stops in three other cities in New Hampshire before moving on to New York, using the travel time and hours that they weren't on shift at the booth to focus on getting their coursework done. Jake used their rest day in Manhattan to take Cougar and Pooch sightseeing, showing them the apartment building he had all but squatted in with seven other people. They stopped in at the diner Jake had worked at before he met Gerry and began moving through several states before settling in Fayetteville. The diner was honestly more frightening than some of the dive bars the Losers had been in. Very good smoked meat sandwiches, though.

In Springfield, Pennsylvania they gave Pooch half of the trip off so that he could be with Jolene as much as possible while the Losers looked after Bailey. Jake took the opportunity to train Bailey to fetch bottles from fridges. Cougar had no doubt that if they had stayed longer then Jake would have taught the dog to use the microwave as well. Jolene expressed her thanks by returning Pooch to them on their last day there loaded with baked goods. Pooch had also acquired, courtesy of Jolene, a small dashboard Chihuahua he referred to as Mojito, and took to ranting at the dog as he was driving. The behavior was a cause of concern for the team until they realized that ranting at the small plastic dog seemed to decrease Pooch’s road rage exponentially. By the time the Losers got to Maryland they decided unanimously that Mojito should be brought in to the field on their next deployment.
In Maryland there was an incident where Jake, Pooch, and Cougar accidentally horrified an elderly woman. After spending so much time in a cramped van with only each other and their homework for company, tensions had begun climbing. In an effort to prevent anyone getting stabbed, bitten, thrown out of a moving vehicle, or punished with CAPE, Clay had insisted that he and Roque take the first day’s shift at the booth to give everyone some much needed time away from each other.

While the three of them were out browsing through a grocery store, the elderly woman approached Jake as he was dissecting the ingredients list on a can of soup, smiled kindly, and spoke the words that doomed her.

“Such a nice looking young man. Jesus loves you.”

Cougar stilled, and waited to see whether Jake’s need to let loose his pent up sass on someone who could not order him to do pushups would outweigh his desire to be polite and friendly to people.

“Well that’s very kind of you to say.” Jake said.

Cougar let out a half breath in relief, only to nearly choke at Jake’s next words.

“But I already knew that. That’s why I married him, after all.”

From the corner of his eye, Cougar could see Pooch further down the aisle turn and stare at Jake in confusion. Jake himself turned to Cougar with a bright, sunny smile.

“Isn’t that right, Jesús?”

The lady’s jaw dropped as she stared at Jake. Pooch’s expression was similar, though coloured with a considerable amount more horror. Cougar was frozen, staring at Jake for a few long seconds before he gave a mental shrug and decided to roll with it. He drew his arm back and slapped Jake right across his ass with a satisfyingly loud crack.

“Awww, muffin.” Jake cooed, batting his eyelashes at Cougar.

The old woman’s mouth closed, her teeth clacking together audibly. She blinked several times before turning around and leaving. Pooch turned and started banging his head on a nearby shelf of soup cans.

“You’re going to hell.” he said, voice strangled. “You’re both going to hell for doing that, and I’m going to hell for thinking it was funny.”

“Oh, Pooch.” Jake said, planting his hands on his hips. “You’re not going to hell for that. You’re going to hell for swiping Clay’s girlfriend’s bra three years back, using it to sling rocks and break the windows of Roque’s car, then leaving the bra there as planted evidence so Roque would make Clay break up with her.”

“I did that for all of us!” Pooch cried.

“You did, and don’t think we don’t appreciate that.” Jake said soothingly. “But you gotta admit that caused a cold war between them for almost three months.”

Cougar shuddered, thinking of the fighting and bickering Roque and Clay had engaged in. It had
only truly ended when Cougar had gotten in to that altercation with Private Warrick. Banding together to look after the team had mended much of their relationship, though Roque had gotten noticeably testier about Clay’s choice in girlfriends since then.

“That was an unforeseen complication.” Pooch insisted.

“Indeed it was. And I’m sure that we’re all glad the whole ordeal is behind us. Now, how’s about we move away from the soups and go find some snacks.”

They wandered through the aisles for some time, each making increasingly odd recommendations for snacks they should try. By the time they reached the dairy section the three of them were trying to gross each other out by suggesting the strangest combinations of food. As they walked down the frozen aisle, Jake began complaining about the slap Cougar had landed on his ass.

“No, you went and made it tender. I can feel my pants shift across the skin of my ass while I walk. If I dropped my pants I’d probably be able to see a bright red hand print.”


“Good point. I wouldn’t want all the ice cream to melt from being that close to so much hotness.” Jake replied, grinning at Pooch’s groan. “But seriously. It’s a good thing that we’re not gonna be locked in the car for hours because I don’t know if I could stand sitting for so long.”

Cougar frowned minutely, and began looking for clues that he had genuinely hurt Jake. Catching Cougar’s subtle assessment, Jake grinned and knocked shoulders with him to let him know that Jake mostly just felt like complaining and being silly.

“Jay, I swear if you get us kicked out of a grocery store…” Pooch threatened.

“I’m not the one responsible for the damage to my delectable derriere, Cougs is. He should totally buy me something cool to sit on, make sure my ass heals nicely.” Jake insisted.

“It was a smack. You don’t need to worry about anything healing.” Pooch said.

“Kiss better, then?” Jake suggested before turning, bending over, and presenting his ass to Cougar. “Come on, kiss and make it better, muffin.”

A choking sound at the end of the aisle dragged Cougar’s attention away from his best friend’s ass. The woman from earlier stood there, staring at them in horror. Cougar felt his face heat as he blushed harder than he had since he was thirteen.

“Ma’am.” Jake said, tossing the woman a sloppy salute, pink in the face but still bent over with his back curved to display his ass as indecently as possible.

The woman dropped her shopping basket and crossed herself before turning and walking away. As Cougar was watching her rapidly retreating form he heard a clattering sound and several objects fall. He and Jake turned in unison to see Pooch knocking milk off of shelves in an effort to climb into the dairy fridge. Pooch had just managed to crawl through when they heard a reedy teenaged voice speak from the back store.

“Uh, sir? You can’t be back here?”

“I need new friends.” Pooch said, voice distraught.

“I, uh. Okay.” the teen said.
Jake looked back over his shoulder, still presenting his ass to Cougar, and said, “You know, at this point I can’t even blame him.”

It took Cougar one hundred and thirty seven seconds to drag them both from the store.

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From Maryland, the team traveled through Virginia, and West Virginia, slowly making their way towards Texas. In Kentucky they met Clay's ex-wife, a glorious spitfire of a woman who screamed at Clay, slapped him with a brick, and eventually dragged the Colonel home with her. Four days later they made a discreet stop at a clinic and Clay got a diagnosis and treatment for a sexually transmitted yeast infection.

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They found themselves in Tennessee around Christmas time, with a few days off since it was the holidays. The Losers used the time to put in one last push and complete all of their coursework. After submitting everything, they hit up a bar to celebrate. They promptly got in a fight with a local gang when one of the members confused Roque for one of his cousins. The team rounded out the night by taking the fight back to the gang's hideout, breaking up a dog fighting ring before alerting the authorities and leaving before anyone showed up.

High off the feeling of accomplishment the fighting had given them, the Losers gathered in Roque's hotel room to patch each other up and enjoy the satisfaction of a job well done. The talk ranged from boasting about what had just happened, to laughing at the idea that there was someone who looked enough like Roque that they could be mistaken for each other.

"Everybody used to have trouble telling Charlie and me apart." Roque said, grinning almost fondly. "We used to pull a kind of doublemint act, dress the same and talk the same, see if we could confuse people. We got away with all kinds of shit because we were too aggravating to deal with. Later on it bit us in the ass. He joined the gang our family was involved with in Baltimore, while I was undecided about it."

"So people from rival gangs would target you when they were aiming for him." Pooch said, applying an ice pack to his knee.

"Yeah. And the shithead who attacked me and got me arrested was someone Charlie had sold some bad quality dope to. Don't know why we didn't find any trouble when we were in Maryland." Roque said, frowning.

"Inter-gang exchange program?" Pooch suggested. "Maybe the guy who started shit tonight had too many people after him, so they sent him here in the hopes he'd stay out of trouble."

"Maybe. Not that it did him any fuckin' good." Roque said, leaning over to swat Clay's hands away from where they were trying to clumsily bandage his own forearm.

"What kind of pranks did you guys pull?" Jake asked.

"Best one was probably the time we covered out school sign in lunch meat. We switched off
talking and what name we would respond to so much that the principle gave up disciplining us and
locked himself in his office so he could get drunk." Roque said as he wrapped Clay's arm properly.

"Kind of wish we could pull that off when Coleman's disciplining us for something." Clay mused.

"We get away with plenty as it is." Jake pointed out.

"It amazes me that they still have no idea who turned half the base pink and sparkly." Pooch said.

"Does it? That's odd. I seem to recall you and I pulling off a much worse prank and not getting
catched." Jake said, eyes bright with mischief.

"The McGibbons Fiasco was small compared to the scale of the Sparkly Kool Aid Incident." Pooch
pointed out. "Also, McGibbons never reported what happened. Only record of it is his
medical file, which indicates everything was self-inflicted."

"What the fuck is the McGibbons Fiasco?" Roque asked.

Pooch and Jake shared a look filled with mischief and amusement.

"It's not the nicest prank I've ever played, but that's mostly because the target took things to a very
unexpected place." Jake said, biting his lip.

"If you tell the story, I will share the time I accidentally ran a person out of their own home." Cougar
bargained as he reached over to press an ice pack to the knot at the back of Jake's head.

"That sounds like a fair exchange." Jake said, sitting forward to tell the story, one hand balancing
the ice pack. "So. As you guys know, Pooch and I were on the same Ops team for a few months
after we both graduated Q course. The first CO our team had was a right bastard that I ended up
punching after he tried to bully someone on the team in to giving him their sister's phone number.
He ended up resigning for psychological reasons that totally have absolutely nothing to do with me
moving all his shit one inch to the left and rigging The Mexican Hat Dance to play very quietly
every time he was alone for more than two minutes. The new CO we got was Major McGibbons.
Some of you may be more familiar with his nickname: McGiblets."

"Wait, shit. You guys played a prank on McGiblets?" Roque interrupted. "And you're still alive?"

Cougar felt his eyebrows raise in surprise. McGiblets was well know in the rumor mill for being a
very strict Commanding Officer with a high turnover rate on his team. Most people did not know
McGiblets' actual name, just that speaking his nickname within earshot of most officers had a
chance of landing you with latrine duty and CAPE for some trumped up offenses. The general
consensus was that McGiblets had had a stick shoved up his ass at some point and it had taken
root.

"Short version? Yes. Wanna hear the long version?" Jake said, grinning.

"Fuck yes. I need new gossip to bring to Coleman. It helps appease his wife when he gets dragged
out of bed at oh-dark-thirty to put out fires." Clay said.

"Awesome! So, McGibbons was not so bad back then, but he did have a tendency to pull rank for
the stupidest shit. Like sending people to get him takeout, or making people write his reports for
him. And, of course, farting." Jake said.

"Farting?" Roque asked incredulously.
"Fuck, man. Every goddamned morning he'd start off with this huge goddamned fart." Pooch groused, shifting in his chair to get more comfortable. "Whether it was barracks or tents he'd wake up, fart, listen to everyone complain, then get up. Most of the team tried asking him to stop, or at least hold it until he was in the bathroom or something. McGibbons said that if he had to put up with our shit, which there was very little of since the team got along and listened to his orders, then we had to put up with his. Any objections and he'd start threatening CAPE."

"That went on for a couple of months, and then we overheard our XO talking with another teammate, saying that if McGibbons kept it up he'd fart his guts out. Which gave me and Pooch an idea." Jake said. He took a sip of water before continuing. "This happened around thanksgiving time, and the base had those turkey dinners going. So me and Pooch snuck in at night and grabbed some giblets from the kitchens. We warmed them up a bit, made sure there were no hard boney pieces. And then we stuck them in McGibbons's underwear while he was sleeping off a night at the bar.

"The next morning was business as usual, with McGibbons waking us all up with his gas. He shuffled off in to the bathroom. A minute later there was this shriek of horror that had me and Pooch struggling not to laugh and give everything away. We figured he'd realize what happened after a minute or two and come out all furious and the team would get a laugh. As far as Pooch and I were concerned, our part in the prank was done."

"But that's not what happened?" Roque asked.

"Nope!" Jake said, shaking his head. "McGibbons stayed in the bathroom for another fifteen minutes. When he came out he was white as a sheet and pulled our XO aside. He said 'You were right! They fell out! They fucking fell out! I had to stuff my guts back in!'"

"WHAT?!" Clay shouted, eyes wide with horror.

Cougar felt his jaw drop with shock while Roque made an odd strangled noise.

"Major McGibbons," Pooch said carefully and slowly as he tried not to laugh, "shoved what he thought were his intestines right up his ass."

"Our ever practical and not hungover XO insisted on taking McGibbons to the medical center. They both came back several hours later. McGibbons was furious. He spent weeks trying to figure out who had done it, and in the end he just slowly got rid of everybody one by one." Jake said.

"That... is outstanding." Clay said, face still blank with shock.

"That is fucking horrifying." Roque said.

"The med staff ended up being the ones to christen him McGiblets." Pooch said.

"I don't know if that makes it better or worse." Roque said.

"Both." Cougar suggested.

"Yeah." Clay agreed.

"So. That's the McGibbons Fiasco. Now what's this about Cougs running people out of their houses?" Jake asked.

"Nothing like your story." Cougar said, grinning.
"For the sake of humanity, that's probably for the best." Pooch said.

"Mi hermanita, Belicia, was dating this boy. She loved him, gave him her virginity, only to find out he was using her as a side piece because his real girlfriend was making him wait. When she found out, she wanted revenge. I offered to take care of it, since I had learned who his real girlfriend was and felt guilty for not alerting Belicia to her identity." Cougar said.

"Who was the other girlfriend?" Jake asked.

"Our oldest sister Anna." Cougar admitted.

Jake gasped, wide eyed. The team as a whole reared back in shock.

"Oh my god. What an asshole!" Pooch hissed.

"Christ. That's something even I wouldn't do." Clay admitted.

"It did not help that Anna was widely regarded at school as the more beautiful of the two. She takes after the Torres side of the family, fine bones and delicate features. Belicia was always taunted for not having a flat stomach. She only weighed fifteen pounds more than Anna, but her face was rounder, more of an Alvarez shape."

"Speaking as someone who was baby faced and chubby till age twenty-three, I would like to tell all the people who made her life difficult to go fuck themselves." Pooch said.

"So what did you do to avenge Belicia's honor?" Jake asked.

"I waited until his whole family was out, snuck in, and hid shrimp in the curtain rods of his room." Cougar said, smirking.

"That makes no sense." Roque said.

"It makes perfect sense." Jake argued. "It's subtle and a genius move, really. Let me guess: the shrimp slowly started to rot in the curtain rods?"

Cougar nodded, enjoying the sounds of disgust his team made. "The smell built up slowly, working its way in to his home. It clung to his clothes and everyone at school talked how bad he smelled all the time. Anna dumped him. His parents hired exterminators and cleaning crews, but the odor persisted. Eventually, they decided there was nothing they could do, so they moved to a new house the next town over."

"Did they bring the curtain rods with them?" Jake asked.

Cougar nodded, smiling when his teammates laughed rather evilly.

"Fuck, Cougar. Rotting shellfish. That is some insidious revenge material there." Roque said. A moment later he asked, "Mind if I borrow that idea sometime?"

Cougar shook his head as the other Losers laughed.

"Before anyone gets any ideas, I would like us all to agree that we won't use any methods discussed here on each other." Clay said.

"Oh, hell no. You have any idea what that would do if we all started pranking each other like that? It'd be war. Only with glitter and exploding taxidermy instead of weapons and bloodshed." Jake said.
"Yeah. Let's all agree to not target each other, okay?" Pooch said, eyeing Jake nervously. Cougar nodded, hoping that exploding taxidermy pieces were not something that actually existed.

"On that note, I'm gonna head to bed." Roque said, slowly pushing up from his chair.

"Sleep's probably a good idea." Jake agreed. "How long are we staying in this town again?"

"Till just after New Years. Then we get back to it. We should be in Dallas by late February, and back to base in March." Clay said.

"Alright. Tomorrow I'll head out and see if I can find a decent bakery, then." Jake said as he stood up.

"What do you need a bakery for?" Pooch asked, stretching his knee before attempting to stand.

"Cougar's birthday is two days from now. I've already got his gift, but picking out a cake four months in advance usually involves problems with edibility." Jake said.

"Fuck. Knew I was forgetting something." Clay said, wincing.

"I'll drag Cougs cake shopping while you three look for gifts." Jake said, smiling.

"I don't need anything." Cougar said quietly.

"Birthdays aren't about need, Cougs. They're a celebration. You beat last year's record for consecutive days lived. For that you deserve recognition. And cake." Jake insisted.

"Apparently there's a lot to do tomorrow, so I'm off to bed now." Pooch said, heading for the door.

"If you guys avoid any of that 'combined Christmas and birthday gifts' bullshit, I won't tell Jolene and Mrs. Coleman that you all forgot." Jake said, grinning mischievously when the other three flinched in unison.

"Fuck. Fine." Clay growled on his way out.

"Get the hell out of my room already." Roque grumbled.

On the way back to their room, Cougar quietly said, "I don't need anything special for my birthday, Jake."

"I know. But I also know it fucking sucks to have people completely forget your birthday. And you..." Jake trailed off for a moment, frowning. He stopped walking and turned to Cougar, expression sincere. "You deserve better than to be forgotten, and you deserve better than the inherent cheapness and laziness of being given combination gifts. You just... deserve better."

Cougar stood there, stunned. He had never put much thought in to his birthday after he had joined the army, after he stopped having a family that would celebrate it with him. For most of his birthdays since befriending Jake they were in the field, or just returned and trying to get somewhere to celebrate the holidays with family, meaning he would wake up to a promise of gifts and cake when they returned, and usually found half his chores done. It never occurred to him that the lack of a proper celebration had bothered his friend so much. Unable to formulate a reply, Cougar leaned forward and hugged Jake tightly.

"Not the intended outcome, But I'm certainly not going to complain." Jake said, hugging back.
Cougar snorted and squeezed Jake a bit tighter, wondering how he had ever managed without this wonderful person in his life.

"Besides, you're turning twenty-eight. Gotta celebrate while we can. Once you hit thirty the warranty expires and parts start falling off. We'll have to trade you in."

Cougar huffed a laugh and turned his head, blowing a raspberry in to the crook of Jake's neck to make him yelp and squirm.

In the morning, Jake researched local bakeries and found one with good reviews. They went in, ordered a five layer chocolate cake for the next day, and bought half a dozen éclairs. They spent a few hours eating them in between parkouring the city before heading back to the hotel. The rest of the day was spent watching Ghibli movies on Jake's laptop.

Cougar woke late on his birthday to the smell of room service breakfast. Jake brought Cougar a cup of coffee when he noticed Cougar was awake, and set things up so that Cougar could eat comfortably in bed. Cougar treated himself to a long bath after breakfast, using some of the eucalyptus bath gel Jake kept supplying him with, and was feeling pleasantly relaxed by the time they met up with the others. Clay had gotten Cougar a bottle of bourbon, and Roque gave him a new knife. From Pooch he got a scarf that he would be able to take on missions, while Jake gave him a heavy looking skull ring. When Cougar raised an eyebrow, Jake explained.

"I noticed that you don't wear watches, the only neck type stuff you like are your dog tags and your rosary. The leather bracelets you like were all given to you by Fernanda so they're irreplaceable. You favor heavy rings as decoration, protection, and weaponry, but you don't seem to have any favorites or sentimental attachment to any of them, so it seemed safest to add to that collection. And I certainly wasn't about to infringe on the sanctity of The Hat."

Cougar laughed softly and put the ring on, unsurprised that it fit perfectly. When Jake planned something he always paid attention to the details.

The day passed surprisingly quickly considering that they did not really do anything. They found an arcade that was still open despite it being Christmas Eve. Pooch and Clay spent a lot of time absorbed in a racing game, while Roque surprised everyone by getting sucked in by a Pac Man machine. Jake managed to find a Jurassic Park themed shooter that they played until an air hockey table became available. From the arcade they went to a nearby Shawarma restaurant for an early dinner before hitting up a bar.

The team had an understanding going in to the bar. It was Cougar's birthday, and it was Christmas Eve. None of them wanted to spend the night or the next day in jail, the hospital, or rescuing anyone from a one night stand. It made for a fairly stress-free night, not having to worry about one of them getting in to a bar fight. Cougar played a bit of pool with Pooch before settling in a booth with the team for some poker.

After a few hands, the team spread out again. Pooch went outside to call Jolene during her shift break at the hospital. Roque and Clay took their own turn at the pool tables. Cougar and Jake flirted with a couple of girls, offering to teach them poker. Both of the girls explained that they already had boyfriends, but relaxed and joined them at their table when Jake assured them that all he and Cougar wanted was an enjoyable, hassle-free evening. The flirting continued while they played, but it was kept light and was meant only in fun.

When Pooch came back to the booth, his mouth was twisted in a way Cougar had come to
recognize meant something bad was about to happen, but at least it would funny.

"You know that nice, calming evening you wanted for your birthday, Cougs? It might end soon." he said.

"¿Qué?" Cougar asked, frowning.

"Look over my left shoulder." Pooch said.


"Is that a bad thing?" one of the girls asked.

"He has terrible taste in women. His last girlfriend put a bomb in his car. He also promised not to flirt with anyone. He knows we want a quiet night, damnit!" Jake said, extricating himself from the booth. He took a moment to mess up his shirt and hair, skewing his glasses. "Alright, be back in a minute. Pooch, come save me when it looks like Clay's gonna punch me."

"When? Not if?" Pooch asked.

"I have a plan," Jake said, grinning.

"Oh, shit." Pooch said, wincing.

They watched as Jake made his way around the edge of the bar, keeping hidden from Clay and the unsuspecting woman. Jake seemed to take a moment to rumple his appearance further and adopted an approximation of a drunken stagger. Jake stumbled to Clay's table, nearly crashing in to it, and ended up sprawling in a chair next to Clay, partially draped over the Colonel.

"Haaaay! Itsh Bobby! Hi Bobby!" Jake slurred. "Remember me? Cuz I remember you! I was sho nervoush, but you jusht- you were sho nishe and calmed me down an you were sho helpful!"

Pooch groaned and scrubbed one hand over his face while Clay looked equal parts terrified and furious. The woman sitting with Clay was clearly mouthing the word 'Bobby' and looking confused. Roque's grin could be seen from the other end of the bar. Roque loved it when Jake's plans to cockblock Clay came with a healthy dose of embarrassment.

"I- uh. This is. I don't know this guy." Clay stammered.

"Shure you dooo! We met at the clinic! I wash really -hic!- really nervoush, I-I-I don't do well with doctorsh. But thish guy-" Jake slung an arm around Clay's neck, "he told me allll about what'd happen an if it'd hurt. He's a real pro at clinic visitsh. An he's sho nishe! You jusht-" Jake started to tear up a bit, "-You meet the nishest people at the STD clinic."

Cougar sank down in his seat in the booth, knowing that if he saw Clay's face right then he would laugh and the whole thing would be blown. His shoulders shook and he reached one hand up to cover his mouth while Clay stammered through a few denials. Cougar barely caught the motion of Pooch moving to intervene before Clay could pull himself together enough to deck their tech and comms officer.

"Okay, Ted. I think you've had enough fun for tonight." Pooch said.

"But itsh Chrishmash!" Jake protested.

"Not for another few hours. But we need to get going if we're gonna be back in time to make sure
Santa leaves the good shit." Pooch said.

"Truuue! Okie dokie! Help me up!" Jake said. When they were standing, he slurred. "You're nishe too, ya know? No crabsh tho, so you didn't keep me company at the clinic like Bobby did. You're shtill a good guy, tho."

"That's good to know." Pooch said, choking on laughter as he steered them through the crowd. They left through the front door, and Cougar knew they would circle around and come back in through the back door.

"I, I'm not. I was never at a clinic. My name's not even Bobby." Clay said, nearly stuttering with rage.

"Hey, Bob! Quit your flirting, we gotta go. Your wife will have our asses if we don't get back soon." Roque said, dropping Clay's jacket in his lap.

The woman at the table gasped with outrage and left, Clay's protests falling on deaf ears. Cougar slumped forward on the table, pillowing his head on his arms as he laughed. He could hear the girls at the table with him giggling quietly as well.

When he had composed himself enough to look up, Jake was standing in front of the table, chatting merrily with one of the girls, Cougar's coat draped over one arm.

"It was lovely meeting you, both of you! We had a great time, but we need to be going while our CO is still too angry to hunt us down. I took care of the tab, so your current drinks are paid for. Anything from here on is up to you girls, okay?"

Cougar slid out of the booth, taking his coat from Jake. He tipped his hat to the girls and followed his friend out in to the night.

Cougar was expecting some kind of swift and terrible retribution to befall Jake the next day, Christmas or not. He was surprised when Clay turned up only to give them their gifts, get his, and wish them a happy holiday. When Roque stopped by that afternoon, he explained that he had reminded Clay about the promise they had all made to let Cougar have a quiet birthday. Clay had felt guilty for nearly ruining that after Jake had emailed him a copy of the woman's rap sheet. It turned out that Clay had limits, and the semi-estranged wife of a minor mob boss was one of them.

Whatever the reason, Cougar was glad for a quiet Christmas. The gifts he received had all been practical and well thought out. Roque had gotten him a new whetstone and a few gun cleaning supplies. Pooch had given him a fine set of lock picks designed to be hidden in long hair. Clay had managed to get his hands on a bottle of Booker's Bourbon, and Cougar spent several hours slowly savoring some of it while he and Jake tried out the Guild Wars Prophecies game that Jake had gifted him with.

In the evening they had a video chat with Jess, Donny, and Beth. They had received their gifts in the mail a week earlier and had dutifully waited until that morning to open them. Beth was ecstatic about the princess themed monster truck toy Jake had managed to find. Apparently, the doll Cougar had sent fit in the front seat of it perfectly and had thus been named Winnie the Pooch. Jess looked lighter than the last time Cougar had seen her, having had a few months to deal with the sudden passing of her parents. Donny assured them that Gertrude was alive and well, and was
actually a very good listener when he needed to rant about clients in the privacy of his office.

Unable to call Fernanda since she was with their family for the holidays, Cougar settled for emailing her and their *abuelos* and turning in early with Jake. As Cougar drifted off listening to Jake's deep breathing coming from the other bed, he felt a deep sense of calm and happiness that made him fall asleep with a smile on his face.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings:

-Murder. Jake and Cougar commit premeditated murder on 2 civilians.
-Mention of drug use and alcoholism.
-Mention of rotting shellfish.
-Mention of past infidelity from one OC to another OC.
-Mention of an OC stuffing giblets up his butt.
-Mention of a pet tarantula.
-Three race related jokes. Specifically, Jake makes a joke 3 separate times revolving around the fact that Cougar is Mexican. It's not meant maliciously, and Cougar does not take offense at any time. If anyone feels that these jokes are inappropriate or offensive, please let me know.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Finally got this one wrapped up! Sorry for the delay, it's been a really hectic time over here.

Trigger warnings in the end notes as always.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In late February the Losers made it to the last stop on their recruitment tour: Dallas, Texas. They were scheduled to man booths at several high schools in the city, meaning they would be in town for nearly three weeks instead of the usual four or five days. Cougar found himself toying with the idea of contacting his Tia Juanita. She had moved to Dallas a few years after Cougar left, both for the better job opportunities and to grant her some distance from her twin, Cougar's father. She had always done her best to be supportive of Cougar, and had been one of the very few to try and talk to his parents after they disowned him. Cougar sometimes wondered if his parents' willingness to sign his enlistment forms had something to do with getting Juanita off their backs. Before he was able to decide anything, however, the choice was taken from him.

Their second week in Dallas had been a repetition of the first, hot and filled with thinly veiled racism. The Losers had worked out a shift rotation at the booth to make sure that either Jensen or Clay was there to discreetly call people out on their disrespectful attitudes without their words being brushed off as being 'too sensitive'. They had also started asking for civilians' security clearances any time one of them asked why Cougar had long hair or why he or Roque had a goatee. It saved them from having yet another conversation where they had to dance around the fact that they were Special Forces soldiers who needed to look like civilians when they traveled the globe killing people.

Cougar, Pooch, and Jake were enjoying some free time, browsing through a small shop when Jake received a text from Clay.

[From: Clay Feb/27/08 11:58 am]

bring us some mexican

"So this is probably a request for food, but there's nothing here that actually specifies that Clay is asking for food. All he says is to bring them 'some mexican'." Jake said.

"Jay, you've got that evil plotting face on. Why do you have your evil plotting face on?" Pooch asked worriedly.
"Because I love unspecific orders that I can interpret as I want. That, and we happen to have a Mexican with us right now." Jake said, turning to grin at Cougar.

Cougar knew that look, it almost always ended in trouble. That look resulted in geese being trapped in offices and Furbies being launched from trebuchets.

That look was responsible for Cougar agreeing to have his wrists, knees, and ankles duct taped to a pole that Jake and Pooch carried on their shoulders, and Cougar's scarf being used as a makeshift gag for purely aesthetic reasons. They carried Cougar across the parking lot like a prized boar they had hunted. Jake and Pooch matched their steps in a military march as they made their way to the booth Clay and Roque were manning. When Clay caught sight of them he did a double take and his jaw dropped.

Jake and Pooch pulled up next to the booth and saluted Clay.

"Jensen." Clay said from between grit teeth. "Jensen, what are you doing?"

"Sir! Filling your request, sir!" Jake said, acting every inch the professional soldier he usually was not.

"Explain." Clay demanded, growing red in the face. Cougar could not see the reactions of the people Clay had been speaking to, but Roque's obvious efforts to smother his smile gave Cougar a good idea of what their expressions might be.

"I received your text, sir, asking for 'some mexican'. So we grabbed the closest Mexican at hand and came here to deliver him to you!" Jake explained.

"I asked for Mexican to eat." Clay growled.

"Sir!" Jake exclaimed, rearing back in shock. "Cannibalism is wrong!"

Roque lost the battle with his amusement and burst out laughing. He clapped one hand over his mouth and ducked down behind the booth trying to smother his laughter. Clay closed his eyes and blew out an aggrieved sigh while Jake kept talking.

"I will have no part in such a despicable crime!" he said, jostling the pole as he started moving away from the booth.

They made their way back to where they had parked the van and gently lowered Cougar in to the back so they could start cutting the duct tape off.

"Jay, man." Pooch said, grinning. "If looks could kill."

"It was too good of an opportunity, Poochman. It would have been a crime to pass it up!" Jake said, gently unpeeling the duct tape from Cougar's wrists.

"So this is what you do in the army?" came a dry, amused voice that Cougar had not heard in a decade.

Looking up, Cougar saw his Tia Juanita standing near the van, one hand securely holding her purse close while the other rested on her hip. Her hair was shorter than it had been the last time Cougar had seen her, but it was still the same dark brown as his own, as Fernanda's.

"I'm sorry, can we help you?" Jake asked, angling his body to keep himself between Cougar and, as far as Jake knew, an overly familiar stranger.
"Esta bien." Cougar said, realizing his silence had lasted too long for his friend's comfort.

Jake turned and looked Cougar right in the eye, searching for truth in his words.

"Es mi Tía Juanita." Cougar said quietly.

Jake relaxed, shifting from bodyguard to supportive friend smoothly. Cougar could see Juanita raise an eyebrow and knew he would likely be explaining things to her. Cougar got out of the van as soon as Pooch finished taking the tape off of his knees and ankles and approached Juanita, who immediately opened her arms for a hug. Cougar had been about three inches shorter and a good deal less muscular the last time Juanita had hugged him, and the differences left him feeling a little bit disjointed and out of place.

"Es bueno verte, Carlito. Han pasado demasiados años." Juanita said softly.

"Lo siento." Cougar said.

"Sin disculpas. Que no fue tu culpa." she said, stepping back. She gently cupped Cougar's face with one hand and looked at himsearchingly.

Cougar turned away, not wanting to watch as her keen eyes spotted all the ways in which he had changed from Carlos to Cougar. He looked at Jake and Pooch, silently hoping one of them would have an idea of what to do next.

"We're gonna go actually grab some lunch now. Why don't you take that time to catch up with your aunt?" Pooch suggested.

"We'll text check-ins and let you know when we need you." Jake said reassuringly.

Cougar nodded, knowing what Jake meant. Jake would text every half hour, and if Cougar needed a rescue then Jake would be there for him. If Cougar needed to get away, Jake would text back with an emergency so that Cougar could excuse himself politely. If Cougar failed to reply within ten minutes, Jake would turn on the GPS chip in Cougar's hat and track him down.

Cougar followed Juanita to her car. As they drove to a place she said had good tamales she kept up a light chatter, mostly commenting on other drivers. Once seated in the restaurant, she leaned forward and asked,

"Is it that you don't want to be here with me?"

"Qué?" Cougar asked, confused.

"You are so quiet, Carlito. If this is too much, or too sudden, please say something. I do not wish to make you uncomfortable." Juanita said.

"I am quiet now, Juanita. It is as much a part of me as anything else." Cougar said, hoping he would not have to spell out that his PTSD damn near made him mute some days.

"You were such a noisy, vivacious child, Carlito." Juanita said, frowning. "Your letters to me are as empty as they can be while still telling me that you are alright. The only thing you really go on about is your friend Jake and the pranks he pulls, or small anecdotes about your team."

"Es complicado." Cougar said. "Most things are classified, I cannot share them even if I wish to."

"And you do not wish to." Juanita pushed, expression shrewd.
Cougar floundered for a moment, trying desperately to find a way to actually verbalize what was in his head. It hit him in that moment how much he relied on Jake. If Jake were there he would step in and interpret Cougar's silences for people who did not know Cougar well enough. For years Jake had served as a buffer between Cougar and people who meant well but did not understand that speaking could be difficult for him and would otherwise make him feel awkward and out of place.

"You know who you look like?" Juanita asked suddenly. When Cougar shook his head, she said, "Your abuelo Torres. When your father started dating Maria in high school, Sr. Torres was maybe fifteen years older than you are now. You have almost the same face, his was a little more lined and his hair was shorter, just starting to get grey at the temples. You have the same eyes as him, though. And now you have the same hunted look on your face when you are unable to answer a question and unable to say why. Like the words got lost on the way from your brain to your mouth. I will try to limit what I ask of you, Carlito, and I will try to give you time to respond, even if all you can say is 'no'. Lo siento."

Cougar felt himself relax and he managed to whisper "Gracias."

Juanita smiled sadly, and began telling him how she had found him. Juanita had kept in close contact with Fernanda, who had passed on the message that Cougar's team would be stateside for a recruitment tour for a few months. When Cougar had told Fernanda in his emails that he would be in Dallas for three weeks, she had asked where the booths would be. She had passed that information to Juanita, who had swung by once or twice before.

Así que el día en que ella se las arregla para encontrarme estoy atado a un poste. Por supuesto, Cougar thought.

Cougar did not have time to dwell on the less than dignified impression he and his friends had made before Juanita went on to say that Estrella would be happy to see him if he had time to stop by their apartment.

"Qué?" Cougar asked, confused. Last he had heard, Estrella still lived with their parents, same as her twin brother, Diego.

"Estrella moved to Dallas. She rents the spare bedroom in my apartment now. She has found work here with a video game company, something art related. I do not know much about it, but it makes her happy." Juanita said, smiling gently. "Since you enlisted, she has slowly been finding her feet, her individuality, and she has been pushing back against your parents and Diego."

"I will admit I did not expect that." Cougar said. Estrella had always been a follower when they were children. She had wanted nothing more to belong, but her many attempts at making friends had been hampered by her hearing aids, her weight, or her race. If she had truly begun to stand up for herself rather than choosing to be led by others then Cougar was proud of her.

"She and Diego have been growing more and more distant over the years. She always took issue with what he said to you so many years ago, as well as how the rest of the family reacted. Shortly before Christmas she packed up and left, arrived at my place a few days later. She has not spoken to your family since, and she ignores Diego's calls." Juanita said, speaking proudly.

Juanita had always been one to challenge social convention, and had repeatedly refused to bend to the will of others, not even her twin brother. Cougar had a moment of fierce pride at her strength, and felt immense gratitude that she had spent so much time babysitting him. With as busy as Cougar's mother had been, running the salon, Juanita had ended up raising him just as much as his own mother, if not more after the twins lost most of their hearing.
"Estrella is willing to see me?" Cougar asked, resisting the urge to fidget or stuff food in his mouth to avoid conversation.

"Sí. She has things she wishes to say to you. Most of them are simply things she never had the courage to say to you before." Juanita said, her voice edging towards reassuring.

"I will see what time I have when I get back to the hotel tonight." Cougar said carefully. As badly as he wanted to find Estrella right away and speak to his hermanita for the first time in eleven years, Cougar had learned to be cautious. He was not the boy who left home so many years ago, there was no way of predicting how Estrella would react.

Juanita nodded in understanding, and turned the conversation to her Krav Maga classes. The studio she had been practicing at for years had offered her the opportunity to teach a beginner's course for children. From the gleam in her eyes, Cougar knew she was remembering the self defense lessons she had given all the Alvarez children, and how often those lessons had proved useful while they were growing up.

When lunch was over, both too soon and not soon enough, Juanita dropped him off near the booth the Losers were at that week. That night, Cougar lay on his bed and outlined what had happened during lunch while Jake typed away at his laptop.

"Are you gonna go for it?" Jake asked, looking at Cougar from over the top of his screen.

"No se." Cougar admitted. "There is a lot of unresolved..." Cougar gestured vaguely at the air in front of him to indicate the conglomeration of thoughts and emotions surrounding the night his family disowned him.

"And you're not sure if any lingering sibling affection will be enough to get you two through it without anything important getting destroyed." Jake supplied.

Cougar nodded, letting his hand flop against the bed.

"Well. I don't know the whole of what happened, and considering recent family events I am probably the worst person to give advice on this subject, but I would suggest trying. I can run all kinds of background checks if you want, make sure nothing shady is happening, but to my knowledge your family's flaws are mainly stubbornness and homophobia. If Estrella is rebelling against that it could be a good thing." Jake said.

"Run the check, por favor." Cougar asked. He doubted that something shady was going on, but it never hurt to be sure. At best, he would be reassured that Estrella wanting to meet him was motivated by entirely genuine reasons. At worst, he could dodge whatever trap it might be.

"It's running." Jake said a few minutes later. "I took the liberty of putting your whole family in there. Just to be safe."

"Gracias." Cougar said.

"De nada." Jake replied. After a few minutes of silence he hummed and said, "So Estrella is seventy percent deaf, according to these insurance records I'm finding."

"Sí. It happened when she and Diego were babies. Nuestro Tío Ricardo had come to take them for an afternoon while Anna, Belicia, and I were at school." Cougar said, frowning as he tried to remember what had happened and when. "I was four, I think. Ricardo es mi madre's younger
brother, no experience with babies at the time but he had offered to look after Diego and Estrella so that mi madre could go back to running the salon. He got them in to the car seats, started his car, and his stereo was going at full volume. Their ear drums popped, and permanent damage was done." Cougar explained.

"Shit. Just... Goddamn. It would kill me if I was responsible for something like that happening with Beth." Jake said, voice quiet and shaky.

"I got home that day to find that mi hermanita y mi hermanito were in the hospital. Juanita was there to take care of us for three days until the twins came home. After that we all started getting lessons in sign language. I picked it up fastest and would often translate for Diego and Estrella." Cougar said. He paused, licking his lips as he considered whether or not to continue. Jake still did not know the full story behind Cougar being disowned. Cougar had initially hidden it out of fear of homophobia or transphobia, but since then Jake had proven to be very accepting, in addition to being queer himself.

"Jake." Cougar said, looking over at his friend. When Jake looking up from his laptop, Cougar maintained eye contact as he spoke. "$\text{The reasons I was disowned. You remember them?}$

"Your girlfriend had abusive parents and you helped her run away, giving away your own money in the process." Jake summarized. "And you kind of insinuated at one point that they’re not terribly keen on people whose sexual orientations deviate from what we’ve been socialized to consider normal."

"I came out to my family when I told them why I had helped Carmen. This was further complicated by the fact that when Carmen was born, her parents named her Kevin." Cougar said.

"Oh. Designated male at birth?" Jake asked. At Cougar's nod, Jake swore. "$\text{Fuuuuck. I figured that you had probably come out to your parents just before they proved how bigoted they were. But uh. Carmen. Christ. That poor girl. Did her parents know she was trans?}$

"No." Cougar said, shaking his head. "$\text{Too dangerous. They made their opinions on the matter very clear previously. To say anything to them would have been to condemn her.}$

"Gay camps and conversion therapy?" Jake asked.

"At the least." Cougar said, thinking of the hours they had made all their children kneel and pray every day, as though God would applaud them for stripping their children of their childhoods.

"Good job on getting her out of there. If at any point you want, I can do some looking around, try to check up on her. I could see if she's hidden well enough to make sure her parents can't find her. And, you know. Let you know if she's still okay." Jake offered, fidgeting slightly.

"I... No se. If you can find her, maybe let her know how to protect herself. But other than that... No se." Cougar said.

"Okay." Jake agreed softly. "$\text{So you learned ASL really young, huh?}$

"$\text{Si.}$" Cougar said, accepting the out Jake was giving him. "$\text{I picked it up faster than Anna or Belicia. To them it was always... a chore. An extra effort that they could not understand why they had to do it. Because of that, Diego, Estrella, and I grew much closer. Mi padre, he told me at one point that my biggest responsibility was to watch out for them. To make sure they were safe and happy.}$""That's a lot of responsibility to put on a four-year-old." Jake said, frowning.
"I was six when he said that." Cougar pointed out, smiling when he earned a rather fantastic bitch face from Jake. "Estrella always followed Diego's lead. He was older than her, and more confident, so when I was not there it was Diego she turned to. When-" Cougar broke off, taking a few deeps breaths before trying again. "When I came out to mi familia, Diego was the first to speak up. He said, 'Good to know I am not the most defective son anymore'."

"Oh my god. That little asshole!" Jake said, his face moving from shock to anger rapidly.

"With-" Cougar struggled to clear his throat. "With Diego clearly not supporting me, Estrella kept quiet when my parents berated me and told me that as soon as I was eighteen I would have to move out. That I was no longer part of the family. Juanita was at work when this happened, and mi abuelos were in Mazatlán. Fernanda was seven, and would not have been listened to if she had even been allowed in the kitchen when this took place. Without Diego and Estrella, I had no one there willing to stand up for me. No one else willing to risk being associated with me." Cougar fell silent, closing his eyes as he remembered how painful it had been to realize that no one would help him. Cougar felt the bed shift as Jake climbed in next to him. He found himself wrapped in a hug, Jake's long limbs tangling with his.

Once again, Cougar found himself thankful for having Jake as a friend. After they had come out to each other the previous year, Cougar had found himself slowly withdrawing from the casual touches that had been a part of their friendship since the beginning. Jake had given Cougar three weeks of space to try and sort himself out before Jake invited himself over for a sleepover. A night of cuddling and gossiping about past lovers while gaming had done wonders to help settle Cougar's thoughts.

While part of Cougar knew he found Jake attractive and wondered what a relationship with Jake would be like, Cougar had ultimately decided that Jake was too important to risk losing if the relationship went south or if his affections were not returned. Cougar could live with what they already had, could ignore the voices within that urged him to ask for more. No one else was as kind and supportive as Jake, and no one else knew him as well. Cougar knew that any lovers he did have going forward would need to come to terms with the fact that Jake had a permanent place in nearly every facet of Cougar's life at this point.

Jake held Cougar close, letting his presence reassure Cougar that he was not alone now. When Cougar started shaking faintly, long buried emotions finally surfacing to wreak havoc on him, Jake pressed closer until Cougar could feel Jake's every exhale on his neck. When Cougar sniffled slightly as he worked through the fear, hurt, and gratitude that coursed through him, Jake reached out and snagged his hat from the pillow Cougar had tossed it on and placed it on his head, using it to partially cover Cougar's face and let him have the privacy he needed without sacrificing the comfort he craved. Cougar gave Jake a watery smile and let himself relax into the comfort Jake offered.

In the morning, Cougar woke to find himself cuddled up to Jake, drooling on his chest. One of Jake's arms was holding Cougar close while his free hand was typing away at the laptop resting on his stomach. Cougar grunted to indicate his return to consciousness and began the process of trying to convince his sleep-heavy limbs to let go of Jake.

"G'morning." Jake murmured, rubbing his cheek against the top of Cougar's head. "Let me know when your brain's online, okay?" he asked, voice soft and quiet.
Cougar was lucky that Jake was well versed in the variety of grunts that Cougar could make. Without that key knowledge, Cougar would have actually had to ask for help detangling himself or, more likely, have lain there for another twenty minutes until the pressure in his bladder became too much to ignore. But, thanks to Jake's ability to decode every grunt, twitch, and blink Cougar made, Jake was able to carefully roll Cougar in to a position that would allow him to reach the bathroom without his morning wood becoming too obvious.

In the bathroom, Cougar bypassed the toilet in favor of stripping and hopping right in to the shower. With the water blocking most of the noise he started pissing, idly amusing himself by trying to aim for the drain. When that was taken care of, he moved on to his next need, bracing one hand on the wall as he jerked off, dog tags between his teeth to keep him from making too much noise as he shuddered through his orgasm. Evidence of his activities was easily washed down the drain before he started scrubbing himself clean.

When he left the bathroom he found that Jake had gotten them coffee and breakfast, had put a change of clothes on Cougar's bed, and had set his laptop on the table in front of the chair Cougar usually chose. Cougar dressed and took his seat, eating as he browsed the information Jake had collected on his family. And his extended family, including two cousins he had not known about. Jake had been very thorough, apparently his abuelos' hacienda in Mazatlán had won a small tourism competition over the holidays.

While Cougar read through the information, Jake took the towel Cougar was using for his hair and began gently drying his hair. As much as Cougar hated having his hair cut, submitting to it only when Jake insisted it was necessary, Cougar enjoyed having Jake work on his hair. It was a unique sort of contact and intimacy that would have felt odd were it happening with anyone else. Jake carefully brought a large comb through Cougar's damp curls and used the towel to work the water out of Cougar's hair. Once Cougar finished reading and was able to say that it was nearly impossible for any of his family to be involved in anything sinister, Jake gave the ends of Cougar's hair a quick pass with a blow dryer to smooth them and keep the Texas weather from turning it in to a mess. When Jake was done, Cougar's hair lay in soft waves over his shoulders.

"So. Your family is clean, as you saw. Do you have a plan?" Jake asked, nudging Cougar's plate to prompt him to resume eating.

"No se." Cougar said, picking up his cold, neglected toast.

"Well, if or when you want to meet up with them, let me know if I need to cover a shift of yours." Jake offered. "Or arrange to have Pooch cover one of yours. Still can't believe you guys are getting so much shit from racists." Jake said, shaking his head.

"Gracias." Cougar said quietly. He was still undecided about meeting Estrella. It was not that he did not wish to see her. It was that he wanted to see her so badly that he was afraid to actually do it.

Cougar deliberated until midday about whether or not to see Estrella. He ultimately decided to take the opportunity given to him while he had it. There was no telling when he would next be in Dallas, and his job was too dangerous for there to be an actual guarantee that he would make it back. If he passed on the chance to either reconcile with her or close the door on that part of his life, there was no way to be sure that he would have another chance. Even if his work did not kill him, civilian life was not without its dangers.

Cougar arranged to go over for supper, the promise of Juanita's cooking more than enough to make up for Cougar pulling a double shift at the booth so that Pooch would take Cougar's place that
evening. The day passed too slowly for Cougar's liking, and yet when it was nearly time for him to
go over he felt sure that it was too early. Jake ended up bundling Cougar out of their hotel room in
clean, casual clothes that Jake had already laid out for Cougar when he returned to their room to
change.

Jake had offered to go with Cougar several times, but to do so he would need to trade shifts with
Clay. Cougar was not ready to tell Clay, and Roque by extension, about his family and his
hermanita. If things went well he would give them a cursory explanation, but if they went badly
Cougar would not be able to deal with having them all know about it immediately.

Cougar arrived twenty minutes early by taxi, and spent ten minutes mentally chastising himself for
even thinking of backing out at the last minute. If he could face down warlords, terrorists, gun
runners, and Clay's girlfriends then he could face his own hermanita. This is different, a voice in
Cougar's head said, you don't care about the opinions of warlords.

Cougar squared his shoulders and walked up the steps of Juanita's building. Once inside, he
bypassed the elevator in favor of the stairs and made his way to the third floor. He knocked on
Juanita's door and it opened seconds later. Cougar locked eyes with Estrella and stopped breathing
for a moment, he was so blown away.

Estrella had grown up. She was still a few inches shorter than him, but she stood taller and
straighter than she had the last time he had seen her. Her cheeks were still soft and round, but
puberty had done its work and given her Juanita's sculpted cheekbones and strong brows that
helped her look soft and striking all at once. The inches she had grown had helped to even out the
roundness of the rest of her body, making her full of soft curves everywhere that Fernanda was
lithe and muscular. Cougar made a mental note to get a picture of her before he left so that he could
show the team and preemptively threaten Roque and Clay.

"Carlos?" Estrella said tentatively, her voice catching at the end.

Cougar reached out carefully, and breathed a sigh of relief when she stepped in for a hug. Tears
pricked at his eyes as he held his hermanita close, and he chuckled softly when he heard Estrella
sniffle.

"Fernanda was right." Estrella said quietly.

"Qué?" Cougar asked.

"You don't look like an army man. I didn't believe her when she said you look like abuelo Torres
might have if he became a rock star instead of opening an antique store." Estrella said as she
shifted back, wiping carefully under her eyes to protect her makeup.

"The older I get, the more people compare me to him." Cougar mused.

"You have Alvarez colours for your skin and hair, but the rest of you is Torres." Juanita said from
further inside the apartment. "Come inside, Carlito. Dinner is almost done."

"We are staying in hotels with no kitchen, or I would have brought something." Cougar said as he
stepped in to the apartment.

"From what Fernanda said, that might be for the best." "Estrella said, leading Cougar through the
living room to the kitchen dining area." She said something about checking anything you offer us
for grasshoppers."

Cougar could not have stopped himself from laughing even if he had wanted to. Fernanda had
never quite forgiven him and Jake for the chocolate covered grasshoppers. Every letter she sent him now had a grasshopper sticker or doodle on it somewhere. Cougar and Jake retaliated by bringing more chocolate grasshoppers with them when they visited.

"She worries needlessly. I would find a different insect to cook for you." Cougar joked.

"I want to know, but at the same time..." Estrella trailed off.

"First time we went to visit nuestros abuelos, Jake and I brought chocolate covered grasshoppers with us. It has become an inside joke since then." Cougar explained.

"You made her eat grasshoppers?" Estrella asked, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

"Good protein." Cougar insisted, grinning when Estrella shuddered theatrically.

"Who is Jake?" Juanita asked as she brought a plate loaded with empanadas and a large bowl of rice from the kitchen.

"My best friend." Cougar said, taking one of the plates from Juanita and setting it gently on the table. "You saw him the other day, in the parking lot."

"The bald one?" Juanita asked. Cougar shook his head. "Ah. The protective one with the nice ass."

Estrella nearly walked in to a chair as she returned with salad and beans at Juanita's words. Cougar shrugged and took a seat at the table, neither ready nor willing to disclose how often he himself had admired his best friend's ass.

"Jake knows I have family in Texas, and that I am not on good terms with most of them." he said, focusing on Juanita's accurate assessment of Jake's first reaction to her in the parking lot.

"Is that all he knows?" Estrella asked, somewhat nervous as she and Juanita took their own seats.

"My team knows a version of what happened. Jake knows the whole story." Cougar said.

"When you say your team knows 'a version', you mean..." Juanita prompted as they filled their plates.

"They know that I used my life savings to help my girlfriend escape her abusive family and was disowned for it." Cougar said, keeping his head held high as he spoke. Estrella winced while Juanita smiled.

"You told them the truth, then. Good." Juanita said, voice warm with approval.

"There is a part of me that still wants to make excuses for our family." Estrella admitted, shifting in her chair. "Part of me still feels a loyalty to them and wants to say that the news about Kevin-"

"Carmen." Cougar corrected, gently but firmly.

"Lo siento. Our family still calls hi- her by the name we knew her as." Estrella said. "I wish to do better, but I am finding it difficult. It does not help that I know very little about the subject."

Cougar finished his bite of food before speaking. "When Carmen came out to me, we were already dating. It felt odd at first, but the way she smiled when I used the name she had chosen or used the right pronouns made me want to develop the habit. It helped that she was also willing to answer a lot of questions."
"I understand that she had to leave, but part of me wishes she were around right now so I could ask questions." Estrella admitted before daintily biting into an empanada.

"We get trans patients at the hospital." Juanita said. "I have gotten in fights with more than one doctor to make sure they were properly treated and cared for. I may not know much about their lives or day to day experiences, but I can answer most medical questions."

"Not at the dinner table you won't." Estrella said, narrowing her eyes at Juanita. Juanita rolled her eyes in response.

"Qué?" Cougar asked, looking between the two women.

"When Estrella first moved in I... misjudged how much medical information was acceptable to share over a meal." Juanita said, tactfully.

"You told me that a guy came in with a pen shoved in his urethra." Estrella said. Cougar froze with a fork full of rice in his mouth.

"Which did not seem like such a horrible story to me. There was very little blood involved." Juanita insisted.

"You were removing a chorizo from a skewer and said 'This reminds me of something that happened at work today.'" Estrella said flatly.

Cougar snorted and began coughing as he choked on his rice. Once they knew he would be fine Estrella and Juanita happily picked at each other for causing him to choke.

Dinner progressed with more casual conversation. Cougar learned more about the lives of friends he had left behind after signing up than he actually cared to know, but it was nice to be included in such a mundane conversation. When he visited Fernanda and his abuelos, or Jess and Donny, Jake was always there, ready to jump in with edited retellings of Clay's brief, technically illegal stint as a Wal-Mart manager, the Duct Tape Sack Race Incident, or the weekend Cougar and Jake taught Roque to cook by rewriting recipes in to chemistry experiments.

Cougar tried to keep up his end of the conversation, but it was difficult for him. He was so used to Jake being there to draw out his words or buy Cougar time to think before he spoke. For so many years Jake had been by his side, reading his silences and interpreting his facial expressions. More than once during dinner Cougar had needed to force some kind of response out to keep the concerned look off of Estrella's face. Juanita, being older and having more experience with abuelo Torres, was more aware of, and prepared for, Cougar's limitations.

After dinner, Juanita shooed both Cougar and Estrella off when they tried to help with the dishes. She gave them a plate of sopapillas and told them to go catch up. Estrella led him out onto their apartment balcony and Cougar did his best not to twitch at the sightlines from the surroundings.

Cougar texted Jake to let him know that Cougar would be back late, and Jake responded by letting Cougar know what bar the team was hitting that night. After another hour or so of quiet chatting, Estrella squared her shoulders slightly and looked Cougar in the eye.

"I've been trying to find a way to say this all night, but I've failed to do so. Lo siento, Carlos. What happened the night our family disowned you was wrong, and I'm sorry I never spoke up. I should have. Growing up, you never once hesitated to speak up for Diego or I. You deserved better than what happened when you needed us."

Cougar opened his mouth to respond, only to close it almost immediately when he found he could
not speak past the lump in his throat. He tilted his hat down to obscure his eyes for a moment while he fought for composure. Estrella reached out and gently touched his arm, and Cougar took her hand and held it between his own while he searched for words.

“Gracias.” he choked out. “Gracias, Estrella. Not only for the apology, but for making the effort to do better.”

“Fernanda had offered to give me your number, so that I could call you and explain. It did not seem like a good idea to me, to call you out of the blue and give you no time to prepare. To decide if you wanted to see me or not.” Estrella said.

“That was a good decision.” Cougar admitted. He was not sure how he would have reacted had he received a call from Estrella with no warning, though he could admit to himself that it would have been in the vicinity of ‘badly’.

“I visited nuestros abuelos to tell them about what happened and Fernanda told me that she had kept in touch with you all these years. She told me about this tour you are on and said that if Juanita or I did not catch you here, then she would talk to you when you stopped by on your way back to base.” Estrella chuckled ruefully, “I did not think she was so good at keeping secrets.”

“She has had much time to practice.” Cougar said regretfully. He had been receiving letters and voicemail messages from her since she was seven, nearly eleven years now. As glad as he was to have her in his life, he still wished it was under less dishonest circumstances.

“At least she does it for good reasons. Mostly.” Estrella said.

“Mostly?” Cougar asked.

“When I visited I saw a name in her phone that I did not recognize while she was playing with it. I asked who it was and she said I would figure it out soon enough. I think she has a boyfriend.” Estrella said, smiling fondly.

Cougar felt his eyebrows raise at the news. He knew better than to demand that kind of information from Fernanda, she would say no on principle. Cougar trusted Fernanda’s judgment and knew she would talk to him when she was ready. Still, when or if she opened up Jake would run a check on the person. If anything unsavory came up, Cougar would present it to her. If the person was clean then they would let Fernanda know she had nothing to worry about.

“What was the name?” Cougar asked. If he could place the name among any of the friends or coworkers that he and Jake had already checked out, then he would save himself time and effort.

“‘Cougar’, if you can believe it.” Estrella said, laughing. “It must be some kind of nickname. I mean, who on earth would name their kid- Carlos, why are you laughing so hard?”

It took Cougar several minutes to calm down and stop laughing enough before he was able to respond.

“Soy Cougar.” he explained. “That has been my name for almost as long as I have served.” After the fourth visit to see Fernanda, she and their abuelos had noticed that he responded faster and better to Cougar than he did to Carlos. They had asked if he preferred them using his nickname rather than his given name and, after an internal debate, he had asked them to.

“Oh! Lo siento, I did not know.” Estrella said. “Do you prefer going by that name instead of Carlos?”
Cougar nodded. He had found it easier to relax while visiting if they used his nickname. He felt more accepted, like he did not have to hide the fact that he had changed since enlisting. It had also helped Sr. Torres to open up about some of the lighter things that had happened during the war; people he had served with who had earned odd nicknames of their own, or animals that had taken a shine to the troops and followed them back to camp.

“Is this something you would want Juanita and I to do?” Estrella asked.

“Can I think on this?” Cougar asked after a moment of hesitation. He had only just gotten back in touch with Estrella, he did not quite feel ready for her to see the ways in which he had changed.

“Of course!” Estrella said quickly, squeezing Cougar’s fingers gently.

“So Fernanda knows what it is that happened that caused you to move here?” Cougar asked, hoping to move the conversation along.

Estrella hesitated for a moment before quietly saying “Sí.”

“If you do not want to tell me you do not have to.” Cougar said, not wanting to put Estrella on the spot. He was more than a little familiar without how difficult their family could be.

“You deserve to know, though. The argument involved you.” Estrella said quietly.

Cougar frowned, trying to comprehend how he could have been involved when he had not seen most of his family in nearly eleven years.

“About a week before Christmas, Javier asked to speak to the whole family. Only nuestros abuelos, Fernanda and Juanita were unable to attend. Javier came out to the family. He is gay.” Estrella said.

“Is he okay?” Cougar asked, concerned. If Javier’s coming out had been anything like his own…

“Sí. He is fine. Everyone accepted him and said they still love him.” Estrella said. “When that happened something in me broke. I think it was my temper. I told Javier that I was proud of him and the courage he showed by coming out, especially considering what had happened when you came out. Then I told the rest of our family that they were all hypocrites. That what happened when you came out to them was wrong, and that continuing to be friends with Kev- Carmen’s parents despite knowing they were abusive was wrong.

“I told them that accepting Javier now did not make up for what they did to you, and that if they genuinely wanted to be supportive of LGBT family members then they would have reached out to you before then. Then I said that, until they apologized to you, I wanted nothing to do with any of them. I packed up everything I could fit in my car and went to see nuestros abuelos to give them my version of the story. From there they sent me to Juanita, who was disinvited from family gatherings for breaking Papa’s jaw a few years back after he called you a homophobic slur.”

Cougar was not sure how to react to what Estrella said. He felt shocked, certainly. Both by the easy acceptance Javier had and by Estrella standing up to their family. The momentary relief he had felt knowing his cousin was fine after coming out had been replaced with a sick, leaden sensation in his chest. His heart felt both too heavy and too large, bloated with emotions he could not begin to process.

“Their loss is my gain.” Cougar said, forcing the words out in an attempt to keep going, keep moving forward.

“I could say that same about you.” Estrella said, smiling sadly. She sniffled slightly and changed
the topic. “So you mentioned having classes to take. What do you study?”

“Languages. Mathematics. I am nearly finished a Master’s degree in Criminology, and I have a degree in English Literature.” Cougar said, shrugging. He would be further along in his studies if they got deployed less, but he was also thankful for all the hours traveling or on watch where he had brainstormed some of his best papers with little to distract him.

“Are you still hoping to become a writer?” Estrella asked, surprised.

“Some hopes do not die, no matter how ardently others wish they would.” Cougar said. “As long as I am still in the military, I cannot publish or profit from anything. But I can still write. I can research and study. Plot out entire novels while waiting.”

“Waiting for what?” Estrella asked, wrinkling her brow.

“Everything.” Cougar said, thinking of sniper nests, endless debriefings, and lunch lines.

“That wasn’t cryptic at all.” Estrella said dryly.

“When Jake and I first started visiting Fernanda y nuestros abuelos, Nanda kept trying to ask questions we could not answer. We kept having to tell her that everything was classified. In retaliation for this the next letter she sent me had all names, dates, locations, and random verbs redacted with a black marker. Jake framed it, and it hangs in my apartment,” Cougar said, smiling fondly at the memories.

“That’s adorable.” Estrella said. “Fernanda seems to be doing well. Her art is getting better all the time. If she ever changed her mind about becoming a tattoo artist, I’m sure she could find work as a digital artist.”

“Is that what you do?” Cougar asked, recalling his conversation with Juanita the previous day.

“I work as a concept and texture artist for a video game company here in Dallas. Long hours, and it can be a bit tedious, but I enjoy it.” Estrella said, smiling.

“Jake does programming.” Cougar said. “Long hours and a lot of strain on his eyes, hands, and back.”

“What does the army do with programmers?” Estrella asked, curious.

“In Jake’s words: that’s classified.” Cougar said, smirking when Estrella huffed a laugh.

“It’s good to know that, whatever else changes, you will always be a little shit.” Estrella teased.

“It is nice to be dependable, yes.” Cougar agreed, grinning when Estrella poked him.

As Estrella laughed, Cougar felt the warm glow of contentment fill him. He was hopeful that he and Estrella would be able to mend their relationship. It would never be the same as it had been, but as Cougar looked at his hermanita and took in how much happier and more confident she was, he thought that the changes were for the better.

Cougar returned to the hotel that night and found his room empty. (.) Ellos todavía tienen que ser
en el bar, he thought. Rather than try to join them, Cougar got ready for bed and stretched out on the mattress with his laptop. He was looking through the ebooks he had when he remembered that Jake had promised to email him a few titles from an urban fantasy series Cougar had begun reading.

Cougar had barely used his email during the tour. The U.S. not being a warzone, no matter what Jake and Pooch said about Wal-Mart or the interstate, it was simpler to just text Fernanda or call his abuelos. The last time he had opened his email had been just after Christmas when he knew Fernanda had written back to him.

Sitting in his inbox, dated for early January, was a delivery notification from the base’s post office. Typically if the team was being deployed for several months they would have their mail redirected to the base so that they could pick everything up as soon as they got back. The email delivery notifications were a recent change meant to reduce the number of people waiting in line at the base’s post office.

Cougar opened the email and looked at the details within. It appeared to be a postcard from his abuelos’ church, likely the same one he got every year after he failed to attend mass due to deployment. Cougar shrugged and closed the email, continuing his search for Jake’s messages.

Cougar settled in to read, but found he was having trouble focusing on the story. Setting aside his laptop, Cougar lay back and tried to examine what he was feeling. There was a restlessness in him, a slightly shaky feeling as though he were expecting something, some kind of fallout. Cougar thought carefully about what could be causing this sort of reaction. It was not physical, it was an emotional response. Nothing in the book he had been trying to read could have upset him.

Cougar sat up and pulled the laptop in to his lap. He brought up the delivery email again and stared at it. His abuelos’ church sent a post card every year, in recognition for both his service and the fact that he was deployed during the holidays. Those cards had never bothered him before, why would that have changed?

Cougar set his laptop aside and stood up, stretching before he headed to where he and Jake had stashed their liquor bottles. He poured himself a glass of the cheap bourbon Clay had given him and silently paced the room as he puzzled over the odd feelings welling in him.

There was a heaviness in his chest that Cougar could not place. He recalled feeling it when he had been speaking with Estrella. Cougar thought back and tried to recall what they had been talking about. He knew it had to do with their family.

Javier, Cougar realized. They had been talking about their family’s easy acceptance of Javier’s coming out. Cougar knew he should be grateful that Javier had not experienced the same rejection Cougar had, but it bothered him.

Why him?, Cougar wondered. Why Javier and not Carlos? They were nearly the same age, had grown up together, gone to school together. Their grades had been similar and they had been on the same sports teams. Javier had learned ASL from Carlos when the twins had gotten old enough to start hanging out with them. They had worked together at his madre’s salon during the summers.

Cougar drained his glass and refilled it, fuming silently. In a moment of spite he thought about how Javier had only watched while Cougar had been disowned and how Javier had stopped speaking to him afterwards, along with nearly every member of their family. Cougar had either lost everyone he had cared for, or been forced to keep his distance while Javier had gone on to…

Cougar paused as he realized that his cousin had gone on to live his life, severely closeted and
surrounded by people he knew he could not be open with. People who claimed to prioritize family above all else, but had already cast out one of their own. People who professed to love him, but had already proven that their definition of love came with strict conditions.

Cougar knocked back the rest of his drink and reached for the bottle again, feeling bitterness well up inside him. The worst part was that he could understand why Javier would have kept silent. In the past Cougar had seen men, platoon mates or friends from basic or complete strangers, who had been caught in compromising positions and had their careers ruined or even lost their lives to homophobic teammates.

It was only when Cougar had finished his third glass of bourbon and was contemplating switching to water that he realized what else was bothering him. It was nearly March. Javier’s coming out, and Estrella’s subsequent ultimatum, had happened in December. The only delivery notification in his email was from a church. His family had had over two months to contact him, to make any kind of effort to mend broken bridges, and they had chosen not to.

Cougar considered the fact that they might not have known how to get hold of him, but soon dismissed that thought with a shake of his head. His family knew, his parents knew, that Cougar’s abuelos still wrote to him. They knew that Juanita wrote to him. If his family had not wanted to ask for Cougar’s contact information from someone who knew him, they could have called any of the army bases or recruitment centers in Texas and gotten information on how to contact a family member in the service.

Desperate for answers, Cougar went over to where Jake kept his laptops and found the one Jake had used to run checks on Cougar’s family. In his intoxicated state he put in the wrong password twice before remembering what Jake had changed it to most recently. Cougar searched through the records of his family’s web histories and call histories. An hour and another glass of bourbon later, he had found no evidence that even a single member of his estranged family had tried to find a way to contact him in the last three months. Diego and his madre had made several calls to Estrella, no doubt attempting to get her to reconsider. The calls had tapered off in late January; they had given up.

They had given up contacting Estrella because she would not speak to them. She would not speak to them because they would not speak to Carlos. Rather than speak to Carlos, they had stopped calling Estrella.

His family would rather lose another child than speak to Carlos.

Cougar stood there, the hurt and anger coursing through him, making his heart hurt and his stomach turn. His breathing grew ragged as he thought back to his childhood, trying to think of anything he had done to warrant such hatred. He had been good; not perfect, but certainly not a horrible son. He could not understand why, out of all their children, out of all the cousins, why Carlos was the one who was somehow unworthy of forgiveness and had been cast out.

The door to the hotel room opened quietly, and Cougar turned automatically to watch Jake enter their room. The half smile on Jake’s face disappeared as soon as Jake looked at Cougar, wide-eyed worry taking its place. Jake took a half step towards him and softly asked,

“Cougs? You doing okay, buddy?”

Cougar took a deep, shaking breath and opened his mouth. He meant to tell Jake about what he had learned. Or to say, at the very least, that he was not okay. Instead he blurted out the worst question that was racing through his mind.
“Why am I not good enough for them?”

Jake reared back in shock as Cougar clamped one hand over his mouth. His breathing grew more ragged, turning to sobs as he lost his composure. His stomach rolled, too much bourbon disagreeing with Cougar’s emotional distress and making bile rise in his throat.

Jake pushed open the bathroom door and gestured for Cougar to go in. Cougar barely made it to the bowl before bringing up the contents of his stomach. His knees buckled as he retched, and he would have likely crashed to the floor if Jake had not wrapped strong arms around his waist and gently lowered him to the tiles.

Cougar did not know how long he knelt there, heaving in to the bowl. When his stomach calmed enough for him to breathe deeply again, his first exhale ended with a sob. Shame swept through him as tears fell, and he was powerless against the anguish that forced more sobs from his throat.

Cougar was distantly aware of Jake’s presence as his friend flushed the toilet and fetched a warm face cloth to help clean Cougar. When Jake settled next to Cougar he carefully gathered Cougar in his arms, holding Cougar’s shaking form close. Cougar clung to him, only relinquishing his hold when his stomach rebelled again. Eventually the day’s events caught up with Cougar, and he fell asleep on the bathroom floor, his cheeks still wet with tears.

When Cougar woke, his head and face ached and his first thought was to wonder if he had caught a cold. When his head cleared enough for him to remember the previous night he had to shut his eyes against a wave of pain and grief.

“Hey.” Jake whispered from somewhere nearby. “I saw you wake up a bit, so I’ll warn you right now: I’m coming in with a cold cloth for your face.”

Seconds later, Cougar felt Jake’s warm fingers gently brush Cougar’s hair away from his face before a cold, wet cloth was placed over his eyes and forehead. Cougar sighed as the cold seeped in and soothed his aching face. Jake’s hand carefully cupped Cougar’s jaw and he felt Jake’s thumb tap his chin twice; a signal for him to open his mouth. A straw was placed between Cougar’s lips and he sighed as cool water filled his mouth.

“Not too much,” Jake said while Cougar drank, “your stomach’s probably still touchy. If you can keep a few swallows down I’ll give you more in a bit.”

Cougar released the straw after only a few sips, his raw throat protesting with every swallow. He waited for the water to hit his stomach, hoping it would stay down. He mentally cursed his past self for drinking so much.

“So.” Jake said, sitting on the bed next to Cougar’s hip. “How much do you remember?”


“What’s the last thing you remember?” Jake pressed.

Cougar frowned under the cold cloth. What had he forgotten? What could he have done in such an intoxicated, weepy state that Jake felt Cougar needed to remember it?
“Fell asleep on the floor near the toilet.” Cougar said after wracking his brain and coming up blank.

“Oh. Okay. That was around midnight. You woke around three, spewing. There was some more crying and cursing as well. When that stopped you told me about your evening. Including the part where you were searching for any attempts on the part of your family to contact you. I put you in the shower to clean you up a bit and started my own search, to see if I missed anything. While that was running I got you cleaned up and in to fresh clothes and then put you to bed. Any of this ringing any bells?” Jake asked.

Cougar tried to think back, to recall anything else, and was hit with a few flashes of memories. He had sat in the tub under the spray and wept until Jake had returned. Jake had cleaned Cougar of any remaining vomit, brushed Cougar’s teeth, then dried and dressed him before carrying him to the bed. Cougar had vague memories of spending a long time regurgitating childhood memories in some attempt to either prove or disprove that his family had always hated him.

“I don’t even have to see the top half of your face to know that you just remembered most of it. I just look at your nose and mouth and my brain auto completes the rest of your expression.” Jake said, his voice fond. Cougar felt him shuffle around on the bed a bit before he heard the sound of a laptop opening. “So, would you like to know what I found in a search for attempts by your family to contact you?”

Cougar licked his lips and swallowed against the lump in his throat. He knew Jake would not be offering if he did not have different results than what Cougar had found. Cougar deliberated over the choice for a tense moment before nodding once.

“Okay. As you saw, nobody contacted any army bases or organizations that could put them in touch with you from their own phones or computers. This is actually pretty smart if, say, you’re living in a family that has displayed intense bigotry towards one of their own for going against the family’s central patriarchal figure. What I have found is that three close friends of some of your family members looked up how to get in touch with family in the military. These searches coincide with phone calls initiated by a Javier Ramirez, a Ricardo Torres, and a Belicia Alvarez.

Cougar felt his jaw drop and scrambled to sit up, his hangover sending him crashing in to Jake’s shoulder while the cold cloth flopped off his face and in to his lap. Jake wrapped one arm around Cougar to steady him and shifted to make the screen more visible.

“I’m guessing that Javier Ramirez is the cousin who came out to everyone?” Jake asked as Cougar stared at the laptop screen.

“Juanita was married to Eduardo Ramirez. He died before Javier was born. Train crash. She kept her own name when she married, but chose to honor him by passing his last name on.” Cougar explained as he read.

“You see the call start time, here? Then a few minutes in there’s the initial search and then several subsequent searches with refined parameters.” Jake said, pointing out the times and dates of the calls and searches. “I’d be willing to be that these members of your family called their friends, chit chatted a bit, then asked them to look this stuff up for them.”

Cougar closed his eyes and slumped against Jake. Three people. Three out of thirty-eight. Cougar was not sure if this made things better or worse.

“Now, I know what you’re thinking. But there’s more.” Jake said. Cougar pulled back to look at him while he spoke. “I checked some lines of communication I hadn’t bothered with before. From
the office computer at your grandfather’s antique store a skype message was sent containing links to several organizations that push for marriage equality and the repeal of DADT. The accounts that received those messages belong to the friends of some of your youngest cousins. Another four family members of yours have potentially been getting involved in this situation as quietly as they can.

“And. Well.” Jake fidgeted under Cougar’s gaze. “There’s also this. Normally your mother called the Torreses every Sunday evening. Sometimes she’ll call outside that pattern, but based on Fernanda’s social media it’s usually to arrange some kind of mother-daughter lunch. So I initially didn’t think anything of it. But the time your mother called at coincides with someone in the Torres condo searching up information about PFLAG.” Jake fidgeted a bit more. “And. Uh. There’s a few searches for ‘divorce lawyer, Orange, TX’ and ‘marriage counsellor, Orange, TX’. So. Yeah.”

Cougar scrubbed on hand over his face, trying to process the latest twist in his family’s drama. *My parents love each other*, he thought, *they would not divorce because of a son they disowned a decade ago.* He felt panic building in his chest at the idea of his parents divorcing. At the idea that he might be responsible for his parents’ divorce.

“Coug? Cougar look at me.” Jake said, gripping Cougar’s arms to get his attention. “The data is not conclusive.”

“But-”

“No!” Jake said, cutting Cougar off. “It’s data and guesses based on knowledge of human behavior and looking for patterns. I could be wrong about a lot of this stuff.”

“Jake,” Cougar protested, “I have seen you take people apart based on your guesses.”

“Yeah, but those were people I either knew or people who I had a clear mold to work from. Civilians are not trained to react in specific ways. They’re not all molded in to different, twisty versions of soldiers. I don’t really know anyone in the extended Alvarez family. Those Skype links from the antique store? They could have been sent by anybody. Fernanda has access to that computer. She could have done her own research in the hopes that someone would ask. It could have been one of the other employees as well. There’s no video security in the office or staff rooms, so I can’t check this stuff out.” Jake said, bringing his hand up to run it through Cougar’s hair, ending with him gently cupping the back of Cougar’s head and neck. Cougar closed his eyes and leaned in to the touch, needing the comfort it offered.

“This also means that I don’t know if your mother asked for any of the stuff that someone in the Torres condo looked up. It could have been wishful thinking on Sra. Torres’ part. We both know she’s had less and less patience with your father in the last couple of years. I can’t actually guarantee that any of this made it to your mother. All I can say is that these events all happened at the same time because I have a log of it. According to this log, the search for a divorce lawyer was over in thirty-six seconds without a single link being clicked on. The search for a marriage councilor lasted twenty-nine minutes, involved seven tabs being opened, about half of which were online review sites.

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“According to the data I can assume that your mom called up your grandmother, bitched about your father and asked for a divorce lawyer’s number before changing her mind and deciding to work on their marriage in the hopes that they can one day welcome you back. But I can’t guarantee any of this. Just like I can’t guarantee that any of the eleven members of your family who might have looked up ways to educate themselves will actually contact you.” Jake finished, looked earnest and a bit sad.
Cougar let out a long, slow breath and closed his eyes. He felt Jake shift slightly before he was wrapped in a tight hug. Cougar relaxed into Jake’s warmth, sliding his arms around Jake’s waist and pressing closer.

Two days ago he had been toying with the idea of seeing his Tia Juanita. Twenty-four hours ago he had been worried about meeting Estrella. Now he was the center of a conflict that had embroiled his entire family without him even knowing about it. He was not sure if he could deal with what was happening, or if he even wanted to.

“We don’t need to do anything with this information, Cougs.” Jake said, rubbing Cougar’s back lightly. “I think the best use of it is just that we have an idea of what’s going on so you don’t get blindsided if someone writes to you. Because locking yourself in the supply closet and panicking is totally my thing and I’d hate for you to copy me.”

Cougar snorted softly and pinched Jake’s side to make him yelp.

“Coo-uuugs!” Jake whined, wriggling closer and holding him tighter. “Okay, really though. This is kind of a huge mess that won’t resolve itself any time soon. But it’s not your mess. And considering how they treated you, I’d say it’s perfectly justifiable to leave them to resolve this themselves. I know you still care about them, this wouldn’t have affected you so much if you didn’t, but this is not your problem and you’re not obligated to fix it.”

“Lo se.” Cougar whispered, holding on to Jake tightly.

“Good. Now, how’s your hangover?” Jake asked.

“Ugh.” Cougar grunted, refocusing on the stuffed nose, aching head, and mild nausea he had been ignoring as best he could.

“The water’s staying down, at least. I think it’s time for some hangover treatments.” Jake said, pulling away just enough to be able to reach the night table where there was a glass of water with a straw, a bottle of Gatorade, two aspirin tablets, and a banana.

Cougar grumbled, knowing that the taste of banana would not mesh well with the Gatorade and his morning breath.

“Aspirin first, a few sips of the Gatorade, then that banana. Small bites.” Jake ordered, handing the items over.

As Cougar was swallowing down the last of the banana there came a knock at the room door. Jake got up to answer it, peering through the peep hole for a moment before unlocking the door with one hand, using the other to sign the shorthand for ‘Roque’ that they had developed. While Jake held a hushed conversation with their XO, it occurred to Cougar that he had no idea what time it was and that he and Jake were likely late for their shift at the booth.

“Aww! You do care!” Jake said, loud enough for Cougar to hear clearly.

“Jensen, shut the fuck up and take the damned soup.” came Roque’s voice.

“We love you, too!” Jake said. From the tone of his voice alone Cougar knew he was grinning obnoxiously at Roque.

“That’s it. I’m out of here. Cougar! You’re on your own!” Roque called.

Jake pulled back in to the room with a large container of soup in one hand and waved with the other
before shutting and locking the door. He set the soup down on the night table and sat on the edge of the bed again.

“So after you fell asleep on me in the bathroom I may have texted the others. They think you have food poisoning and a hangover, so we’ve got the day off. That,” Jake said, pointing at the takeout container, “is possibly the best Vietnamese chicken dumpling soup I have ever smelled and I am actually a little jealous that you get to eat it.”

Cougar looked at the large container of soup and felt his stomach protest even though he knew he was hungry. “We could share.”

“Do you really think you’ll be up to solids today? Half a bottle of bourbon and enough family drama to fella a bull elephant doesn’t usually make for an easy time on the stomach.” Jake pointed out.

“Exactly. I will not be able to eat all of that.” Cougar pointed out.

“Good point.” Jake said, mulling the idea over. He got up and went over to the room’s coffee maker and grabbed two mugs, two spoons, and half the stack of napkins.

Cougar scooted over and backwards on the bed so that Jake would be able to sit next to him. Jake doled out soup in to the mugs, passed them to Cougar, and got in bed. Cougar passed one of the mugs to Jake before sipping from his own.

“Oh damn, that is good soup. Remind me to do something nice to Roque’s credit score later.” Jake said around a mouthful of dumpling.

Cougar sighed and sipped at his soup, letting Jake’s presence sooth him.

They spent most of the day in Cougar’s bed. Jake loaded the e-books Cougar had been looking for on to an e-reader so that Cougar could read more comfortably. Cougar dozed on and off throughout the day and still found himself tired enough to sleep through the night.

In the morning they joined the others for breakfast and Cougar was told four separate times that he looked like shit and everyone would understand if he needed another day off. Cougar refused each time, wanting the distraction that came with manning the booth. After his shifts at the booth, Cougar would return to the hotel room and sleep or read.

As the week passed he found himself more easily exhausted despite sleeping nearly triple what he usually did. He only really noticed the change because Pooch and Jake began watching over him in shifts. He would fall asleep to the sounds of Jake typing and wake up to find Pooch in the room, usually reading or watching tv.

When the booth was broken down for the last time and Clay told them to meet back at base in two weeks, Cougar had a moment of panic. He and Jake were supposed to go visit Fernanda and his abuelos. In Orange, where the rest of his family was.

“Hey, Cougs?” came Jake’s voice from his right side. “You kinda went really still and zoned out.
I’ve been pretending to look up restaurants on my phone for eleven minutes to buy you some time, but I’m getting a bit worried now.”

“No quiero ir.” Cougar blurted out, his heart pounding oddly.

“To the hotel?” Jake asked, confusion and worry plain on his face.

“To Orange.” Cougar admitted, tilting his hat down to shield his eyes.

“Oh. Ohhhhh. Okay. Um. I can get us flights?” Jake offered. “If you want to go somewhere else. Just name it, really.”

“Home. I want to sleep in my own bed.” Cougar said quietly. *Quiero evitar demasiados parientes en un pueblo muy pequeño que ya están jugando con mi cabeza*, he thought.

“Oh.” Jake said, bringing his phone up and typing away for a few minutes. “Alright. Our flight leaves in three hours. Let’s go pack up and get out of here.”

They took a cab back to the hotel and packed in silence. Jake triple checked their bags to make sure they had not forgotten anything before they left. Throughout the ride to the airport, the wait before boarding and takeoff, and the flight itself, Jake played with his phone. Whether he was texting or indulging in a Wikipedia spiral Cougar could not tell, nor did he have the energy to find out. Cougar spent most of the flight dozing upright in his seat.

When they finally made it back to Fayetteville, all Cougar wanted was to crawl in to bed. From under his covers Cougar was able to hear Jake flit around his apartment, opening windows and dusting and calling in an order for groceries. Cougar dozed on and off until a bowl of warm stew was placed on his bedside table.

“If I come back and find this stuff cold and untouched I’m going to puree it and feed it to you through a nasal tube.” Jake threatened cheerfully.

Knowing exactly how capable Jake was of making good on his threat, Cougar sat up and downed his stew as quickly as possible before going back to sleep. The next time he was aware, Jake was forcing him out of bed and complaining about the smell. Cougar was confused until Jake said that he had slept for nearly eighteen hours. Cougar scrubbed himself clean and was fed another bowl of stew before being allowed to return to bed, barely noticing that clean sheets had been put on it.

After that a pattern emerged; Jake would demand some kind of action out of Cougar once a day. If Cougar complied he was allowed to eat wherever he chose. If Cougar had no energy to apply to Jake’s task there would be stew for every meal and Jake would sit in bed to keep Cougar company. Cougar knew that this was not normal behavior, he just did not have the energy to do anything to change it.

After eight days of this, Jake decided that Cougar should get washed and dressed and eat out on the futon in his living room while Jake went out to run errands. Cougar was listlessly poking at his fried rice when Jake’s open laptop on the coffee table in front of him came out of sleep mode. A messaging window opened immediately and pink text appeared soon after.
JJ: Don’t kill me for this I didn’t know what else to do.

Cougar frowned and leaned forward, watching the screen carefully. The video chatting program Jake used came to life and a call was placed as Cougar watched. The call connected, and when the video came in to focus Cougar’s bowl fell from numb fingers.

“Hello, Cougar.” Dr. Bandyopadhyay said, smiling at him. “It’s been a while.”

Cougar felt tears sting his eyes as he closed them and took a deep, shuddering breath.

“Jake?” he asked, knowing the answer.

“He’s very worried about his friend.” she said. “He’s also very earnest and charismatic. I’m glad you have him in your life.”

“Yo también.” Cougar said, his voice cracking with repressed emotion. He cleared his throat and tried to focus for the first time in days. “I did not know you still had the clearance to treat me.”

“I do not have the clearance to treat current army personnel, no.” she said, shaking her head. “But I do not need clearance to treat Mr. Gomez Addams. A veteran struggling with PTSD who has developed depression after finding out a few things about his family.”

“Gomez Addams?” Cougar asked flatly.

“His insurance is covering the sessions. It’s all very well organized and thorough.” she said, smiling mischievously.

“Cara mia.” Cougar quoted dryly.

“Mon cher.” she responded, smirking. “So. Tell me what happened.”

“I had dinner with mi Tia Juanita et mi hermanita Estrella.” Cougar began.

He spoke for a long time, sometimes needing to pause and focus on something else to keep from getting too emotional. At several points Dr. Bandyopadhyay asked him to stop and examine how he felt at certain moments, or to explain his thought process. Cougar ended up taking a small break to clean up the bowl of fried rice he had dropped while talking about how angry he had felt that no one had even tried to contact him. He also expressed his realization that he might have been avoiding celebrating his birthday ever since he had been disowned, as well as his frustration with himself for still being affected by a family he thought he had washed his hands of years ago.

“First off, you have every right to be angry, upset, disappointed, and heartbroken. You have every right to your emotions, and it’s good that you’re able to tell where these emotions are coming from and what prompted you to feel certain ways.” Dr. Bandyopadhyay said, examining her notes.

“Now, I can’t guarantee anything because I don’t know your family, but from what you’ve said it sounds like your family is in the process of becoming less bigoted. Possibly they are going to restructure themselves a bit; change who gets invited to family gatherings or weekly dinners. Some relationships might fare better that others. I can’t know all of what might happen, but what I can say for certain is that what’s going to happen is only tangentially about you.”

Cougar frowned at Dr. Bandyopadhyay. How could the situation not be about him?
“Whatever is going on, all of the coming changes and divisions, they would happen whether you knew about it or not. Because you’ve been out of their lives for eleven years now. Some of the people getting involved in this were tiny kids, or even babies, the last time you saw them. So this is not about you. It’s about the power dynamics in your family. Javier’s coming out and Estrella’s ultimatum forced a confrontation between those in your family who are genuinely bigoted, and those who only follow along in the hopes that they will not be targeted. It’s a tactic often used by people who live in abusive households. Your parents may not have struck you at any point, but there are more forms of abuse than just physical violence and they are all equally valid.”

Cougar leaned back and looked at the ceiling as he tried to let Dr. Bandyopadhyay’s words sink in. It was not about him. It had probably stopped being about him shortly after Carlos had left home.

“If you do get letters or calls from your family, it’s a personal victory for them. It’s them defying toxic patterns that have been enforced for a very long time. At this point, much as I hate to say it, you are probably more of a concept to them than a person. If you choose to respond to any letters you might get, you’ll likely have to find subtle ways of reminding them that you’re human. And that you deserve all the respect that being human entails.” Dr. Bandyopadhyay said gently. “It’s a tricky situation made all the more difficult because there’s nothing you could really do anything about unless you choose to contact them first. But I don’t know that I would recommend that as a course of action.”

“No?” Cougar questioned.

“Do you think, with your knowledge of your family and the information that you’ve since found, that being the one to contact them will bring you any kind of closure? Any kind of peace regarding what happened to you nearly twelve years ago?” she asked.

“I… no se.” Cougar admitted, frowning. “I want to say yes, but I do not feel that any answer they could give would be enough to make up for a decade of silence and hurt.”

“You already speak to Fernanda, right?” Dr. Bandyopadhyay asked.

“Y mi abuelos. (And my grandparents)” Cougar confirmed.

“And now you’re got Juanita that you can be a bit more open with, now that you’ve bridged the gap a bit.” she pressed.

“Y Estrella. (And Estrella)” Cougar added.

“This is already a huge improvement over the last time I saw you, Cougar. You have five close family members that you actually have seen in the last year. You don’t just have acquaintances and teammates, you have friends. On top of that you have a best friend who loves you enough to admit when he needs help taking care of you. These changes are huge and they did not happen all at once. And that’s a good thing. If your entire family showed up and asked to be a part of your life, how well do you think you’d adjust to that?” she asked.

“Badly.” Cougar admitted quietly.

“Exactly. It’s okay to take time to adjust to changes in your life. Take time to process what’s happened and find a way to cope. What makes it difficult to cope is if you have no energy and can’t actually begin processing things because you’re too drained to do so. Which is where pharmaceuticals can come in. Look in the drawer of the coffee table.” she instructed.

Inside the drawer was a paper pharmacy bag whose contents rattled when Cougar grabbed it. There
was a pill bottle inside with a label that told Cougar that Gomez Addams had a prescription for low dose antidepressants, a prescription Cougar had been on before. He held the bottle in his hands, turning it over a few times before looking at Dr. Bandyopadhyay.

“You feel this is necessary?” he asked, unsure.

“Can you tell me what the purpose of crutches are?” she asked.

“To help you keep going while you heal.” Cougar answered, closing his eyes and sighing.

“And those pills are just tiny chemical crutches to help you keep going while your mind heals. A bunch of people did a number on it, even if they aren’t aware of it, and it needs help to hobble along until it’s doing better. Sound okay?” Dr. Bandyopadhyay asked, smiling understandingly at him.

“Sí.” Cougar said, feeling better about needing the medication.

“Good. You keep me informed on how they are working for you, Jake has my number so just text me, and I’ll adjust the prescription as needed. Of course, if you find yourself having a bad reaction, or feel that they don’t work for you, then stop taking them.” she said.

Cougar nodded, turning the bottle in his hands as he read the prescription instructions.

“Now, I know that you may not always have time to do this, but I think it would be a good idea to keep some kind of journal. Some place where you can write down your thoughts and feelings and any realizations you may have. It can help, particularly when you’re dealing with very strong emotions, to have them written out so you can go back and analyze what you were feeling or thinking while it was going on. You’re not obligated to tell me anything you write down, but if you want to then you’ll have it at hand to reference.”

Cougar blew out a slow breath and nodded. If his behavior had been enough to make Jake worry, then he would listen to Dr. Bandyopadhyay and do everything he could to get better.

“Okay then, Mr. Addams. I’ve got you scheduled for another appointment next Saturday morning at ten, your time. Until then our time is up.” Dr. Bandyopadhyay said, smiling at Cougar.

“Gracias.” Cougar said, waving at the screen until she disconnected the call.

Cougar stood and stretched, feeling the uncomfortable stiffness in his body that meant he had not exercised nearly enough over the last few days. He looked around his apartment and found it was surprisingly clean before realizing that Jake had likely been keeping it that way. Guilt burned in his belly for what he had been putting his friend through. Cougar looked at the prescription in his hand and resolved to get started right away. He padded in to his kitchen and took his first dose with a glass of water. As the water hit his stomach he remembered that he had barely eaten before he dropped his food, so he helped himself to another serving from the full wok on the stove.

Cougar was just finishing up putting away the dishes he had cleaned and dried when his front door opened. Cougar turned to greet Jake, to thank his friend for taking care of him, but when he saw who was there instead he felt his jaw drop in shock.

“Hola, Cougar.” Sr. Torres said, walking forward.

Cougar was dimly aware of low voices having a hushed conversation near his front door, but all he
could focus on was his abuelo standing before him.

“Jake said you might need some cheering up.” Sr. Torres said, pulling Cougar in to a hug.

Cougar sagged against his abuelo as much as he dared, mindful of the old man’s knees and back.

“Lo siento, Cougar.” Sr. Torres whispered, hugging Cougar as tightly as he could. “I had hoped mi hija would find the courage to speak to you again. But even though she has not, you are not without family. Family that loves you no matter what.”

“Gracias, abuelo.” Cougar whispered, trying not to cry.

“Now, come see tu abuela y Fernanda. They have much fussing to do over you.” Sr. Torres said, giving Cougar one last squeeze before letting go.

Cougar wiped his eyes hastily before turning to the door. It was only open enough for one large hand to be gripping the edge of the door, simultaneously keeping it open while preventing it from being too open. Cougar could hear his hermana y abuela nattering at Jake for insisting his abuelo go in first. Smiling, Cougar walked over and tickled Jake’s knuckles lightly to get his attention.

“Oh! Hey! That. Feels weird, honestly.” Jake said as he opened the door just enough to stick his head through. “Hey! Hi. Sorry. I just. I thought-”

“Gracias.” Cougar said quietly, cutting off the impending torrent of nervous, apologetic babble.

“Oh. Okay, good.” Jake said, relaxing. “Are you ready for your other visitors?”

“Sí.” Cougar said, pulling the door open.

“Cougar!” Sra. Torres and Fernanda said in unison, swarming him.

Cougar took a moment to enjoy having them both in his arms, clearly glad to see him.

“Still too skinny.” Fernanda whispered in his ear, earning a pinch to her side.

“Come, come! Let us see this apartment of yours.” Sra. Torres said, herding Cougar and Fernanda further in.

Cougar turned to check on Jake and saw his friend pulling luggage in to his apartment. Jake caught Cougar’s eye and nodded his head in the direction of Cougar’s room. Cougar nodded once, understanding that Jake was going to put Sra. Torres and Fernanda up in Cougar’s room for their stay. Cougar could not quite recall if he had fresh sheets on his bed, but he trusted Jake to take care of that if it was needed.

Cougar’s abuelos and Fernanda spent most of the day catching up with Cougar and Jake, exchanging belated Christmas and birthday gifts as they spoke. Fernanda was in her last year of high school, and would be starting her tattoo apprenticeship in April when she turned eighteen. Sra. Torres announced that she had begun volunteering at a hotline for LGBT youths, and Sr. Torres still went in to the antiques store several times a week to make sure things were running smoothly.

Cougar and Jake shared some stories of the team’s antics during the recruitment tour. For the most part that meant Cougar would give a one sentence prompt and Jake would explain the context and events, with the occasional extra detail added by Cougar. He waited until Jake was in the bathroom
to tell his family about the incident in the grocery store in Maryland. They laughed, Sr. Torres nearly choked on his tea, and when Jake got back they teased him about horrifying the poor old woman. Jake, having no shame, added details that Cougar had left out so his family could properly appreciate the degree of shock and horror on the woman’s face.

For dinner they ate the leftover fried rice, and Sra. Torres bemoaned his lack of an actual dinner table. They settled in for the night, with Sr. Torres taking the guest room and Fernanda and Sra. Torres taking Cougar’s bed. Cougar and Jake camped on the large futon in the living room, with Jake making jokes about pillow forts, junk food, and other childhood sleepover staples.

Once they were settled, and the light no longer shone under the doors of Cougar’s bedroom and guest room, Jake turned to Cougar and stared at him assessingly in the moonlight.

“I know you’ve kind of had a big day, with surprises and all.” Jake whispered, looking unsure. “I have one more for you, though. Think you might be up for it?”

Cougar thought about it for a moment before nodding. He trusted Jake to know his limits, now more than ever.

“Okay, just. One second.” Jake said, rolling over and nearly falling off the futon. He rummaged around in the small pile of things he set up on the floor on his side of the futon. He rolled back over with a laptop in hand and passed it to Cougar.

Cougar took the laptop gently, raising an eyebrow. Jake nodded encouragingly and shuffled a bit closer. Cougar turned to lay on his side so that he could more easily read or watch whatever surprise Jake had prepared. The fact that doing this gave Jake the opportunity to spoon up behind Cougar was an afterthought.

Cougar opened the laptop and found a video file waiting to be played. A gentle touch on his elbow signaled Jake passing him a set of headphones. He plugged them in and put them on before pressing play.

The screen filled with the user interface of the secure video call program Jake had designed. The mouse moved on the screen and a call was placed before Cougar could track who the recipient was. The person who picked up was a woman Cougar had never seen before. Long brown hair with thick blonde streaks was held back in a low ponytail over one shoulder. She had large brown eyes and a cleft chin that made her heart-shaped face look striking rather than simply pretty. She tugged on the cuffs of her pink cardigan nervously as her eyes darted around the screen.

“Um, hi.” the woman said, her voice a bit lower than Cougar had expected.

Jake’s voice came through the headphones, his tone reassuring. “Hi, again. Everything going okay?”

“Yeah.” the woman said, nodding. “Still find this a little weird.”

“Which part?” Jake asked.

“Some random hacker contacting me out of the blue to help me keep my identity protected so people can’t find me?” the woman said, raising an eyebrow. “It’s more than a little weird, you gotta admit that much.”

“Yeah, I guess. But you know I had my reasons.” Jake said.
“Ah, yes. This mysterious mutual friend of ours that you won’t name.” the woman said, rolling her eyes.

Cougar tensed and leaned a little closer to the screen.

“Well,” Jake said patiently, “I couldn’t name him before because I couldn’t verify the security of your connection. But! You’ve got a new PC, new OS, better security, a better net connection, and you’ve learned to safeguard your data. So if you want to know on who’s behalf I contacted you, I will answer you now.”

“Who?” the woman demanded.

“Do you remember Carlos Alvarez?” Jake asked.

The woman’s eyes grew wide and she leaned forward and whispered, “Carlos? Carlito asked you to look in on me?”

“He wanted to make sure that you made it out alright, Carmen.” Jake said. Cougar inhaled sharply at her name. “He was never able to contact you because he didn’t want to accidentally lead your parents to you.”

“How is he?” Carmen asked.

“He’s doing okay.” Jake said after a brief pause. “His family didn’t react well to what happened, and he ended up in the military pretty early. Which is another reason why he was hesitant to reach out. Rumors about Navy guys aside, most military branches aren’t the most open minded.”

“The military?” Carmen asked, sounding confused. “Carlito wanted to be a writer when he grew up. I have a hard time picturing him in the military.”

“He’s got medic training, takes care of a group of knuckleheads who are proud to consider him a friend. In between all the active combat he’s been studying Criminology so he can write once he’s decided he’s had enough.” Jake said. “And, like I said, his family didn’t respond well to what happened. It was sort of his only choice.”

“What happened after I left?” Carmen asked, voice quiet with worry.

“A lot of stuff that… it’s really not my place to talk about. Carlos only talks to his grandparents, littlest sister, and an aunt. Though he’s gotten back in touch with his other younger sister recently.” Jake said, pausing for a moment. “The people he doesn’t talk to made it pretty damn clear what their opinions were on what went down. A direct result of this was that Carlos enlisted when he was seventeen. He’s been in military ever since.”

“Oh, Carlos.” Carmen said, her face falling.

“In our previous sessions I didn’t record anything, but this time I am. So if you want to send him a message, I’ll make sure he gets it. I’m sure it’d do him good to hear that things turned out well for you.” Jake said.

“Oh my god.” Carmen breathed, blinking back tears. “Where do I even start? Carlos, I need to thank you for what you did. The way you helped me when we were teenagers saved my life. I made it to San Francisco and found people who could help me further. People who understood what I meant when I said my name is Carmen, even if I still looked like a boy at that point.

“My life has gotten so much better since you helped me. I’m transitioning. I went to college. I’m a
social worker, and I married a wonderful man; a lawyer who does pro bono work with LGBT youths. We’re thinking of adopting in a few years.” she said, pausing to inhale shakily.

“None of this- absolutely none of it – would be possible without you, Carlos. If you hadn’t listened to me, believed me? If you hadn’t spent years helping me work towards my own freedom I would not have the life I have now. Thank you.” she said, her breath hitching. “Thank you so much, Carlito. I will never forget what you did for me. Te amo, siempre.

“I don’t know what’s happened to you in the years since I last saw you, but I hope you’re well. I hope you’re happy and have people who love you and support you. If they’re even half as supportive of you as you were of me, then I’ll sleep well knowing you’re in good hands. You deserve good people in your life. God, you deserve so much. I hope you get it all.” she said earnestly, her voice breaking.

Carmen covered her mouth while she visibly fought her need to cry. After a long moment she shook her head and held up her other hand, as though asking for a pause.

“Okay,” Jake said, his voice soothing, “take some time. If you think of anything else you want to say to him, you know how to contact me.”

Carmen nodded, ending the video call, and Cougar took one shaky inhale and slowly let it out. He blinked away the tears blurring his vision and sniffled. Jake’s hand appeared in front of him, holding a tissue that Cougar took to blot at his tears.

“She’s safe.” Jake whispered when Cougar removed the headphones. “She lives in a good area, and her records are sealed as much as they can be. Anyone trying to find her based on her parents won’t be able to, and anyone looking for her past based on who she is now will have a very hard time. She’s as safe as a trans civilian can be, but that’s all I can promise.”

Cougar turned around to face Jake. “It is enough.” he choked out. “It is more than enough! Jake… Just to see that, to know she made it? To know she is happy now?” Cougar trailed off, words failing him in the face of an overwhelming sense of relief. “It was worth it. The time, the money. My family. Everything. It was worth it.”

Jake reached out and drew Cougar in for a hug. Cougar curled in close and wrapped his arms around Jake, clinging to his friend. If Cougar muffled his crying in Jake’s shoulder, at least he knew it would stay between them.

Dimly, Cougar was aware that he had not cried this much in such a short time period since he had first been disowned. He also knew that, where his previous bouts were brought on by hurt and sorrow, this time it felt more like a great relief. Instead of crying because he was in pain, he felt as though he was healing.

Cougar fell asleep pressed as close to Jake as he could comfortably be, trusting Jake to watch over him.

In the morning, Cougar woke slowly. The room was filled with light and he stretched where he lay on his stomach, enjoying the tangle of limbs starting to shift next to him. He opened his eyes and took in the sight of Jake sleeping peacefully on his back next to him. Jake’s nose twitched, a sign he was waking up, and Cougar made sure to pull back a bit so that he did not look like an idiot that
was besotted with his best friend.

“Mah-hmmmmrr.” Jake mumbled, eyes still closed, before clearing his throat to try again. “Morning. How’s you?”

“Bueno.” Cougar answered, reaching out to card his fingers through Jake’s bed head. Jake smiled and hummed with pleasure. “Gracias.” Cougar said quietly.

“De nada. (You’re welcome)” Jake said, slowly blinking his eyes open.

The sound of papers being moved had both Cougar and Jake pausing and turning in the direction of the noise. Sr. Torres was standing in front of the brick wall of Cougar’s living room, examining something. It took a long moment for Cougar to wake up enough to remember that the only unframed paper things he and Jake had that were hung on that wall was a collection of tickets, fines, and arrest papers that spanned five continents of the world map Fernanda had painted there several years ago.

Cougar and Jake tensed as one, staring at Cougar’s abuelo as he flipped through a sheaf of tickets taped to the wall. Sr. Torres was frowning as he read, and after a long moment he turned to them and asked,

“How many times am I going to find the words ‘naked in a tree’ on this wall?”

Cougar planted his face in his pillow and whined, and Jake started laughing. The futon shook from it, prompting Cougar to chuckle along. The ridiculousness of the situation had the both of them rapidly descending in to giggle fits.

“What is your fascination with being naked in trees when you are drunk?” Sr. Torres continued.

Jake made some kind of strangled noise as he turned red and laughed harder.

“I’ve been drunk, I get the naked part. I even get the tree part, you always did like heights. But why both? Wouldn’t the bark hurt?”

Jake was wheezing with laughter at that point, on the verge of tears. Cougar kicked the futon mattress from where he lay with his face buried in his pillow.

“I was going to suggest we go to a park later today, but now I’m not so sure.” Sr. Torres joked.

“It’s the ghillie suits,” Jake choked out, “they make him feel tingly.”

Cougar pushed Jake off the futon as Sr. Torres laughed.

“I am going to get some breakfast made. The two of you should figure out something for us to do that does not involve trees. Or alcohol.” Sr. Torres said. Cougar sat up to go help him, but was waving off. “If I cannot find something I will ask.” he said, walking towards the kitchen.

Cougar flopped back on the futon, and Jake flopped down on top of him soon after.

“Not a bad way to start the day, huh?” Jake said, grinning at Cougar.

Cougar grinned and nodded back, stretching out on the futon.

He knew it would not be simple to move forward from this point. His family, his disownment and their continued silence, was an old wound. He had thought once that he was over it and had put it behind him, only to have it ripped open and freshly bleeding. This time, though, he would not be
dealing with it alone. He had friends and family who could afford to be openly supportive of him. He had Jake.

For the first time in a very long time, Cougar looked to the future with hope in his heart for what lay ahead.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings:

The team copes with racist behavior towards them.
One cannibalism joke.
Mentions of PTSD.
Past homophobia on the part minor characters.
Past transphobia and mentions of conversion therapy.
Vomit.
A character copes with depression, losing several days to too much sleeping and a severe lack of energy.

End Notes

Questions, comments, concerns? Come find me on tumblr

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!