US Civil War AU. Fired by abolitionist spirit and the desire to see long-standing wrongs righted, the influence of the Novak family enables James Castiel Novak to be named Captain of Company B of the 27th New York Infantry. Determined to do right by his family, do his duty as a soldier of the United States, and stand up for liberty and justice, James is quickly faced with the hard truth that there may be no way he can do all three.

*Notes on the Tags*
1. Characters are listed in the order I introduce them, more or less.
2. Character Death: I have debated having the MCD tag on this story, because the definition of "Major" is pretty damn fuzzy. However, general consensus in the fandom appears to be that Major Character Death in Supernatural encompasses Dean, Sam and Castiel and leaves out everyone else. By that definition, there is no Major Character Death in this story. However, there will absolutely be "minor" character death. Consider yourselves warned.
3. I've filled in tags well beyond what's published (including some that hint at spoilers), based on my outline. CURRENT TAGS ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE, and I bet I'll be adding more.
4. Also note, the ultimate chapter count is an estimate.
The Better Angels of Our Nature

Chapter Notes

I'm a Civil War buff. My father is into military history. When I was a girl, we'd go on camping trips and wander battlefields. I've read dozens of books and visited every major battlefield in the East, and some in the West. This is one of my passions, as is Supernatural, and I'm incredibly excited to put them together.

You don't have to be a history expert to read this story. I'll do my best to keep things accessible. If I make a throw-away reference, chances are you won't need to understand it. I'll explain what matters. Also, I'll be annotating the story with links to articles, images, maps, and videos. If you have questions about the historical events, please comment and I will explain (unless doing so gives spoilers for the story). I'll also post supporting material on my Tumblr (unforth-ninawaters).

The US Civil War is one of the defining conflicts of US History. Fought from 1861 to 1865, it began when the Southern states seceded in response to the election of Republican President Abraham Lincoln, whom Southerners feared would push anti-slavery legislation and other things they opposed (such as a Homestead Act). Asserting that the US Constitution was not a permanently binding contract, but rather an agreement that a state could opt out of, 13 states seceded, starting with South Carolina on December 20th, 1860. All thirteen had legal slavery.

Declaring secession unlawful, and that the seceding states were in open rebellion, Abraham Lincoln mobilized the remaining 20 states (four of which, called the Border States, had slaves - Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland and Delaware). The war began in South Carolina on April 12th, 1861, when Confederate forces opened fire on Fort Sumter after Federal troops refused to vacate the fortress located in Charleston Harbor.

Here's a Helpful Map

By July, 1861, when this story begins, things were chaotic - it wasn't clear if the border states would secede, armies were facing off in Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, and all along the border between Virginia and Maryland. Confederate troops menaced the US capital in Washington DC. The Confederate capital was in Richmond, Virginia. Washington and Richmond are only 100 miles apart, and thus that area was obvious as a theater for war.

650,000 men died in the US Civil War - to put that in perspective, roughly 725,000 US soldiers have died in every other war the US has participated in COMBINED. The Civil War killed 2.4% of the entire US population. Roughly a third of all soldiers who served were casualties (casualty is defined as killed, wounded, captured, or missing in action). Individual battles had casualty rates as high as 40%. Compare to World War 2, where casualty rates for the armies - excluding civilian populations - were around 15%, and battles usually hovered around 10% casualties of the total men engaged.

Basically...the US Civil War bloody and brutal. I'm going to try to do that justice in this story...as such:

WARNING: CHARACTER DEATH. I'm fuzzy on the definition of "major"...but people are going to die, and people are going to get hurt, and it's going to get graphically
violent.

I'm making an effort to keep this accurate, but I'm making some deliberate a-historical decisions. Feel free to point out that I've goofed something. If it's one of the things I've done intentionally, I'll let you know, and if not, I'll try to amend, but no promises. :)

There are three types of characters in this story.
2. Historical figures. Abraham Lincoln is president, etc.
3. "Replacements." A small number of Supernatural characters, I've "cast" as historical figures. For example, Bobby Singer is basically James Longstreet - there will be no Longstreet in this story.

Recent controversy on the Confederate Flag has, I've noticed, left a lot of people with the impression that the US Civil War was about "good Northern people" and "bad Southern people." This is a gross oversimplification. Most people on both sides were horribly racist by modern standards, and even President Lincoln declared that if he could end the war by leaving every single slave with their owners, he'd do so. Just because someone fought for the Confederates, that did not make them unsympathetic to the suffering of slaves. Both sides committed atrocities, both sides did noble deeds, there were men and women on both sides who did the "right thing," and plenty who didn't. This story is about exploring those shades of gray.

This is the most ambitious project I've written. I'll do my best to update regularly - I'm hoping for 3 chapters per week. I anticipate final word count between 200,000 and 300,000. I'm a little terrified of bringing it all together, but bear with me - I promise, if nothing else works, the smut will be hot. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 1: The Better Angels of Our Nature

Dearest Anna, July 14th, 1861

We are arrived in Washington with such fanfare that you’d think us the first Regiment on the scene, rather than one of dozens. There is nothing like unearned adulation to go to one’s head, make one feel a hero simply for donning the uniform and waving the pennant. Fortunately, the officers of the 27th are wise men, and none of us have allowed the cheering to go to our heads. Or rather, some may when we left Elmira, when we were wined and dined by the ladies of Williamsport. However, when we passed through Baltimore, we were reminded vividly that it’s not all “Union Forever, huzzah boys, huzzah!” It was the oddest experience in the world to listen to a crowd cheer “Jeff Davis and the Confederacy! No Union with traitors! No alliance with oppressors!” Do they not hear the irony of their words? Do they not see the contradiction? The oppression of 4 millions of our fellow men and women is an invisible crime, yet the installation of a legally elected president is the most heinous of villainy, simply because they do not agree with his political view. As if we have not been subjected to, forced to, practically enslaved to their political view for my lifetime and then some, yet have borne all tyranny and injustice with wise rhetoric and compromise! Now we see the fruits of our patience, the price of near a century of appeasement will be paid in blood.

Forgive me, I digress, and say nothing that you do not already know! I waste my paper and ink on a sympathetic audience. To matters on which I can actually edify you – the trains move most rapidly,
and the countryside is beautiful. The men have behaved excellently and done New York proud. We passed through Pennsylvania and Maryland so quickly I can scarce believe it – I am recalled to when I last made this journey and rode the way to visit my brother, when it took weeks. Now, the same distances that once took a day seemed to pass between the time I closed my eyes to blink and when I opened them once more.

Given the late nights of our journey, our arrival last night near midnight, our lack of provision upon our finally marching into Camp Anderson, our early rousing today to the sound of trumpets and “to drill, to drill!” I should be exhausted, yet I find myself filled with energy and excited for what is to come. Rumor has it we will march on Richmond soon, and with God and the right on our side, can the outcome be in doubt? So says everyone, and yet I wonder, thinking on the Secessionists we passed in Maryland. Surely, they feel the same? Thus I ask you, darling – pray for us! Pray that the good in man overcomes the evil, that we can save this most glorious Union, protect it from rebels and fire eaters, and in so doing make this truly a country where it is self-evident that all men are created equal and entitled to life, liberty, and happiness. Yea, before you amend my statement, and women too! You know I stand with you, my love, in this as in all things.

Your, J.C. Novak

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Sweltering heat marked mid-afternoon in the capital, weather unlike anything James was familiar with. Sweat soaked through his shirt and vest, made dark patches on his pale blue pants, and only the navy of his uniform jacket hid similar stains. If ever there was a place and a time unsuited to garments of thick felted wool, it was Washington DC in July. Liquid matted dark hair to his forehead, fortunately shielded from public view by his hat, and at least the brim provided his flushed face scant protection from the relentless sunlight. Looking over his troops, formed in battle lines before him, James saw his distress mirrored on nearly every face. Sergeant Bradbury looked so much like he was baking that James wondered that he did not smell the burning flesh, and Lieutenant Fitzgerald was so drenched that he might yet melt into a puddle on the flagstones. Only Lieutenant Henriksen, dark skin coated in a sheen, and Corporal Winchester, whose faint, cultured accent spoke of time spent in the South, seemed immune.

“March by the flank,” bellowed Colonel Elkins. In the calm of Franklin Square, every soldier in all three assembled regiments could easily hear the command. Nevertheless, Elkins was a veteran and insisted that what was done on the parade ground was what would be replicated on the battlefield, and thus all must be done properly. Thus, James and every other officer present echoed the Colonel’s commands at their loudest shouts.

“Right face!”

With practiced precision, the soldiers of the 27th New York Volunteer Infantry, 12th New York, and 8th and 14th New York Militia turned to their right, half staying in place, the other half stepping broadly to their right amidst a rustle of fabric and a clatter of equipment. Rifles bobbed, tired arms strained under the weight that was still growing familiar despite near six weeks of drill in Elmira before leaving for Washington. Less encumbered with saber and revolver, James felt a lot of sympathy for his troops. None of them were used to this kind of heat and humidity, none of them were used to drilling for this many hours at a time, and certainly none of them were used to the august scrutiny of the assembled watchers. On a leisurely Sunday, many cityfolk had assembled to watch the soldiers of New York drill, and James thought the crowd must number in the hundreds. With pride, James watched as not a soul of his Company stepped out of place, forming four files where there had previously been two, at the ready and expectant for the next order in the sequence.
“Forward march!”

Drawing his saber, James took the lead before his men. The columns marched, more than 2,000 men, some companies in better order than others, tracing the square of streets surrounding the barracks built in the park. The audience oohed and aahed, some few scoffed audibly, and there was a smattering of applause. The dress of the civilians revealed many of the onlookers as among the first of Washington DC society. A familiar face caught James’ attention as he tried to focus on maintaining a steady pace, his elder brother Zachariah giving him a wry smile and a wave. Beside him, Zachariah’s wife Margaret made a gap in the line of spectators with her wide skirts, a lacy parasol dappling the sunlight over her dark hair and fair skin, watching without the least evident interest in the proceedings. James noted before forcing his gaze before him once more that Zachariah’s brow was no less sweaty beneath his top hat, and that his black suit was effective at hiding his sweat, but the white shirt he wore beneath was not.

“Halt! Front!”

A simultaneous tromp of boots marked all four Regiments stopping, turning, and re-forming battle lines smoothly. To an outside observer, the maneuver looked easy, but it could only be executed if every single private, corporal, sergeant, lieutenant and captain knew precisely where to stand and how to move. If one person did not know their place, chaos erupted. It had taken a month of daily drill before the company had been able to execute the 20 or so formations that they now knew by rote. There was still much to learn. James despaired of everyone memorizing the bugle calls, especially Lt. Fitzgerald, who had proved completely tone deaf. In battle, when their voices might be drowned out, understanding the clear tone of a trumpet could spell life or death. Worst of all, though equipped with rifles, the Regiment had yet to be issued ammunition, and had never fired a single shot. At least they were slated for live drill the following day.

“At ease!”

For a breathless moment, no one moved, and then a cheer broke out among Company D, and the militia echoed it, and within moments pandemonium reined, the ordered lines of troops breaking into clusters of men congratulating each other. Bradbury was at his side in a moment, enthusiasm as bright as the sunburn on his youthful face as he scrubbed sweat from his bright red hair.

“We did good, sir, right?” he said, his voice the husky tenor of a boy trying desperately to sound older than he was. Whoever was responsible for the enlistments in Elmira had been especially lax in allowing in the under aged, and James despaired to think that at least 10 or 15 of the men under his command were younger than him by a decade, despite the theoretical requirement that all be 18. There was nothing to be done for it now – their names were on the roster, signed and notarized declaring themselves of age, and none to gainsay.

“Yes,” James quirked a gentle smile at the boy. Raising his voice, he spoke to the company, “Excellent work today, everyone!”

“Way better than that unit we saw from Pennsylvania,” Gallagher sneered loudly, turning the state name into an insult, earning a general whoop of agreement from his fellow privates.

“That is the wrong sort of competition,” admonished James, raising his voice for all to hear. “We are all fighting for the Union, unity and peace. If one unit is under-prepared, it risks all of us. Instead of looking down on them, we must help them to reach our level.”

“Yeah, yeah, Captain.”

“Come on, you know we’re better.”
“Who needs Pennsylvania? New York can beat the whole damned Rebel army!”

“Don’t even get me started on Boston.”

“It’s all fun and games until some blowhard gets us killed…”

“Our level?” Winchester seemed to appear at James’ shoulder, a feat that should be impossible for a boy six feet tall and surely still growing. He spoke softly, and only James and perhaps those standing closest to him – Bradbury, Ashley, Alfie – could hear. “A single veteran unit would have three rounds off before we finished forming line of battle.” His accent gave the words a gentle lilt.

“Then it’s a good thing that, north and south, we’re all green together,” said James quellingly. Of course they had room for improvement, but the negative talk wouldn’t help anything. Not for the first time, James wondered how the young man could speak about military matters with so much authority. Estimating generously, James thought Winchester might be 16, only his height and manly voice to belie that he needn’t shave regularly, yet he spoke with confident knowledge, and there was something to his eyes that couldn’t be doubted.

“A fine show,” Zachariah strode across the parade grounds as the Company began to break up, a long line forming at the well pump as everyone sought to refill depleted canteens. With a frown, James’ eldest brother wrinkled his nose at the antics of the soldiers as they laughed and passed around a kerchief with which to wipe their brows. “Up to a point, anyway.”

“They’ve – we’ve – been working very hard,” said James. “Would you care to meet my officers?”

“‘Your officers,’ ” mimicked Zachariah. “You’re doing well, Cassie, you’re doing very well.”

James flushed at the nickname, and Bradbury cackled, his voice cracking. “Captain Cassie Novak!”

“Thanks, brother,” muttered James. “Sergeant Bradbury, may I introduce you to my brother, Congressman Zachariah Novak?” Margaret trailed behind, eying the ground distastefully as she used a gloved hand to hold her white-trimmed blue skirts above the dust and browned grass. “And my sister-in-law, Mrs. Margaret Novak?”

“Congressman?” squeaked Bradbury. The smile vanished from his face, his eyes went wide and oddly frightened. James felt guilty, he didn’t mean to embarrass the boy, merely to get him to never, ever repeat the nickname James’ family had given him. “Well, uh, I’d better make sure everyone gets back to barracks.”

“Thanks, Sergeant,” James said calmly. His brother’s watchful eye always made him nervous, a pointed reminder of how high his family’s expectations were, but he suppressed his worries. Neither of his brother’s had gone into the military. Now that he was in the army, there was no one to compare his achievements to except his father, and from that point of view, he was already doing well – Michael Novak had begun his service in the War of 1812 as a private, and ultimately won promotion to Colonel. All James had to do was replicate that accomplishment, all James had to do was leverage that success into political office, all he had to do was marry Anna Milton and produce a bevy of good Christian children, all he had to do was distinguish himself in every field he pursued. He let out a slow, measured breath.

Perhaps sensing the tension, Bradbury hesitated a moment, gave a decisive nod, and fled, waving for the other sergeants to join him, grabbing Winchester by the wrist and dragging him along. “Don’t crowd, there,” Bradbury shouted, voice breaking again. “Form a line, form a line!”

“You’ve already met Lieutenant Henriksen, I believe?” continued James, ignoring Margaret’s look
of affronted politeness. James gestured towards his senior Lieutenant, senior in truth, Henriksen probably had 20 years on James, and a lifetime of experiences as a slave and freed man. There was a solidity to Henriksen, a tendency to communicate with a single look exactly what he thought about the world around him, especially the racism and oppression he faced daily. Margaret’s reply was a perfect example, her affront became a sneer, her nose wrinkled with disgust, and she rolled her eyes. It had taken all of what little clout James possessed to have Henriksen as his subordinate, and the way most people responded to seeing a black man in the uniform of the United States government sickened James.

“Yes,” Zachariah’s manners were superior to his wife’s, as was his open-mindedness towards people of African descent. “Though I am surprised to see him in such a position of authority.”

There wasn’t a hint of surprise in his brother’s voice, and their mother had undoubtedly written every detail of James’ Captainscy in her frequent letters. James refused to dig for the subtext behind the pointed jibe. “Mr. Fitzgerald, of the Binghamton Fitzgeralds, is my other Lieutenant.” Fitzgerald had taken up a position by the barracks door, staidly taking muster as the men returned to their bunks for a little rest before dinner and more drill as the cool of evening began to relieve the oppressive heat and humidity. The low door frame made Fitzgerald’s height evident, he was usually self-effacing that he faded into the background even when giving commands, but his hat the wood, and nearly every man who walked by him was shorter him by noticeable inches.

“Perhaps we shouldn’t disturb him, he appears busy,” Zachariah said smoothly, arresting James as he began to walk towards the building. “If all goes as planned, we will have the opportunity to meet him this evening, anyway.”

“Oh?” James asked.

“We’d like to extend an invitation to you,” Margaret spoke with all the languid indolence of false good breeding. “To Lieutenant Fitzgerald, as well, and any of your other officers whom you deem… appropriate.” James repressed a scowl, at Henriksen’s being pointedly excluded, at the disgusting wording that would drop the crime at James’ feet – Henriksen’s omission was entirely deliberate, but if James called Margaret on it, she would proclaim her innocence and suggest that James was the racist, for not deeming his inclusion “appropriate.” God save James from a marriage of expediency!

“We’re hosting supper this evening,” Zachariah’s smile was nearly as false as his wife’s tone. Another source for troubled thoughts, James reflected sadly. Every year, his brother became further integrated into Washington’s culture, less genuine, more unctuous.

“I’m not sure I can be spared from my duties,” objected James. It wasn’t exactly a lie. The Regiment could manage perfectly well without him for an evening, but he was an officer and it was his responsibility to set an example, to be assiduous in seeing to his command, to attend drill and share the hardships of his men. If that meant skipping supper, as he had the night before, so be it. If they could endure it, he could endure it. The idea of spending the evening in a parlor while the troops spent it drilling and retiring to pallets, feasting on delicacies while they ate hardtack and salt pork, was distasteful.

“Cassie, I can’t imagine you being dilatory to even the slightest degree,” said Zachariah dismissively. “It is important for the men of the military to be seen as members of society, of high society, not merely as ruffians and common-folk. A man such as yourself, at a table such as mine, can set an example for all of Washington society.” James quirked a skeptical eyebrow. “And I’d like to spend an evening with my baby brother.” The confession sounded forced, and Margaret’s lips flat-lined disdainfully at the reminder that her husband might have some humanity left beneath his die-hard Republican exterior.
“I’ll attend,” James gave Zachariah a faint smile, and got a triumphant one in return. “I doubt I’ll be able to bring Lieutenant Fitzgerald or the other officers, though depending on the hour they might be spared. It’s possible that Colonel Elkins could attend, as well.”

“We’re counting on it,” Margaret said with what James hoped was an unintentional air of sarcasm. “He will be family, after all.”

“Indeed,” James shook his head. “It took me an hour to convince Hannah not to accompany us to Washington, as if an army of rough men was any place for her!”

“Are you sure you convinced her?” Genuine warmth came to Zachariah’s voice for the first time. “I wouldn’t put it past her to agree to your face while secretly forming a plan of her own. Think of the scandal were she to come alone, and them not yet married! She is as stubborn as our mother, with none of mother’s manners to council restraint.” Family could still bring Zachariah back to himself. James prayed that it was always so. While James understood the importance of politics, the necessity and prestige of having members of the family among Washington’s elite, how critical it was to build alliances in order to effect meaningful change in the nation, James regretted how interacting with such people seemed to alter – he was loathe to use the word that sprang to mind, corrupt, with all it implied about sin and filth – Zachariah’s behavior and mind-set.

“She wouldn’t,” said James with more confidence than he felt. “She—”

“My love,” Margaret interrupted dispassionately. “We must speak with the Colonel. You will have opportunity to speak with Captain Novak later.”

“Captain Novak,” echoed Zachariah with a disingenuous smirk that set James’ teeth on edge. “Excellent, excellent – you will do us proud, I’m sure.” There was a whisper of you’d better, as if James had ever considered shirking his responsibilities. He was spared having to make a reply as Margaret raised her broad skirts once more and crossed the park towards the Colonel, automatically turning her parasol to block the dazzling sunshine. Zachariah followed with casual haste, an impressive show of not hurrying in her wake while still managing to stay just behind her swaying flounces. Though distance and the hubbub of the troops drowned out the words, James watched with detached interest as Margaret greeted Elkins far more graciously than she’d ever treated James. It confused him, on the one hand – wouldn’t it be more appropriate to be polite to one’s family members? – yet he was actually relieved that the political nuances of her behavior were beyond him. Michael Novak had high hopes that all of his sons would be successful in all walks of life, distinguishing themselves in politics, war, and business. James had no head for politics, though he had a knack for the law he’d taken up after graduating from Union College. If he could excel at war, and return to his growing practice after, it would have to be enough prestige to satisfy his father.

Thus far, he’d been surprised how appealing he found his military role. The organizational aspects of the work appealed to him, and the prospect of leading men in the cause of right, liberty, and to defend the United States of America fired his blood. With a spring in his step, he joined his lieutenants as they ordered the men to a brief afternoon rest, sending Sergeant Reidy to check on the status of their rations for supper. There was an endless amount to do. Some of the company still did not have hats, not a soldier had an actual sheath for his scabbard, some 15 had been given cartridge boxes with the bottoms out, and no one had ammunition for the Harpers Ferry muskets they’d been issued. The list went on, essential equipment that some or all of his troops lack. James had planned to spend the evening pestering the quartermaster that Colonel Walrath of the 12th had introduced him to at services that morning, but Zachariah’s invitation meant he’d not have time, so instead, he scrounged up paper, ink and pen and began to assemble a list, tracking down each of his officers in turn to ask their opinion, his thoughts entirely absorbed elsewhere.
There were great wrongs to be corrected, as he’d written Anna, a chance to finally rectify that which was terribly compromised when the nation was founded. It had to end, the rebellious spirit had to be quelled, the concepts of “secession” and “nullification” need forever expunged from the national lexicon. There were no rights for the states save those granted by the federal government, and there could be no great country if every sway of public opinion could lead this state or that to cry, ‘nay, we object, we withdraw!’ Further, there could be no justice for all while there were so many denied even basic rights of citizenship. There was Henriksen, chastising Zeddmore and Spangler for horseplay, uniformed and prepared to die for the country of his birth, denied the basic protections of the law, denied the right to vote for those in whom his fate reposed, denied even the possibility of citizenship no matter how long he might dwell upon free soil, denied the right to do as Moses once did for the Jews and lead his wife and child to the promised land. Henriksen was denied humanity because of his skin color, because of the servitude into which he was involuntarily born. It was a crime, a national stain, and James was elated that the time for it to end had come in his lifetime.

*I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists.*

So President Lincoln said in his inaugural, but James didn’t believe it for an instant. Already, there was talk of drafting a bill for compensated emancipation in the District of Columbia, and it would not end there. Was this not the same man who said,

*I hope the lamp of liberty will burn in our bosoms until there shall no longer be a doubt that all men are created free and equal.*

Had he not declared,

*This Government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved – I do not expect the house to fall – but I do expect it will cease to be divided.*

Those were not the words of a man who personally believed that slavery should stand as an institution. The words of Lincoln’s inaugural were, even to James’ unkeen eye, those of political necessity, a desperate last attempt to avert the War that the South had no desire to avoid. Lincoln had avowed repeatedly that slavery was a moral, social and political evil – James had read such sentiments in speech after speech, had believed in them whole-heartedly as he’d helped his father campaign for Lincoln in Wayne County. James didn’t think it optimism in supposing that slavery’s abolition would be a condition of welcoming back the states in rebellion. Indeed, he found it impossible to suppose how else things might end.

“Sir?”

Corporal Winchester’s quiet voice broke through James’ thoughts, and James came back to his task to find that he’d jammed the metal nib of his pen through the paper, bending it on the board beneath that he used as a writing surface, splattering his neatly ordered list with ink. Smiling shyly, Winchester met James' eyes for a moment, hazel shadowed.

“I brought the list for my squad,” Winchester proffered a slip of paper to James. On it, in a fine, almost feminine hand, the Corporal had listed every missing item his squad lacked from the expected accoutrement, and how many of each would be needed to bring the men up to muster. Winchester flicked a suggestive look at the inventory that James had just ruined, and James chuckled despite his frustration.

“This is good work,” James said. Winchester beamed under the praise, sweeping back long, sweaty locks from his forehead as he lowered his gaze to hide a faint flush. “Perhaps you could integrate your list with mine? And rewrite them?”
“Absolutely!” said Winchester enthusiastically, practically grabbing the board, page and pen from James. “I mean, yes sir, Captain Novak!”

“You may use the desk in my office,” James offered. It was not nearly so generous an offer as it sounded, his “office” was the glorified name for the closet that had been assigned to him in the barracks. That it had flimsy walls and a curtain serving as a door afforded him more privacy than anyone else in Company B had, and it had space enough for a narrow cot, a stool, and a writing surface so small that it could most rightly be called a lectern, based on its shape. Best of all, he could stand, dress and shave in private, provided he did not attempt to turn around, for doing so would certainly tumble him on to the cot, promptly collapsing it. As a bastion of solitude, it was the height of luxury. In the entire regiment, only the Colonel had more space. The accommodations for the 27th New York were unusually sumptuous, from what James heard. Several regiments were sleeping on the hard stone of the floor of the unfinished Capitol building, and the night before, marching from the train, they’d passed hundreds sleeping on the ground, and had heard of others sleeping four to a tent meant to accommodate 2, officers and men crowded alike.

“I’ll let the Lieutenants know to bring their tallies to you,” added James. “And Corporal – I expect I could use a clerk in the future, if that is a position that interests you.”

“Aren’t you supposed to give orders, sir?” The challenge was back in Winchester’s eyes, his intelligence gleaming brightly despite his attempt to appear demure. Curiosity flickered once more, leaving James to wonder how a teenaged boy could so effortlessly portray such confidence and experience.

“Are you questioning me?” James said sternly. Winchester’s lips quirked in a smile, chestnut hair falling free again. “I order you to serve as my clerk, Corporal.”

“Yes sir!”

Scurrying away, Winchester attempted to slip past Fitzgerald into the barracks, and instead nearly split his forehead on the door frame. James snorted on a laugh. Winchester might be an old soul, but there were many reminders that he was yet an ungainly colt, unused to his height and growing body, entirely capable of forgetting that he was no longer small enough to share a doorway with a grown man, even one as lean as Lieutenant Fitzgerald.

The last of the men retired to the shade and stillness of the barracks as James approached Fitzgerald, and a moment later they were joined by a scowling Henriksen.

“I’ve named Corporal Winchester my clerk,” James informed them. “Get him the requisition lists, he’ll compile them. Henriksen, if you would take the list to the quartermaster when he’s done?”

“Are you sure you don’t want Fitzgerald to do it?” Henriksen, bit off the name like a swear word. Fitzgerald tugged his hat off, stirred limp, damp hair around, and tugged it back on obliviously. James watched the exchange, troubled. So far, none of his men had given Henriksen any problems that he’d noticed, but he wasn’t always around.

“I asked you to do it,” James said mildly. Henriksen’s scowl deepened. “Lieutenants, is there a problem?”

“Every man present and accounted for,” Fitzgerald answered cheerfully, passing James the Company roster he’d been using to take attendance. For a moment, Henriksen looked even more affronted, and then he sighed and deflated.

“No, sir,” said Henriksen.
“It is important that we be able to work together,” insisted James.

“It has been my experience,” Henriksen forced out in clipped tones, “that the government officials with whom we deal would respond better to a different officer.”

“You’re my first lieutenant,” James practically barked. He wasn’t angry at Henriksen, he was angry at every single damned person in Washington who saw the color of a man’s skin before the color of his uniform. “If you are unable to execute your duties, I will relieve you and name someone else. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Henriksen snapped to attention, back rigid, heels of his brogans making a crack of leather on leather. “I will speak with the quartermaster, sir.”

“If anyone disrespects your authority, they disrespect mine, and that of Colonel Elkins, and that of Governor Morgan when he authorized your position as an officer, and thus cast aspersion on the entire state of New York,” James continued. Fitzgerald gave him a lopsided, encouraging grin, and Henriksen’s eyes caught the sunlight and gleamed fire and pride. “Feel free to tell them I said so.”

“I will, sir.”

“If that’s settled?” James gave them each a stern look, and earned a crisp nod from Henriksen and a lazy bobbing of the head from Fitzgerald. “Excellent. Excuse me.”

Stepping into the barracks was like stepping into an oven. The flimsy wooden walls absorbed the heat, there was not a window to allow in air, and the dirt floor radiated fire through the soles of James’ boots. The high spirits that had briefly reigned with the end of the drill session were muted to groans and sour mumbling as the members of the company braved the inferno, most lying with unbuttoned jackets and rucked-up shirts, canteens pressed to foreheads or stomachs to bask in the short-lived, relative coolness of the lukewarm water drawn from the deep. Bradbury had his hat and boots off, sweat-darkened hair sticking out in all directions, and had convinced Alfie, Milligan, Ashley, and Reznick to some kind of card game. Gallagher lay back on a cot staring blankly at an open bible. Mondale leaned against a wall, hunched over his lap writing a letter frantically and chewing anxiously on the butt of his pen. The Benders stood together in a group, joined by several others as Jared Bender read extracts from Friday’s newspaper, his young sister – one of the only camp followers in the Company – ghosted among the troops gathering up laundry. Thursten played a haunting melody on a Jew’s harp, which James recognized, and beside him, Eliccott sang softly, off-key, “the rebels out in Maryland they madly raved and swore, they’d let none of our Union troops pass through Baltimore.” Others talked quietly, or wrote letters, or simply lay, dozing or awake, the exhaustion of the journey from New York finally telling on men who had thus far done duty bravely and well. A surge of pride brought a fierce smile to James as he paused within the doorway, before the heat drove him on to the task at hand.

James’ room was on the far end of the barracks, and he strode down the central aisle rapidly, hard-packed dirt absorbing the sound of his steps. The curtain that granted him scant privacy was pushed aside, and Samuel Winchester’s tall form looked amusingly large in the small space, perched on the rickety stool, hunched over the writing tablet. His sodden hat rested on the cot, and sweat matted his hair to his head and neck, curled tendrils around his ears. The faint, rapid scratching of the pen was the only sound as he worked, table spread with scraps of paper that he glanced at only for an instant before returning his attention to his main ledger.

“When you’re done with that, might you copy over this roster?” James said, thrusting the company roster journal into Winchester’s view. The boy started and jerked his pen from the page, breathing hard, and shot a frightened look at James, took a carefully controlled breath and visibly calmed himself.
“Yes, sir,” Winchester murmured, reaching over and taking the book, leaning it against the wall at his feet.

Awkwardly, James leaned over Winchester’s back and strained to reach down the wall, where he’d mounted two curved wires that he generously termed hooks and which bore his spare shirt and coat. “Pardon,” he said apologetically, concerned that he’d startled the boy so badly when he came through the curtain. Grabbing the garments, James leaned out of the doorway. For a moment, he considered changing on the spot, but thought better of it. The goal was to not appear a sweaty mess at his brother’s dinner, and if he changed in the confines of the barracks, he’d soak through his only extra shirt in moments. It was a wonder there was any liquid left in him. He’d change when he arrived for dinner.

“Captain,” Sergeant Reidy gave him a crisp salute by way of greeting the moment James turned around, startling him.

“Sergeant.”

“There’s an issue with the men’s rations…”

With a sigh, James’ tossed the clothing over Winchester’s back and onto his cot, straightened his coat, and listened as the Sergeant explained that the wives and daughters of the men of the 14th New York Militia refused to cook for an entire additional Regiment. James tracked down Colonel Fowler, the red pants of his uniform stained to crimson by moisture, to remedy the situation and bring the gaudily-clad soldiers from Brooklyn into amity with their neighbors from Upstate. The issue was that the women couldn’t be forced to do anything, as they were not under anyone’s formal command, anymore than James could make Missy Bender wash Henriksen’s laundry. Only promising to lump the 14th’s supply requisition list in with his own unit’s prompted a compromise, and led James back across Franklin Square to deliver a new pile of papers to Corporal Winchester.

The youth had scarce moved since James last saw him, though now he worked assiduously on the roster, flipping back and forth between the front pages and the one on which he wrote, copying over each name. James explained the addition to his workload, reached over Winchester to grab his coat, and even managed to lay a hand on it before Bradbury was at his shoulder.

“Message for you, sir!” He pressed a slip of paper into James’ hand.

In a nigh-illegible familiar scrawl, James read that his school friend Bartholomew Boyle was in Washington, serving as a Lieutenant of the 6th Massachusetts, quartered on the floor of the senate. Boyle suggested they meet imminently, though James couldn’t decipher precisely why, so he grabbed his spare uniform and made for the National Mall. He’d scarce gone a block when Sergeant Ashley came running up behind him, breathing hard, scraggly beard a strange contrast to the long hair covering the collar of his sack coat.

“Horses, sir,” gasped out the Sergeant. As far as James had been able to tell since he met Ashley in May, the only southern thing about the man was his accent; he’d been born and raised in Buffalo and spent much of his life in Boston.

“What’s that?” James asked blankly.

“The quartermaster…sent someone…to talk to Colonel Elkins…about horses…for the officers,” Sergeant Ashley bent double, clutching his knees as he drew air in roughly, then let out a vocal, “woo-ee, it is hot!” Patiently, James waited for the rest of the message, and the silence stretched out. “What’re you standing around here for?”
“I was on my way to the Capitol,” James trailed off hesitantly, unsure what someone speaking to Elkins about horses had to do with him.

“Unless you want to walk to Richmond, you get back to barracks,” Ashley said firmly.

“You’ll be walking to Richmond.”

“Captain needs to ride,” Ashley actually had the confidence to grab James’ arm and give him a firm pull back towards Franklin Square. “For the honor of the unit!”

It took a ludicrous amount of time to sort out the horse situation, and before they were done James had been tapped on the shoulder three more times by members of his company asking this question and that, complaining about the food provided by the 14th New York, asking how to send mail, wondering where to procure an ointment to deal with boils, one nervous Corporal inquiring about their free time at night, all manner of questions, many of which they should have known better than to expect James to know the answer to. The sun was a fiery orb on the horizon by the time James escaped – at least he’d have a horse the next day, though he’d had to produce the funds to pay for the mount. His pay would cover it, but the Regiment hadn’t been paid yet, another issue to be sorted out, James made a mental note to investigate the paymaster to get his men two months back pay. When the conversation ended, Henriksen stole the man from the quartermaster department, Elkins turned to deal with something else, and for a wild-eyed moment James looked around, unable to conceive that no one else needed to speak with him. Seeing the way clear – Fitzgerald was hollering orders to assemble for evening drill – James escaped, bolting for Twelfth and Avenue H. Only when a screen of low buildings completely hid the small park did he slow, breathe, and make his way towards the Capitol Mall.

The streets of the city were mobbed as he walked south. Normally, Sunday with dusk approaching should have been quiet, families settling in for supper, much of Congress returned to their home states to escape the oppressive mugginess of summer in the glorified swamp that was the District of Columbia. With the advent of war – merely thinking the word sent a thrill of combined excitement and fear through James – everything was different. Off-duty soldiers made knots on street corners or formed rough, brash groups striding confidently down the streets, uniforms mostly blue, though some in reds, grays, greens, khaki, he even saw one group swaggering by in kilts and speaking in brogue. Civilians were scattered among the soldiers. Barefoot youth scampered back and forth or stopped to ogle the strange variety of “foreigners.” Families of distinction made small parties on the sidewalk, gentlemen talking, women herding their better-born children to prevent them sprinting after their low-born counterparts. Slaves worked diligently bearing loaded baskets or packages with their eyes fixed towards the horizon. Working women walked boldly down the street, hawking hand pies or wrinkled apples or tin utensils or sewing kits or Holloway’s Ointment or anything else they thought soldiers would buy, many doing a brisk trade. Apparently, some had found the paymaster, and the lucky few could apparently think of nothing better to do with their funds than spend them as quickly as possible on whatever caught their fancy.

Outside the vast, porticoed patent office, a large crowd had gathered to listen to a man on a raised platform. “No siree, you will not find a finer product, let no imitators tempt your eye, let no tom foolery distract you, for this – this is the real deal!” A dull thrum followed the word, and James caught a glimpse of a sculpture of a torso – no, a breast plate, in classic Medieval fashion! – as the fellow rapped a knuckle against it. “I would give you a demonstration except the ricochet of the bullet might kill any one of you fine people – it’s that effective! No bullet, smoothbore or rifled, can pierce Elliot’s Bullet Proof Vest, not pistol nor rifle neither! This vest will save your life, and all it will cost you is a mere $5 dollars.” James turned a choked-off exclamation into a cough. The amount was ludicrous, nearly half what a soldier made in a month. The crowd, on the other hand, seemed rapt, rumbling with quiet noise. “And if you’ll just line up over here, I’ve got enough to armor every
man jack of you! The rebels have not cast the bullet that can pierce this steel!”

The patter continued, but James hurried on. Dusk was shadowing the streets now that he was amidst the majestic, marble government buildings. Leaning against the post office, a woman gave James a suggestive look that he refused to assign a meaning to, her jacket unbuttoned to reveal her smudged collar. “Hey soldier,” she called. The moment he had passed, a pair of privates walked going the other direction. “Hey, soldiers.” The two men laughed, low and coarse, and James was glad to leave them behind before the liaison could progress.

James had anticipated escape to the Mall to be an escape, but he hadn’t factored on the changes that mobilization had brought to the capital. The tree-lined expanse had once been green, but the heat and the activity had left it barren and brown. Long barracks, nearly identical to those at Franklin Square though equipped with the luxury of windows, stretched in neat lines alongside Columbia Armory, and towards the stump of the Washington monument, an impromptu supply depot bustled with activity, dozens of wagons and horses moving to and fro, men packing and unpacking supplies to the accompaniment of creaking wood, shouts, and whinnies. Watching them, a dozen ideas for things they needed sprang to James’ – good Lord, the men didn’t even have tents, what would they do for shelter if they marched out of the city? – but he pushed the thoughts away, intent on his destination. After the near-frantic activity of the city streets and the Mall, the approach to the Capitol building was quiet, a peace James had thought to welcome but instead found disconcerting by contrast. On the weekend, there were no workmen arrayed around the unfinished dome, no politicians or journalists hanging about the steps to escape the heat within. Long slivers of sunlight painted the marble façade incandescent orange and yellow. A single company of soldiers stood in perfect parade ground formation before the steps, an officer in front wearing a grim, impassive expression, every man standing firm despite the wilting heat.

“State your business,” the Captain asked boredly.

“Captain James Castiel Novak, Company B, 27th New York Infantry, here to see Bartholomew Boyle, Lieutenant, 6th Massachusetts.”

“Go ahead,” the man gestured vaguely. “Senate is to your left after you go in.”

Nodding, James hurried up the stairs, through the enormous doors, and into the wide Rotunda. Within was dim with early evening darkness, no lamps to light the way. Scaffolding was arrayed all around, reaching towards the high temporary ceiling, and men lounged about the floor, laying on blankets strewn directly over the hard stone. A pall of smoke filled the air from the number of lit cigars and cigarettes, and men read, talked quietly, played at dice, all the pastimes that soldiers found to pass the endless hours. In one corner a man picked at a banjo, and the eerie sound echoed through the high-ceilinged chamber, notes distorting and distending as James crossed to the senate.

Though he’d visited the House of Representatives while it was in session to watch Zachariah make a speech on the Kansas-Nebraska controversy when he visited in ’56, James had not had opportunity to see the Senate in session. Today brought a strange contrast, for soldiers were encamped within the building, and the senators would convene in the morning. The main lectern was prepared for business and the men kept worshipfully clear of it, but the desks and seats for the elected officials were stacked neatly against one wall, and in their place were perfectly ordered rows of men settling down for the evening amidst hushed chatter. The contrast was awe-inspiring, the reminder that even amidst the flames of disunion and war, the democracy of the United States continued to function, laws continued to be debated and passed, free elections would yet be held. True to the founding fathers and the Constitution, there would be no cessation of the normal function of government, no turn to despotism. However the rebels and Democrats might decry some of the policies Lincoln had
implemented since his inauguration, this was yet a Republic of the people, by the people, for the people. Those principals were so deeply ingrained that even this most august center of law-making, this space that had echoed with the words of Daniel Webster and Henry Clay, now accommodated the whispered voices of the men of Boston, the accents of everyman.

“Novak!” Boyle’s bright voice, echoing dully, pulled James from his reverie. The tall, handsome Lieutenant hurried down the narrow aisle between the blankets and extending a hand. “Glad you made it! We leave tomorrow, you know.”

“Does the army march?” asked James, breathless with excitement at the prospect. The imagined boom of cannon and march of thousands of feet whispered through his thoughts, a vision of fleeing men in gray disappearing into the streets of a fantasy of a burning Richmond.

“Don’t know about that,” shrugged Boyle. “But we do – we’re to Baltimore in the morning to guard the railway lines, and back home by the end of the month. We’re nearly done!”

“Done?” James said blankly.

“Yes, done! 90 days, Novak,” Boyle laughed. “But did you hear what happened to us?”

“Of course, though I’d not a clue you were involved,” said James. “If I’d known…well, I’d have done nothing differently, I suppose, I was already getting fitted for a uniform by the time the news reached us. But – I must to my brother’s for the evening. Won’t you come? I’m sure you’d be welcome.” Boyle should fit his sister’s high standards for culture, his family had a history in Boston dating to the Tea Party and before, and his uncle Wightman was mayor.

“Which of your brothers? Gabriel or Zachariah?” Despite the question, Boyle showed not the least hesitation, accepting James’ gestured suggestion that Boyle proceed him through the door and striding confidently across the Rotunda. James followed on his heel, easily keeping pace, adjusting his hold on his spare jacket.

“Zachariah,” clarified James. “Though I’ve hopes Gabriel might be in attendance, as, last he wrote, he was in the city.”

“Splendid,” Boyle glanced over his shoulder and grinned. “I’ll have at least one other person to talk to!”

“So, Baltimore! What happened? What was it like?” James was alight with curiosity.

“Indescribable,” confessed Boyle as the stepped out of the building. “You’ll learn something like eventually, I’m sure.” James took the lead, down the stairs and into the streets behind the Capitol, towards the house Zachariah rented each year. “People everywhere, and the noise, you can’t even imagine the chaos, or how loud a volley is when fired from 500 muskets! A sergeant was killed right beside me, took a brick to the head, and the way it looked…” Boyle’s face went a little green. “I thought we were all going to die, honestly, every man jack, beaten to death by Secessionist devils. We rallied, though, showed those cowards what Boston is made of. I shot one myself – at least, I think I did – no, I’m certain – so many of us fired at once it was hard to say for sure, but I aimed and down he went, so it must have been me, right?” There was a quickness to Boyle’s words that seemed off, and James looked at him again to see his pallor face despite the slowly dropping temperatures, an unnatural sheen to his skin that had nothing to do with the infrequent gas lights spreading pools of yellow in the lowering darkness.

“It must have been something, to have a chance to prove your mettle so soon,” James couldn’t keep a trace of envy from his voice, finding Boyle’s emotions unreadable.
“You’ll understand when you see the elephant,” Boyle’s usual calm restored quickly, the color returned to his cheeks, the lamps making his skin ruddy from sunburn and the heat. “A raw recruit such as yourself cannot possibly understand what it means to be a veteran.”

“I believe it,” James said dryly. “Unless goes horribly awry, I’ll be among your ranks soon enough. The 27th signed two year papers, none of your ‘ninety days and home’ for us.”

“Nonsense,” Boyle waved dismissively at the air by his head. “You’ll be home days after I am, you’ll see. The rebels in Baltimore crumbled as soon as we fought back. The rabble gathered across the Potomac will be just the same. Confident to a tee when they can attack a man with a cane, shoot a man in the back or break his skull with a stone, but confront them with the uniform and the bayonet and hot lead, they’ll be running after the first volley.”

“Would we run after the first volley?” James asked pensively, eying the tree-cloaked buildings along the street as he searched for the right address. It had been several years since he’d last been to visit, and even in that brief time the landmarks that had once been familiar were all changed and in the darkness he struggled to find his way.

“Of course not!”

“Why should they be different?” A tree caught his eye, cleft by lightning and regrown neatly despite being nearly severed in twain, and he smiled in recognition and hurried on to a side street.

Boyle snorted. “If you’d seen what I saw, you’d not ask such an absurd question. Poverty stricken farmers or spoiled rich boys, none worth a lick. I’d like to set the lot of them against our Southies, that’d be a prize fight for the ages. Or not, bet it’d be over before it scarce began.”

The confidence in Boyle’s tone was a strange contrast to the inexplicable concern that had brought pallor to Boyle’s face as he’d described the 6th already-legendary journey through Baltimore, but before James could question his friend further, they came upon the open porch of the modest home that the Novaks kept, surrounded by fragrant rose bushes and shaded by trees. Two flickering flames in sparkling glass sconces illuminated the entryway and cast lurid shadows over Boyle’s face.

“Speaking of prize fights,” Boyle laughed as James reached for the ornate brass knocker. Though the house wasn’t large, it was rich, the paint fresh and bright lavender trimmed in a dark shade of blue. “I hope both your brothers are here. It’s been far too long since I’ve had the chance to watch them go at each other.”

James gave a sad shake of his head. That was in no way a sentiment he could enter in to. Watching Gabriel and Zachariah argue always pained him, especially since they so often were actually saying the same things, simply from a different point of view. Before he could think on it further, a dark-skinned servant – certainly a free woman, no Novak would own a slave – opened the door and bobbed a courtesy. She wordlessly accepted James intelligence that they were invited and expected, and he hastily dashed up the stairs, ducked into the guest room that had once been his. Fumbling out of his coat and vest, James tossed his suspenders aside, tugged his damp shirt over his head, and tossing the sodden items on the bed, dressing rapidly again. With no spare vest, the garment made a clammy wet layer between a wonderfully dry jacket and shirt, but there was no help for it. He was downstairs again in moments, a bemused Boyle blinking after him as the servant waited incuriously.

The house was modest, the first floor containing two parlors and a large dining room, the upstairs four bedrooms. A second building behind housed the kitchens and the stables, James knew from his prior visit. The walls were white washed and mounted with tasteful, generic paintings of flowers and landscapes. Gleaming polished furniture in dark woods accented the entry hallway, a side table
topped with a rose-filled vase, a narrow chest of drawers topped with an elegant lace runner and a fine porcelain vase. As with the outside, there was not a thing out of place, every feature spoke to luxury and wealth on modest display. Zachariah stood as the primary inheritor for the fortune that their father had made in rents and mining, and while there were many wealthier families, the Novaks did not want for anything. Good taste ruled the day within the rental, though occasional flourishes spoke to Margaret’s less restrained influence. The clink of fine china and crystal glasses tinkled from the table of plentitude that awaited them in the dining room, and Boyle gave a mocking formal bow and made a flourish to suggest that James lead the way.

A chandelier spread gleaming light over the dining room, reflected and enhanced by two large mirrors. Dark mahogany made a fine dining set, hutch and glass-fronted cupboard and sideboard, and an enormous table sat around with elegant chairs upholstered in red. More than a dozen finely dressed men and women turned towards James and Boyle as they stepped in the door. James flushed under the attention, adjusting his hat to hide the pathetic mess of his hair that he was suddenly uncomfortably aware of. Zachariah had the head of the table in a well-fit evening suit, and Margaret sat at the foot, a lace concoction edged in silken flowers closely fitted around her corseted top, draped in gathered layer upon layer around her hoop skirt, so wide James marveled that she could sit at all. The sides of the tables were lined with guests, some known to James, others not. Gabriel was in attendance, his wife at his side, her presence making James wish he’d had the nerve to invite Henriksen after all, so Raphael would not be the only dark face invited to join at the supper table. Unsurprisingly, his sister Rachel sat with her husband, Frederick Seward, serving as Assistant Secretary of State under his father William Seward; she lived in Washington year round, and they owned a mansion northwest of the city. Colonel Elkins had beaten James there easily, and was the only person who didn’t pin James with a surprised stare, too intent on his beefsteak and potatoes to care. None of the others were known to James, though some were familiar, such as the pocked older man sitting at Margaret’s right hand.

“James!” exclaimed Gabriel excitedly. “Just the man, just the man. Welcome to Washington, brother! I hope you’ll not stay long!” Setting aside his silverware with a clatter, Gabriel reached over the head of a clean shaven man in a tailored tan suit who sported a smile that showed perfect white teeth. The man grimaced for an instant, then returned to dancing attendance on the youthful blonde sitting beside him, coyly hiding most of her face behind a fan that could not hide her shrewd eyes., ignoring the glower that touched nothing but his dark eyes.

“Hello, brother,” James restrained his smile, though he was just as pleased to see Gabriel, happily shaking his hand. “I wasn’t sure how long you’d stay in the city, your last letter was some time ago.”

“I told you to write,” Raphael’s words were chastising, but her smile was gentle. Gabriel shrugged and gave James’ hand a squeeze.

“Our brother has turned lobbyist,” Zachariah said with disgust that James dared hope was feigned. “He is petitioning congress for a Confiscation Act.”

Gabriel turned withdrawing his hand into a grand gesture that took in the entire table. “Butler’s precedent stands,” insisted Gabriel, his tone the well-rehearsed voice of one rehashing a familiar argument. “The southern states have spent near a century insisting that slaves are property, and not people. By their own logic, it is therefore entirely as legitimate to seize slaves in reclaimed territory as it would be to seize cattle or bales of hay or rifles.” Around the table, mouths opened, expressions darkening, especially on the face of the older man sitting beside Margaret and anon-descript man with fine sideburns, dangling meaninglessly on the arm of a beautiful, slim brown-haired woman in a bodice of bright red trimmed in black, skirts hidden beneath the table, her neck dangling with ostentatious gemmed jewelry glittering in the candlelight. With single-minded determination, Gabriel pressed on. “Every single black man, woman and child who we leave under the hold of traitors aids
the rebellion against the rightful government of—"

“Gentlemen!” interrupted Margaret sharply. “Politics at my dinner table!”

Scowling, Gabriel snapped his mouth shut with a click and inclined his head to hide the utter lack of gracious surrender on his face. Raphael managed a much better approximation of contriteness, dark eyes lighting with a smile, lips curled in a gentle smile. “My apologies for my husband’s manners,” she said in a rich voice. James resisted the urge to shake his head in wonder. For all that Raphael pretended to modesty, anyone who knew Margaret would know that the show of polite manners by the black woman, such a contrast to the rudeness of Margaret’s interjection, would only incite the hostess further. James chanced a glance at Boyle to see him grinning broadly. This was exactly the kind of battle he’d hoped to witness, and that James had hoped to avoid.

“Everyone, may I introduce my brother and his school friend?” Zachariah cut in with unctuous smoothness before any of the range of bemused, puzzled, affronted, or indifferent expressions arrayed around the table could turn into uncomfortable or impolite words. “Tracy, would you set two more places at the table?”

“Yes, sir,” the servant girl said demurely, catching James’ eye with a vague gesture that she’d like to pass by, if that were possible. He stepped out of the doorway and she hurried into the room, grabbing chairs from where they were pushed against the wall, placing one between Gabriel and the woman in the absurd jewelry, and then hauling the other around the table to place it facing the first, between the beautiful blonde and James’ sister Rachel. That done, she left, and Zachariah gestured impatiently for them to take their seats.

“Captain James Castiel Novak and Sergeant—”

“Lieutenant,” corrected Boyle.

“Lieutenant Bartholomew Boyle,” Zachariah explained as they each sat, James settling in gratefully beside Gabriel. Perhaps, when normal conversation resumed, they’d have a chance to speak, though James was less than optimistic. It was not a setting in the least conducive towards catching up with his middle brother. “Around the table we have Richard Roman, Miss Joanna Harvelle.” He skipped Rachel, Frederick, and Colonel Elkins. “General A. Z. Blaine.” That was the man with the skin roughened by exposure and age, and James recognized the name – Zachariah’s father-in-law, Margaret’s father, and apparently made general through some trick of influence, for he was certainly no military man. Instead, he was a Westerner and a Democrat, both groups to be courted in these times of politics mingling with war, and surely it was to that he owed commission. “My beautiful wife, of course – Mr. Balthazar Freeley of her Majesty’s Royal Army, Miss Ruby Cassidy, and on your other side, James, are Mr. and Mrs. Talbot.”

“How d’ya dos” and “pleasure” were exchanged all around, and the other guests resumed eating as Tracy returned with place settings for James and Boyle. Suddenly ravenous, James filled his plate with cuts of roast bird – turkey, he thought – and baked sweet potato as everyone fell quiet, once more intent upon their supper. The fastest eaters were nearly done, though, and as they finished and Tracy cleared plates, conversation resumed. Quite sure that the sum total of what Zachariah and Margaret wished of him were that he to sit straight, look good in his blue uniform with its polished golden buttons, and demonstrate excellent table etiquette, James contented himself to enjoy his meal and let the talk flow around him, catching bits and pieces without inserting his opinion where it was likely undesired.

Mr. Talbot was utterly silent, but Mrs. Talbot, in a distinct British lilt, was engaged in a conversation with Zachariah, clearly resuming a topic interrupted by the arrival of food. The matter at hand was manufacturing, and Mrs. Talbot intently described the merits of certain business ventures as sound
investments, as evidenced by the fact that Mr. Talbot had shares in them. Though she said all that was proper and right for a woman, still she dominated the conversation, Mr. Talbot occasionally offering inarticulate support for her assertions. From across the table, Mr. Roman listened avidly to every word Mrs. Talbot said, interjecting occasionally with questions or comments that made it clear he was a man of considerable means, and without appearing to consciously think about it he interacted with Ms. Harvelle, who simpered and flirted from behind her fan while her intelligent gaze flagrantly absorbed every detail of what happened around her, including sparing an assessing look for James.

Rachel, with every ounce of her excellent manners, made small talk with Boyle, and Mr. Seward joined in as needed, speaking with her and Boyle on the one hand and Elkins on the other. General Blaine and Mr. Freeley were engaged in a lively discussion about what Blaine considered to be the merits of Popular Sovereignty, the older man, his brown eyes gleaming almost yellow in the lamp light, striving to override Mr. Freeley’s determination to argue against the political philosophy. Despite Margaret’s earlier admonishments regarding appropriate mealtime discourse, she did nothing to deter her father even as he grew louder and more insistent that, had not slave state agitators interfered, the entire question of slave or free could have been solved in Kansas and Nebraska through a vote of the legal immigrants to the states, and that such could have been further extended to the entire country. It was a tired argument, and one that brought a sour taste to James’ mouth, for those who wished to see Kansas free soil had been as guilty of agitation as those who wished to see it a new land of plantations, and the pipe dream of Popular Sovereignty had done nothing but serve as further appeasement at a time when a hard line had been needed. Ruby Cassidy hung on every word Mr. Freeley said, and Margaret hung on every word her father said, and Mr. Freeley blankly refused to understand that General Blaine made even a single valid point while disdainfully attempting to disengage from an increasingly argumentative general, and the whole was so uncomfortable to listen to that James returned his focus to Mrs. Talbot.

The realization that much of what she proposed amounted to war profiteering did little to make him feel better.

“Truly, I’m glad you’re here, brother,” Gabriel said softly as the increasingly boisterous General Blaine grew louder, thus rendering it much easier to engage in private conversation.

“Will you be in Washington long?” James asked.

“As long as we can stand it,” Gabriel replied, rolling his eyes as Margaret laughed over-loud at something her father said. “Longer than you, I’m sure. On to Richmond!” He managed to make the common rallying cry sound wry and sarcastic.

“Do be careful,” added Raphael.

“Extremely careful,” seconded Gabriel. “Don’t get shot, Cassie. Father expects you to be a hero, but I’m sure he’ll be satisfied if you simply strut about behind the lines and then come home. As long as you can put on the appearance of being distinguished, he won’t care of if you actually do anything to distinguish yourself.” James frowned but spared himself from answering by taking a fork-full of potatoes. The suggestion was anathema. An officer who would not share in the hardships of his men, to the point of risking a bullet as surely as they did, was no kind of man and had no right to command. “And once your done, I could use your help, and Anna’s as well. Already there are nigh on two thousand runaways living in an appalling camp north of Washington, and dozens more arrive every day. They need help, support, aid in traveling further north to find work, education, even food and clean water and clothing, not to mention the medical aid. The scars some bear would sicken you.”
Swallowing hard, James nodded, stomach turning. The rich food didn’t sit well when he knew how much others lacked, and he didn’t need to imagine what the raised ridges on a whipped back looked like when they healed, for he’d seen the damage first hand on escaped slaves who’d used the Novak home as a stop on the Underground Railroad, one of their last layovers before reaching Canada and freedom. If only such images were more widely spread, James couldn’t believe any right-thinking man in the country could support slavery. That such sights must surely be common in the South was proof that the Devil was loose in the nation, that He wore a mask of righteousness, that blood and fire and bravery and the might of the free North could affect the change that diplomacy and compromise had been unable to touch. Grimacing, James forced the last few bites of food necessary to clear his plate, unwilling to waste while others wanted, but the flavor was as ash.

“I think I can better help where I am,” he answered softly as Gabriel opened his mouth to surely give voice to another impassioned plea. “There are two thousand fled from plantations in Virginia and Maryland and from private homes here in Washington. How many more toil yet in Alabama and Mississippi, unaware that freedom is even an option, languishing in hopeless misery, separated from wives and children? We need men and women who do as you both, but we also need soldiers to serve in this war. I’ve not your way with words, Raphael, nor your stubbornness, brother – leave me to my duty, and I’ll leave you to yours. When I next write to Anna, I can broach the topic to her, however.”

“Marry that woman, brother,” Gabriel grinned. “It’s a travesty you didn’t do so before you came south. If you’re not careful, she’ll yet pull a Hester, and, as our sister did, Ms. Milton will realize that she has no need for any man to make her way in the world.”

“I’d prefer to wed when the family can be in attendance,” James gave Tracy a gentle smile as she took his plate, but she completely ignored the gesture. “When the war is over – this fall, I hope.”

“May we be so lucky!” said Gabriel fervently.

“I’ll drink to that,” Boyle’s voice cut loudly through the hubbub of conversation, catching James’ eye. He hadn’t even realized his friend was listening.

“Hear hear!” agreed Freeley. “What are we drinking to?”

“A rapid, victorious end to the war!” Boyle declared. Zachariah made an urgent gesture towards Tracy, who hurriedly retrieved a decanter from the sideboard and circled the table, pouring dark liquid – port, James suspected – into glasses.

“Confusion to Jeff Davis,” Blaine added. Tracy finished her rapid circuit, and everyone raised their glasses, crystal chiming as neighbors traded strikes before sipping.

“Freedom to the enslaved,” said Gabriel, staring a challenge at Margaret, but she didn’t naysay it, and the company took a third sip.

“And success to the Republican party!” concluded Zachariah hastily, and glasses were tipped and emptied.

The alcohol gave James a warm glow, fuzzed his thoughts just enough that the table conversation ceased to concern him. Over a dessert of cheese and dried fruit, he leaned back and let the words wash over him meaninglessly. Freeley and Gabriel discovered they had a great deal in common, and spoke of education and teaching. Blaine turned his officious attentions to Colonel Elkins, who bore all with the plastered-on look of one long accustomed to suffering peaceably through whatever nonsense a superior might see fit to spew without risking an accusation of insubordination. Boyle spoke earnestly with Ms. Harvelle. Roman and Mrs. Talbot were engaged in a serious conversation.
about machine shops, and Zachariah looked over all with a smile as a king surveying his subjects. As much as it troubled him, what Zachariah did was every bit as important as what Gabriel did, what James was doing. The war was not merely on one front, it required political and social action as much as military. Each brother was doing his part. The idea brought a pleased smile. Each had found their niche, and each would excel, and the Novak family would stand proud among those leading the North towards a more perfect union than the Founding Fathers had ever dared strive for. Surely, that would satisfy their parents.

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Interlude

Singer, June 1st, 1861

It's a far cry from Chapultepec when Virginia secedes from the Union and we have word of it on the frontier within days. I'm not to fight myself – there is something I must do – but my eldest has declared his intentions to join the Cause, and I'm inclined to let him fight and die for his country. That had always been my hope for him, for both boys, but Dean's a dullard, and Sam's declared he's never for West Point, and I'm glad Mary's not lived to see it. I'm sure my angel watches down from Heaven and shakes her head in remorse to see what they've come to.

Dean's not good for much, but I thought if anyone could find a place for him, it would be you, old friend. Thus, I'm sending him your way. Make him a scullery for all I care, he's gotten good at laundry the last few years, though if you ask me, he's for the cavalry. I've not been able to get him off horseback in two years, and he's as brave as any three men. That's about all he has going for him, so might as well make the most of it. He doesn't cook too badly, either. Judge for yourself, and if you've no use for him, shove a musket in his hands and push him towards the front, he'll aim the right way and shoot straight and true, guaranteed.

If you hear word of my younger, I'd appreciate a letter to that effect. Send it by way of Kate Milligan, of Deposit, New York. She'll know how to get it to me.

Your Obedient Servant, Jno Winchester

Chapter End Notes

FYI: The title of this story is from the Fun. song "Some Nights." If you're wondering why, go watch the music video.

Some notes on rank and military organization:

At the start of the US Civil War, the standing army of the United States was less than 20,000 men. Within the first few months, several hundred thousand men were mobilized, and by the end of the war, more than 2 million people served in the armies. While it's not essential to understand the structure of the army to understand the story, I do NOT intend to explain it in text (cause seriously what a boring info dump...) and I think it might help ya'll understand stuff.

The building block of the army was the Company. Companies had between 50 and 100 men when they were founded (casualties reduced this throughout the war; a quirk of the army structure caused by state rivalries and politics was that depleted units were not "restocked," instead they were allowed to shrink while new units were created).
A Captain had command of a Company. Beneath him were two to three lieutenants, each responsible for roughly 25 men (a platoon). Beneath them, four to six sergeants each had charge of a squad (roughly a dozen men). Corporals helped the sergeants, and there were roughly the same number of corporals as sergeants. Every other soldier in the unit was a private. Theoretically, corporals and sergeants were "non-commissioned" and not considered officers, whereas lieutenants and captains were "commissioned." In practice, it was extremely common for *all* of these people to be civilians during the Civil War. Generally, Captains were political appointments, and they'd either name their lieutenants or the lieutenants would also be political appointments. Sergeants and corporals were usually elected by the privates in the unit. As the war progressed and officers died, it was common for competent sergeants and corporals to be promoted to lieutenant, captain, or even higher ranks.

Roughly 10 Companies were organized into Regiments, roughly 800 men. These companies would be given letter designations (A through K; J was skipped for being too similar to I). The commander of a Regiment was called a Colonel. Each state was responsible for raising a certain number of regiments, and the states organized and equipped their regiments (with exceptions - and it varied somewhat North and South, the South was more rigid about "each state cares for their own," as a side effect of the states rights obsession). Every Regiment was given a numerical designation (Starting at 1 and counting up). Regiments were referred to by their number, state and branch of military - the 101st New York Infantry, the 56th Ohio Volunteer Militia, the 6th North Carolina Artillery, the 14th Tennessee Cavalry. Regiments were the primary command unit - the functional unit of battle.

Regiments were organized into Brigades, composed of between 2 to 5 regiments, or roughly 2,500 soldiers. Brigadier Generals had the command of Brigades.

Brigades were organized into divisions, roughly 8,000 soldiers (2 to 4 brigades) under the command of a Major General. At the time when this Chapter is set, this was the largest organizational unit.

As the armies grew bigger, in 1862 they were divided into Corps, composed of 2 to 3 divisions (around 25,000 troops - or around 30 Regiments, or 300 companies!) and commanded by a Major General.

There's a cool graphic here, if you're a visual learner.

Political appointments were common at *every single level* of the command structure; being a general in NO way required that the officer was a veteran, had attended West Point (the primary source of military training in the US at the time), or knew anything about war at all - in fact, it often simply meant they had influence among an important electoral that was being courted (for example, Benjamin Butler was retained as an officer despite incompetence in the field until right after the 1864 election, because his influence among Democrats was considered essential for keeping the North in the war). Even among the career military men, politics was critical in gaining promotion and holding position - if William T. Sherman's brother hadn't been a senator, he never could have burned Atlanta, for example. Seniority played a lesser role - since failure meant thousands of deaths, those who gained command were, surprisingly often, those most capable. But not always - often with tragic results.
To See the Elephant

Chapter Notes

I include links to a couple battle maps in this chapter. This isn't information Castiel would know, but I find battles impossible to visualize without maps.

I think a clear map of a battle is worth 10,000 words. Especially if you’ve never been at the physical location, it can be difficult to get a sense of what is being described. As such, I’ve provided some links, but I thought I'd include some basics on interpreting Civil War battle maps, which use some conventions that someone new to the genre/history won't know - things that are so standard that they are rarely included in the map’s key or legend.

For reference throughout this "article," look at this map of the battle of Bull Run.

Union forces are always depicted in blue. Confederate forces are always in red. Troops marching in column are generally depicted as lines along roads, usually with an arrow indicating their direction of march. Troops shown in a long thin bar, labeled on this map with a name, refer to troops deployed in battle lines. Often, the thickness and length of the line give an idea of how many troops are involved – on the example the longer lines are brigades, whereas, if you see where it says “Burnside” and there are three small rectangles in a line, each of those rectangles is a single Regiment, with all three Regiments under the overall command of a man named Burnside.

The names given are those of Generals commanding the troops. So, McDowell is written in big, bold blue – he had command of the entire Union Army, hence the large size of his name. Ditto Beauregard and Johnston for the South. Hunter and Heintzelman are smaller, but still bold – they were Brigadier Generals commanding divisions (7,500 – 10,000 troops). The names in the smallest font, such as Franklin and Jackson, were commanding brigades (composed of 2 to 5 Regiments, 2,000 to 5,000 troops). As a reminder, Colonel Elkins in this story commands 1 Regiment (800 troops), the 27th New York, and James Castiel Novak is Captain of a Company (around 70 troops).

Some maps will show down to the Regimental level and will label regiments either with the name of the commander for the Regiment or, more commonly, with the number and state abbreviation for that unit. Some maps will have symbols to represent that a unit is cavalry or artillery, otherwise assume the unit is infantry.

Landscape features are labeled with mixed regularity on battle maps. I try to pick ones that label the terrain. Areas of forest are shown as patches of green, pictograms of trees, etc. Other landmarks are labeled as appropriate – houses are usually black squares. Many battlefields have well-known landmarks, such as geographic features (“the copse of trees” is a landmark at Gettysburg), man made features (“the mule shoe” describes a trench at Spotsylvania), or by events (“the hornet’s nest” was a site of intense fighting at Shiloh). Many maps will label these features, but not all.

Roads are usually white lines, bodies of water are usually in blue, and places where roads cross water, though often looking like bridges, are more likely to be fords – shallow places where the river can be crossed easily. In most cases, roads are narrow worn dirt country lanes. It was unusual for roads to be paved, though the most trafficked might be macadamized. Many roads were informal and many had three or four different names – throughout the war, disasters happens because roads sucks, maps are informal,
or roads described as "passable" are utterly unsuited to troop movements. All of which is to say – what looks clear and straightforward on a map is often anything but. For example – Bull Run, in these maps, looks crossable, but the map doesn’t show that much of the river (it’s about 20 feet wide) is sunk 6 to 10 feet below the level of the rest of the ground.

The passage of time/events happening at different times can be tough to interpret on maps. Some will give time stamps. The best don’t try - they just make multiple maps for different times during the battle. On the example, at the top middle you can see Hunter and Heintzelman…and then they’re also in the left top as well! What happened? About six hours of marching, but the map doesn’t label that well. It's hinted at by the arrows showing direction of march – but the details simply aren’t on the map. That can make understanding challenging – but I’ll do my best to include enough description that you don’t get confused!

Regarding this story and maps of Bull Run: if you want to know where James is, look for the name Porter – Colonel Andrew Porter had command of the First Brigade of the Second Division, a Brigade which included the 27th New York.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 2: Seeing the Elephant

Dearest Anna,                                                                                                             July 20th, 1861

We’ve spent the day quiet at Centreville, but it’s not to last – the Confederates are encamped mere miles from here – indeed, when the paltry breezes chance just right men swear they hear Dixie, though I’ve heard naught. It’s likely nerves, for which I couldn’t blame a soul, but on the chance it’s truth our musicians have been playing John Brown’s Body as if it were their sole mission in life. Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Two days past, a foray was made towards a nearby ford and was repulsed after coming under heavy fire from troops reputedly under Generals Singer and Early. Our friends from the 12th New York came under heavy fire and were forced to retreat, and have returned speaking in haunted tones of fog and fire and heat and fatigue and the crash of artillery. We were just arrived in Centreville when the conflict took place, and though the battle was some three miles distant, we could hear the echoing booms of the cannon, a distant thunder on a day of stunning clear blue skies and a sun like a sledge beating down. In my mind’s eye, I see the battle so clearly – the lines of soldiers standing proud, facing each other across the verdant field, firing in volleys, in bursts of noise and flame and smoke, some fall each time but others step up to fill the gaps, until one side flees and the other emerges victorious. Col. Walrath of the 12th informs me it was nothing like, that the ford was heavily wooded, they could scarce see 50 feet before them, and from across a narrow waterway, a haze of acrid smoke and a screen of tree trunks obscured all. They scarce knew they were under attack before some dozen of their comrades had fallen. It’s a sobering thought, enough to temper even the most enthusiastic spirit.

It is a strange position, that of the soldier. We know nothing. We wake each day when the bugles sound – regardless when that is – serve as ordered, and retire, a small piece of something unthinkably larger than we are. Last night we were up the whole, and I write to you this morning having not slept, and though we’ve been granted permission to rest during daylight today, none do so, for the heat is intense, the sky is unspeakably bright, and the encampment is bustling and noisy. If
we were ordered out now, we’d obey – or it might be days hence. Surely, someone knows, but I see no sign that Colonel Elkins is so informed, not of General McDowell’s intentions for us, nor of the disposition of the enemy, nor of the lay of the land, nay I’ve not even seen a map, save one that Henriksen sketched from long-past memories of a journey through the area. We must repose our trust in our superiors, and in God.

My love, I hate to leave you in suspense, since I truly believe battle imminent, and it seems cruelty to send this letter ahead when I might instead hold it and append to it the outcome. However, there is no knowing the outcome, or when I might be able to send word again – if we advance on Richmond, we will be entering further into enemy territory, and I cannot imagine this will render our mail reliable, nor can I foresee it being prioritized as compared to other traffic. I promise, I will write again as soon as I am able.

In the meantime, know that you are in my thoughts and in my heart, and that the memory of you soothes and succors me in the moments when anxiety recalls that even in the finest of victories, some must fall. Though the days ahead be difficult, take heart that all will be well, for we’ve the greatest cause in the world. How can we fail? And, though I’m loathe to even think of it, if the worst should happen, I like John Brown will go to be soldier in the army of the Lord until all men are free. Know that I love you, have always, will always, and that whatever grace is granted me, I will watch over and protect you, howsoever the days of your life that follow shall proceed. Seek happiness, darling – with me, if possible, without if you must, but let your comfort and safety and joy be your guiding principles.

Your, J.C. Novak

Reveille, the notes of which had resounded so freely through the 27th New York’s camp in Elmira, fell heavy and dull in the humidity and oppressive heat lingering even in the depths of darkness blanketing the early Virginia morning. Blinking, James rolled on to his back and stared at the night sky as the call faded to silence. Haze obscured the stars, paled them, fuzzed the brightest into haloed blobs. Momentarily disoriented, James listened with fatigued bemusement to the rustling and grumbling all around him, cut through by someone – Bradbury or Fitzgerald, he thought – exclaiming excitedly, “up, guards, and at them!”

“It’s too early for Wellington,” groaned someone – James would have to figure out who, anyone who could recognize the quote would be well worth talking to. Running a hand through his greasy, disheveled hair, fumbling for his hat, James sat up and looked around, but it was impossible to identify anyone in the faint light of scattered camp fires, everyone alike dark blobs with pale, featureless faces. They had no tents to protect them, no blankets to soften the ground, and James’ back gave a resounding crack as he stretched his arms overhead and arched over to work out painful stiffness.

“What’s going on?”

“What time is it?”

“Who cares?”

“Go back to sleep!”

“Everyone up!” snapped James, hopping to his feet, regretting it instantly as the world seemed to teeter and spin. Too little sleep, too much discomfort, too poor fare, too much anticipation, added up to fatigue that would take more than a few hours to cure. “Company assemble! Bradbury?”

“Yes, sir!” The boy materialized before him, smiling brightly, cheeks perfectly smooth despite the
early wake up. The observation reminded James of his own scruff, and he scratched his stubbled cheeks and swallowed a yawn.

“Find the Colonel and figure out what’s going on.”

Bradbury bolted off, and James surveyed his company. Some were beginning to rise, others had rolled over and wrapped arms around their heads, some sat awkwardly, knuckling backs and straining their jaws on yawns. Henriksen was up and looked impressively alert, scowling with annoyance at everyone’s lack of responsiveness to the call; Winchester stood near him, twisting his torso, rolling his shoulders, working the kinks out of his gangly body. A few committed souls stumbled to their feet and assembled into the barest imitation of their usual lines for morning roll call.

From elsewhere in the camp, shouts echoed, officers called their soldiers to order, horses stomped loudly, equipment clattered, a single gun fired inexplicably.

“I said assemble,” roared James, shaking off the last traces of his own tiredness. Startled faces all around turned to him, took in the seriousness of his expression and the firmness of his words, and most stirred with more determination, rising and taking position, some excited, some nervous, some sullen, some listless. Reidy, stumbling unsteadily, began moving amongst those still sleeping, roughly nudging them with his foot, as Henriksen and the other sergeants and corporals herded the men into line. Soon, the only means of recognizing that near on 80 people had slept on that patch of field was the piles of belongings and neatly stacked arms, and James was looking over his sloppy assembly, lines well-ordered but men standing at ease, stretching, unshaven, eyes blood shot, patting dirt from their uniforms. Through the darkness, he could see other companies doing the same, hear the blur of calls loud and soft, basso and tenor. As he glanced into the near distance, an approaching figure resolved into Fitzgerald, beaming, one arm wrapped around an overflowing haversack.

“Roll call!”

“Amici, Phillip,” called Winchester.

“Present,” announced the man, hastily replacing a hat over his receding hairline.

“Baxter…”

Sidling up beside James, Fitzgerald said, “I got breakfast for the Company, sir.” The pride in his voice was endearing, as was his earnest expression.

“Up early, Lieutenant?”

“Couldn’t sleep,” Fitzgerald shrugged. “Figured I could make myself useful.”

A tap on the shoulder drew James’ attention the other way, where Bradbury stood, breathing hard. “Colonel Elkins says, when we’ve finished roll, we’re to gather our belongings, form column, march to the Warrenton Pike and join the Regiment there. We’re marching out.”

“Is it a battle?” James heart skipped and raced at the thought, unable to keep anticipation and excitement at bay. With a helpless frown, Bradbury made a vague gesture. Though speaking with Colonel Walrath and other acquaintances in the 12th New York had tempered James’ expectations of easy glory, it had done nothing to reduce his desire to experience the realities of battle for himself. The small voice that suggested that men would die that day if there were a fight, that people would be injured and suffer, seemed unreal. Surrounded with the vibrant hubbub of the slowly waking behemoth that was the Union army, it was difficult to credit the dire suggestion of fatalities even when he knew, intellectually, that the danger was real.
“Ellicott, James!”

“Good call on the hard tack,” James said to Fitzgerald, who broke into a beaming grin. With his teeth showing and his ears sticking out like barn doors beneath his forage cap, Fitzgerald’s expression reminded James of a dog thrilled to have done well by his master.

As Corporal Winchester proceeded through the roll, the night surrounding them was abuzz with activity. Down the broad avenues of the haphazard camp they’d settled on the southwest outskirts of Centreville, Companies and entire Regiments marched towards the turnpike, boots tromping in time to the rat-a-tat-tat of drummers marking cadence. Few voices spoke, those that did inevitably raised in command. A Company stopped behind them, and James recognized Captain Franklin of Company E at the head. Another Company joined a moment later, Company C from the 27th, James thought, and his nerves began to jangle that the others were ready and he wasn’t. Finally, the last name was called.

“Gather your things and form column of march on Henriksen and I,” James called, leading the way to stand before Company C, where Captain Pike was scowling at James impatiently and making a slight gesture that communicated get on with it loud and clear. “Quickly!” To their credit, everyone moved fast, though all must be as weighed down with fatigue as James felt. They’d stood picket watch for nearly 12 hours the night before, and few had been able to sleep before evening last night. A glance at his pocket watch, held at an awkward angle to catch enough light from the few lamps scattered about the camp, told James it was not even three in the morning. Breaking their lines for roll, the men hastened through their bivouac, hefting belts laden with cartridge cases and cap bags, sheathed bayonets and large golden belt buckles emblazoned US. Haversacks were hefted, belts were donned, jackets were buttoned. From neat stacks, the men grabbed rifles and tried to find their preferred piece – and those who’d been assigned weapons they were not fond of tried clandestinely attempted to swap for someone else’s. Captain Pike sighed impatiently, but James was proud of their diligence and alacrity as they stepped hastily into column for march, Henriksen and Reidy herding the few stragglers into position. By the time they were done, a long, snaking line of troops four abreast waited behind them and stood before them, neatly lined up, several hundreds or even a thousand men ready to march to the Turnpike.

Despite Captain Pike’s terse implications that Company B was responsible for the hold up, the column made no forward progress after they were assembled, and raised voices and the loud sounds of men moving through the night spoke to the army gathering. At length, the column finally began to move at a snail’s pace, and they reached the hard-packed, macadamized highway connecting Washington DC with Warrenton. Colonel Elkins met them there along with the remaining companies of the Regiment, and Major Carnegie, of the Colonel’s staff, gathered James and the other Captains as the Regiment took to the road and marched southwest to the rolling clatter of the drums. Four abreast, the soldiers occupied roughly half the road, and the remainder was occupied by supply wagons, ambulances, spare horses, artillery, all of the vehicles and supporting forces that would ensure the army could function. Managing his horse with ill-ease – mount and man had only had days to grow acquainted – Colonel Elkins paced the Regiment through the knee-high grass alongside the highway, and James and the other Captains walked alongside him. There’d not been enough horses in Washington to see them all mounted before the battle, for which James was secretly relieved. While he had experience as a horseman, it was not his forte, and to be thrust in to the position Elkins was on, on an unfamiliar beast in the midst of a stressful situation, did not suit him.

“The 27th New York is assigned to the 1st brigade of the 2nd division of the army,” the Colonel explained tersely, pacing the Regiment as it joined the column marching on the Warrenton Turnpike. “Commands will come from Colonel Andrew Porter, charged with the brigade. We march to the first intersection ahead, where we’ll turn right and pursue a maneuver intended to turn the enemy’s left.
flank. As I understand, we’ll head north to another juncture, then swing south, cross the river – **Bull Run**, it’s called – at the ford in Sudley Springs, and then we’ll break into battle lines, advance, and face the enemy wherever we encounter them.”

“That’s it?” asked Captain Wandell incredulously. “That’s all we’re to know?” Despite his youthful appearance, Wandell was the only veteran Captain in the Regiment. James reflected on the orders and entered into Wandell’s disquiet. Orders to come from a man who none of them knew, advance to be made along roads none of them were familiar with, battle to be entered into with an enemy whose location was unknown.

“We’ll receive further information as the situation progresses,” said Elkins. “For now, our purpose is to complete the flanking maneuver. Understand?”

“Yes, sir!”

When Elkins described their activity succinctly, it sounded easy. They’d marched from Washington to Centreville, after all, a distance of nearly 30 miles, what was a short excursion to flank the army?

The Warrenton Pike was an excellent road, smooth, worn, and easily wide enough for the use it was being put to. Even better, **pioneers** had gone before the army and cleared away the trees felled by the Confederates as they retreated, an impediment which had made the march from Washington tiresome. James’ expectation of an easy march didn’t last ten minutes. The march was halted, all progress arrested for long enough that Fitzgerald was able to hand out all of the hardtack he bore with time to spare. The darkness cloaked everything around, the countryside naught but black land ending in a horizon either tufted with trees or flat and even, and the sky a brighter shade of dark, the stars giving meager light, the faint crescent of a moon barely showing to the south. Sounds carried oddly. An officer dashed by on horseback, the hooves making a dull clack that faded far too quickly, yet there were shouts he could make out clearly that must be some distance, for he could make out no one speaking. Which, he supposed, didn’t mean much, since on foot he couldn’t see more than 10 files ahead and behind himself – he couldn’t even make out the entirety of his own Company.

As the pause stretched out, men grew antsy, gnawing at the hardtack, stomping, shifting, adjusting their grips on their rifles. After an eternity, they began to march again, but it proved the first of many stops, and never an indication as to why. At length, they turned onto the road north. Within minutes, they were completely enveloped in scraggly forest dense with undergrowth, making the dark nearly absolute – James could scarce see make out the file before him, navy blue uniforms, dark hair and dark hats blending perfectly into the night. Looking back, all he could see were ranks of shadowed faces, pale ovals floating like ghosts amidst the woods. The road was narrow and deeply furrowed, making footing treacherous. The steps of those who had come before had rendered the surface two inches deep in yellow dust that burst in clouds so thick that, combined with the darkness, James couldn’t see his own feet. Swear words and exclamations accompanied every step as the obscured ruts turned ankles, unbalanced troops into collided with their file mates, and soldiers tripped and tumbled in a clatter of equipment. Of course, that was only when they were marching. The endless delays and stops continued, fraying on everyone’s nerves.

They were finally making decent progress when noise behind them marked some unknown event, men shouting angrily, one or two shots firing, the interruption of steady marching and break in drums signaling trouble. James was one among many who glanced back nervously, but there was nothing but a cloud of dust.

“Make way!” bellowed a strident voice, followed immediately by a brash trumpet call that communicated no meaning whatsoever to James. The noise to their rear grew louder, closer, rustling and stomping behind him that told as little as the bugle. “Off the road, off the road!” The stomps
resolved into hoof beats, many hoof beats, and before James knew what was happening, something slammed into him, knocking him off the road.

“What—?” Dryness settled in his throat, a coating of grime in his mouth absorbing all moisture, and he broke into a sputtering cough.

“Sorry, sir,” Henriksen said disgustedly. The man was atop him, having borne him to the ground and off the road. On the instant he rose, offering James a hand up. James twisted and looked to see more horsemen then he’d ever seen at once galloping by, the dust so thick they looked to be floating. Their urgent progress had forced his troops from the road, fighting with shrubs and vines, clinging to tree trunks that had them mere inches away from the oblivious cavalry. Rising, James watched with frustration until they were passed, and he suspected his scowl was perfect mirror of Henriksen’s.

“Back in formation!” James snapped angrily the moment the road was clear.

At least when the experience was repeated some time later, the horse-drawn artillery, officers, soldiers, caissons, cannon and all gave them time to get clear. As it was, word passed down the line, carried by couriers and messengers and footsore, exhausted stragglers, that a soldier had his leg broken by indifferent cavalrny, and another tripped and fell under the wheels of an artillery piece and was killed. James swallowed at the news and prayed it wasn’t true. Surely life could not be so cheap as that, even during war.

Thus the night passed, march and halt, clear the road and reassemble, not an order to be heard, no sense of where they were going. Sometimes, the forest around them cleared to show misty morning farmland, sometimes it thickened until they strode once more as if through deepest night. As the blackness slipped into gray by imperceptible degrees, they finally turned south. The delays did not decrease as the day dawned, but at least there were was countryside to enjoy when they stood, unmoving, on aching feet. In the harsh light, James could see how tired the soldiers looked, haggard, hours with nothing but hardtack and tinny, hot water to sustain their energy.

James’ watch said nine when they finally reached the ford at Sudley Springs. At least, he dearly hoped that was where they were. Despite Colonel Elkins’ promise that more information would be forthcoming, they’d been told nothing, simply put one foot in front of the other, following on the tail of Company A, followed close behind by Company C. Only the rumors brought information, whispered by the increasing numbers of laggards who lined the side of the road. At the ford there was a whole crowd of them. A tangle of artillery and horses clogged the way ahead and the Regiment halted, affording James the opportunity to watch on curiously as a harried officer haranguing the dawdlers.

“Do your duty, men! What did you volunteer for, if not for this? The foe lies ahead!” The man was slim and sallow, and James suspected that beneath his well-trimmed beard he had no chin. His uniform hung on his body loosely, sized much too large for his gaunt form.

“Sounds like a great idea – you go fight, we’ll be right here waiting for you!”

“I ain’t had nothin’ to eat in a day!”

“It’s too damned hot!”

“Count the men,” said James to Henriksen in an undertone, mortified at the prospect that any of his could put on such a display.

“We flogs deserters,” blustered the officer, taking his hat off as the only means he could find of expressing his frustration. “On your feet!” He waved the hat, half angry importuning, half courteous
suggestion that they join the line of march.

“Oh yeah, blowhard? Gonna flog us? You and what army?”

“The one you’ve got is busy!”

“We’ve got you outnumbered!” A man with a thick beard, arms bearing sergeant’s stripes, stood and cracked his knuckles suggestively.

“Flogging!” the officer threatened shrilly, cringing back towards the men of the 27th as if expecting armed support against the recalcitrant stragglers. Based on what James had read in the regulations, it was not outside the realm of the possible that his men could be ordered to shoot on those shirking their duty. The thought nauseated him, as did his memories of several days earlier, when the entire army had been assembled to watch two regulars whipped bloody after abandoning their posts. These men must not have witnessed that horror, for if they had, they’d not dismiss the prospect so coolly. The screaming had been the worst part, watching strong men straining with all their might to keep silent until, finally, they could hold in their cries no longer.

“We’re down four,” Henriksen informed him as he returned, warily watching the confrontation.

James sighed. “Please tell me it’s none of the officers.”

“All the officers are accounted for,” said Henriksen, with a faint smile as expressive as a broad grin from Fitzgerald.

“It’s something,” he muttered. The officer gave the bearded sergeant one last look, slammed his hat back on his head and he bolted north up the column. The assembled shirkers laughed triumphantly and loudly. Glancing back over his troops, James couldn’t but notice how many faces lingered longingly on the crowd, and wondered what, if anything, he could do to keep them motivated. The inactivity didn’t help. Watching the efforts of the men attempting to clear the ford was not particularly stimulating, as at the moment they were focused at yelling and pointlessly waving their arms at horses that strained and blew and huffed and utterly failed to dislodge wide wheels sunk in mud or snagged on rocks. Under the strain of a long night, boredom, hunger, thirst and fatigue, Company A’s ordered formation was crumbling, and more than one man was slowly edging their boisterous fellows and freedom.

“I’ll be right back.” James hurried to where Colonel Elkins sat his horse, watching the situation and frowning but taking no action. “Sir?”

“Yes, Novak?”

“Since we can’t march anyway, perhaps we could call a halt – let them men sit a few minutes, refill their canteens?”

“Absolutely not,” Elkins shook his head decisively. His horse pranced a step, and he steadied it with a calm, firm hand. “Where do you think those boys came from?” He gestured at the men, several settling into a game of cards as others stood, arms crossed, staring defiance at their more dutiful comrades. “It’s easy enough to slip out of ranks when a halt is called. When we are able to resume there’ll be no time to call roll and ensure all present and accounted for. However, you do have a point – have the sergeants gather the canteens and refill them in Bull Run. It’s going to be a long, hot day.”

As if in reply to the words, there was a distant patter as of hail, and a single echoing boom. Moments later, a puff of white smoke drifted over the hill to their fore, but the view of what lay beyond was
obscured by trees and a fair-sized building.

“Yes, sir.”

James returned to the head of the Company and had Henriksen gather the sergeants, passing on the order. He sent Winchester to speak with Captain Pike of Company C, to suggest they do the same – refill canteens and pass the word on down the line. In front of them, the officers of Company A were herding the men back into formation, and disgruntled corporals stood ankle deep in the water, trying to find some way of filling canteens faster than holding them under the flow one at a time. In the middle of the ford, the artillermen had dismounted, their horses held by a few firm hands on the far bank, and thick ropes had been attached to the wheels. Men grasped the ropes and hauled for all they were worth to the accompaniment of an officer shouting.

“1, 2, 3, pull!”

The faint pops of gunfire heard from afar continued, until a single large burst sound – a company or more firing at once, James surmised based on his extremely limited experience – and silence fell once more.

"Pickets encountering each other,” Reidy said wisely as he returned heavily laden with full canteens, his pants wet to his knee. He continued down the line of anxiously shifting men, distributing water, before James could answer. Instead, James took a drink from his own, swishing the liquid in his mouth to clear the dust out, watching the horizon and wishing some clue would appear. Anticipation was thick in the air, Milligan even standing on his tip-toes and craning his long neck as if he could somehow see over the intervening hills.

With a triumphant “hip, hip, hooray!” the last cannon clattered over the rocks and onto the far bank. The rest of the army had marched on rather than await the clearing of the impediment, so there were only scattered men visible across the river, and wagons clustered around the building on the crest.

“Forward!” shouted Elkins at the top of his lungs. With faint grumbles, decisive nods, quelled yawns, the men waited patiently as Company A proceeded, and then followed suit, save for one – Mueller, James thought his name was, who quirked his head to listen to an echoing boom of distant cannon fire, frowned, and – ignoring Bradbury’s squawked admonishments – joined the stragglers with a determined look on his face. A handful of others watched him wistfully, saw how helpless the officers appeared to be to prevent his defection, but none followed, for which James was grateful. For one, he wouldn’t act. For more, he’d draw his pistol against them if it was the only way to get them to keep marching. The cause of the Union was too important to shirk the fight.

“Bastard,” snarled Henriksen, starting after Mueller, but he was arrested as James lay a hand on his arm.

“Leave him,” James said. Raising his voice, he added, “We don’t need any cowards in the 27th New York. Any who are ready to fight, get marching. The rest, you might as well stay here.”

Not a soul left ranks, and one sheepish, unknown private, lingering on the edges of the craven, swallowed hard and stepped into the place in ranks left by Mueller.

Well, it was something, at least.

*It’s a lot, it’s everything – even when we do not agree on the specifics – do we fight to end slavery or protect the Union or for the adventure or for our families? – we all fight. There is nothing more important.*
The sound of fire ahead picked up as they sloshed free of the ford, James’ boots soggy and his socks chaffing uncomfortably, and with a strident trumpet call the limbered horses ahead broke into a ground eating trot as the men sprinted to their saddles. A single horseman topped the rise, crossing the sparse forest at a gallop, dust making clouds in his wake, shouting, “Rhode Island is engaged, on the double, on the double to the front!” He didn’t slow as he passed them, splashing the column with water as he continued to bellow his warning to the marching troops.

“You heard the man,” Elkins roared, “double time! Advance!”

Company A broke into a run, impressively organized, each file keeping pace with the one ahead. James had but a moment to steel himself, to push aside the aches in his body and the fatigue in his mind and the discomfort of his boots, before he was running as well, belatedly remembering to echo Elkins command. It took all his nerve to force himself to look back over his shoulder and confirm – to his vast relief – that Company B was running behind him, and C was starting as well, the column snaking back into the distance to disappear around a bend in the road through the forest. Now that the waiting was finally done, the worry and anxiety he’d seen clouding so many faces minutes before faded, and he turned his gaze forward once more – barely in time to jump over a pothole in the road, thank God. Falling on his face on his first advance would have been fantastic. He’d have heard about it for the rest of his life. However long that is.

They crested the hill, and James expected to see the overheard battle, but was taken aback to be confronted by a forested ravine past which he could see nothing. Anything could await them on the other side, but James didn’t slow. The drive to keep up with the company ahead, the rattling, even step of the company running behind, forced them forward. A shrill shriek drew all eyes up, barely in time to see a chunk of metal crash into the trees to their right. With a shattering crash and a splintering of wood, the ball boomed to the ground, several saplings falling and taking down their neighbors. The men ahead of him flinching and ducked as there was another whistling roar, looking every which way for the next missile, but it was nowhere to be scene.

“Steady,” James shouted. “Steady, New York!”

“Quick, now, quick!”

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!”

The run felt endless, the distance between them and the conflict unbridgeable even as the sound grew louder and louder. Constant fire resounded, sometimes in booming bursts, other times in disjointed, broken volleys, punctuated by the deeper, thrumming of artillery. Undecipherable yells and cries, and the occasional cheer, served as a reminder that it was not the hand of God making the noises, but that of men, that the power to make such a cacophony was in their own possession. The unit of artillery vanished from sight, topping the hill and vanishing to the other side, even as the tail end of a column of infantry came in to view to their front. The cannon fire grew thicker, errant shells scattering and exploding amongst the woods, shattering branches to splinters, toppling trees, some exploding overhead in clouds of dirty gray smoke. The dazzling morning sunlight flickered as dark clouds drifted over the incandescent white orb. Sweat streamed down James’ back, his muscles burned with the effort of barreling uphill, his heart raced, his lungs labored, every blink was a lifetime in darkness that left him disoriented when he once more took in the world. In the need to press forward, the exhilaration of upcoming conflict, the effort seemed meaningless, someone else’s straining, someone else’s struggle, and he gave a wordless cry of encouragement to the men. Elkins galloped by, taking up a position atop the next hill, waving them forward urgently.

There were near the crest when he realized that soldiers were coming towards them, one or two, then
more, clad in gray. For a sickening moment, he thought them enemy troops and was on the verge of raising the cry to arms, wondering why no one else had done so, when a flag-bearer crested the ridge and ran towards them, a finely embroidered blue flag streaming behind him, figures of Liberty and Justice fluttering in the breeze. The fabric was rent, a loose strip flapping, and behind him came more troops, dozens, a hundred or more, gray uniforms splattered with blood, one clutching an arm, another’s face a red mask. It was the 8th New York Militia, with whom they’d shared Franklin Square, with whom they’d paraded but a week before. Ahead of them, Company A began to crest the tree-lined ridge, the sunlight fractured into shadowed streamers by the narrow trees, dappled light adding to the surrealism of the scene.

“Give ‘um hell,” suggested a helpful wounded soldier as he toddled past them towards the ford, a stream of blood leaking from the corner of his mouth.

“Line of battle! Form to the right – to the right!” Elkins shouted, wheeling his horse and leading the way at a trot. “On the double, on the double, hurry your laggard asses, to the front!”

Overhead, the leaves of the trees moved and whispered as if in a rainstorm, and it wasn’t until something pinged off the brim of James’ hat that he realized the sound was gunfire passing through the branches, tearing leaves and snapping twigs. A spent slug rolled from his hat on to the ground, and he shuddered to think what would happen if it pierced him, but he couldn’t stop to think, couldn’t stop to wonder, there was nothing but advance and run and his Company.

Turning on a heel, drawing his saber, James turned to face the troops, hustling backwards as best he could, confident that his way had been clear when last he looked.

“Company into line, on the right by file!” he shouted. The words came to his mind instantly, and his thoughts raised fervent gratefulness to the diligence that had him studying Gilham’s Manual every night in Elmira.

They were already moving, God bless their brave hearts, their duty well drilled into them as James’ was into him, the files of four men abreast scattering with alacrity into lines two deep, the sergeants and lieutenants running to the fore, the corporals taking the corners of each line to speed the men on. Legs pumped as they reached the top of the hill, they hurried to take a position to the right of Company A, Company C doing the same, sprinting to lengthen the line even as they spread haphazardly into their battle lines, Company D coming up behind them. “Hold steady, hold steady, don’t fire yet!” The last he bellowed to one of the Benders, they all looked the damn same in their hats, the fool was aiming at nothing, wild-eyed as an artillery shell exploded above them and rained broken branches and leaves over half the Company.

Finally, after a damned lifetime of running that objectively he knew had been maybe a quarter hour, they crested the ridge and James looked over his shoulder for a view of what he was stumbling backwards into. The trees ended abruptly and a long grassy slope dipped into a broad, sweeping valley, dotted with occasional trees but mostly clear. At the shallowest place, a fine house stood surrounded by a rail fence and a cleared lawn, hard upon a road that, if James had managed to maintain any sense whatsoever of their relative location, he suspected was the Warrenton Pike to Centreville. The mental drawing of a map preoccupied his bemused thoughts far too completely, his wide-eyed vision refused to acknowledge what stood more immediately before him.

A world-shattering volley broke through his stunned, sluggish mind, muzzle flashes and a burst of smoke, and screams filled the air, something whisked by his head, behind him someone swore loudly.

This was a battle.
A long, thin line of soldiers was arrayed before them, uniforms in every color from blue to red to gray, when they wore uniforms at all. They faced an equally thin line of mostly blue, everyone oddly small against the vast sea of green grass, yet vividly, piercingly enormous and real. The space between the two was clear save for the fallen – yes, God, there were already fallen many of them, more than James could count or conceive of, mangled limbs, grass beaded with blood like dew. A head sat right in the middle of the space between the opposing armies still-open eyes visible even at several hundred feet distance. Men writhed in pain, mouths open, screaming or crying, young and old, large and small. Flags waved, shouts and cries were lost amid the endless clatter of fire, and like the tide men rose, fell, loaded, fired. Some threw down arms and fled, some stood nearly alone before the storm, some cowered, squatting in their line of battle with hands over their ears, lips moving in fervent prayer, even as their fellows tried to force them to rise. From these paltry, thin formations, more men streamed to the front to support each side, the Union line lengthening to right and left, the hill behind the rebels strewn with soldiers in clumps of fifty or one hundred that looked small and lonely and so vulnerable.

We look like that. That’s entirely how we appear to them.

Directly before them, the artillery they’d watched at the ford was unlimbering rapidly, while from the grounds by the stone house, three lone cannon manned by men in gray proved to be the source of the amply intimidating fire that had passed over head. He could have sworn it took a dozen cannon to make so much noise, a score, yet there were but three, the troops working them working feverishly as a horse went down shrieking in pain beside them; all ignored the beast as it thrashed, none to care.

“What are you doing, Novak?” Henriksen practically screamed in his ear.

“Forward!” bellowed Fitzgerald.

“Forward!” echoed James, finding his voice and purpose at the same time. The artillerymen were bellowing, and what looked like an entire regiment of rebels were turning towards where Company A was lengthening the Union line. It looked like so few men in comparison to the sweep of the land, yet it was many more than he led, and when they fired as one, the cacophony was deafening. The men of the artillery froze in place for an instant, cowed, only to realize en masse that they weren’t all dead despite the volley of gunfire aimed in their midst, and they raised a heartening cheer and returned to their duty as the Confederates reloaded as quickly as they could. With a burst of inspiration, James shouted, “Defend the guns!”

The men sprinted up, the fastest passing him, getting lost amidst the horses. “Not directly in front of them,” James practically screamed to get them to form up and stop advancing. “Here, right here!” He stood firm and waved his saber, wishing he had a flag. Looking around desperately, he spotted Corporal Dodd, far in the rear, wheezing as he struggled to keep pace. “Dodd,” he roared, “here!” He took a position just to the right of the artillery, so that the Company wouldn’t be shooting through them, but could defend them from the Confederates, troops leveling arms to fire once more.

“Yes, sir!” the laboring man gasped.

“Raise the flag!” To his credit, Dodd did so, despite his obvious exhaustion and the chaos around them. “Here, Company B, here!”

They listened, thank the Lord, they listened! The line formed, far from perfectly it was true, but as the slower men caught up, they took up their positions, the front rank dropping to one knee, the back standing at their shoulders. The other companies of the 27th rapidly formed to their right, and the 14th New York were beyond that, the red pants of their uniforms bright against the field, Colonel Walrath and Colonel Elkins riding together, both identically fearless of the gunfire and cannon
surrounding them with missiles and potential death.

_They expect me to ride a horse next time? Good God!_

“Load—”

The roar of the battery drowned out his command, so loud his ears rang. The horses – as green as the rest of the army – shrieked at the noise, some breaking free of restraint to bolt towards the rear or between the lines. The pieces skipped back belching fire and smoke and shot that scattered into pieces and fell around and beyond the enemy lines. A whole section of the Rebel line disappeared, enveloped in flame and dirt and soil, men screaming, some turning and running, an arm and a leg flying into the air. James could make out his opposite shouting to hearten his men, the humanity of their words striking at his heart.

_They’re like us, they’re just like us, what are we doing, what are any of us doing?_

Fitzgerald fell to his knees and vomited.

_They are trying to kill us. They are rebels and slavers. They are not men, they are monsters, without humanity. We must quell the traitors. We must!_

“Load your muskets!” James shouted. The artillery troops were shouting to each other, cheering their success, their officers bellowing out the sequence to reload the guns.

_They’re not monsters. They’re people. But we have to do this anyway. That’s how important it is._

From further down the line, someone bellowed “fire” at the top of their lungs, many people taking up the cry, and the entire line of the 14th New York lit up. The effect on the rebels before them was as devastating as the cannon fire had been, men falling, crying out, close enough that James could see the red splattering from their wounds.

_Don’t think about it._

“Aim steady, Company B!” he yelled as calmly as he could.

_Don’t think about it._

He could hear the Captain of Company A calling similar, all down the line. Fearlessly, Elkins cantered before the line, circling behind them further down the line, and shouted, “fire!”

_Don’t think about it._

“Fire!”

_Don’t think about it._

“Shoot, you slugs!”

_Don’t think about it._

“Fire, fire, for the love of God, fire!”

_Don’t think about it._

“Fire, men!”
James forced himself to watch, forced himself to look at the impact of their volley, and was shocked at how little it truly was. Men fell –it sickened him to think of them as men, he forced the word away, replaced it with rebel and enemy – but only a handful, and some rose again instantly. A Captain at the front, James’ mirror, took a bullet through his head, skull shattering to pepper the troops behind him, and perhaps that was what did it, or perhaps it was the call of “aim!” that went up from the artillery battery, but one soldier opposite threw aside his weapon, turned, and bolted up the hill.

“Load, load,” James raised an arm over head and gestured emphatically. “Quick, now, just like we practiced!” It was a haphazard display. James doubted they’d loaded their weapons more than a dozen times before, and now some did so with careful experience – men like the Benders had a lifetime of familiarity with muskets – others fumbling uncertainly, Alfie mouthing the steps as if only by speaking them could he remember, and several stared at their ramrods as if at a complete loss how to proceed, watching their comrades and imitating their actions hopefully. It would have to do. It wasn’t their fault that they’d had so little training.

All green, all green alike.

Some dozens more Confederates looked over their shoulders, saw that there was not a soul on the hill behind them, no one coming to support them, even as the Union line continued to lengthen. All along the line, men began to back away as Union Regiments fired, some attempting to reload even as they stumbled over the ground made rough by cannon shells, discarded equipment, hidden ruts and dips, and the bodies of the dead and wounded.

“Fire!” the artillery commander roared, and a volley tore through men and shredded the hill above and beyond them, many of the nearly dozen shots landing ineffectually. To the rattled nerves of their opponents, though, the noise and smoke and debris were as damning. With scattered screams and shouts, the Confederate line crumbled.

“Aim,” Elkins trotted back and forth behind the line.

No, they’re running, they’re backs are to us, we can’t...

“Fire!”

“Fire,” James echoed half-heartedly, and as one his troops fired into fleeing opponents, men pitching and falling, some never to rise again, others helped to their feet by comrades, some barely stumbling before they ran on, their shirts or trousers or flesh staining red as they moved despite their injuries.

This is war. This is it. They’re running. We won.

To his left, the units that had arrived before gave a triumphant bellow and charged down the hill towards the stone house, the remaining resistance crumbled, and cheers broke out as the Union soldiers drove the rebels before them.

“Hip, hip, hooray!” shouted someone, and the cry was taken up all along the line. Hats were thrown in the air, hugs were exchanged – a dangerous prospect considering how many people bore loaded firearms – laughter and joy spread. James turned to his lines and was shocked to see not a single fallen soul. The bullets he’d heard whizzing around them, the artillery that had fallen around them, had somehow completely spared them. Grinning with utter relief, he exchanged a handshake with Henriksen, another with Fitzgerald, just getting back to his feet – it had been mere minutes since the first artillery shot, mere minutes since Fitzgerald had thrown up, it seemed impossible.

We won, and we’re alive.
“Quit your hollering,” Elkins shouted. “You done well, but we’re not finished yet! Battle lines, reform – forward!”

“Form lines and forward march!”

Enthusiasm and mirth buoyed their spirits as they formed lines. In the shallow valley, the charging Union units halted along the Warrenton Pike, the fleeing Confederates disappearing over the peak of the next hill, and officers moved up and down the lines, urging the soldiers back into battle lines. All around were the reminders of what it their partial victory had cost. Men in blue lay scattered along where the Union line had been, some struggling to rise and move, others gone forever. Friends and comrades helped them, or prayed for them, or stared unseeing. A handful moved among the fallen enemy as well, helping those who yet lived to the Union rear for treatment and captivity. As the 27th New York began to advance, they passed these troops moving towards the rear – some with minor wounds, some bleeding so heavily it was impossible to look for the sick feeling and sympathetic pain James felt with even a glance. Some didn’t appear wounded at all, wide-eyed, pale, terrified and shaking so that they could scarce place one foot before another.

Making their way over the field while maintaining their formation was challenging, dodging bodies discarded and broken equipment, dropped rifles, lost hats, the lines of Company A breaking to separate around a fallen horse, and their own line splitting around a hole left by shell fire. James glanced back to see his soldiers, to a man, staring at a dismembered body at the bottom, torn beyond recognition, but James couldn’t look himself.

That was a man an hour ago, a man with a home and a family who cared for him, a man with a history, things he strove for, things he wanted, a man with aspirations and plans. A man like me, like us.

I wonder if he owned slaves.

Instead, James forced himself to focus on his men and their reactions, ranging from sick green renewed on Fitzgerald’s face – young Milligan leaned over and threw up without breaking rank – through sick excitement on the face of the Bender family. Only the veterans seemed unphased, Sergeant Reidy’s face an undecipherable mask, his eyes distant as if he looked at and through the damage, saw nothing but meat, no different than a slain pig or chicken. Winchester, too, James realized in shock, looked impassive. Not untroubled – his lip was caught between his teeth, his skin was pale beneath the thick sweat beading on his brow in the heat – but his eyes had the same distant glaze as Reidy’s, the same impassivity that said he’d seen such things often enough to have grown horrifically comfortable with them.

It wasn’t that death was unfamiliar. James would be shocked if there was a man in the company who hadn’t seen death first hand. James himself had sat at Inias’ bedside as he passed, despite his mother’s injunctions not to risk his own health because his brother was dying, and he could remember, faintly, the last pale, broken infant that his parents had lost in childbirth. Everyone lost friends and loved ones, to accidents, to illness. In some ways this was the same, but yet it struck James as utterly different and alien. This violence was so sudden, so random; the impersonal hand of fate reached down amidst the thousands and selected those to pass without regard for merit or sin, for obligations or age or innocence. It was tempting to look and think that kind grace had smiled on the survivors, but no one who’d watched the violence could believe it anything other than random.

It was terrifying prospect. At any moment, any one of them might be shot dead, struck by artillery, accidentally trampled by their own cavalry horses, and that would be it, never to see hearth and home more, no one to give succor to the grieving families.
In comparison to the crack of explosives, the mere sound of voices and boots striking dirt was quiet and hollow. Beneath the usual yells and orders, though, there was a strange sound, ghostly and soft, the susurration of hundreds of wounded and dying men breathing their last. It was so soft it faded to the background, so loud it seemed to consume the world, whispers for comfort and love ghastly loud. The calls of officers and stomps of hooves should have drowned out all, but they didn’t. James was relieved when they left the battle site far enough behind that the noise faded, replaced by the more familiar, living sound of the Union army reforming along the Warrenton Pike where it met the north/south road that the infantry column had marched on from Sudley Springs ford. Distance shouts were audible as the hum of voices interrupted by the occasional ping of musketry fire. Behind them, the creek of wood and whinny of horses spoke of the artillery preparing to advance, and the distant drum of galloping spoke to more batteries or cavalry approaching. Elkins rode ahead, making for a cluster of mounted officers, all keeping firm rein on stepping, uneasy beasts. In his absence, James looked towards his fellow Captains uncertainly, but they’d been told march, so march they did, past the others, to the house. Up close, it was a fine, solid structure of river stone, showing minimal damage for the battle raging around it, but from within came the sound of screams and moans and weeping.

With a whistle, a missile arced amongst them and exploded, so near it threw James to the ground in the blast, ears ringing and body aching.

“Sir, are you alright?”

“Halt, halt, stop the advance!”

“Captain?”

“Oh God, oh God, please Lord!”

“What happened?” James asked woozily, rolling on to his back and, with the help of someone – his eyes refused to focus and recognize who – he sat up. A blurry scene confronted him, blue and green and red, the red of the stone of the house, the red of blood.

“Hold your position!” Hoof beats rattled feet from his head and he cringed despite himself. His vision cleared to show him chaos, troops of Company B thrown about, a crater in the ground, mangled rail posts blown outward, a mangled pile of flesh utterly beyond recognition lying bleeding over the lip of the hole, a limb that could in no way be accounted for.

“Come on, wake up, wake up damn you.” Someone leaned over another still form, Spangler, he identified the living man belatedly.

“Are there casualties?” James asked dumbly. He pushed the daze away and tried to stand, only to drop again as a shell slammed into the house with a resounding crack, answered by a ghastly chorus of frightened screams from inside even though the ball didn’t penetrate the wall. “Of course there are, there’s a body, there’s...” He’d known these men for months, and now he’d led some to their deaths. The cause was worth it. It had to be.

“Take your positions,” roared Henriksen, apparently unphased. “Spangler, leave Reznick be, he’s dead. Help Hall to the rear.” Hall stood stock still, staring blankly at the torn, bloody sleeve where his right arm once was.

“Shut up, darkie!”

“Spangler!” snapped James, leaping to his feet and managing, barely, not to plant onto his face again.
“You will follow Lieutenant Henriksen’s orders. Reznick is dead.” God, he was standing right behind me. “Hall is still alive, and he needs help.” That could have been me. “Take him back.”

“Yes, sir,” said Spangler, shooting a resentful glare at Henriksen. James returned the look with contempt, looking down his nose. Someone else was hurt, too, the younger Ellicott was helping whoever it was up – but there was too much blood on their face for James to recognize who.

Seemingly indifferent to the explosion that had torn through their serenity, Colonel Elkins rode to the front, ignoring another shell as it burst nearby. It was impossible to tell where the shots were coming from. The sloping hill before them was bare, empty of anything save more scattered equipment and a single horse struggling valiantly and futilely to rise. Against the horizon, a couple of young trees stood around the silhouette of a wooden house. The sky showed through a hole in the side of the building where shot had mangled the corner. Smoke drifted along the ridge, made eerie clouds in the sky, and only voices and bangs to speak of what lay beyond the brightly lit ridge. The Union forces could have been alone in the world, if not for the increasingly intense artillery barrage raining among them.

“We’ll be holding this position for the foreseeable future,” Elkins announced loudly. “Captain, get your men in order.”

“Yes, sir,” James nodded, head spinning. His stomach turned. Would he ever be so indifferent to death? It was horrible to think he would become so, yet the alternatives were no less terrible. To feel every loss keenly in his heart? To lament for every friend and foe who falls? If he was to keep fighting, he’d need to come to terms with it somehow, accept it, and learn to move on. It wasn’t as if Reznick was a dear friend.

What if it’s Winchester or Bradbury? What if it’s Alfie? What if it’s Henriksen? If one life doesn’t matter, where does it stop?

Do any of our lives matter now?

“Sir,” Ellicott looked up from helping the bloody form, now moaning and writhing on the ground. “I think they’ve set up a field hospital in this house – I’m a doctor back home, I could help, and Warren cannot be moved far.”

“Do it,” James said, pushing away the macabre thoughts. This wasn’t the time. There were living men to care for, he couldn’t be troubled with the dead. “Thank you. Everyone, close ranks!”

Despite rattled nerves, troubled looks, tears, every sign of distress and indifference and curiosity and relief evident on dozens of faces, they obeyed. The other Companies were assembled close, and the other Regiments to their rear and left, and they stood even as artillery continued to fall all around. Some soldiers flinched every time, others looked skyward as if they could predict and dodge the next shell, but increasingly, as the seconds stretched into minutes, a few minutes into many, they grew indifferent, even when a shell plowed into Company K far to their right, even when the sounds of agony in the stone house grew louder, even when a new column of infantry approached along the Warrenton Pike and the officers on horseback gathered on the sloping hill once more, utterly unconcerned when shot fell close to them.

That was the job of the officers, James realized. They’re role was not merely to lead and give orders. He’d known it all along, of course, but seeing it so graphically demonstrated drove home what James’ purpose in this battle was. The privates presented overwhelming force, bearing arms. They stood arrayed in their Regiments, most just as Company B, increasingly calm as the day grew longer, the dangers more familiar, the heat more intense. The boom of unseen artillery promised potential death plummeting amongst them, the inexplicable delay lengthened, and they waited. Counting
formations as best he could, James realized there must be close on 15,000 men around the hill, enough that it was beginning to seem crowded, and most stood and waited under fire as if it were no matter. Even those who looked terrified stood their ground, because that was what privates did. When the moment came, they’d advance, they’d shoot, they’d have an even chance at killing or being killed. The officers were there to give them courage, the officers were there to show that they did not face hardship alone. The generals, colonels, captains, stood at the front or walked directly behind the battle lines, a vulnerable target, virtually unarmed – James realized with a chuckle that he hadn’t even loaded his pistol that morning – and faced the same perils as the men, but without that even chance. James would kill no one, and standing in front, he faced far more danger of being killed.

It seemed a small price to pay, a small extra burden to bear, to strengthen the willingness of the troops to follow him to their deaths. No one man mattered. No one man changed the course of battle. The weight of thousands was what made the difference, so the potential sacrifice of one to inspire those thousands was entirely worth it, especially weighed against the consequences of defeat. The morning stretched into afternoon as they stood before the stone house, listening to the surgeons doing their grisly work, watching as more and more wounded arrived, and James accepted his place in this mighty machine of war. Yes, the men followed him into potential death, and yes, some part of him was horrified to see the corpses of people he’d known sitting, neglected, on the ground just behind where the Company had reformed, and yes, he quailed to think he’d led them to that agonized end. But he asked nothing he did not risk himself. Reznick had been standing feet behind him, with hardly a change that corpse could have been James, and that was precisely the point. He’d never be able to lead from behind, but as long as he faced everything his men faced, everything, he could absolutely conceive of facing peril again, that day, other days.

The thoughts brought peace, and though he dripped with sweat, though his canteen grew lighter as he husbanded the contents through the long day, though the men behind him shifted uneasily, James was calm. Whatever happened would happen.

No orders came, no word of what was to happen reached James’ ears, but suddenly couriers rode back and forth, troops marched, the artillery advanced and took taking to the road that had brought them from the Ford, rolling south. The further up the hill they went, the more intense the sounds of fire from the rebels beyond, and the on the very crest, at the limit of what James could see, they took up position. Even as they unlimbered, several Regiments trotted by, troops in excellent form, hurrying to take position. With bemusement, James watched as couriers went to speak to others, but none came to them, and the other units left, even the 14th New York to their side joining in the march, raising a rousing cheer to be moving after the interminable wait. Atop the hill, the artillery battery unlimbered alongside the house, faint orders blurring together with distance.

“What about us?” muttered Ashley grumpily.

“Never complain about not fighting,” Reidy advised, eyes never leaving their advancing comrades. “Complain about crap rations, complain about sleeping in the rain, complain about the whores giving you the clap, complain about missing your family, complain about the flux, complain because John Smith gets to go home but you signed damn two year papers – but never complain about not marching into battle.”

“Amen,” whispered many a voice among the ranks.

“Alright, New Yorkers!” Elkins appeared as if Reidy’s speech had summoned him, and James prayed that the Colonel could not hear the dark words that many spoke. “The enemy is atop this hill, in much greater numbers than we’ve faced them yet. We’re to advance to the top and give battle. Steel yourselves. This will not be easy, but we have broken their lines once, and we will do so again.
Are you ready?” A half-hearted cheer went up from the Regiment, the long delay settling fatigue in every bone, the heat draining energy as midday came upon them. “I said, are you ready?”

“Yes!” shouted Fitzgerald enthusiastically, so loudly all in earshot laughed and echoed his word and found their fight once more.

“Forward!” The Colonel declared, leading the way. Along the Sudley Springs road, a thick column passed, marching in lockstep, drums sounding the beat, a fife joining in with a lilting tune with more spirit than musical merit.

Instead of running, they marched at a measured pace, watching the Union batteries thunder, listening to the answered calls of the enemy. Smoke drifted over the ridges, settled in the muggy base of the valley, acrid, and shouts and cheers and screams accompanied advances and retreats as the Regiments who’d gone before engaged the enemy. There was a huge burst of gunfire, louder than any James had heard yet, and his heart began to race, the heat and stimulation leaving him dizzy and disoriented with room for only one thought:

We march to face the enemy ahead. We march to do our duty.

Colonel Elkins went down.

There was no shout, there was no sound, there was no distinguishing one shot from another, one moment he sat his horse, the next he lay on the ground, one foot tangled in a stirrup, his horse twisting and crying out, eyes rolling. Before anyone else reacted, Winchester bolted forward and grabbed the reins. An instant later, one of the Lieutenants from Company A was there, an older man, his face buried in a beard, whom James did not know.

“He’s alive!” the Lieutenant shouted, though the general wash of noise was growing great enough that it was hard to hear. Freeing his foot, the Lieutenant helped the Colonel up, and Winchester did an effective job of calming the skittish horse down with a gentle hand and soothing noises.

“Captain Wandell,” Elkins’ reedy voice carried despite being quiet and thick with pain. “You have command. You know our orders!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Help me mount,” Elkins instructed the Lieutenant. Witnessing Elkins’ injury was oddly inspiring, reflecting the danger that James had so recently accepted. He nodded confidently to his commander as they passed him struggling to get back on horseback, and left him behind. They’d see him again after the battle, God willing.

This is utter madness.

It was impossible to think otherwise in the first instant they crested the rise and James saw what was arrayed before them. A dozen or more cannon rolled death among the lines to their right, there was not a Union soul to their left, though Regiment upon Regiment of the enemy soldiers were arrayed in battle line in that direction.

“Fire!” roared someone with a mighty voice from before them, and the lines they faced broke into a wall of fire and smoke. The bullets whistling all around him, something tugged at James arm, people screamed.

“Steady!” James shouted, wishing he had the least idea of something more heartening to say.

“Line up on the artillery,” Wandell bellowed, and voices echoed the command down the line.
Under constant fire, they hurried at the double quick as ordered. Panting desperately, mystified that he wasn’t dead – he wasn’t even hurt, though a rent in his jacket showed how close he’d been to injury – James lead the way. Men yelled simply to hear their own voices, to hearten themselves and their fellows, and the clatter of musketry and cannon was constant, the roaring swell of voices enormous.

“Hold! Aim and fire, men, aim and fire!”

The Confederates were reloading, far enough away that in the smoke and heat haze they were a blurred, faceless line of demons. “Fire, men, fire!”

Rifle butts poked into the edges of James vision, and the line behind him erupted. Across the field, men fell, others took their place, and from over the sounds of explosions, gunfire, and cries, the eeriest sound James had ever heard erupted. A thousand voices rose as one, ten thousand, more – who knew how many damned souls faced them, maybe 500 feet across low grass – raised a ululating cry, a shriek, a tortured cry that chilled the soul.

This is Hell.

“Reload and fire,” roared Henriksen, and others took up the cry.

“A cheer for the Union, men,” James added. They needed something heartening to break the spell that terrible banshee’s call had settled in their blood. “Hip hip—”

“Hurrah!” The word was shouted from a hundred throats, a pitiful competition to the unearthly sound the rebels made.

“Hip hip—”

“Hurrah!” More took up the cry, the entire Regiment, he thought, maybe more, but an answering cry from the rebel devils nearly drowned them out.

“Hip hip—” Now it was not James alone who raised the initial cry, but officers all along the line.

“Hurrah!” The deafening yell was accompanied by a huge volley, and that, mercifully, brought a moment of stunned silence to their enemy, a moment when it seemed the whole battlefield was impossibly, utterly quiet. Then the moment past and the air was rent by shouts and screams and booming, echoing artillery.

Facing off against volley after volley seemed impossible. Their lines were mere hundreds of feet apart, and the air screamed with the sound of metal whistling by, yet not only did the 27th New York not crumble, when James shifted his position to march behind his lines, offering encouragement to the men, he was shocked to discover that they weren’t even being particularly hurt. Could flesh stand up before such a rain of metal? Yet, there was scarce a man down in Company B, and the line of their opponent showed little damage either, though it was hard to tell, the view obscured by languidly drifting air, curls of deep gray shifting in the thick humid drafts.

Following his lead, Henriksen and Fitzgerald circled behind the men – the sergeants and corporals were bearing arms as well, except for Dodd, who yet waved the flag – and whispered encouragement in each ear, reminding them to load and fire, over and over, as the time passed. Inexperienced hands grew more familiar with the weapons of necessity, loading and fire until the barrels grew so hot they steamed, until more than one weapon needed to be cast aside unusable, and one exploded in the face of an unsuspecting private, fortunately only barely injuring him. Troops moved around them, James sensed more than saw, so intent on his section of the line he couldn’t do
else.

To their right, charges were initiated and repulsed by both sides, men sweeping back and forth, holding positions around the increasingly tattered house only to be beaten back. It was impossible to follow the details, though. Each time James glanced over, the view was nearly unrecognizable as compared to the previous time, and the ground grew increasingly covered in a writhing mass of the fallen that he could not permit himself to think on more. Watching the regiments to the fore, outnumbering them easily, James prayed they’d not be charged. It seemed impossible that his thin line could repel such numbers if they attempted to advance. He prayed too that no one would order his lines forward. To charge that line of fire was suicide.

“How’re we doing on ammunition, Lieutenants?” James asked as the day stretched on and the stalemate on their section of the line continued. His voice rasped dryly, his body too wrung out to produce much more sweat, not that it mattered, he was soaked by the heat of the day and the inferno of battle. Idly, he noticed that his hands were gray with soot, his eyes burned from the ever-drifting smoke.

“I’ll check,” Fitzgerald said, his cheer unrepressed despite their having been under constant fire for what felt like hours. Henriksen nodded his agreement.

“Troops coming up on our left!”

“It’s the 8th New York!”

“The 8th, the 8th!”

A ragged cheer went up from the men, roughened voices showing the wear of combat in the thick smoke and muggy heat.

“It’s not the 8th,” called someone from down the line. “They’re rebels, rebel gray, they’re wearing rebel gray!”

A volley burst from Company A, aimed towards the new arrivals, and several men fell.

“Stop, you’re shooting our men!” James shouted, the sound small and hoarse in his own ears. “The 8th New York wears gray!”

“Hold your fire, hold your fire!”

The entire Regiment went quiet, though battle continued to rage all around.

An officer at the front of the approaching soldiers ran to their fore, circling his saber in the air as he urged them forward. James frowned, narrowed gritty eyes in an attempt to see clearly. It might be Colonel Lyons, he thought uncertainly.

“They’re not the 8th,” someone screamed.

“Open fire, fire at will,” bellowed the unknown officer in a voice that carried easily as he charged Company A.

The front rank of the soldiers gave a terrible shriek, dropped to their front knees – 100 feet, maybe less, James thought sickly – and there was no time to react, no time to do anything but watch bemusedly as the enemy line lit up with bursts of red and at least ten people in Company A went down, more around him, some behind him, screams and cries of horror replacing the cheers.
“Charge!” roared the rebel officers.

“Fire into them!”

The line before them rose, cried out again, and advanced at a sprint.

“On our flank,” someone shouted.

“Reform lines facing left!”

“No, forward, face forward!”

“Reinforcements are coming!”

“More rebs, it’s more rebs, say your prayers, boys!”

“Run!”

“I said fire!” The urgent command brought a response, Company A, B, and C turned and fired into the charging men. The front rank went down almost to a man, and the others turned and fell back, but not far, dropping to knees once more and loading as if their lives depended on it.

All our lives depend on it!

“Hold your positions,” roared James. His heart pounded. He had no idea where Wandell was, the only mounted officers he could see were well down the line. He was the Captain of this Company, and there was no one else to give the orders. Command was his responsibility. “Company B, hold your positions! Reload!”

“Yes, sir!” several voices echoed, but down to his right, the line was wavering, the men looking in all directions, eyes terrified. The quickest rebels were hefting their pieces and taking aim.

“What are your orders?”

“Hold our positions!” Henriksen’s rich voice showed none the strain that James’ did, still clear and deep, easily audible.

“Hold, sir!” croaked Fitzgerald from down to his left, considerably less intelligibly. “Reload, men, reload!”

“Most of the men only have about 10 rounds left,” Bradbury appeared at his elbow, breathing hard. His hat had been lost at some point, and his hair was matted dark red against his skull, his face was blackened by ash and smoke, streaked clean in places by sweat.

“Reload! Aim!”

There was another crash of musketry to his left, but James couldn’t let him trouble him. They’d either die, or they’d not, and until they were struck there was nothing to do but keep fighting. Company A yet faced the new arrivals, but their ranks were thinning, and as they fell back, it cleared the way for Company B to aim at the men in gray.

“Company B, fire!”

God bless his troops, he thought fervently, as to a damn man they obeyed.

“That’s the spirit, Company B, that’s the spirit!”
“Reload!”

“Troops coming up from behind, sir!”

“Company A is running!”

“Skeddadle, boys, skeddadle!”

“Hold, Company B!”

“Fuck this!”

The dull reverberation of hoof beats directly behind him startled James into jumping and turning. “Reload, and hold, New York!” He shouted as best he could, wondering if the words existed in the English language to prevent his crumbling Company from turning tail and fleeing.

“Withdraw your troops, Captain,” an unfamiliar authoritative voice shouted, an officer James didn’t know, but there was an entire regiment in blue deploying behind the man, running into positions to reinforce the wavering 27th, and a small color guard bore the flags of the United States and New York.

“Yes, sir,” James said with unspeakable relief. “One last volley, men, let’s make sure they remember us! Fire!” There were fewer shots this time, some men already hedging away from the battle lines, more discarded muskets on the ground than before, but the volley still went. It was enough, it had to be. He was proud of them. Waving for his lieutenants, he shouted, “Company B, fall back on the stone house! Fall back, Company B! Henriksen, lead the way.” Instantly, muskets were shouldered, and though James had feared a route – most of Company A was sprinting downhill and to safety for all they were worth – Company B were surprisingly calm, some few even determinedly reloading and firing one last shot. He loved them for it, as frustrating as it was. Orders were orders, and more important than the stubborn desire to not quite the field. Tomorrow, that would be a conversation to have.

*Tomorrow. We’ll have a tomorrow.*

It was the most heartening thought he’d had in nigh an hour. From the ruins of Company A – men lay scattered on the ground where they’d been deployed – came a pathetic burst of fire, but it had no sting, and no man fell among the rebels, who were rising to charge once more. The ground on which Company B had been was strewn, unmoving bodies amidst the bloody grass, and some of his men stopped to help their friends up. “Fitzgerald, go!” Broken muskets, jackets shed in defiance of the orders and the heat, discarded cartridge bags and haversacks, and smoldering grass completed a scene of destruction, and James saw the wariness on the faces of their replacements, wide-eyed, breathing fast, as they faced their first baptism.

James didn’t fall back until the last of the men was gone, Dodd bearing the colors steady at their rear. Sprinting down the hill, taking the distance in leaps and bounds, James felt dizzy with the euphoria of survival and adrenaline. They were alive, they were done for now. Would they advance again? Would they fall back? His men were in good order, forming lines even as they retreated, all he could see making calmly for the house in the valley. Many others could not say the same. From all along the front line, troops were retreating, fresh coming up in some places, not in others. The quick glimpses he had of the front showed him no sign of who was winning and losing, how the battle progressed, and he couldn’t spare the attention from his own duties. Each step had him on the verge of falling and the world spun. When had he last sat down? When had he last rested? When had he last had something to drink?
The stone house looked precisely as they’d left it a damned lifetime ago. By the time they reached the base of the hill, James had caught up with Henriksen and the head of his command. The retreat remained orderly, and while James could see individuals fleeing pellmell around them, Company A was beginning to have rally and Company C marched calmly, if disorganizedly, to his left. Even better, despite the cannon fire yet breaking overhead, true to his orders, they all stopped before the house rather than fleeing on down the road as many others did.

“Winchester, quick, I need a head count!”

There was no answer.

“Winchester!”

“He’s gone, sir,” Bradbury wiped sweat off his face, smearing ash and a thin line of blood. He blinked his eyes, dazzlingly green in the twinkling daylight.

“Is Corporal Winchester dead?” demanded James.

“I don’t know, sir, I think he fell, though.”

“Sergeant, give me a head count!” The thought of never seeing the talented youth again stung, he already liked the boy, but there was nothing to be done. If the Company advanced again, they’d be out of ammunition in minutes, and anyway, he could see looking at the faces before him that no amount of haranguing would induce the men back into the fray.

“59, officers and men,” Bradbury called a moment later.

They were down 20. A quarter of their number, fallen or missing. He dared to hope – as much as it pained him to think it – that some had merely fled. Surely so many could not have died.

Is it not a miracle that any survived the maelstrom at all?

“What now, sir?” asked Fitzgerald with unbreakable serenity. A lieutenant from Company A was hovering nearby as well, Wandell nowhere to be seen, and Captain Pike of Company C was watching him closely. Though other troops meandered all around them, some wandering thoughtlessly, some fleeing, some clearly hurt, some clearly intact, none showed the organization of their three companies, and James wondered at the fate of the rest of the Regiment, of the rest of the army. As if in answer, a roll of drumming on the north-south road from the Ford spoke of some new troops appeared from somewhere, cresting the ridge and moving steadily towards the front, and a shrieking shrill yell from the hilltop spoke of the Confederates charging.

I don’t know, I don’t know, I’m not in charge, I’m only the Captain, I cannot make this decision.

They are all looking to me.

I must make a call.

Even if we were to advance, how would we fight?

“Are there any wounded not able to walk?” He’d start with what he knew how to handle. Several cries and two raised hands replied. “Corporals, pick privates to aid the wounded to the back.” The order was obeyed instantly, and James took heart at it. He might not think he was in charge, but no one else seemed to be questioning it. Confidence growing, he continued, “We will form columns for march, cross country towards the ford, and see if we can locate any source for additional ammunition. Else, we make for Centreville.”
Bemused looks greeted him, and no answer, and James wondered where the obedience has gone wrong.

_They expect orders, not explanations._

“Form in columns for march,” he repeated, and to his pleased amazement, they obeyed, lieutenants giving the command, Captain Pike nodding in support.

Closing with him, Henriksen leaned close and murmured in his ear, “not to question you, sir, but if we’re to Centreville, why take the long way around? This road is surely the Warrenton Pike, we can march it far more easily and head for Centreville right off.”

The road before the stone house was shockingly clear. Individual men wandered along it in confusion, even in groups up to 15 or 20, stumbling back towards the village and their camp, and James felt the fool for not thinking of Henriksen’s idea right off. Why replicate the awful 6 hours they’d marched that morning – Jesus almighty that had truly been that very morning! It felt a lifetime ago – when they could take the direct route? There was no flanking maneuver to be done now.

“Form on the Warrenton Pike!”

It was done in moments, and, walking to the head of their small column – 200 men seemed nothing, not after the armies he’d seen that day – James led them off at a brisk pace, finally remembering to take a drink from his long neglected canteen.

There was no water inside.

The bottom was neatly pierced by a bullet hole.

“Here you go, sir,” Fitzgerald said cheerfully, handing him one. “We did good today, right?”

_Water, water, need water right now_, James thoughts shrieked the instant the liquid touched his lips, and it was all he could do not to down the entire contents, which were little enough, much less answer Fitzgerald’s query.

Yells and shouts and screams surged in volume from the nearby battlefield, and, startled, James looked to see men fleeing down the hill. As he watched, what started as a handful grew into dozens, then into hundreds, the army breaking under the strain of the extended combat and the latest Confederate charge.

“Get out of the way!” shouted someone frantically. Wheeling, James saw his men leaping from the road and heard the sound of hoof beats. Cavalry, again, indifferent to the infantry, clattered down the Warrenton Pike, scattering the men before them. James had to throw himself aside to avoid being trampled. Rising and dusting himself off, James watched as rank after rank cantered by. On the hill behind, the sounds of panic increased.

“Out of the way, urgent business!” was the closest to an apology they received from an arrogant man, looking down his nose at them as if on filth. His face wasn’t streaked with sweat and blackened ash, his cheeks weren’t scruffy with 24 hours beard, his hair wasn’t plastered to his head by dirt. The men on horseback looked like they hadn’t fought at all.

_Bastards._

“Reform column, Company B,” James pushed his pique into a vain attempt volume and authority. Rising again in the wake of the interruption to their progress felt impossible. He was so tired, so very tired.
“Run!” A deep voice screamed in incongruous terror, and others took up the call. “Run, flee, they’ll kill us all, get back, get away!”

That terrifying shriek echoed disturbingly over the rise, rebel troops silhouetted like fire against the horizon by the shattered shell that was all that remained of the house that had once stood on the crest.

“Company B!” James’ words were completely drowned out, and even as the Cavalry cleared the road, men ran by as fast as their feet could take them, utterly disorganized, all those who had wandered in confusion now united by a single overwhelming thought – to get away, to get back towards safety, to flee for Centreville. Hearing James’ worn voice over the swell of fear was impossible, and the press of people separated him from near-on every familiar face, only Fitzgerald, Bradbury and Alfie remaining with him, the others swept away as by the tide.

“Have we lost, James?” Alfie asked breathlessly. Bradbury squeaked, a youthful, nearly feminine sound. Somehow, Fitzgerald found it in himself to watch even this disaster with a bemused smile.

From the ridge above, a volley of artillery fire lit into the fleeing mass.

“We cannot stay here to find out,” James sighed. “However, we can at least try to proceed calmly amidst this insanity.”

In truth, he wouldn’t mind running, but he hadn’t the energy. Most others seemed to share his problem, men bolting a short distance only to stop, run again, seeking a way through the milling mass of men clogging the road. Something ahead prevented people from moving forward, and soldiers pushing so desperately for forward progress that there were screams as men were crushed. Thanks to his height, James could just make out the bottleneck – a bridge completely clogged with troops, soldiers in gray harassing the fleeing mob. The crowd shifted and the view was lost to him again, and there was nothing to do but try to keep with his officers and hope someone, somewhere, knew what the devil was happening and what to do about it.

The bridge exploded.

Or so James assumed, when there was an earth shattering roar and men and bricks were thrown high in to the air.

Pandemonium erupted.

There was no sense to be had, no idea of who moved where or why. James did naught but continue on determinedly towards the river as men ran in terror in all directions, or collapsed beside the road, exhausted, prostrated by the heat, or immobilized in fear. Entire Regiments stampeded by, and an attempt to clear the road trampled many as an artillery battery cantered in retreat, cannon and caissons careening, poorly harnessed to panicked horses. One moment, Fitzgerald was beside him, the next gone, and determined not to lose the last two of his Company – only two survivors, only two of 79, God I’m tired – he grabbed Bradbury and Alfie’s hands and dragged them along with him, breaking out into the open fields in search of a place where they could cross Bull Run.

Though the bridge was gone, a mounted officer stood at a faint trail suggesting a road and waved men on, “to the ford, men, to the ford!” Sure enough, only a little ways from the shattered remnants of the bridge, chunks of masonry sticking up in the shallows, was a ford across the water, and there did James cross amongst the thronging, milling fearful.

Finding way across the narrow river was like escaping captivity for freedom. Though on the far bank, the fleeing Union troops were no less chaotic, and though artillery fire yet screamed overhead and hounded them onwards in fear, there was no longer the press of enemy troops firing into their
midst, and inexplicably, no pursuit chased after them. With the immediate threat apparently passed, slowly, by degrees, men began to calm – or to grow so overcome by their fatigue that they could no longer run, only stumble alongside the road towards the village they had left in such high spirits the middle of the previous night.

The sun was a fiery ball on the horizon behind them, and James found to his chagrin that he could, in fact, still sweat. His whole body was a mass of discomfort, his feet agony in his wet socks and boots, his suspenders and belt barely able to hold his sodden trousers about his hips, his face itchy with unshaven hair and filth. Weariness dulled every sense, made every thought slow, every movement lethargic. The road was a mess of cavalry, tipped artillery pieces, and carriages, through the windows of which James could see finely dressed men and women whose presence defied any explanation. Their progress slowed as the road clogged, an impenetrable thicket of forest on both sides of the Pike creating a bottleneck. Past any thought but the need to return to Centreville, James waited for the way to clear, Bradbury wilted against his side, Alfie praying a constant litany under his breath. There was no point in trying to press forward, so James found them a thick tree against which to lean and waited for the way to clear, checking his watch as he did.

Six fifteen in the evening.

It felt hours ago that the Company had held the heights, days ago they’d faced the first skirmish he’d dared to think a battle before the stone house, months ago they’d waited for the artillery to clear Sudley’s ford.

“Sam?”

Voices had surrounded them the entire way, shouts and cries and weeping and fervent pleas to God and moans and the hum of conversation and chatter and talk and gossip, the drawl of yawns and moans, yet this one cut through and caught James' attention. It lacked the edge of fear and panic that marked the broken Union army, for one, though it was thick with concern. It bore a thick Southern accent, for another, an oddly familiar accent. Curious, James looked around for who had called out.

“Sam!”

That might be the most handsome horse I’ve ever seen.

The man was easily visible, mounted on a fine, sleek black horse with a worn western saddle and ratty saddle blankets, a bundle tied behind. Sitting with the confidence and comfort of long experience, man and horse moved as one. Not wearing a uniform, the fellow had on plain tan pants, a red and black plaid cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up above his elbows, and black suspenders, his head uncovered. Brown hair was matted to his head, his sun-darkened skin was flecked with freckles covering the arch of his nose and fine cheek bones. Scruff covered his chin, and he was young, of age, James thought, but certainly younger than he by several years. From his high vantage point, the man looked over the heads of the stalled fleeing army, frantically glancing one way and then the other as he searched. For an instant, James met the man’s shadowed eyes, narrowed with worry, but then that piercing gaze was gone, seeking the missing Sam, reins held negligently in one hand.

That might be the most handsome man I’ve ever seen.

“Dammit, let me through! I’ve got to find my brother, Sam!”

That was where the accent was familiar from, James realized. It matched Corporal Winchester’s, though where Winchester spoke with quiet refinement, this voice was gruffer, more rough, the strain of the south not hidden in the least.
“Sorry, brother, we ain’t your Sammy,” wisecracked someone, and there was general laughter.

Urging his mount through the milling men to the accompaniment of swearing and jeers, the rider pushed west along the road, back towards the battlefield.

“Anyone know Sam Winchester, dammit?”

James started. At his side, Bradbury exclaimed a startled “what?” The sound drew the man’s attention instantly, the only voice not raised in condemnation or insult of the man’s surely fruitless attempt to find his brother. The gaze went shocked, making the man appear even younger, and showing his eyes deep green as he fixed James with a stare.

“Don’t you trouble yourself, you’ll find him again, in Centreville or heaven,” someone joked insultingly, but the stranger’s attention was all on James, Bradbury and Alfie.

“Do you know Sam Winchester?”

“I know someone of that name,” James said, his voice cracking dryly. “But there must be many.”

“Uh – gangly, kind of short last I saw but I bet he’s grown like a damn beanpole, brown hair, brownish eyes?” excited, the man made useless gestures to accompany the description.

“Could be him,” Alfie said speculatively.

“Where did you see him last?”

“It might not be him,” James said.

“Bet it is,” Bradbury nodded. “It’s suicide to go back for him, though. Last I saw him was on the battlefield.”

“Son of a bitch,” muttered the stranger, staring back west towards Bull Run. The road was completely choked “Did those Virginian bastards shoot my brother?”

“We don’t know,” James said honestly. “I certainly hope not.”

Whipping his head around, the man gave James the strangest look, confusion and vulnerability layered over surprise, and James thought that it was the first time the man had really seen him. Grimacing, the man gave a helpless shake, freeing tension from his back and causing his horse to shake its head, not in distress, merely in reply to his action. The two moved as if they shared thoughts, it was amazing to watch a horse in such uncomfortable straights – surrounded by strangers and chaos – behave so calmly.

“Look, if I...” the man licked his lips. “If I find him, and bring him back, will you take care of him?”

“Aw, isn’t that sweet?”

“You shut up!”

“More, more!”

“This is the most exciting thing I seen all day!”

“Yes,” James met that troubled gaze with every bit of command and confidence that the preceding day at taught him. “He’s my clerk, and I’d rather not have to train another.”
“You’re an officer?” asked the man.

“I’m the Captain of Company B of the 27th New York. Samuel Winchester is a Corporal in my unit.”

“And I have your word, on your honor, that you’ll keep an eye on him?”

“I swear it,” James vowed with all the sincerity he could muster, finding himself strangely determined to set the stranger’s fears to rest.

“Encore!”

The gratefulness that flooded those beautiful eyes – beautiful? – was so profound that James had to look away, but the happiness barely touched the rest of his expression.

“Thank you,” the man breathed, somehow making the words for James’ ears despite the hundreds close enough to hear.

“Hey, can I hitch a ride?”

“Out of my way,” snapped the man brusquely. “Hiya!” He gave a flap of the reins, and the gorgeous horse surged forward, bodily forcing men out of the way. Breaking through the crowd onto the verge, the rider surged into the underbrush through the scraggly forest, and with a clatter and rush he was gone to the accompaniment of whoops and catcalls and cheers and boos from the on-looking soldiers.

*I didn’t even ask his name.*

“Did you know Winchester had a brother?” asked Bradbury, staring bemusedly after the man.

“Sir!” a happy voice chirped from the other side of the road. Standing near a head taller the next tallest man near him, Fitzgerald grinned and waved. “Knew I’d find you if I kept walking east!”

“Today is never going to end, is it?” asked Alfie, exhausted. James’ childhood friend looked positively crushed, and James wished the ill-health that had kept Alfie from many youthful pursuits had been enough to keep the man from joining the army, but Alfie had been raring to go for all the same reasons James had been. Fitzgerald made his awkward way through the throng, which slowly, slowly made its way through the dense thicket and on to the road beyond.

“It’ll be over before you know it,” James said, staring back the way they’d come, towards Bull Run, towards the battlefield, towards Sam Winchester and the man who might be his brother. “By tomorrow, you’ll think it never happened at all.”

“No, sir,” said Bradbury, shaking his head. “Not that. Never that. I’ll remember today as long as I live.”

*Interlude*

Army of the Potomac, Attn: P.G.T. Beauregard, Brigadier General Commanding

July 15th, 1861

Please see appended map of probably lines of march for the Army of Northeastern Virginia. Their stated intention is to test the fords of Bull Run in an attempt to force Manassas. If immediate
crossings not practicable, secondary plan is to force the western flank in an attempt to take your forces by surprise.

Count on US forces is five divisions under Generals Tyler, Hunter, Heintzelman, Runyon, Miles; Irvin McDowell in overall command. 12 Brigades total, 35,000 troops in total, approximately 20,000 expected to advance. Patterson not present nor likely to arrive before battle.

I will send further intelligence as able. Please send specific questions by way of courier. I will endeavor to answer as quickly as practicable. Awaiting regular arrangement for delivering correspondence.

J.B.H.

~~~~~~~

To: Sam Winchester, Company B, 27th New York Infantry                                        July 14th, 1861

It’s been a while. I doubt you remember me, I’d only just come when you left Kansas – Benjamin Lafitte. I’m friends with your brother, Dean. He wanted you to know he’s in Virginia, and that John Winchester ain’t anywhere near – and isn’t that a right blessing, for a change? I know you two didn’t part on the best of terms, but Dean is rightly wrought up to hear you’re in the fighting, you still being a youth, and he’s hoping he can convince you home. Mail’s not easy now, but if you’d see fit to leave a letter at the home on the corner of 5th and Avenue F in Washington, it’ll find its way to him. He apologizes for being such a bother, by the by, long-winded enough to bore you to tears, though obviously not in those terms. He actually said like, “you tell him he’d better come right back, and soon, or I’ll know the reason why,” but that’s as good as begging your forgiveness, coming from the Dean we know and love, ain’t it?

Your Servant, Ben. Lafitte

~~~~~~~

Dean,                                                                                                                          July 17th, 1861

I have no idea what you’re playing at, or how you even found out where I was, but I’m not leaving the army until the rebellion is put down. I told you when I left: I know right from wrong. Those things dad told us? Those things we saw in Kansas, the things we did? Those things are wrong, and I’ll have no more part in it. I can’t believe you’ve come to Virginia to fight. Are you out of your mind? It’s a lost cause, Dean, the whole thing is a lost cause. This is about dad, isn’t it? You’re doing this for him, just like always. Think for yourself for once! You’re better than this, I know you are – momma raised us for better than his dream. Ask Lafitte, he’ll tell you – you are worth ten of our father, if you’d only believe it.

Think about it, will you? You don’t have to fight just because it’s what he wanted. You’re free now. You don’t have to do anything he wanted. That’s what freedom means, you can make your own choices, not only the ones he’s always tried to make for you.

Do you think this is what momma would have wanted for you?

Leave me alone. Don’t write me again. It’s too dangerous.

Sam Winchester
...so, I know this was tremendously long. I hope ya'll didn't find it to be a drag! I won't be writing quite this in depth on every battle (I expect?), but I really wanted to capture the flavor, especially of the first. :)

I tried to put in a lot of pictures...I figured why not? :) If you're reading this and you're a huge history buff - note there are a few historical inaccuracies, small things (such as who marched exactly where) and there are also things that were going on (such as observers from Washington - the carriages whose presence Castiel could not explain) that lack explanation/exploration because there's no way Cas could know about them. :) If you really care I could probably put together a list. :) (the biggest change was blowing up the bridge...that doesn't actually happen til later. Sorry not sorry. :) I also completely left out a branch of the river, to simplify things...)

If you want to get a quick overview of this battle, I found this really awesome video that gives an animated overview of the whole battle, showing each unit (the 27th is clearly marked; I used this video a ton as reference in writing this scene; I only made some minor changes to their level of involvement).

Note that some of the pictures are ones I took myself in 2011 when I visited Bull Run on the 150th anniversary of the battle (it was 103 - 108 degrees those days, wretched, and I wasn't even wearing a wool uniform, ugh!). Here's a link to the whole Flickr set. I've labelled the pictures for ya'll - if you're super curious (lol) - note that "Henry Hill" is where the main conflict took place, and the house there was Henry House, not that Cas got to learn that. The house of river rock is actually just called the Stone House. :) (also note that I took these pictures while researching a specific project, so they have a focus on a different part of the battle...)

There's also at least one shot of troops in line of battle mixed in there - that's another of my photos, for the anniversary, 5,000 reenactors gathered and did "highlights" of the battle, and it was pretty awesome. The first encounter James is in (before the Stone House) involves probably about double the number of men in the images I sent; the second counter is more like six times the number - but as you can see, on a huge bare field, 5,000 people...doesn't actually look like that many people.

In particular...(my video isn't great, I only had a tiny hand held, sorry...)
Troops Marching
Musketry and Artillery Fired by Several Thousand People
Reenactment Battle Footage
Artillery Barrage
Troops Marching in Battle Lines
Marching Demo and Basic Drill Formations
Fire demonstration

Oh, and guys? This is the first time I've ever tried to write a battle. I'd much appreciate feedback, positive or critical...
I've been debating what exactly to say on a sensitive subject. Listen...in this chapter, and I'm sure in chapters to come, a main character is going to say some pretty racist stuff. I'm not a racist, guys, and writing characters who are racists in a story set during a time when nearly everyone was a racist...doesn't make me a racist. Please don't judge me but what my characters say, okay? I don't have to agree with a point of view or action to write about it.

Other than that...no vast historical notes for you this time! :) We're moving into a section of the story much more focused on interpersonal relationships, it'll be a bit (nearly a year, in story!) before things get uber-historical again (which isn't to say there isn't still loads of history...). And there's a lot of smut between here and there, too. ;) I know ya'll are waiting patiently...well, smut starts this chapter (though Destiel smut doesn't start until next chapter!)

I've ball parked the final number of chapters to 32 - that's how many are currently in my outline - but as some of the chapters are looking kinda scary-long, and I haven't actually decided where to end the story (don't get me wrong, I know the ending, just not how much I'm going to show "on screen") I suspect the final number will end up higher.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Chapter 3: A House Divided**

*Dearest Anna,*

*July 22nd, 1861*

*Has it been merely two days since last I wrote? What a lifetime it feels like.*

The single line headed the page, taunting him, as James’ thoughts wandered, attempting to find anything else he could say about the previous day.

*I’m alive and unwounded.*

That much was straightforward, though he felt a fool as soon as the words left his pen. Of course he was alive – how else would he be writing. Fatigue yet made his thought sluggish, stole some of his reason. Better to leave the errant words than to cross them out, though. Anna would understand. But for the rest? What could he say, what could he possibly say, to the innocent green-eyed angel who awaited him at in Wolcott? The news about the outcome of the battle would reach her far before a letter would. There was no call for him to describe the sequence of events, the defeat, the rout. There was no need to fill her vivid imagination with the painful immediacy of his first hand experiences.

*I am safely returned to Washington, as are the majority of the men from the 27th New York. We know of three dead and two wounded from the Company, but more than a score are yet missing. Casualties for the Regiment total approximately one hundred so far.*

James set his pen down carefully at the top of his writing board and sat up straight on the stool on which he’d been stooped uncomfortably. After the battle, James had thought to return to Centreville
and reassemble his command, but when they’d reached the village near midnight, there had been no way to stop. The press of the crowd was too great, the urgency pushing them all towards Washington and supposed safety was too desperate. Dawn found James in the capital once more, stumbling as if in a dream towards the barracks at Franklin Square, so footsore and weary that had it not been for the mutual support of Fitzgerald, Bradbury and Alfie, every bit as spent as he, he was sure that they, like so many of their comrades of arms, would have lain collapsed along the roadside. They’d ghosted through the night amidst a steady stream of fleeing men. Two had even followed them to the barracks despite being utter strangers and happily taken a place on the vacant cots. The four of them were the first from Company B to return.

*Colonel Elkins was injured. I do not yet know the severity of his wounds.*

They’d slept together, too rattled and exhausted to consider letting go of living, breathing, warm proof that they were all alive. Utter exhaustion had compelled him to sleep through much of the bright day, but he’d been forced awake though scarce feeling rested by an extremely relieved Henriksen. Disentangling himself from Alfie, Bradbury and Fitzgerald without waking them had been depressingly easy, they had been dead to the world, though now all were up and had escaped the stifling heat of the barracks for the relatively pleasant shade along the east wall of their barracks. Henriksen had retained more than a quarter of the Company under his command, and close on a hundred others from the Regiment, a task that all sheepishly agreed was due to his skin tone – as the panic faded and men returned to their senses and sought their officers, Company B had merely to look for the only dark face in the entire army. More stragglers arrived throughout the day, alone or in small groups.

Though James longed to retreat to the meager privacy of his cot, with wakefulness, duty and obligation had returned, and he’d become absorbed in seeing to his men. Some bore minor wounds and needed bandages, some had lost equipment – hardly one yet bore his rifle – and all were hungry and footsore. Water, at least, they had in ample supply thanks to the aquifer beneath the park, but it had been more than a day since any had rations, including James himself, and solving that problem had, as always, uncovered several others, and in shockingly quick order things had resumed a semblance of what had passed for normal the past weeks. The routine was familiar and comfortable, held back foggy, dream-like memories of mangled soldiers and panicked faces.

At least there was no drill.

James barked a laugh. He couldn’t help it, and the emotion was so freeing, so relieving, that he continued, shaking so hard he nearly fell off his stool. Around him, startled gazes looked up from forlorn introspection, spirits oppressed in light of the previous day. He’d brought his stool outside to enjoy the fresh air of dusk. It was muggy and sweltering, but it was still better than being within. Many others had followed him, leaning against the side of the building or lying on their backs staring up at the deepening blue of the sky. Everyone was low, shocked that the army had been defeated, ashamed that they’d skedaddled, horrified by the carnage they’d witnessed.

“Captain?” asked Reidy uncertainly. Fitzgerald chuckled, joining in, and so did Ashley, laughing in time to the flick of his knife against a length of hardwood he was carving.

“At least...” James broke out in a fresh gale. “At least we’re not drilling!” Stunned silence fell, even Fitzgerald and Ash staring at him, and James laughter died, and he frowned self-consciously. “Well, I thought it was funny.”

Henriksen snorted, Reidy grinned, and then everyone was laughing, all of them, from Bradbury’s boyish cackle to Hall’s deep booming guffaw. From the other barracks, men stuck their heads out, confusion and wonder on every face, and James words were repeated by gasping, doubled-over
men, spreading mirth like a contagion until the whole camp was alive with it.

“You’re alright, Captain,” Ash said, clapping James on the back, utterly unconcerned that he was holding a pocket knife open in his hand as he did. “You’re a-okay.”

“Thank you, Sergeant,” James smiled. Every time someone repeated the story, everyone involved started to laugh again. “You did well yesterday. We all did. We’ll show them next time. And we’ll probably have to drill tomorrow.”

Though the words dulled the humor of the moment, they couldn’t wipe the ease from every face, and the forlorn tension mercifully dissipated. James took his pen in hand once more.

*We lost the battle, and it was a terrible thing to see, but we are alright – we are all alright here. We have lived to fight again and, God willing, next time we shall be triumphant.*

*With love, J.C. Novak*

It wasn’t much of a letter, but it would have to do. No force on earth would compel James to disillusion and hurt Anna by describing to her what the previous day had actually been like. Setting the board aside on the ground, weighing down the page with his pen – not that there was any breeze – he mustered the energy to force his desperately sore body to rise, his painful muscles to stand and walk. Despite his earlier activity, his time sitting had stiffened him, and he could scarce believe his joints capable of unbending.

“Winchester!” shouted a high-pitched voice, bright with elation. Head jerking towards the sound of the cry, James saw Bradbury pointing south down 14th Street, waving urgently. Rolling his shoulders, James rose, pushed aside every ache and hastened to where she gestured. Those with the energy followed suit – few enough, most preferred to lounge while they yet could, but Alfie and Milligan came, superficially resembling each other, paired tall and slim, and Sergeant Ashley gave a whoop and leapt to his feet as if the past day hadn’t affected him at all, dashing towards Bradbury.

The noble horse was even more impressive in the open, a healthy sheen to her black coat, each step graceful and perfect. If she was troubled by the weight of two men on her back, it didn’t show. Winchester’s brother sat as easily as the day before, though he looked as exhausted as everyone who’d participated in the battle appeared, expression slack, eyes dull. The limp form of Sam Winchester was draped over his back, arms over his brother’s shoulders, head lolling against the older man’s. Side by side, the family resemblance was evident, alike in cleft chins, chiseled features, brown hair, and plush pink lips, though the younger Winchester was already the taller. The elder also shared his brother’s distant stare, much more obvious today when fatigue and worry furrowed his brow. The man’s eyes scanned over them all as if calculating how much of a threat they were.

“Captain!” Gruff and low, Winchester’s voice sent a strange shiver down James’ spine. *Too tired, too tired by a mile. “Sam needs a hospital.” Too tired by an ocean. What does that even mean?*

“Of course,” James said distractedly, running a hand through his hair, wishing that in so doing he could clear the fog from his thoughts. Determined to feel human, he’d scrubbed his face with water poured into the only basin in the barracks, his skin so filthy that the water had come away thick with silt, and he’d shaved two days brown stubble, dunked his hair in the basin to wash out the worst of the sweat. Winchester stared at him.

*Oh, right, I have to move now.*

Shaky steps grew more confident as James hurried as best he could to meet the horseman. Leaving the others behind. Stopping before the horse, James hesitated uncertainly.
“Preferably now,” Winchester added impatiently.

“How badly hurt is he?” James asked. Investigating the hospitals had been a priority that afternoon, when several of the Company had hobbled in as walking wounded, and James had learned the injured were being taken either to the Washington Infirmary or the Union Hotel – the Infirmary was much further but better equipped to handle serious cases, as it was an actual hospital.

“Wouldn’t mind seein’ some urgency here, Captain, unless that’s too much trouble?” snapped Winchester. “He’s shot through the shoulder. I sewed him up as best I could, but I’m no doctor.”

“Of course,” James said again. “Of course.”

“Need some help, Captain?” asked Ash, the others hanging back.

James shook his head. “Stay here and keep the soldiers in line. I’ll be back soon.” All nodded reluctantly but stepped back, there was no need for three officers to accompany him on an errand that James and Winchester could as easily accomplish alone. Glowering, Winchester huffed a breath and the horse stepped with irritation.

Making a snap decision, James started west towards the Hotel. It was considerably closer, and James couldn’t escape the conviction that Winchester was competent to provide basic wound care no matter how self-deprecatingly he’d declared his lack of expertise. From what James heard, the Infirmary was completely swamped, and the Hotel should be adequate for treating the Corporal’s injury.

They walked in silence. James stride grew steadier, his steps more rapid, and Winchester’s fine horse easily kept pace. Traffic was light along I Street, much to James’ relief. Earlier, the streets had been packed with panicked citizens, demanding information on the battle from anyone they could find wearing shoulder boards, terrified that the rebels were mere minutes from rampaging through the streets of the city. With the sultry heat of late afternoon, the crowds had vanished, and those few who remained saw James’ filthy uniform and gave them a wide berth, expressions ranging from respectful to scornful. He’d not had time to beat the dirt from the thick wool, and his spare had been left, unthinkingly, at Centreville. He could only imagine that he was a sight, his navy jacket peppered with tan dust, his pants watermarked to above the knee, the leather of his boots stained with white lines, his red sash limp and streaked black. The bronze of his belt buckle, still incongruously bright polished and bearing the letters US, stood out by contrast as they walked towards the sunset.

“Do you think the wound serious?” James asked at length, seeking anything to distract from how the pain of being upright wasn’t fading even though walking stretched his muscles.

“Every wound is serious,” said Winchester, fatigue and bitterness in his voice. The horse’s head drooped tiredly, each step plodding, horseshoes making dull clomps on the unpaved roads. “But Sammy’s young and strong, he’ll heal.”

“God willing,” agreed James fervently. Winchester snorted. Walking alongside the horse, James glanced up, surprised at the derisive reply, and saw him scowling. Unsure how he’d offended, James pressed on. “Where’d you find him?”

“Henry Hill,” came the terse answer. James caught Winchester’s eyes and expressed with a glance how little the name meant to him. “Where the battle was? Wood house, atop a hill? You charged it – or did you skedaddle first, leave the suckers to face the bullets?”

“We stood for an hour, maybe longer,” James said with dignity, holding up his bullet-torn sleeve as if it offered proof of his valor. “I’m sorry we left your brother in danger, truly, but I did not know that he was missing until after we retreated, and then there was no way for us to return. As I said
yesterday, I value him highly. He has been my officer for two months, and I’d like to think he’s my friend – not to mention he shows signs of being an excellent clerk. Did you truly ride alone across a battlefield occupied by the enemy in order to retrieve him?”

“Not lettin’ him get captured,” muttered Winchester sheepishly, looking everywhere but at James. “Weren’t nothin’.”

“It was incredibly brave,” James disagreed. “The rebels might have captured both of you. Rumor is they took 3,000 prisoners.”

“Nowhere near,” he shook his head. “Few hundred, maybe a thousand.” Startled, James tried to catch his eye, but the other man stared dead ahead, though there was nothing remarkable on the road before them. “Sorry I impugned your honor.” James snorted on a laugh. “What?”

“I don’t feel impugned,” James replied dryly, amused disproportionately by the formal words in Winchester’s thick drawl. “I certainly don’t blame you for worrying about your brother. Were it my brother, I’d have felt the same.” Even Zachariah.

“You’ve a brother?”

“Two of them,” confirmed James. “And three sisters. We were 10 total, but three died as infants and my next older brother passed of illness when I was young.”

“Sam’s all I got,” Winchester’s inflection was painful to listen to, utterly flat, inexplicably determined. “They fightin’?”

“My eldest is a congressman,” James said. “The other is...” How could he describe succinctly Gabriel’s employment? “I suppose he’s a professional abolitionist.”

Winchester barked a laugh. “They pay people to give a damn about darkies these days?”

“I never said he was paid for the work,” said James with dignity. “Many of us are willing to care about our fellow men entirely for free.”

“Well, ain’t that high and noble,” chuckled Winchester, faintly mocking, but more indifferent than anything. “Don’t get me wrong – I seen men treated like I wouldn’t treat a dog, and it don’t sit well, but there’s plenty of our own people in need Why bother with them that’s got a master to watch over them and feed ‘um three square a day and keep clothes on their backs?”

Good God, every word was worse than the one before. From talking with the Corporal, James knew that Sam Winchester didn’t share his elder brother’s sentiments, and James had heard far worse, from men who should know far better, but nonetheless he was momentarily at a loss as to how to reply. Normally, he’d not attempt to counter such ignorance – it was rarely worth the stress or the effort, as such men rarely could be talked to reason, and James lacked Gabriel’s tendency to take perverse delight in inducing others to showcase their crudeness. In James’ experience, a person either saw black men and women as people, or they didn’t, and no words James possessed were adequate to convince those determined one way of the truth of the other. Yet, there was no malice or contempt in Winchester’s voice, only negligence and perhaps – did James imagine it? – a hint of genuine curiosity, as if he truly, actually wondered why anyone would devote themselves to aiding slaves while expecting no reward. The combination made James want to attempt to enlighten the young man.

“It depends how you define ‘our own people,’ ” James said earnestly. “Can we agree that, white, black, red or yellow, we’re all part of this great humanity?” Winchester nodded. “And that, by merit
of living in the United States, we are all Americans?"

“I’ll allow the freedmen Americans, but the slaves?"

“They reside in America,” James pressed on firmly. “Though they cannot be citizens and lack legal rights, in the Constitution, they count as people. The three-fifths clause—”

“‘The number shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years as three fifths of all other persons,’ ” Winchester quoted. James blinked. The accent and attitude had led him to think Winchester uneducated, and in that moment James realized how absurd that supposition was. Sam Winchester was clever, well-read, and obviously schooled, so why should his brother not be so?

“Precisely,” James smiled, warming to the conversation. “Further, the clause specifically excludes Indians, drawing the distinction – they are not Americans, but the slaves are. If slaves count for representation, then regardless of their servitude they are Americans. Thus, your suggestion that they are ‘not our people’ falls flat – for by the measures that matter, of humanity, of residency, they entirely are ‘my people.’ That they have different skin color matters as little as that you have green eyes and I have blue, or that I am from New York, and you are from...”

“Kansas,” supplied Winchester.

That explains a great deal.

“Oh.”

“It’s as bad as you think,” Winchester added, taking in James’ shocked expression and murmured reply. “Been there since ’50, left two months since.”

Kansas territory, less than a year ago admitted to the Union as a free state, had been alive with violence throughout the ‘50s, the first, dire warning of the potential for bloody conflict between those who supported the spread of slavery and those who opposed it. Thinking on Winchester’s words and attitudes, he wondered on which side of the Kansas their family had been involved. The sad truth was, both sides had behaved heinously. Those supporting slavery had burned Lawrence to the ground. John Brown and others opposing the spread had slavery had wantonly massacred pro-slavery settlers. At the time it had seemed like oceans of blood, it had been anathema to the public imagination that a few thousand Americans would organize and do battle against each attack each other, that a hundred would die, to determine whether a new state be slave or free. After yesterday, it seemed like a prelude. If the rumors running rampant through the capital could be believed, a thousand or more men had died the previous day.

Unaware of James’ reflections, Winchester had hardly paused before continuing, “Have you ever thought slavery’d stop being a problem if y’all’d stop agitatin’?” No wonder Sam Winchester, yet in his teenaged years, looked on the battlefield as familiar. The brothers had lived in a war zone for nearly a decade. What kind of people brought children to such a place? What kind of people remained there with their family as the violence grew worse?

“No,” said James, pushing away his troubled thoughts. “I’ve never thought that silence on the issue of slavery would end the conflict. Were every anti-slavery voice in the world gagged it would not change the injustice of four millions being held in captivity indefinitely. You’d not risk your brother falling in to the hands of the Confederates – even knowing that the war will have an end point when the rebellion is put to rest, even knowing that his freedom at that time would be assured. How, then, would you feel to see him bound in chains for life and treated as those poor souls that you’ve surely observed in your time in the south?”
“I’d kill them,” Winchester said, his tone, of all things, pensive. “If someone tried to treat my brother like I seen slaves treated, I’d kill him. But Sammy’s white, no one’d make a slave of him, ‘cept maybe some Injuns.” James wanted to grind his teeth. It was said so matter-of-factly, as if it were completely natural for one type of person to be denied freedom, while the alternative was inconceivable, and that somehow that logic invalidated James’ entire argument.

“Well, if it doesn’t impact you personally it must not be an issue of any kind, my mistake,” said James sarcastically.

“I don’t mean to make you mad, Captain,” Winchester said, once again with emotion that James found inexplicable – defensive and mollifying. “I think you’ve a point, honest, you’ve given me something to think about over the long days to come. But if you Yanks could have just let it be...well, it’s no matter now, y’all didn’t, and here we are.”

“Literally,” James agreed, simultaneously relieved and disappointed as they approached the hotel. “That is the hospital.” The sincerity in Winchester’s declaration that he’d think over James’ words was undeniable and calmed James’ rising temper, made him feel that the conversation hadn’t been wasted, that further discussion of the matter with Winchester might yet produce a convert.

_I can’t blame a man for the ignorance with which he is raised. I can only blame him if, upon being acquainted with the injustice and inherent cruelty of his beliefs, he willfully refuses to change._

A wagon was parked before the large main doors of the hotel, a line of many more stretched out of sight around a corner. At the entrance, people worked, shouting directions at each other and at the wagon drivers, bearing stretchers, transferring the wounded, their clothing stained near-black by dried blood, their faces splattered. A terrible smell suffused the humid air, decay and death writ large, though there wasn’t a corpse to be seen. The street ran with red rivulets of blood that pooled amidst the dust. Men and women alike in civilian garb worked feverishly and morbid sounds leaked from the wagons, enough to stir the hearts of the most callous. James thought of all he’d seen the day before, the wounded and the dead, gory and bloody and torn, and steeled himself to witness more of the same, his stomach rebelling sickly.

“Steady, Impala,” murmured Winchester as his horse’s nostrils flared at the miasma. “Captain, I’m going to shift Sammy down your way. Be prepared, he’s heavier than he looks.”

“How’d you get him up there in the first place?” asked James curiously, leaning back from the horse and setting a leg firmly behind himself to prop up the expected weight.

“Lafitte,” Winchester explained succinctly and unhelpfully. Twisting in the saddle, Winchester shrugged his brother’s arms from his shoulders and wrapped an arm around his waist, easing the taller man down. James reached up and caught Sam’s shoulders as Winchester awkwardly lowered him. The horse – Impala – took an uneasy step, and then calmed as Winchester shifted subtly. “You got his top?” James nodded. “I’m gonna drop his legs down.” James nodded again, and Winchester lifted Sam’s leg from the far side of the horse and let the young man’s lower body slide to the ground. A huff of breath rushed from Sam, ghosting humidity over James’ cheek.

Winchester was down from his horse in an instant, securing the reins to a convenient hitching post. Stepping to Impala’s front, Winchester pet her nose and gave her an adoring smile that warmed his entire expression and left James feeling as if he’d intruded on a private moment. “Now, baby, you kick the crap outta anyone who lays a hand on you, right?” Impala actually bobbed her head, apparently in reply. Winchester beamed and James felt a blush of heat rising in his cheeks.

_He really is the most handsome man I’ve ever seen._
An image of his fiancée sprang to mind, Anna’s dazzling green eyes, the auburn hair framing her face, the way her expression lit when she smiled, much as Winchester did now. The image provided no adequate answer to James’ strange thought, he thought his fiancée lovely, but his visceral emotional response to Winchester persisted. Bemused, he wondered what had brought the comparison in the first place. Anna was so feminine, slim and petite, and Winchester so masculine, broad shouldered, bare forearms thick with muscle, bow-legged from a lifetime spent in the saddle. There wasn’t the least similarity beyond green eyes and a gentle smile on pink lips. There was blood on Winchester’s plaid shirt, James noticed for the first time, a dark stain on the back where Sam had been leaning against him.

“Captain?”

“Ready whenever you are,” James said, shifting his hold on Sam’s shoulders. A breathy whimper whispered through Sam’s lips. Winchester gave Impala one last pat and stepped over, placed himself between Sam’s limp legs and wrapped those powerful arms around Sam’s thighs, hefting him up. Awkwardly, James stepping backwards, they made their way to the hospital.

“Wait your turn, wait your turn!” snapped a tense, narrow-nosed man with a salt-and-pepper beard, wearing a blood-splattered white apron.

“But he’s my—”

“I don’t care if he’s Christ almighty risen again,” the doctor interrupted savagely. “Every man here is someone’s son or husband or brother or father, and you’ll wait with the rest of them.” Behind him two orderlies unloaded a gruesomely injured man, arms dangling limply, black infection already settling in to a gaping wound in his side that his mangled navy jacket could not hide. Flies buzzed around his mouth, caked with cracking dried blood, about his wound, about his eyes, crawled into his ears. That a creature in such a state yet breathed – and the injured man did, his chest rose and fell, his nostrils flared, his eyelids fluttered – was beyond pitiable. James choked back vomit, at the sight, at the smell. Winchester’s sun-darkened face went pale.

“Yeah,” Winchester agreed, licking his lips and grimacing at the very taste of rot suffusing the air.

Yeah, right.”

“After this wagon.”

It was agonizing to watch as the forms were removed from the wagon, impossible to look away. A second was carried forth, half of his face torn away to show bone and sinew beneath, the interior of his mouth visible through what little remained of his cheek. The next had a leg torn away, the shredded bloody rags of his pant leg hiding the actual injury, his head turning this way and that as he moaned in agony. That one met James eyes for a moment, wracked with pain, beyond recognizing aid, and begged him piteously for water and mercy and death. The following wore gray, but none appeared to care, or maybe he was a Union soldier from the 8th New York or another Regiment that had come to the capital equipped in gray. It was impossible to tell and it was a relief that wherever he was hurt, it was not visible. 8 in all were removed from the wagon, and with a snap of reins, the two mules pulled the covered vehicle away, uneven wheels rolling the box in a way that must have been agonizing for the injured men at every rotation.

As soon as the way was clear, Winchester gave his brother a shove into James, and, steeling his willpower, James took the backward plunge into the hospital. Within, harried orderlies ran back and forth, and every place James looked he saw the injured, lying on the floor, leaning against walls. The conscious mostly bore their wounds with impressive stoicism, though some wept silently or moaned in despair or begged everyone who passed for help. There was enough pain in sight to break the
hardest heart, and the building had five stories and many other rooms.

“You don’t have any idea where you’re going, do you?” asked a woman in a soiled dress, wisps of graying hair escaping from the bun with which she secured her hair. Face lined with age, she gave James a gentle smile, seemingly unaffected by that which surrounded her. James shook his head. “Dr. Garrison is doing triage for the walking wounded in there.” She gestured to a nearby door labeled “Hotel Office” in fancy gold leaf. “All of these men are waiting.” She made a sweeping motion to indicate all of those who stood and lounged in the hallway.

“Young man with a bloody, torn off wound in place of his left ear said with excessive politeness. “Many of us have had no water since the battle. Is there any way…?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” she replied kindly, and hustled off. Before she broke eye contact with James, she caught sight of tears in her eyes, and noticed that her hands shook. He’d sooner face bullets again than do the work she was engaged in.

By the time Dr. Garrison was ready to see Sam, James had seen enough misery to leave him sated for a lifetime, though not enough to inure him to sympathy, for which he was sincerely grateful. The worst outcome of exposure to these horrors would be to grow indifferent to them. There was a hallway down which the most serious cases were carried, the sounds of screams came endlessly from away to their left – the amputation room, one man explained with a haunted expression, holding his mangled arm nervously to his chest. Those who died on the journey to the hospital were carried straight through the lobby towards the back, to presumably be left somewhere awaiting burial as the sweltering heat bloated their distended corpses. The building reeked, the air was thick, and Winchester looked increasingly troubled, eying the door as if seeking an escape. Every attempt at conversation, with Winchester, with the other men, died in the miasmic atmosphere.

The doctor wore an earnest, troubled expression, but his exhausted eyes were bloodshot and hard, a man who’d been making difficult decisions all day and didn’t dare pause to consider the ramifications of the choices he made on behalf of others. “Is he the only one hurt?” he asked, voice thick with fatigue, as James and Winchester lifted Sam onto what had been a dinner table days before, wood already deeply stained with blood. They both nodded. Garrison took in Sam’s appearance with a single glance, saw the stained hole in the shoulder of his jacket, and used a pair of scissors to quickly cut the cloth away. The wound beneath was surprisingly neat, stitched shut with what even James could recognize as a competent hand, edged in dark red and oozing a slight stream of fresh crimson. Propping a hand behind Sam’s neck, Garrison lifted Sam up and checked the wound from behind, frowning at whatever he saw.

“Carry him to the third floor and find him a bed,” the doctor said. “Next!”

“What, that’s it?” Winchester asked, taken aback.

“Whoever sewed him up did as good as any of us could,” Garrison shrugged. “We’ll only hurt him worse if we cut it out and do it again. Get him out of here, and send in someone who needs my help.”

Arms aching with the strain, James once more took his place at Sam’s shoulders, and together they followed Garrison’s instructions, laboriously hefting the tall boy up two narrow, switch-backed stair cases. In between heavy breathes and struggling steps, Winchester looked wide-eyed at the wound he’d treated, muttering the occasional swear word under his breath.

“You…did well…” James managed.

“Guess I did at that,” Winchester didn’t sound nearly as strained as James felt, though presumably
Winchester hadn’t walked nigh on 50 miles the previous day. “Son of a bitch.” He looked up and met James’ eyes, and James nearly gasped with shock at the evident pleasure on the young man’s face, the gleam in his eyes despite the dim light in the stairs, the guilelessness of his expression. The crazy desire to grin back, to say more things to bring that smile out, to give the man a supportive hug, washed over James, but he was spared considering the ramifications of those instincts by their arrival at their destination.

A nurse greeted them, a woman so old her back was stooped and her worn dress hung baggily from a form made gaunt and crooked by the passage of time. “I think there’s a bed in Room 325,” she said in a creaky, raspy voice, pointing down the hallway with one gnarled finger. Overhead, the sound of furniture being moved made a clatter and crash against the floor boards of the fourth floor.

The room in question was spacious and had presumably been a relatively luxurious suite in the Georgetown hotel, but now it was crammed with 8 beds, tucked close together, and a middle aged woman with a forlorn, careworn face waved them negligently to the only empty place. Several of the other men sat up, plush blankets at odds with the ragged, soiled uniforms they yet wore; the rest lay, one tossing and turning and muttering, the others still and pale. They set Sam in the bed, and he lay, head at the top, feet off the edge of the mattress, wan and unmoving, chestnut hair spread over his pillow.

“Captain Novak?”

Startled, James looked up and met the eyes of Colonel Elkins, laying supine on the corner bed. James smiled broadly and walked up to his friend, commander, and future brother-in-law. “Colonel!” James held out his hand, and Elkins took it and shook enthusiastically, smiling also. “How are you?”

“I’ll heal,” Elkins said gruffly. “Shot me in the thigh, but it’s only a flesh wound, nice and clean. With luck and God’s mercy, it’ll stay that way, and I’ll be back before you know it. What brings you here? Are you hurt?”

“No, sir, Corporal Winchester was shot,” James explained. “That’s his brother.”

“Another Winchester? You joining the regiment?”

“Uh, no…sir,” Winchester said awkwardly. “Well, Sam’s good now – you said you’d take care of him for me, Captain, don’t forget – I need to go.” Turning a heel, Winchester was past the disinterested nurse and out the door before James could stop him.

“Excuse me, sir,” James said hurriedly. “I’ll be back tomorrow morning, if that’s alright?”

“Don’t let it trouble you, I’ll keep an eye on the Winchester boy.”

“Thank you!” Hard on Winchester’s heels, James hurried out the door, but the man moved like lightning, the door to the staircase already closing behind him. Every muscle protested as James pushed himself to greater haste, and he more fell than walked down the stairs. He managed to reach the last landing above the ground floor as Winchester put his hand on the door knob.

“Wait!”

Shoulders going tense and rigid, Winchester froze and glanced over his shoulder, looking for all the world like a boy caught with his hand in a cookie jar.

“What’s your name?”

Winchester blinked at him, broke into another of those dazzling, relaxed smiles that had James’ heart
inexplicably catching at his throat, and let out a rolling laugh that echoed warmly in the confines of the staircase. “Dean,” he said. “Dean Winchester. Thanks for your help today, Captain.”

“All right,” James said with breathless sincerity. What was it about that smile that made him feel like he was getting a glimpse of heaven? “I mean that – truly – anytime at all.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Winchester – Dean – replied, wearing a shy smile but his eyes darting to and fro like he was a hunted man. “And, uh…same to you, Captain.”

The door opened and Dean left like James was chasing him. “James,” he muttered to the bare walls, echoing with the moving of furniture overhead, the clatter of the door closing, and the screams and moans of the wounded yet being carried into the lobby. “James Novak.”

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Dearest Anna,                                                                                                             July 31st, 1861

Today I received yours of the 14th inst., the first to reach my hand since our transfer to Washington. I cannot express how gratifying it was to check with the postman and find he had something for me, nor can I begin to relate the feelings in my heart as I read your words. You are the sweetest – the kindest – the dearest creature in the world to me, and though it plagued my heart to read of your sorrow at my departure, it eased me to read how well you understand why I must do this.

I’m relieved to hear that things are well with my parents, and amused at your relation of your discussion with Hannah as regards her coming to the capital, for it matches in every detail one that I had with her days before you wrote me, and is especially ironic in light of the events of the past few days. Three days past Hannah and Hester arrived. They tell me, with much more recent authority than the letter I nonetheless cherish, that you are well and healthy, and I can report to you that they are the same. Hannah has proved a blessing to everyone in Colonel Elkins’ ward, as the nurse who had been assigned them was utterly dilatory and inattentive to their needs. Observing this, Hannah asserted her authority (dare I say she bullied her predecessor from the premises?) and took over administering to eight men herself. All I can do is pray that she and Colonel Elkins are wed soon, in the hopes that her marriage will set to rest the spirits that endlessly tell her that such brash behavior is feminine and appropriate. Do not mistake me – I think the sentiments that guided her commendable – but when I consider the insult and effrontery to which she is exposed every day, not to mention the sorrow of seeing to the gravely wounded, the heartache of watching men suffer and die, the danger of exposure to illness – I cannot but think it an evil best kept short term.

Hester feels entirely differently, as I am sure she has already informed you, so I’ll not rehash her arguments. She refuses to consider that what is acceptable in herself, a spinster in her thirties, is not acceptable in one of but two-and-twenty and engaged.

There is more, but I’m called away – I will write tomorrow if I am able.

Your, J.C. Novak

Hastily signing off the letter, James left the letter and his pen on his writing podium, grabbed his hat, and hurried to see what was causing the uproar outside. It was early, the men lined up for breakfast that James had decided to skip – his stomach had been troubling him for several days and he’d decided he’d rather skip meals than regurgitate them.

“Hip, hip, hurrah!”

The sound was deafening, raised at highest volume from every throat. Stepping out of the Company barracks, James was confronted by the strange sight of the entirety of Franklin Square empty, not a
soul, man, woman or child, moving among the buildings. From where he stood, the surrounding streets also appeared empty.

“Hip, hip, hurrah!”

The cheering came unmistakably from the east, the direction James could not see for the building directly behind him. Hurrying around the building, where everyone had gone became instantly apparent. 13th Street was completely enveloped in a sea of humanity, the men packed ten deep at least for as many blocks as James could see. Across the street the crowd was as dense, though buildings meant they were packed more closely together, soldiers cheek by jowl with civilians. James couldn’t make out what they cheered.

“Hip, hip, hurrah!”

Approaching the rear of the mass – which reminded him unpleasantly of the milling, aimless crowds that had choked the Warrenton Pike after the battle at Bull Run – James stood on his toes to see over heads, only to find the street empty.

“Did you see him, sir?” A breathless Bradbury appeared at his shoulder, desperately trying to see over the taller men before him, craning his neck, resorting to jumping up and down and the boy could not gain enough height to see the street. “Has he already gone by?”

“Hip, hip, hurrah!”

All along the route, hats were thrown in the air – forage caps, top hats, the slouch hats worn by the local laborers, some thrown high enough they tangled in tree branches and were lost.

“Seen who?” James asked blankly.

“General McClellan!”

Suitably impressed, James joined Bradbury in eagerly attempting to catch sight of their new commanding officer. Listening loudly to the repeated cries and to the shouts and cheers, observing the way people in front of them leaned forward and out into the streets with eager gazes, he suspected McClellan was south of them. Excitement had run high in the army since the announcement four days prior that General McDowell would not be given the opportunity to repeat the debacle of July 21st. McDowell’s superior, General Winfield Scott, once known lovingly as “Old Fuss and Feathers” but now all used the nickname with derogatory tones, had claimed responsibility for the unsuccessful and ill-conceived push “on to Richmond!” as if it had been entirely his own idea, rather than the concerted demand of the entire nation. The General had been removed from his overarching command of the war effort, though the news claimed with derisive glee that Scott would yet serve in an advisory position. This demotion seemed to bring joy to many but saddened James, who had met General Scott twice and whose father spoke extremely highly of. The Novak family had dedicated much effort to each of Scott’s unsuccessful presidential campaigns. In Scott’s place a new general had been named and that all were enthused about him though few could speak much to his actual accomplishments. Though the only fight of the war that could rightly be called a battle thus far was Bull Run, General McClellan was widely known for his victories in skirmishes at Philippi and Rich Mountain in western Virginia, and on this dubiously exalted record he supplanted one of the greatest military men the nation had ever produced. For this triumph the newspaper had dubbed him “the Young Napoleon” and all spoke of him with hushed reverence. The army had been in raptures since learning that he was to lead all.

Though the anticipation made the time seem to pass slowly, it was mere minutes before a group of four men came into view. All were of fine military bearing, sitting stiff-backed on the finest mounts
the Quartermaster could supply – a far cry from the poor old spavined beast that James had been beneficently presented with two days earlier.

“Which one is he?” James asked Bradbury curiously, eying the four men. One lacked shoulder boards, a man with deep set eyes and receding hair, so it couldn’t be him, but James could see it being any of the other three, one with gentle eyes and a well groomed beard, one with a wild shock of silver hair and a long beard, and the last with a truly impressive mustache and a triangle of dark hair below his lower lip that James found comical.

Breathless with excitement, Bradbury dug in his pocket, pulled out a crumpled clump of papers and thrust them into James’ surprised grip with one hand as he took of his hat and waved it high in the air with the other, indifferent to the way his hair wisped in every direction. It was a newspaper, and on the front was an etching of McClellan, black haired and mustached – the man himself, comical triangle beard and all, now rode directly opposite them, the gold embroidery on his shoulder boards and the polished bronze of his buttons gleaming in the sunlight. With an emphatic gesture, McClellan rallied the crowd, circling his arm in the air.

“Hip, hip, hurrah,” the assembled soldiers and civilians obligingly cried, Bradbury as loud as anyone. McClellan smiled encouragingly and looked into the crowd, meeting the eyes of individual soldiers and managing to make it appear like that heartening expression was just for them. Everywhere McClellan’s gaze fell, momentary silence followed, only for the cheers to redouble as he looked on. The disappointment James had felt at General Scott’s removal dissipated as dark eyes met his, and James considered that he’d never seen a man who looked so much a soldier. True, McClellan had not proven himself at Bull Run, but that alone could not be cause for condemning a man. James would reserve further judgment until he saw what events followed.

The riders moved steadily north, engaging with the bystanders all the way, and to their south the crowds started to dissipate. Those who could still see the general mostly seemed intent to stare at his receding back, but the excitement was past.

Smoothing the newspaper, James said, “May I hold on to this?” Papers had been difficult to come by; with the number of soldiers in the city, the demand for news far exceeded the supply.

“Keep it,” Bradbury said. “One of the Benders has promised me a copy of today’s; that one is two days old.”

“Thank you,” James turned from the crowd and crossed the square, Bradbury pacing him. “Winchester will appreciate it.” A flicker of imagined green eyes flecked in hazel, so different in shade from the ones that Bradbury watched him with intently, came to mind. Wrong Winchester.

“You’re to the hospital? May I go with you?”

“If you wish,” James shrugged. True to his promise to the elder brother to look after the younger, James had made an effort to visit the hospital daily, affording him the chance to check on all of the wounded. Hall and Warren were there as well and contrivance had seen all the injured of Company B moved to the same room; Colonel Elkins and several men from other companies in the 27th were there as well. Warren would be leaving soon, returning home to complete his convalescence. With his arm amputated he’d not be returning to service. The others should be on duty again soon, God willing – one from Company D was already back, a wound to his lower arm healing well. Each day, most of the wounded showed improvement, save a poor fellow from Company A, who, Hannah had lamented the day before, appeared to be dying. Each day, different members of Company B accompanied James on his errand of mercy – Fitzgerald and Ashley came often, Bradbury had come a couple of times, even Henriksen once, treated with casual scorn by the nurse whose position
Hannah and Hester had happily usurped. Their arrival should make the atmosphere more congenial to the black lieutenant, and with that in mind James searched for a dark face amidst the crowd drifting from the parade route, but though he spotted several, none also sported Union blue. Perhaps tomorrow.

The trip to the Union Hotel-turned-hospital passed quickly now that the route was familiar, and the hospital staff ignored him as he made his way upstairs.

“Brother!” Hannah exclaimed with all the delight of a rare and unexpected encounter, as if she’d not seen him repeatedly over the past few days. With her dark hair and blue eyes, she bore the closest resemblance to James of all his siblings, both more closely resembling their father, Michael, whereas Zachariah, Gabriel and Rachel were more like their mother, Naomi. After a moment’s hesitation in which she and Elkins shared silent communication, she rose and gave him a staid hug, her fine, flounced dress covered in a perfectly clean white apron.

“How are you today, sister?” he asked, returning her embrace chastely.

“We are well, save Johnson, who passed during the night,” she raised her gaze heavenward, though all there was to see was the tin ceiling of the room, whispering an inaudible prayer into which James entered. “Sergeant Bradbury!” Hannah turned her dazzling smile to the young man, who started and colored at the warmth of Hannah’s greeting, giving James a helpless look.

“Good day, Ms. Hannah,” Bradbury said uncertainly. “Is your elder sister around as well?”

“No, I think this part is entirely Hester’s doing,” said Hannah. “Before the telegram arrived informing me of Daniel’s injury, she was already packed and ready to go – among those copious letters had been one from Mrs. Fremont, indicating that General Fremont is planning to push the emancipation issue during his tenure as commander of the Department of the West, and suggesting that sympathetic politicians in Washington would be essential in furthering ‘the Cause.’ Thus, Hester was away, away, to speak with Zachariah and push him to speak in favor of emancipation as a declared war aim of the Republican Party. However, my darling Colonel was hurt,” Hannah paused to shoot Elkins a doting expression over her shoulder, “and thus her plans were ‘briefly’ diverted by the need to come to the hospital. Upon seeing that situation…well, we both knew petitioning Zachariah was a waste of time anyway, he will hedge his bets until he sees which way the winds blow, especially in light of this terrible defeat in battle, so she’s decided her energies are better used elsewhere. I give it six months before she is distracted by something new.”

“That is unfair,” James reprimanded Hannah kindly. “She has been devoted to her cause since she was younger than you are now, it is merely her methodology that changes with the seasons. The goal has always been equality for the genders. But why have you come, Hannah? This is no place for a young woman of your stature and in your position in life! Our men of the 27th are fine sorts, but there are many who are less so, and to come here with only your sister for escort when you are
unmarried…” He trailed off as her expression grew more and more sour.

“You, too, James?” she sighed. “I thought you, at least, would understand – so I told Anna, when she counseled that I stay, even knowing my affianced to be gravely hurt. I even offered to prove it, were she to come along she’d see that you, at least, are beyond such outdated nonsense! Yet here you prove me liar!”

“It’s not nonsense when you’re safety is at stake,” James replied. “There are thousands of rough men in the city, men who cannot be trusted with a woman’s virtue.”

“But you’re not worried about Hester?”

“Hester carries a **Deringer,**” he said dryly. “I think I worry more for the man.”

“And you think I am undefended?” Hannah said with such an air of primness that he couldn’t but laugh in defeat. He noticed Bradbury smiling with obvious approval.

“Apparently I am much mistaken,” James surrendered. “You will do as you’ll do. I’m amazed our parents permitted it. Shall I find Hester so that we may all sit together?”

“I’ll do it,” Bradbury cut in eagerly, to James’ surprise. “It’s no trouble at all.” Before James could suggest that it was not the Sergeant’s responsibility to hunt down his errant sister, the youth had tipped his hat to Hannah and darted out the door, which slammed shut loudly behind him.

“Sorry!” squawked Bradbury’s voice, muffled through the wood, and then footsteps showed him rapidly departed.

With a gasp and a start, Winchester sat up in his bed, looking around wildly in response to the loud noise. He suffered was several wide-eyed moments of panic before his situation returned to him, and he recalled where he was and why. A soft groan escaped his lips, and he settled back in bed, Hannah hurrying to his side.

“How are you feeling today, Corporal?” James asked, grabbing a stool from by the door and setting it in the narrow aisle separating Sam’s bed from a sleeping soldier from Company C. The boy opened his eyes to be confronted by Hannah, insistently pressing a cup of water at him, and James helped him sit up so that he might drink. Hannah pushed the cup in James’ free hand, and quickly adjusted Winchester’s pillow so that he might sit up comfortably.

“I think I’ll be back on duty in a couple days,” Winchester said, words at odds with his pale face and quavering voice. “I feel much better.”

“Everything we hear is that the army will be fortifying Washington,” James said soothingly, taking his seat as Sam mustered the strength to bear the cup for himself. “There’s no reason to think we’ll march soon. Take the time necessary to heal where there is care available. You’ve no cause to risk further illness by pushing yourself too fast, too quickly.” The first few days in the hospital, Winchester had been feverish and delusional, slipping in and out of dreams, mumbling incoherently, and James had feared for him greatly. Fortunately, the fever had broken and he’d returned to his senses, and now the wound seemed to be healing well.

“The Colonel tells me that my brother was here…?” Winchester trailed off as if uncertain if he’d really been told the information or if it had been hallucination.

“Yes, a Mr. Dean Winchester,” James confirmed. Winchester glowered. “He sought you out on the battlefield after the retreat, at extreme personal risk to himself, as the entire Confederate army yet held the field and he was but one man a-horse back.” Relating the tale of heroism brought a smile to
James’ lips and a warm glow to his chest, called to mind a remembered smile, half cocky, half abashed, as James had praised the man to his face for his valor. “To protect you from capture, he carried you, unconscious, from harm’s way, and found a place of safety where he and a friend treated your injury so thoroughly that the doctors here said they could not have done better.” Not until he spoke of the elder Winchester to another did he realize how impressed he’d been. The younger brother had other ideas; the longer James spoke, and in such glowing terms, the deeper grew the scowl on Winchester’s expressive face, his frown growing so pronounced it would have appeared comical if not for the obvious and sincere anger clouding his eyes and furrowing his brow. Confronted with such spirits, James felt the strange need to further sing Dean’s praises, to convince Samuel that his brother’s behavior had been exemplary and commendable. Teenagers could be recalcitrant but surely there was no cause for condemnation in anything James related. Hannah looked positively awed, and Colonel Elkins was nodding approval with a pensive quirk to his lips.

“I cannot begin to guess your fate if not for him,” James concluded ardently. “I was entirely as impressed with him as I have been with you.”

“Just stop,” said Sam with heat.

“Corporal—”

“I’m sorry, Captain,” Sam said hastily, his anger fading to bitterness. “He doesn’t…I mean, we have history.” The southern accent, so pronounced in Dean’s voice, was barely evident, and Sam spoke slowly and deliberately as if trying to repress it completely. “Anyway, he wasn’t in near so much danger as you suppose.”

“Do you recall something of your rescue?”

“No thing,” Sam ground out. “Only, a rebel soldier hasn’t got anything to fear from other rebels.”

Stunned, James’ jaw dropped. Impossible!

*Thick southern accent, no uniform, just happens to be riding along at the site of battle, defensive of slavery, racist and indifferent…*

Damnation, James should have seen it in the first place. It was obvious, all things considered. He’d even noted the differences between the brothers’ behavior and attitudes. There were many families divided by the war, it should not surprising that he should meet members of one such.

…*Winchester rode through Federal lines, rode straight into Washington, rode into an encampment of thousands of armed Union troops in order to secure help for his younger brother. No less fearless than I’d thought, no less brave, no less devoted to his family. No less misguided than I thought, either – there’s many a Northern boy as wrong-headed as Dean, many a northerner more callous towards the plight of their fellow men.*

All the nerves, all the self-effacing behavior, every hint of Winchester’s discomfort made sense now.

*Bravery can’t exonerate him. Courage doesn’t change that he’s a traitor to the United States of America.*

The others were talking, Elkins commenting, Corporal Winchester toying with his blankets and looking anywhere but at his Colonel, tone evasive, but the words were meaningless.

*I wonder what brought him to rebellion.*

Tension was thick in the air, and James felt the fault of it keenly, for speaking so warmly of
Winchester, from defending Dean from his brother when of course Samuel knew better than any what sort of man Dean was.

I’d like to talk to him again.

Pushing the inexplicable thought away, James spoke brightly into the awkward silence that had fallen. “I’ve brought a newspaper, only a couple days old. What news would you like?”

All of the conscious men in the room roused at James’ words, eager to ease away the unpleasantness and genuinely interested in the paper, and a bevy of questions came at him all at once.

“What’s interesting?”

“Is there anything about us in there?”

“What about out west?”

“Just read the headlines!”

James started with the news on the war, as that was the topic on everyone’s minds, except for one Sergeant James didn’t know who groaned at every mention of the situation in Western Virginia and Harper’s Ferry, rolled his eyes when James read aloud on the dubious neutrality in Kentucky and the number of Kentuckians jumping the border to fight for the South, and ground his teeth at the overview of the conflict in Missouri’s state convention, as they Missourians took their sweet time deciding whether or not to secede. Most of the news was bad, but the situation in Missouri was improving, General Lyon had captured Jefferson City the week before and the latest news was that the Convention was on the verge of selecting a Pro-Union governor. There was a murmur of general consent when Hannah suggested a prayer to the Lord to let reason overcome madness among the members of the Missouri Convention. Every border state lost provided more manpower and material to the rebellion, and it was frustrating to watch events helplessly from afar, unable to do more than hope that people made wise choices. Since Virginia seceded in May – with those against secession intimidated into agreeing to the disastrous move – calmer heads had rarely prevailed, and had been in extremely short supply.

There was news of the home front, updates on the casualties from Bull Run, information on the movement of regiments, and tales of heroism and camaraderie that the injured men ate up. There was international news, on the state of things in Germany and the status of the Austrian empire, on how the Canadians were bemusedly watching their southern neighbor tear itself apart, on a destructive earthquake in Buenos Ayres. James’ favorite articles were the editorials and opinion pieces, and fortunately Bradbury’s choice of newspaper aligned with James’ own political views, for he found his view of matters very much in line with the editors. Over the objections of several of the men, he read one article in its entirety as Winchester, Hannah, and a couple others nodded their agreement all the while.

“It has been said the war has nothing to do with slavery, but no one will pretend that slavery has nothing to do with the war,” James read. Those who said the war had naught to do with slavery were deluded fools, ignoring the whole of US History to trumpet States Rights to the heavens, forgetting what right the state’s most sought to defend. “But for slavery the southern states would be on as good terms with those of the North as Illinois and Massachusetts, and the idea of dissolving the Union, or of a war between the North and the South, would be as preposterous as that of a war between Pennsylvania and Ohio. The most natural way to put an end to a controversy is to remove the cause of it, and since the war has resulted from the refusal of the slavery propagandists to submit to the laws, the obvious and certain cure for the political malady is the abolition of slavery. The Government will be slow in adopting this radical mode of treatment, but the public mind is rapidly
ripening to the conclusion that no other will prove effectual.” Oh, how James prayed that such was so! It was, in his heart he knew it to be truth, knew that the longer the conflict was sustained, the more inevitable the downfall of tyranny.

But, oh, how he dreaded the price in blood that men would pay before the destruction of injustice was achieved.

For better or for worse, as long as it took, no matter what it cost him personally, what it required of those he cared for, what toll it took on the nation as a whole: no matter how many days like July 21st he must wade through, James would see this great war through.

Interlude

“Wet and ready for me, aren’t you, beautiful?” Benny’s smooth, sweet accent shivered down Dean’s spine like a touch, Benny’s rough fingers toyed at his grease-slickened hole.

Yes, yes, please! Dean’s thoughts screamed, but he repressed the words against his arm. Benny didn’t want to hear Dean’s voice, didn’t want a gruff reminder of masculinity to break him from his fantasy.

“Gonna make you feel so good,” Benny rumbled. Hands blindly caressed the contours of Dean’s ass, encouraging Dean to press his chest more closely to the leafy forest floor, to lift his hips higher into the air, to accentuate the unmasculine curvature of his lower back and hips, the result of muscles honed by long hours on horseback. The touches were gentle, teasing, confident. They’d done this countless times, and the parts of Dean’s body that Benny acknowledged at all, Benny knew intimately. “Gonna make me feel so good.”

Anticipation left Dean panting, breath hot and humid against his already sweat-sticky skin, the musky smell of soil and rotten leaves thick in his nose. There was nothing ideal about their relationship. Dean wanted so much more than Benny was prepared to give, was prepared to share so many things that Benny couldn’t possibly accept from a man. However, unlike the handful of other men who had bedded Dean, there was no judgment, no negative consequences.

“Sweet girl, pretty girl, gonna fill you so good.”

Benny didn’t actually expect Dean to pretend to be a woman, didn’t ask him to dress in women’s clothing or wear make-up. Benny didn’t care how Dean interacted with Benny’s body or with his own as long as it didn’t break the fantasy. That primarily meant that Dean had to keep his damn mouth shut, which in truth was better anyway, no one – himself least of all – wanted to hear his hoarse groans and pathetic whimpers. In Kansas, where female companionship was even more scarce than it was proving to be in the army, arrangements between men were not uncommon, a practice all condemned even as most indulged. The question of who played woman was rarely an issue, as most men stuck to using mouths and hands to get what they needed. Men like Dean were rare, those willing to open themselves to another man’s hardness – Dean had met few others, and none seemed to derive the enjoyment from it that he did. The satisfaction Dean undeniably derived from these encounters was merely further proof of how broken, how useless, how idiotic he was.

The thick, blunt tip of Benny’s cock nudged against Dean’s entrance, slid tantalizingly over pork fat melted by the heat of Dean’s body. Pleasure obliterated Dean’s errant thoughts, brought him blissfully back to the moment.

Shame was for before, when he prepared himself so that Benny would be spared every possible reminder that he was invading an ass rather than a cunt. Shame was for afterwards, when release
leaked from Dean’s hole and soiled his pants, when the craving to do it again set into his bones until he fingered himself and wept to be filled, until he wondered how soon he could suggest they do it again without appearing precipitate.

At the moment, all he felt was the need, the desperate need, to have Benny spread him, stretch him, torture him with lust and friction. With a chuckle, Benny teased at Dean’s entrance, rubbing against him without attempting to penetrate, and Dean pressed towards the contact, rutting against Benny’s cock, the pleas that filled his mind finding meager outlet in tears forced from his closed eyes.

“You like that, know you like that, love that you like that,” breathed Benny. “But you know what I love even better?”

A firm hand shifted from Dean’s ass to his hips, squeezed bruisingly hard to hold him still. Dean gasped, adoring the roughness of it, and Benny used his thumb to run a soothing line beneath the curve of Dean’s butt. With his other hand, Benny guided his cock against Dean’s hole, pushing against the resistance of still-tight muscles. Dean spread his knees further apart, spread his cheeks as wide as he could, and his hole slowly, slow stretched open as Benny unrelentingly pushed forward.

“Love filling you,” Benny groaned. The large man’s movements were deferentially gentle, accepting of the constraints of Dean’s body, demonstrating in every movement that even though Benny took pleasure in pretending that Dean was a woman, he fully understood that Dean wasn’t, that Dean’s body could not work as a woman’s did. “Damn good, so damned good.”

So incredibly good, so big, so thick, so full, always so full. Love your cock, Benny, I love your damned enormous cock.

God, Benny felt glorious inside of him, stuffing Dean so completely that pain mingled with pleasure as he was opened beyond what Dean could comfortably accommodate. Benny used both hands to draw them together, to force himself deeper even as Dean’s body resisted and protested further intrusion. He groaned at the strength with which Dean’s muscles clenched around sensitive flesh and didn’t stop until Benny’s broad thighs and pelvis were flush with Dean’s ass.

“So tight, beautiful,” whispered Benny reverently. “You have no idea what you do to me.”

The fact that Benny so clearly adored being inside Dean compensated entirely for Dean’s sacrifices. It was all pretend. Despite near three years screwing, Dean’s best friend had no interest in a more permanent arrangement, was always on the lookout for the dark-haired, curvy woman of his dreams. However, so long as that hunt remained fruitless, Benny was content with this and Dean got what he craved.

Benny drawled out a moan that set Dean’s blood afire, dug his fingers into Dean’s thighs to hold him in place, drew his hips back and thrust in so hard that bright white spots danced against Dean’s eyelids and his aching, desperate cock bobbed against his still-clothed belly. Another thrust, another, hard and determined and deep, so deep, drove Dean towards his own fantasy as the combined pain and ecstasy of Benny’s every movement drove Dean wild. Wrapping a hand around his cock, Dean pumped himself dry-palmed in time to Benny’s mind-numbing pounding. His body felt increasingly far away, a prison riddled by fatigue and aches and recriminations that his euphoria lifted him free of, and he lost himself.

In his dreams, he was on his back on a soft bed instead of pressing his knees and elbows into the sod. Blue eyes stared in to his; thin, dry lips brushed against his mouth; a powerful, lean body matched each hard plane of Dean’s own. Coarse fingers caressed the corded muscles of Dean’s arms, ran over his abdomen, toyed with his nipples. A low, rough voice, betraying the owner every bit as lost in passion as Dean felt, whispered his name like a fervent prayer to the God Dean hadn’t believed in.
since his mother died. Cock filled him, powerful hips pumped against his thigh, friction and abrasion and glorious pressure against the sensitive nub within his channel drove Dean to delighted distraction. Those tender, calloused fingers wrapped around Dean’s hardness and stroked firmly. The mystery man had no name, though of late the man’s features had taken on more definition than they’d ever had before, eyes more brilliantly blue, hair short and dark brown and disheveled, thick stubble and the dirt of battle a shockingly alluring combination covering his smooth, warm skin. The shadow of a blue uniform yet clothed the handsome body. The dream soldier had no name, but as bliss drowned Dean, it was all he could do not to cry out the title his thoughts inevitably attached to the stranger.

_Captain!_

Benny groaned and kept pumping as Dean’s channel clenched tight around him and then relaxed, every muscle gone limp as Dean spent his load amidst the indifferent leaves. Dean was delighted to allow Benny to keep going, to pound and pound into Dean’s sated, over-pleasured body for long minutes. He lost himself completely in the feeling, adored being pushed past his limits until he couldn’t have said whether he was in agony or rapture, his cock twitching but unable to harden so soon, and he imagined the pleasure that his dream lover took from Dean’s accommodating ass. There was nothing but heavy breathing and bliss and his blue-clad delusion and the vaguely remembered need to remain silent and pliant, his body a willing tool for Benny’s pleasure, nothing more, nothing less. On and on Benny went, grunting and groaning his enjoyment. Had he been able, Dean would have screamed how good he felt to the Heavens, but instead he merely sobbed bliss into his arm. Finally, with a pleased sigh, Benny sank in deep and rolled his hips against Dean, spurring his release.

“Love you, Andrea, love you, beautiful, so good for me…”

Dean’s phantom lover faded as Benny whimpered out the words with the passion of climax. What Dean imagined was impossible. This was reality. It was enough. At least, when they’d both cleaned up, when they left the thicket separately and returned to Singer’s camp from different directions at different times, Benny would smile and greet him as an old friend, not a trace of judgment, not a hint of condescension. They shared a mutually beneficial arrangement, nothing more, nothing less, and it had to be enough, because in his heart Dean knew it was all he’d ever be allowed to have.

Dean had Lisa, to prove to his father that there was at least one way in which Dean wasn’t a total disappointment, and Dean had Benny, to give Dean what he needed, at least until Benny’s errant love finally realized she’d chosen a monster over one of the best men Dean had ever had the honor of knowing.

Dean was lucky to have what he did. It was more than someone like he was entitled to.

Chapter End Notes

For more on "no really everyone was racist," I thought folks might be interested in the full text of the article that James reads to Sam. The title is "The Connection of Slavery With the War: Its Doom" and it's from the July 29th, 1861 edition of the New York Times:

It has been said that the war has nothing to do with Slavery, but no one will pretend that Slavery has nothing to do with the war. The war is not made upon Slavery. The slaves
have not been proclaimed free, and called into the service of the Government; although any foreign nation at war with a slaveholding country would avail itself of so conspicuous an element of weakness. Slavery still exists, with all its constitutional guaranties, in the Border States, and the citizens of these States who are not in open rebellion have repeatedly had their runaway slaves returned to them. It is only in those cases where slaves have run away from rebel masters, who freely lend them to the rebel Government for the construction of fortifications, or for soldiers in the field, that the commanders of our Armies have refused to deliver them up.

It is therefore literally true that the war has nothing to do with Slavery, while Slavery has everything to do with the war. But for Slavery the Southern States would be on as good terms with those of the North as Illinois with Massachusetts, and the idea of dissolving the Union, or of a war between the North and the South, would be as preposterous as that of a war between Pennsylvania and Ohio. The most natural way to put an end to a controversy is to remove the cause of it, and since the war has resulted from the refusal of the Slavery propagandists to submit to the laws, the obvious and certain cure for the political malady is the abolition of Slavery.

The Government will be slow in adopting this radical mode of treatment, but the public mind is rapidly ripening to the conclusion that no other will prove effectual. If undertaken at all, it should be done with a strong hand. The utmost care should be taken to prevent and to punish violent outbreaks among the slaves, as well as every tendency to rapacity, violence and lawlessness, whether the enemies or friends of the Union be the victims. In the Border States, where the body of the people are for the Union, reasonable compensation should be made to slaveholders, except where they have taken an active part in behalf of the rebellion.

It is not probable that this thorough treatment of the case will be adopted at present, if at all. To put it into successful practice would require a vast deal of moral courage and political sagacity; and regarding the matter from the stand point of constitutional right, nothing short of a great public necessity could justify it. That such a necessity would warrant it, no intelligent thinker upon the affairs of mankind will question, and that such a necessity seems to be rapidly pressing upon us, is an opinion not confined to the school of Abolitionists. It is to be remembered that the general abolition of Slavery in the Southern States would not be attended with the much and justly dreaded evil of a large free negro population in juxtaposition with the whites, except for a very brief period. It would be the natural order of things for the negroes to go to the extreme South to supply the demand for labor, while their places in the Border and Middle States would be taken by white men from the North and from Europe. The laws which govern the demand and supply of labor, taken in connection with the climatic adaptations of race, would be almost sufficient of themselves to adjust the populations to their appropriate latitudes; but to these influences legal persuasives might be added, and the result would be, in the course of a few years, the concentration of the great body of the negroes in the Gulf and South Atlantic States, with a free outlet to Mexico, the West Indies, and other tropical regions.

Slavery is a doomed institution. Its upholders and propagandists have waged unholy war upon the General Government, for no other reason than that they have been turned out of power by the result of a fair election, and now they must take the consequences of their crimes. Providence seems to be using their ungovernable ambition to bring about the overthrow of the wicked and barbarous system they would diffuse over the world; and now that their necks, as well as their fortunes, are staked upon the issue of the war they have waged, it is not at all improbable that their necessities will forestall the action
of the General Government, by compelling them to become its destroyers. Already we hear of black regiments before the first campaign is over, and when the fatigues of campaigning, the chances of battle, and the ravages of disease, shall have destroyed the flower of their youth we shall hear of whole armies of blacks, who will receive liberty on the condition of defending the lives of their late masters.
So, I promised smut this chapter. That was before I started converting my outline into actual story and realized I've got (as usual) a terrible sense of how much narrative it takes me to actually accomplish certain things. Along those lines...I've put in an estimated chapter count, but odds are it's well on the low side. If you're reading this and want to know the outcome, expect to be in for the long haul, cause I've covered three months in 50k words, and the war lasts four years...

...but there'll be smut. I promise. So I'd appreciate it if ya'll bear with me. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4: The Virginia Quickstep

Dearest Anna,                                                                                                   September 19th, 1861

We have orders! Oh, to be free of over-crowded Washington, the over-bearing politicians, the over-enthusiastic recruits arriving by the tens of thousands, the over-wrought quartermasters ready to skin a man for requesting nothing but what is reasonable, the over-solicitous hucksters intent on swindling the ignorant of their earnings, and the over-abundance of flies! Marching out means that we will lack amenities to which we have become accustomed – two months has seen our barracks transformed into a semblance of a home – but my men are a resilient, resourceful, dedicated group, and I have no doubt that our new location can be improved as sufficiently as our current; perhaps even better, for there will be rich country on which to thrive, none to steal through intent or ignorance that which we have made for our own convenience, and, dare I hope, the opportunity to do what we have come south to do, rather than simply sit in Washington DC and rot.

Our exact posting has yet to be told me, but I know we are for Virginia. General McClellan has an ambitious plan to fortify the capital against attacks by the rebels, for if Washington should fall that would severely imperil our cause. Several forts are already completed in Arlington and beyond. It is an honor to us that we among those chosen. Regiments deemed unprepared for active service are retained in the city for further training. Only veteran units, those proven to the General as ready for battle and versed in the soldierly arts, have been sent west and south. All know that it is a mark of pride, and most have been strutting like peacocks, flapping jackets like flared feathered, since we received the news this morning.

I have in my hands yours of the 10th, scarce a week behind, and I thank you for the information on my parents, the intelligence on your family and your brothers, and of course I love to hear the minutiae of your life! However, you resume your narrative of Mr. and Mrs. Milton’s trip as one continuing a relation begun prior, and I regret to report that I have never received whatever letter contained the intelligence of their departure or their arrival in Chicago. Please, do fill me in, for what you relate of their experience there is intriguing to me and I’d love the context to understand all.

I fear my letters on militaria are dull for you. I have had little else of import to communicate. As Colonel Elkins and Hannah’s wedding approaches, I hope I will be able to send you that which is of
a rather more gratifying nature to your interests. Along those lines, know that Hannah has, with much recrimination and unhappiness, been convinced to stay in the city with Zachariah, Margaret, and Hester when we march out; and that so far as I understand the date has been set for October 20th, to be held at the Church of the Epiphany (did you know Col. Elkins Episcopalian? I did not!) Will you be able to attend? It would be a veritable miracle to see your face, but only if you may travel safety, with dignity, and in company – I’m sure my parents would be too thrilled to be among your escort.

We march out at dawn tomorrow. While I expect at first our post and other such luxuries will be delayed, I doubt it will be long before things normalize, so fear not – I will continue to write, send my letters as I am able, and cherish every one of yours that reaches my hand. Do be well, my love!

Your, J.C. Novak

The day that followed was one of endless frustration that James was growing to associating with the organization of the army. Communication between departments, between individuals in the same departments, was too poor; the number of tasks expected of everyone, himself included, were too multitudinous; and orders were too often given that would work exceptionally well were the individuals involved in a void where no other people existed. As it was, at dawn the 27th New York marched in excellent order to the docks along the Potomac, with orders to board ship and proceed the short distance down the river to Alexandria, only to find the way completely clogged by others with similar orders. Those arrived yet earlier had already departed on all available steamers. The backlog was lengthy enough that the harried naval officers overseeing the situation turned the regiment away. Each subsequent attempt to cross the river was thwarted. The Long Bridge had been recently closed to accommodate the building of a railway line, the Chain Bridge was impassable due to the Union soldiers fortifying and securing it, and in the end they marched nearly six miles in the opposite direction of their eventual destination before they reached the unobstructed Aqueduct Bridge in Georgetown. The delays were not over, for the troops defending the bridge had no orders that any were permitted to pass and so the 27th stood, strung out along the bridge in perfect marching order in a steady drizzle, for near two hours while Colonel Elkins’ aide Major Carnegie secured written orders that the regiment be permitted into Virginia.

By then it was afternoon, and even James found his excitement to be on the march dimmed as misery upon misery was heaped on them. The rain fell continually until they dripped, their uniforms were heavy and sodden; every stitch they carried, including tent, blanket, leather, hardtack and all were soaked through. Standing, they were all accustomed to. After day in and day out of naught but drill, drill, and more drill, there could all happily, or at least resignedly, stand from dawn to dusk. However, marching had grown unfamiliar again. The furthest they’d gone since July had been between Georgetown and the Capitol, to participate in the periodic reviews that General McClellan was exceedingly fond of. The men at first had resented the pomp and circumstances as far from the reality of war, but the heartening cheers of the thousands that lined the parade routes had gone to their heads, and now leaving behind the hope of more such was also much bemoaned. Even had they spent all summer marching they’d have been ill-equipped for the miserable march to Alexandria. After the dry summer, the unrelenting downpour turned the roads to quagmires, and much to everyone’s horror, it was discovered that the shoes they’d been issued not three weeks ago could not stand up to water. The glue that held the uppers to the soles dissolved, and within a few miles nearly everyone was barefoot.

James had never been so glad he got to ride on horseback, even though his wet saddle caused his soaked wool pants to chaff uncomfortably against his bottom. Saddle sores would heal, but he had no idea when they’d have new shoes. It was un-Christian of him to be grateful for such, and he felt increasingly guilty as the men grumbled, but their unhappiness did little to dim his relief.
In other circumstances, James would have been impressed with what a fine city Alexandria was. However, in the driving rain, the lavish brick structures appeared to be weeping, drawn curtains hid the warm light that might otherwise have poured through expensive glass paned windows, the weather was bad enough to have driven the citizenry to their homes, and the hour was late enough that all of the shops were closed. Those few people they did see, mostly laborers, shot them dirty, resentful looks, and one older woman made a rude gesture, obviously directed at Henriksen, that prompted Bradbury to ready his rifle, as if his waterlogged powder had the least possibility of igniting.

The prospect of the warmth and dryness within those houses was alluring, and James was not the only one who looked wistfully. As they trudged down the cobbled streets, James spun out a fantasy, of one of these buildings being home, of a welcome awaiting him and his comrades-in-arms. Impossibly, there was room to accommodate them all, towels and fresh-drawn hot baths to drive away the clammy chill that had settled into his bones despite the mildness of the temperature, dry clothing and bedding, and a finely cooked meal enormous enough to sate even the hungriest of their number. Glimpses into the few uncovered windows, lit by interior candlelight to glowing gold, showed a life eerily reminiscent of the one James enjoyed in New York. Within one parlor, a young couple exchanged tender glances and shy smiles, and the reminders of Wolcott driven home even more as James recalled Anna giving him a near-identical demure look, expression limned with a hint of coy promise that made him think things he knew he shouldn’t.

A black woman, eyes lowered, shuffled into view as James’ horses passed the window, and his last view into the room was off the man breaking off his flirtation, face contorting with anger as he yelled at the slave girl loudly enough that his voice was audible as a dulled hum through the thick wood door.

The sight drove away all nostalgia. This was Virginia, not New York. If James sought sanctuary in one of these homes, he’d be condoning an institution he found reprehensible, and if he balked in seeing through his military service, such scenes would be repeated ad infinitum in homes throughout the south. In that moment, for that day, he was undeniably uncomfortable, but he was only one man, and it was only one day, he served only a two year term. The war would end and James would return to his nice, warm, welcoming home, the arms of his waiting fiancée, the career as a lawyer his parents had planned for him since he was a boy, and he’d never have to suffer another day. His sacrifices were paltry in comparison to what was asked of others as a matter of course for their entire lives.

The city faded behind them as they passed beyond the last homes and towards the steep hills south. Despite their early start, it was late afternoon when they finally, wearily crested one of those hills, bare save for a small encampment laid out on top. From the peak, Alexandria made a drab vision washed in the gray of clouds, dusk and water, the Potomac visible as a deeper gray beyond that, the hills of Maryland ghostly in the distance. Another hill flying the US flag was barely visible to the west, and the valleys between were a patchwork of nondescript, bare farmland, made drear and brown by the bad weather and coming fall. Occasional stands of trees blocked further view, but the road south disappeared in the blurred haze of the horizon. In sunlight, James thought it would be handsome country, but that evening it was swamped with a pervasive, oppressive gloom.

The Colonel ordered a halt before several large tents glowing with lamp light and short line of low triangles adequate to accommodate maybe a company. A few of the tents were occupied by men asleep, but the rest were presumably on picket duty. Their location was near the southern edge of what the Union held securely, and the threat of attack must be taken seriously.

Their arrival was a cruel reminder that there was no rest to be had at journey’s end. Major Carnegie came around to summon James, Fitzgerald and Henriksen to a command meeting. Orders were
distributed that Company A would be joining in picket duty, Company B would shovel the camp privy, Company C was to cook some semblance of mess, Company D would gather tents and assemble them in lines, Company E were to see to the regimental horses, and on down the regiment until all had tasks.

The meeting with the Colonel got James and his lieutenants out of the rain, but the alternative proved little better. The existing encampment proved to be a cadre of engineers who described plans to construct a fort atop the hill, and the 27th New York was there to do the digging and building. Their description was extremely technical, unnecessarily so, and the interior of the over-crowded tent was humid and stuffy to the point that James felt himself growing sick with it, the atmosphere unbreathable, his lungs scarce able to muster the strength to lift his uniform, made heavy by water.

It was full dark before the company, and much of the regiment, retired to their tents. The rain was accompanied by dazzling lightning strikes that blinded the eye and reminded them how dreadfully exposed they were on the bare hilltop. Thunderclaps ripped through the night, each one flaring memories behind James’ eyelids of cannon, smoke, fire and damnation atop Henry Hill. The simple linen squares under which he slept did nothing to repel the deluge. Somewhere in the wilderness to the south some beast with a cry like a woman in agony rent the night on occasion. The temperature plummeted until James shivered in his woolens. Even with all that, when sleep came, it took him completely, he was so exhausted from the day that had been.

I wonder who wakes the bugler.

Such was James’ first bemused thought on being woken by the inelegant note of the regiment’s inept trumpeter. His second was an unjoyous reiteration of every discomfort of the previous evening, his uniform still damp, his feet swollen painfully inside the tight leather of his boots, his nose itchy, and to all of that was added an alarming disquiet in his stomach that made him extremely nervous. Thus far, the 27th had been spared any serious outbreak of illness, but they had been lucky. Washington DC had festered in the ludicrous heat of the summer, disease run rampant where men lived in close quarters sharing bad food and dirty swamp water. Even as the hospitals had discharged those recovered from their wounds taken at Bull Run, a new sort of casualty had filled the beds – men taken ill with every sort of complaint, but the most common was the one James felt now, the pressure to relieve himself, the need to hasten to the privy pits. Rising, he obliged his discomfort, and found himself far from alone. Shame at the act of using the bathroom publicly had long since faded among the troops, and instead James exchanged sheepish grins with the others who squatted near him. It was easier to smile at their mutual discomfort than to acknowledge it by any other means, simpler to chuckle at the absurd sounds some of them made than to consider the potential severity of their condition. The flux could kill a man, and all of them would sooner face bullets again than go out like that.

Duty cared little for the illness that obviously afflicted many of the men that day, and as the Colonel gathered them to pass out their orders, James could do little else but pray for the symptoms to pass quickly. There were to be no delays in constructing the fort – already dubbed Fort Lyon by the engineers, in honor of General Nathaniel Lyon, recently killed during the fighting in Missouri. Company B had been issued shovels the previous day, and thus they were instructed to dig once more, beginning the construction of a deep ditch around the hilltop. Most of the other companies were set to felling trees. Those with experience in carpentry were singled out and given the equipment necessary to prepare the trees to build a stockade. Throughout the day, wagons of equipment and supplies arrived, and the regimental quartermaster took charge of the material and organized it, overseen by the keen eye of the engineers.

Guilt drove James to pick up a shovel and help the men. As an officer, no one expected him to do so, but the drudgery of the task was evident. Though the day was sunny, the air was cool, and the sun
did little to dry the waterlogged soil. Heavy, dark brown sod made up the hillock, and digging it up was hot, difficult work. Men who had started the day ill grew more so, and even as James helped shoulder the load of physical labor, interrupting his labors occasionally to see to the demands of his roiling insides, he watched his troops and worried.

The wagons contained much that appeared useless, from carts with enough grain to feed three times the number of horses they had to nails that were obviously too short to be of any use in their task to one cart that contained nothing but replacement wagon wheels, but they did produce a few boons. One, bearing the seal of the [US Sanitary Commission](https://www.history.navy.mil/), proved a particular God send. The health-minded citizens of New York City had, with impressive foresight, sent them a tent to be used for men who were wounded, an [apotropary](https://www.medicines.org.uk) worth of medicines, long strips of clean bandages, splints; in short they’d been provided with a mobile hospital just when they needed it most. Fearing that the most ill among his troops would suffer disproportionately, but well aware that without orders he risked being accused of insubordination if he gave them a break (Col. Elkins would not second-guess James’ judgment, but General Wright and the men from the engineer corps were too unknown for James to guess their reaction), James instead sent his sick men to aid in the unloading of the hospital and the assembling of the tent. No one reprimanded him for his actions, so either they had passed unremarked, or their new superiors were not insensitive to the physical needs of the individuals under their command. That was a relief, for James had already observed that too often, officers – especially those of the West Point variety who had been to war before – saw the privates under their commands not as people but as interchangeable units.

They dug until the lengthening shadows made it impossible to continue. By then, James’ hands were thoroughly blistered, his innards were twisted in agonized rebellion, and only the knowledge that not eating would further weaken him was adequate to force himself to consume minimal sustenance in the form of hardtack crumbled and soaked in the cleanest water that he could find.

James was far from the only man up and down throughout the night.

When James joined the others to resume digging the following morning, Henriksen gave him a wry look, seized the shovel from his weakened grip and refused to give it back. James was too unwell to belabor the point, and contented himself with offering encouragement to his men in between harried trips to the privy. Near a third of the company was relieved from duty due to sickness, retreated to the large, open-sided hospital tent, lying on blankets on the damp ground under the care of Private Ellicott, the regimental doctor Whittaker, and a sergeant from Company H whose name James didn’t know. Most the few women who’d accompanied the regiment assumed nursing duties, which constituted keeping the direly ill supplied with fresh water, keeping them clean and disposing of the disgusting, often bloody, waste. While some men appeared to be improving, some were definitely growing worse, bodies wracked, faces contorted to reflect the pain, pleading for water that they could not keep down. It was horrible to watch, and though James visited the ill of Company B, and knew by all rights he should be among their number, he could not bring himself to stay.

Fearing he could succumb as others clearly were, James drank throughout the day and ate a little whenever he felt he could. Despite Bradbury’s frequently rolled eyes and Fitzgerald’s polite suggestion that James might benefit from a lie-down, he stayed on duty, and he wasn’t sorry for it. Even the minimal work he was capable of served as a welcome distraction from his discomfort, ensured that the time passed with the semblance of haste. By evening he was relieved to find he was no longer passing blood, and his sleep was only interrupted once during the night.

Private Zeddmore died just before dawn. Spangler cry of inconsolable grief woke most of the camp before the buglers were able. Come morning, the mourning soldier took up his shovel, walked down the hill to a place near where the outer pickets were stationed, and determinedly dug a grave, ignoring every reprimand and castigation that Sergeant Reidy, Henriksen, and James hurled. Their
efforts were half-hearted. It was difficult to fault a man for wanting to do right by his best friend, and when it became clear that nothing they said would stop Spangler, James instead told him to continue, returning to the officers and securing permission to build a small regimental graveyard at the location that Spangler had selected. Not only was permission given, but several additional men were assigned to the task, for over the morning two more men had died, and thus three graves were needed.

On Sunday, Chaplain Murphy led a modest, poorly attended church service. Scarce a hundred men were arrayed devoutly on the grass, James, Henriksen and Fitzgerald as always in attendance. Few of the other officers and men of Company B attended, though Winchester joined them as well. James wished he could convince them all to attend, but it was not for him to dictate the church-going habits of his men, no matter his desire that they care for the health of their souls as assiduously as they tried to do for their health of their bodies. Especially in light of their current situation, when death could befall anyone at any time, James thought all belonged in prayer. The outbreak of disease was mending, but six men had fallen since they’d arrived at Ballenger’s Hill, with no knowing who might be next. It troubled James to think what might await his lapsed troops in the hereafter. It troubled him that in three days, near as many men had died of illness as had died under the hail of bullets at Bull Run.

Church was followed by a funeral service for those who had passed. Many who cared not for homilies and psalms attended to say farewell to their friends and comrades, and at least half the regiment was in attendance, gathered in knots along the slopes of the hill. Wooden crosses had been carved for each casualty, their full names on them, birthdays given when they were known, and their date and cause of death.

The service was informal. Chaplain Murphy invited the gathered to speak for their friends, and a few came forward to say a few words. Spangler, openly weeping, knelt before Zeddmore’s cross and said “goodbye” so softly that only those closest could have possibly heard. Colonel Elkins said a short piece on sacrifice and duty, commending them for their bravery and service as if they’d died under enemy fire instead of being laid low by the bloody flux. When no one else approached the fore to contribute, Chaplain Murphy stood before the graves and spoke from memory.

“The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them.” Murphy’s voice was strong and carried easily over the assembled soldiers. “In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died, and their departure is thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction, but they are at peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good because God tested them and found them worthy of Himself. Those who trust in Him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with Him in love because grace and mercy are upon His holy ones and He watches over His elect. The Lord is my shepherd, and I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for His Name’s sake. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup runneth over. Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever. Amen.”

“Amen,” echoed the assembled hundreds in a hushed rumble.

“Amen, Lord!” declared a hearty woman’s voice. Intent on the service, none had noticed the small group approaching them, at their lead a short, rotund black woman in an ill-fitting off-white muslin dress, her black hair pulled back from her forehead by a thick band of cloth. Despite her bold words, she wore an appropriate expression of sorrow, and the group of black men and women following her looked similarly respectful. There were a dozen, ranging from a gaunt, haunted-looking child to a
man stooped and old enough to be a grandfather, his hair iron gray, is lined face achingly mournful.

“Excuse me?” Spangler, his grief-stricken face flat but his voice outraged.

“Y’all’re Union soldiers, right?” The woman spoke in a thick, uneducated accent that in no way detracted from her firm, confident authority. The group, surely fleeing slaves, wore simply, ragged clothing. Most were barefoot. All save the woman and the old man had a hunted, wary look that James remembered well from the faces of those fleeing souls who had sought sanctuary at the Novak home on their journey north to Canada.

“Yes, ma’am,” Colonel Elkins smoothly interjected, stepping between the new arrivals and the irrationally irate Spangler. Chaplain Murphy, sensing the tension of the situation, began shooing people away from the site of the completed funeral. Men stepped back but few departed, intrigued to see what followed. James and the other officers, all of whom had attended save those too ill, made a buffer between the curious and the Colonel.

“We’re…” the woman trailed off, hand circling the air as she searched for the word.

“Contraband,” wheezed the old man, his voice rheumy.

“Exactly,” she gathered herself up, put her hands on her hips, and managed to look down on Elkins despite being inches shorter. “We’re contraband,” she repeated with a decisive nod.

A long moment’s silence thickened with tension and James worried that Elkins was on the verge of turning them away. Gabriel and his allies had successfully seen the Confiscation Act signed into law, and precedent suggested that any slaves from rebellious states who escaped to Federal lines were to be given refuge, but racist, officers harboring sympathy for the southern cause often refused slaves sanctuary, or at least so said rumors. Elkins would do no such thing unless he was under orders from his superiors to do so, but such was entirely possible. The ominous expression clouding Elkins’ face did nothing to quiet James’ concerns. The child, biting her lips, glanced around and caught James’ eye, and despite her downtrodden appearance her dark eyes were hard with fire and defiance.

“We cannot house you on the hill,” said Elkins firmly. “Nor do we have the resources to care for you unless you work for the army.”

“ Heard you got contraband helping with diggin’ and buildin’?” A muscular man with a bluff face, one arm protectively encircling a pregnant woman whose skin was so light it might have passed for being tanned, flexed his free arm to demonstrate his strength.

“It would be wisest if you take refuge in Alexandria,” Elkins suggested. James scowled. From what he’d seen, they’d only scarce be free there. If they were in the employ of the Federal army, they would be paid, they’d receive food and shelter, whereas in the town they’d be at the mercy of anyone pretending friendship.

“Colonel?” James spoke up, and waited for an acknowledgement from Elkins before continuing.

“Yes, Captain?” There was a trace of exasperation in Elkins’ tone that James determinedly ignored.

“We have spare tents and blankets and rations enough. It would be a matter of simplicity to set up a camp by the road on the north side of the hill,” James said quickly. “While this group is small and Alexandria can accommodate this number, more will come, and how many can we leave to shift on the townsfolk?”

“So you propose we accommodate them all?” asked Elkins with an air of resgination.
“I suggest we gather those who come, find employment for them, and when a large group assembles, send them to the camp north of Washington where the government can aid them as they see fit.”

Though James and Elkins spoke softly, a glance at the intense, attentive expression on the face of the woman leading the group made it clear that she was attending them closely.

“Very well,” Elkins said, loud enough for everyone gathered to hear. “They’re your responsibility.”

“Excuse me?” said the woman defiantly. “We’re our own responsibility now. That’s what freedom means.”

“I agree,” James approached her, holding out a hand by way of greeting. For the merest instant she was astonished and then she took it, her grip powerful, expression bright with triumph. “Captain James Novak.”

“Missouri Moseley,” she said.

“Henriksen!” Calling loudly, James glanced at the gathered troops. As it became clear nothing terribly interesting was going to happen, most were drifting up the hill, some somber, some laughing, some talking with their fellows, one person singing a funereal dirge in what James thought might be Dutch, and several attempting to console a loudly weeping Spangler. Only a handful lingered, and from the mass of men Henriksen emerged, striding purposefully towards James. The instant the uniformed black man came into sight, the former slaves gasped collectively.

“Well don’t that beat all!”

“Where do I sign up?”

“Praise Jesus!”

Fitzgerald trailed uncertainly in Henriksen’s wake, holding back, an uncertain smile flickering over his lips.

“Lieutenant, I’d like you to take responsibility for this – for them,” James amended quickly.

An expression flashed over Henriksen’s face too quickly for James to interpret, and he said tightly, “Yes, sir.”

“Feel free to grab Winchester as well – put together a list of what you need, secure what you can from the camp, and I will obtain the rest,” James continued. “Tents and food, obviously, but I’ll see if we can get them shoes and clothing suitable for the cold weather to come. Also, see who among them is interested in working and what they are capable of, and I’d like you to oversee that, as well.”

“What of my duties as lieutenant, sir?” There was an acid note in Henriksen’s voice, his expression schooled utterly neutral.

“Don’t you think this is more important?” asked James, startled.

“If I thought that anything was important than serving in this army, I wouldn’t have enlisted,” Henriksen said tightly, stance parade-ground perfect and oozing affronted pride. “If you think it’s so important, why not give over your own duties?” Somehow, James had offended the man profoundly, and he hadn’t the least clue how.

“I’ll do it, sir,” Fitzgerald interjected blithely, apparently oblivious to the tension electrifying the air. Without waiting for James to say anything, he sauntered to Missouri in his long-limbed way and held
out his hand. “Lieutenant Fitzgerald, ma’am.”

Part of James rebelled at the thought. He’d given the order to Henriksen, and that made it Henriksen’s responsibility. James was Captain, and Henriksen was his subordinate, and he didn’t get to pick and choose which orders he followed and which he didn’t. On the other hand, he didn’t want something this important left to someone who was anything less than passionate about it. Henriksen would do his duty, James was sure, but what might he neglect in bitterness and frustration? Why was he so enraged?

Why had James automatically asked Henriksen, his first lieutenant, instead of any other officer in the Company?

The thought instantly troubled him. In those first moments it had seemed obvious that this should be Henriksen’s responsibility, but objectively, he could scarce spare the man – he couldn’t spare either of them, but if one was going to be dividing their time, better Fitzgerald than Henriksen.

“You won’t be able to enlist,” Fitzgerald’s apologetic voice cut through James’ momentary preoccupation. “Our lieutenant is the exception, not the rule – but there are folks working to see that changed, so you never know.”

Henriksen was black.

“Winchester,” the amount of authority in Fitzgerald’s voice as he called for the sergeant was surprising. Fitzgerald was so diffident normally that James did a double-take to see the confidence on his face now. Sam must have been close, for the gangly youth appeared in an instant. “Would you get a stool for the lady who is expecting?” She made a gesture that deferred the honor while suggesting the gray-haired man might take it instead. “And if you can find any others, grab those too.”

“Yes, sir,” Winchester bolted up the hill in long-legged leaps.

With a sick wrench, James knew in his heart that he had asked Henriksen to take responsibility for their new arrivals because of the color of their skin and the color of his skin. James hadn’t even paused to consider who among his staff might actually be most suited to the responsibility.

“I’m sorry, Henriksen,” he said softly, sincerely. “You’re right. You are essential to me as a lieutenant and second-in-command. The company can’t spare you.” Raising his voice for all to hear, he added, “Fitzgerald, I expect a report on your progress this evening.”

“Absolutely, Cap’n,” Fitzgerald gave James a cheerful wave.

Feeling utterly drained, by his illness, by his oblivious thoughtlessness, James nodded to Fitzgerald and started up the hill. “Walk with me, Lieutenant.” Stiffly, Henriksen trailed in his wake. “I am sorry. My order was out of line.”

“It’s your prerogative to give orders however you see fit, sir.”

“Yes, it is,” James sighed. “That is why it is critical that I do so responsibly, with consideration. I didn’t just now, and I’m ashamed of myself. Of course you are too essential as lieutenant for me to reassign you to oversee refugees, and had I thought about it as I ought I’d never have named you first.”

“Whatever you deem fit,” said Henriksen coldly. There was a pained pause, James’ temper rising. He was trying to make this right, and his lieutenant was shutting him down completely.
The men’s off-time ends at noon,” James pushed his pique into business-like efficiency. They had to work together. Henriksen had been the victim of much worse, and much more obvious, racism, from men who’d never apologize for they saw nothing inappropriate in their actions. “See that we have no shirkers. We’re back to digging after lunch, and then we have drill in the afternoon.”

“Yes, sir,” Henriksen said. They were nearing the crest of the hill. The encircling trench now allowed only one narrow entry point to the top, a narrow road that would ultimately lead to a large door. After another awkward pause, Henriksen released an explosive sigh. “Captain, it…it is not worth nothing that you figured out where you went wrong. I had long thought that you, unlike most I’ve known, saw me as a fellow man and soldier first and foremost. To realize that you don’t is a disappointment. But I was expecting too much, that you might be so far beyond your race. It’s enough that you recognize it, and that you will seek to be more sensible to it in the future. I won’t lie – I’m still angry now – but I’ll cool down. I accept your apology, and appreciate your intentions to improve. In the future I will try to give you the benefit of the doubt, instead of letting my temper get the better of me immediately.”

“Thank you,” James wished he had something more adequate to say, wished he could take back his earlier actions, wished he hadn’t found that hidden kernel of internalized inequality within himself. “I will strive to be the man you thought I was.”

Henriksen made no answer, moving away to walk towards his tent. James watched him go, sadness and guilt in his breast, wondering in distress how many others he’d slighted in the past without even realizing it.

With church finished and several hours yet of Sunday morning leisure, men lounged lazily around the camp or indulged their oft-neglected hobbies, writing letters, reading the newspaper or a bible, socializing, carving or crafting or whittling, playing at cards or dice, and a group of men were playing a ball game learned from soldiers from New York City. The strains of a popular new song made a cheerful backdrop to all,

_Marching along, we are marching along;_  
_Gird on the armor and be marching along._  
_McClellan’s our leader, he’s gallant and strong!_  
_For God and for country we are marching along._

The day was lovely and James felt tempted to join in the frivolity, but he hadn’t the energy. His body yet ached, his stomach reminded him he was scarce recovered, and his thoughts were exceedingly troubled by his argument with Henriksen. Pretending he was deaf to Bradbury’s call that he come watch the ball game, James retreated to his tent, bundled himself in his blanket and fell into a restful doze, lilted to sleep by the sounds of jollity in the camp. He did not stir until the trumpets, inevitably, rat-tat-tat-ed out their call to duty.

In the fatigue of the late morning, a nap had seemed a great idea, but in the shadowed darkness of a clear night lit to surprising brightness by a gibbous moon, James lay beneath his tent wide awake, thinking about Henriksen, the contraband, his sister-in-law Raphael, the many freed blacks and runaway slaves his family had helped over the years, and wondering how often he had unconsciously perpetuated ignorance and injustice while wearing the mantle of righteousness. The same recrimination went ‘round and ‘round as James examined the minutiae of every interaction he could remember having with a colored person, chastising himself for the least hint of recalled impropriety. No amount of reminding that judgmental voice within himself that past ignorance was beyond repair, that all he could do was strive to improve in the future, caused his ceaseless thoughts
to still. The square of linen that passed for his tent was only barely long enough to cover him head to toe, and no matter which direct he lay, moonlight bright as day fell over his face. He put his hat over his eyes, attempted to forcefully impose calm in his mind, but each time he moved the hat slid to the ground and his thoughts sparked back to life. Gradually, the moon dipped towards the horizon, the bright beam across his face elongated, and frustration and anxiety destroyed any hope of a restful night. Giving up, he rose and stretched, pleased to note his stomach was calm; now it was merely his thoughts that roiled.

The view from the hillcrest was oddly distorted by the haunting light, long shadows cast by the hills themselves obscuring thickets of trees and undulating farm land into ominous shadow while other details were limned by the cold light and gleamed in stark relief. The face of a clock mounted on a tower peeking above the rooftops of Alexandria beamed like a second moon. Faint noises filled the air, insects chirping, a shockingly loud frog croaking, the rush and clatter of leaves and branches stirring in a faint breeze, the unfamiliar call of a night bird. The camp itself was still, faint snores and occasional snorts the only sounds the sleeping men made. There was something beautiful about the ordered lines of low tents, the contrast between their facing sides catching the moonlight and the dark shadows they cast behind them, the neatly stacked rifles, butts resting on the ground, tops making a pyramid where they crossed, polished barrels twinkling. At the end of each line of tents, two sleepy men ostensibly stood guard, but they were scarce more alert than those who slept. James received barely an acknowledgement as he walked by them.

A line of pickets stood at wide intervals around the trench. None stopped James when he wandered down the narrow road and wended his way to the base of the hill. There was another ring of pickets below, the men closer together, their duty sound the alarm should attack come and to provide the first line of defense. A squad of troops were arrayed around the neat cluster of tents that Fitzgerald had assembled for the contraband slaves, and another squad stood at the road, oblivious to James’ approach until his boot struck a stone with a loud clack and they all jumped and turned around with wide-eyed alarm.

“Evening, Captain,” the Sergeant said, voice tight with nerves that his casual words couldn’t obscure. “No one allowed out at night.”

“I just need to go for a walk,” James said. When he’d been home, he’d always found that getting out of the house could soothe his late-night anxieties, when his thoughts would careen so that he couldn’t sleep.

“Just need to find a warm bed and some amenable company,” muttered a private, another sniggering in reply.

“Sorry, sir,” the Sergeant gave a smirk that betrayed his agreement. For a moment, James’ temper flared—far from having considered availing himself of a prostitute, James had never been with anyone, and would not until he and Anna were wed, whenever that might be—but he quelled it. Their orders were clear, and though James knew he meant no harm, it was a slippery slope to allow him egress. Once one exception was made, why not others?

“My apologies, Sergeant,” he said and started back up the hill.

He’d scarce begun when he had the thought that he could stay within the picket line and still obtain his end, circling the base of the hill. The thickets that had at one time cloaked the base of the slope had been felled, the trees dragged to form a thick abatis to protect the nascent fortress from attack, and the pickets stood within the line of felled trees, watching the trunks and branches with obvious boredom and fatigue. Protected by the obstruction, the men were spaced far apart, and as James stepped into the shadow of the hill, he realized it would be simple to sneak between them and work
his way out through the tangled tree limbs. The obstruction was, after all, meant to keep people out, not in. He’d have to return, but if he was sensible and careful he could think of no reason he’d not be able to retrace whatever route he took now.

Passing between the pickets proved embarrassingly easy. Passing through the trees silently proved impossible. Freshly fallen, the branches of the abatis were covered in dying leaves, inky black and appearing an impenetrable barrier in the deep darkness where no moonlight fell. With the whisper of leaves and the snap of twigs, James attempted to find a way through, cringing at every noise his movements provoked.

“Git!” shouted one of the pickets.

James dropped to his knees, loathe to get caught, as his unhelpful thoughts pointed out the very real possibility that his brilliant plan to take a walk might get him shot. Looking over his shoulder, he realized retreat was nearly as hazardous as pressing forward, as he’d passed nearly halfway through the barrier.

“Damn deer,” muttered the man. The piercing sound of a single gunshot shattered the stillness of night, and James flinched though he didn’t hear anything to suggest that the bullet had come anywhere near him. Considering his options, stubbornness won out over sense, and tentatively James continued even as he resolved on what a terrible idea this was. “You come in here, we’ll eat you!”

A screen of branches parted and James was in the clear. Returning would be less difficult than he feared, as he could simply masquerade as local fauna once more. Stepping into a field near Ballenger’s House at the foot of the hill, he felt a wonderful, liberating peace settle on his shoulders. He had no desire to abdicate his responsibilities, but now for the first time since May he had some few moments on his own, away from all expectations, nothing to prove, not a soul looking to him for instruction. Rolling his shoulders, James took to the road, resolving to begin his gallivanting by investigating a dense copse of trees some half-mile south.

The last thing he expected was to find someone else already in the copse.

Thick trees hid a small clearing, and James could barely make out signs that this was a well-used campsite, likely a haven for those who didn’t wish to brave the price of accommodations in Alexandria. A vast shadow, ominous in the midnight dark, stood within, and, frightened, James froze beside a large, knobbed tree trunk. Not until the monster shifted a foot and stomped did the distinctive sound of hoof on sod bring James to his senses and he realized the beast was merely a black horse. It stomped again, shook its head with a slap of the leather reins draped negligently over its neck, and whinnied. A shadow shifted at the base of a tree and resolved into a man clad in dark clothing, skin a strange, sickly gray in the night. The fellow approached the horse and pet its nose in a gesture James found inexplicably familiar.

“S’ok, baby, I know it was a long ride, but rest now while you can. It’ll be just as long goin’ back later.”

Fatigued, slow, drawling, deep, quiet, and utterly unmistakable.

*It’s impossible. What are the chances?*

The horse stomped again, nuzzling the gentle hand, then nipped towards his clothing. He laughed, a low sound that tingled through James’ skull and caught under his skin. “Oh, is that all?” Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out something, rubbed whatever it was against his jacket, and then held it to the horse’s mouth. The horse mouthed it happily and there was the distinctive crunch of apple.
Dean Winchester, here, now?

Nervous, James stepped backwards unthinkingly, and a branch snapped. Horse and man looked his way simultaneously. Dean’s eyes glimmered, gathering a sparkle of the moonlight breaking low through the trees as he searched the shadows of the thicket.

It can’t be a coincidence.

“Someone there, baby?”

Maybe it’s to do with Sam. He couldn’t think of how, though. If Dean had been in the camp, James could hardly have missed him, and Sam hadn’t sneaked out at night. Why not? I did.

“‘Course, if someone all innocent-like stumbled on me, there’d be no need to hide,” Dean continued as if he were still talking to Impala, but his gaze never stopped watching the undergrowth that James prayed masked him from view.

No, Sam hadn’t contacted his brother. The bitterness in Sam’s voice as he’d spoken about Dean made it perfectly clear that Sam wanted nothing to do with his brother. Corporal Winchester has every right to be angry. Dean has joined the rebellion. He’s a traitor.

“But it’s okay,” Dean said. “It’s tough times – suspicious times. Can’t fault a man – or woman, for that matter – if they don’t want to show themselves.”

Why is here? Why isn’t he in uniform? Where is the Confederate army? Rumor is they are at Centreville, using the tents that our army abandoned when we fled after Bull Run. So why would he be here, now, alone?

“Don’t you worry none, baby.” Dean’s keen eyes returned to his horse and even in the darkness James could see his expression soften.

Maybe he’s not a rebel.

“Ain’t no one here to trouble us,” Dean leaned forward and kissed Impala between her large, liquid eyes. She gummed lovingly at his hand, snorting a faint neigh. “If they was, they’d have said somethin’ by now, right?” Dean made one last piercing survey of the thicket in which James hid. Satisfied with whatever he saw, Dean nodded and returned to the thick tree trunk against which he’d been sitting when James arrived, an enormous, ancient oak older than any James had seen since coming south. Sighing tiredly, Dean slumped bonelessly to the ground in a rustle of old leaves, nestled between two bulging roots emerging from the soil. His dark clothes faded into the forest floor until only his skin showed ghostly, pale in comparison to the night though James vividly remembered how tanned and freckled Dean looked by day.

Maybe he’s a rebel.

“If someone did have somethin’ to say, ain’t no secret where to find me,” Dean added with an assumed air of casualness and a gesture that made it clear that the clearing was his haunt. “Jus’ like always.”

Maybe he’s a spy.

Heart thumping so loudly James couldn’t believe it did not give him away, he crept as quietly as he could through the ring of trees and undergrowth and back out to the road.

What did it mean? Why was he here?
Winning his way back through the abatis proved embarrassingly easy. What stopped an army dead in its tracks proved a scant impediment to one determined man, and the two pickets near whom he emerged had left their posts to engage in a silent game of dice together. The next man down the line was equally absorbed, noticeably craning his neck to watch. Once he was within the line of pickets, James saw no need to hide, returning as he’d come. Hardly cognizant of the strain of climbing the hill, of passing the sleepy guards, of skirting the teepeed lines of rifles, he found himself before his tent once more. His once-loud thoughts were strangely still, and tiredness tugged grittily at his eyes. Settling beneath his blanket, James closed his eyes, and one thought rang loud, clear, and true.

I have to see him again.

Interlude

**Army of the Potomac**, Attn: **J. E. Johnston**, General Commanding

**September 23rd, 1861**

Please find included a map of the defenses of Washington DC compiled from various sources, including fortresses and works currently in planning, drawn in dashed lines, and those under construction, marked with a star. Garrison details provided when known, including regiment(s) defending, approximate manpower, known ordnance, commanding officers.

Thank you for providing the liaison I requested. His abilities are precisely as I recalled them to be, and I appreciate the demonstration that you trust my judgment on this matter. Please also pass my thanks on to General Singer.

J.B.H.

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**To: Sam Winchester, Company B, 27th New York Infantry**

September 27th, 1861

Dean’s sorry, as he knows you asked him not to write, but he’s had no word since your injury and he’s a might worried. He heard your regiment is stationed outside Alexandria, and has no idea if you’re hale and hearty, still abed, or worse. You know how he gets. Do us all a favor and set his mind at rest, would you? I know you’re still warm at him, though to own my opinion that scarce seems fair since you’re the one who left, never a worry what you left him to and scarce a letter to let him know how you was doing. I’m not asking you to love him like a brother again, that’s for you two to work out in your own good time. I’m asking you to let him know you’re not dead. I don’t put any kind of odds on how long before he comes by that fort to check on you if he don’t hear anything. How many times you think he can pull those kinds of stunts before he’s found out and hung from a gibbet? Two words in your hand, “I’m fine,” and I’ll keep him from bothering you more.

Your servant, Ben. Lafitte

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**To: Captain Novak, Company B, 27th New York Infantry**

October 4th, 1861

From one brother to another, if you could find means of letting me know that Sam is alright, I’d be in your debt – more than I already am.
I already have a good chunk of the next chapter written, so hopefully it'll be a little quicker between updates.
The Irrepressible Conflict

Chapter Notes

Last chapter, I meant to post a quick note on how I'm deciding who dies and when. Aside from a few casualties that are "scripted" (such as Sam's injury at Bull Run) and a few that are "reality based" (Colonel Elkins is based on a real person - Henry Slocum - who really was injured in that battle) I'm deciding most of it randomly.

See, I have access to casualty numbers for the war - I have, for example, the exact number of casualties that the 27th New York sustained at the First Battle of Bull Run. Based on that, I broke it down in to percentages of men who were wounded, killed, and MIA. (I don't have numbers for men captured, unfortunately, so I have to wing that). Once I have the percentages, I go down my list of named folks and my tally of unnamed folks and I roll a 100 sided die (online, it's too annoying to use a real one...). If there's a 6% chance of someone dying, and I roll a 6 or less...then that's that. Ditto for illness - I have overall illness numbers for the war, and I used those and have already got the list of everyone who is going to die of sickness, and approximately when they'll do so.

So...I know some of what's going to come, but honestly it's as much of a surprise to me as y'all who is going to die. I prefer it that way...I can do my character building without that "hanging over" the character, which is more appropriate - it's just like in real life. No one in a war knows if they're going to get shot in the next battle, no one *actually* pulls out the photograph of their girlfriend to sappily show to their best friend while reminiscing that when they get home they're gonna marry that girl and thus inform everyone watching or reading that in 3.5 seconds they're going to get killed.

I've got the bulk of the actual *plot* planned, but stuff like that...? Man, there's some people I'm gonna be pretty upset if they kick it.

(obviously I'm not rolling for Cas...he's my PoV character...so it'd be a problem if I killed him...like, oops, sorry, no more story...yeah, no, not doing that...)

Dearest Anna,                                                                                                        October 5th, 1861

I'm pleased to report that I am entirely recovered from my illness, but I've little else of interest to share. The company has received little mail since we arrived in Alexandria, so I cannot fill the empty page with response to that which you have surely written. Thus, I will be brief, rather than bore you further with accounts of our doings.

The fortress comes together impressively quickly. In my mind, construction is a process that takes months, begun in spring with the laying of a foundation or digging of a basement, a dozen men mounting scaffolding, mortaring bricks, working wood, plastering walls, until finally by fall one has a home to show for it. Contrasted to this, I am shocked at the speed with which we have completed our work. Last week, three further regiments arrived to aid in the building, which means we are near 3,000 soldiers devoted to one task. The hilltop is unrecognizable compared to when we arrived,
sides made steeper with dirt, log walls covered in stone, the whole looking like it has stood solid and impregnable for years rather than being completed yester evening. We are holding a ceremony today to mount the US flag, and our next task is to construct the magazines to contain the ordnance for the defensive artillery that shall be arriving any day. Once that is done, our last job shall be to build a barracks for the fortress garrison, and then my understanding is that we are to remain here and man the fort. While some of the men fear that will be dull work and grumble again for battle, I think it may prove interesting. As we must winter somewhere, why not have it be here, with high walls to protect us from the winds? Further, I presume that staying means will receive training in utilizing the cannon that will be mounted along the walls, a prospect I find intriguing.

I have naught to report of our family in the city, as I’ve been confined to camp while we have labored. I do hope your letters arrives soon, for I long to hear from you and know how your family and mine does. Tempers have frayed all around as we have gone so long without mail – it is indescribable, the impact that word from home has on our lonely men, myself included! I’ve had but one since I arrived, that today, from father, and it was all business and no news. Not that I believe you’ve been dilatory, for I know that were my fate in your hands I’d have a new letter every day, but sadly we are left to the less tender ministrations of the United States Postal Service. So all I can say is, I hope this finds you and yours well, and I miss you desperately.

Your, J.C. Novak

A twinge of discomfort squeezed at James’ heart as he set his pen aside upon writing the final line of his letter. He did miss Anna, that was true – her kindness, her attentiveness, the warmth of her smile, the shrewdness of her observations, the simple enjoyment of being in her company – yet it lacked that urgency that romanticism suggested his feelings ought to have. Everything in James’ upbringing and education had told him that sentimentality was youthful nonsense, that affection was meant to be staid, reflective, respectful, distant, with his parents held up as the ideal to which all of the Novaks should strive. Michael and Naomi were publicly formal and scrupulously proper. Even in the privacy of their own home James had scarce scene them smile at each other, much less engage in tender moments. That was proper comportment, to reserve love and affection for the intimacy of one’s own chambers and otherwise to appear unaffected. So thus were Zachariah and Margaret, though at times Margaret in particular crossed the line from distantly proper and polite to actually dismissive, and Zachariah often directed his false smile her way rather than gracing her with naught but supposedly appropriate indifference. For much of his life, James had thought all couples so.

Familial love was integral to James, but passionate, ardent love was strange and new when Anna Milton and her family moved to Wayne County. James was 14 at the time, Anna only 10 and an only child. The two families grew friendly despite some differences in temperament, brought together by shared devotion to the same causes, especially those of religion and equality. Mr. and Mrs. Milton were warm-hearted and open, pleased to laugh and smile with each other as if sometimes they shared a private joke, and Anna was the same, unafraid to wear her feelings on her sleeve, exuberant and carefree. With no siblings of her own, and she of an age with Hannah, the girls became close immediately and Anna became like unto a sister to him. It was only as they each grew older that he realized both nursed greater affection than would be appropriate towards a sibling, and it was Anna who had come to him with the warmth of her affections, Anna who had woken in him for the first time that spark of heat and need that was desire for another person.

When Gabriel had first brought Raphael to meet the family in ’55, James encountered another iteration of this guileless, unabashed expression of love. Gabriel had never been one to hide his emotions, and he and his fiancée openly bucked the disapproving looks of the Novak parents, exchanging tender looks and affectionate jibes at every opportunity. Hannah, meanwhile, had ever been utterly hopeless from the time she was a girl, spiritng in forbidden novels from who-knew-where – James suspected Gabriel’s aid. Too young to go out alone, she would insist on James
walking with her so that she could explore the hills, and when she called a halt she would pull out whatever story their parents would have burned had they known it was in her possession and read to him whatever her favorite passage was at that moment. To a one her excerpts had been alike in passionate, near-savage declarations of eternal love that James had struggled to enter into yet had been moved by nonetheless.

James’ sense of filial obligation and duty said to be obedient to his parents’ example and wishes, but his own thoughts were oddly captivated by what he’d seen. Though poor at mimicking the passion he saw enacted by those around him, he was captivated by it. After he completed university, he began to court Anna in earnest, and her joy was infectious. The merest smile from her was enough to set James’ heart racing, to warm him head to toe on even the coldest winter nights. He lacked her gift for expressing romanticism, but he had unrestrainedly shared the love thus expressed. Had this war begun two years ago, had then James been forced to suffer long-term separation from Anna it would have been agony, and had he been called to write such letters to her “I miss you desperately” would scarce have done justice to the depths of his misery. There had been a time when departing her company for the evening, with the sure knowledge of seeing her again the next day, had felt like an unbearable separation of interminable duration. Now, it was four months since last they’d met, and he was deeply perturbed at the discovery that his parting words felt disingenuous. It was a lie to claim he missed Anna “desperately.” Rather, James missed her quietly, as a presence sometimes shadowing him yet inexplicably absent when he turned around, as the phantom of delicate fingers twined through his, as a light feminine voice whispering his name on the dancing breeze.

Had his need to see his fiancée been acute, the means of escaping his duties temporarily was in hand. That day they’d received mail for the first time since leaving Washington, and James had a letter from his father, dated September 4th, expressing:

_We are exceedingly proud of your conduct in the late battle. In light of your heroism, record of which has reached many ears, there has been talk of your returning home for a time to aid in recruitment. Zachariah is confident that leave can be secured for you without any impact on your soldiers, assuring me that Lieutenant Fitzgerald is a competent man well able to keep a mere company of troops in line in your absence. Your efforts at home will have a broader impact than anything you can accomplish at the front during the winter._

Every instinct, every sensibility, every iota of honor he possessed rebelled against the idea of spending the winter safe at home giving speeches while his troops suffered in the cold without him. Lieutenant Henriksen, conveniently unmentioned, would never be permitted to serve as acting Captain in James’ absence, meaning that James departure would heap insult on the head of his friend when they’d only just found ease with each other after James’ previous gaff. His other officers could manage – James was blessed with a Company of men whose worse vice was occasional drunkenness, loud games of cards and singing bawdy songs while they were tipsy and lonely for female company – but that was not the point. James had sworn to do a job, and he would do it. Yet, that his father would even suggest he do otherwise raised doubts, for it was Michael who had instilled duty and honor and responsibility into every fiber of James’ being. If Michael thought it appropriate for James to leave his command for a month or two, than James had to wonder if he was being over-scrupulous.

He didn’t think he was.

Only a few men of any rank had taken leave since they arrived, all for family emergencies, and all had returned shortly save a handful of deserters – none from his Company, thank God. Even Colonel Elkins had resumed his responsibilities as soon as he was able to stand, leaving Hannah in Washington with Zachariah and Margaret to plan their upcoming nuptials. Further, James didn’t wish to leave. So far from home, with minimal contact with his family, James felt the oppressive weight of
their expectations falling away. When he’d traveled before, when he’d attended college, he’d not felt that sense of liberation, but in school he’d still been close to them and seen them often, and he’d traveled with Zachariah, so there had been no escape. Further, at those times the end goal of achieving all they dreamed for him had seemed so far away. Now, in the army, despite his father’s admonishment that James could do more good at home, he could see the concrete steps leading him towards the distinguished future they sought for him. Rumor said that Colonel Elkins would be promoted to general for his actions at Bull Run, with no word yet who might be promoted to resulting vacancies – Elkins would take Major Carnegie and likely several of his other staff members, and most or all of the positions would be filled by internal candidates, James as likely as any. All in all, he was upsettingly comfortable with the knowledge that he might not see Anna or his parents until his enlistment expired in May of 1863. If the war wasn’t over at that time, as inconceivable as that seemed, he couldn’t imagine that he wouldn’t re-enlist, either, so it might be longer yet.

This was precisely where he wished to be.

Setting aside the letter he’d written to Anna and the letter he had received from his father, his eyes fell on the third sheet before him, the impossible note from Dean Winchester.

By the clear light of day after his encounter with Dean in the forest, James had convinced himself he was behaving absurdly, that whatever Dean’s purpose it was none of his concern, that sneaking out again was folly. James had watched Sam Winchester closely and seen every evidence of diligence and propriety in his behavior, and with that fear settled he’d pushed the matter from his mind. Yet now he held a note in an inelegant hand somehow received a mere day after it was sent, asking James briefly but earnestly for information on Sam. James hadn’t the least idea how the letter had come to him nor was there any clue how to direct a reply to ensure that it would reach the elder Winchester, but he had the inescapable suspicion that he knew precisely where to find Dean and thus relate the intelligence on Sam’s recovery first hand.

Doing so was a terrible idea.

James was disturbed by how much he wished to.

The flag raising ceremony at Fort Lyon proved interesting more for the dignitaries in attendance than for the ceremony itself. Various members of congress, several high-ranking generals, and the mayor of Alexandria turned out in their finest to give speeches on the importance of the war, the significance of this fortress in the defense of Washington, and the ingenuity of the engineering corps. A knot of a half-dozen journalists wrote feverish short hand. The brigade was assembled on the hill, the ground worn to brown dirt by the activity of the past weeks. Shoes had been procured in time for the occasion so that they’d all look properly turned out and none would see how worn the men’s flesh had become without them; Missy Bender had resentfully helped Missouri and the other contraband women wash the regimental laundry; and the few officers who’d had the foresight to bring button polish and polishing boards had found themselves owed a many favors as men heard rumor that General McClellan would be in attendance and, determined to impress, had resolved to brush their uniforms, make their buttons and belt buckle gleam, polish the leather of their belts and bags, oil their rifles, and do everything possible to ensure that they would not shame their commander. The disappointment that McClellan was not there was tempered only by the presence of a photographer cataloging the occasions. A tent was set up and time over the next few days was for the soldiers to purchase inexpensive portraits.

Though the event was unremarkable, the day was pleasant. Scattered clouds blew rapidly over a rich blue sky, the air was scented with the pleasant aroma of fall leaves, and a brisk wind caught the national colors and made them dance. James’ chest swelled with pride to see the flag unfurled, and his doubts as to the correct course of action faded. His place was here. There were other heroes to
return home and aid in the recruitment drive, men who had noble injuries to show for their service or those like his father who had fought in prior wars. James was not a great orator, and he had no idea how to present his feelings on the battle at Bull Run in a way that would inspire anyone to emulate him. He had no desire to lie and pretend the battle had been anything but terrifying and brutal. Most men would not find such sentiments heartening enough to prompt them to enlist, even if James explained with all sincerity that the cause was important enough that the hardship was worth it. No matter what his father thought, James could best do his duty in Virginia.

General Wright declared the fort completed, orders were given, a rifle salute was fired off the hilltop to celebrate their job well done, everyone froze in place for long minutes as photographs of the assembly were taken, and the troops were dismissed to their duties. To reward the troops for their good work, one day leave had been granted each regiment. Today the honor went to the 27th, to reflect that they had arrived first and born the hardest of the work. The rest of the day was their own, and as they happily broke ranks, loud talk spoke of plans to laze about the hillside, read or write home, or – most commonly – descend on Alexandria in search of entertainment. The mayor’s presence at the day’s event and his wary expression spoke to the uneasy discussions and compromises that had led to the permission being acquired for hundreds of men to roam the streets. Men from the 26th New York, on duty, would be in place to ensure that those on leave took no liberties. More than half the regiment made for the photographers tent as the others pursued their leisure. Bitter looks from the regiments yet waiting their turn for liberty followed the troops of the 27th, but none seemed phase, knowing that the next day their situations would be reversed.

The gathered civilians broke into small groups to explore the fort, walk the ramparts, gaze at the impressive view, socialize with their friends, speak with their journalists, or retreat to the carriages that had brought them. All ignored the common soldiers who occasionally walked across their paths. Thinking to obtain a portrait to send Anna, reassuring himself his inclination to do so was not due to guilt, James took a place in line. Bradbury joined him, a beaming smiling hiding a tightness about his eyes. He appeared on verge of speaking, but bit his lip to stop himself every time. In the face of his obvious reticence, James refrained from asking what troubled him. Fitzgerald sauntered up, immediately striking up conversation on his plans for the day, into which Bradbury entered with obvious relief and James nodded and made vague noises as needed. Henriksen walked by, his eyes fixed on the horizon, his expression hard. There was no one for Henriksen to send a portrait to; his loved ones were still in servitude, a wife and two children lost to him when they were sold to new owners further south. Even after buying his freedom and doing all in his power to find them, he’d gotten nowhere, and there was no one else to whom Henriksen might send a photo. Ashley and Alfie passed next and joined them, parting with Reidy who hurried to catch up with a group of privates departing for Alexandria. To James’ surprise, Winchester also walked indifferently by.

“Join us, Corporal!” Bradbury called brightly. Giving them a quirked eyebrow, Winchester shook his head. “Haven’t you a sweetheart? With that pretty face?” At that, Winchester’s wryness melted into embarrassment, he shook his head again and hurried away.

“So does that mean you’ve a sweetheart?” Ashley asked Bradbury, doing a cloying imitation of the tone of voice the young sergeant had used. Bradbury’s sunburn had faded somewhat with the passing of summer, but in that moment it was impossible to tell, his cheeks bright as they’d been in July.

“Of course not,” Bradbury said unconvincingly. “I want a photograph to send my parents. What about you, Ash?”

“Naw,” the sergeant’s hair blew in the wind despite the hat over his head. Over the months it had grown longer in the back though the front was still short, and he now wore it complimented by a
short scruff of facial hair and a fine mustache. “Just thought, why not? Seems a thing one ought to do, and I ain’t polishing my buttons again for no man, not even Little Mac himself.”

“Yours will be for Ms. Milton, right, Captain?” Alfie asked.

“I’ll get several copies, for my family, my brothers, and Ms. Milton of course,” James said.

“Mine’s for Bessy.” Fitzgerald supplied unsolicited with a comically forlorn sigh and a glance heavenward. “I had a letter from her today, says she misses me.”

“I didn’t know you engaged,” James said, surprised.

“Married,” Fitzgerald supplied. James blinked in surprised, combing his memory of his time in Elmira to think if he’d ever seen the lieutenant with a woman. Fitzgerald was from Binghamton, only a short distance from the encampment the 27th had made before shipping south, but James could think of no one but family members coming to visit the young man. “It’s a secret,” Fitzgerald added in a stage whisper. “Our families disapprove, but I couldn’t leave for war having given her nothing. What if something were to happen to me?”

The rhetorical question troubled James disproportionately. His mother had pushed James to do the same, to wed Anna before his departure so that she would have his commitment while he was away, so that if the worst should happen she would be his legal widow, but he’d not been able to bring himself to do so. It had felt wrong, to promise himself to her right before departing, to leave her in suspense as a new bride, to tie her to his name. If he should die, many would frown on her marrying again, and she could find herself a widow for life at the tender age of 22. Yet, hearing the sad affection in Fitzgerald’s otherwise irrepressibly good humored voice, thinking on his earlier reticence, James wondered if his reluctance to wed had been the first sign of the issues concerning him.

Nay, it was nonsense. He loved Anna, he was sure of it, felt it in his bones, longed for her, had pictured her gorgeous face and whispered her name as he’d seen to his masculine needs of a long, lonely night. That he didn’t feel ardent at this moment was, he suspected, more a symptom of how passionately he felt about the need to see the war through, not a reflection on the devotion of his attachment to her.

“Is that Captain Novak?”

The exclamation, in a light, feminine voice, drew James back to the moment. A lovely young woman, vaguely familiar, approached him, towing behind her an equally familiar clean-shaven man with a plastic smile and perfect hair peeking from beneath an expensive top hat. A white lace parasol protected her beautiful blonde head from the sun, her wide skirts were dark green and blue and trimmed in fringe that swayed with every step, and her eyes, brown and flat, failed to match the apparent excitement of her expression. The intelligence hidden beneath her fair exterior was what recalled to him who she was, how he knew her.

“Ms. Harvelle?” he asked hesitantly. She beamed at him, and her older companion, wearing a finely tailored business suit in olive and gray, held out a hand to James. “Mr. Roman, if I recall?”

“It’s a pleasure to see you again,” said Roman in the exact same disingenuous tone that James had heard him use every time he spoke. “Your brother speaks of you often, but has been unable to say when you might next join his table for dinner. Had I known you were involved in the building of our latest fortress, I’d not have wondered at it so much. You and your men have done excellent work here, Captain.”
“Thank you,” James said, stepping aside from the line as it advanced so that he’d not be in the way.
“What brings you here today?”

“Well, you are not the only one who built this fortress,” Mr. Roman explained. “The progress of the war is about much more than labor, Captain Novak. I loaned the government the money that paid for it.”

“Indeed?”

“And one of my re-purposed factories is as we speak casting the cannon that will defend its walls,” Mr. Roman managed to make his pride sound condescending. “You see, it is not only soldiers who make the war effort go forward. Everything costs money, Captain Novak.” James shoved down a tide of effrontery swelling in his breasts. He had said nothing to insult Mr. Roman, yet the man was acting as if James had set him down! “Yes, the war effort wouldn’t last two days more without deep pockets backing it.” Or perhaps he was merely boasting, James reflected as he calmed. Roman’s eyes were so predatory, his smile so fake, that it was challenging to know what to think of him.

“The country is in your debt,” James managed.

“Literally and figuratively,” bubbled out Ms. Harvelle. Roman threw back his head and laughed, and James couldn’t miss the way Roman’s arm found the slim curve of her waist and traced along her skirts. “Have you heard from Congressman Novak? Has he told you of Mr. Roman’s latest acquisition?”

James shook his head.

“I’ve a house in Alexandria,” explained Roman. “I’ve always wanted one, it is the loveliest of the cities surrounding Washington, but the FFV have monopolized all the finest houses, and none could be induced to sell. The war has changed all of that, of course. I put in a bid for the Custis-Lee Mansion, I thought surely with General Lee in open rebellion the house would be available, but apparently it has been deemed ‘militarily essential’ and the grounds are being held by troops, something about commanding a view of the river? I don’t know, it all sounded nonsense to me. I suspect Cameron wishes the place for one of his cronies. Be that as it may, there are – as they say – many fish in the sea, and I was able to obtain the Carlyle House, at the expense of ousting the troops who thought to use it as a hotel.” Roman laughed derisively at the plight of those he’d unceremoniously dispossessed, and James used every ounce of his good breeding to maintain a polite smile. This was the kind of man his brother was friends with these days!

“May I, Mr. Roman?” Ms. Harvelle wore a shy smile.

“I haven’t the least idea what you’re asking, but anything for you, my dear,” said Roman gallantly. James wondered at her behavior, wondered at his. For an obviously shrewd businessman, Roman seemed oblivious to the ways that Ms. Harvelle was as disingenuous as he was, with her simpering and flirting. His hand had found its way around her middle, and hers, in a dainty glove, now rested on his arm. Perhaps, in whatever world they came from, this was how everyone behaved all the time. God protect James from ever having to move in such circles regularly. If his parents had his way, this would be James future. He far preferred the military types he interacted with now, most were straightforward and simple men. Even the warriors for social causes with whom Gabriel associated were less nauseating. They were often passionate about their interests to the point of irrationality, but at least they were genuine and dedicated. The self-importance, pomposity, and arrogance of those Zachariah associated with was disgusting to watch.

“Captain Novak, you’ll join us for dinner one evening I hope?” Ms. Harvelle said. James’ stomach dropped. ‘I’m sure as hostess I can provide a table you’ll not find wanting, and company that will
entertain you. Your brother has been so helpful to Mr. Roman, I would love to return the favor by seeing you distinguished as you deserve!” It was the longest speech that James had ever heard Ms. Harvelle make, and for the first time he noticed the faint traces of a lilting southern accent in her dulcet voice.

“Yes, do, Novak!” Mr. Roman nodded. “And do write your brother to tell him all about it. I’d like him to know that Richard Roman looks out for those who look out for him.” The predatory grin that concluded this request left James utterly bewildered as to what Roman might actually mean.

With every fiber of his being, James longed to say no. The games that Zachariah and Margaret played to gain influence, secure patronage and build consensus were beyond him, would ever be beyond him, and he wanted no part in them.

“Of course, I’d be honored,” James instead said. However little he wished to participate in the charade, Zachariah worked too hard for James to spoil what he strove for, and Mr. Roman was obviously powerful, too important for James to dare risk offending by declining. There was no choice but to go.

“Excellent.” Ms. Harvelle took her hand from Roman and he released her as if he’d been doing nothing at all inappropriate in touching her intimately, in public, when they had no formal relationship to speak of. “I will get all arranged and send a man with an invitation. I wish I’d pushed Ms. Hannah to tell me which fortress her Colonel Elkins was helping to build, for if I’d known it was this one I’d have insisted we pay a visit much sooner! Oh, it’s so nice to know we have friends nearby to protect us should the rebels dare approach the banks of the river!” She managed to make the word “rebel” sound like the dirtiest of swear words.

“Until then, Captain,” Roman tipped his hat to James, looped his arm with Ms. Harvelle’s, and together they sauntered away, her swaying hips set her skirts to dancing, he moving with casual ease and pointing things out to her. Rather than departing, they moved towards the ramparts to inspect the finished fortress and take in the impressive view as many other civilians were yet doing.

The frown that had settled over James’ face proved difficult to conquer. It was only one evening, he pointed out to himself. The food would be excellent, and even if the company was distasteful, James would be helping his brother and helping further the Union cause by aiding in keeping Richard Roman happy and satisfied with his investment. Thought of in that light, it felt petty that James only objection to participating was his disinclination to do so. Despite that, he feared he’d yet be glowering as he finally stood for his picture.

The photographer posed him with a rifle he could scarce have loaded, his other hand resting on the hilt of his saber. With his thoughts yet lost on the unpleasantness of a meal with Mr. Roman and Ms. Harvelle, his worries about Anna, the need to decline his father’s request in some suitable fashion, and his uncertainty how to deal with the note from Dean Winchester, the few minutes of absolute stillness passed in a seeming instant, and then James was done and utterly at a loss how to spend the rest of his day of freedom. After living under the rigid control of the army for nearly 6 months, such a embarrassment of riches – 8 whole hours of liberty! – was strangely intimidating. Wandering back towards his tent, he looked to see if any of his friends were about, but Fitzgerald, Bradbury, Ashley and Alfie had finished their pictures before him and departed for who-knew-were. The only officer he saw about was Reidy, using a knife to work a large bone which had yet to assume any recognizable new form, trading jibes with Pa Bender, the old Ellicott, and Lawrence Pike, while Krause laughed loudly at every joke but offered none of his own, his understanding of English far exceeding his ability to speak it intelligibly. There was no place for James amidst the older men, and the mirth would fade away if James, as Captain, intruded himself into a conversation between the privates and the sergeant. Ghosting away, he decided to take the short tour of the fortress walls, as if
he hadn’t done so multiple times previously, to enjoy the cool breezes and sweeping view.

Hard work had seen the natural steepness of the hill greatly accentuated. Looking straight down from the walls was vertiginous, the walls sheer and surrounded all around by a 20 foot trench that Company B had been solely responsible for constructing. The only approach to the fortress from the single road that led to the gate. The walls and the pit were only the last two obstacles to prevent the enemy from storming the heights. At the foot of the hill, rifle pits had been built, completely hidden by the thick abatis, even more dense than formerly, branches making an impenetrable thicket all the way around. To James’ inexpert eye, their position seemed unassailable, but he’d thought the same when he’d viewed Edinburgh Castle during the tour he’d done of Europe, and he’d later learned it had fallen a half-dozen times. Even if their duty was mere garrisonship, it would not do to grow complacent.

The view was the main appeal, and looking out over Virginia it was easy to forget their real purpose for being there. Each direction showed a different, fine prospect, the river nearby to the east, the city of Alexandria to the north, the west and south countryside. With October upon them, the trees on the distant hills were tinged with the colors of fall. The seasons fell differently across the Virginia landscape. Were he home, it would already be well into the season, the nights chill with the increasing risk of frost, the trees shedding their leaves, branches and ground afire with orange, red and brown. Everyone would be indulging in cider and apples and pie at every turn, for the county was one enormous orchard. Here, it could still pass for summer, the temperature soaring as the day stretched into afternoon, only a few trees beginning to change. He optimistically hoped that promised a mild winter. The coldest nights had already been enough to recall to James’ mind all the renowned horrors of Valley Forge, and no amount of reminding himself that the Union Army had all manner of advantages that General Washington had only dreamed of could dissipate his concerns completely.

Sam Winchester stood alone at the southern wall of the fort, looking at the view of rolling farmland dotted with houses and thickets. James debated leaving him be, but then his eye caught the dense ravine where he’d encountered Dean, and he thought of the elder brother, so determined to learn of Sam’s fate that he’d written to James of all people. For the first time, James considered that one ramification of that letter was surely that Dean had written Sam and received no reply. Taking a position beside the corporal, James leaned his elbows on the top of the wall that came to above his waist and looked out over the green and brown patchwork beneath the dazzling blue sky. Winchester didn’t move, didn’t react, though there was no way he could have missed James’ presence, and James maintained the silence, taking a moment to secure his hat more firmly on his head lest the wind tear it away.

“I was born near here,” Winchester said at length, sounding old beyond his years.

“I thought you were from Kansas?” asked James. That drew a startled look from the boy – James and Sam had never discussed where Sam hailed from, beyond what Sam’s enlistment papers stated: that he resided in Geneva at the time he joined the army.

“I was four when I moved there,” Sam said. A moment later, his expression blenched, and James couldn’t but smile. “I mean, I was, uh…”

“You realize that without knowing what year that was I cannot compute your current age?” James kept his tone intentionally casual, looking out over the hills with studied indifference. “But even could I, I don’t think you 18, and I’d not do anything about it if I could.”

“I’m 16,” muttered Sam, and a sidelong glance showed James the color on his tanned cheeks. “I’m… we’re… my brother and I grew up in Fredericksburg. Our father was from the Peninsula, I don’t know exactly where, and our mama was from New York. They met while he was studying at West
Point.” James didn’t think that Sam was aware of the contrast between how he said “our father” and “our mama,” the former with coldness bordering on contempt, the latter with sorrow and warmth. “Dean always wished we’d never left here. He remembered it better than I did – he’s four years older – and he always talked about our great-grand-da, who fought in the Revolutionary War and would gather Dean and all our cousins up and tell stories and send them off with sticks to pretend the wheat stalls were Cornwallis’ lobster-backs. Dean says I used to play, too, but all I remember was mama reading to us in the nursery and how happy she’d get when she got letters from our father and buying honey candy at the store when we went for our morning walks.”

Sam paused for a long time, but James held his peace. Inexplicably, he found he wanted to know more, desperately so. Dean drew James like few other people ever had, and Sam only scarcely less so, with his erudite intelligence and haunted looks. The discovery that Sam had made the Wellington reference on that surreal morning before Bull Run had led to the discovery that he was extremely well conversed in military history. In light of the information that the Winchester father had studied at West Point, that was one mystery solved. The man had been military educated, and though many men from West Point didn’t remain in the army, many did. Despite his desire to push for more information, James watched a bird of prey circle and plummet and waited in the hopes that Sam would continue.

“Once we got to Kansas, we were too intent on looking forward to look back,” Sam said. “Father wanted to build something in the west, and mama wanted to help, and I was going to go to West Point, and Dean…” Sam shook his head, expression distant but eyes swimming. “After mama died, when I asked about Virginia and suggested maybe we should go back, father would ignore me and Dean would get furious, and now I guess I’ll never know.”

“You miss your brother…?” James asked hesitantly.

Sighing explosively, Sam grimaced expressively and dropped his head into his hands, running his fingers through his long hair. “No,” he lied flagrantly. “No, I asked him to leave with me and he wouldn’t, even though he had nothing to stay for. We could have gone together – we could have fought together now – and instead…instead he…I’ll never understand him.”

“I got the sense he cares about you a lot,” said James. “He must have had his reasons.”

“He sure thinks he does,” Sam’s bitterness was back, and James watched the openness fade from Sam’s face, knew that he’d win no further disclosures that day.

“Have you told him that you’re recovered?”

“No,” snapped Sam. “He made his choices, and I made mine, and what I do now is none of his business.” Turning on his heel, Sam broke off conversation and strode away along the fortifications, leaving James staring after him, a decision, a resolution, firm in his heart.

I’m going to find Dean tonight and tell him that Sam is alright.

Somehow, settling that one thing brought peace and order to the rest of James’ scattered thoughts, and he returned to his tent to spend the remainder of his free afternoon composing the necessary letter to his father. Putting off doing so would not make it any easier, and Michael needed to know that regardless of what good James might be able to do at home, he knew that he was doing good where he was. As an ameliorant to his father’s inevitable flare of temper when he read that James had not immediately conceded to Michael’s will, James included an extended account of his conversation with Mr. Roman, emphasizing the praise that the businessman had heaped on Zachariah. He concluded with reflections of how much the Novak family stood to gain in furthering such an acquaintance, beginning with James’ attendance at any and all suppers at their home to which he
might be invited. Lest his father have any doubt that James was doing more to further the family cause than “merely” serving as Captain to a company of 70 men, he hoped his relation should serve as a reminder that there were other benefits to be derived from James’ remaining in Virginia.

He was nearly finished when the trumpet called dinner and those who had remained in camp assembled for their evening meal. The brigade had settled into comfortable patterns, and recently the wagons had brought somewhat more palatable meals. The men and women of the contraband camp now numbered near a hundred, and a goodly number of them had been given mess duty, turning the uncertain meat and questionable vegetables delivered each day into hearty stews that were, for the most part, surprisingly palatable, so long as one did not enquire too closely what any morsel actually was. There was word of a government bakery under construction in Alexandria, and rumor said that soon they would have fresh bread and all the apples they could eat to see them through the fall. James took it with a grain of salt. Rumor said that Jeff Davis had been found stalking the halls of the White House in women’s clothing, declared that South Carolina had decided to secede from secession, and suggested that the Union army in Kentucky had been under continual assault by slaves so loyal to their masters that they donned the uniform and fought to defend the south. The only wild rumor James had heard in recent memory that had proven true was that Fremont had tried to declare emancipation in Missouri, and President Lincoln had ordered the proclamation rescinded.

After the meal, James found himself drawn into a game of chess with Henriksen, the board drawn into the ground with a stick, the pieces pebbles that led James to constantly confuse his rook and his knight. They played until it was too dark to see, at which point James tracked down a lantern and Henriksen a newspaper and they shared it companionably, reading by the faint light, occasionally discussing items until the trumpet blared out curfew. Through the evening, drunken men stumbled home, but many still had not returned when the call to blankets was sounded, and James found Winchester and had the corporal go through the roster book and make a list – a depressingly long list – of those who would be facing disciplinary action when they returned. At least only one officer was missing, Corporal Dodd, but near a third of the company would face punishment, much to James’ chagrin. They were good men, but after so long confined to camp apparently even they were susceptible to the temptations of Alexandria. Most, he suspected, were down a bottle.

The camp fell dark as the night watchmen assumed their positions and everyone else bedded down. Their living situation was, for the most part, infinitely improved from several weeks ago, and in most respects the large, oiled tent in which he now lived was a luxury. The downside was that he shared it with his lieutenants and sergeants, 9 men tucked into the confines. Fortunately, as Captain, none questioned his decision to stay outside the tent for the evening. It was not uncommon for at least one of the officers to stay up the night, to keep an eye on the men and be prepared in case orders came through. Noises carried and blurred oddly in the night, men snoring, the occasional whisper speaking to those still awake, the splash of the privy in use, a single drunken revel belted out by some straggler too drunk to realize the noise he was making, the stomp and whiny of the horses. The breeze carried the occasional hint of music – probably from the contraband camp, where a man had arrived several days ago with a banjo and a woman had made a drum from a barrel ring and a worn length of saddle blanket. The later the hour grew, the more the occasional noises passed and the more absolute the darkness became. There was no moon, and a near-invisible haze left the sky black but obscured all but the brightest stars. Occasional lanterns cast circles of orange light that seemed too small in comparison to their source, and James sat awake, waiting for the camp to quiet enough that he’d feel comfortable sneaking out. Finally, when the sound of Reidy snoring within the tent drowned out the softer susurrations made by hundreds of men breathing nearby, James rose and made his way towards the road out of the fortress.

Large, teepeed Sibley tents had become the norm at Fort Lyons, and though they were more hospitable than their old arrangements, and took up less room, the men actually had less space. As many as sixteen shared each one, the space so confined they slept cheek by jowl, though at least his
own troops were enjoying the luxury of extra space that evening as a result of their recalcitrant fellows continuing absence.

A huffed exhalation sounded loud to James’ ears as he reached the end of the line of tents where Company I of the 27th slept, followed by a breathy moan.

Faint sounds of pleasure weren’t unheard of in the camp – there were, after all, three thousand men there, and men had needs, and so far from wives and sweethearts, with so few women around, few cared about the supposed harm that masturbation could do. Indeed, though James indulged infrequently himself, he’d never been able to credit the dangers supposedly inherent in such behavior. During college James had, unavoidably, been exposed to the appetites of a wide variety of young men with whom he shared his dormitory, and nothing he’d seen suggested that academic success or failure could at all be credited to which were engaged in licentious behavior. More of the inevitable camp rumors spoke of the results of more religious-minded and conservative commanders attempting to curb such behavior among their men and the chaos of disobedience and disgruntlement that resulted, and James was satisfied to look the other way so long as those pleasuring themselves were discrete.

“Quiet,” whispered a voice, eerily loud.

“Feels...feels good...” panted another in reply.

James colored crimson from chin to forehead and hurried on.

“Yeah, well, if you don’t shut it, I’m stopping!” The harsh murmur drew a plaintive whine in reply.

“Please...”

This was something else entirely. Of course he’d heard of men doing such things, of men doing such things together, but the very concept was scandalous. It was one thing to bed a woman – or so James supposed, he had only his imagination and the fervent over-sharing of some acquaintances to go by – but to share intimacy with a man? Surely it must be completely different, completely alien, a vile twisting of God’s natural order. Beyond that, it was an absurdity! Men lacked the anatomy for such a liaison.

The noise faded, thankfully, from his hearing as James proceeded on.

Green eyes meeting his gaze with an unmistakable challenge. Broad shoulders in place of curved breasts, firm muscles in place of soft flesh, coarse hair in place of smooth skin, but the same warmth, the same invitation, the same spark of mutual interest. Fingers interlaced, matched in strength, equally calloused. A low voice in place of a high, but the same needy sounds. A strong grip around his cock, stroking powerfully and confidently, stroking familiarly; his own hand doing the same for another, drawing out pleasured grunts, forcing whispered praise from his lips, chasing each other closer to the brink, until...

Absolutely not.

Denial couldn’t change the stirring in his pants. Denial couldn’t change the tingle of heat streaming through his veins, pooling in his gut, fuzzing his thoughts. Denial couldn’t change the sudden rapidness of his heartbeat, his panting breath. Exertion couldn’t explain his rushing blood away, fear of discovery couldn’t not explain his sudden hyper-awareness of everyone around him, the feeling that everyone was looking and knew what he had been thinking, knew how the thoughts had made him feel.
Just the same as when I imagine being with Anna.

It was a thought he could not begin to guess what to do with, so he pushed it aside, paused in his walk down the hill to calm himself. He’d always found himself buzzed with arousal when he accidentally overheard others engaged in such behavior, it was perfectly ordinary. It had happened when he’d once been forced to sleep next door to Zachariah and Margaret with but a thin wall separating them, it had happened when his college roommate had thought to masturbate when he believed James asleep, it had even happened the one, mortifying time he had returned home early and been able to hear the knock of the headboard and the heavy breathing as his parents had indulged. This was no different, he’d heard those two men and his thoughts had trailed to a logical conclusion and there was nothing else to consider.

The weeks spent building the fortress meant he knew its few weak points, and despite the denseness of the abatis and the pickets stationed at regular intervals encircling the entire complex, all were tired after a long day and the night was dark. If any heard the snag and pull of twigs and branches as James snaked his way through the fallen trees, they said nothing, and with shocking ease he escaped onto the road that ran south from Alexandria – a road which, if James recalled rightly from the map Colonel Elkins had bought and installed on the table in the spacious tent he shared with his lieutenant colonels and majors, led eventually to Fredericksburg, where Sam and Dean were from, and beyond. Feeling strangely light hearted, James walked south towards the copse of trees.

No matter how careful he was, in the absolute dark beneath the yet-leaved branches, it was impossible not to make noise. The utter silence that each rustle broke made James think that, no matter what Dean had hinted about his intentions of haunting the campsite frequently, he was not there. The only light in the world was the faint tracery of foxfire limning decaying wood and old roots. The darkness rendered the world in shades of deepest gray, and when James looked at things directly he could see nothing, only his peripheral vision resolved details, and he relied on that to guide him to the clearing, convinced that he was wasting his time.

The distinct snort of a horse drove away James’ doubts, and a flicker caught his eyes as he realized there was a light source in the clearing. Unhesitatingly, James pushed a bush aside, and by the glow of a well-shielded lantern he could make out the warmth of Dean’s skin, the outline of Impala, the flick of Dean’s hand as he busily worked, so intent that his tongue stuck out pink, his lower lip caught in his teeth. A sound James had dismissed as the wind resolved into the brush of a stub of charcoal over paper, and the single beam of light from the lantern illuminated the page Dean stared at to near-incandescence, painful to James’ night-sensitive sight.

“Jus’ a sec,” muttered Dean without glancing up.

Selecting a tree trunk opposite where Dean sat, James dropped cross-legged to the ground and said, “Your brother has made a full recovery.”

Dean’s head jerked up, shock dropping his jaw, the charcoal crunching in his hand. “You!” James colored at Dean’s consternation; he’d not meant to startle him.

“You wrote me and asked that I let you know,” explained James apologetically. “This seemed the easiest way to honor that request.”

“Yeah,” Dean dropped the shattered bits of charcoal and ran a blackened hand through his hair, streaking it with ash. He squinted in James’ general direction. “Wow. Captain, you’re about the last person I ever thought to see here. You struck me as the sort to wave the flag for all you’re worth.”

“I don’t understand,” James frowned, feeling silly, for there was no way that Dean could see him. He recognized my voice. The thought brought a bizarre warmth to James that had nothing to do with the
“I bet you don’t,” Dean said. The tension and surprise faded from his expression, shifted to a knowing smile that James couldn’t enter in to. “Got somethin’ for me?”

_Does he think I’m a spy as well?_

“Only, as I’ve said, an answer to your query,” James explained, baffled. “Samuel fell ill in the days after taking his wound, but has since recovered and healed. He rejoined the regiment in late August, and has been with us ever since. As I’m assuming that you’d not have written me if contacting him had answered your concerns, I’ll add that he’s quite angry with your decision to enlist in the Confederate Army and was disdainful of my suggestion that he write to you about how his health.”

_Damn, I should have played along. If I’m to stop him doing whatever he is up to, I’ll need proof that his actions are nefarious._

There was a strained pause, and then Dean burst out laughing, a sound that James couldn’t help but imagine rolling over the empty, silent valleys. The glow in James’ chest pulsed in time to each peal, heat spread through his veins and down to the tips of his fingers. James’ uncertainty faded into a bemused smile.

_Chaffed, thin lips in place of thick, pink plush ones..._

“How’d you find me?” asked Dean. With a quick huff of breath, he blew across his paper, set it aside, shuttered the lamp and leaned back against the tree. With the loss of the dim light, the night was rendered instantly impenetrable.

“Two weeks ago—”

“The night someone approached and Impala alerted me but wasn’t actually concerned about it,” Dean interrupted pensively. “Figured it was someone she knew. She gets a might defensive when strangers come close.” The horse snorted again, stomped, and shook her head.

“She’s a very impressive horse,” said James.

“Ain’t she, though?” Affection softened Dean’s voice, and James swallowed at the sympathetic emotions that Dean’s tenderness provoked within him.

_What’s the matter with me? _Anna ghosted through his thoughts, a tantalizing presence, a whiff of lavender soap, a challenging flash of green eyes.

“What were you writing?”

“Wasn’t writin’,” all the softness drained from Dean’s voice in an instant, replaced with a hard defensive edge that James couldn’t comprehend. The man was a cipher. “Drawin’.”

_This...this is how I feel when I’m with her. This is how I’ve felt every time I’ve seen him, and it’s the same. That’s impossible._

“May I see?” asked James. Maybe the picture would be proof that Dean was a spy – a map, perhaps, or an image of the fortifications the 27th had completed, or—

“No!” Dean growled. Hurt replaced the more pleasant feelings James had been nursing.

_I’m in love with Anna. I barely know Dean. He’s a man. He’s a traitor. He’s my enemy. Nothing_
about this makes sense.

His troubled thoughts from earlier, upon hearing the two men involved in clandestine affection, surfaced powerfully. The tangle of James’ emotions seemed impenetrable, so he pushed the feelings aside, focused on his suspicions. Getting a look at the picture became a primary object.

“If you prefer,” James said with an attempt at sincerity that he hoped hid how genuinely he wanted to see whatever Dean was working on.

Silence stretched out, and James wondered if there was some way he could push harder, some question he could ask that would draw the man out. He felt a fool for not realizing what Dean was hinting at when they first started speaking. Had James simply played along, he could have had all the information he needed and seen Dean arrested, prevented from acting against the Union.

*If he’s arrested out of uniform, if he’s arrested as a spy, he’ll be executed.*

James repressed a shudder. The idea of that he could see someone he knew, that he liked – yes, whatever else was going on, he couldn’t deny that he felt an affinity for Dean Winchester – strung up as a common criminal was sickening. The possibility that James could be responsible for that punishment was nauseating. No amount of pointing out to himself that, if Dean really were a spy, his crimes merited the punishment, made James any more comfortable with the idea.

“Do you really want to see?” The words, soft, vulnerable, pierced through James’ troubled thoughts. Dean sounded so young, so unsure, and there was a hint of hope in his voice that made the rest that much more endearing.

“If you are willing to share, I would love to see your work,” James answered warmly. It was impossible not to react sympathetically to Dean’s tone, impossible not to feel a lurch in the pit of his stomach, an urge to offer comfort to the hurt hidden in that simple question. He wished he could see Dean’s expression, but even with his eyes reaccustomed to the dark, he could make out little but a gray oval pitted with two dark circles in place of eyes.

The brush of cloth against cloth and the crackle of dry leaves told of Dean moving. All his sight could resolve was the shifting of shadows, the dark shape crossing the clearing, the flash of paleness as Dean’s hand, gripping his artwork, swung at his side. With a grunt, Dean settled at his side, and to James’ surprise, passed him the page without producing the lamp.

Taking the paper carefully, James was surprised to find it only a little difficult to make out, the paper white enough that the charcoal lines on its surface stood out as if backlit. A beautiful woman looked out at him, long, wavy hair framing her face, expression tender. James couldn’t have said how thick black lines could communicate the paleness of blonde strands, the brightness of eyes, the warmth of a smile, yet they did. The woman breathed from the page. Looking up, James tried to catch Dean’s eyes, but the face made ghostly by darkness was fixed firmly on the ground, Dean as intent on picking at the dirt with a stick as he’d been on his artwork when James arrived.

“She’s beautiful,” James said. Dean flinched. “You’re a very skilled artist.” Dean’s shoulders hunched nearly to his ears, he curled in on himself and poked his twig so forcefully at the ground that it snapped.

“Shit.”

Memories of how Dean had behaved in Washington, his diffidence, his embarrassment and shock when the doctor had praised his stitches, returned to James intensely as he watched the young man wilt under James’ simple, sincere praise.
Has no one said such things to him before?

“Who is she?” James asked gently. The urge to reach out and soothe away the pinched look on Dean’s face was uncomfortably strong. Instead, he held out the picture to return it, and Dean took it – his left hand, James noted, the same as he’d used to draw, the same as he’d used to dig.

“Our mama,” Dean said, staring at the picture, his hand clutching it so tightly the paper crinkled. “I passed through Fredericksburg a few days ago…” He trailed off, gave James a sidelong look.

“Sam told me that is where you are from?”

“Yeah,” Dean nodded and looked up, gazing sightlessly south. “First time I been back since we left in ‘50. Got me thinkin’ ‘bout all kinds of things, ‘bout the past. When I rode by our house the door opened and I actually thought she’d come out like she always used to, but it was just a slave bearin’ a basket, didn’t even glance my way. It’s been near five years but apparently I’m too dumb to realize she ain’t ever comin’ back.”

“You loved her,” James said. “It’s not foolish to miss her, there’s no shame in wishing to see her again.”

Dean crumpled the paper, and even in the shadowed planes of Dean’s face James could see how light gathered in the tears pooling beneath his eyes. “Waste of everyone’s time,” said Dean angrily, clearly operating under the belief that James couldn’t see how genuinely upset Dean was. “I got things I have to do.” At a loss how to reply, James waited to see if Dean would continue, and after a few moments, he did. “Thanks for lettin’ me know about Sammy.”

“While I appreciate that Corporal Winchester is upset and respect his desire to exclude you from his life, I don’t think he understands that you genuinely care about and are concerned for his welfare,” James said. “Passing on information of his recovery was the least I could do.”

And I wanted to see you again. James quashed the thought ruthlessly.

“So, what, you don’t care that I’m a damn Johnny Reb?”

“We seem able to converse amicably, even though I’m a Billy Yank.”

“You never know, I might be about to shoot you dead,” Dean’s wry tone belied the threat, and all signs of vulnerability faded as he gave James a cocky grin.

He’s shown me beneath this brusque exterior, though. He hurts so much. I must find a way to reconcile him to Sam.

“You’d never do that,” James said with all the conviction he felt. Nothing about the words struck him as odd until he saw Dean’s mask slip again for an instant, his jaw drop, his eyes nearly pop, but then the expression was gone again, Dean was grinning, and James was glad that his blush would never show in the night.

“Maybe I would,” Dean smirked, throwing the balled-up paper negligently aside.

“But you’re not worried about my shooting you?” James countered.

“You’re not armed. Just sayin’, you seem mighty trustin’ of my good nature,” Dean unfolded, leaning back, his arms on the ground behind him to hold him up, his long legs stretched before him. “You should listen to Sam, he knows me better than you, and don’t he say I’m trouble?”
“No,” James said, wishing he could see Dean’s face more clearly, pick up on the nuance of each change in his expression. “He hardly talks about you, but I think he’s upset that you chose to stay in Kansas instead of leave with him, and he’s angry that you sided with the Confederacy.”

Dean snorted. “Nothin’ like. He’s mad I sided with dad.”

“Is your father also fighting for the rebellion?”

“I don’t know where my da is,” there was a snap to the words, the first genuine anger that James had heard in Dean’s gruff voice. “But he ‘pects me to be a good soldier, and that’s just what I’m gonna do. What about you, Captain? Why you riskin’ your life? Is it about that garbage we talked about last time?”

“The plight of the black man is hardly garbage,” James said dryly. “Though with that attitude I need hardly ask what you are fighting to defend.”

*It’s good that he says such things, it reminds me that Dean is not my friend.*

“What, slaves? I don’t care ‘bout that,” Dean flopped on to his back back, looking up at the starry sky barely visible through the leafy canopy. “I was in Kansas when through all the bleedin’, and I saw what went down, what happened, was even involved in some of it. And what’d I see? I saw northerners come just to bring trouble, sure as I saw Missourians doin’ the same. I saw those in favor of slavery goin’ after those who was against it – and I saw those who were ‘gainst slavery goin’ after *anyone* who disagreed with them. This whole war? It’s ain’t an accident it’s happening. It’s because of damn John Brown, it’s about him being a damned murderer, *when he was in Kansas*, afterwards at *Harper’s Ferry*. It’s about how he massacred folks as done no more than make threats, sure as I saw Granny Lee bein’ the real hero and now he’s hung in effigy for it. It’s about how you northern boys cheered for Brown, how your northern ladies wept to see him hung like he deserved, it’s about your troops marchin’ on Virginia soil singin’ *

*John Brown’s body lies a moulderin’ in the grave*

*But his truth is marchin’ on.*

“Do y’all even think ‘bout what that *means*? His *truth*, that the way to solve the *irrepressible conflict* was to invade Harper’s Ferry and arm the black folk to kill the whites? We’re not your enemy, Captain, we’re Americans like you, but the North has decided our entire way of life is wrong based simply on where we live, whether we have slaves or no, as if our forefathers didn’t fight and bleed for this country same as yours did. My grandpa had a couple slaves, but he freed ‘um – they was expensive to keep, and too old to sell for much, but it ended up not matterin’, they stayed with him by their own choice. We had none in Kansas, but did that matter? Not a damn to anyone – all your people saw was that we was southern and that made us evil. Nothin’ is that simple. Sure, our boys fired on *Sumter*, but the first shots of this war were fired by John Brown at Harper’s Ferry when he sought to trigger insurrection and was celebrated for it, the first shots were fired in Kansas when those damned *Jawhawkers*, the Brown family and Azazel and *Montgomery* and all the rest, killed indiscriminately, even folks who did nothin’ wrong, who were just tryin’ to live and build somethin’ new in a new place. If the blacks were all free tomorrow that’d be fine by me, though I’ll own I think it unnatural. I care about my *family*, I care about my *home*. That’s where my duty lies, Captain. *That’s* what I’m fightin’ to defend.”

There was no answer to the fire of passion in Dean’s voice, no answer to his anger and his pain. A string of platitudes sprang to mind – that whether one had slaves or not, simply to fight for the southern Confederacy was to condone it’s evil, that standing aside and doing nothing while terrible
things were done was as bad as aiding in those things being done, that the South were the ones who broke the compact of the Constitution rather than seek further compromise – but James knew it wouldn’t be adequate to meet the conviction behind Dean’s words. For James, this war was about high ideals, about right or wrong, about human rights and freedom. Whatever had happened to Sam and Dean Winchester in Kansas had made the war personal for them, and though something had led Sam to turn to the Union, Dean had chosen to remain loyal to his family and birthplace. Try as he might, James found it impossible to fault Dean for that. He could wish that Dean might see past whatever events in his life had brought him to this point, to see the bigger picture, but he couldn’t blame Dean.

This has something to do with their mother.

“So, whaddaya think?” Dean said wryly as the silence stretched out. “We all villains and traitors?”

“I agree with you,” James said. Even in the dark he could see the shock on Dean’s face. “About John Brown, I mean.” The raid had always troubled James, the way his friends had celebrated Brown’s actions as a triumph despite the unnecessary violence of it. The South feared slave insurrection, feared to see Charleston and Richmond and Mobile and New Orleans become the next Saint-Domingue. Brown’s raid had fueled those fears, forced normally rational men to consider that Brown’s actions represented what the North truly wanted – for the black men to rise up and murder their oppressors, for the white men of the South to be massacred in their beds and replaced by new overlords, for their women to be forced into marriages with those who killed their brothers and husbands and fathers. Men who had vacillated and apologized for slavery before Brown’s raid were prepared to fight to the death to protect the Peculiar Institution after it. No one man had done more to ruin the hope of compromise and the dream of preserving the Union than John Brown.

“I was wrong to judge you, wrong to make assumptions about your motivations,” James continued as Dean stared at him in unveiled amazement. “The men I know are fighting for many reasons, and in all honesty few are fighting to end slavery – quite the contrary, when Fremont attempted his Emancipation movement in Missouri, several soldiers told me they’d leave the army if Lincoln endorsed it. Of course I should have considered that men on your side – men fighting for the Confederacy – would have as many and as nuanced reasons why they have donned the gray as we have for donning the blue. You treated my flippant, ignorant comment with more respect than it deserved, and gave me a serious answer that shows a great deal of thought, intelligence, consideration and merit. Thank you.”

The silence stretched out, Dean blinking at him, expression growing unreadable in the darkness. Finally, with a sigh, James rose, brushed fragments of leaves off the bottom of his pants and straightened his jacket.

“I should return to my duties,” James said.

“Thanks for comin’ out to let me know about Sammy,” Dean looked away, the edge of vulnerability back in his voice. Hearing it made James want to give Dean a reassuring pat on the shoulder, a hug, run a hand over his cheek. “I’m sorry I lost my temper.”

This entire evening is an exercise in absurdity. ...but I do want to run my finger along the curve of his chin, over his lips. Good God, Novak, what are you thinking?

“It’s fine,” said James. Exhaustion was clouding his reason, his brief, unfulfilled arousal was interfering with his sense. “I appreciate that you trust me enough to share your true feelings. You’re a very interesting man.” Glancing at Dean, James caught a glimpse of him staring at James’ back and mouthing the word ‘interesting’ with exaggeration. Their gazes met and Dean averted his quickly to look skyward once more with feigned disinterest. James took advantage of Dean’s supposed to
inattention to lean down, ostensibly to fix his pant cuffs, in actuality to scoop up the crumpled ball of paper, the drawing of Dean and Sam’s mother.

“You’re a piece of work, Captain,” Dean said, a smile loud in his words though invisible in the dark.

“I’m going to take that as a compliment, Johnny Reb.”

“You should, Billy Yank.”

Green eyes, a laugh like a warm embrace, and deft hands followed James home, haunted his dreams when he fell quickly to sleep in one corner of their large tent despite Reidy’s continued snores.

Interlude

“Who was that?”

“An informant.”

“Sure sounded like you were talking with an informant.”

“Ain’t nothin’ to you what it sounded like. I get that you like to think you’re my sole reason for bein’ out here but you know that ain’t the case, right? I got scoutin’ to do, I got other contacts, and Singer got other spies. So you mind your own damn business. Don’t you pry in mine, and I won’t pry in yours. You got stuff for me to carry back to the general or don’t you?”

“Thank you for the reminder, Winchester, I nearly forgot that we were friends once.”

“Wasn’t me who burned that bridge.”

“No, it was your father. If you see him, tell him my mother and I say hello, would you?”

“Ain’t seen John. Ain’t gonna see John.”

“Is he still after Azazel?”

“Mebbedunno.”

“What was that? I couldn’t quite make it out.”

“Don’t know where he is. He didn’t tell me, which means it ain’t none of my business – and once again, that means it definitely ain’t none of yours.”

“Fine, fine. Wait, no, it’s not fine. You realize he’s never going to stop looking, and if you try to help him, he’ll just drag you down with him, right? There’s nothing but hellfire and damnation down that road, Winchester...Dean.”

“You ever think that might be fine with me?”

“Did you ever think that maybe Mary raised you for more than trailing in his footsteps?”

“She don’t exactly get a say no more. Another thing to lay at the feet of that son of a bitch!”

“Which one of them?”

“Azazel!”
“You sure about that?”

“Of course I’m sure about it, I was there. You seen somethin’ like that, there ain’t no way you’d ever forget.”

“Wow. You’re a piece of work. I shouldn’t have to remind you that I did see something like that. You’re not the only one who got hurt in Kansas, you selfish bastard.”

“Yeah, right. I’m sorry. Seriously – I’m sorry. That was a stupid-ass thing of me to say. You know I’m just an idiot, I don’t mean nothin’ by it. You’ve ever right to be upset, and you’re a better woman...a better person than I am, takin’ the higher ground like you and your mother done.”

“If I didn’t know you tried to save him, I’d horsewhip you. Don’t you dare try to foist off your father’s horseshit on me. You’re no imbecile, and the only one who ever thought you were is John Winchester. The only way you’re stupid is for believing him.”

“Look, I’ve a long ride back. We done here?”

“We’ve got maps to label.”

“Right, then let’s do that. The past is the past, and I got nothin’ else to say ‘bout it.”

“Fine. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“Only two tonight.”

“These are really good, Dean.”

“Just shut up and write the damn names in for me.”

“You’re always such a ray of sunshine. No wonder we’re no longer friends.”

“Look, this one is Fort Ellsworth, and the Orange and Alexandria Railroad – this is a supply depot they built – and the crosshatch is meant to reflect that they’re expanding the Little River Turnpike...”

“Got it. What’s this symbol?”

“Fords in the river. Found a couple I don’t think the Feds know about. And this is a...”
Chapter 6: The Business of War

Dearest Anna, October 16th, 1861

Today I received four of your letters, after having none since we left Washington. I’m at a loss to account for this embarrassment of riches, and I’ll own to being overwhelmed at the prospect of attempting to address all their matter in one reply, so forgive me if I jump topics.

I am saddened greatly that you’ll not be able to attend the wedding. It is nearly upon us, and I’d held out hope until this very morning that, in four days, I might see you. Had I known about the meeting in Seneca Falls, I’d not have even posited the possibility. You are completely right to put your appointment there first, and I hope you have not troubled yourself overmuch considering the correct course of action, since your prior obligation clearly takes precedence.

Setting his pen aside, James considered what else to say. The truth could not be set to paper. He was disappointed that she’d not be attending, because he missed her but also because his thoughts remained unquiet, torn between what he’d always thought his love for her and his increasing inability to deny his wandering attention. Self-deception had always been anathema to James, and only the most flagrant denial of his own thoughts could avoid the simple truth that another pair of green eyes had him captivated. The implications of that interest were manifold and painful, though, and James pushed them away to focus on the problem at hand.

He tried and failed to not be further troubled by the realization that he had just thought of writing to his fiancée as “the problem at hand.”

James was surprised that she’d prioritize a meeting with Hester’s friends in the women’s rights movement over Hannah’s wedding. Not only were James’ parents and the Miltons attending, but Hester would be there as would several of her other friends. Washington DC on the 20th would be as conducive to discuss women’s equality as anywhere in New York. It raised the upsetting possibility that she was no more enthusiastic to see him than he was to see her. It raised the even more upsetting possibility that she was naught but her usual thorough, considerate, diligent self, unwilling to break a prior engagement no matter the temptation of the new, and that he was projecting his own reticence on to her. There was nothing in her letters to suggest anything but her usual warmth.

Darling James, read a typical one, dated September 8th,

Every day we have news from all over, and little good, and all I can think is how I wish you home with me instead of facing unknown perils. Your letters give me only delayed intelligence of your
situation – I have one this morning, dated the 14th of August, though as I mentioned prior yours of the 17th arrived days ago. All of us comb finely through every news article in search of mention of the 27th New York, Colonel Elkins, and our friends, but there is rarely any mention, and when there is it does not but produce anxiety. We worry away the dull hours only to learn the next day or the next that it was merely wild speculation on the part of a desperate reporter with a column to fill, a deadline to meet and an editor to satisfy.

Do my letters to you arrive as disordered and jumbled as yours to me? I wish I’d realized prior; what a muddle things must have appeared to you! Let this be the first where I give a synopsis so that, even if you are entering the tale having missed a chapter, you will not be at a complete loss as to the story.

Our mothers have combined their impressive abilities to turn the energy of the fretting women of Wolcott towards the knitting of socks, preparing of bandages, gathering of healthsome foods, and the formal incorporating of a Soldiers’ Aid Society. Already much good has been done, goods sent, money raised, and we’ve a package of enough socks for the entire company to have a pair. We are working on winter gear next, scarves and mittens and the like. Funds have been earmarked to see to our injured as they return home, and Mr. Zachariah Warren is the first to benefit. He arrived a week back and was given a hero’s welcome, an impromptu parade by the remaining militia, and a feast. His shoulder yet troubles him, and though he’s unable to work due to his maiming, he needn’t worry, for though he’s no family locally every door has been opened to him. If the Aid Society continues to raise funds at the rate they have, we’ll be able to do as much for any who come home in such sad straights – I pray that it will not be necessary!

There is a dark cloud looming over our triumphs. Mrs. Carrigan, spurred on by her over-solicitous husband, feels that Mrs. Novak is not the best choice to lead our efforts and has proposed an alternative commander-in-chief – who but herself, of course! I’ll not bore you with an account of the pettiness that has resulted from this entirely one-sided squabble, only that Mr. Carrigan is committed to her cause, mobilizing the husbands to natter at their wives about the Novak pride. Mr. Novak refuses to intervene, Mrs. Novak is pretending the challenge does not exist, and we are well on our way to our own Civil War, but in place of secessionists and federals we are Methodists and Lutherans. We’ll yet make the Thirty Years War look like a mild disagreement.

I’ve a letter from Hannah that she and Colonel Elkins have secretly decided to set a date for their nuptials and that she was so excited – and Hester so disinterested – that she had to share with someone whom she knew would enter into her feelings. She requested that I keep the information close, but with the delays in the post and the proximity of the date I am confident that unless they intend to elope (I could believe it of Hannah, but not of the Colonel!) you will certainly know of the event long before this letter reaches you – may already know as I write, as her letter was dated weeks ago. I’ve plans made months ago that I’d not break for the world, as the women involved rarely gather in one place, and it’s an honor that Mrs. Cady-Stanton invited me – a credit to Hester. However, it renders my attendance impossible, and thus I break trust with Hannah to tell you as early as possible to please not get your hopes up, my dear. I’d hate to think your expectations at the moon, to think how sad you’ll be when they are disappointed. I miss you so very, very much. You must know that if I could, I’d be at your side on the instant!

Things in Washington sound dull, and I am relieved to read of it. Long may it stay so! I cannot bear to learn of battle being entered into, cannot stand being forced once more to wait weeks to learn of your fate. Do keep writing. I live for the post, and for the day when it brings me word that you will be coming home!

With all my love, Anna Milton
He had three others similar, much of the information repeated as Anna strove to compensate for the confusion engendered when letters arrived out of order. Or, he realized, were lost completely – glancing through the sequence, three of the letters alluded to an earlier letter describing the Soldier’s Aid Society in more detail, and such a letter must have been written in August, yet he had not seen it. Rubbing his temples, he held his pen carefully so the ink would not leak and considered how to respond to all with the single sheet of paper in his possession.

How stands the War of the Roses? I would write a lengthy reply save that your letters are so late in arriving that I can’t but imagine that things have completely changed. Knowing my mother, she’d not long suffer Mrs. Carrigan’s antics, and must, by this point, have given one of her legendary set-downs. Politely and properly, of course. Though I do wonder – is there truly so much harm in having two groups working to aid the troops? Presumably each congregation alone can only do so much, can only pull in so many women, whereas if each enters into their own efforts, that much more help can be secured. Or is the issue that it’s Mrs. Carrigan, and her infamous mismanagement of the wreath sale of ’58 has demonstrated her unsuitability for authority and public office?

By the time this reaches you, you’ll already have had your meeting with Mrs. Cady Stanton, and written me all about it! I anticipate learning all, so don’t stint on the details. It is a wonderful opportunity and an ideal step along the path that leads, ultimately, towards that which I know to be your true goal. Everything you write me of your preparations sounds exemplary, and I hope you have not been too anxious about it. Had I known of it a month ago, I might have written you calm and collected, for I can imagine your anticipation and I wish there was ought I could do to soothe your nerves. Whatever has happened – I haven’t the least doubt they are delighted with you. (I am combing my mind for the worst case and I’ll own I can think of nothing you might possibly do in the course of such a meeting to truly offend, so you are spared the joke I might else have made at your expense.)

My father’s request that I return home for part of the fall has much pre-dated the arrival of your letters, though the two are dated the same, and I suspect that my reply has reached you, but lest that not be the case, and the letter be lost, I will reiterate that I have no intention of returning home before the term of my enlistment. Just as you would not quit your meeting with the women of Seneca Falls, I will not leave my duty to suit my fancy. While I entertain longings for your company and for home – especially as the cold weather sets in without a sip of hot cider to lift the chill – I did not sign on to strut about in a uniform, nor did I enlist so that I might make fine speeches. I am a soldier, and this is a war, and my place is with my unit. Let Mr. Warren speak to the masses about the glories to be won on the front, or if his amputation disqualifies him, set my father upon the stump and let him wax patriotic on Beaver Dams and Chippawa.

There is little to say of events here. The wedding is in four days and this evening I will be attending a dinner hosted by Mr. Richard Roman and his consort lady friend companion Harriet Lane, in this case known by the name Ms. Joanna Beth Harvelle.

It occurs to me that if I reply to all that you have written, I will have naught but the events of the dinner and disinteresting camp gossip to relate until whenever next I have the pleasure of hearing from you. Thus, though there is more I could say, I deliberately forestall further reply until the morrow, and leave you now with my sincere love and affection and the reminder that I am as ever –

Your, J.C. Novak

“Novak!”

James had no sooner entered the hallway that a bright voice greeted him. Undoing the final button on his great coat, James passed it to the pale, dark haired, green-eyed servant girl who admitted him and
turned to greet whoever had called so enthusiastically, only to find himself with an armful of Bartholomew Boyle.

“Boyle,” James stammered. “What are you doing here? I thought you’d mustered out!” Boyle drew away from him, and James took in the fine cut of Boyle’s brand new uniform, the gleam on his buttons, and the eagles on his shoulder boards. “You’re a colonel?”

“That’s right, Captain, I outrank you!” Boyle smirked and gave him a mock-salute. “Be careful, I might give you orders.”

“We’re off duty,” protested James.

“Joke, Novak,” said Boyle, rolling his eyes. “You do remember how those work, right? Or’d that get drilled out of you?” Unsure how to reply, James gestured for Boyle to lead the way further into the house. The entry foyer was dimly lit and suffused with the heavenly scent of beeswax and the earthy aroma of wood polish, Roman choosing to use candles instead of gas to provide illumination. The luminous glow from the modest chandelier cast golden shadows over dark paneling, pale walls hung with dull paintings of landscapes and a mosaic floor in lustrous marble. A staircase of richly gleaming cherry led up to the family rooms, and the sounds of the dinner party emerged from a door to their left towards which Boyle walked with all the confidence of familiarity.

“You never did have a sense of humor, now that I think of it,” Boyle added, shooting James a grin as he looked back over his shoulder. James frowned but didn’t bother to defend himself. Boyle was often abrasive when he was in high spirits, and judging by the glow to his cheeks and the warmth of his greeting, he was in a mood and likely already several cups deep.

The parlor of the Carlyle House was beautiful, doors the same cherry as the staircase, walls cream, elaborately molded plaster trim painted baby blue. The room’s furniture had been pushed along the walls to make space for the dozen people who milled about. The walls were hung with insipid etchings, hand painted in water color, showing views of the capital area. Expertly wrought tables and satin-upholstered chairs in a distinctly European style lined the walls, expensive Chinese porcelain and the last roses of the year on display. Above the marble mantle hung a portrait of a young Richard Roman, hair combed back, eyes sharp, nose like an eagle, false smile incongruous in the warm palette and pink undertones easily recognizable as the work of Rembrandt Peale. A large fire crackled and sparked and was by far the most inviting aspect of the entire situation.

Beside Boyle’s pristine appearance, James felt drab. He’d done his best to spruce his uniform up but it showed all the wear of heavy usage: the knees of his pants and elbows of his jacket were worn to a fuzzy halo of felt, a stain left by spilt gun oil made a black patch over one hip, and the tear left by the bullet that barely missed him at Bull Run had been repaired inexactly by his own hand and then with far superior skill by Ms. Moseley, but was still noticeable as a pucker in the fabric. His other uniform was in worse shape. He had a new one being made for the wedding, but despite all he could do, the tailor had ignored his every plea and insisted it could not be finished until the 18th.

The appearance of the others in the room did little to set James’ mind at ease. Roman was engaged in quiet discussion with General Blaine, Mr. Talbot, and a man he didn’t know. Roman’s unceasing, saccharine smile was a contrast to the hard, flat scowl that was Blaine’s default expression, and Talbot’s diffidence with both of the more forceful men was painful to watch. Ms. Harvelle, in an aubergine gown that James knew to be the height of fashion though to him she looked to be draped in parade bunting, spoke enthusiastically to Mrs. Talbot, who bucked the drear colors favored in fall in favor of pale peach, her waist so tightly cinched that James thought he could have encircled it completely with his hands. The thought brought a glow of color to his cheeks, and he repressed it as he took in the other guests: two gentlemen whose bespoke suits indicated wealth comparable to Mr.
Roman’s; a demurely dressed older woman sitting boredly by a curtained window; two young women who kept tittering and glancing at Boyle from behind silk fans; and a stunningly beautiful woman, her skin the exotic dark olive of the Mediterranean, her pale green dress gleaming silk, her lustrous brown hair elaborately coiffed, dropping curly waves to frame her face and shoulders. She stood by herself, her posture promising the cold shoulder to anyone who approached her.

It was not an assembly that offered him any immediate idea where to direct his attentions. Boyle was the only person he knew well, the only one he’d care to associate with outside of this room were he given the choice. Gathering himself, he took a deep breath. From the moment he’d received the invitation he’d known it would not be an evening that offered him any enjoyment or gratification. It was a credit to Ms. Harvelle’s talents as hostess that even Boyle was there to keep him company, and with that concession it was for him to do his duty by Zachariah and behave well for his brother’s friends and business partners.

“Captain Novak,” Ms. Harvelle broke off her conversation with Mrs. Talbot to come over, a flirtatious smile on her lips, her cheeks pinched to a girlish pink. “It’s a pleasure to see you.”

“You could stand to learn something from his manners,” she added with a false, girlish laugh and a simpering look at Boyle.

“So I’ve been told before.” Boyle’s smile was closer to a smirk, his eyes lingering at the lace over Ms. Harvelle’s bosom, so flagrantly that James was embarrassed on his friend’s behalf. “My parents have lamented my coarseness for years. My uncles and aunts, my elder brother, my other acquaintances, all have been held up as an example of proper comportment. In fact, I recall a speech given me by a professor at Union that I should take Novak as my model, so you’re not the first to suggest I require amendment. However, none of the lessons have taken.” He sighed melodramatically. “I have long thought it is for want of a proper teacher. Ms. Harvelle, perhaps you would undertake to aid me? I think you’re instruction would prove most edifying.”

Clearly, James had misread why Boyle was present. In light of the obvious comfortable acquaintance between Ms. Harvelle and Boyle, it seemed more likely James had been invited to be a friend to Boyle rather than the other way around.

With a coy moue, Ms. Harvelle looked skyward and flipped her long, blonde hair over one shoulder as if she hadn’t a clue what Boyle’s hungry looks suggested. It was all James could do not to stare open-mouthed at the exchange. He’d seen the calculation every time he’d looked at her, but that she would so openly engage in flirtation while Mr. Roman was present, and that Boyle would be so taken in, was as shocking as her transformation. There was nothing of the shrewdness he saw when she was with Mr. Roman, either, and the troubling thought struck him that she was a more skilled actress than he’d believed – that she behaved with barely masked shrewdness intentionally when she was with Mr. Roman, that she was so talented that she could feign that emotion as well as all these others. Immediately, he dismissed the ideas as preposterous. No one was that skilled an actress. A more plausible explanation was that the lovely young lady pursued Roman for mercenary ends, but when she looked saw Boyle, closer to her age, handsome in his uniform, she saw a paramour instead of a target for her wiles.

While he’d thought, Boyle and Ms. Harvelle exchanged inanities, and James’ attention returned to hear Boyle concluding, “…cleared my schedule for Friday afternoon and will be able to give you the promised tour of Fort Runyon before it is decommissioned. My good friend, Colonel Rogers, has granted me permission to show you through the Custis-Lee Mansion as well.”

“That would be delightful, thank you so much, Colonel,” gushed Ms. Harvelle. “I was hoping to see
Fort Albany, though.”

“I know,” Boyle sighed. “I’m still working on securing permission. It’s in active use, you know.”

“Precisely,” Ms. Harvelle said. “What a fascinating experience, to see a fort in full operation in a time of war!” She sighed, her voice thick with youthful romanticism. “Captain Novak has already seen the delight with which I toured Fort Lyon, and I’d hoped to have the pleasure repeated in a new locale, if only to see more of the lovely views of Virginia!”

“If views are what you want, the Custis-Lee Mansion is the place for that,” said Boyle. “I—”

“Though of late Fort Lyon has rather been more of a bane than a boon,” she interrupted, turning the intensity of her dark gaze on James. Boyle scowled at James, who found himself at a loss to explain his friend’s displeasure. “They’ve been exercising their guns all day and night ever since they arrived last week, with not a warning to the town when we can expect the noise to begin. Does your training go well?”

“Moderately so,” James acknowledged. “Though we are not to be made a dedicated heavy artillery unit – it does not appear that such will be assigned to the fort at this time.” A fact for which James was profoundly grateful. Select infantry regiments were being re-trained in the use of the large ordnance placed in Washington’s defenses. Such units were unlikely to leave the confines of the forts to which they were assigned. Many prayed for such, seeing safety behind the stout walls, but James was already bored after a week on garrison duty with little to do, and the prospect of spending a year or more thus was singularly unappealing.

“By the way, Captain,” Ms. Harvelle said. “Are you excited for your promotion?”

“My what?” asked James blankly.

“Oh, well, I suppose it’s still a big secret,” she continued in a comical stage whisper, as if anyone else in attendance was paying attention to their conversation. Mrs. Talbot had drifted over to speak sneeringly to the Mediterranean beauty, the older woman was scolding the two younger girls who were maintaining a contrite facade even as they shot Boyle further glances, and all of the gentlemen were now engaged in a loud discussion, enough people speaking that no one voice could be made out in the din suffusing the small room. “I believe Colonel Elkins plans to announce it at the wedding, a sort of gift for Ms. Novak? She’s a delightful girl, by the way, I’ve been so pleased to get to know her during my time at your brother’s house. But of course, there is more to such things than words, and all of the formal government…things…are taken care of, so it’s ‘official’ even if it’s not ‘public.’ ”

“I’m afraid I’m no closer to understanding,” apologized James.

“Colonel Elkins is made brigadier general,” she explained brightly. “There’s been a lot of talk at your brother’s table about who is to succeed him.”

“What, me?” James couldn’t keep his astonishment from his voice. “That’s nonsense, surely. Most likely they’ll bring in a West Pointer lacking a command. Ever were they to name one of the captains, it’s Wandell, surely: he’s a veteran.”

“Oh, la,” she tapped James on the shoulder with her fan over-familiarly, laughing. Boyle’s face was growing steadily redder, his eyes narrower, and James could do little but be astonished at her forwardness and that Boyle would think for an instant that James was susceptible to such. Both must know James was engaged. Because of course my engagement renders me immune to all influence, save the temptation unconsciously offered by Dean Winchester. The thought darkened his
expression, but if either noticed, they didn’t react, and Ms. Harvelle said, “I’m sure Captain Wandell is a fine man, but there are more qualities than that required to make an exceptional officer. Just look at Colonel Boyle – as inexperienced as he is, he is doing a marvelous job.” That brought the smile back to Boyle’s lips, cooled the rising flush reddening his cheeks. It was all James could do not to shake his head. Ms. Harvelle’s eyes were locked on Boyle’s, but she added, “and of course there are many prepared to put in a good word for you, Captain Novak. If you wish the position I’ve no doubt it’s yours for the asking.”

“I hadn’t thought about it in the least,” confessed James.

“Do so,” said Ms. Harvelle, with a sidelong glance that showed every sign of the shrewdness he’d seen previously. “So, Colonel, tell me how go your plans for your regiment.”

*Perhaps she is behaving thus on purpose. If that be the case – why? To what end would she flirt with me when she already so clearly has Boyle wrapped around her finger?*

“Very well,” Boyle stammered under the intensity of her gaze. “As I’d hoped, the 14th Massachusetts has been assigned to Fort Tillinghast – we will be starting there on November 1st, and word is that we are becoming a Heavy Artillery unit.” This last was said pointedly, towards James, as if he should envy Boyle and his unit that they’d be bound to a Fort for the rest of the war. “Indeed, we—”

A movement caught James’ eye and he looked up to see Mrs. Talbot waving at him, the ringlets about her face bouncing. Grateful to escape the uncomfortable tension Ms. Harvelle’s actions caused, he crossed the room eagerly.

“It’s been too long, Captain,” Mrs. Talbot said warmly. Her smiles were no more real than those of anyone else in the room, but at least there seemed to be actual happiness behind them. “Mr. Novak has regaled us with tales of your valor, and Mr. Roman promised that should I attend tonight, I could hear them told first hand – I’m glad that’s proved correct!”

“I did nothing particularly valorous,” James objected. He’d thus far been largely spared being pressed into discussing the battle. The account he’d sent Anna had been minimal. He’d deflected Hannah’s determined questions by telling her that the details were not appropriate for the ears of a young woman, overriding her insistence that Elkins had already told her all and thus he could do no harm. Only his brothers had heard the main of his account, but even with Zachariah and Gabriel he’d left out some details – how frightened he’d been, any description of the agony of the casualties, the shameful details of the Great Skedaddle as it’d come to be known, the encounter with Dean Winchester. “My unit did our duty, but nothing exception. Perhaps you should speak with Boyle – you know his 6th Massachusetts was involved in the Baltimore riots? Or I could introduce you to my friend Colonel Fowler of the 14th New York – they gained some renown for their charges against General Jackson’s forces atop Henry Hill.” His understanding of the battle had expanded over the past months two months as newspaper accounts built a coherent picture of events that had been impossible to distinguish on location at the time.

“You are too modest, Captain,” Mrs. Talbot chided him. “Who cares about a little tussle in Maryland? This is *war* and you’ve been to *battle*. You must learn to own your triumphs or you’ll never find greatness.”

*I don’t wish greatness*. James repressed the thought. His family wished him distinguished, and he wished his parents and brothers proud of him. For their sake if not his own, it was important that he pursue greatness.
“Fortunately, Mr. Novak understands that and has done your boasting for you,” she continued. “May I introduce my friend, Ms. Kormos?” The dark-haired woman nodded as James inclined his head to her and murmured a how do you do that she didn’t reply to. “She is accompanying General Blaine.”

“I have heard no account of the battle,” Ms. Kormos said, her voice breathy and soft. “I’m curious.”

Repressing a sigh, James accepted that there was no polite way to dodge the explanation. As he began to speak, the two young ladies sidled up to the conversation to listen with wide-eyed curiosity. He related his experiences in vague terms that he thought would be acceptable to the ladies – about how loud it was, about confronting the enemy, about the ambush by the Rebel unit they’d mistaken for the 8th New York. Neither seemed particularly moved by the information: Mrs. Talbot made appropriate noises but her expression was untouched; Ms. Kormos watched without apparent interest despite the intensity of her gaze. The young ladies, though silent, looked suitable pale and affected – perhaps too much so, he feared one, slim and dark-haired, might faint. When he stopped, they all bombarded him with questions and the ensuing conversation carried him through until dinner and wasn’t too unpleasant as conversations went. More guests arrived, conversation ebbed and flowed around them. Mrs. Talbot spoke of Mr. Talbot’s factories as if they were her own, speaking of the niche they’d forged in the production of shoes for the army, their efforts to modify a Massachusetts site to the making of uniforms, and dropped hints that investment would facilitate matters as if she believed that James had a source of money independent of his families wealth. Ms. Kormos said nothing of herself. The young women, he learned, were narrow-faced Ms. Amelia Thompson, whose parents were in attendance, and her blonde friend Ms. Becky Rosen of Charlotte, trapped in the north by the war, who smiled enthusiastically at near everything she heard, even James’ account of the retreat.

The dinner call ended their conversation, and the seating arrangements spared him making further attempts at socializing. Ms. Harvelle placed him between Boyle and General Blaine, those across from him were strangers, and though hasty introductions were made, James was unable to enter in to the discussions of business and uninterested in joining those on politics with those who clearly did not enter into many of his views. The ladies, with the exception of Mrs. Talbot, mostly kept quiet and attended to the conversation of the gentlemen with whom they’d arrived, and James let the hubbub wash over him. Boyle engaged animatedly with Ms. Thompson and Ms. Rosen, telling them in painstaking detail about the Baltimore Riot. The fear that had tinged Boyle’s account when he’d shared his experience with James over the summer was no longer evident; instead the tale was well-rehearsed, dramatic, declaimed at a volume that half the table couldn’t help but hear. With impressive good breeding, both young women listened attentively, though their eyes were a little glazed. As Boyle launched in to a panegyric on the bravery of the men of Massachusetts, Ms. Rosen gave James a look as if begging for rescue, but there was naught to be done, no way short of rudeness to stop Boyle’s boasting.

While listening to Boyle was dull, it was still superior to the discussion on James’ other side. Blaine was as impossible to ignore as Boyle was, and combined the two were loud enough to prevent James from listening in on any other conversation at the table. At least Boyle’s tale was non-offensive. Despite James’ attempt to focus his attention on the overblown tale of the 6th Massachusetts caught in a life-or-death struggle with the citizenry of Baltimore, bits and pieces of Blaine’s words came through.

“Spent a lot of time in the South. They’re like animals. If you’ve not been down there, you’ve no idea. The poor live like dogs, lapping at the heels of the wealthy while taking scraps from their table, all the while thanking almighty God that at least they were born with white skin. The rich maintain a facade of gentility, but it’s a mask to cruel realities, their fields worked by chattel slaves, many of a suspiciously light hue with features too similar to this gentleman or that gentleman for there to be any
illusions.” Of course such was true, everyone knew it, but to speak it at a polite dinner, with women present, was beyond the pale. Even Mrs. Talbot looked momentarily shocked before returning to her conversation with Mr. Roman, and only Ms. Kormos seemed accepting, her expression impassive edging into what James hardly dared name indulgent. "Extermination is the solution, every last villain needs to be eliminated and the states re-colonized by good Northern stock."

At least, he thought despairingly, the arrival of the food forced all to silence, and it was delicious.

After dinner, the men retreated to Mr. Roman’s study, the women to the parlor, and James settled by the fireplace, as unobtrusively as he could manage, wondering how early he could justify departing. The mantle clock chimed 9, and James was considering that he could justify it his cue, beg off that he must be on duty at 10, though it was a lie. His attendance should be adequate to support Zachariah; he didn’t know enough of the state of Zachariah’s affairs – his scheming, James thought unkindly – to be able to say anything to further his affairs. Having been seen in his uniform, a reminder that the Novak family stood in important positions in multiple walks of life with influence to spread around, must be satisfactory. Despite his resolution, he didn’t make a move. In his heart he knew it was too soon to go without risking giving insult.

The study was small, close and stuffy. The dark wood and densely packed bookcases and ten men crowding together made the room feel claustrophobic after how much time James had spent out of doors or in tents over the past months. The brightly blazing fire was uncomfortably hot. Another painting of Richard Roman smiled down from over the mantle, this in a distinctly European style that James did not recognize, and priceless objet d’art were scattered negligently on every available surface like so many pearls before swine.

“How are you enjoying the evening?” asked Mr. Roman, taking up a position alongside James and handing him a tumbler of dark alcohol.

“It has been as interesting as I anticipated,” said James with absolute honesty. Roman blinked at him for a moment and then laughed, patting him on the shoulder with too much familiarly.

“I like you, Novak,” Roman said. “I appreciate a man who says what he thinks.” Unable to give any adequate reply, James swirled the liquid and took a sip, finding it to be smooth, top shelf whiskey. “Congressman Novak tells me there is a Colonelcy to be had. I’ll put in a word for you.”

“Please do not trouble yourself,” protested James. The last thing he wanted was to be in this man’s debt.

“No trouble, none at all. Mr. Talbot and I have a meeting with Mr. Cameron and others from the War Department tomorrow, it will be no matter to put a word in his ear. We all must pull together to successfully suppress the Southern rebellion. The Secretary of War is grateful of the extent to which we men of business have stepped up – at great personal sacrifice – to convert our industry to the support of the war effort. He expresses that gratefulness with appropriate largesse.” James murmured vague agreement. Oh yes, a great deal of personal sacrifice, evident in every polished inch of this lovely Alexandria home, in every sip of this imported liquor, in every silken drape on Ms. Harvelle’s dress. The bitterness in the thought bothered him – James had sacrificed little enough – but he couldn’t help it. His thoughts wandered to the men under his command, to Henriksen seeking his family and Fitzgerald leaving his wife, to Spangler who had already lost two dear friends and Warren who had lost his arm, and he thought how much they were all giving. He thought of Dean and Sam Winchester, family torn apart by the events in Kansas, the divisions worsened by secession. Such damage would not be healed simply by the end of the war. So many were giving so much, losing so much, who were any of the men in the room to speak of sacrifice?

“I am in the debt of your brother,” Roman continued, his smile fixed, his eyes considering. “His
investments have helped to fund the modification of my factories, and he has been ceaseless in his efforts to ensure that the most qualified men receive the contracts so essential to supply the troops. We are all extremely grateful to him.

“Does Zachariah wish me Colonel?” James asked before he could stop himself.

“I believe he considers it a primary object,” confirmed Roman. “It is an honor you entirely deserve, especially when, in four days, your brother-in-law Elkins becomes general of your brigade.”

The past month had felt wonderful, away from Zachariah, hardly a letter from his parents, but with Roman’s words, the full weight of familial obligation settled on his shoulders. It was selfish of him to not push for the position that would reflect positively on the Novaks. The more distinction he could earn on the battlefield, the greater the benefit to Zachariah especially. Promotion helped Zachariah, it helped himself, it likely would help Gabriel, it would almost certainly help Hester...for the good of the family, if this opportunity could be his, he should strive for it.

“I appreciate your help,” said James, repressing a sigh.

“That’s the spirit,” Roman clapped him on the shoulder again, grip powerful enough to hurt. “Come, have you met my solicitor, Mr. Edgar Martinez? Allow me to make the introduction...”

The room was too warm, his shirt slowly growing damp from sweat. The alcohol didn’t help; though he only had the one glass it left him fuzzed and hot and far too inclined to tell people what he really thought instead of smiling docilely and nodding. Only repeated silent injunctions that he was doing this for Zachariah kept him from telling General Blaine how reprehensible James found his calls to violence, kept him from suggesting that Mr. Roman find a better use for his money than having his portrait painted for the fifth time, kept him from drawing Boyle aside and suggesting that he stop behaving like a jealous ass.

Perhaps he was not as resilient to the effects of alcohol as he’d thought. Or perhaps Mr. Roman’s whiskey was far more powerful than he was accustomed to. Or perhaps he simply hated being there that damned much.

Fortunately, James had a lifetime of practice at keeping his mouth shut and speaking when spoken to. His upbringing had been strict and his parents were not to be gainsaid. In a group of like-minded individuals he could be vocal enough, but in large social gatherings among acquaintances and strangers, where he knew his views were unlikely to coincide with that of his fellow guests, he preferred to keep quiet. When he reflected on it, he realized there were very few people whom he felt truly comfortable speaking his mind freely: all of his siblings save Zachariah, Anna, Alfie and Henriksen, Winchester and Fitzgerald, most of his other subordinates...surprisingly, he felt more comfortable in the army than he’d ever felt at home...

...Dean.

James had never felt any qualms speaking openly to Dean.

The ladies and gentlemen reunited, Ms. Rosen cornered James to ask minutely and far too personally about his experience in the army, and James thought of green eyes and a tentative, uncertain smile. There was not the least possibility that he was thinking of Anna. It was useless to attempt to believe she was on his mind at all.

*I want to see him again.*

It had been two weeks. Though Dean had crossed James’ mind often, the 27th had been busy, and
many nights he’d been on duty. Further, as he reminded himself endlessly, it was utterly inappropriate in every conceivable way. The interest he felt was not to be indulged.

Why not?

The reasons were endless. James was engaged, he loved Anna, he was committed to what they intended to build together. Sneaking out of the camp was grounds for court martial and could be construed as desertion, and fraternizing with the enemy was grounds for being named a traitor. Dean was a virtual stranger, that James should feel drawn to him was ludicrous, that James should feel carnal interest in him was criminal.

Dean was a man.

And yet...

At least Ms. Rosen’s enthusiastic attentions kept all others away aside from the occasional interjections of Ms. Richardson. At least Boyle seemed to be thawing under the influence of Ms. Harvelle’s attention and an impressive amount of alcohol. At least General Blaine had been induced to leave early by Ms. Kormos, and those interested in business were content to occupy themselves about their own concerns. The parlor was not quite so stuffy as the study had been.

...and yet I cannot deny I think of him near as much as I think of Anna, I cannot delude myself into the belief that the feelings that stir in me when I imagine Dean are similar to those I feel when she enters my fantasies. I cannot pretend that I do not wish to spend more time with him, to know him better, to speak with him.

This was the night that would not end.

At least I might see Dean on the way home with none to know I made a detour.

The thought stunned him, brought color to his cheeks and some expression to his face that, whatever it was, left Ms. Rosen stunned and stuttering, her cheeks pinking delicately until she lowered her eyes to stare intently at her hands as they toyed with the gathered trim of her dress.

“It’s been a pleasure meeting you, Ms. Rosen,” the warmth in his voice had nothing to do with her, but the color in her cheeks deepened anyway. Excusing himself, he made his “good evenings” to the other guests and his hosts – and received the dubious pleasure of Ms. Harvelle promising to invite him to future such events – and waited for far too long for the waifish servant girl to retrieve his great coat.

It was nearly midnight when James finally escaped.

The air outside was shockingly cold after the close heat within. James’ breath made clouds at every exhalation. Walking down the darkened city streets, lit irregularly by gas lamps, James folded his arms before him and tucked his hands into his wide sleeves. The hour was late and only soldiers were about, all on duty, guarding with the semblance of wariness against the unlikely event of trouble in Alexandria. With the encircling forts complete, there was virtually no danger of Confederate activity, but the once rebellious city was occupied by Federal troops just in case. The surreality of that thought stood out in James tired mind as it rarely had since the start of the war. I am in a city being occupied by Federal Troops. This city is technically on enemy soil, on foreign soil, at least until such time as the rebellion is put down and the states are reunited.

How had the country come to this point? It seemed inconceivable.

Fall was finally showing on the countryside. The night was bright, a full moon gleaming brightly
overhead casting long shadows of every tree, every bush, every stile and barn and silo. The road was empty and James made the short walk to Fort Lyon with a briskness that staved off the unpleasant chill. The lingering effects of the alcohol were driven away by the crispness in atmosphere and fresh air in his lungs, but did nothing to stave off the longing that had seized him so completely.

*Dean is probably not there any longer.*

There was only one way to find out.

Without a backward glance, James continued past the road leading to the Fort and proceeded south to the copse of trees haunted by Dean Winchester.

*At least I can spend some portion of the evening with someone I don’t detest.*

As the change of the seasons drove the leaves from the trees, the thicket presented the appearance of thinning, some branches already bare, others in the process of shedding leaves. The light of the moon was so bright that James could make out the red and gold of maples, the brown of oak, the yellow of birch and purple of sweetgum and traces of lingering green on all. The sparseness was an illusion, however, and even in the bright shadows the undergrowth was impenetrable. It was not until James passed through the overgrown outskirts that he was able to make out Impala standing indifferently. She did not react to his arrival at all.

“Evenin’, Captain.”

The horse was not the only one apparently unsurprised by James’ arrival. Dean did little more than look up and put a hand to the brim of his hat, not rising from the base of the tree that seemed to be his preferred place to wait the evening.

*He’s beautiful.*

“Sam okay?”

*Seeing him feels nice.*

“Yes, he’s very well.”

*What am I doing here?*

“Then what brings you out here this fine, fine night?” said Dean sarcastically.

*I don’t know.*

“How have you been?”

Dean barked a laugh. “You’re concerned ‘bout me? Well ain’t that somethin’…” There was a challenge in his voice, and when James refused to meet it, Dean continued in a softened tone, “Not bad, Captain, not bad at all. A might cold. Not used to these ‘northern’ winters.”

“Why not make a fire?” asked James. A thick carpet of leaves of covered the ground, but didn’t obscure a charred depression in the center where previous campers had made a blaze. Dean shrugged. “Don’t want to get caught?”

“Doin’ what?” asked Dean. “I’m jus’ a man and his horse makin’ camp in these difficult times. Nothin’ against the law.”

“You do realize you’ve told me you’re in the Confederate army, right?” James reminded him wryly.
“Hey, you wanna make an accusation, I’m all ears,” said Dean, shifting but not rising. “Though I can’t but notice you’re unarmed again.”

“True,” James said, settling down amidst the ground cover, finding the bed of leaves surprisingly soft. “My secret plan is to catch you at whatever you are doing and put a stop to it.”

“You’re not too good at that ‘secret’ thing, are ya?”

“Not really,” James replied, smiling. “Can you blame me for being curious?”

“Naw,” Dean leaned back against the tree. “I’m curious ‘bout you, too. But you’ll not catch me out as a spy, Captain, because I’m no spy. You’re the one out past your lines – this here, where we are, this is still Southron territory, and I could as soon arrest you for infiltratin’. You’ve got the look of bein’ up to no good.”

“Touché,” murmured James.

“Aw, come on, none of that French stuff,” scoffed Dean, grinning. “Remind me of Lafitte, he’s always pullin’ out foreign on me.”

“Lafitte?” The name rang a distant bell, and James combed through his memory of his previous conversations with Dean, trying to place it. Oh yes – the person who helped Dean treat Sam’s wounds and get Sam on horseback.

“Yeah, he’s like a brother to me, or at least nearest thing to since Sammy left,” Dean explained. There was a curious note in Dean’s voice, at once distant yet open, that made James’ heart ache. “Benny Lafitte. He’s from New Orleans, moved to Kansas for the same reasons we did – make a new life – and though he didn’t want to, he came to Virginia with me and joined up rather than stand by and let me risk my life alone. He’s a better friend than I deserve.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” said James more enthusiastically than he should have. He colored at his exuberance, and Dean looked away, crumbling a handful of leaves in a fist.

“Named my son after him.”

The words lurched through James, twisted his stomach in a knot. “Oh, you’ve a family?”

“Been married two years,” Dean said. “Though I scarce see her. It ain’t safe out on the plains so Lisa’s in Lawrence while dad and I live out in the country. I’d never forgive myself if somethin’ happened to her or Ben.”

James could think of no answer to that, to the obvious sense of obligation that Dean felt, to the churning sickness making him nauseous.

_What was I thinking? What difference does it make if he’s married? What I feel, it’s not real, men do not feel that way about each other._

He knew that was not true. There would be no need for society to proscribe such behavior if it never happened, and James had over these past weeks overheard several trysts between the soldiers in the camp. When he’d been at Union College, there had been a scandal, hushed up, relating to a liaison between a professor and one of James’ classmates. The boy in question had spoken for months about the affection he harbored and all his acquaintance had thought he meant of a young women in Schenectady or Albany, not Professor Ludensky. James knew it was possible. What he couldn’t understand was how it was happening to him. He’d never felt anything like this before, not for a man, and hardly ever for a woman – only for Anna.
“What about you, Captain? You leave a wife behind?”

“No,” James collected himself with difficulty, tried to keep the disappointment out of his voice. Dean looked up sharply, eyes catching the silvery light and flashing brilliant green. “I’m engaged. We intend to marry after the war.”

“Shouldn’t have to wait too long,” Dean said, looking away again, frowning at nothing that James could see. “Figurin’ you Yanks will get tired of losin’ pretty quick.”

“Confident words, Johnny Reb,” James mustered a reassuring smile. 

*There’s nothing here. He’s married with a family. I’m engaged. For God’s sake we’re both men. I should never have come to speak with him again, it only makes me think impossible things, insane things.*

“You know it, Billy.” Hesitantly, Dean met James’ eyes again, caught the smile and returned it, and James’ heart skipped a beat in the precise same it had the first time Anna had timidly taken his hand while they walked the gardens at her parents’ home.

“I should go,” James said abruptly. *And I should never come back.*

“Shit, I’m sorry, Captain, I didn’t mean...” The distress that widened Dean’s eyes, made him fumble and rise awkwardly, was painful to watch. James rose smoothly to his feet.

*What on earth has him so riled up?*

“No, you did nothing,” James said more harshly than he intended. “Believe me, Dean, you’re not at fault.” Dean had nearly gotten himself up, only to collapse with a gasp to his knees. Astonished, James watched as Dean’s eyes went completely round, and suddenly James’ brain caught up to his mouth.

*I called him Dean. Good God, I used his given name, out of nowhere. Have I even called him Winchester before? Have I called him anything but Johnny Reb?*

“I have to go.” James turned away, like tearing a sucker from his flesh after wading too long in the mud and muck.

There was no staying, there was no encouraging the entirely one-sided interest and intimacy that James felt growing in his bosom. *We’re strangers and enemies. We cannot be friends, must not be friends.* He started through the trees, not worrying how much noise he made.

“You could come back sometime,” Dean called after him. “If you wanted. I’m here every night, and it’s real lonely.” His hopeful tone, so exposed, so vulnerable, froze James in place. No amount of internal attempt at restraint could keep James from looking over his shoulder. Dean stood at the edge of the clearing, shoulders hunched, hands in his pockets, head down, lip caught in his teeth, a boy caught out doing something he wasn’t supposed to. One foot nudged at the leaves, making them rustle, and Dean watched the ground, lips in a thin line, eyes sad, expression screaming guilt and regret.

“I won’t be able to do that,” lied James. *I can’t let myself do that.*

“Oh,” Dean visibly steeled himself. “Right, sorry, forgot, you hate me and everything I stand for.”

James made himself look ahead, back into the shadows of the forest. “I don’t hate you. I don’t think I could ever hate you. But I have to go.”
He didn’t wait for Dean’s reply, crashing through the woods towards the road loudly enough to drown out any call made after him, and he didn’t look back until he greeted the guards stationed before Fort Lyon. The road behind him was utterly empty.

*I should apologize to him.*

Guilt wracked James as he walked up the hill, as he made his tired way to his crowded tent. Reidy’s snores were audible from a dozen tents away and only grew louder the closer he got. James shrugged out of his great coat, pulled a blanket around himself, a curled up in the only available space, so close to the entrance that every breeze ruffled his dark hair. His thoughts raced.

**He didn’t deserve the way I treated him this evening.**

The blanket was suffused with the night cold and a hint of dampness, Enwrapped in it, James felt clammy. The hurt look on Dean’s face danced before him every time he blinked, blocking out the possibility of sleep. No amount of telling himself that his reactions to Dean were impossible caused them to go away, and when he put aside the recrimination and actually allowed himself to feel, his emotions were unmistakable.


_I want to see him again. I want to get to know him better. I want to find out why he hurts so much. I want to help him heal. I want to know what he thinks about music and art and literature and politics and women’s suffrage and everything. I want to see his eyes in the light of day. I want to rub my thumb over his lips, along his cheek. I want to kiss him.*

*What’s the matter with me?*

The moon had long since set and the gray light of pre-dawn hinted at the morning to come. Atop the hill, they usually had an hour or more warning before the sun yellowed the horizon and the bugler’s called Reveille. Reidy’s snores had quieted, but it didn’t matter. The noise wasn’t what had kept James awake, and now with morning so near, even if he somehow stilled his exhausted mind, he’d not be able to rest. With a sigh, he draped his blanket over his shoulders and stepped outside, settling cross-legged like a sentinel before the entry to the tent. The bite of wind against his skin tingled soothingly, and he closed his eyes and focused entirely on the sensation.

A rustle of fabric startled him, and his eyes opened to show him Bradbury emerging. Hat and jacket removed for the night, his red hair fell sloppily over his forehead and around his ears. The muslin of his shirt had grayed over the months, and without his shell coat swelled about him, he was slight, lean, tiny. Though James’ immediate thought was a reminder of how young the boy must be – no hint of stubble first thing in the morning, shoulders hardly filling the shirt – there was something about his face that spoke to more age, that hinted at experience. It was not the haunted, distant stare that Sam and Dean Winchester had, the one James was learning to associate with combat experience and exposure to violence. Rather, there were lines about his eyes, a tight set to his jaw, a world-weariness in the way he wrapped his blanket around his waist and dropped down beside James.

“Can’t sleep, Captain?” he asked, voice simultaneously bright yet husky with fatigue.

“No,” James stared at the dirt ground, the same wind that pinked his face making eddies of loose dust.

“That dinner of yours went really late,” Bradbury said. “I thought you’d be back by midnight.”

“You were awake?” Surprised, James looked up, glanced at the Sergeant, who was watching James
“Yeah,” Bradbury managed to quirk a lip into the semblance of a smile. “There’s something – someone – on my mind.”

“Same,” admitted James. A crazy desire to confess everything stirred in him, to give voice to his confusion and uncertainty, to hear once and for all he was a deviant and adulterer, to hear that he wasn’t crazy. “It’s not someone I should be thinking about.” He clamped his mouth shut lest he say more.

“A few things you’ve said and done of late...I thought we might share that particular problem,” Bradbury nodded slowly, slipping into a sad, tired smile. “I’ve been wrestling with it for a while. It’s tough, you know? Knowing there’s someone waiting for you back home, but they’re hundreds of miles away, and we’re here, and no matter how supportive they are, they don’t really know what it’s like. Any one of us might die without ever seeing the people we love again, and we’re surrounded by thousands of new faces, and even though there are ten of us in the tent it feels like being alone once curfew is called and the lamps are out. There are things I’ve felt...things I’ve wanted...I don’t want to die without experiencing them. But I don’t want to betray what I left behind, either. If I survive, when I go back there are secrets I’ll have to keep for the rest of my life – about how I know I killed a man, about how that felt like nothing, about what it smells like when someone is torn apart, about how damned scared I am sometimes, about how every time my stomach aches I wonder if it’s the bloody flux and if I’m going to die like Zeddmore did, shaking and leaking blood and begging for water I won’t be able to keep down. These feelings I have for this other person, they just feel like another secret I’ll have to keep. You know what I mean?”

“Yes,” said James. Every word rang true, and hearing them spoken to him by another was like having a great weight lifted from his chest. “That’s exactly right, that’s exactly how it feels.” A sudden thought struck James. “It’s not my sister Hannah, is it? She talks about you constantly.

Bradbury laughed, a light, airy, oddly feminine sound. “God, no. She’s a sweet child, but she’s just that - a child – and she’s marrying Colonel Elkins on Sunday. But you’re not far from the mark, it is a nurse I met at the hospital. My fiancée is at home, worried sick about me, writing me near daily, and I can’t stop thinking about blonde hair and dark eyes.”

“Green eyes and brown hair,” murmured James, picturing every detail of Dean’s face. “We hardly know each other, and yet...”

Breaking eye contact, Bradbury looked towards the horizon, the distant paling of blue peeking over the walls of the fortress. “If I don’t get to know this woman, if I don’t find out if she feels as I do, I’ll spend the rest of my life wondering if there was something there. If I pursue it, and she enters into my feelings, someday I’ll go home with whatever we’ve done together hanging over my head, and I’ll have regrets and will be forced to spend the rest of my life living a lie. But won’t I be doing that anyway? My fiancée can never really know the things we’ve done.” With fire in his night-dark eyes, Bradbury looked back to James. “I decided to get to know her better. I decided if I’m to live with regrets either way, I’d rather make the choice that feels right now and learn to deal with the consequences than deny myself in this moment and spend the rest of my life wondering what I let pass me by.”

Nodding slowly, feeling like he was in a dream, James rose, letting the blanket slip from his shoulders.

“Captain?”
“I have to go,” James said distractedly, eyes fixed towards the clearing, the trees of which were barely visible from the hilltop. Would Dean still be there this late – this early? “There’s someone I have to talk to.”

“Just don’t get yourself shot sneaking back out to Alexandria,” Bradbury said with supportive wryness.

“Not Alexandria.” Even without his great coat over his jacket, James hardly felt the cold. The chances that James’ bizarre infatuation was in any way reciprocated were nonexistent. However, even with their limited acquaintance, James cared too much about Dean to leave him as hurt as James’ abrupt departure surely left the young man feeling. James had to speak with Dean. “I should be back by Reveille. I’d appreciate if you’d not mention seeing me, as if I’m caught I intend to say that I spent the night in the city.”

“Good luck, Captain.”

“You too, Bradbury.”

Sneaking out proved easier than James had feared. Though the lightening sky rendered hiding difficult, the inattentive fatigue of the bored pickets, all of whom knew they were close to being done and would soon be able to retreat to their blankets, compensated for the extent to which the brightness should have given him away. To the accompaniment of someone muttering about “raccoon and other varmints” James pushed his way through the abatis. By the time he got back there, those who had granted him admittance at the road earlier would be off duty, and he still bore the brief note signed by Colonel Elkins authorizing James to attend the dinner and allowing him re-admittance to the camp unhindered. Uncertain how late Dean stayed each evening, chased by the swelling glow on the eastern horizon only somewhat blocked by Ballenger’s Hill and the fort at its summit, James jogged down the road towards the copse. The early morning gray haloed the trees in mist that reflected the yellows and reds and oranges of the leaves.

With light to work by, James noticed that not far from his usual entry point, there was a narrow, well-worn trail leading into the thicket, and he used that, making a note of its location for future visits.

Yes, future visits. I’ve never wanted anything – anyone – this much in my life. I can at least be his friend. I can at least have that much. I don’t care which side he fights for, he is not a villain. I never really thought him my enemy, I just had to say something, anything, to deny the truth. But there’s no use in denying it. I like him, and I refuse to condemn myself further for that. I am an adult, I can exercise self control. God, I hope he’s still here.

James’ first glimpse of the clearing dissipated his concerns. Under the trees, the shadows were yet dense, but the deeper dark of Impala was obvious. A sound struck him next, heavy breathing, tinged with a vocal undertone, that paralyzed James with worry. Dean was partially visible, slumped in his usual spot, head back, eyes closed, mouth slightly open, chest rising and falling far too quickly. James could see the shifting shadows where one of Dean’s hands was buried beneath his checkered shirt, fumbling at hidden flesh, but his other hand and legs were yet out of sight, blocked by a tree. Concern that Dean had been injured set James’ heart pounding, chilled him through as the night air had failed to do on the walk over. It took only a moment to overcome his fear and start forward, a call coming to his lips.

The words died unsaid as Dean came fully in to view. Pale flesh moved so quickly it made a blur, Dean’s left hand stroking up and down over his crotch, and though in the darkness and shadows James could not make out every detail, his imagination filled in the rest and knew exactly what he beheld. The cold threatening to freeze flashed to heat enough to incinerate James in an instant, the soft sounds leaking from Dean’s lips now recognizable as those of pleasure instead of pain, the
tantalizing glimpses of Dean’s cock utterly tempting. Dry-mouthed, James stared, unable to stop himself despite how profoundly embarrassed he felt.

Even James’ shame could not overcome how incredibly arousing he found the sight.

_God, it’s never felt like this, never, not when my classmates told me of their exploits, not when Ms. Allen ‘accidentally’ contrived to have my hand against her bosom, not when I’ve pleasured myself, not even when Anna has kissed me. This is impossible...this is wrong...this is amazing._

“Yeah,” mumbled Dean. The hand under his shirt shifted, and James bit back a moan when he realized the man must be playing with his nipples. “Jus’ like that.” Dean’s hand slowed, and every instinct in James’ head screamed for him to close the distance between them, to replace Dean’s hand with James’ own, to feel Dean’s fingers wrapped around his own rapidly-hardening length.

_I should leave, I should leave right now, before he sees me, before he realizes I was ever here. I need to leave before I cannot._

_So much for my self-control._

There was no compelling himself to turn away. It was all he could do not to fulfill his filthy fantasy and beg Dean to touch him. Setting a palm hard over his crotch, James watched as Dean teased himself, rubbing a finger over the head of cock, hips rolling towards the touch he was denying himself. James’ erection caught roughly on the abrasive wool of his pants, the sensitive tip aching at the unkind contact, and James pressed against himself harder, willing the discomfort of the fabric to quell his desire.

_He truly is the most handsome man I’ve ever seen. I want him, God how I want him!_ What that desire entailed, James couldn’t say. With a woman, he knew what his body demanded, knew he longed to caress and kiss and penetrate and thrust, knew even though he’d never experience intercourse himself.

A luscious sound, half sigh, half moan, rumbled through Dean’s chest as he wrapped his hand around himself once more and began to stroke slowly. Unable to stop himself, James matched Dean’s rhythm, pressing his length against his belly and running up and down it with his palm. Up and down, his heart racing, his cock throbbing in time, desire built incandescent behind his eyes, washed out the faint light of morning, blurred out the edges of the clearing until all James could see was Dean.

With a man, what was James to do? Touch seemed inadequate, there must be other ways for people, for men, to pleasure each other. Mouths, James supposed, imagining how it felt when he sucked some morsel from his finger, the heat and wetness and the pressure. He’d used saliva to slicken his hand for masturbating in the past, and he recalled Boyle describing an encounter he’d had with a prostitute, that suggested that lips and throat could make an extremely satisfying experience. A vision struck him powerfully, Dean on his knees, rough lips encircling James, green eyes staring up at him. Hardly able to guess how it might feel, his imagination nonetheless nearly drove him to the ground with want.

“Captain, feels so good, so good, please...” Fumbling blindly, Dean adjusted his grip, drew his hand out from beneath his shirt to curl around his sack, and shuddered against the tree as he stroked more firmly and played with his balls. “Damn, Billy, jus’ like...jus’ like that...” He trailed off with a moan.

_Me, he’s thinking about me, he calls me Captain, he calls me Billy Yank, no, that’s impossible, if he meant me, he’d say my name, he’d say James, just like it’s all I can do not to moan Dean, Dean,_
Dean, I want his hands on me so badly. God, do I, dear God, give me strength...

...even if he doesn’t mean me, why would he say Captain, that’s no woman, he’s not thinking about a woman...you’re being insane, Novak, if he meant you he’d say so...

...I’ve never told him my name.

The realization struck him so powerfully and suddenly he barely bit back an incredulous laugh, and had Dean not been so lost he must surely have heard the choked off sound. As it was, Dean showed no signs of any awareness beyond himself, expression slack with pleasure, every breath a desperate gasp.

God, it’s true, he addressed his letter to ‘Captain Novak,’ he doesn’t know my damn name! I’m such a fool! What if he does mean me, what if he’s imagining me right now? I’m here, I’m really here, oh, Dean...

“Oh, Christ,” Dean groaned, back arching away from the tree, hand cupping the head of his cock to catch his release. James caught fragmented glimpses of white streaking free, stared mesmerized at the frantic bucking of Dean’s hips, his head filled with the sounds that Dean struggled and failed to repress.

...Dean, Dean, gorgeous Dean, please...

Dean collapsed back against the tree, panting, eyes closed but tears leaking free from the corners, a silly, lazy smile gracing his lips. All the tension that tensed him normally was gone and he was utterly relaxed and calm and perfect. That one beautiful moment didn’t last. A sigh deflated Dean, his shoulders slumped, and James had an instant to realize that if Dean opened his eyes, they’d be staring at each other. An emotion other than all-encompassing desire finally overwhelmed him – mindless panic – and he ducked into the only possible hiding place behind the tree that had partially blocked Dean from James’ view when he’d first arrived. Impala gave a snort, a pile of leaves shifted loudly, and branches snagged and snapped around him.

“Someone there?” Dean’s voice was raspy and dry and...hopeful? No, that last was James’ imagination. Every frantic breath James took sounded immensely loud in his ears, the racing of his heart must be audible from across the clearing or from damned Fort Lyon, and he applied painful pressure to his persistent erection, wishing it away. It felt like a lifetime passed in silence and anticipation that screamed that at any moment Dean was going to discover him. His mind played that out as a fantasy, he’d smile awkwardly and apologize and next thing he knew Dean’s arms would be around him and...

‘Course not,” muttered Dean. “No one comin’ this late, and the Captain made it damn clear he ain’t comin’ back.” Now he definitely means me, and the pain that tightened his chest finally had some impact on James’ desire, softening it, dulling it. “Jus’ you ‘n me, Impala, like always.” The horse gave a neigh, and Dean laughed softly. “What you say we head to camp and get you some oats?” Another approving neigh. “Might even be able to scare up a carrot or two. Lord knows you’ve earned it.” The noises reaching James’ ears spoke of Dean’s preparations, straps adjusted, leather snapped, stirrups lowered, Impala shaking herself out after resting the night. “You’re too good to me, baby, I wish I didn’t have to put you through this every night. It’s only for a little while, I promise.”

Soft, distinct sounds spoke to Dean mounting, the creak of leather announced him shifting. Leaves crunched as Impala took a step, and James risked a peek around the tree to see Dean mounted, sitting his horse with utter comfort, back straight, legs relaxed and comfortably encircling her broad sides. Impala turned and with only the subtlest of pressure from Dean’s legs, they steered out of the clearing and away. “That’s my girl,” Dean’s voice faded as they left the clearing. “That’s my beautiful girl.”
Silence stretched out. James hardly dared breathe, waiting to be positive that Dean was gone. The gray of early morning was brightening towards dawn, and the only sound was the brush of leaves and branches in the wind. Finally, when he felt safe, James’ willpower finally gave way before the need screaming in his head.

Desperate fingers undid the button on his pants, he thrust his hand within and wrapped fingers around his half-hard cock. He went stiff instantly at the long-sought touch. Two quick strokes sufficed to bring him to erection. The head was damp with early release and he indelicately smeared it over his hand and then wrapped around himself again, the feelings so intensely good that he threw his head back against the trunk of the tree with a painful thunk. A plaintive voice in his mind whispered Anna and conjured her delicate features, her beautiful face and soft hair, but James was beyond the lie, too tired and too aroused, and the image dissolved into Dean’s gorgeous post-orgasmic expression, tanned skin scattered with freckles, brown hair bleached pale, strands disheveled after a long night, cheeks rough with stubble, and James repressed a groan as he jerked himself hard.

Dean, the name throbbed through him, pounded in his ears like a heartbeat, matched the increasingly rapid pulse that surged through his cock as he stroked himself urgently. Dean, Dean, God Dean, yes, yes, oh yes, oh Dean! Just that quickly James was overcome, semen splashing hot, catching on his pants, dripping down amongst his dark, coarse pubic hair, smearing the back of his hand and smoothing his grip as he squeezed his last few strokes, toyed with his foreskin, milked the last few drops to bead at his tip. Panting, he slumped against the tree, the cold marvelously welcome.

For the first time since he’d arrived at Richard Roman’s, his thoughts were wonderfully quiet, simple, and clear.

There’s no denying what I’ve felt tonight, what I’ve felt all along. If he wants me as well, I have to see this through. I may be out of my mind, but I have to know what this might be, what this might mean.

The irony didn’t escape him, though. Dean thought James never wanted to see him again, and James hadn’t even had the opportunity to apologize. Tomorrow, he’d return and make things right. Tomorrow, he’d see Dean again. Wiping his release off on an obliging leaf, James shivered in a way that had nothing to do with the cold.

Interlude

Army of the Potomac, Attn: J. E. Johnston, General Commanding

October 18th, 1861

Please find attached detailed plans for Fort Albany, Fort Runyon, Fort Tillinghast, the entrenchments surrounding the Custis-Lee House, and a general map of the fortifications surrounding the approach to the Long Bridge. Fort Runyon is no longer gunned, poorly positioned and especially vulnerable, and Fort Albany is not yet complete. Several of the other forts are also under construction. It is my opinion that, should a strike against Washington be attempted from Centreville, it should be soon, before all of the defenses become operational.

Failing that, an attempt circling to the south near Alexandria remains feasible. The guns have only recently been placed at Fort Lyon and the soldiers are yet inept in using them. Fort Ellsworth is better prepared but it is but one encampment manned by a single brigade, and the two are the only,
inadequate defense of the city. The citizens of Alexandria would welcome liberation and many would take up arms to secure it. The Union soldiers positioned for its defense, though veterans, are complacent and certain that no attack will come.

I have been in Alexandria this month past but will be returning to Washington DC for the winter, and will once more have increased access to the War Department. I will forward dispatches as I am able. If it be possible for Winchester to move closer to the city, that would greatly facilitate my efforts going forward. He insists it cannot be done but if you order him, he will find a way. He’s a more resourceful bastard than he gives himself credit for.

J.B.H.

Chapter End Notes

As an FYI, the Custis-Lee Mansion - which has been mentioned several times in passing - was Robert E. Lee’s home before the war. The home is now a national monument and is known as Arlington. The property on which it sits is now Arlington National Cemetery. During the war, as an intentional snub to the south, the decision was made to bury Union dead there and turn it into a national cemetery, and such it remains to this day.

Also, my wonderful readers, I have a favor to ask - as you can likely tell by the many small mistakes that slip by me, I don't have beta-readers, so sometimes it's hard for me to get a sense of if I've accomplished something I've set out to do. If anyone wouldn't mind taking a moment and giving me their impressions of Anna based on the letter she wrote, that would be extremely helpful. Thank you! Ya'll are awesome! I hope you enjoyed this chapter!!
So, I made a fairly egregious mistake in the previous chapter that I noticed after it was posted – when I was editing, I mixed up the order of a few sentences in the paragraph where General Blaine was complaining about the South – mixed them up in a way that COMPLETELY changed the meaning of what James thought upon reflection. I’ve retconned it in Chapter 6, but for those who’ve already read past there, here’s how the paragraph should have read:

“Spent a lot of time in the South. They’re like animals. If you’ve not been down there, you’ve no idea. The poor live like dogs, lapping at the heels of the wealthy while taking scraps from their table, all the while thanking almighty God that at least they were born with white skin. The rich maintain a facade of gentility, but it’s a mask to cruel realities, their fields worked by chattel slaves, many of a suspiciously light hue with features too similar to this gentleman or that gentleman for there to be any illusions." Of course such was true, everyone knew it, but to speak it at a polite dinner, with women present, was beyond the pale. Even Mrs. Talbot looked momentarily shocked before returning to her conversation with Mr. Roman, and only Ms. Kormos seemed accepting, her expression impassive edging into what James hardly dared name indulgent. "Extermination is the solution, every last villain needs to be eliminated and the states re-colonized by good Northern stock.”

Oops. :) (In the original, I make it look as if James supports the extermination of all the people of the south...)

Chapter title is taken from a poem by Walt Whitman (all of the chapter titles for this story are period quotes) - the poem is "To A Stranger," and I think it pretty relevant to this chapter - you can read it [here](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/16475/to-a-stranger).

Also: I'm sorry about the two week hiatus from this story. I really needed a mental break, and I'll own I was feeling kind of low about it. But then the wonderful [Xenrae](https://www.xenrae.com/) made me an absolutely gorgeous piece of fanart, and it was like I got all my energy back! So I'll be focusing on this again until I need another break - I've already started the next chapter after this. Bear with me - this story is gonna be hella long, but we'll get there! :)

By the way - I'm going to add this to Chapter 1, but if you're reading along as a subscriber, take a peak at the photo manip of Castiel that Xenrae did for me!
Chapter 7: I Am to Think of You When I Sit Alone

Dearest Anna,  

October 20th, 1861

I met the most interesting man. His name is Dean Winchester. I can’t stop thinking about him.
The past few days had been maddening. James’ resolution to visit Dean on the evening of the 17th failed due to exhaustion; having not slept the night before, James retired early to his tent to doze before dark and inconceivably did not wake until the morning trumpets. When he awoke on the 18th, it was to new orders that the 27th New York would be taking over the night picket duty for the brigade, thus necessitating that James be at his station during the hours when Dean was in the thicket. The commands were given as if a gift were being bestowed, a way that James could attend the wedding without sacrificing duty to familial obligation. It was impossible to be pleased at the change, knowing that it divided him from Dean for the foreseeable future.

Despite his attraction to the man, despite the regularity with which James found himself aroused at inappropriate moments when his thoughts wandered, that was not what he unhappy about. He was not distraught for his own sake. What drove James to distraction was knowing that Dean believed that James didn’t like him, that Dean thought that James would never speak to him again, and that James was powerless to correct that misconception. By the time James was free to leave the camp again in the deep midnight, Dean might no longer be at the copse of trees. Did James have any other way to get word to the elder Winchester? All he knew were two names – Dean Winchester and Benjamin Lafitte – who could be anywhere in the vast Confederate army encamped around Centreville. If offered the opportunity, he might ask Sam, but the younger brother never gave James an opening to ask such a question, and it was inconceivable that James might bring up Dean unprompted no matter how he might wish someone to speak with about his conflicted feelings.

I can’t explain what it is about him that draws me. I cannot point to what has changed about myself, about my feelings towards you, that has allowed me to entertain thoughts of someone else, thoughts of a man. Yet, I have such feelings. The need to speak of them, to share them, is immense, but there is no one to whom I might turn. I am long used to having people to speak with when I am troubled: Gabriel and Hannah, my college friends, you of course. I am accustomed to being free with those I care about. Now that I find myself with a problem that I cannot be open about, I am driven mad by it. I can speak of it to no one, and my trapped, confined thoughts run in circles, cycling from fantasy to affection to curiosity to guilt to self-condemnation to repression. I quell them as best I can for there is no one to whom I might speak of them. Even Bradbury, whom has shown himself to enter in to some similar concerns, I can say nothing to without either lying about the nature of my paramour or confessing more than I am willing to own. I focus on my duties, distract myself as I may, attempt to not think of him and wonder, until my attention wanders or some little thing reminds me of him or I speak with one Winchester and my thoughts stray to another or I awake from a dream aching, and then the cycle begins once more.

It is wrong in me to feel this way about anyone save you.

I am shocked by the extent to which knowing that does nothing whatsoever to deter the feelings.

This is not how affection should work. It is a quiet thing, one built slowly on a foundation of mutual esteem. That is how it was with you – we met when we were young, came to know each other, found we had much in common, increasingly entered into each other’s interests and pursuits, grew together, until without hardly realizing it you became an irreplaceable fixture in my life, essential to comfort and happiness, and imagining life without you was as imagining life lacking a limb, impossible to conceive of. That was when I realized I loved you, that was when I realized I desired you, that was when I realized that I would be content to raise a family with you, to spend the rest of my life with you.

Now “content” seems such an insipid word. “Content” has nothing to do with the feelings I harbor towards Dean. I barely know him, scarce know how to esteem him, have only the most vague idea what his ideals and interests and pursuits are, and yet I want. I crave to know more of him, to see
more of his artwork, to speak with him on politics and modern events. I yearn to get to know him, to learn of his past, to understand that which troubles him, to suss out the cause of the haunted looks and sadness I so often detect about his person. I burn with the desire to touch him, grow aroused when I imagine him touching me. I cannot even write the words without a tingle passing through my skin, a longing teasing at my loins. My friends have spoken of desire with this degree of ardency, but never have I experienced it myself, not even for you. Imagining your touch shivers through me, tempts me, but it doesn’t harden me instantly, does not render it an act of willpower to not touch myself. I’d not have thought it possible for anyone to do to me what Dean Winchester does.

I have searched my heart and do not believe my love for you has waned, even as every fiber of me strains towards something that violates that affection and trust fundamentally. I have ever been horrified at the man who could scorn the love he already has in pursuit of a new one, thought him the worst kind of cad, yet now I find I am that man. Is it ever thus? That one thinks it impossible that one could behave in such a terrible fashion until the temptation is presented and one is tested?

I fear to fail this test. I fear to damn myself. Yet I cannot believe interest in a man to be as sinful nor as unnatural as has been suggested. I have always believed that the impulse to adultery was as much a violation as the act of doing it. If I loved you as I ought, could this desire have entered into my thoughts at all? That I have imagined touching Dean, that I have imagined him touching me, that I have been aroused by this fantasy, that I have come to believe that, should I speak the right words, this fantasy could become reality – in short, that I have conceived of the act and derived pleasure from that conception – I have already committed adultery.

So surely has he, touching himself while he whispered my name to what he believed to be the unhearing night. Though he have wife and child, though my shocked jealousy to learn of them drove me foolishly from his presence, I cannot convince myself that when Dean says ‘Captain’ and ‘Billy Yank’ he means anyone other than me. Perhaps that is hubris. Perhaps that is self-deception. Perhaps it is merely wishful thinking. I do not know, but I believe it to be truth – that my attraction is shared and that, based on the things he has said, my esteem is reciprocated.

What, then, is there to prevent me proceeding further? If I am to be damned, I might as well be in for a pound as a penny. It is as Bradbury has said – better to regret having done, having explored, having lived, than to regret harboring the thoughts and not acting on them, to wonder what might have been. But, Lord, I wish this had never happened.

I dare not sign off this letter as ever I have before, for to do so would be disingenuous, so I merely write to you as——

J. C. Novak

Signing off with a scrawl, James surveyed the frantically scribbled words, ink splotched and smudged in his haste. Every inch of the page was covered in sloppy script and he could easily have written more had he more time. The conflict in his mind and heart was enough to fill an encyclopedia. It was all madness, irresistible madness. He’d taken no care to neatness as he wrote, spent no bother on giving the liquid time to dry. It was poor, watery ink, and as he lifted the paper it streaked and flowed in rivulets along the paper, smearing the words to nonsensical blurs, rendering the page soggy. The writing resembled the distracted ravings of a madman. With a sigh, he crumpled the letter into a ball and threw it into the flames, wiping the ink that blackened his hand on to his writing desk. In the first instant of heat it crackled and spit as the liquid resisted the flame, and then the paper blackened and smoldered and burnt to ash. James stared at it until he was sure every word had been destroyed. None could ever know what he had written on that page. There was no one to whom he could speak his of his feelings save the man himself, and he had no opportunity to do that.
That was what troubled him most of all.

Objectively, it should trouble him deeply that of all the terrible, problematic, scandalous aspects of his situation, his inability to spend time with Dean was what most ate at him. Knowing that didn’t change the reality of his feelings. James needed to see Dean, more than he cared to see his family at the wedding, more than he longed to see his distant fiancée, more than he wished to see wrongs righted, even more than he felt compelled to do his duty.

Nay, he was not so gone as that. If he were, he’d have shirked, he’d have found an excuse to leave his post and creep to the copse of trees to spill out his troubled thoughts. He wasn’t yet so far gone.

But it is a tempting thought. I would only need one evening to correct his misconceptions and establish a rapport with him, to learn what I must to communicate with him further in the future.

With a sigh, he rose, brushed his clothing off and went to the corralled horses to retrieve his own. It was a long ride to downtown Washington, and it would not do to be late to Hannah’s wedding. He’d write an actual letter to Anna in the evening, before his picket duty, and tell her of the events of the day, and never, ever mention Dean Winchester’s existence to her.

The wedding was modestly spectacular, if such a thing were possible. The Church of the Epiphany was minimally decorated, allowing its natural beauty to shine through. Austere and exquisite, the walls were painted pristine white, the rafters and buttresses and arches deep polished wood that accentuated the clean lines of the interior. Glowing gas chandeliers illuminated the space, necessary even on the bright fall day because the church had hardly any windows. As James walked in, the organ reverberated through the space, throbbed through his chest, wiped his mind wonderfully clear for the first time in days. Simple white swags lined the pews along the center aisle and an immense stained glass window illuminated the apse in a rainbow of fragmented colors. Elkins, now officially titled General, stood at the front, handsome in his brand new uniform, sporting fancy epaulettes to show his new rank. He looked calmly impassive, neither excited nor anticipatory nor unhappy nor bored. James had seen precisely the same look on Elkins’ face as he’d waited patiently through a long day of drill. No matter how well James came to know his soon-to-be brother-in-law, he never understood the attraction between Elkins and the exuberant Hannah. The appeal on Elkins’ side was obvious – Hannah was young, beautiful, intelligent, energetic, sure to be a committed wife and excellent mother – but what Hannah saw in Elkins would likely remain a mystery to James. He didn’t doubt that she loved her husband, and he was sure that where Hannah loved, she would be happy, but he could not see what drew them together.

Why does any one person love any other?

James had thought he’d understood what spawned affection until he met Dean. Now that he had experienced that epiphany of emotion that accompanied unexpected attraction, he could better understand the many couples he’d met in his life whose commonalities were beyond his ability to fathom. He’d once been inclined to judge such couples harshly, regardless of how happy they appeared, but now he understood how unfair he had been. The feelings required no explanation; it was enough that they existed and must be given a chance at expression.

Delays at the bridge crossings meant that James arrived scarcely before the ceremony began. Rather than disrupt many seeking a seat in the crowded rows of pews, he silently took a seat in the back, staring at the backs of Washington’s finest. The men were mostly staid in blacks and browns; the women wore ornate feathered hats and coiffed hair that obscured his view when he was no longer standing.

Seeing Hannah was the highlight of the event. Moments after James arrived, the doors swung open and the bride stepped into view. Every expense spared when the church was left unadorned was
lavished on Hannah’s wardrobe. She was beautifully modest in a high-necked, shimmering satin dress with wide skirts that swished before her each time she stepped. The bodice and bottom foot of the dress were decorated with gathered fabric and festooned with beautiful pink bows, and her floor-length sheer lace veil was affixed to her head with roses made of the same pink ribbon. A delicate bouquet of pink tea roses, baby’s breath and gayfeather, was clutched in her hands, and she beamed demurely, cheeks a delicate flush to match her bows and flowers, as she walked down the aisle. She caught James’ eye and winked as she walked by, and he couldn’t but smile to see his youngest sister so obviously overjoyed. She passed from his view, and James could see nothing else. It mattered little. All weddings were alike, with the usual “wilt thous” and “I wills,” hands clasped, hands unclasped, kneeling, rising, and heartfelt prayers to the Lord to bless the union. The sentiment of the event was in sharing it with loved ones, and in the reception that was to follow, and so he contented himself with his blocked view, closing his eyes to bask in the familiar rhythm of ritualistic words of the ceremony.

Willards’ Hotel, a short walk from the church, was the site of the reception. Many of the guests attending the wedding were staying at the hotel, and the reception hall was lovely and well-suited to a large group. Despite the advantages of the location, James thought the choice gauche, and in it saw his parents’ influence on the nuptials. Many prominent congressmen made Willards’ their home while they were in the capital, and staying there and using their facilities gave the wedding entourage occasion to grow their relationships with the influential. Far be it for the Novaks to pass up the chance to turn a happy occasion into an opportunity to further the family and the causes they supported. The longer James spent away from them, the more mercenary their behavior seemed. Joining the procession accompanying the bride and groom to the hotel, he watched Zachariah, Michael and his sister and brother-in-law Rachel and Frederick Seward engage in eager conversation with a knot of senators and the Secretary of State himself, Rachel’s father-in-law William Seward. Disgust twisted his stomach, and James reminded himself how important their work was, how crucial politics was to furthering abolition and suffrage and the other social causes that his family believed in. Their actions weren’t for personal gain but for the greater good. Mr. and Mrs. Talbot wandered by, and James’ stomach turned further. That the two business people were invited to his sister’s wedding proved the lie. However important Zachariah’s investments might be to the war effort, they were also extremely lucrative. James had never felt further from his family even though he was surrounded by more members of it than had been in one place since Christmas of ‘58.

Upon arrival at the spacious reception room, James sought out his sister and brother-in-law to wish them hearty congratulations. Now that the event was passed, Elkins did appear moved: he smiled brightly and wore most bemused, abstracted expression each time he glanced at Hannah. James was pleased to see it. His sister deserved someone with passion to match hers, and while James had seen Elkins display such passion as a commander – not in fiery displays but in diligence and attention to duty – this was the first sign of it he’d seen in Elkins’ interpersonal relations.

“The new Colonel arrives tomorrow,” Elkins attempted to segue, but before he could say any more on the topic, Senator Sherman seized his hand and shook it enthusiastically while congratulating him and suggesting that his brother could use an officer of Elkins’ rank and quality at his new posting at the west. A woman James did not know used her skirts to aggressively clear space around the groom so she might shake his hand next. James was left to wonder who their new commander was and to smile and shake his head that, for all the promises of influence and aid made by Roman and others, James was not the man. A weight James hadn’t realized he bore lifted from his shoulders and his thoughts quieted with relief. Drifting to the side of the room, James watched the complex dance of the guests seeking acquaintance and influence and wondered how he had ever looked forward to the reception as the more pleasant part of the wedding.

“Ah, James,” Zachariah approached him, waving and smiling his most unctuously. Taking up station beside James, Zachariah gave a look that projected welcome to the room and before James knew
what was happening a group of men and their fancifully dressed wives assembled and Zachariah introduced him to all. At a loss how meeting him had become an object, James shook hands and exchanged hasty “how do you dos” with every one as Zachariah slowly worked through the crowd, dragging James in his wake. All the while, Zachariah kept up a constant patter of small talk, “it’s a pleasure to see you, Mr. Simmons, how does your daughter? Ah, Mr. Lane, your efforts in regards to requisitions have not been overlooked. Mr. Browning, you stand in the shoes of giants – haha! – but you have filled them admirably.” By the time Zachariah finally settled into a conversation with a set group, James was famished, he’d lost track of who was who nearly an hour before, and his hand ached from the number of firm grips to which he’d been subjected. As far as he could tell, his sole purpose was to stand dumbly and be obviously in uniform, and so he obliged Zachariah, wondered when the meal would be served, and had a shocking idle thought suggest that it might be enjoyable to dance with Dean Winchester when, inevitably, the floor was cleared for a waltz.

“As you not going to say hello to your mother?” Mrs. Novak lay a gloved hand on James arm to draw his attention, as if her cutting words were not adequate to do so.

“My apologies,” James said, lowering his eyes guiltily. “Hello, mother. How do you do today? How was your journey?” It seemed odd that she should be unchanged since last he’d seen her; it felt a life time ago though it had been but six months. Smooth skinned despite her age, her features were bluff, her beauty derived from her authority and confidence rather than from her thin lipped smile and broad nose. Her chestnut hair was streaked with gray that did nothing to detract from the power she projected, the ease with which her steely presence made him feel a child. As befit the mother of the bride, her dress was extremely fine without having the least ostentation to it. By the fashion of the day, her skirts were small, but the materials were of the utmost quality and the workmanship was impeccable. Everywhere she went, the way cleared before her as for a queen amongst her court.

“I have not received a letter from you in sometime,” she said.

“I’m sorry.” Only a lifetime of facing her kept him from mumbling as he colored in shame. “I have written often, but I cannot account for the post.” He’d written her diligently each week, and his father a separate letter, but now he wondered if he shouldn’t have done more. He wrote to Anna nearly every day. “Anna tells me my letters arrive dreadfully late and out of order.”

“Ms. Milton,” corrected Naomi sternly. “And that is true, I have had a couple arrived months after you posted them.” The hand on his arm firmed and pointedly steered James clear of Zachariah’s political conversation. “Your father and I will be visiting Fort Lyon tomorrow.”

“It would be my pleasure to show you around.”

“General Elkins says that his replacement is to be a fellow from Albany, a West Point graduate turned politician named Crowley?” Naomi asked. James shook his head, unable to offer further intelligence. She frowned.

“I was not aware, mother,” he explained hastily. Surely he was too old to be required to acknowledge her every statement with a spoken reply! Yet her displeased expression broke at his words, and James felt even more like a petulant boy than he had under her initial scolding for his supposed neglect in not greeting her.

“It is a disappointment,” she said mildly, taking a moment to adjust his appearance, straighten the shoulders on his coat, pull down on the front so it lay smooth over his flat chest. “I’m sure you’ve done your best, however.” Her tone cut him deep, conveying her certainty that James had done nothing of the kind. His parents knew how committed he was to his duty, knew how hard he worked at everything he devoted himself to, had raised him to be as diligent and determined as they. That she should think him otherwise was shocking. Blind-sided by her unmerited attack, he could think of no
reply that would not sound defensive, petulant and juvenile.

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” he finally managed, abashed.

“Your father does as well,” she said, expression impassive. “It is not too late to return with us for the remainder of the season. Wayne County has yet to meet the recruitment goals set for the state. If you are to be a mere Captain while lesser men gain promotion, it would be best that you be home, using your abilities to aid the war effort there. If a new Regiment could be raised, influence could be exerted with the Governor to see that you made the Colonel. I believe that is what your friend Boyle has done – see how successful he is, a credit to his family!” Naomi gestured towards where Boyle stood among a knot of simpering young ladies, regaling them with some story that had them hanging on his every word. “Even better, he has position in Washington and is able to devote his efforts accordingly. You are wasted on this outpost position, son.”

Unable to give voice to any of the protestation that flooded his head, James averted his eyes floorward. “Mother—”

“You know we only want what’s best for you,” Naomi continued relentlessly. “It is a credit to the family that you have joined up as you have, and any can see you fill the uniform splendidly. Yet Zachariah informs me you are rarely at his table, and Hannah gushes romantic about your duty and fidelity. That is splendid, James, but you are destined for greater than to die a martyr to any cause, even one so important as this. You can serve your duty far better by exercising your skills at a rank befitting your upbringing and education, and you can benefit the cause to a much greater extent if you are able to be of aid to your brothers. You are wasted in a Captaincy.”

“That was not my impression of your and father’s sentiments when I first received my commission from Governor Morgan in May,” James finally found words to throw in her way. Guilt rose powerfully and painfully. Was he being selfish to remain with the 27th New York, especially now that the possibility of promotion was once more grown distant? Anna languished at home awaiting him, Zachariah strove day in and day out to effect political change in the capital, Gabriel was not in attendance at the wedding, having forgone personal pleasures in the name of removing to Kentucky to aid in the growing contraband crisis there, and Hester was working with the Sanitary Commission to develop a system of field hospitals so that the appalling conditions endured by those injured at Bull Run would not be replicated in future battles. What had James done while they had been so productively occupied? Helped to build a fortress. Aided a few score runaways who happened upon his path. Trained his troops. Supported his officers. Languished in camp in idle boredom. Obsessed about Dean Winchester.

His mother’s stern look and silence spoke volumes. She knew her point made, knew her argument was unimpeachable. Either James believed himself capable of more, in which case he was at best lazy and at worst indolent to remain at his post, or he did not believe himself capable of more, in which case he was an embarrassment to his family. The plaintive voice that whispered that he did not wish to do more – that he was precisely where he wished to be – was impossible to credit. He should want more. What he wanted meant little in comparison to how he could best benefit the family and the country.

“Well,” she said crisply, the ghost of a smile crossing her lips without having the least impact on any other part of her expression. “We may speak of this more tomorrow upon our visit – I expect your father will wish to make his thoughts known to you as well. He received your letter declining his suggesting to return home mere days ago and he was not pleased – but I’ll not put words in his mouth.”

James opened his mouth to thank her, to find some appropriate expression of familial obligation upon
her departure to socialize with others, but no words came. He could not think of a thing to say. Instead, he struggled to meet her icy blue eyes, thoroughly cowed and drowning in shame and self-condemnation. She waited, chin raised regally, for him to speak, her impassive face betraying nothing when he snapped his mouth shut, thrust his hands behind his back and wrung his fingers together anxiously.

“Ah, Mrs. Talbot, correct? Zachariah has told me so much about you.” Mrs. Novak noticed the businessman’s wife standing somewhere behind James and easily transitioned to being a gracious hostess, leaving James speechless and stunned as she brushed by him, waving pleasantly.

“She’s wrong about you, you know,” a soft voice spoke at James’ ear, and he snapped up straight. “Good God, are you this tense all the time? You must be a real joy to be around when there’s gunfire and cannon going off.”

“Hester,” he sighed, relaxing. “No, I’m not this tense all the time.” Turning, James put a hand to his head, rubbing his temples, as he turned to face his eldest sister. More than anything, she resembled a younger version of Naomi despite her wheaten hair. Her face was on the square side, eyes pale, and there was too much directness about her for her to appear beautiful by conventional standards. She and James had never been close; there was nearly a decade between them, and by the time he was old enough to be able to converse intelligibly, she was 18, the youngest attendee at the Seneca Falls Convention, and thoroughly engrossed in the feminist causes that had were her primary focus before the war brought her to nursing.

“Mother just…I simply…” He flushed.

“I heard,” Hester said dryly. “And as I said, she’s completely wrong. It appears to me she has forgotten the lessons she spent a lifetime instilling in us – that achievement does not come all at once, that it is better to work quietly and diligently than to seize the spotlight and grandstand. It’s true that you risk a lot, Cassie, and that at the moment you toil in obscurity, but in the long run, the potential rewards for your choices are commensurate to the risks. Your friend Boyle makes himself better known by staying behind high walls in Washington, but his braggadocio guarantees that he is a mockery. In the end, all will see him for what he is; whereas by quietly doing as you do, seeing to your duty, attending to your Company, not only do you prepare them for the conflict, but you ensure that both you and they are prepared to seize glory when the moment comes for it.”

“Unless I get shot,” sighed James. “Or we are left to languish in Fort Lyon for the duration of the war, or I get dysentery, or am accidentally trampled to death by an artillery unit. It’s impossible to be in the army for any amount of time and believe that a glorious fate awaits us. For every Elmer Ellsworth to die gloriously hoisting the flag there are dozens – nay, probably hundreds – who are dying every day in obscurity. The reaper cares not what rank we are. I’ve already been ill once, and I still am queasy many a morning though I recovered near a month since. If I’d died then, what of all that I might have done to help end slavery? What then of Anna and our family and Zachariah’s plans?”

“If you are called early, you are called early,” she shrugged, her practical calico dress making the gesture easy where a more corseted, fashionable woman would have scarce been able to move. “You know, mother didn’t wish me to go to Seneca Falls. She felt I should stay home, allow Mr. Hayes to court me, wed before I attached myself to any cause. We are not bound to our parents’ wishes, no matter how loudly they may state them, and so long as our chosen path brings success, they will relent in the end. From what you say, your service seems to have one of two ends – either you will die in service to your country, in which case it will not matter what they thought, or you will serve with distinction, in which case in the long run they will be satisfied. Mother sells you far short of your worth and much mistakes your character, to think that the best you can do for the family is to
make a pretty accent piece in Zachariah’s parlor. Despite having known you all your life I think she
is under the mistaken impression that this sort of environment suits you.” Hester made a gesture that
encompassed the entire room: the musicians tuning their instruments, the staff laying out tables for
their afternoon meal, the politicians arguing loudly, the young woman gathered around Hannah to
fuss and titter over her lovely dress. “I can think of no place more ill-suited to you. Leave Rachel and
Zachariah to senate chambers and pretty words; you and I and Gabriel and Hannah are people of
action. When that action is that which mother herself would have taken, she finds it commendable;
it’s only when she would have chosen otherwise that she begins to natter and pester.”

Despite the disquiet yet roiling in his mind, James smiled. “You think her valid suggestions that I am
squandering myself as a Captain amount to nattering and pestering?”

“Indubitably,” Hester confirmed, returning the smile. “Everyone frets to see the army frittering away
the fine fall weather. It’s near November, yet McClellan insists the time has not come to advance.
Mother has been in Washington for near a week and has heard naught but complaints that winter is
near come without action. While here she has spoken with nearly us all: seen how busy I am with the
hospital; had ample opportunity to observe how in demand Zachariah is among Washington’s elites;
has secured invitation, thanks to Rachel, to dine with the President and the Cabinet; and has had
Hannah’s nuptials and General Elkins’ promotion to celebrate. Though Gabriel is as always a
dilatory correspondent, Raphael makes up for that in spades, sending essays home once per week
knowing full well that each letter will be published in *the Liberator* and syndicated elsewhere, so that
those interested in the Cause will know how fare the contraband. Every child thus presents her with
the appearance of busyness and application that she deems appropriate – and then there is you. To
her mind you must be utterly unoccupied for she has not the least idea what a soldier in camp might
do with themselves save the worst kind of idleness, yet you send but a single letter a week – two if
you count the messages to father – and they but a dull, brief message on a handful of slaves
encountered, the southern bastion completed, Henriksen offended. It is kitchen gossip, especially as
compared to all the rest, so she assumes you do nothing and grows discontent.”

“I hadn’t pictured it that way,” James admitted. “I am so busy all of the time, and the bulk of it is so
exceedingly boring and uninteresting, that I scarce know how to fill a page. I spend near 16 hours a
day on duty, and every issue among my troops comes to me and…” He trailed off as Hester held up
a hand to quiet him.

“You do not need to convince me,” she said gently. “I have been among soldiers constantly since I
arrived in July, and I’ve seen the ludicrous minutiae that goes into keeping a hundred men fed,
clothed, prepared for battle and satisfied with their lot. If mother would open her eyes and look at all
that goes on around her, she would see it to. I suggest you contrive to give her a demonstration
tomorrow.” Turning her upraised hand into an invitation that he lead the way, Hester urged James
towards one of the long tables that finely clad servants were setting up. As the family of the bride,
they had seats of honor near her for the meal. The tables were beautifully turned out, all in white and
gold and crystal, pristine table cloth, simple yet tasteful china, tinkling glasses, gleaming candelabras,
the whole accented by small vases of baby’s breath. As he moved to his place, James considered
what he might do to show his commitment when Michael and Naomi visited him. Given the night
duty that Company B was working, it was a tall order to meet; at the moment the Company spent
much of the morning hours asleep, only to be woken at noon for breakfast followed by long hours of
drill on rifle and artillery.

“While there will be drill to watch,” he replied as he took his seat, “but I find that the inexperienced
eye is completely unable to appreciate the practice required to present a clean drill. Only one who has
observed the disastrous attempts of a novice regiment truly understand the precision and expertise
required to execute a maneuver cleanly.”
“Father will know,” pointed out Hester. “If mother tries to suggest otherwise, he’ll correct her.” She must have caught the skepticism in James’ expression, for she laughed, her eyes lighting up. She was ever at her loveliest with a smile on her face. It made such a wonderful contrast to when she was serious, the sound was so lovely, and her mirth was so rare. “I believe he will. They do not want to be disappointed in you. Quite the contrary, they wish to be able to crow about your achievements every bit as loudly as they do over every other child’s, to announce to Mrs. Carrigan that you have done this or that. As far as I’ve observed, that is the core of their frustration – those who know them ask, ‘how does Hester? How does Gabriel?’ and they have excellent, smug answers, but when the question comes, ‘how does James?’ the only reply they can make is ‘he is a Captain in the army.’ Worst, that is not new news, for they have been able to report that to their friends and correspondents since May. A scandal to think that in six months James Novak has not distinguished himself with fame and plaudits despite having no military background and being part of an army that has only marched into combat once, and then to defeat!” James colored again. “Do not be ashamed of it, brother. It is not on you. As I said, when your opportunity comes, all of the hard work you have quietly done will show to effect, none will doubt that Company B of the 27th New York Infantry is as fine a Company in as fine a Regiment as ever to march in this army of civilians.”

“You can’t know that,” he protested. “You cannot imagine what it is like to be under fire. Nothing done outside of the battlefield compares to it, there is no way to prepare for the experience.”

“Were you frightened?” There was no sympathy in her voice, it was merely a question. He nodded. “Did you stand your ground?” He nodded again. “Are you prepared to do it again?” A third time. “Are your troops similarly prepared?” A fourth. “Then you are worrying for nothing, I remain confident: when the time comes, you will do as you ought.” She broke into a grin at his obvious embarrassment. “And I will have a chance to participate in and see all!”

“What?” he asked, astonished.

“The field hospitals have been approved and funded,” she shared happily. “George Strong – do you know him?” James shook his head, and Hester gestured at a slim gentlemen whose receding hair was combed neatly back from clean-shaven cheeks, seated among a group none of whom James recognized. “He is the Sanitary Commission’s treasurer and has guaranteed the funds. At my request, I am sent to organize and manage a hospital attached to General Elkins’ brigade. Helping me to set up the hospital should provide you all the opportunity for activity that our parents could wish to observe.” Seeing James puzzled expression, she rolled her eyes. “Your brigade, James: Elkins is made general of your brigade.”

“So you’re joining the army?” he asked, dazed at the news, unable to think of anything save the many dreadful potential consequences. What danger she would be exposed to, serving in a hospital in the front line! She might be killed, grow ill, be subject to deprivation and indignity, exposed to the worst suffering of man. If a battle were to go poorly, she might be captured and at the mercy of rebels, and no matter how likeable and honorable Dean Winchester might be, James could scarce credit he was the model on which all Confederates were based. Many Union soldiers had been captured at Bull Run and rumor spoke of the outrages to which they had been subjected. At best, she suggested to spend the entirety of the winter making camp with them through the frigid cold, rain and snow that was to come. There was absolutely no way in which Fort Lyon was an appropriate place for her. “Hester, I don’t think…” She shut him down with a stern look as the first course of the meal was set before them, a steaming bowl of stew that smelled divinely of cream and shellfish, perfect for the cooling weather outside but a bit much for the closeness of the crowded room.

Taking a spoonful of soup, blowing on it gently to cool it, Hester met his eyes. “I am returning with you tonight, in fact.” James blinked. She drank the soup, her expression showing her appreciation for the flavor. James took his own spoonful and had it at his mouth when she continued. “Someone must
James choked on his soup. “She’s coming too?” he managed raggedly.

“No force on earth – not even Mrs. Naomi Novak – could compel her from Elkins’ side now that they are wed,” she grinned. “After the honeymoon, they’ll return together so that Hannah may ‘keep tent’ as she might instead have ‘kept house.’ Going forward, Fort Lyon will be a regular Novak family reunion.”

Shaking his head, James took another spoonful of soup. Forget having a Company of soldiers to help, forget Dean Winchester and all the conundrums he posed; watching over his sisters was tantamount to a full time job all by itself.

Dearest Anna,

October 24th, 1861

In all likelihood, my silence the past few days has not even been observable from your vantage point, give the irregularities of mail delivery, but nonetheless I am sorry for it. Since Monday – nay, since Sunday evening – I have been as busy as I was when we first arrived in Washington, when everything needed doing at once and when we scarce knew one end of the rifle from the other. I wish that the source of this bustle was that we were to advance, but it is no such. Our new Colonel, Mr. Fergus Roderick Crowley of Saratoga Springs, has been reviewing every member of the company from drummer boy to quartermaster, every item from to tent spike to cap case, with an eye on every belt buckle and hang nail. The result has been pandemonium as all seek to impress him even though he does not appear to feel the least need to impress us. Thus far he has been condemnatory of our efforts, aloof, and sometimes downright cruel. His behavior towards Henriksen has been particularly appalling, reviewing his uniform time and time again and always protesting that despite Henriksen’s efforts, there remains some stain that has not been cleansed. It is sickening and I’d resign over it, but that the Colonel has seen fit to distinguish me, and I have hopes that through what little influence I might have with him thanks to my unasked for authority, I might convince him to cease his abominable behavior.

As I alluded to last paragraph, I am promoted after all, if not to the extent that my family wished for. Not made Colonel, a position I did not wish anyway, but made Major, to serve on Colonel Crowley’s staff. In my place, Fitzgerald is Captain of Company B, another slight to Henriksen, and Bradbury is second Lieutenant. As Major I am not to show Company B any peculiar distinction nor to be involved in their affairs except to the extent necessary to see through my current duties, but I find the prospect of not attending to them incomprehensible. They have been my sole responsibility for half a year and it is discomfiting to see them under the command of another even though I have not the least doubt in Fitzgerald’s ability to man the post.

As a Major, I bear many of the same responsibilities I did formerly, but on a larger scale. Where once I served but a Company, now I pursue my efforts on behalf of the entire Regiment. Thus, for example, the Captains bring me their requisition lists and I am to liaise with the Quartermaster to see their requests supplied, and when goods are delivered I am to ensure the equitable distribution of said supplies. There is a great deal more of the same but I’ll not bore you with the details. General Elkins informs me that it will also be my responsibility to lead the Regiment into battle while the Colonel and Lieutenant Colonel Tanner coordinate from behind, so I regret to say that the extent to which I advance in to danger will rather be increased by this promotion than decreased.

Much to my chagrin, Hester has taken up permanent residence in our camp. Did you know such was coming? Helping her to set up her field hospital has occupied our days as surely as picket duty has occupied our nights, but it is completed now and already home to several dozen sick men, a
handful of soldiers injured during the construction, and several recently arrived contraband who were nearly killed making their escape.

For once, I find I have more to write in a letter than time to commit it to paper. I have skipped a meal in order to pen this, and now my break is up. I hope to have time to write more tomorrow, and as always await whatever word I might have of you eagerly. Until then, I remain—

Your, J. C. Novak

When James’ parents arrived in camp, they came in company with Colonel Crowley and Lieutenant Colonel Tanner, speaking companionably as old friends. The news was promptly shared that James was to be major, and where James had been dreading the visit from Michael and Naomi, with this good news all sins were forgiven, and James didn’t even need the illusion of ordering his Company in the construction of Hester’s hospital. This was fortunate, since the Colonel expected James to begin immediately, and he had hardly the least idea a Major was expected to do. He learned quickly enough, as fortunately he was able to locate former Major Carnegie, of Elkins’ staff, now made attache thanks to Elkins promotion.

Fortunately, as it turned out, James’ new responsibilities were similar to his old, save on a much larger scale and with far fewer people to help him. Where before, he had two lieutenants and near a score other officers with whom to divide responsibility for management, governance, and logistics essential in the overseeing of 70 men who could scarce do a thing for themselves within the constraints of the military order, now James worked virtually alone to oversee the supply and care for near 700 men, plus the contraband and the camp followers. Further, he was expected to coordinate with the staff for the other regiments in the brigade to ensure that their needs were aligned and that all requisitions and reports were delivered up the chain of command in good order. Theoretically, Colonel Crowley and Lieutenant Colonel Tanner devoted as much of their time to such responsibilities as James did, but in practice, both officers were frequently absent even in those first few frenetic days of transition. On a blustery morning near the end of October, a periodic frigid drizzle soaking all, James glanced from his duties for a moment to observe the Colonel and Lieutenant Colonel receiving visitors – General A.Z. Blaine, accompanied by Ms. Harvelle, Mrs. Talbot and several uniformed men that James did not know. The sound of Mrs. Talbot’s bright laugh echoed through the camp and prompted many an inappropriate comment from the men, only silenced when James’ temper got the better of him and he snapped that the next man to suggest an indignity against Mrs. Talbot’s or Ms. Harvelle’s person would be horsewhipped. That shut them up, and though James thought they feared the punishment, Winchester quietly suggested to him later that the soldiers were more shocked at his unfamiliar show of pique than they were intimidated by the empty threat.

If not for Samuel Winchester James thought surely he’d have lost his mind. Colonel Crowley had begrudgingly allowed James to retain his clerk, an indulgence he bestowed as if giving James a most wondrous, unearned gift. Hardworking, intelligent, and devoted to his duty, Sam unprotestingly shared James’ tiny new tent and kept the same unhealthy hours that James’ new duties forced him to. They woke at dawn and from that time til near midnight they worked, covering the duties that of all three men, since the Colonel could so rarely be found by those who sought him. When Crowley and Tanner could not be located all turned to James to solve whatever earth shattering dilemma preoccupied him. Disinterested in whatever task he’d been in the middle of, the petitioners poured into his ear whatever information they had to share, whatever grievance they felt the need to get off their chest or, worst of all, whatever gossip they simply could not contain themselves from sharing. That last, James had recently gotten in the habit of telling precisely what he thought of them wasting his time. To Captain Fitzgerald’s jibe that being rude to those most likely to spread word of what he said to any who would listen was not the best way for James to make friends and spread influence, James countered sarcastically that any who could not recognize how little value such men had were
not friends that he needed, and that he’d rather be known for his competence and efficiency than for his ability to suffer fools. Fitzgerald had wisely held his tongue on the topic thereafter and James gratefully observed the new Captain speaking with his comrades in hushed tones, noticed afterwards the noticeable decline in nonsense that found its way to James’ tent. Even without the added distractions, there was still more than he and Sam could do each day.

Bright and early the last day of October saw James in Colonel Crowley’s tent for a meeting with his commanding officer. Winchester was left in his tent to field the endless stream of callers and to tackle the never-ending mountain of paperwork on James’ small desk. Too tired to concentrate effectively, James iterated and reiterated a task list for his day to come, quibbling with himself over prioritizing, frustratedly forcing himself to attempt to schedule time adequate for the inevitable interruptions that would plague him. They always came at the worst possible time, too, when he and Winchester had finally found the momentum to make progress on some task that required their concentration.

“Are you listening, Major?” asked Crowley pointedly. Though his expression was always pleasant, a faint smile unobscured by his short-trimmed, neat facial hair, Crowley’s voice managed to permanently convey a sneer.

“Yes, sir,” James replied. “That is good news, the winter gear will be much appreciated by the men. Do you know when we’ll receive it?”

“Delivery is slated for the first week of November,” Crowley explained with the air of someone repeating themselves for the fourth time, though James had been paying attention and Crowley hadn’t said anything of the kind. “We are one of the first brigades in the army to be thus supplied, which has been no small feat to achieve.”

There was an implication to his words that James couldn’t care enough about to attempt to understand. Something about politicking, James suspected, something related to all the time Crowley spent away from the Regiment, speaking with others, and how little time he spent about his duties at Fort Lyon. Idly, James wondered if that was the kind of work his mother would prefer him to do – leaving his post to enjoy fine meals and high company, leaving subordinates to the burden of the work, earning the praise for a ship-shape Regiment without doing any of the work. It was the sort of co-option that his mother had always decried, yet from what James had seen thus far, doing such would be the only way to meet his family’s expectations. Their good spirits with him had lasted two days; when he’d seen them their last night in Washington they’d both agreed that with any luck Colonel Crowley would help James to find a post more suited to his abilities. He smiled as best he could in the face of their high expectations, clung to Hester’s words, and took strength from the scathing looks his sister directed at Naomi whenever their mother was too focused on James to notice. At least Michael saw the merit of James’ achievements, praised him even as he pushed James to not grow complacent with what he’d already achieved.

Crowley was staring at him with raised eyebrows, and with difficulty James forced his attention to the present. “Major.” Crowley managed to make the title sound like an insult every time he said it. “I understand that you have been struggling with the duties assigned to you. If you are not able to execute the responsibilities of your new rank, there are other junior officers who would be delighted to take your place. I hope you understand the importance of each of our roles, and the necessity of the Regiment being well-managed.”

“Yes, sir.” He could do this. He had to do this. There was too much at stake for him to fail.

“Along those lines, Tanner and I have been discussing shifts of duty. We believe the Regiment would benefit from having one of us be available and on duty at all times, supervising and overseeing the troops, dealing with any unexpected situations that arise, while of course continuing
to execute the day-to-day operational minutiae. As such, in addition to your current duties you are assigned to oversee those troops assigned to overnight duty. I do not merely mean staying awake in your tent and awaiting word of trouble – I expect you to patrol, Major, to make rounds and check on the line throughout the evening.” James’ stomach lurched, his head spun dizzily. He was scarce managing enough sleep as it was; adding overnight to his existing responsibilities left him with no time at all.

“Yes, sir.” He was scarce conscious of forming the words.

“You are doing well,” added Crowley as if bestowing lavish praise, as if he hadn’t just threatened to remove James from his position. Whatever it took, he could not risk demotion. It would ruin his career. Word would get out that James was inadequate to greater responsibilities and future opportunities for advancement would evaporate as dew before the summer sun. No one would care that Crowley was asking an unreasonable amount from him. All that those outside the Regiment would see was that James had been given an opportunity that he was unable to rise to, that he’d cracked under the pressure of increased responsibilities and clearly could not be trusted above the rank of Captain. Whatever it took, he must shoulder whatever burdens Crowley saw fit to heap on him, no matter the strain. It would not be forever. Crowley in no way acted like a men content to be a mere Colonel.

“Thank you, sir.” James waited patiently. Crowley turned to Tanner.

“So, Tanner, have you secured the invitation to Mr. Roman’s...” Crowley trailed off and turned to James with a distasteful expression. “You’re still here, Major?”

James flushed angrily. “My apologies. If there’s nothing else?” He rose, straightening his uniform. Crowley waved towards the tent flap dismissively, and James left.

The light outside was bright enough to sting his eyes. Feeling numb, James retreated to the tent that he’d been assigned next to theirs. He shared it with Winchester, and inside were two cots, a small desk, and a chest for their things. It wasn’t much to call home, but it was more than he’d had as a Captain, more than nearly anyone else had. Winchester looked up from the page he was working on and swept long hair back from his face, his hat set on the corner of the desk.

“What’s wrong, sir?” he asked. James wondered how his face must look, to prompt such worry.

“Great.” He almost didn’t recognize his own voice, so much anger and frustrating slipped into the single word. “I’ll be staying up the night to monitor our pickets.” Winchester opened his mouth to speak, but James pressed on. “In addition to everything we are already doing. Tell me, Winchester – do you think I’ve done anything to make Colonel Crowley hate me?” With an aggravated snarl, James dropped into his cot, which promptly collapsed beneath his weight, dropping him onto the hard-packed dirt beneath. “Damn it!” Winchester blinked in shock.

“Anything he say?” Winchester asked earnestly. “Can the overnight duties be split?”

“No.” Rubbing his aching behind, James rose and scowled at the broken cot. “It would be best if you sleep as much as you are able. I’ll need you here during the day and I will sleep as I may when we are less busy.”

“That reminds me – while you were meeting with the Colonel, your sister came by asking to speak with you,” Winchester said.

Rubbing grit from his eyes, James gave up on the cot. He’d sleep on the ground again. He was used to it at this point. “Thank you, I’ll follow up with her immediately. Make sure you have the updated
sick roster ready by the time I return, the General has requested it to forward to Washington.”
Winchester murmured an acknowledgement and hunched back over his work. James could swear the boy had grown inches since they’d met, and he’d been tall to begin with.

After a week growing used to his new duties, James had finally begun to find a rhythm, and he’d dared hope that he might have the opportunity to finally visit Dean over the next few days. As he made the shower walk to the hospital tent, James abandoned that hope. There was no way he could sneak off, not with so much riding on his shoulders, not with Crowley clearly determined to weigh him down and see him mess up. Perhaps this was secretly a boon to him. Perhaps he was clandestinely being protected from his own temptation by a kind and benevolent Lord, who saw his willpower faltering and thus contrived a change to James’ circumstances that forced him to behave as he ought. The thoughts did nothing to make him feel better. All they did was increase the guilt he felt that his desire to see Dean was unabated; indeed, James thought it amplified by his stress, fatigue, their long separation and the misunderstanding that James had yet to have the opportunity to correct. If he could have but five minutes to speak with the man! But it was impossible before, doubly impossible now.

“I have terrible news for you, Lieutenant,” Hester’s warm voice reached him as soon as he stepped in to the large tent serving as the hospital. Secured firmly to the ground so that the taut sides barely flapped even when the harsh wind scoured the hilltop, it was surprisingly pleasant inside. Row upon row of cot were laid out, enough room for fifty soldiers or more, most of the beds occupied. Soldiers who were well enough sat up reading, playing at cards, doing their best to pass the boring hours. The most sick lay still or coughed or groaned their discomfort, and the others stayed away from them rather than risk exacerbating their own infections.

“Am I dying?” asked a youthful voice melodramatically, smile obvious even though James couldn’t see the face. James recognized it, though in the dim light within he could scarce recognize Bradbury, his bright hair tucked under a hat, the back of his uniformed identical to every other soldier. Was Bradbury sick? Concern brought a frown to James’ face and a furrow to his brow.

“Unfortunately,” Hester trailed off tauntingly. She stood at the far corner of the tent and as James approached he could see the incongruously playful expression on her face as she smiled at the soldier she was speaking with. “You’re completely well.”

“No!” Bradbury gasped aghast. “Tell me it’s not so.”

“No!” Hester gasped aghast. “Tell me it’s not so.”

“It is, it is,” laughed Hester. “Now, please stop wasting my time!”

“Talk to you later?” Bradbury asked with an obvious edge of excitement. James froze and blinked, his tired mind finally processing what he was hearing. Bradbury wasn’t sick. He and Hester were flirting. It seemed impossible, Hester must have fifteen years on Bradbury. He was only a boy, yet the smile lighting Hester’s pale eyes couldn’t be denied, and as Bradbury rose and turned towards James he could see the happiness in every line of the boy’s face, a cocky grin making his persistently sunburned cheeks swell.

“If I’m able,” Hester shooed Bradbury away.

“Promise?” wheedled Bradbury.

“Good Lord, Bradbury, yes, I promise,” Hester laughed again. James’ jaw dropped. Grinning, practically skipping, Bradbury hurried by James and out of the tent. He stared after the young soldier, astonished. “Ah, James.” Every trace of humor vanished from Hester’s voice. He jerked around to face her and found her flushed bright red, eyes lowered, hands fiddling anxiously with the white apron she wore over her plain, serviceable dress. “I was hoping to speak with you about these
blankets we received. They are completely inadequate. I need good stout wool, not this shoddy!"

Still at a loss, James tried to think if he’d ever seen Hester flirt with anybody, ever seen her flustered by anyone. Her embarrassed behavior now reminded James of nothing so much as his own reactions to Dean Winchester.

Surely there must be some way that I can let him know how sorry I am, let him know that it was never my intention to make him feel that he’d done anything inappropriate. How could I condemn him for having a family when for all intents and purposes I have one as well? It is ludicrous to be jealous of people I will never meet, to envy this Lisa woman for having Dean Winchester when I wish him. It is for me to decide if I am prepared to engage infidelity – if, as I believe, Dean reciprocates my feelings, it will be for him to decide as well.

What was it Bradbury had said about having someone he was developing feelings for? The pieces suddenly fell into place, from the day in the hospital when they’d visited Sam Winchester and Bradbury had disappeared to seek Hester out, to Bradbury’s firm statement that by no means was he interested in Hannah. God, it is barely a stretch to say that Hester could be Bradbury’s mother! The boy doesn’t even shave regularly yet. And yet, Hester was unattached, and Bradbury was an intelligent, competent officer with a promising future in the army or out of it...

Hester was staring at him, the blush slipping away to be replaced by a shrewd expression. “I can absolutely take care of that for you,” James managed, pushing his distracted thoughts away. It had only been a week and he was already so tired. It didn’t bode well for the days and weeks to come. “Bradbury is an excellent young man.”

That brought her up short. She colored again, but rolled her eyes. “James, are you attempting to give me your blessing?”

“You know he’s engaged, right?”

Hester’s show of girlishness fell away, replaced by her usual firm look and businesslike manner. “Thank you, brother, I was aware. I didn’t realize that a flirtation became forbidden when one party was engaged. Engagements can be broken.”

The words struck him like a rain of blows. James flinched, his chest clenched and ached, his thoughts circled back around to how much he longed to see Dean, to how far away Anna was, to all of the things Bradbury had said about the contrast between a loved one who was far and someone present. “I’ll get you new blankets quickly as I can,” James said stiffly. “Colonel Crowley suggests we are getting winter supplies imminently, if there are any extra I will see they come to you before being offered to the other Regiments in the Brigade.” Without another word, he turned and left. His last glimpse of her face showed him eyes narrowed in temper, lips drawn thin in aggravation. He couldn’t blame her. It wasn’t a reasonable thing for him to say. His own behavior couldn’t have withstood scrutiny, either, and having a fiancée had in no way deterred him.

What does that make me? What does that make Bradbury? Have we truly convinced ourselves that our behavior is excusable? No, he hasn’t – he has decided he’d rather live with the consequences of trying. I decided that as well, save that I’ve been unable to act on that decision, and it is slowly driving me mad. How much of this disquiet would settle if I could but speak with Dean? Surely there must be some way I can converse with him.

As overwhelming as James found his new schedule, he was surprised how quickly the days took on a familiar, exhausting rhythm. Stealing sleep a half an hour at a time, James rested as he could. Frequently, he’d no sooner lay down than someone would need him and he’d be on his feet once more. By night he patrolled the lines unnecessarily in a long loop that he repeated until he could have
walked the route in his sleep, until his chosen path was a worn trench due to the passage of his and many other feet. His thoughts wandered frequently, to matters with his family, to his friends, to his soldiers, to Dean. To know that the other man was so close, in the copse James could watch wistfully whenever he faced west or south, and yet was so out of reach caused an endless ache in his chest. More than once, he wondered if he might send word. He hadn’t the least clue who in the Confederate army he might direct a letter to, but if her wrote a note and gave it to one of his friends – to Henriksen or Bradbury or Alfie or Ash or Fitzgerald – he could look the other way as they snuck off, have them deliver it to Dean’s hands. Of course, doing was unspeakably dangerous. How could he possibly explain, possibly justify, why he would ask such a thing of them? There could be no reasonable purpose to deliver such a message in the dark of night. None would believe it an illicit tryst; they would believe it espionage. James would sooner own the truth about his strange attraction to Dean, to Dean’s personality, to Dean’s person, than risk a false accusation of fraternization. There was no quicker way to dishonorable discharge, no faster way for him to shame himself and his family and to damage everything his parents and siblings had worked their whole lives for. It was inconceivable that he could take the chance.

The nights grew steadily colder, longer and darker. The wind seemed to blow endlessly, and on the depths of the coldest night yet, pale snowflakes swirled to the ground, too scattered to stick but promising a long winter to come. Exhausted, James wished, not for the first time, that there was some way to combine his bookkeeping and clerical tasks with his nightly routine. Crowley had made it exceedingly clear that he expected James to be on patrol with the soldiers, out in the field, there to be seen as an authority figure. As James crested a low rise and came out on a vista with a clear view of the fields south, he gazed towards the copse of trees as he did every time he reached the crest. Watching the road to Alexandria closely had taught James that a surprising number of riders passed in the night, but none of the faint shadows he ever saw by dusk, mid of night nor dawn resembled Dean and no one ever entered or emerged from the copse of trees.

“Sir?”

Startled, James turned to Bradbury, who stood in the minimal shelter of a bend in the wall, hiding from the rushing wind that constantly threatened to tug James’ hat into the valley.

“Are you upset with me, sir?”

“No, Bradbury,” he sighed. “I was surprised. When you said you had met someone, and a nurse, Hester was far from what I was expecting.”

“She tells me that you reprimanded her for flirting with me when I was engaged? I'll own I was surprised to hear it. I thought better of you, considering your own situation,” Bradbury said, an attempt at a casual tone of voice inadequate to keep the hint of accusation from his tone.

“I apologize,” James said sincerely. “I was surprised and I spoke without thinking. It was wrong of me, you’re right, to pass judgment on another when my own behavior is far from unimpeachable.”

“Apology accepted,” said Bradbury with all his usual good cheer. There was a long pause. “Your sister is amazing, Major.”

“I'm embarrassed to confess you certainly know her better than I do,” James said. “She has spent most of my life busy with her cause, with the result that we have never been close.”

“Well, then, I am glad for both our sakes that her hospital is with the Regiment, and likely to be for the foreseeable future,” Bradbury smiled widely, an expression that brought out his youthfulness. Looking out towards the copse of trees once more, James shook his head, at a loss to account for taste.
Hannah and Elkins, Zachariah and Margaret, Hester and Bradbury, myself and Dean...truly it defies comprehension what draws two people to each other.

“Does yours know how you do?” asked Bradbury, breaking the silence.

“No,” James sighed and tore his eyes away from the dark cluster of trees. The view held no answers for him, could do nothing to soothe his frustration, loneliness and regret. “I’ve had no opportunity.”

“How long do you think you would need?”

Startled, James glanced towards Bradbury, but his eyes were on the horizon. “Perhaps an hour?” James said. “But it is impossible. The Colonel has been watching me closely.”

“The Colonel and Lieutenant Colonel are dining in Alexandria this evening and are to spend the night,” supplied Bradbury. “I overheard them speak of it when I was bringing them a message.”

“Interesting,” James murmured, hope bursting incandescent in his chest.

An hour, just one hour, to sit with Dean, to see how he does, to let him know how foolish I have been. One hour to find out if he thinks of me anywhere near as often as I think of him.

Whistling a cheerful tune, Bradbury turned around and stared with every appearance of attention at the blank wall of the fortress.

Without the least hesitation, James bounded down the hill. All reservations and fears aside, in his heart he knew precisely what he wished, precisely where his inclinations lay. When he had naught to do but sit and stew and think, he was conflicted, but when faced with the possibility to act there was only one possible course of action.

The trip to the thicket had never passed so quickly, James’ heart racing with excitement and anticipation. With the moment finally upon him, James hadn’t the least idea what he would actually say beyond apologizing. He would have to say his piece, explain that he did not hate Dean, that he understood why Dean fought for the Confederacy, that in fact he had profound respect for Dean’s integrity, his artistic ability, his intellect, his bravery. It took an unusual, daring man to flirt so close to enemy lines, to risk everything to gather intelligence. It took a loyal one to serve a cause in the name of his friends and family, it took a dedicated one to devote himself so entirely, it took a brilliant one to hold the opinions on the big questions of the day that Dean had expressed. There was so much in the man that was commendable, and James wished to know so much more, to make that vulnerable young man realize in what esteem he was held.

He longed to hear his name moaned in that low, drawling voice.

Surely, Dean could not speak so of James – he had been speaking of James, must have been, when he pleasured himself! – if he did not harbor some similar feelings. Surely, James was not deluding himself to think that if nothing else, Dean was curious about him, Dean was attracted to him. If they shared nothing else, the physical interest was mutual. The temptation Dean represented was nearly incapacitating, it hardened James on to such an extent, desire of a sort that was completely new to James. He wanted to touch Dean. He wanted to be the one to draw those alluring sounds from that handsome body. He wanted to feel soft skin and calloused hands, to suck the nipples he’d seen Dean fondling into his mouth, to feel Dean shake with need beneath him. It was so raw, so carnal, James could scarce credit it.

He wanted everything, wanted to share all there was to share with the other man, wanted to learn if this was merely a passing infatuation or if within James’ ardent attraction there was the kernel of a
more lasting affection.

The trail into the copse was where James recalled it. He passed through easily, silently, blood racing with a rushing noise through his ears. After two weeks anticipation, he finally had another chance, he finally had the opportunity to pour free that which he’d been harboring in his heart.

He broke into the clearing, dim in the moonlight, scattered with clinging flakes of snow white against the blanket of fallen leaves.

There was no horse sleeping blissfully, no man leaning casually against the familiar tree trunk.

Dean wasn’t there.

Dear Gabriel,

November 7th, 1861

How have you been? I hear increasing word of the good that you and Raphael are enacting in Kentucky. I’m so glad that you have been able to implement real change there, and look forward to hearing more of your activities. Do write me in detail on the matter, if you’ve the time.

I know we have not been much in correspondence over these past months. I can only imagine how busy you must be, and thus I am truly sorry to trouble you, but there is a matter that has been much on my mind and I’ve no one with whom I can speak of it candidly. You have ever been someone to whom I could confess when there was no one else, someone in whom I could repose confidence, knowing that you might tease me but you would judge me nor condemn me. With the understanding that I appreciate how little time you must have to devote to such things, would it trouble you over much if I were to write to you of my confusion? May I rely on you to interpret the distress that drives me to share, and not think the worse of me when you learn what it is that distresses me?

I will await writing you the bulk until I receive confirmation that I am not inconveniencing you too greatly. My love to you and Raphael, and do let me know if there is anything whatever I can do to further your efforts, any ear into which I can drop helpful words.

J. C. Novak

American Telegraph Company

Received: November 14th, 1861

To: Cassie Novak, Major, 27th New York, Fort Lyon, Alexandria

You wrote much and said little. If something troubles you, say it and allow me to judge as I will. I won’t be too hard on you, baby brother, I promise.

From: Gabriel Novak

Interlude

“Alright, then, what’s your opinion, boy?” asked Singer, gruff voice incongruously lilting with a distinguished Virginia accent.
“There ain’t nothin’ wrong with our current rendezvous location,” Dean snapped. “I been keepin’ an eye on that girl. She ain’t spending her time in Washington anyway, she and that Roman she’s got wrapped around her finger are stickin’ to their place in Alexandria. We got a system that works. Why change it?”

“As she explains, she’ll be spending the winter in the city and the current location won’t be viable,” Singer reviewed the latest message from the spy attentively. For all that the letters were address to General Johnston, Dean delivered them to Singer’s hands. After that, who read them and who did what with them were nothing to him. It wasn’t as if he was going to read them. Their contents were none of his business anyway.

“And where’m I s’posed to find someplace safe to wait so close to the city? If I get caught I’ll be hung—”

“Hanged,” murmured Benny.

“—Hanged, and then who’ll carry her damn letters back and forth? You gonna do it, Benny? Maybe she could do it her own damn self!” Anger made Dean’s accent even more pronounced than normally, made his voice surly and raspy.

“You’ve done a fine job so far,” Singer said with dismissive confidence. “I’m sure you’ll be able to find some way to make this work.”

Shuffling through the papers on Singer’s desk, Dean pulled out his most recent map. It depicted the dozen complete or near-complete forts defending the main crossings from Washington DC to the Virginia side of the Potomac River. Dean had diligently replicated every damn tree on the pages he’d drawn out. There wasn’t a single place to hide. That was the entire point of the configuration the Union engineers had devised. Wordlessly, he gestured at the images. He knew Singer could see as clearly as Dean could that there was no way for Dean to sneak into Washington, no way for Harvelle to sneak out. What was she even thinking, suggesting that they meet closer to the city? Was she trying to get him killed?

Wouldn’t be the first time.

“I appreciate your concerns,” said Singer, forced calm tightening his voice. “Make it work. I’ll write you a letter to bring her, and you and she can discuss how best to proceed. I don’t give a damn about the details, all I want is for you to continue bringing in this intelligence.”

“But—”

“Are you questioning my orders, Winchester?”

Seething, Dean clamped his mouth shut on every protest. “No, sir,” he ground out through gritted teeth.

“Excellent,” Singer paused without dismissing them, skimming through the images on his desk. Long moments passed, and Dean resisted the urge to walk out. Watching Singer leaf through the maps and diagrams of the fortifications he’d drawn made Dean feel self-conscious. His father said art was a waste of his time, and even knowing how helpful the images were, Dean couldn’t escape the feeling that he was superfluous. He should be at West Point. He should be studying to be an officer. He should be leading troops and risking his life under fire. He shouldn’t be not sneaking around like a damn spy. Even when Dean tried to do the right thing, he was nothing but a damned useless disappointment.
What kind of boy draws? Are those watercolors? This is a parlor hobby for young girls! Mary, why’d you teach him that nonsense? Dean ain’t suited for anything like this womanly garbage. Dean ain’t suited for anything.

John was a Captain in the regular army. He could have had virtually any rank he wanted in the Confederate army, could have had Dean on his staff or among his soldiers. Dean could have finally had the chance to prove himself in a “real” combat. The conflicts in Kansas were nothing, John said, and that Dean thought they were conflicts worth the name had been a source of endless amusement to John. John had been to war, been in the US Army during the Mexican War, fought against Santa Anna alongside Bobby Singer and many of friends now divided by the war. Though John had given Dean the chance to prove himself by providing him introduction to Singer, Dean didn’t care about demonstrating his abilities to the general. All that mattered was having a chance to demonstrate his mettle to his father. But instead of joining the army, John had resigned his commission and left on his own, and though he’d told Dean nothing, Dean couldn’t but suspect the truth. John must be hunting Azazel, using the fog of war to hide himself as he pursued the man that killed Dean and Sam’s mother. What hurt the worst was that John hadn’t taken Dean with him.

There’s nothing of use you can do to help, Dean. There’s nothing of any value you can contribute. Trust me, son, I’m sending you to the only place where you might be wanted.

Singer picked up one of the drawings and stared at it avidly, eyes tracing out roads and lingering at places on the page that Dean couldn’t identify from where he stood. At least Dean’s skills had come in handy. He’d wanted to join the Confederate army to defend his home, to aid his family and friends, to protect his wife and son. It was kind of Singer to create a place for Dean on his staff. Singer had been under no actual obligation to do so.

You’re a very skilled artist. A low voice, deep and appealing, echoed through Dean’s head and he was glad for the warm light of Singer’s lamp to hide the pink staining his cheeks. Blue eyes made dark by moonlight gleamed confidence at him.

Don’t matter. He hasn’t come back. He ain’t gonna come back. He’s just like everyone else. He looks at me and don’t see no one worth the time of day.

At length, Singer continued. “You do realize I wouldn’t ask you this if I didn’t believe you capable of it, right?” Dean made no answer. “Look, I’ve heard the way your daddy speaks about you. He’s wrong. You’ve done good service, and you’ve my confidence that you’ll continue to do good service. Take a few days to scout. Keep your ears open. You’ll figure something out.”

“Yes, sir,” Dean knew his answer sounded sullen, but he couldn’t help it.

Useless, son. At least if you’d been born a girl I could have married you off to someone with something to contribute. Instead I’m stuck with your lousy cooking and crap washing and your burning my shirts every damn time you iron them and I don’t even get the only real benefit to having a wife.

John Winchester hadn’t always been like that. While Mary lived, he’d been dismissive of Dean but loving of his wife and devoted to Sam. It was only after she died that John revealed to Dean how little he thought of him, only after she died that Dean appreciated how much Mary had protected him from. There had to be some way to make John see that Dean wasn’t a complete embarrassment of a son. Nothing Dean did would ever qualify him for West Point, he was too stupid and too incapable to succeed at the school, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be a soldier, didn’t mean Dean couldn’t excel in the arena of masculinity that his father most respected. Dean had to do well for General Singer.
Dean quashed the thought. When the moment came to fight, he’d fight. Singer had promised him the chance and Dean wouldn’t miss it for the world.

He was mortified to realize that, in the depths of his heart, he was glad that John hadn’t wanted Dean’s help in his pursuit of Azazel. For the first time since he, Sam and Mary moved to Kansas to join their father, Dean didn’t have John’s constant daily reminders of Dean’s inadequacies: that he was no kind of man, had no kind of future, was good for nothing but housework and keeping farm and giving Lisa healthy babies boys who stood a chance of succeeding in all the ways that Dean had failed.

“You’ll start tonight,” said Singer with a much-delayed sigh. “Now get out of here, idjits.”

Benny led the way out of the large tent. Singer was one of the foremost generals in the Confederate army, and he and his entourage had a small camp of their own amidst the long ordered lines of tents at Centreville.

“Didn’t you say you and Harvelle’s history wouldn’t be a problem?” Benny drawled, heading towards the small tent the two of them shared. It was luxurious by the standards of the privates, but wasn’t much for that – two piles of blankets made awkward beds on the floor, there were two low stools, and Benny had a portable desk that sat in his lap and had compartments for ink, paper and pens. When they sat on the stools, their heads brushed the tent, and it was impossible to stand even if they stooped.

“It ain’t,” snapped Dean angrily. He was too tired for this shit. He’d never admit it but the nightly trips back and forth to Alexandria were wearing on him. As much time as he’d spent in a saddle the last few years, neither he nor Impala were accustomed to covering 50 miles day after day. Most horses couldn’t have done it at all, but Impala was the best, a damn sight more than Dean deserved in a mount.

“Then what’s the problem, brother?” Benny asked. Shaking his head, Dean crawled into the tent and threw himself onto his blankets, not caring that they were thin and the ground beneath hard. There was no problem, or at least there shouldn’t be a problem. There was nothing waiting for him in the small copse of trees a mile south of Alexandria. There was no reason to go back there.

*I could never hate you.*

There had never been anything real to Dean’s fantasies. They were merely that, fantasies: a handsome man in a sleek uniform that brought out his eyes; a curious man who sought Dean out, asked questions and listened respectfully to Dean’s answers, who told Dean when his ideas had merit; a powerful man with an enticing low voice who wanted Dean for who he was, rather than viewing Dean as a surrogate for someone else; a gentle man whose over-generous praise left Dean feeling euphoric, desperate to demonstrate what Dean could never himself belief – that he deserved those kind words, that he deserved Novak’s interest, friendship, respect. There was no reality to support his imagination. His brief acquaintance with Captain Novak had ended in the only way such a thing could ever have ended, and Dean was left alone with his delusions, a handful of blurred charcoal drawings he had foolishly indulged himself by drawing, and a frustrating, unjustifiable feeling that he’d been abandoned by a friend.

Dean’s objections to switching rendezvous locations were valid, but they were all surmountable and he knew it. He hadn’t told Singer that he already had a way into Washington if he needed, having acquired a passport into the city from a sympathetic Alexandrian who had stumbled upon him one night. It wasn’t that he couldn’t switch locations, it was that he didn’t want to. Some part of him
refused to let go of his dream of the handsome Captain and his imagined mutual interest. Dean knew he wasn’t worthy of Novak’s attention. Despite that, some part of him yet fantasized, even though it’d been weeks.

There was no problem in switching rendezvous locations. The Captain wasn’t coming back.

“Want to scout with me tonight?” asked Dean, unwilling to answer Benny’s question.

“You thought I was gonna leave you to that alone?” Benny replied, surprised. “‘Course I’m goin’ with you.”

“Good. We’ll leave at sunset.”

He was never going to see Captain Novak again. He had to put the man out of his mind and do his duty. John had made it clear that he expected Dean to be a good soldier, and Dean had let his father down far too many times. He couldn’t let him down again.
The Right to Act, Think and Speak

Chapter Notes

I mentioned all the chapter titles are quotes. Here's some info on the first few chapters. I'll include this from now on.

Chapter 1: The Better Angels of Our Nature

From Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural Address; the line refers to his hope that the two sides can find peaceful resolution to the conflict without resorting to war. War broke out less than a month later.

Chapter 2: To See the Elephant

This was a time-period idiom that meant "to go see something remarkable." When the circus was in town *everyone* would want to go see the elephant. During the Civil War it came to mean specifically the first time a soldier goes into battle.

Chapter 3: A House Divided

In 1858, Lincoln gave a speech that helped catapult him to national fame. He discussed the tensions threatening to split the United States and referred to the US as a house divided - and made it explicit that he meant slave states versus free states. It's called "the house divided speech."

Chapter 4: The Virginia Quick Step

During the war, soldiers developed a lot of slang. I've been working it in as I can, when I think the meaning will be clear from context. The Virginia Quick Step refers to dysentery, because of the haste with which sufferers would make for the privy. The state in the nickname often changed depending on where the troops were serving.

Chapter 5: The Irrepressible Conflict

William Seward, a prominent Republican and former Governor of New York State, ran against Abraham Lincoln for the presidency in 1860. In 1858, he gave a famous speech about how the tensions between slave states and free states reflected an irrepressible conflict. At the time, the speech was seen as so divisive that it caused Seward to be labeled an extremist and convinced his party-mates he was unelectable to national office. In this story, I specifically picked where the Novaks are from so that they would live close to Seward; the families are friends - fictional Rachel Novak is married to Seward's eldest son. (Seward has made a couple cameos...)

Chapter 6: The Business of War

...I'll confess, this one isn't a *specific* quote, but I was so darn stumped for this, and it's a very common phrase over the past couple hundred years, generally used derisively to refer to the people who make money from conflict.

Chapter 7: I Am To Think of You When I Sit Alone

As I wrote last chapter and linked to then, this is from a poem by Walt Whitman, one of
the greatest American poets of all time and, in my opinion, one of the best.

Chapter 8: The Right to Act, Think and Speak

This is from a quote by Belle Boyd. The full quote is, "There are those who maintain that in this world women have no right to interfere in the affairs of state, in politics, in plots and counter-plots. Others there are who, more chivalrous, are willing to admit that women have as much right to act, think and speak, as men." ...Belle Boyd is most famous for being a Confederate spy.

Before we proceed, I wanted to add a note on nicknames. I've noticed when I read modern historical fiction there's a tendency to have characters use their full names all the time. This is absurd. People historically used loads of nicknames. Think, for example, of Pride and Prejudice, written in the early 19th century - Elizabeth's family calls her Lizzy, her younger sister goes by Kitty in place of Katherine, etc.

Both of the most famous generals of the US Civil War had familiar nicknames that their friends used - Ulysses S. Grant (which isn't even his birth name!) went by Sam among his friends (because his first initials, U.S., reminded them of Uncle Sam); William Tecumseh Sherman went by Cump (say the middle name aloud and it makes sense...).

So not only were nicknames common, they weren't necessarily what you'd think, and the way they were concocted were just like now - from shortening a name, from random associations, from that one time that person did that one thing and now they're labeled X forever after.

I've only really used Cassie so far, but in this chapter I use Gabe, and in the future this will keep coming up, so just in case anyone thinks I did this just cause "this is what we call them in the show or in fandom," I thought I'd take a moment and explain the context of why I used them in a historical piece. :) (indeed...there'd be more except that James' inner monologue is so PROPER. Gabriel calls Margaret Masters Novak "Meg" ...but James doesn't. Cause James. :) )

Warning: brief allusion to anti-semitism in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 8: The Right to Act, Think and Speak

Darling James, November 1st, 1861

For a wonder, I’ve already received yours of the 24th, a mere week after you sent it! Perhaps the post has finally settled into a semblance of normality. Or, more likely, it is the choicest fluke, for I’ve naught from you about the wedding, which seems impossible and suggests that a letter has gone astray. I am terribly sorry to hear that your new commander is so harsh on you. Have you considered examining your own behavior? Perhaps there is some fashion in which it has been deficient? Forgive me, I know it to be impossible that you might intentionally perform inadequately, but he does not know you as Elkins did, nor as your friends in Company B do. I’d not ask at all, save that I know how much pressure your family has placed on your as regards this promotion. Are you sure that there is not someplace deep in you that resents another being made Colonel in your place? In the chaos of the command change, have you had ample chance to acquaint yourself with the full scope of your new responsibilities? Might there be some area of unintentional neglect? Mayhap you
have missed some essential task completely inadvertently! Failing all that, he would not have his civilian nor his military rank if he were an unreasonable man. If I may offer council, perhaps you might discuss with him the challenges you face and the issues you have noted? Especially those related to Henriksen which, I dare hope, do not reflect intentional slights against our friend. Though I’ve no intention of doubting you, I’ll hope for one of the above, because I’d prefer to think the problem rectifiable. Failing that, if Colonel Crowley be simply unpleasant, that is lamentable and irreparable, and I can think of no means out for you but to bear the injustice and do your best, as I’m sure you are already attempting to do.

You would not believe what Mrs. Carrigan has done! Before her departure for Washington, Mrs. Novak made arrangements for us – by which I mean the Soldier’s Aid Society of Wayne County, for such we are formally called now – to host a Thanksgiving Charity Ball on the 28th. You’ll recall, or may now be given to understand, that peace had been declared between the two skirmishers, an accord been reached, the two groups reconciled and united in our efforts, and Mrs. Carrigan given a seat of honor at Mrs. Novak’s right hand during our weekly board meetings. All hostilities ceased until Mrs. Novak left for the wedding. Mrs. Carrigan stood during our next congregation and declared that she was in charge in Mrs. Novak’s absence and that the Ball was a ridiculous indulgence, like to incur more in expense than it brought in as donations, and thus should be cancelled and replaced with a more modest event. This she declares when invitations have already been sent, early donations already received, and much of the expense already accrued! And knowing that the expense is little enough, as nearly all the victuals are to be donated, the staff are volunteers, and the venue is the church! Oh, to see our young truce so thoroughly violated, and when our general was not in attendance to lead us to battle! The real surprise to me, however, was how many of the other ladies agreed, even among those who expressed enthusiasm before Mrs. Novak’s departure. Those of us who yet support the ball are pressing forward in the face of rebellious opposition, but I’ve little hope of calming tempers until Mrs. Novak returns to impose order.

I couldn’t help but reflect on our situation as a microcosm of the nation. In the face of the squabble between North and South, even should compromise be reached, what then? Will the Southerners truly relinquish their aims of independence, of self-government, of slavery? If we force them to compliance with the wishes of the Federal government, will we merely sow the seeds of future dissent? Perhaps dissent even worse than that which we currently face? Though I’ll own that I cannot picture what that might resemble – what worse than Civil War on a national level? What might be the outcome if we simply let them go their own way, and we ours? Yet, thinking on our history, is it not one of temporary compromises that do nothing to heal the divisions and fissures beneath the surface? I find myself wondering for the first time if it might not be better to let them go about their business, and we about ours. Might not both parties be happier? Might not Mrs. Carrigan be happier to have her own Aid Society?

One last note that I think will amuse you. Do you recall Doctor Benton? Did your parents ever use his services? Mine did, but once, and were most put out by the results, he bled me near to death! An elderly fellow, with several cruel scars along his face, and an air about him to make the nerves thrill uneasily. He is involved in the Soldier’s Aid Society and has been providing free medical care to those who return, for which I pity them. Mr. Warren now quails whenever he hears the name. But I stray from the point. He brought me a bouquet, and asked me to walk with him! He must be three times my age! And he knows me engaged! I was so in shock I laughed aloud, much my mortification and his chagrin. I have never pled so earnestly for someone’s forgiveness in my life, though in truth, my rudeness aside, he scarce deserves my consideration. What can he be thinking?

I hope the thought of such may bring a smile to your face, my love. Do write me about the wedding if you’ve not already. Though I’m sure when your parents return tomorrow they will tell me their
impressions, I long to know yours as well. I am positive can count on you for a more fair appraisal of Hannah’s dress than ever Mrs. Novak will give. I kid, of course, but I know you will see things to which they are blind, and I will value most dearly your perceptions of an event I so regret missing.

Do try to be at ease as concerns Colonel Crowley. I’m sure all is a misunderstanding that will resolve in time when you come to understand each other’s worth more fully. All my love—

Anna Milton

James stared at Anna’s letter incredulously. Though mail was coming more regularly and, it seemed, arriving with more alacrity, this was the most recent of her letters he’d received, the first he’d gotten written after the wedding and after his dubiously rewarding promotion. With near a month now under Crowley’s command, James was well on his way to hating the man, as loathe as he was to hate anyone who wasn’t a villain or traitor. To read Anna so mistaking the matter, to read her chastising him to duty and responsibility, to read her in essence blaming James for Crowley’s ambition, unreasonable and perennial absence, was astounding and affronting.

James scolded himself that surely she did not intend her words that way. He could not recall in what terms he’d described the Colonel three weeks before, but he must have said something to feed her suspicions that all was miscommunication rather than Crowley’s contrary temperament. With only a few days acquaintance with the man, he cannot have fully painted the picture of the patent unfairness of Crowley’s constant double standards. The urge to write her a long, complaining letter flared as anger burned hot in his breast: anger at his family for pushing him into this promotion; anger at Anna for not immediately taking his part and growing indignant in his defense; and anger at Crowley for treating him like a slave – oh, the irony of that thought. A moment later, he deflated. He hadn’t the energy to stay angry, hadn’t the energy to devote the effort to writing a letter to correct her misconceptions. His correspondence had flagged recently, for he rarely could spare the time to compose, and where once he could write long to Anna daily, now he must either send her short notes or snatch minutes over several days until he’d said all. Today was to be the exception; short of emergency he thought to have near an hour, but he couldn’t with equanimity defend himself from her insinuations nor could he enter into her frustration with Mrs. Carrigan or her amusement with Doctor Benton. The news of home seemed unreal. To acknowledge with honesty the feelings he nursed in his mind, he forced himself to allow that her also seemed irrelevant. What were Mrs. Carrigan and Doctor Benton in comparison to disunion and war and death?

It occurred to him that, seen from distant New York, James’ concerns about Crowley must seem just as petty. It certainly explained Anna’s response.

With a sigh, he put her letter aside. This was a sign, perhaps, that the moment had come for him to confront his fears and write that which he had been dreading. Taking up pen and paper, he began before he could convince himself that the time would be better spent on sleep.

Dear Gabriel,                                                                                                    November 16th, 1861

This is not easy for me. I will try to be to the point.

He took a long deep breath and released it slowly. His eyelids drooped with fatigue; his hand shook as he gripped the pen. Nearby, Winchester glanced at him, and James stared intently at his paper to hide the intensity of his blush. Thank God man could not read James’ thoughts! James had written his brother, had asked for help, and as he’d expected Gabriel had offered it unhesitatingly. Nonetheless, sharing was daunting. After keeping his feelings silent for so long, that he might pour them on to an uncaring sheet of paper, that he might actually mail it instead of burning it as he had last time, was frightening and intimidating. However, delay would avail no one, and James needed
help, needed advice, or perhaps he simply needed to share, but regardless, he must tell someone. There was nothing to do but to say it.

In the past few months I have developed feelings for someone other than Anna. Honestly, I’m shocked. I’d never before felt affection nor attraction towards any save her, and I’d known her years before I developed feelings beyond brotherly care and protectiveness. It’s been four months since I met this other individual and I can count on one hand the number of times we’ve met and spoken, and yet I cannot stop thinking about them. Is this normal? Have you felt the like? Has there ever been a time you doubted your affection for Raphael? If so, how did you handle it? I want to get to know this person, I want to spend more time with them, I want to be with them, I want to explore what might be, but even thinking of them feels a crime. I’m at a total loss.

With another deep breath, James steeled himself and forced his hand to write the words he dreaded most to admit.

It’s a man.

I must send this before I change my mind. I don’t know what to do, Gabe. What should I do?

J.C. Novak

Hastily, hands trembling, he folded the letter heedless of the smudging ink and stuffed it in an envelop. With hasty vague words to Winchester – his brother, these feelings are for his brother, this is insanity – James made his stumbling way to the tent maintained by the postmaster who had recently taken residence at the Fort. His nerves were so frayed he could scarce keep his balance, anxiety compounding fatigue to leave him aching and dizzy.

I’ve committed it to paper. I’ve written it down. What if someone other than Gabriel reads it? What if Gabriel reads it? Dear Lord, what is he going to think of me? This is madness, I shouldn’t send this, everyone will know. How many careers, how many people, have been ruined by a single scandalous letter?

The need for advice, his inability to longer face alone his disordered thoughts, spurred him on.

“Payment in advance,” said the disinterested postman.

“I thought…” James trailed off, unable to believe that the tremulous, reedy voice was his own. Swallowing, he thought better of attempting to speak again. Recent legislation made it possible for soldiers to send mail payment on delivery, but doing so would require Gabriel to produce the funds. That hardly seemed fair, so James thrust the letter forcefully at the uniformed postmaster, dug his wallet from his pocket, handed over a nickel and received two cents in return. The man turned from James and affixed a stamp before dropping it into a slot on a clapboard box. Turning back, they stared at each other.

It’s done, it’s irrevocably, he’ll know now, whatever the consequences.

“Is there something else?” the postman asked dryly. With a start, James realized he was standing stock still, trembling, his outstretched hand yet holding his change.

“No – yes, while I’m here, if you’ve stamps, I’d like a score, please.” He was out and stamps were hard to come by, but more he had to prove to himself that he could manage a coherent sentence.

“Sixty cents,” said the man. James handed over a dollar and received a pile of stamps and coins in return, sticking them in his billfold negligently. With regular camp came regular pay every other month. Most he sent home. The small amount he retained enabled him to acquire modest luxuries.
from the sutlers who had recently been granted permission to set up shop in tents outside the fort (promptly nicknamed “robber’s row” by the rank and file). It was a fair appellation; considering the proximity of Alexandria and the capital, the prices that the merchants charged were exorbitant, taking full advantage of the soldiers’ inability to obtain leave to visit the nearby town – a restriction that had proved necessary as the number of fancy girls who had been found in and about the camp.

At soldiers’ pay, the prices the Jews charged were criminal, but James’ wages were greater and he was now making more than he had at any time previously. Before the war he’d worked two years as an aide in the law office of his father’s friend Mr. Anthony Giles, earning $25 a month aiding in the preparation of cases for trial. By comparison, as major earned more than $100 a month, an embarrassment of riches. He should save nearly all, he knew. His food and board, such as they were, came from the government. Though he was responsible for his mount, his tack, and his uniform, he had all he needed in that regard at the moment. Nonetheless, he could not resist retaining a little and indulging. The jar of strawberry preserves James had recently acquired was particularly treasured, and though it was more sour than he was accustomed to, he’d found it could make even the most unpalatable concoction of flour and water appetizing. When they next were paid he was optimistic it would reflect the substantial pay raise that came with his promotion, and he intended to use the difference to buy Christmas gifts for his siblings and their spouses, for Anna, for his nearest friends in the army…

…for Dean.

He sighed and colored bright. He was still before the postmaster, whose expression was slowly slipping towards open incredulity that James yet stood stupidly before him. Thanking the man for the stamps, James hurried out. He had a meeting scheduled with an official from the quartermaster’s bureau set for 9 AM, but if he did not get at least a little rest before he returned to duty he’d be good for absolutely nothing.

“Has anyone been ‘round, Winchester?” he asked as he stepped back into the tent. The boy started severely enough to topple his stool, splashing ink on his hand, looking around wild-eyed. James wondered if he’d woken him. Though Winchester did not stay up the night patrolling with James, he worked hard enough. On the rare occasions that James passed by the tent during the long, cold evenings, the walls were often aglow as Winchester burned midnight oil to complete some report or document that should have been Crowley’s responsibility, and failing that should have been Tanner’s responsibility, and failing that should have been James’, but there was none to do it save Sam. The poor boy fumbled at the ink on his hand, wiping it on the edge of the rickety writing table forced on them when Crowley decided he needed the nicer one that James had managed previously to acquire.

“No, sir,” Winchester replied with evident relief. “It’s been quiet for a whole hour.”

“Thank God for small miracles,” murmured James.

“Amen,” Winchester added fervently.

Curling up in the inadequate shoddy blanket that was to be the topic of his mid-morning meeting, the literally lousy thing already falling apart after a mere weeks’ use, James shivered, asleep the moment his eyes closed.

Warm, calloused, powerful hands coursed over the muscles of James’ chest, rubbed roughly over his nipples, left him hot and hard and desperate in a way utterly familiar and yet completely new. In his entire adulthood, no hand had touched James’ unclothed body save his own. The burning tingle of it set his heart racing, and when the touch moved away James inadvertently followed, chest and hips arching up from the bed and prompting a scandalously arousing low chuckle from his lover.
“I didn’t say you could stop,” gasped James. The hands returned, long, thick fingers wrapping around James’ waist and kneading up and down his sides. Sultry heat ghosting breath over his nipple was the only warning he had before lips closed around it and sucked, instantly drawing the flesh into a taut nub, painfully sensitive, spawning pleasure so intense his hips rutted at the empty air, his cock desperate for touch.

The mouth came away from his nipple, the sound of lips being licked moist criminally loud and appealing, and a gruff voice heavy with desire whispered, “what do you want, Billy Yank?”

The words formed clearly in James’ mind – touch me, stroke me, I need to feel your hand on my cock, need to feel your lips sucking on me – but they were too filthy to say aloud, too shameful to acknowledge. Instead, panting with the urgency of his need, James wrapped his hand around the one caressing his side, dragged it down his body. Fingers trailed through the nest of dark hair at his crotch and James felt the first glorious touch of the hand of man against his cock, an echo of rapture through his body that shook him like the booming thud of artillery. James’ mouth burst open in what would have been a scream were he not beyond breathless, beyond vocalization, beyond anything save pure sensation. Faint trembling showed the hand less confident than its movements would suggest, reflected the difficult restraint of James’ lover. A thumb circled the base of James’ cock, traced a rough, chaffing line up the smooth skin of his length, paused to toy with his foreskin, and finally, finally, ran over the most sensitive head, flicked over the liquid beading from his slit.

“God, Dean,” he groaned. “You have no idea what you do to me, no idea…”

“Tell me,” Dean whispered, resting his sweaty forehead on James’ breast. His hand gripped James’ length and gave it a dry stroke that nearly drove James’ to climax. “Tell me.” The fingers on James’ side tightened convulsively, every tense line of Dean’s yet-clothed body screamed of need, desire, mirrored the urgency that James’ felt thrumming through his own body. “You’ve got to tell me, Captain, got to…” They groaned simultaneously as James wrapped a powerful hand over the back of Dean’s head, lost his fingers in surprisingly soft brown strands, thrust into Dean’s grip and seized what he need.

“I will,” he panted, lost to anything but bliss and the pursuit of the greater rapture that built within him, suffusing his body with heat, his mind with light. “I will…I will…”

“…I will,” mumbled James, eyes fluttering open to show him the dulled, pale light of his tent. His body felt afire, every heartbeat coursing pleasure through him that blanked his vision in mist. Simultaneously profound embarrassment and ravenous need swamped his thoughts. Rolling over caused his uniform to rub against his skin and even that abrasive contact pushed him further towards his climax. With sleep-blurred vision, he glanced to the desk now inches from his face and was unspeakably relieved that Winchester was not sitting there. James couldn’t bear to think what kind of noises he might have been making in his unquiet sleep.

Of course, that’s the only reason you’re relieved.

Frantic fingers betrayed the lie, slipping beneath the waistband of the pants that fit him more loosely now than when they’d been made the month before, scrambled through his small clothes and wrapped around his cock. Only a harshly bitten lip kept him from crying out in pleasure. My hand doesn’t feel as his would, or does it? I have no idea. How am I even able to imagine, to fantasize, when I’ve never experienced? It didn’t matter; he knew he wanted, profoundly, and a rough grip on himself pulsed hot, carnal euphoria to every extremity. His body jerked each time he stroked, guttural breaths burned at his throat, and the phantom brush of touches traced faintly over his chest.

Dean!
With a convulsive spasm, James arched back, his cock pulsed in his grip and he climaxed as rapturously as he ever had, wracked by more pleasure than he would have thought possible, unsure if he was moaning Dean’s name aloud or only howling it in the silence of his mind. Collapsing back to the ground, drawing desperate pulls of air, James lay still, thoughts blank save for wonder and afterbursts of bliss.

*My God, Dean, my God, how can I possibly crave you this powerfully? How do you do this to me?*

“Major, time to…” The tent flap burst open with a rustle of fabric and Winchester stooped to enter, trailing off as he saw James limp and breathless, eyes unfocused. “I was coming to wake you.” A pink flush overtook the brown tan of the boy’s cheeks. Too gone to be embarrassed, James wondered bemusedly how he looked. At least the most damning aspects were hidden, the damp mass in his pants absorbing into the fabric, his hand and cock obscured by his pants and by the blanket yet draped loosely over him.

“Give me a minute,” he managed.

“Yeah…of course…yes…I’ll be right back, I need to…do…something,” Winchester stammered and backed out of the tent. A ludicrous urge to laugh came over James, and it was all he could to suppress it to a giggle as he wiped his hand and forced his loose, satisfied body to move, to rise despite his continued fatigue, to fold up his blanket, to adjust his pants and jacket to a semblance of decorum.

When Winchester returned, an elderly man with an enormous white mustache was at his side and James forced himself with difficulty to address the matter at end.

“I’ve been speaking with the soldiers of our regiment,” James said without preamble, “and I believe that the winter gear that we have been issued will not be adequate.”

“I appreciate your sensibilities,” said the man without giving the least impression of either appreciation or interest. “However, Virginia is not New York. What you have is adequate – indeed, it is superior to what many have received. Is this what you requested conference to discuss? I am a busy man, Major, and it is not a short trip from Washington.”

Grabbing his blanket, James set it before the man, whose eyes widened as James pointedly and deliberately removed a louse from the thick weave and flicked it across the room. “Though I can’t claim we were previously a paragon of cleanliness, and we were infested before ever the supplies arrived last week, I myself was clean. The blankets came thus.” He picked out a second bug and crushed it between his fingers as the officer went green at the gills. “It also came thus.” He shoved a finger through a large, ragged moth hole. “This, on the other hand, is new.” He turned the folded square to reveal where Winchester had spilled a canteen and the weakly felted shoddy had dissolved into tattered, ratty mill ends. “Oh, and if I might encourage you to take a whiff?” James held the offensive blanket towards the fellow’s face and took a perverse delight in how he shied back. “No? Well, suffice it to say that the wool was not cleansed of what my mother politely likes to refer to as ‘vegetable debris.’ ” The man grimaced. “By which she means sheep dung,” James added, mostly to see the man grow more disgusted.

“Personally,” continued James, “as an officer I might purchase myself a finer quality blanket and leave the shoddy to the men. However, I cannot afford to personally re-equip 700 men, and cannot with good conscious ask them to suffer through what I myself won’t endure. I am sure that these blankets were a fantastic bargain for the War Department. However, there is no price to be put on the lives of the men who will sicken from having their blood sucked, grow ill from animal leavings, or freeze to death during the long, cold nights that, I am assured by natives such as Corporal Winchester, occur even in Virginia.” He gestured at the clerk, who nodded agreement. The blanket
was too small for Winchester’s gangly form. James had awoken to hear Sam’s chattering teeth more than once and it was only November. “Many of our other supplies are substandard in similar ways. Our winter coats are laughably manufactured, our first and I’m warned only supply of socks has worn out in less than a week, and our new tents have scant survived their first exposure to adverse weather. What I want to know – what everyone in this brigade wants to know – is, what is the quartermaster’s office going to do about these problems?”

“These are your winter supplies,” said the officer, a shrill note incongruous in his bass voice. James realized with surprise that he neither learned the man’s name nor cared. Individual people, even of such rank and supposed importance, were growing depressingly interchangeable to him of late. “You will make do and be glad that Colonel Crowley and General Elkins had the clout to have ones of such quality brought to you. Many are not so lucky.”

“That can’t be true,” protested James. “Soldiers will die this winter if better supplies cannot be obtained. A master wouldn’t ask a dog to winter with such meager goods.” An owner would not ask a slave to winter with such meager goods. Except, many would.

“A dog, perhaps not,” the quartermaster sneered. “But a soldier? These blankets and the others supplies were precious expensive, and we must prioritize those who have nothing over those who whine and complain over the imagined inadequacy of that which they have. Now, if you are done wasting my time, I had several legitimate concerns to address while I am at the Fort. Good day, Major.”

Without giving James’ stunned thoughts time to catch up, the man rose and departed the tent.

“That went well,” grumbled Winchester.

“Did he truly just suggest that the cost of a blanket was greater than the price of the life of a man?” James stared at the flapping tent door, the bright light outside coming within fractured and dazzling.

“I believe so, yes, sir,” said Winchester. “Do we have any other recourse? I appreciate that others have as little or less but that doesn’t make what we have acceptable. Mama bought a perfectly good felted blanket in Lawrence when it was scarce a village, and it cost $5.15 but it’s still good to this day. If they could manufacture that then, why not now?”

“Why should they?” asked James bitterly. “If the army will pay more for lesser quality, what incentive have the factories to produce anything but garbage?”

“Do you think there’s a single blanket left at the sutlers?” Winchester glanced wistfully towards the outside, as if he might find a merchant with a snug blanket outside their door.

“I’ll speak with my brother,” James vowed. “If my family is to have influence, let us use it for something.” He hesitated, torn over whether to address the primary concern that occupied his thoughts. “Winchester, apropos of nothing…” He trailed off, the curious expression on Sam’s face serving to drive home how inappropriate James’ question was and how little he could justify asking it. Except that I must speak with him. “It’s been on my mind of late – did your brother suggest any means by which you might contact him?”

“Dean?” asked Sam, shock replacing his interest. “What?” A shadowed look veiled his eyes, his brow lowered. “No, why?”

“I…” James hesitated, frantically searching the corners of his mind for any reason he might legitimately need the information. “Well, to own truth, he asked me to occasionally send him word on how you were doing, as he believed you’d not do so,” James prevaricated. Sam’s face grew more
forbidding by the moment. “He appreciates that you and he did not part on good terms, but he’s your brother and his concern for you is genuine. You—”

“Listen, Major,” interrupted Sam angrily. “Save your paternalistic crap for getting the regiment blankets. My relationship with my brother is none of your damned business. If you’ll excuse me?” Before James could answer, Sam stormed from the tent, barely ducking low enough not to hit his head on the taut-drawn fabric.

“Well, that went well,” James muttered darkly, echoing Sam’s words after the man from the quartermaster department left.

The day passed as so many of James’ days did, in hours of intense activity, discussion, and report writing interspersed with brief periods of peace during which James stole what minutes of sleep he could. Fortunately, his morning sending did not repeat. To call it a mere dream felt inadequate. If he was prone to superstition and belief in the fantastic, he’d suspect a demon, an incubus sent to test him, but despite some of his parents’ more fervent moments of religious zeal James had seen nothing to lead him to believe that either the Lord or the devil was capable of so material a touch on the world. Whatever drew James to Dean, it was all within himself, it was all him, entirely, fallibly human. The thought was strangely comforting.

Things with Sam remained tense for less than 24 hours. The next morning, the young man clambered into the tent bearing a newspaper and a steaming cup of coffee. The noise woke James instantly from a light, fitful sleep.

“There’s going to be war,” said Sam, strangely enthusiastic and far too cheerful considering the dark that suggested it was yet early morning.

Sleepily, James stuffed his fist in his mouth against a wide yawn and rubbed his bleary eyes. “I was aware, Corporal.” His voice slurred with fatigue. “I’m fairly sure that we’re in the army, in fact.”

“No, another war.” Sam thrust the tin cup into the air several feet over James’ head. James reached up for it and sat, clutching the painfully hot metal in benumbed fingers. “Listen: ‘The United States steam-frigate San Jacinto arrived in the Roadstead having on board the rebel Commissioners John Slidell and James Mason. They were taken from an English mail steamer on the 8th off Bermuda. Misters Slidell and Mason made feeble resistance but were induced to leave with Lieutenant Fairfax. The English captain of the steamer raved and swore and called the United States officers ‘piratical Yankees,’ and other abusive names. Commodore Charles Wilkes of San Jacinto expressed his opinion that he had done right and said that, right or wrong, these men had to be secured, and if he had done wrong he could do no more than be cashiered for it. When it became known that these two worthies were in Hampton Roads, the excitement was immense.’ ”

“They were on an English ship when this happened?” James asked, horrified. Good Lord, Sam wasn’t exaggerating, it could mean war.

Sam nodded, continuing, “‘Slidell and Mason were going abroad as Ministers of the Southern Confederacy to France and England. They had embarked on board an English mail steamer. Hearing of the fact, Wilkes determined to take them, and coming up with the steamer in the Bermuda Channel, he sent aboard and demanded the surrender of the arch rebels. The reply was that there was not force enough to take them. The English steamer took them on board, knowing who they were, their destination and business. We shall, doubtless, soon hear something official in regard to the arrest of Misters Slidell and Mason. The name of the British vessel is reported as the Trent. The captain of the British vessel delivered up Slidell and Mason under protest.’ ”

“Has the president had anything to say on the subject yet?”
“Not that I’ve found yet,” Sam said distractedly as he scanned the columns of the newspaper. “There’s a biography of John Slidell – ‘this arch-conspirator,’ they call him. And Mason, of the First Families of Virginia. Here’s Charles Wilkes, who ‘so neatly nabbed’ them. ‘The whole country now rings with applause of his bold action.’ ”

“Very bold,” muttered James, “violating British sovereignty on a British ship in neutral waters and seizing passengers.”

“But if Slidell and Mason get to England—”

“Then what?” James shrugged. “Do the English want war with the United States? Either they think the Confederacy will lose, in which case if they deal with Confederate ambassadors they risk the wrath of the US in the aftermath; or they think the Confederacy will win, in which case they need do no more than await the outcome and recognize the ‘new country’ when its existence is a fait accompli. Why should they risk anything by precipitately recognizing a rebellion? So long as the cotton continues to flow regardless of the blockade, so long as they can make money selling Enfields to both sides, why should they involve themselves? Further, they have no love for slavery – indeed, it’s continued existence disgusts many there – and early signs suggest that their cotton needs may yet be supplied by India now that the inferior product grown there need not compete with South Carolina long staple.

“I’ve been to England – they see our policies and attitudes as a dangerous series of contradictions, see Americans as immature, and it would take a brave politician to meddle in what is still likely seen as an internal matter by the international community. Cotton keeps Manchester in operation, but the very laborers who stand to lose their employment should the factories close are proud that they earn and loathe the that they might ever have to compete with slaves, dread that they could perhaps become slaves themselves. The English will wait and protect their own interests rather than risk themselves in a third unsuccessful overseas adventure against America. Left alone, they will do nothing. On the other hand, they care very much if they US presumptuously interferes with their sovereignty. If they are pushed and public opinion there can be united against us? That is when the English become dangerous. This is precisely the sort of matter that should have been allowed to lie. This man Wilkes sounds too impulsive for his own good. Think what he says, that what he did might be ‘right or wrong’ – he knows he pushed too far, endangered all, for little.”

“Everyone seems to think we’d win a war and if they want to fight, let ‘em,” said Sam. “I’m surprised you don’t agree. Even Fitzgerald said it.” Sam sounded genuinely surprised, and James blinked at him in wonder.

“God, no, why should I? We’re already in one war we’re not winning, why should we get involved in a second?” James took a sip of bitter coffee and wished he had sugar with which to sweeten it. The strong brew instantly went to his head, clearing the fog from his thoughts, wakening him. “Think of it this way – we went to war with England last in part because of their practice of violating the neutrality of US ships and impressing those we considered Americans in order to force them to fight against Napoleon. How different is what we did – to board a neutral ship, to forcibly remove those who, from all legal stand point, had every right to be there?”

“The Times seems to think it commendable,” observed Sam, shooting James sheepish glances.

“The Times needs to sell newspapers,” James countered dryly. “Don’t worry, Winchester. President Lincoln is a sensible man; he’ll find a way to avoid this devolving into conflict, and I guarantee you that it will not involve the long-term incarceration of either Slidell or Mason, no matter how condemned they are for supposed villainy in Raymond’s editorializing.”

Though James spoke his opinion candidly with Winchester, as camp gossip spun out of control over
the days that followed he increasingly held silent on the matter. Of a sudden, everyone was an expert on international law, and the word on every tongue was how legal and justifiable Wilkes’ actions were. The Washington officials who should most have stated a public view – President Lincoln and Secretary of State Seward, in particular – were publicly silent. There had yet to be time for word of the incident to reach England and for the British response to cross the Atlantic, but despite the parade of boastful voices declaring the affair a US coup, James held firm was pleased to find that, despite their recent argument, Winchester never again spoke enthusiastically of the prospect of war with Great Britain; James even overheard Sam explaining to a vociferous Spangler that it would be in the US best interest to let the matter lie and not antagonize the British. The memory gave him strength each time he was forced to share Crowley’s tent for a meal and listen to his commander’s hope that President Lincoln wouldn’t cave to the timorous by releasing the two Confederate envoys.

More than anything, James dreaded having this unpleasant performance repeated on a larger stage. Were he to receive invite to Zachariah’s, he’d have to spend an evening with a plastered-on smile, biting his tongue against all the things he’d say were he willing to offend where his family sought to placate and flatter. Thus far, he’d been left alone as the season deepened towards winter, and he suspected that soon, Zachariah and Margaret would return the New York for the holidays. Only the momentous times had kept them in Washington even this long. As late November approached, he prayed that no invitation would be forthcoming. If there were a merciful God in heaven, He’d free Slidell and Mason to ensure that no war with England took place, He’d end the war with the Southerners before the madness and death could spread further, He’d end slavery on the moment, and pray Lord He’d ensure that no one in James family thought for one moment about November 22nd.

James’ faith was not to be shaken when none of the hoped-for events took place.

Dear James, read a hastily penned note delivered to him on the 20th, you owe Margaret all thanks and solicitude. If not for her mentioning it to General Blaine last evening I’d not have recalled that it is your birthday on Friday. We’re delighted to host a meal to celebrate. We’ll see you at 8. I’ve sent invitations of Colonel Crowley, the Elkins’ and Hester, so I expect you can make a fine party of it.

Z. Novak

With a defeated sigh, James consigned the note to the flame by which he’d read it and wished he had any means of not attending, but there was no hope of it. At least by going, he might have an chance to speak with Zachariah about the supply matter. Even if James could not secure better winter equipage – he was not optimistic of success, all things considered – he could at least whisper in the ear of one who could make a big deal of it, who could agitate to Thaddeus Stevens and the Ways and Means Committee to increase the army’s appropriations budget, and perhaps pressure could be put on Secretary of War Cameron to exercise more restrain in awarding contracts and implement some kind of review process to ensure minimum standards were being met. After all, securing superior blankets only for the 27th New York was a fundamentally selfish goal when, as the man from the quartermaster’s office had indicated, the entire army suffered similar neglect. Perhaps, if Zachariah’s energies were engaged on the matter, improvement could be made for all soldiers. It was a heartening thought, even if a niggling suspicion told James that his brother’s close relationships with manufacturers rendered it unlikely that Zachariah would pursue the matter as strongly as he should.

Not long after the invitation arrived, Colonel Crowley called at James’ tent to wax gleefully about the opportunity to see his old friend Blaine and hypothesizing that other friends such as the Talbots and Mr. Roman would surely be in attendance. With a snide air, he assured James that, despite James’ shortcomings thus far, Crowley did not begrudge him an evening to spend with his family, especially
while he was yet so young as to value the celebration of such an absurd thing as a birthday. James
ground his teeth but bore it all and for once was grateful when Crowley returned to condemning the
English, against whom his grandfather had apparently fought. Every word from Crowley’s mouth
was like a promise of the conversations sure to fill the entirety of the dinner party, and as the time
passed before the event he took what solace he could from the knowledge that Hannah and Hester
would be there and would provide him with someone to whom he could speak without frustration
and mortification. When the time came to depart, though, it was not to be – Elkins and Hannah were
to attend, but Hester could not leave the camp. Doctor Ellicott, so instrumental in treating Company
B’s bout of flux in September, had escaped illness then only to succumb now. Hester was
determinedly nursing him in an effort to save his life and was optimistic of success but only if he
received constant care.

Thus did a supposedly merry company depart Fort Lyon as darkness began to fall on the 22nd.
Sunsets had been coming earlier and earlier, and though a bout of unseasonable warmth kept the
temperatures comfortable, the temporary change in the weather did nothing to slow the daily
progression towards winter. Thanks to the intervention of General Elkins, they were spared the long
ride to Washington, nor would they spend the night. Instead, they were authorized to take the ferry
now operating smoothly day and night between Alexandria and the capital. After all, Elkins defended
with a faint smile, he was in charge of the brigade and had command of the fortress. While it
was permissible for him to take a single evening off, it would be unseemly for him to stay away the
night. The most gratifying thing about the journey was watching the long-suffering look on
Crowley’s face as Hannah happily bubbled away. She was understandably excited to see her friends
again, having been at Fort Lyon and thus away from society for two whole weeks. James derived far
too much satisfaction from seeing Crowley kowtow to another, after the many valuable hours James
had wasted listening to and reluctantly agreeing with the frustrating man.

Unsurprisingly, yet none the less disappointingly, there was not a single aspect of the dinner intended
for James’ gratification. The gathering was larger than usual and spilled into the browning, dim, chill
yard behind the house. A number of politicians were present as were the usual cast of businessmen
and their families. Even Ms. Rosen and Ms. Richardson attended, apparently to provide
companionship for Hannah, judging by the excitement with which the young women greeted each
other. In an obvious nod to James theoretical desire to have someone to speak with at a party
supposedly in his honor, Boyle was there, but so far from providing a companion, Boyle appeared to
be actively avoiding him, even more engaged by Ms. Harvelle than he had been the last time James
had seen them. James was only mildly surprised to find himself relieved that he did not have to be
troubled to force small talk with his old friend. The snippets of conversation he overheard showed
Boyle as boastful and self-centered as he’d appeared at the dinner at the Roman party, and the idea of
playing flatterer disgusted James as much as being forced to agree with Crowley did. Faced with the
stuffy parlor and close press of guests, James found himself completely unequal to entering into
tedious small talk.

The rooms of the small Novak house were crowded; the study reserved for the gentlemen was thick
with cigarette smoke and squabbling; and James was grateful when he found an opportunity to steal
away with a tumbler and stake a solitary post on the porch. With dark night came a chill promising a
frost and a change in the weather, and after the humid heat within, James basked in it. Unusually, he
was on his third drink. Having the glass in his hand kept him still, having something to sip kept him
from speaking when it was better to hold silent. The evening had afforded him far too many times
when keeping his peace was preferable to stating his opinion, with the result that his body felt
unpleasantly warm, his head fuzzed, his thoughts blurred in a way that he did not like. Staring at the
largely empty street before their house, he longed to be back in the camp. Even patrolling through the
endless cold hours was better than returning to the den of adders within. At least when he was
outside through the night he could keep watch on the copse of trees for sign of Dean.
“They do prattle on, don’t they,” said a pleasant, familiar accented voice that James couldn’t place. Turning, he frowned deeply as he tried to recall what name to assign to the blue-eyed, short-haired older man. He wore a red British uniform like a challenge, buttons polished gold to match the thick gold embroidery at the wrist cuffs, waist synched with a pure white belt that bore an obviously decorative saber, and simple black pants over brightly polished boots. James pursed his lips as he tried to recall who the fellow was, certain that he’d seen the face, though he could think of no one he’d met in the United States who wore Her Majesty’s Royal Uniform or whatever they called it. He bit back a laugh as the thought distracted him entirely. He might be a little drunk. He swallowed another laugh.

“Anyone declared war on you this evening?” James asked, unable to fault himself for his lack of inhibition. After all, the man had accused the guests of prattling – surely he could accept some ribbing. Perhaps James had met him while he was in England? It had been five years and he’d met so many people while he was there. One gentleman in uniform looked much like any other; just ask the three guests who had confused James for Boyle in the course of the evening, though they looked nothing alike.

“General Blaine and Colonel Crowley made the attempt,” confessed the man with a wry laugh. “I regretted to inform them precisely as I informed the President yesterday: despite my presence in the States as an official envoy, I am in no way qualified or authorized to negotiate for the British Empire. All concerns must be addressed to Lord Lyons, and may God have mercy on Lyons’ soul for having to deal with this mess. They were...disappointed.”

“Oh, no, they’re always like that,” James said flippantly, taking another sip of his drink. He should get drunk more often. It felt shockingly good to say, flat out, what he really thought. The man’s answering laughter was particularly gratifying.

“You don’t remember who I am, do you.” It was a comment rather than a question, and James shrugged. “Balthazar Freeley? You met my companion Ms. Cassidy and I when you first arrived in the city, before we crossed to the Confederacy to fulfill my government-ordered obligation to serve as an observer in the Confederate army. It was meant to be a long-term position, but with the Trent affair I thought it wisest if I return temporarily to Washington DC to make myself available to the Lord Lyons should my services as a soldier be required.”

“My apologies, Mr. Freeley, I remember now,” James said. At the time, James recalled thinking Freeley and Ms. Cassidy a matched pair to Roman and Ms. Harvelle, though speaking with Freeley now he was less sure. Freeley’s easy humor and casual conversation was a far cry from Roman’s fake smiles and self-serving remarks. “So you think war likely enough that the Minister might be in danger? From whom – us? Union troops?” James couldn’t keep incredulity and disappointment from his voice. Freeley seemed more sensible than most, and if his assessment of the situation didn’t match James’ that was disheartening.

“Not at all,” Freeley grinned. James broke into a relieved smile. “Honestly, I believe war between the United States and England incredibly unlikely. Lincoln may be many things but I’ve spoken with him more than once and I can in no way believe him a fool. General Singer’s camp at Centreville is eminently boring. Your McClellan refuses to advance – I thought better of him, after knowing him in Crimea – and now I fear it is too late and we’ll be forced to linger in dull hibernation ‘til spring. For myself, I can manage. The winters here look to be mild in comparison to Sevastopol. However, Ms. Cassidy deserves a respite and time amidst society. If we are subjected to Lafitte singing one more off-key French Creole song I fear she’ll do him violence. Though General Johnston and General Singer have been very welcoming, I fear they’ll not be able to overlook that. I would hate to be forced to switch my observations to the army in Kentucky; it is a long journey, this theater looks to be by far the more interesting, and I fear Ms. Cassidy would not wish to be so far removed from her
family in Boston. By the by, she informed me that this entire occasion was theoretically orchestrated
to celebrate your birthday? Is that true?”

“Yes,” James rolled his eyes and took another sip of his drink. “I’m 27. Apparently this is cause for
celebration in some corners? I was truly hoping it would pass unnoticed. It is a matter of utter
indifference to me.”

“It is my impression that your brother spares no opportunity to adorn his parlor with important,
influential, rich people,” observed Freeley. James lifted his tumbler in mocking agreement and took
another sip. He was nearly out. He’d need to get another. “With exception made for the exotic, as I
assume that is why myself and Ms. Cassidy were invited. We’d not have attended, save that Ms.
Cassidy was dearly hoping to see Ms. Harvelle again. They – what’s the phrase here – hit it the first
time they met? Quite delighted with each other, from what I’ve seen.”

“Ms. Harvelle has that effect on people,” James replied. Watching her flirt with Boyle was
infuriating, watching her exchange shrewd looks with Roman was irritating, and he’d had the
opportunity to listen to her positively simper to Crowley. Any good will he’d ever felt towards Ms.
Harvelle was completely passed. “She makes friends everywhere she goes. I’m less sure she can
keep them, though so far none seem to have noticed the games she’s playing.”

Cassidy was hoping to wish you felicity, and I think she’d be most entertained to hear more of your
views on this topic, and perhaps on others. Excuse me.”

“Might you have her bring me another drink?” James asked.

“You know drinking is a vice, Captain Novak,” scolded Freeley cheerfully.

“One I rarely indulge in,” James agreed. “But it’s my birthday, I thought I’d earned an exception.
And it’s Major now.”

“A fine point, and I’m sure your indulgence can be humored at least this once,” Freeley gave him a
wry grin and proceeded within.

Sighing forlornly, James slumped over the porch railing. What was he doing here? He hated these
people, hated attending these parties. Only seeing his family members afforded him pleasure, and
even they were changing by degrees into people he scarce recognized. Zachariah was a far cry from
the elder brother whom James had grown up esteeming, respecting and intent on emulating. Rachel
was so wholly absorbed in Washington society that James scarce recognized her with her coiffed hair
and fine dresses. It was impossible to see Margaret as anything save an in-law, and James scarce
knew Rachel’s husband Frederick. Hannah, at least, was yet Hannah, but she was ever one to be
delighted by the surface exuberance of her friends without concern for their hidden depths. James
feared how he was changing, his uniform coming to feel an extension from himself, his body
accustomed to sleeping on the hard sod, his dreams occasionally troubled by the remembered horrors
of Bull Run. They were growing up, growing into new people. Where once they were shaped in the
same household and by the same society, now all were in different places and all were adapting to
those new circumstances. They’d never again have meals as they did when he was a child. Then,
there was Anna and the increasing divide he felt from her. Though his heart yet ached for her
presence, her recent letters had not been gratifying to receive and he feared his responses were
growing noticeably dilatory.

The sad thoughts sobered him, left a lonely ache in his chest and brought a tear to his eye, though
James cheered to think he was making new friends, perhaps building a new family. Winchester,
Bradbury, Fitzgerald, Henriksen, Alfie - serving with them forged fresh relationships. He already felt
he had more in common with any of them than with a single person attending Zachariah’s party. At least Hester and he were growing closer. If only Gabriel were still in Washington, if only James could see him and speak with him. Instead, he waited increasingly on tenterhooks for how Gabriel’s answer. There’d been no reply yet. There scarce could have been. At best it would take more than a week to reach Kentucky. Even were Gabriel to wire again – unlikely, if he were to write a response that did justice to the desperation of James’ request for help – there was little hope of receiving word imminently. It would be weeks yet. The suspense was maddening.

I want to see Dean. If I could pick an actual way to spend my birthday, that would be it. I would leave this party, return alone on the ferry, walk to the copse of trees. He’d be there and we’d speak. Whether we could reach an understanding or not, it would at least set to rest all these demons that haunt me. I could ask him where he serves, I could ask him of his life, I could ask him about...

Lafitte. Good God, Freeley had said the name Lafitte. Was it a common name? Were there many men named Lafitte in the Confederate army? It must be a coincidence, must be. And yet...jittery, hands shaking around the glass, James jerked around to return to the house intent on asking Freeley for more information only to be confronted by the door opening and the lovely Ms. Cassidy stepping out. Her sleek brown hair gleamed in the faint lamp light illuminating the porch, her brown eyes sparkled with intelligence, her perfectly fit dress showed off every curve of her slim body, and her delicate neck was accentuated by an expensive wrought choker. A dainty, gloved hand held a drink for James, but he could do nothing but stop and stare dumbly at her.

“Are you well, Major Novak?” She paused. “Perhaps you should not have another after all?” James seized the drink from her hand and downed it in one swallow before she could take it away. “No, I’m quite certain something is the matter. From all I hear this behavior is entirely out of character.”

“I'm having a bad month,” he admitted, stacking the two glasses and setting them with a forceful clatter on the porch banister. They promptly tipped off the curved wood and fell amidst a garden shrub. He sighed defeatedly. “You wished to speak with me?”

“I’d prefer sober,” she sniffed disdainfully.

“I’ve my wits,” he said, unsure if he was telling the truth. The best he could say honestly was that he felt no less cognizant now than he had any time in the past month; the fog usually caused by fatigue now caused instead by alcohol. “Are you pleased to be back in Washington?”

“Yes and no,” Ms. Cassidy shrugged her narrow, shapely shoulders. “I have greatly missed society, greatly missed the opportunity to spend time with women of taste and culture. Lieutenant Colonel Freeley and I visited Richmond for a month as the guest of Mrs. Varina Davis, and that was lovely. Since then, we’ve been at Centreville, where I am a duck out of water and draw undesired attention everywhere I go. I do not know what your Northern soldiers are like, but I find the average Confederate to be shockingly lacking in common civility. They are a pack of ruffians, Major.”

“While I wish I could tell you we were the nobler species, I regret to inform you of the truth, that the Union army is certainly comparable,” said James, hardly minding the words as his thoughts stirred and he struggled to focus on more important matters. There must be some way to pursue the information that he most needed to know. If it truly were Lafitte, Dean’s Lafitte, singing at the tents of General Singer, might that mean Dean was there as well? “The officers are generally gentleman, but the enlisted men are of all walks and my impression is that the men who join our army are surprisingly similar to those in theirs. Though I’ve no evidence, I think the distinction is more east and west than north and south – those men who are from the coasts, from the original colonies, if you will, are more refined, better educated, often better off. On the other hand, our westerners – whether they be Wisconsonian or Texan or Kansan – are hardened by the frontiers that they have trail-
Ms. Cassidy nodded, lips pursed pensively as she considered his words. “There is merit to that, yes. There are a surprising number of Westerners in these Eastern armies. You’d think they’d stay to the outer reaches of the conflict – Missouri or Kentucky or the like.”

“To move west is to be an adventurer, and for better or for worse this war is the greatest adventure of the age. I suspect many were so eager to join in that they hurried here to defend their respective capitals,” James said, his words coming faster and faster, his heart racing. “A subordinate of mine mentioned a friend of his, Benjamin Lafitte, who seemed to fit this description.”


“Me? No, we’ve never met,” James shook his head and the world spun disturbingly. With effort, he kept his balance, stilled his body. His throat felt choked by his nerves and need. “But my clerk, Winchester, is from Kansas and mentioned that he knows several Kansans, such as Lafitte, who hastened to fight for the Confederacy as he hastened to fight for the Union.”

“Did he now?” There was a laugh in Ms. Cassidy’s voice and James hoped it wasn’t the alcohol telling him that there was something far too knowing in her expression. She knew the name, she must know the name. “You know, Major, I believe we’ve found two sides of the same coin. Has your Winchester a family member fighting for the opposition? A cousin, perhaps, or a brother?”

“He has,” said James with an affected air of thoughtful indifference. “An elder brother whom I met once in odd circumstances – Dean Winchester.”

“The very man,” said Ms. Cassidy with delight. “That is indeed a coincidence! Well, when I return I shall have to pass on this intelligence to Winchester and Lafitte, I’m sure they’ll find it amusing. They are both coarse about the edges but beneath their rough exterior I’ve found them to be thoughtful and educated. They are not the problem among the men of General Singer’s staff.”

“They’re on his staff?” James asked, astonished.

“Indeed,” she nodded. “But do tell me, Major, under what circumstances could you possibly have met Dean Winchester? He seems to me a busy man – always in and out of camp, never where one expects him to be.”

“His brother was injured at Bull Run, and I met the elder Winchester when he brazenly rode into Washington to deliver his sibling back to us for care,” James explained. His head was pounding in time to his racing heart and his stomach roiled. He wished now he’d had less to drink. He needed his wits about him to keep her from growing suspicious. Already there was a knowing glint in her expression that he feared the implications of. “With that in mind – perhaps you’ll think me strange, for I scarce know the man, but I wonder if, in the months from then to now, Mr. Winchester has had word of how his brother does. You’ll be returning to the Confederate army after this diplomatic matter is concluded, correct? If I wrote Winchester a note to assure him of his brother’s complete recovery, do you think you might carry it for me?”

“That is quite inappropriate,” she said primly. There was an endless pause, every second punctuated by the over-loud thud of James’ heart. “However, I have heard him express more than once that he is concerned for his brother – what was the name, Sherman? Stewart? Something the like...”

“Samuel,” supplied James, recognizing the test for what it was, though unsure why she was testing him. He definitely should not have had so much to drink.
“Yes! Samuel,” she agreed with delight. “I can carry word for you Major; Mr. Winchester deserves the peace of mind. However, I think you will be sorely disappointed if you write him a letter.”

“Why?” asked James blankly.

“He cannot read,” she laughed. “I know, ridiculous, isn’t it? An adult man in this day and age, unable to manage so much as to read the alphabet aloud if it is spelled out for him!”

*But he has written me!* James scarce held the words back. From her increasing mirth, he thought his shock evident and, he hoped, entirely misunderstood.

“Perhaps another might read it to him?” James managed to ask with a semblance of dignity. Lord, how could he say what he must in terms that were suitable for any eye other than the intended recipient? How could it be that Dean couldn’t *read*? It made no sense. Sam could read excellently, and Dean gave the appearance of being as intelligent as his brother. Perhaps Ms. Cassidy was mistaken.

Her laughter faded into a sympathetic look whose meaning he could not understand. “You are in earnest,” she said, wondrous. She shook her head. “Oh, Major, you are something. I had thought perhaps you wished to send some covert message – yet you truly wish to reassure a virtual stranger about his brother? You really do not have a care who else might read it? Very well – I will take your message for you and read it to Winchester for you. If I am able, I will even do one better – I believe I have means to get you a letter back. I’m sure Winchester would love to communicate with his brother, and to thank you for your aid. I could pen it for him, or Lafitte could – that is how he usually manages. You are stationed at Fort Lyon, correct? That’s quite a forward position. If I could get letters there from behind enemy lines, perhaps you would be of service to me, as I am of service to you? I’d appreciate help in forwarding personal correspondence to my friends and family in the North. They have had little word of me while I entered rebel territory and I fear I worry them exorbitantly during my long absences.”

“Absolutely,” James said. If he were routinely passing messages for Ms. Cassidy, he could routinely send word to Dean. Every regret he’d had over attending the evening’s festivities faded. He could not have hoped for a better outcome. “If you’ll give me a few minutes, I’ll write something immediately.”

“Of course, Major Novak,” she said graciously, gesturing towards the entrance. “Take as long as you need.”

James held the door for her, she swept in regally and immediately was caught in conversation by a young man James didn’t know. James hurried past the crowds clogging the hallway, ignored the knots of people in the study as they all ignored him. None of this noise and bustle was about him, *none of it*, the guests couldn’t care less if he was present and there was no point in pretending otherwise. He was sick and tired of the masquerade of giving a damn about *any* of this. He had a way to contact Dean. That was all that mattered. Grabbing paper, pen and envelop, he retreated upstairs to the family’s private rooms and attempted to think what he could write that aligned with what he’d said to Ms. Cassidy yet still communicated the things that James *had* to tell Dean.

*To Mr. Dean Winchester,*

*November 22\(^{nd}\), 1861*

*I have for some time sought a means of getting in contact with you to update you on the health of your brother Sam. Don’t worry – he is perfectly well, completely recovered from his injuries of the summer, and has weathered the autumn without illness. Further, I am pleased to report that Sam has been promoted and is now clerk to the Major of our Regiment – who is none other than myself. With these promotions has come dramatic increase in the magnitude and extent of our*
responsibilities, as you can imagine. Sam is a hard worker. I do not know how we would see to all our duties if not for the many nights that we work together from dusk until dawn to keep atop things. I’m extremely sorry that it has taken me such a long time to outreach to you. You must understand that short of miraculously encountering you in person once more, I had not the least means of contacting you until fortunate chance this evening introduced me to someone who not only knows you, but expects to see you again soon.

Resisting the urge to chew on the end of the pen, James rubbed his forehead with his off-hand and considered how best to proceed, writing one uncertain word at a time.

Ms. Cassidy has suggested that she can act as intermediary if you wish to send a response to this letter. I would be happy to pass anything you wish on to Sam, and request her to deliver to your hand any replies he might write. These are tense times for crossing enemy lines, but I believe there are still some means of doing so, if care is taken, as I’m sure all concerned in this exchange will be. When the potential reward is worth the risk, the danger becomes as nothing and the effort involved scarce to be thought of. Let me know what you wish of me, and I will do my best to oblige. Though we be enemies by circumstances, I do not believe we are by natural inclination – that nations fight does not mean that individual men must be similarly split. I know little of you, Mr. Winchester, but my sense from our brief encounter was that you are a man whom, like your brother, I would be proud to call friend. I would hate if the momentous events that have overtaken us should prevent us from achieving amity as individuals. If you feel similarly, I hope you will rely on my discretion to ensure that you and your brother are not cruelly divided unnecessarily.

Forgive me if this message prove unwelcome. I sought only to set your mind at ease and to quell the anxiety I have felt since last we parted. Sincerely,

J.C. Novak

What it lacked in veracity, James hoped it made up for in subtly communicating the things he most wanted to say – that he hadn’t wished to stop visiting by night, that he’d have contacted Dean sooner had he been able, that he was sorry, that if possible he’d like to meet again. Placing the paper in the envelope, James didn’t bother to seal it. Though he couldn’t say why, he felt certain that Ms. Cassidy would read it within minutes of it being handed to her regardless of what steps he took to prevent her doing so. Even were he wrong, she was most likely to read it to Dean when it reached him – if it reached him – and she’d learn its contents regardless.

Let her. The letter was as innocuous as could be. All he could hope was that Dean understood him.

Ms. Cassidy said nothing when James passed her the letter. The necessary concentration had sobered him, but he found he didn’t mind. Writing to Dean lifted a binding pressure from his chest that he’d not even realized was there. The relief was shockingly powerful. He could meet even Mr. Roman with the semblance of cheer, accepting his birthday wishes and encouragement that James strive his hardest in his new position because Crowley was a man who could do much to further James’ career. Eventually, midnight came and General Elkins apologized to the assembled that the party from Fort Lyons must depart – though he magnanimously granted Colonel Crowley permission to stay for no reason that James could determine. The explanation James could concoct was that, observing the friendship between the General, Hannah and Crowley, the Colonel was a far different man to his superiors than he was to his subordinates.

James slept well that night, awoke refreshed the next morning, and though his anticipation grew throughout the next day, throughout the next week, he felt he could weather it as long as he didn’t have to wait too terribly long.

In the clear frigid light of an early December morning, Ms. Cassidy’s confidence that she could pass
messages through the lines seemed strange, and her need to use him as an intermediary was suspicious. Considering it from all angles – a welcome distraction from awaiting word from Gabriel or Dean – he couldn’t but wonder what prevented her from sending personal letters by more conventional means. If she could reach him, surely she could reach someone more suited to be her mail carrier? She seemed impressed by James’ earnestness. Perhaps she thought him trustworthy? Personal correspondence should not require the discretion of the sender. That hers might suggested there was something more to what she wrote than mere news to family members. Though it seemed incredible that such a slight young woman might be doing something illicit, the whole thing was inexplicable by any other means.

Then, there was what Lieutenant Colonel Freeley had said of Ms. Cassidy’s relationship with Ms. Harvelle. James had suspicions of Ms. Harvelle that he’d dismissed for similar reasons, yet he had to give her credit for shrewdness and intelligence. Despite his instincts that told him subterfuge was unfeminine, he had to acknowledge that Ms. Harvelle was capable of it. At the party it was obvious she had Boyle wrapped about her finger as surely as she did Roman. What if the two women were working together in some fashion? Passing information to the Confederates? If that were the case, Ms. Cassidy would need messages delivered to her, not from her. And what benefit in involving James? If Ms. Cassidy could come to James in Alexandria, could she not as readily find her way to Washington to communicate with Ms. Harvelle directly? Entry into the city was carefully monitored, but none would stop a gentlewoman from traveling where she would even in these difficult times.

It was a long, strenuous journey from Centreville to Washington, which would suggest that neither woman was travelling as they shouldn’t – but the journey from Centreville to Alexandria was no less arduous. Perhaps the friendship between the two woman was mere coincidence. In that case, it became possible that if Ms. Cassidy was a spy she served the Union. Coming from Boston, she was not a likely suspect to be a Confederate infiltrator, and there’d be no cause for her to attach herself to Freeley, knowing him southbound. If she served the US, he’d best not ask too many questions and aid her as he might, passing her letters without digging.

Of course, there was the most obvious conclusion, that everyone was precisely as they appeared – Ms. Cassidy infatuated with an attractive Englishman who led her into adventure, Ms. Harvelle fond of captivating the men around her, liberally bestowing her flirtation while making no promises – and that there was nothing nefarious going on at all. However, whenever he thought that he recalled his initial impressions of each: that Ms. Harvelle was a fine actress who knew precisely what she did; that Ms. Cassidy was a woman who would read his letter in a heartbeat. He could no longer convince himself that their behavior aligned with the standards of womanly modesty, not compared to their actual actions. Be they spies or otherwise, there was something more than he knew going on with both of them.

*If it were Hester I’d not doubt her capable of such duplicity and bravery, and the same with Anna, the same even with Hannah. If I can believe it of the women I know best, whom I know to be every bit as capable as men, why should I not believe it of these strangers?*

Round and round as he might go, James could find no means of explaining his limited observations.

*Whatever she is, whoever she serves, I hope she can deliver as she’s promised.*

The waiting felt endless. James waited for a letter from Gabriel, waited for a note from Dean, waited for word from Ms. Cassidy, waited for winter to begin, waited to learn if there was to be war with England, waited to see if McClellan intended the army to march, waited through the long slow nights for the dawn and his brief snatches of sleep. It felt like for more than six months, all James had done was hurry up and wait.
Interlude

Ms. Cassidy’s lyrical voice fell silent and Dean could do nothing but stare at her in amazement.

What the hell was that?

The Captain had written to him. The Captain had written to him to tell him that Sam was alright? Dean already knew Sam was alright. It didn’t make any damn sense. That hadn’t been the purpose of the letter, it couldn’t be. Dean had never wished more in his life that he could read the words for himself, that he could study them for hidden meaning, but he wasn’t smart enough for that. If Novak were trying to tell Dean something covertly, he’d vastly over-estimated Dean’s intelligence. And why would Novak try to be subtle? Did Novak know the embarrassing truth? The one time Dean had written the Captain, he’d pathetically allowed the man to believe that Dean had written the letter himself, too ashamed to risk revealing the truth. The letter must mean what just what it said. Except that what it said made no sense at all, not based on their actual history. Desperately, Dean tried to hold on to the phrases that stood out to him, tried to tell himself to stop being ridiculous.

…working dusk to dawn...

…stop the anxiety I’ve felt since last we parted…

…meeting in person once more…

…some means of crossing between the lines…

…send word back to me, tell me what you wish of me and I’ll try to meet your request…

…I would be proud to call you friend…

It made no sense, none of it did. From the flagrantly incorrect statements such as that they’d only met once and briefly, to the subtle suggestions that they had parted on good terms, it was absurd. Novak must know that someone else would be reading the letter and felt the need to speak circumspectly. Either that or Dean was once again deluding himself as to the man’s potential interest in him.

The second was by far the more likely. The letter must be precisely what it appeared, an attempt to update him on Sam, perhaps a well-meaning but officious effort to reconcile them. Each point Novak made came around to Sam in the end. Perhaps Dean could ask Cassidy to read the letter again, or have Benny do so, and then in his usual slow, dull way he could figure out what it was he was missing, what Novak was attempting to tell him.

“Mr. Winchester?” Cassidy interrupted his racing thoughts, a saccharine smile setting Dean’s teeth on edge. He wasn’t sure why, but he loathed her, had since the day she’d shown up hanging on the Englishman’s arm and imperiously requesting a private tent with a garment chest and washbasin. A woman like her had no place in a camp like theirs.

“Thank you kindly, Ms. Cassidy,” drawled Dean. “And you’re able to carry word back to my brother, if I choose to reply?”

“I’d be happy to,” she smiled. “Because of my neutrality as Lieutenant Colonel Freeley’s companion, I am free to be an intermediary, so long as it does not become too frequent.”

“And will you read my mail, as you’ve read Captain Novak’s?” he asked. Wait, the letter said he’s a Major now…

“Unlike you, Major Novak is literate,” she said with that same infuriating smile. “He shan’t need me
to read the words your proxy sets to paper. I’m willing to help you with that, if you’d wish.”

“How about no?” Dean managed a toothy grin and her expression flickered momentarily to a scowl before she plastered on pleasure once more. “I’m relieved to know my brother is alright, but we didn’t part on good terms. I’ve no need to answer. Thank you for your generous offers, though.”

“How about no?” she purred. Several beats passed with her standing impassively as if waiting for him and then she offered him his own damn letter as if *deigning* to give him a fricken *gift* and swept away between the tents as if down a broad city street. As she left, Dean heaved an explosive sigh of relief.

“How much’d you hear?” Benny asked, coming up behind him.

“Just the end,” Benny shrugged. “She bring you a letter? From your brother?”

“Sort of,” said Dean, offering Benny the note. “It’s from Sam’s commander, a fellow named Novak. We met briefly when I took Sam to Washington in July.” He did his damnedest to sound nonchalant, and earned himself a quirked eyebrow for his efforts. “I’d like to write him back, but first I was wondering if you could read it over to me again. I’m too stupid for his fancy education and big words.”

The quirked eyebrow lifted higher, but Benny didn’t say anything, merely nodded. “Come on, let’s get in the tent. It’s colder’n Andrea’s heart out here.” A hint of bitterness tinged his tone but Dean let it go. Benny wouldn’t thank him if Dean acknowledged the implications of those words. They’d long ago talked over everything there was to say on Andrea’s betrayal and what Dean considered the ludicrous reality that his friend yet harbored affection for the woman.

The interior of the tent was scant warmer than outside and the thin material did little to cut the wind. Wrapping himself in a blanket, Dean slumped to the ground, happy to have another layer over his flimsy uniforms. At least they both had boots. Espying the cracked and split feet of those who didn’t, Dean was thankful for that every day.

By the faint light seeping in, Benny softly read the letter aloud and Dean focused on the words, desperately trying to retain the exact words in his mind since he could never read them on the page. If he were to attempt to read it himself, the words would be gibberish, the letters in no coherent order. No matter how he concentrated, no matter how he studied, no matter how often he tackled the same text, his abilities never improved. However, when he heard them aloud he could remember if he concentrated. So many of the things Novak said made no sense, did not align with the actual events. The fervent apology stood out this time, as did the implications that they shared common ideological ground, that they might have things to discuss if they spoke, all carefully brought back around to Sam.

*Of course, Sam must have told him that I can’t read. Why shouldn’t Sam tell Novak every negative thing ‘bout me? He’s made it plenty clear he ain’t over what happened, dumb kid.*

Benny’s voice trailed off and they sat in silence for several minutes.

“Will you write out something for me?” Dean asked in a rush.

“Sure thing,” Benny nodded and grabbed his small writing desk, sucking on the tip of his pen to warm the metal enough to induce the ink to flow. “Who is it to?”
“Major Novak,” Dean said with more confidence that he felt. His interpretation was wrong. It must be wrong. Taking a letter to Novak would do no more than confirm that Dean had misunderstood Novak’s intent. Then, Dean would know for certain that Novak had no desire to see him again and Dean would never have to think of the handsome man more save in his dreams. “Today’s the 6th?”

“7th.”

“Put in the date,” requested Dean. “Then, ‘dawn, Wednesday the 11th.’ ”

“What, that’s what you want me to write?” asked Benny incredulously.

“Yeah.”

“Dean...”

If Benny was calling him by his name he must think something really bad was happening. Fantastic.

“I want to talk to Sam,” lied Dean. “The Captain – Major – he’ll know what I mean.”

“And you were worried sneakin’ into Washington was gonna get you hanged?”

“Just write the damn letter,” Dean snapped.

“Fine, but I ain’t goin’ to your funeral.”

“Didn’t think you would anyway.”

There wasn’t a damn person who would mourn him if this went badly, and he was fine with that.

“Sign it with my name. I’ll take it over myself tomorrow.”

“Just be careful, okay, brother?”

“Haven’t gotten caught yet, have I?” Except that he had. Novak had caught him, in so many more ways than one.

Damn, Dean hoped that Novak would be at the copse of trees when the sun rose next Wednesday.

Chapter End Notes

When I was plotting this story I used random.org to choose a birthday for James, and it turned out to November 22nd. So no, I have no reason at all for this choice, in case you were wondering. I just figured it’d be helpful to know. :)

Quotes are from the November 17th edition of the New York Times, drawn from a few different articles all related to the Trent Affair. I made minor changes and consolidated the original text for clarity and streamlining. Note that it wouldn’t actually be possible for James and his crew, in Washington, to get access to a New York City newspaper so soon after its publication, but it’s the newspaper whose archives I have access to, so ya’ll are stuck with it. :) The only thing in the articles I flat-out changed (though I skipped whole sentences and swapped out a word or two) was that, historically, the name of the British ship Trent was not known at first. However, I thought the narrative clearer if the
name was stated clearly.

Speaking of which...so, there's this idea in modern times that at one point the media was an unbiased source of pure truth?? That NOW our media has *become* partisan in the US, and that's new and weird? Um...this is one of the least supportable common beliefs I encounter. It's demonstrably false. In the 19th century, newspapers were ludicrously partisan. In every major city and region, multiple papers were written intentionally to appeal to people of different political parties. Papers openly identified as Whig (later Republican) or Democrat, and people upheld the veracity of their own papers and decried those of the opposition (sound familiar?). Newspaper reading was a national pastime, and newspapers were passed around and read by all, read aloud to those who could not read for themselves (literacy rates among free adult men were around 70% nation-wide).

One side effect of this was the celebrity of editors. Several editors gained a LOT of prominence, and as Abraham Lincoln sought to marshal support for the Civil War, a VERY important part of this was maintaining alliance with the primary Republican editors in the country (Lincoln faced internal opposition from within his own party from those who felt he wasn't radical enough, as well as facing opposition from Democrats who thought the Union should sue for peace). For example, foremost among these allies was Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune, one of the most widely read newspapers of the time. Greeley was an ally of Seward (I talked about Seward in the opening note...) and supported Lincoln throughout the war, while always pushing him to be more radical and forcing Lincoln to meet him on issues in exchange for his help. Which is to say - this newspaper editor had a material effect on the course of the war. (he went on to lose a presidential election to Ulysses Grant...)

So, there's a point where James mentions the editor of the New York Times by name (the Times was a growing paper at the time and the editor, Henry J. Raymond was once Greeley's assistant. The Times was a bit more neutral, but still pretty Republican. At this time, the editor was primarily responsible for writing the (extremely, flagrantly partisan) editorials. An educated Republican like James would definitely be able to name the editors of several prominent newspapers - in the same way that I, as a regular reader of the modern day NY Times, can name several of the people who write editorials for the Times and tell you basically what their political leanings are.
Chapter title is from another Walt Whitman poem - I suspect this will be something of a theme for the chapters mostly about Dean and James, since it's hard to find period quotes that portray homosexuality in a positive light. :) This one is from "Once I Pass'd Through a Populous City." Note that the "standard" vision uses heterosexual language, but the original manuscript version used male pronouns - or at least so says this article I found.

A note about time:

In this chapter, there is a bit where it's dawn, James pulls out his watch, and finds the time to be 4:30. "But wait," you say, "Unforth, I just googled sunrise on December 11th in Alexandria, and it's 7:15 AM!" (Wait, am I the only one who googles things like that regularly?) "How can James be saying it's 4:30?"

Time is a construct. What time is it really at any given moment? In the early days of the railroad, time tables began to be standardized for various reasons (for scheduling, to be sure people got to their trains on time, to prevent accidents, etc.). Before that standardization, at any given place at any given time, what time it was…was kind of relative, in a strange way. So James’ watch would be set to the local accepted time for the army, and probably matched the time in Washington, Alexandria, and the general vicinity. However, this was a point before time zones existed or any of that jazz. In the US in the mid-19th century, every single railroad company kept it’s own standard time!! A quote from Wikipedia to demonstrate how ridiculous this was: “Some junctions served by several railroads had a clock for each railroad, each showing a different time.” Indeed, standard time zones in the United States are first proposed during the war, in part to simplify/aid with the logistics of supply and transport.

In the meantime, individual places did as best they could, and confusion was more than once caused by different officers thinking the time was different.

In my personal decision to call sunrise 4:30 on this day…well, I’ve read a LOT of accounts of battles, which often cite times (since generals who wrote reports tended to name the times in said reports). Though I’ve never read it explicitly described anywhere I’ve noticed that very often, marches start at dawn, with statements like, “the troops began the movement at 4 AM, not long after dawn.” This has lead me to think that timekeeping then tended much earlier than timekeeping now – I mean, I’ve never been anywhere in my life where dawn was at 3:30 in the morning (though I’ve never traveled in the north in summer…). The people writing these reports were in Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee, not Nova Scotia or Scandinavia. Time must just have been…different.

For example: The Battle of Fredericksburg starts on December 11th, 1862 – so, the same day as this scene. That day, engineers begin building a bridge in the “pre-dawn darkness.” This aligns to 2 AM, apparently, when Union artillery is in place. By 5 AM, despite thick fog, it was bright enough that soldiers put out their fires.

So, in Virginia, in 1862, dawn on December 11th was right around 5 AM. It has nothing to do with our modern conception of time. Time isn’t an absolute, and it was
different then. :)

Oh and in case you were wondering…the battle of Fredericksburg? Why yes, that IS the same Fredericksburg that Sam and Dean are from. *smiles teasingly and secretly*

Chapter 9: We Wander, We Love, We Separate Again

Dear Zachariah, December 8th, 1861

I’m writing to beg your intercession with your acquaintance. Though it’s not yet winter, the weather has been cold even in comparison to New York, a level of chill I’m informed by the locals is absolutely shocking. A man in Company D froze to death last night, and I have spent the day rearranging the regiment’s sleeping arrangements in the hope that such might be prevented in the future, but body heat and fire can only do so much. We need stout wool. I recall Mrs. Talbot discussing her family’s textile concerns and was hoping you would approach the Talbots directly about acquiring more adequate protection for our soldiers.

Thank you for the party held in my honor. I had a delightful time and I am grateful for the effort that you and Margaret went to on my behalf. Send her my thanks as well.

If you are returning to Wolcott for the Christmas holiday, might you carry my best wishes and gifts with you? Please let me know.

J.C. Novak

Gently blowing across the page to dry the ink, his breath misting in the cold air, James flexed the stiff fingers with which he’d been holding his pen. He recalled that, months ago, Anna had mentioned that the Aid Society was busily knitting winter gear, but not a single package had ever been received by the Regiment. The sutlers could not keep gloves in stock and the army did not issue them. It had been days since his hands had been warm through. No amount of holding them towards the fire or clutching them around his coffee mug got at the core of cold. In addition to the death in Company D, there had already been several cases of frostbite. One of the Benders had lost two toes. Now when James’ thoughts wandered to Valley Forge he could no longer sanguinely believe that the government would ensure that General Washington’s tragedy was not repeated. That no one seemed to care was the worst part.

“Major?”

James jerked his head up to see a large form silhouetted against the entrance to his tent. Brightly backlit, it could have been anyone, but even tentative, Henriksen’s voice was unmistakable.

“Yes, Lieutenant?” James asked, wondering how long Henriksen had waited for acknowledgement, that he sounded so unsure about interrupting. “Come in.”

“Sorry to bother you, sir, but I’ve been looking for you all day.” Stooping as he entered, Henriksen let the tent flaps fall shut behind him and James blinked to clear brilliant spots from his vision. “A woman from Alexandria approached the pickets on the road last night with a note for you. I have it here.” Henriksen produced a small folded slip of paper from his pocket and passed it to James. Sans envelope, it was sealed tallow judging by the grease soaking the cheap weave.
“Thank you,” James said.

*It could be from Mr. Roman or Ms. Harvelle. It could be from someone in my family. It could be from almost anyone. But it must be from Ms. Cassidy. What other woman would come with a letter for me? There’s no other explanation.*

James’ heart started to race, his breath to come more quickly. Anticipation spiked, but he didn’t dare open it with Henriksen standing there, didn’t trust himself to react impassively to whatever it might say.

“How have you been, Henriksen?” James asked. It felt like forever since he’d spoken to any of his friends from Company B except in the course of their formal duties. They’d been rotated from night patrol, which was great for them but meant that James no longer spent the long, quiet hours with them and he was far too busy to socialize when not on duty. He was always on duty. It was all he could do to occasionally steal meals with Hannah or Hester, to exchange pleasantries with Fitzgerald while James was getting information on the Company’s needs from him.

“More of the same,” replied Henriksen with resignation. “You’ve seen how the Colonel behaves, and in the face of his attitude, many who formerly kept their mouths shut now feel free to state their opinions to my face.”

“I’ve tried to—”

“I know,” Henriksen interrupted harshly. “I know,” he repeated more kindly, with a smile, squatting down beside James. “I in no way meant to imply that I blamed you. Don’t trouble yourself about it. From what I’ve seen, you’ve got plenty of troubles already. Colonel Crowley appears to have almost as high an opinion of you as he does of me.”

“It’s beyond my comprehension,” confessed James, rubbing grit from his eyes with the backs of his cold hands. Still clutching the letter, he jammed his hands into his sleeves. “I’ve completed every duty he’s requested of me, every duty that he didn’t requested but would not have been done due to his neglect. I’ve ensured that despite his frequent absences all appears as it should. None would think the regiment poorly managed...” James trailed off with questioning inflection, and Henriksen nodded his agreement. “…which protects him from reproof. I do not require thanks nor praise – I am not so shallow as that – but I would expect him to be appreciative and instead I am rewarded with callous sniffs.”

“And talk when your back is turned,” supplied Henriksen. James sighed. “Have you considered asking for a transfer?”

“Have you?”

There was no need for either to answer the question. Neither would consider it, because neither was prepared to concede that they were incapable of facing their treatment. James felt a surge of kinship towards Henriksen and resolved that should he have the opportunity, he’d make sure that his friend was rewarded for his forbearance and hard work.

“It recently came to my attention that, since Fitzgerald became Captain, management of the contraband camp has fallen to you?” Henriksen asked. James nodded. “Was Bradbury not able to oversee it?”

“It seemed inappropriate to request such of him,” James said. “It should never have been the duty of a single company, of a single lieutenant. After all, the camp is under the stewardship of the entire brigade. The people who live there have aided to every regiment by doing laundry, taking over mess,
and wielding shovels to build the new line of trenches around the base of Eagle Hill. It seemed only fair that overseeing the camp fall to someone of higher rank. I have spoken with General Elkins and he has requested a suitable officer or civilian be assigned from Washington. I merely have the stewardship until such an individual is found.”

“If you cannot learn to delegate you will work yourself to death,” said Henriksen bluntly.

“It is a duty I would only give to one I truly trust to look after the former slaves’ best interests,” James said with an imitation of blitheness. In truth, being relieved of that additional responsibility would be splendid and enable James to relieve Sam of tasks that should never have been his. There had been no word from Washington. The request was likely sitting at the bottom of an enormous stack of papers on the desk of the wrong functionary, never to see the light of day. The chances that aid would be forthcoming seemed depressingly low, given how well acquainted James was becoming with the near-inert behemoth that was the United States Department of War.

“I’ll do it,” Henriksen said. James blinked. “I understand that in light of our previous argument you’d never ask me. But am I mistaken in my belief that I am ‘one you truly trust?’ ”

“With my life, Henriksen,” James interjected with heartfelt sincerity.

“In that case, consider me an eager volunteer,” said Henriksen. “While I am frustrated that all will look and say, ‘of course the black officer is responsible for his fellows,’ the Colonel has curtailed me to near-uselessness despite Fitzgerald and Bradbury’s efforts to the contrary. This, at least, he will allow me to do. I’m sure he’ll feel caretaking the ex-slaves is an appropriate direction for my energies.” There was a sour note in Henriksen’s voice, but it overlaid his obviously genuine willingness to be of service. “If I may trail you over the next few days as you attend to that aspect of your duties, I’ll be prepared to take over in no time.”

“That would be perfect.” James couldn’t keep the relief from his voice. “Aside from the inevitable interruptions, I generally attend to matters at the contraband camp between 4 and 6 – currently, that is just after sunset. Alternatively, seek out Ms. Moseley. She is pleased to pretend to primarily be the regimental wash woman but in actuality she is the one ensuring that the camp is seen to, for I haven’t the time to devote myself to them as they require. If you speak with her, I’m sure she can train you as thoroughly as I, save that I am the one who handles the aspects of management internal to the army – requisitions and pickets, some other odds and ends. The population is nearing 300, and though the Colonel has suggested to me that winter will decrease the number of arrivals, I disagree. Reports suggest that the Confederate army is baring the local cellars in their need for food. No matter how much ‘a part of the family’ many swear their slaves are, when January and February come and it is a choice between feeding actual family members – white family members – and slave property, we both know who will suffer.” By the time James fell silent, Henriksen’s expression was grim.

“I’ll take care of it,” Henriksen vowed.

“We’re not to pester the locals, no matter their treatment of their slaves,” cautioned James.

“I won’t do a thing I shouldn’t,” said Henriksen, feigning innocence. James smiled despite himself, envisioning covert rescue parties being sent from the contraband camp to pressure the remaining local enslaved population into seeking their freedom. He couldn’t encourage such behavior, but the contraband weren’t actually in the army, James couldn’t order them not to try to free their fellows. How they spent their free time was their own concern.

“I’m positive you will be the soul of propriety,” James agreed. “And discretion.” Henriksen gave him a grin, and James returned it.
“I will see you this afternoon,” Henriksen said. “Until then, try to get some sleep, sir.”

“Unlikely,” James replied, “but I’ll manage what I may. Thank you, Henriksen.”

Henriksen ducked from the tent. With sleepy bemusement, James reflected with pleasure on the conversation. It was nice to share his duties, nice to feel that he was doing good, but more than that, it had been exceptional to have a few minutes to speak with a friend and to discuss matters with someone who entered into his feelings. There was no need to hide his opinion with Henriksen, no need to smile and pretend. Going forward, for the sake of his sanity he’d have to carve out more time with those he knew best.

The thought reminded him what he held in his hand, and as the tent flap stilled behind Henriksen, James withdrew the message from his sleeve. The tallow had grown tacky in the heat within his wool uniform and it gummed and threaded as James carefully unfolded the square of paper, his nerves thrilling. He could scarce get a breath through his tight-clenched throat. The greasy fat had caused the ink to run, but the words were legible, the hand recognizable.

Major Novak, December 6th, 1861

Dawn, Wednesday the 11th.

D. Winchester

With surreal detachment, James noted it was the same hand as last time – it must be Lafitte writing, despite Dean’s name appended to the bottom. It was a letter, it was from Dean, at least it claimed to be from Dean, and it gave a time and date, a time when presumably Dean wished to meet, a date soon...

...Dean wrote to me, Dean is willing to speak with me, Dean wants to see me...

The world spun and James realized he was taking desperate, shallow breaths, his heart racing. The hand clutching the page tingled but it had naught to do with the cold, for he felt warm for the first time in days, over warm, feverish. The sheet shook with increasing violence as James tried and failed to still his hand.

This letter doesn’t necessarily mean any of those things. What exactly did I write, does he think to meet Sam, is he expecting I’ll bring Sam, should I bring Sam?

There was not the least question that James would go. He’d rise from his deathbed to see Dean. It was an absurdity and yet he knew it was the truth. Only by seeing the young man again could James hope to quell the disquiet aroused in him.

Only by seeing Dean again can I touch him, have him touch me, spend time with him, soak in his presence.

His vision faded white around the edges. Seizing his errant thoughts, with difficulty James restrained his breathing, forced a semblance of calm. His reactions were insane, unreasonable. Something was wrong with him, something beyond potential infidelity that troubled him less and less, something beyond his desire for a man. James longed for Gabriel’s answer to his letter. Perhaps, inconceivably, his brother would write with the explanation of what ailed James.

Perhaps seeing Dean again would enact a cure for what ailed James.

It had been six weeks. It felt like a lifetime.
The thought proved depressingly prescient. Whereas the weeks since October had passed at once like lightning and at a snail’s pace, they had nothing on the three days that separated James from his meeting with Dean. Sleep was impossible to come by, his thoughts running round and round anticipation and self-recrimination. His irrepresible longing to see Dean was opposed by his perception of the inappropriateness of his feelings, the unreasonableness of his expectations, his fruitless attempts to counsel himself to modest hope and good sense. James attended to his duties, but he felt like a ghost, disconnected from his exhausted body. He scarce ate for the knots binding his stomach and throat and the chill wind cut through the fraying felt of his uniform and left him shaken and weak. His behavior wasn’t healthy – given the unrelenting cold, might even be actually dangerous – but he couldn’t help it. For once, he understood the severity of emotion he’d oft read in stories of romance and had never understood. The absurd things he was thinking and feeling, the ridiculous reaction of his body, must be the misery that drove many a Shakespearean tragedienne to an untimely end.

Ash, Bradbury and Alfie found James while he was doing an inventory of supplies on Tuesday afternoon. Ash seized one of his arms, Alfie another, and when James protested, Bradbury threatened to grab his feet and carry him unless he went peacefully. Unsure what was going on, but determined not to make that much of a spectacle of whatever it was, he allowed them to drag him to his tent.

“What’s going on?” James asked dumbly as pulled him within the modest shelter. Winchester didn’t even look up from the ledger he was working on.

“Go to sleep,” said Alfie with all the demanding, near-officious confidence that only a childhood friend could muster.

“There are too many things to do,” argued James, taking off his hat to run a hand through his already-mussed hair. “I need to—”

“Go to sleep,” snapped Bradbury. Ash didn’t speak. Instead, he gathered up James and Winchester’s blankets, shook both out and held them up pointedly.

“But—”

“Major, right now I doubt you could overpower one of us, much less all three,” Bradbury interrupted acidly. “You can’t keep pushing yourself like this. It has to stop. You are only one man and you can only do so much. Hester suggested that we hit you over the head, but we thought you might at least consider reason. We’ve all seen how hard Crowley is pushing you, but if you do not eat and sleep you’ll collapse, you’ll sicken and you won’t recover. If you won’t do as you ought for your health, I have your sisters permission to sit on you.”

“What about—”

“I’ll take care of it,” Winchester said. “I’ll be here, working, and Alfie and Bradbury will stand guard. There are exactly three people in this camp who do not believe you are in a track to kill yourself by the end of the week: Colonel Crowley, Lieutenant Colonel Tanner, and yourself.”

“I will punch you in the face if you don’t rest on your own, James,” Alfie added with a wry smile.

“I’ve felt your punch, it’d barely tickle,” said James, mustering what little dignity he had left. Ash held the blankets out towards James insistently. At least the cold had killed the lice. A yawn burst from James before he could restrain it and it nearly drove him to his knees. They were right, of course, even his tension and anxiety for the coming meeting could only fuel him for so long. He was so tired. “Fine,” he mumbled, surrendering. He lay down on the frozen earth and Ash lay the
blankets over him. For an instant, James felt even more chill, but rapidly the cloth gathered his warmth and he wrapped them around his body to shield him from the ground.

_If I don’t relax, if I don’t forgive myself, if I don’t accept my feelings, I won’t be able to see him at all._

The thought comforted him, warmed him, even though something about it niggled at his thoughts as inconsistent. He couldn’t think on it, couldn’t muster any logic in the face of his fatigue. Four sympathetic faces peered down at him.

_Thank you_, he tried to whisper, but he had no idea if he said the words aloud, sleep overtook him so quickly.

When James woke, it was full dark save for the faint, warm glow of a lamp within the tent. Winchester did not appear to have moved over however many hours had passed, still bent over the table working diligently.

“What time is it?” James asked, his mouth feeling strangely unresponsive. God, he was tired. He felt even more tired than when he’d fallen asleep. The blankets were snug, a contrast to the cold of his cheeks and nose, and the ground was cold against his back despite the layers protecting him. His stomach grumbled loudly.

“Late,” replied Winchester without looking up. “Go back to sleep.”

“How late?” James said suspiciously.

“Maybe 10?” Winchester shrugged as if he wasn’t saying something that spelled James’ doom. “I don’t have a watch; it’s been a while since curfew was called.”

Scrambling at his blankets, James tried to rise. Instantly, Winchester was leaning over him, a hand on James’ shoulder pinning him to the ground, surprising strength in the youth’s grip. “Ms. Novak spoke with General Elkins and told him that, in her ‘professional’ opinion as a nurse, you needed a night off to sleep. Elkins concurred. You might as well lie down, Henriksen is standing outside the tent with a rifle and bayonet to prevent you leaving should you try.”

“May I have something to eat before I go to sleep again?” James asked. He wanted to sound wry, angry – how dare they treat him like a child? – but instead the words came out sheepish and meek. He couldn’t deny that he needed the rest. He felt pathetic for it.

“We can manage that,” Winchester said. “Henriksen, you hear that?”

“Yup,” Henriksen could be clearly heard through the thin material of the tent. “Ms. Moseley kept a bowl of stew aside for him and some fresh bread. I’ll be right back.” The sound of thick-soled shoes on frozen dirt faded into the distance quickly.

“You don’t get to leave just because you’re no longer under guard,” Winchester added distractedly, making a note on the page he was working on.

“I’m still under guard,” grumbled James.

“You remind me of my brother,” said Sam abruptly. James sat up, the world spinning, and blinked at him in surprise. The golden light picked out every line of Sam’s face and gleamed auburn off the long strands of brown hair framing his cheeks. For the first time, James noticed a sparse, short growth of fuzz on the boy’s cheeks. “Our dad was always saying things that made Dean feel like he wasn’t good enough and Dean always believed him, so he’d push himself hard – too hard – as if
there was any amount Dean could do to meet dad’s expectations. Couldn’t, of course, nothing Dean did was good enough, but that didn’t stop Dean from trying until he was ready to fall out of the saddle.”

“That sounds familiar,” James admitted.

“I thought it might.”

“I’m the second youngest of six,” said James. “My parents have high expectations. They want to see me excel. I’m only trying to show them I am as capable as my brothers and sisters.”

“You haven’t slept more than an hour at a time for more than a month,” Sam pointed out. “You’re the only person in this entire camp pushing themselves that hard. I doubt your siblings do half as much.”

“They’re very devoted to their goals,” James protested.

“I’ve seen how your younger sister spends her days,” Sam said dryly, glancing at James. Despite the way he was scolding James there was a faint smile giving a charming yellow gleam to his eyes. “And your elder does work hard but she still takes care of herself.” There was a long pause and Sam continued with a tense nervousness that James didn’t understand. “Don’t be a martyr. Your friends and comrades in arms would rather you do less and be alright than do everything and die.”

“I understand,” said James at length. Sam burst out an explosive, relieved sigh. “What?”

“When I said that to Dean he told me to go to hell,” explained Sam. “Glad you’re not that much like him.”

“I thought you didn’t want to talk to me about him,” said James tentatively.

“Sorry I lost my temper last time you brought it up,” Sam looked away, expression shadowed as he faced the dark corner of the tent. “I was worried about him and he was a jerk to me. He said I should get out of his life if what I said was how I felt, and so I did. He doesn’t get to decide that he wants me back now. If he doesn’t understand yet what I was trying to tell him, there’s no point in us trying to reconcile.”

“What were you trying to tell him?”

“That he needed to stop believing the words of the only person who didn’t believe in him,” Sam said, voice far away. “That he needed to consider that flattening himself to impress someone who hated him was never going to get him what he wanted. That if he tried to define his identity by what our father said about him, he’d never be anyone worth a damn.”

James’ heart ached. The implications of Sam’s words – that Dean was unhappy, that their father had said terrible things to Dean, that their father had hated Dean – were too sad to consider. However frustrating James found Naomi and Michael’s unachievable standards, they did care about him. They wanted what was best for him and pushed him because they believed him capable of more. It sounded like Sam and Dean’s father didn’t believe Dean capable of anything, which was demonstrably untrue. Dean was intelligent, educated, a fine artist, an excellent rider, fearless and committed to his brother. Even barely acquainted with Dean, that much and more had been evident. If Sam were asked about Dean’s good qualities, surely the list would be much longer, yet it sounded like their father felt differently, and that for whatever reason Dean had taken his cues from his elder instead of from the brother who cared about him and respected him.

“He did tell me how to reach him,” said Sam after another long silence. “I just haven’t made any
attempt to do so.”

“Do you want to?”

“I don’t know.”

Before James could ask more, try to learn more about the man he hoped to see in hours, the tent flaps brushed apart in a swirl of shockingly chill air and a rich aroma of spice and potato. Henriksen came in and passed James a tin bowl filled with steaming stew and a large chunk of crusty fresh bread. James’ mouth watered. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a meal that wasn’t small and hastily consumed while he was in hurrying about some other task.

“A lot of people went to a lot of bother for you, Novak, make sure you appreciate it.” James nodded even as he tore off a chunk of bread with unseemly haste and soaked it in broth, letting it get soggy before he lifted it and took a bite. He moaned around the delicious mouthful. “I don’t only mean telling Ms. Moseley you like her cooking. You take care of yourself from now on, you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” James said. A trickle of stew leaked from the corner of his mouth, and he used the stub of bread to mop it up and took another bite.

“Good enough,” Henriksen rolled his eyes. “Get some more sleep. You’re back on duty tomorrow.”

Sam fell silent as James ate, and James was too hungry for even Dean to distract him. When he’d finished every bite of the best meal he’d eaten since he joined the army – counting every meal at Zachariah’s and Roman’s – he set the dirty bowl aside, lay back down, and promptly fell asleep again, warm through and sated. What else he might have asked Sam faded in the wake of contentment. It didn’t matter. He’d see Dean in a few hours, he could ask Dean those questions. Maybe Dean would even answer. James was lucky to have such good friends.

The tent was dark when James awoke. The only sign that Sam was present was the steady breathing of another person and a warm presence to his side. As the nights grew colder, men sharing tents huddled for warmth, a comforting presence through the long winter dark. Rolling out of the blankets, James rose quietly. He spread the blankets over Sam, who muttered incoherently and shifted before settling again, a hand tugging one of the blankets up about his face, which showed as an indistinct pale circle in the blackness. Curious how late – or how early – it was, he stepped out into a crystalline night.

Faint starlight showed the camp in shades of black, blue and gray. Henriksen sat curled in a ball beside the tent flap, rifle negligently held between his folded-up legs, muzzle sticking up over his shoulder, his arms draped around his knees, head down. They really had kept James under guard all night. There was no hint of dawn yet on the horizon and too dark for James to read his watch, but he thought it must be after midnight. Fully awake for the first time in days, James felt strangely hyper-alert, incredibly aware of his surroundings: the chill tingle of the air against his skin, the dry hint of future snow itching at his nose, the surprising amount of light despite the absence of the moon, the sky so clear that James could count the bright blue stars of the Pleiades, the sound of hundreds of men sleeping and breathing and dreaming and snoring, the underlying rank smell of the privies. Anticipation burned through James’ throat, compressed his chest.

Going to sleep again was inconceivable. James was wide awake. Ducking back into the tent, he retrieved one of the blankets from atop Sam, stepped outside and wrapped the other around Henriksen’s shoulders. Neither man reacted, both too tired to so much as stir. That done, James walked a brisk loop around the camp, energized by the bite in the air and the rest. He hadn’t realized how profoundly spent he was until he could feel the contrast. While he’d been exhausted, it had been impossible for him to see past the necessities of the moment. He’d been completely absorbed in the
present, with everything that had to be done immediately – not to mention the things that had needed
to be done the day before but weren’t complete yet. Clear-headed, he could see now he’d been stuck
in a cycle that left him short-sighted and exhausted, and that the added stress of his upcoming
meeting with Dean had been the final anxiety that pushed him past all ability to self-assess and
restrain himself. He’d not make the same mistakes again. Going forward, he’d find a means of
getting a few solid hours of sleep each day.

What if I misunderstood the note Dean sent me?

No one said anything to James as he circulated among the tents. Few people were awake at that
hour, and those that were had grown accustomed to James’ presence. None questioned when he
stepped out of the fortress walls and made a circuit of the exterior walls as he did every night.

What if Dean didn’t intend for us to meet in the thicket? Where else might he have meant? Maybe it
wasn’t a request for a meeting at all? Why wasn’t he more specific, why didn’t he give me more
information? Does he think that someone is reading his notes? Someone must be, presumably
Lafitte, but then why not give more detail? Is Dean keeping secrets from his friend? What secrets?
Something related to me?

All was normal. Despite Crowley’s injunction that one of the officers charged with leading the
regiment be awake and on duty at all hours, there was no sign that Tanner or Crowley had taken the
duty upon themselves while James enjoyed his night off. Why should there be? The nights were
uneventful unless one counted the occasional disorderly drunk or shirking private attempting to skulk
back after an unauthorized evening in Alexandria. If the Confederates ever did attack at night, all of
the regimental captains were men who knew their duty well, and James wished that Crowley would
trust them. And stop punishing me, added a thought James could scarce credit.

What if Dean intended for me to bring Sam? What if he has no interest in seeing me, only his
brother? Other than when Dean rescued Sam at Bull Run, when was the last time they saw each
other? It must be years. It’s selfish of me to think this has anything to do with me, selfish of me to
assume that, considering how much I wrote of Sam in my letter, Dean wouldn’t be thrilled to see his
brother. I deliberately mislead Dean, let him think that Sam wanted to speak with him when I know
it not to be the case.

James knew every nook and cranny of fortress walls, and thus it was easy for him, when he found
the optimal moment, to escape prying eyes and duck into the abatis. Since the trees had been felled,
wild animals had made a few narrow, low passageways through the obstruction, and James had
made a note of where such was located against the possibility that he would need to leave once more
to meet Dean. Tunnel-like amidst the thick dead branches, the animal run wended and switch-backed
down the hill past frozen tree trunks and around rocks before emerging in the clear not far from
Ballenger’s Farm at the northwest corner of the hill, close to the copse of trees. He’d not had a
chance to scout where the tunnel egress was, and was pleased to find it so well situated for his needs.

What if it’s a trap of some kind? What if I was right about Ms. Cassidy, she is a spy of some kind,
and all of this is an elaborate means of making me appear traitor? If I am captured at a time like
this, it will ruin me, disgrace my brother, cast suspicion over the entire family. When the Joint
Committee on the Conduct of the War finishes investigating Ball’s Bluff, the Novak family could be
next, I could be next, if I’m not named Benedict Arnold and executed for whatever crimes they can
pin on me.

Traffic on the road to Alexandria had steadily fallen off as the nights grew colder. Where in the mid-
fall, James routinely saw riders, now he’d seen hardly one all night. Taking to the road, James neither
saw nor heard a soul. A sliver of a moon had risen to cast a faint silvery glow, giving the impression
of a pristine night so fragile it might shatter if James made a loud noise. Every step, every scuff of boots against macadamized pebbles, seemed preternatural in the stillness. Arriving at the thicket was a relief, for there the few leaves yet clinging to branches rustled in the wind, branches clacked, and the world suddenly seemed alive again.

What if he doesn’t want to see me? What if this is only to tell me not to trouble him more? What if I say my piece and he feels differently? What if he rebukes me? What if he thinks me corrupt, vile, disgusting, for desiring him as I do?

The thicket was thin with winter bareness, the ground so carpeted in fallen leaves that the path James had discovered was obscured. There was no way to move silently; the dry rustle and crunch of crumbling frozen leaves accompanied every step. Nearby, a clatter spoke to some animal hearing his approach and fleeing, but he could see little. Even the scant cover of barren branches was enough to filter out what little light the moon and stars cast.

What if I’ve misjudged him? What if he’s actually depraved? What if he is trying to use me, as I suspect that Ms. Harvelle is using Boyle? He is clever enough to concoct and enact such a ruse. When we meet tonight, will he ask me of Union placements and plans? Does he think me high enough rank to have knowledge of troop movements, fortification plans for the city, McClellan’s intentions for the spring? He’ll be sorely disappointed when he learns how profoundly ignorant I am of everything save how many barrels of hard tack 700 men eat in a week.

The clearing was, unsurprisingly, empty. James was hours early but even so he felt intensely disappointed. The anxiety of anticipation was wringing him out and he would have taken comfort if Dean was as eager as he for this meeting, if Dean arrived as early as James did. The letter had said dawn, though, and objectively James knew how unfair it was of him to expect Dean to arrive earlier and to judge him for not doing so. Crossing to the tree where Dean always sat, James settled between the roots, the cold of the trunk and the frozen ground soaking through his clothing instantly.

This is where he sat as he stroked himself, as he thought of me. He meant me, didn’t he? He must have meant me.

Dean’s low, raspy moans yet echoed through James’ memory: Dean speaking to his imagined lover, calling that person Captain, calling them Billy. No woman would be referred to thus. Dean had been picturing a man, fantasizing about a man, speaking about man.

About me. Dare I believe that it was about me? If it were so, that would be...marvelous. Yes, God help me, it would be. That is what I want.

The thought quickened his heartbeat, dried his mouth, caused his cock to twitch despite the quelling chill. With difficulty, James turned his thoughts aside. It wouldn’t do to arouse himself. He could exercise some self-control, even as concerned Dean.

I wonder what will happen if this meeting goes well, if all my fears prove unfounded, if my optimistic assessments prove correct. I wonder if we might be able to meet thus again in the future. Soon.

Given the opportunity to grow and blossom, hope warmed James through and through and he lost himself in more pleasant mental wanderings, thinking on all the things he’d like to ask Dean, all he’d like to know of the man, carefully shying away from the prurient temptations whispering all the things they might do together, given the opportunity.

In the overgrown thicket, dawn came all at once, heralded by a burst of eager birdsong. It seemed hardly a moment passed between when James could scarce see his hand before his face and when he could make out every rhimed leaf on the ground, every overhead branch silhouetted against the sky.
There was hardly any color in the world, the tree trunks brown, the leaves a lighter shade of the same, the sky white with thin clouds. Deep green evergreen leaves bedecked a holly, waxy and near black in the dim light. Rich ruby red caught James’ eye, berries buried in the briar that thatched between the trees to his left. A flash of bright blue drew his gaze, a jay stopping on a branch to glare at him balefully. James pulled out his pocket watch. 4:30 AM. How long might he be absent before anyone at the camp noticed? He suspected he’d have at least another hour or two. Knowing how diligent he was, he dared hope his friends and subordinates would assume that he was taking some more time for himself, getting more rest somewhere. Bradbury might even think he was visiting his mysterious paramour. Crowley would assume the worst of him regardless. He had time. But damn did he hope that Dean came soon. His nerves were thrilling with tension. He stared so avidly about him that his eyes burned from the bite of the wind, then closed them and counted seconds in the hope that somehow he could make the time pass more quickly.

One.

*How long should I wait before I give up and head back to the fort?*

Two.

*It will be much harder to sneak back in by the light of day.*

Three.

*A different regiment will have the guard duty, none to know me or help me or look the other way when I return without permission to have left.*

Four.

*There’s so much to do today: all the things I didn’t finish yesterday, all the day’s business, and tonight it is back to duty as normal.*

Five.

*I must carve out time for sleep, though.*

Six.

*Perhaps I might reserve from 5 until 8 this evening for myself.*

Seven.

*It will be full dark then, which should help me to sleep well.*

Eight.

*The camp will be noisy, but it could be worse.*

Nine.

*I wonder if Crowley will be angry if I say that in the future, save in emergencies or unexpected exigencies, I will not be available at those times.*

Ten.

*Winchester can keep an eye on things in my place, as he’s done any...*
“Mornin’, Billy Yank,” Dean’s voice cut through James’ thoughts, painfully dry, so perfect that James gasped as he opened his eyes. He’d been so lost in thought he hadn’t even heard Impala approach.

In daylight, Dean was even more handsome than James recalled. Impala stood idly behind him but James could spare no attention for the horse. For once, Dean wore a uniform, the wool of both the jacket and pants a tan nut color, buttons of blackened tin, the cuffs at the wrists and ankle worn and frayed, grown threadbare and thin at the thighs due to the hours Dean spent in the saddle. The garments were too large, yet instead of being unflattering, their size served to heighten the contrast between their bagginess and his slim, muscular body. Beneath the jacket he wore what looked to be the same gingham shirt he’d worn the first time James had seen him, though now the collar was completely out, damage inadequately hidden by a jaunty green sash tied around his neck. The worn leather belt cinching the waist of his jacket revealed the narrowness of Dean’s waist compared to his wide shoulders and highlighted the strong curve of his lower back and hips, made powerful by endless time on horseback. Worn but well-maintained cavalry boots disappeared beneath the tattered pants, and Dean was armed with a finely made revolver, engraved silver showing through a holster at his hip. Shameless in his appraisal, James’ gaze reached Dean’s face, took in the embarrassment and uncertainty that had in no way been audible in Dean’s greetings. In the early morning light, Dean’s eyes practically glowed green in contrast to the more muted shade of his neckerchief; James could scarce remember noticing their color before but now it was so vivid he knew he’d see it in his dreams. Dean’s skin was paler than James remembered, a scattering of freckles across his nose and cheeks reminding James of his youth. Thin lips made a tempting pink line. His features looked to be in transition, shedding the last round plushness of youth in favor of the harder lines and planes of adulthood.

Praise holy God he’s gorgeous.

“I, uh, wasn’t sure you’d come, either,” Dean said awkwardly, averting his gaze and apparently doing his best to interpret James’ stunned silence. With a bow-legged gait, Dean crossed the small clearing and sat down heavily to James’ left, further around the tree. He added softly, “I’m glad you did.” At this angle, James couldn’t see Dean’s expression, only a shadowed profile, his shoulder, the curve of crossed legs meeting distractingly at Dean’s crotch. James tore his eyes away and forced his gaze forward.

“I’m sorry, Dean,” said James in a rush. Dammit, I used his first name again! He didn’t let himself dwell on his mistake, didn’t let himself stop talking now that he’d started. Dean was there and listening and there were things that James must say. “I’m sorry I left that night and I’m sorry I haven’t been able to return since late October. I managed to steal one midnight in November but you weren’t here, or I’d have said these things then. The last thing I heard you say,“You...” Dean trailed off with a wet sound of lips being licked. “You don’t have to apologize. You didn’t owe me anything then, you don’t owe me anything now.”

“I’m not saying this out of a sense of obligation,” James said. “I’m saying it because it is my genuine sentiment. I wanted to come back.” I did come back, and it was spectacular, but there was no way I could say anything, no way I could tell you that I was there. “I haven’t been able to return since because I have worked through every night since late October. I managed to steal one midnight in November but you weren’t here, or I’d have said these things then. The last thing I heard you say,
that you feared I hated you and never wanted to see you again, has haunted me for six weeks. It’s not at all the case. I don’t hate you, and I do want to see you again. I’m so profoundly sorry, Winchester.”

There was a drawn out silence that made James increasingly uncomfortable. What was Dean thinking? Was there some clue on his face? It was all James could do not to look over, but he forbade himself doing so. All it would do was make him more nervous. He could only hope that Dean would be forthright and tell him the honest truth.

“You can call me Dean,” whispered the other man, strained voice revealing nothing. “Do you mean all that?”

“Of course I do!” James tried to think through what he’d said, to determine what aspect Dean might be doubting, but the words were gone from his mind, he couldn’t remember what he’d admitted to, what he hadn’t, over the clamoring of all the confessions still screaming in his thoughts.

...want you, want to talk to you, want to touch you, want to kiss you, want to hold you, want to hear you moan my name, want to be with you every way I can be...

“That you wanted to see me again? That you came back but I was gone? That what bothered you was learnin’ about Lisa and Ben? That you...” The sound of Dean licking his lips came again and James’ skin tingled as his thoughts spun out tantalizing fantasies. Dean’s voice dropped lower and softer before he continued, a faint rumble blurred by his accent, “That you care about me?”

With the question, all James’ anxiety suddenly silenced. His thoughts went completely clear, his heartbeat ceased beating like a bass drum, his breathing slowed. Every detail of the overcast morning came to him crystal clear, the seconds stretched out. Dean’s voice wasn’t that of a man who didn’t share James’ feelings. Dean’s voice was that of a man who didn’t dare believe, couldn’t conceive, that James felt the same way as he did.

“I do,” James replied calmly. “I do care about you, Dean.”

The moment lengthened again, but James could wait now. He had no idea what Dean was thinking, but he knew, knew, they were moving in the right direction.

“Why?” Dean asked in shell-shocked confusion. James started to answer, but Dean pressed on. “You don’t know me, and you think I’m some sick slave-lovin’ bastard. It don’t make a lick of sense.”

“That’s not true,” said James. “I don’t think you’re a ‘slave-loving bastard.’ I think you’re a man caught up in events, fighting for his home and his family. While I think some of your views on slavery naive and inadequately considered, I also consider that an issue we can discuss. Thus far you’ve shown every sign of being willing to hear me out and consider my point of view. With a foundation of considerate respect for each other’s opinions I can’t but think that over time we can find even more common ground than we already have. Further, I thought your explanation of your views cogent and apt, and I can’t but respect them. I don’t agree with the cause you are fighting for but that doesn’t mean I am not respectful of the reasons you personally have chosen to fight. If you had told me you were fighting to keep every man, woman and child of African descent in perpetual servitude, we’d not be having this conversation. You said nothing of the kind – all you said was that you were indifferent to their plight – but I’ve seen such signs of kindness and consideration in you that I’ll own that I think you can be brought to care, to be as horrified by their lot as I am. But even if you can’t be, I believe you respect our difference on this and that you are not actively malicious towards the suffering of your fellow man. It is saddening that you do not care more passionately but it does nothing to reduce the interest I feel in your other parts.”
“What other parts?” asked Dean suspiciously.

...oh, all of them, your eyes, your lips and mouth, your powerful hands and broad shoulders and round butt, your stiff cock...

James blushed crimson and chanced a sidelong glance. Dean was staring at him, mouth curled in a faint frown, brow lowered, and James forced his gaze to the bare tree trunk across the clearing from him.

“I do not know you well yet, not so well as I would like to,” James spoke quickly to cover his embarrassment. “But from what I’ve observed, you’re brave, intelligent, hard-working, devoted and loyal. You’re educated and talented and skilled. You’re...” He closed his eyes and pressed on. “Behind your aggression and bravado, you’re young and you’ve been hurt and you’re vulnerable. You’re intriguing to me.”

“You’re serious,” muttered Dean. “You’re serious. I don’t...I mean...I can’t...I can’t.” There was a rustle of leaves as Dean shifted, started to rise, set a hand on the thick tree root that separated them.

No!

Desperate for Dean to stay, James grabbed the hand, wrapped his fingers around it before Dean could finish standing. Dean gasped, turned towards him, and James met wide green eyes.

“What is it with you?” Dean demanded. “What does someone like you want with someone like me?”

“What does that mean?” James held that gaze, refused to let go. “I’ve told you what I think of you – I think we have far more common ground than we have conflict. What do you think of me that leads you to believe that we cannot be friends?”

“You’re...you’re...” Hovering half-risen on one knee, Dean tried to tug his hand free without breaking eye contact. “You are...” Dean pulled hard, and James twisted his wrist, caught Dean’s thumb with his own, managed to intertwine their fingers. “You’re perfect,” Dean groaned, collapsing back against the tree, slumping in defeated. The words shivered down James’ spine, tingled along his skin, captivated his entire imagination. Without a doubt, he’d hear those words in Dean’s beautiful voice as an echo down all the years of his life.

“I ain’t none of those things you think,” Dean said unconvincingly. “You’re too nice for your own good, Captain.” Far louder than words, James listened to the uncertainly delivered compliment and the way that Dean was tentatively running the rough pad of his thumb along the arch of James’ knuckle and pointer.

“I have no sense that you appreciate your own value,” James smiled and gave Dean’s hand a squeeze. “Perhaps that is something I can help you to see, going forward?”


“That doesn’t sound like a ‘no,’ Johnny Reb,” said James.

“It’s not,” breathed Dean.

Relief flooded in and James’ tension drained out with a long sigh as he settled back against the tree trunk. “Thank God,” James couldn’t keep the whisper back. Dean’s hand spasmed around his, flesh hot to the touch, palm sweaty.

“I’ve been thinkin’ about you for weeks,” Dean confessed. “Convinced there wasn’t no way you felt
the same. I never thought I’d see you again. When I got your letter, I still thought, ‘don’t get your hopes up, Dean, ain’t no way it’s what you’re thinking.’ All that talk about Sam...told myself you wouldn’t be here today, told myself he’d be the one here, told myself I’m a fool.”

“I’m sorry the letter was so vaguely worded,” said James. “Ms. Cassidy informed me that you would not be reading it yourself, that she would be the one to read it to you. I scarce know her and do not trust her. I’d told her I knew you only due to Sam, that I wrote entirely to ease your mind as regarded his well being, so I had to couch all I said in light of that. I’ve been dreading that you did not understand, that if you arrived today at all, it would be with the expectation of seeing your brother.”

“I’d not mind seeing my brother,” Dean said. His hesitation was palpable, and James waited patiently. He was beginning to see the pattern, Dean’s natural reticence causing him to pause a long time before admitting to things that frightened him or revealed his vulnerability, and James was content to give Dean time, pleased that he found the other man so easy to read. “But today I was hopin’ to see you.” There was so much to those simple words, such hope and wistfulness and expectation and fear and uncertainty.

“I’ll teach you to be sure how I feel about you, how I think of you, how I want you. I’ll teach you to see yourself how I see you.

They sat in silence as the morning steadily brightened, the dawn birdsong faded. There was more to say, but the moment felt so nice, the confessions they’d each already made adequate and safe.

Tell me...you’ve got to tell me, Captain... Dean’s voice whispered to James from a dream, his own reply following immediately. I will, Dean, I will.

If he didn’t find the nerve now, would he ever? If he shared the physical aspect of his attraction, would that destroy the rapport they’d built? Would Dean’s walls go back up, would he try to leave again, would he avoid James? Could James stand the anxiety and tension of not knowing?

It would be better to confess all and know the truth. It’d be better to have all in the open and deal with the consequences, whatever they are. I cannot bear more weeks of agonized wondering.

Inadvertently, James cleared his throat and Dean started.

“Do you remember the last time we spoke?” James broached.

“Nope, forgot all ‘bout it,” said Dean dryly.

“I came back that night,” said James. Dean’s hand went stiff in his. “I felt terrible for leaving as I had, guilty. Your parting words, the pain in your face as I left, harried me, troubled me deeply. I tried to get some sleep, but couldn’t, and as dawn came I resolved to return, to apologize to you.” His heart was pounding again, with desire, with anticipation, with concern. He couldn’t leave well enough alone, no, he had to push further. I have to know. If he doesn’t reciprocate I have lambasted myself for nothing, confessed to Gabriel for nothing, accused myself of all manner of evil for nothing. I need to know if he feels the same as I do. If he doesn’t I return to life as it was before, return to Anna, return to the peace of mind I felt before I ever met him. If he does... “You were...busy...when I arrived.” If he does feel the same as I do...

“Fuck,” muttered Dean, head clunking against the tree as he dropped it back, but he made no move to leave, no attempt to escape.

It’s not my imagination, it’s not my dreams, what I feel is real, and he feels it too, or else he’d already be running for the hills.
“I saw...” James swallowed, cheeks warming. “I heard...” He didn’t really have to say it, Dean’s behavior made it clear he recalled exactly what he had been doing that morning at dawn. That Dean would remember at all spoke volumes. “Did you mean me? The things I heard you say...” He took a deep breath. It shouldn’t be hard to say anything more, what could he confess more mortifying than what he’d already alluded to? “I thought...maybe...you were thinking of me.”

“What if I did mean you?” Dean asked, hand going clammy in James’ grip. “What if I was thinking of you?”

“I’d like that,” admitted James. Dean groaned, and the sound was like dry tinder to flames. All sense of the cold of the morning vanished as James felt suddenly sweltering in his uniform, blood rushing to his cock to thicken it, lengthen it. All sense of shame at his desire vanished as if it had never been. Dean had as good as admitted that he was thinking of James and with that confession went all sense that James’ desires were wrong. If the attraction was mutual, there was no harm in James thinking of Dean as an object of desire.

It’s not as if Dean is a woman. It’s not as if he and I could ever do the things a man would do with a woman. It’s not the same, in the same way that the men who entertain each other in the camp are not violating oaths as they would be if they instead bedded a prostitute. Dean is a man, all of his attraction is that he is a man. It is still a betrayal of Anna’s trust that I speak to him thus, that I consider being with him, but is it truly a betrayal of our engagement? I think not.

There was a ring of disingenuousness to the thought, but James pushed it away. He wanted this too much to hesitate now.

It’s not the same.

“I like the idea of your touching yourself and thinking of me,” James said, scarce recognized his own voice, deep, coarse, wanting. The words no longer struck him as shameful. They were honest, sincere, and heartfelt, a confession of the simple truth James had known and nursed for weeks.

“You’re perfect, Captain,” breathed Dean, hand clenching James’ harder, breathing quickening audibly. “You’re impossible.”

I want to hear you say my name, want you to call me James... A whisper of Anna’s voice in his mind, the sweet inflection with which she said his name, brought a momentary surge of the guilt. No. Not James.

“Castiel,” James said. “My name is Castiel.”

“Castiel,” Dean repeated his middle name, sampled it, tested it. Desire thrilled unrestrainedly through James. “Castiel.”

“Yes,” murmured James encouragingly, rubbing the back of Dean’s hand with his fingers. A vocal sound – that a whimper, please let it have been a whimper – escaped as Dean exhaled.

“Cas?” Dean asked.

“That would be fine,” James continued in the same low voice. As long as he doesn’t call me Cassie. Their palms pressed together, Dean’s damp with cold sweat, and James swore he could feel the racing pulse of Dean’s heart beat. “It’s taken me months to come to terms with how much I want you, Dean.” Head yet back against the tree trunk, James let his eyes slip shut, reveling in the liquid hot feeling of his body, the pleasured anticipation gripping him, the firm connection between them where Dean determinationlly clung to James’ hand. “I’ve never felt this way about any man before –
about any one before.”

“I have,” whispered Dean anxiously. “Is that okay? I think of you, now – I always imagine you, now. Since the first time we met, I’ve wanted...I’ve longed for...is that okay?”

“That’s fantastic,” James said, earning a drawn out moan. Dean’s grip eased in his, and James recognized another pattern, the relief Dean felt when James reassured him, followed by growing fear and tension, until James offered further support and Dean’s stress faded away again. “I loved listening to you that night. After I was sure you were gone, I had to see to my own desires.” Another groan, as arousing as James dreamed a touch might be, caused James’ aching cock to strain against the wool of his pants. “Does that make you hard, Dean?”

“I said that, I said that aloud, I—

“Yes,” panted Dean. The tension in his grip was growing again, but James sensed no undertone of fear this time. It was Dean’s desire, a match to James’ own, and it was glorious. “God, yes.”

—and he doesn’t mind, and he feels the same, I can say these things, it’s alright. I can admit what I want...

“Would you touch yourself for me?” James asked breathily.

“Anything you want, Cas,” Dean’s voice was pleading. “Anything at all.”

“Reach into your pants,” instructed James. He heard the rustling as Dean did so. He wasn’t sure why he didn’t watch, but this felt right. James wanted to soak in the beautiful sounds of Dean’s desire, wanted no distractions from the effect every moan and whimper was having on James’ enflamed body and captivated thoughts. “I’m doing the same.” James suited action to words, shifting his jacket so he could reach beneath the loose band of his pants. A rough, low gasp escaped Dean, his hand trembled against James’. James’ fingers were painfully cold against the heat of his cock, but even so the relief of finally touching himself was profound. “Grip yourself...grip your cock loosely.” Saying the word aloud spurred James on, perfectly filthy, and Dean’s long groan as he followed the orders – James hadn’t the least doubt that Dean was following his orders – was just as perfect. “Slowly, very slowly, I want you to stroke yourself. Is that okay, Dean?”

“Yeah,” whispered Dean, the words accompanied by the faint brush of fabric on fabric, of flesh on fabric, of flesh on flesh. Dean’s hand twitched in James’ grip. James followed his own instructions, cupping his length loosely, tracing up and down with a teasing, tortuous pace. “Feels good, Cas. Feels so good. Is there something else you’d like me to do?”

There was something crucial in that simple question, something James had needed, had never known he needed until Dean asked and James suddenly realized that he’d taken the lead, that Dean hadn’t questioned it, that Dean was following his instructions willingly, that Dean wanted James to continue. “Stop,” he demanded, unable to prevent himself from pushing Dean, from testing him. The sounds of movement ended abruptly and James let up his own stroke, though every part of him screamed protest at his self-denial. The moment stretched out and Dean didn’t move, his breathing grew increasingly vocal, increasingly desperate. A groan tore through James.

Dean listened, damn, he listened, that’s amazing, why is he listening? Why isn’t he doing as he will? He wants me to tell him what to do. And damn do I want to direct him, want him to obey, want to tease him until he cries my name in that desperate voice over and over.

James’ body felt afire, bliss thrummed through his gut, sparkled like sunspots against his eyelids, pulsed rhythmically through his cock. He couldn’t resist his desires, he tightened his grip against
himself, jerked chaffed skin roughly against his incredibly sensitive flesh, felt the pressure of his climax building spectacularly. Another stroke, another, accompanied by the delicious sound of Dean whimpering, but not moving, James was certain Dean was not moving. God, it was amazing. James swiped a finger over the head of his cock, through the liquid pooling there, and moaned.

“Please,” gasped Dean, voice reedy with need. “Please...”

“You want to continue to stroke yourself?” James forced his hand to slow, forced himself to hold back his impending finish.

“Yes!”

“Then why don’t you?” As much as James didn’t want to break the wonder of this moment, ruin it by pointing out the simple truth that Dean was under no obligation whatever to do as James said, it was a question that he needed to know the answer to.

“Because...” Dean moaned low. “You haven’t...you didn’t...you were telling me...what should I do, Cas? What do you want me to say? I don’t know...I don’t know why, but you said...it feels so good...I want to hear you say that it’s alright...I can’t...”

“Shhh,” murmured James soothingly, caressing Dean’s hand. He felt a stab of guilt at Dean’s confusion and distress and realized how completely vulnerable Dean was at that moment, how completely he had opened revealed himself, how completely he was trusting James. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you. You know you don’t have to do as I say, right? I won’t stop wanting you if you do otherwise. I won’t become angry. I won’t leave.”

“I want to,” Dean whispered, his hand quivering and weak in James’ grasp. “It feels right. Is that okay?”

“Yes, Dean.” James’ desire struggled against his self-restraint. He had no idea where this urge to take the lead had come from nor what had prompted him to start giving orders in the first place, but Dean’s willingness to obey was... “It’s spectacular. It’s perfect.” ...it was beautiful, and James thoughts were already spinning with ideas of things he could ask of Dean as he wondered how far Dean’s obedience would go, what he’d be willing to do. Visions outside of anything James had ever dreamed of sprang to life in vivid detail: Dean on his knees, Dean with his hands bound awaiting James’ touch, Dean staring a challenge at him even as James thrust into Dean’s open mouth. Another groan tore from James, echoed instantly by Dean, and James’ hand spasmed around his cock. When they were less...involved...James would have to ask Dean what he’d be comfortable with and what he wasn’t. There was a frightening amount of potential for abuse of Dean’s vulnerability and exposure.

“With just a light touch, Dean – I want you to touch the tip.” James swirled his own finger over his slit, his cock throbbing and bucking as Dean sighed with happiness and moaned. “Is it wet?”

“Yeah...”

“How does it taste?” James had no idea where the question came from, couldn’t bring himself to care. Pure instinct had taken over, and he pulsed with pleasure when he heard the distinct smack of Dean’s lips around his finger.

“Bitter,” answered Dean. “Like...like dandelion greens. And a little sweet.”

“May I try it?”

Dean didn’t answer. Instead, there was rustling, of cloth, of leaves, and then there was a wet finger
against James’ mouth. Without opening his eyes, James parted his lips, sucked the finger in, earned a
drawn-out groan from Dean. Dean’s skin tasted like leather and horsehair, his release like nothing
James had ever experienced, a hint of bitter, a hint of sweet, a hint of something earthy like
mushroom, and James loved it. He ran his tongue along the length of the finger and he could feel
Dean quivering.

“May I taste you?” asked Dean in a rush.

With a wet pop, James released Dean’s finger. “If you earn it.” God, was that his voice? So low, so
gravelly, so breathy? “Back against the tree.” Giving a disappointed whimper, Dean settled into his
seat. “You may grip yourself again – stroke gently.”

“Thank you,” Dean breathed, moaning as he followed the instructions. James held off on touching
himself, though every sound from Dean thrilled him, his desire screamed to be sated. Instead, he
soaked in every moan and groan, every whimper and mewl and pant, every swishing sound of
Dean’s hand rubbing against his length. The strain of patience told on both of them, their off hands
trembling as one where they gripped each other across the tree branch that divided them.

“Don’t go faster,” James said. “Tighten your grip around your foreskin. Draw it over the head and
back down, slowly.” Dean groaned gutturally as he did as he was told, almost a growl, and James
could no longer resist, he began a brisk stroke over his cock, his thumb going to his slit to toy at it. It
was too good, he felt too fantastic to hold himself back. He wanted Dean to hear how affected James
was, wanted Dean to understand where this strange power dynamic had spontaneously arisen from, but he liked it and appreciated it. “Just like that, Dean.” He didn’t
need to see to know Dean was obeying him. The thought was pure bliss, and James groaned and
squeezed Dean’s hand, received a squeeze in return. There was a faint wet sound, each of their
hands working over their lengths, the flap of the cloth of their pants, the crisp smell of winter a
contrast to the hot breath filling the air before James’ face as he stroked and caressed himself, listened
to Dean pleasuring himself.

“Please,” whispered Dean.

James deliberately ignored him. Time passed, bliss built in James’ veins, his cock bobbed against his
grip every time his hand passed over it. James could feel each stroke as a pulse through him, see each
as a pulsing light before his eyes, endure each as fire searing through his veins. The steady rhythm of
Dean working beside him was like a drug to James’ feverish body, essential, pushing his pleasure to
heights beyond anything he’d ever experienced before.

“Please,” Dean whimpered out between vocal pants. “I need...”

“Do you think you can climax just from doing that?” mused James, still amazed by Dean’s
obedience, by the self-restraint that kept Dean from surrendering to his desires and taking what he
was begging for.

“Please,” Dean gasped, moaning. “Please...please...”

“No, Dean,” James whispered. It was hard to speak, he was so hot, so needy, his breaths came so
quickly. “Keep going just the same, just like I told you.” A choked-back sob answered the directive,
but the sounds of Dean touching himself didn’t change, his pace didn’t quicken. Rapture surged in
James mind, coursed fire through his body, and he groaned and jerked his cock hard. “You’re
perfect,” James panted, tightening his grip, stroking powerfully and rapidly. “You’re perfect, you’re
perfect, Dean, God, I...”

“Please, Cas!”
“I...”
“I’m so hot, I’m so—”

“Dean!” The name ground out between clenched teeth as James’ cock pulsed in his grip and ecstasy enveloped him, seared his skin, devoured all thought, and thick hot liquid spurted against his fingers, burst against the wool of his pants, dripped down his length and into the coarse hairs thick around his sacks.

“Oh, God, Cas, please, please, please...” Dean whispered the word endlessly. Pushing towards awareness through layer upon layer of bliss, James opened his eyes to find them gritty, the light of day dazzling.

Moving as if in a dream, he shifted left towards Dean. James pulled his hand, dripping with white release, from his pants. Dean lay slumped against the tree, head lolling, eyes closed, tears leaking from the corners, mouth slack as his pleas trailed off but his lips continued to move in the imitation of the his begging words. Dean’s pants made a pulsing tent where his hand worked against his hardness.

“You’re so handsome, Dean.”

“Please,” came the forlorn whisper in reply.

James settled straddling Dean’s legs and Dean’s pleading broke off in a moan. The moment Dean’s lips cracked open, James slipped two release-streaked fingers within, brought their joined hands to rest against the fabric of Dean’s pants so he could feel Dean running of and down over his length. Dean’s entire body seized up, his eyes flew open, bright green and deep black without the least sign he saw his surroundings. Dean’s lips sealed around James’ fingers, sucking eagerly, spawning surprising pleasure in James’ satisfied body, prompting a small spurt from James’ cock though he’d have sworn he was spent. He groaned at the aftershock, and Dean hummed a moan around his hand.

“Come on, Dean,” James whispered encouragingly. Dean lapped at his fingers, hips rutting into James’ other hand, and, unbelievably, stunningly, maintained the same slow pace as he masturbated, drawing his foreskin slowly over the head and back down. Their eyes met, Dean’s gaze wide and vulnerable and delightfully pleased, and James couldn’t bear to tease him longer. He released the hand he’d held all along, wrapped his grip around Dean’s other hand with only a thin layer of wool separating their flesh, and forced Dean to hold himself more firmly, to stroke from base to tip. Dean groaned, and James repeated the movement, again, again, harder, faster, taking his fingers from Dean’s mouth to cup Dean’s scruffy chin, keep their eyes locked together.

“Cas,” groaned Dean.

“Good, good,” James murmured, tightening his grip further.

“Cas!”

“I can’t believe you want me too, Dean.”

“Caelst!” Dean moaned the name lingeringly as his hips thrust into their paired hands and his eyes rolled back in bliss.

Watching Dean overcome by ecstasy was easily the most enticing, gorgeous thing James had ever seen. James’ cock gave a twitch of renewed interest. James panted, his hand stroking Dean through his climax as Dean moaned and then went limp, desperately drawing hoarse breaths.
Leaning forward, James brought their foreheads together, let his eyes slip shut.

“Did you enjoy that, Dean?” James asked warmly. There was genuine worry behind the words.

Dean chuckled. “What do you think, Cas?”

“I’d like you to tell me.”

“It was great,” breathed Dean. “Better than anything. Never felt this good...never...”

“I’m glad.” James shifted to brush his lips over Dean’s forehead and was surprised when Dean sighed contentedly in response. Leaning back, James opened his eyes to see Dean watching at him with wonder and contentment. As their gazes met, Dean broke into a relaxed smile unlike anything James had seen on his face before, and James’ heart pattered in reply. Unthinkingly, James shifted a hand to the side of Dean’s hair, slipped fingers beneath his hat, accidentally smeared release in Dean’s hair. Embarrassed to see the white clinging to the brown strands, James colored and looked away. When he forced his eyes back again, it was to find Dean staring at him with an expression James didn’t dare name worshipful.

“Maybe...” Dean blushed bashfully. God, with all his walls down, he looked and acted so young.

“Maybe we could do this again?”

“Dawn is a good time for me,” James said pensively. Not repeating this experience was inconceivable. “Is there a time soon that would be convenient for you?”

“Same time, same day, next week?”

“That sounds perfect, Dean.”

“Thank you, Cas – thank you for all of this. I never thought...I didn’t think...”

“It’s okay,” murmured James. “Neither did I. I’m so glad we were both wrong. I’m so glad that you want this as much as I do.” He huffed a sigh. “But I have to go, I have to get back on duty before my absence is noted.” He started to rise, started to turn away.

“Wait!”

A thought struck him, and he turned back to see Dean was moving towards him. Judging by his movements, Dean shared James’ idea. They shifted in perfect harmony, turned, eyes slipped shut and mouths came together in a chaste kiss. Dean’s lips were dry and chapped and nothing like Anna’s, so soft and delicate, and James pushed the unwelcome thought away. Dean’s lips were wonderful, unique, James never wanted to compare the two again, needed the two to be completely separate in his mind. A faint taste of bitterness, of musk, of wood smoke, clung to Dean’s lips, and James delighted in the gentle contact. It was a wrench to pull away.

Neither said another word.

James started back to camp, cleaning himself up and adjusting his appearance to normalcy as best he could as he prepared to crawl back through the animal run, sneak past the pickets and find his way back behind their high, secure walls.

Absolutely perfect.

Interlude
Dean awoke with a start to the feel of a hand settling on his ass, soothing over the curve of his lower back. The glow of his dream carried him through the first few bemused moments – yes, Castiel, touch me, please, touch me – but then a voice whispered in his ear.

“Makin’ those needy noises in your sleep again,” Benny drawled. The fantasy snapped and to Dean’s shock his stomach twisted in revulsion as he realized it was Benny’s hand touching him. “Tonight at dinner call?”

“No,” snapped Dean. He twisted away, knocking Benny’s hand aside. Propping himself up on his elbows, he caught a glimpse of Benny’s surprised expression. Dean never said no. Dean always wanted more than Benny was interested in giving to him. Dean was the eager one, Benny was humoring him, letting Dean have what he needed, as if Benny didn’t get anything out of their physical relationship, as if Benny didn’t enjoy screwing him.

Castiel said my name. Castiel asked to hear my voice. Castiel touched me, kissed me, tasted me. Castiel wanted to be with me, not a woman, not a substitute, me.

“Hey, don’t worries, I didn’t mean—”

God, that’s impossible.

“Yeah, you did,” Dean snarled, unable to restrain his temper. He was angry: at Benny for treating him as a surrogate for so long; at himself for letting Benny; at Castiel for offering him so much sweetness when Dean knew it would all crumble once Castiel knew him better; at himself for letting Castiel use him; at himself, for letting all the men who’d touched him use him. “S’ok. I don’t want to do that anymore.” Not with you.

“At all?”

“At all.”

“Sure thing, brother,” Benny shrugged. “Whatever you want.”

Dean’s anger crumbled. He shouldn’t go back to see Castiel again, shouldn’t encourage what was sure to end in disaster, but he couldn’t help it.

“It don’t change anything else, right?” muttered Dean, slumping down against the thin, tattered cotton he’d lain over the rocky ground. “You’re still the best friend I’ve ever had. That ain’t gonna change...?”

“Sometimes I think you actually are stupid,” laughed Benny, rolling his eyes. “Didn’t change while we were messing ‘round, don’t change when we’re not. Honest? I’m glad of it. You deserve better’n what we’ve been doin’ – don’t get me wrong, it was fun and all, but I can take of myself. Always felt like I was usin’ you.”

Dean felt a stab of guilt to hear Benny say aloud the things Dean had been thinking. Benny wasn’t using him. Benny had never done anything that Dean didn’t agree to, didn’t ask for. Now he conceded their relationship without protest, only a gentle smile that reminded Dean of why he’d enjoyed his friend’s company for so long. “Thanks, Benny.”

“All you have to do is ask, Dean,” Benny said gently. “All you’ve ever had to do is ask.”

Dean buried his face against the spare shirt he used as a pillow. He was relieved when, a moment later, he heard the tent flap open and Benny step away. Unlike Dean, Benny didn’t spend all night, every night on duty. Benny didn’t need to sleep during the day, not that Dean thought he’d be able to
sleep any more that day.

Mere hours ago, he’d been with Captain Novak, with gorgeous Castiel. It was impossible. It was proof to Dean that he had finally cracked. No man like that could be interested in Dean. No man like that could want anything but Dean’s body.

You’re intelligent, loyal, hard-working, skilled...

The morning had been spectacular, everything Dean had fantasized about and more. But now, in the cool, faint light of day, rested and aware, Dean was haunted by the questions Castiel had asked him.

You want to continue to stroke yourself? Dean repressed a groan, his cock hardening even though it was uncomfortably trapped between the ground and his thighs. Then why don’t you?

Because I don’t want to, because I want all the proof I can get that you actually care for my pleasure, because I want to hear you tell me that I’m good. Because I want you to say that it’s alright that I feel this way, that it’s alright that I want you. Because I need to be reminded that you want me, because that’s impossible. Nobody wants me.

Slipping a hand along his body, Dean adjusted himself, moving his erection into a more comfortable position, unable to ignore the pleasure that even a light touch against himself gave.

Castiel said I was handsome. Castiel said I was perfect. Castiel said he cared for me. Castiel said he wanted me.

Can I believe him? I want to believe him.

Propping himself up on his knees slightly, raising his hips, Dean wrapped fingers around the loose skin beneath the head and caressed it, pulled it up and down over the head just as Castiel had instructed him to do earlier. Brightness danced before his eyes, pleasure like pinpricks played over his skin.

So useless, I’m so useless, and he’ll see that, he will, but when I’m with him I don’t feel useless. When I’m with him I feel good, I feel respected, I feel cared for, I feel so many things I don’t deserve and have never earned. I can’t stay away, I could never stay away. I can’t believe he thought I didn’t want him. Who wouldn’t want him?

Can climax just doing that? whispered the memory of Castiel’s voice. Dean nodded mutely against the ground. He could; just remembering being together was so intense that he was close, his body trembling with the strain of continuing his slow pace.

I must be wrong about him. He can’t as perfect as I believe, otherwise he’d never want me. But right now I don’t care. I want him. I need him, God, I can’t wait a week to see him again. He’ll tell me what to do, tell me it’s alright, tell me to stop if it’s not alright. He knows that this is wrong, he knows I shouldn’t enjoy it, and he made me work for it, made me earn it. He didn’t give me anything he didn’t think I deserved. He gave me what I needed. No one has ever given me what I needed. It felt amazing.

That’s crazy. Why would I like that? Why would I want that?

But I do – I do – I want it so much. Please, Cas, please, make me wait, make me beg, and then, only then, give me what I—

With a barely muffled groan, Dean splattered his release into his hand.
I'll probably never see him again. He'll never come back for me.

Chapter End Notes

There's the smut I've been promising. I've had this scene planned in my head pretty much since I started writing in the beginning of August, and I'm so excited to share it. I hope you enjoy and that you find it in character for the two as I've described them. If you've been wondering just how the D/S was gonna work in a time period piece? ...you're looking at it. Thoughts?

A note on Confederate uniforms: there was no point in the war when the Confederacy had a standardized uniform. Unlike the Union, where after the first year or so everyone pretty much wore navy blue jackets and sky blue pants (with exceptions), Confederate supply was inconsistent enough, and the Confederate states were so impossible to force into agreement about anything, that different states provided uniforms of different colors. A lot of Confederates wore whatever they could get their hands on – including raided Union uniforms.

The two most common colors for Confederate uniforms were gray and a color always referred to as “butternut.” I don’t know WHY that was chosen as the standard way to identify that specific shade of brown, but there we are.

Quick Character Guide:
There's been a confusion over who is who, because some of our standard SPN characters don't go by their last names (or don't HAVE last names).

The Novaks:


Anna Milton: James' fiancee.

Naomi Novak: James' mother.

Michael Novak: James' father.

Zachariah Novak and Margaret 'Meg' Masters Novak: James' eldest brother and sis-in-law. Republican in the House of Representatives.

Hester Novak: James' eldest sister. Spinster active in the women's rights movement. Runs a field hospital at Fort Lyon.


Frederick Seward and Rachel Novak Seward: James' brother in law and middle sister. Assistant secretary of state. Son of secretary of state William Seward.
General Daniel Elkins and Hannah Novak Elkins: James' youngest sister and the commander of the brigade at Fort Lyon. Former Colonel of the 27th NY.

**The Winchesters:**

Dean Winchester: Confederate soldier serving as a scout under the command of Gen Robert Singer.

Lisa Braeden Winchester, Ben Braeden Winchester: Dean's wife and son.

Benjamin 'Benny' Lafitte: Dean's best friend and sometime lover.

Sam Winchester: Dean's younger brother. Union soldier. Serves as James' clerk.

John Winchester: Dean and Sam's father. Former soldier. Current location unknown.

Mary Winchester: Dean and Sam's mother. Died in 1856.

**People in the 27th NY:**

Ferguson Roderick Crowley: Current Colonel of the 27th NY.

Duane Tanner: Lieutenant Colonel under Crowley.

Victor Henriksen: 1st Lieutenant of Company B. Probably the only black man in uniform in the entire Union army.

Missouri Moseley: a former slave who helps the regiment.

Garth Fitzgerald IV: Originally 2nd Lieutenant of Company B, now Captain.

Charles "Charlie" Bradbury: Originally a sergeant of Company B, now 2nd Lieutenant.

John "Ash" Ashley: Sergeant.


Others in Company B:

Sergeant Calvin Reidy; Corporal Dodd; Chaplain Jim Murphy; Doctor Whittaker; Adam Milligan; Andrew Gallagher; Harry Spangler; Craig Thursten; Pa Bender; Lee Bender; Jared Bender; Sanford Ellicott; James Ellicott; Phillip Amici; Randolph Baxter; Curtis Mueller; Marshall Hall; Jeff Krause; Larry Pike; Matt Pike; Ronald Reznick (deceased); Wesley Mondale (deceased); Ed Zeddmore (deceased); Zachariah Warren (crippled and sent home); Missy Bender (camp follower)

Others:

Steve Wandell, Captain, Company A
Pike, Captain, Company C
Irvine Franklin, Captain, Company E
Rick Carnegie, member of Elkins' personal staff

**Allies/Friends of Zachariah Novak**

General A.Z. Blaine: political appointee general. Margaret Novak's father.
Richard Roman: businessman

Joanna Harvelle: socialite

Bartholomew Boyle: College friend of James'. Colonel of the 1st Massachusetts Heavy Artillery.

Mr. Talbot and Bela Talbot: business people.

Stanley, Mrs., and Amelia Thompson: bankers and investors.

Becky Rosen: Amelia's friend.


Ruby Cassidy: young Bostonian attached to Colonel Freeley.

Others:
Mrs. Carrigan: a rival of Mrs. Novak's in Wolcott, NY.

I think that's everyone I've mentioned more than once?
Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from one of my favorite Christmas carols, "O Come O Come Emmanuel." The video links to a later translation (and doesn't even seem to have the right verse?) but as much as I love this song I didn't have the patience to listen to umpteen versions on YouTube in the hopes of finding the correct 19th century English version. :)

Hats off to aloha for unwittingly suggesting the perfect Christmas present for James to give Dean. I can't wait to get to the point in the story that will make it clear WHY it's the perfect Christmas present. :

(I'm trying not to tease, I really, really am, but guuuuuuys it's so hard!! I want to share all the things!!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 10: Disperse the Gloomy Clouds of Night

Dear James, 

December 9th, 1861

Sorry for the delay in my response, I am extremely busy in preparation for the holiday recess. Further, I delayed because I've read your letter several times and I do not follow your meaning. You suggest the supplies you've received are inadequate? Inconceivable. Thanks to my intercession with the Talbots and Mr. Roman and the influence of Colonel Crowley with General Blaine and his circle, the 27th New York has been the beneficiary of the best that can be offered, fresh from the looms and presses our friends' factories. Though they are strained by the immense task of supplying the army, they wished to show their appreciation for all that I have done to aid them by aiding you in turn. I think you far too sensitive, brother. Men die in war. If a fellow froze to death, that is sad, but for whom to blame look to his poor constitution. I have personally examined these goods and there is naught wrong with the quality of that which the government has generously provided, that which our industrialists have sacrificed much in profit and production in order to make for you. 

Margaret and I will be returning to Wolcott for Christmas with the Searows and would be happy to carry home anything you wish, though we'd be happier if you'd accompany us. If I can spare the time, I'm sure you can.

Zachariah Novak

Fury blanked James’ vision, wiped away every pleasant afterglow of his morning. He tossed the letter negligently on the rickety writing desk. That the stranger from the quartermaster’s department thought a man’s life worth less than a blanket was reprehensible; that his brother would go further and blame the man for his own death was infuriating. For weeks, a faint whisper in James’ mind had lamented the necessity Christmas in Wolcott, been tempted by memories of gifts and good cheer and pine and spiced cider and warm fires. That temptation died now. It would take longer than two weeks before James could face his brother without giving rein to his anger, telling Zachariah precisely what James thought of Richard Roman, Mr. and Mrs. Talbot, and all the villains who
haunted the parlor and study of his brother’s home of an evening. High quality blankets had been available in ample supply before the war. James refused to believe that the time required to weave a shoddy blanket was that much less than that required to weave a snug one, refused to accept that wool and cotton could be such short supply that the worst materials must be so universally employed. If the supplies were poor, it was because there was no incentive for the producers to craft better. Zachariah had gone further even that, though, denied that any deficiency of production existed. James thought of Mrs. Talbot’s shapely bejeweled neck, of Mr. Roman’s bespoke garments and sumptuous home. Heaven forfend that Mr. Roman be forced to greater sacrifices than the war had already forced him to by being require to produce goods suitable for use by mankind.

Roman might have to give up sitting for his portrait again. He might have to opt for American made clothing instead of Savile Row. He might, oh poor soul, be required to offer his guests one fewer cheese selection on the dessert platter. Mrs. Talbot might have to wait one entire week additional before she can afford the newest gem whose sparkle has caught her eye. And Zachariah, what might he have to sacrifice? What benefits in influence and wealth and consideration has he reaped by being cozy with these profiteers? How many lives will his selfishness cost? Is there ought I can do about it? I cannot believe he would value them over the lives of men brave and true willing to fight and die for their country, cannot conceive that—

“You were gone a long time this morning,” observed someone behind him, voice suggestive. James rounded to confront Bradbury, who took one look at his face and went pale. “Oh,” he said meekly. “Uh…didn’t go well?”

“What?” James jerked his hat from his head and ran a hand through his hair, slamming the hat back into place to hide the disheveled strands, grown long enough that they curled about his ears. Exhaling explosively, he tried to calm down and make sense of what the lieutenant had asked him. “This morning? This morning…damn, did anyone else notice I was gone?”

“Henriksen and Winchester, of course – when reveille sounded and you weren’t there they couldn’t but notice,” Bradbury answered slowly, color returning to his cheeks. “They looked for you but fortunately I found them, told them that since you usually have the first few hours after dawn to yourself, you’d chosen to go for a walk and that they shouldn’t trouble you. Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine,” James sighed, letting the anger drain away with a long exhalation. There was nothing he could do to prevent Zachariah’s behaving as he would or amend Zachariah’s friends. It had been optimistic of James to hope for intervention. He would have to find some other means of gaining what was needed. “At least as regards that, everything is fine. You’re right, I was with… them. With the change in my schedule, it has been impossible. This was the first time we’ve met since you and spoke of the matter in October. Thank you, Bradbury, for ensuring I got rest yesterday and for protecting me this morning.”

“Anytime,” Bradbury said. A hint of wariness remained, a tightness about his eyes, but he smiled widely.

“No, only Wednesday mornings,” muttered James.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

“A regular tryst, is it?” Bradbury asked, a sparkle in his eye as the last of the wariness faded. “I bet that will do you as much good as a night’s sleep will!”

...Dean’s hand moving eagerly beneath the fabric of his pants, Dean’s low voice moaning pleasure
with every breath, Dean’s release bitter on James’ tongue…

…is there something else you’d like me to do, Castiel?

“Do you think it will raise suspicion?” James asked worriedly, cheeks pinking and cock twitching at the memories.

“Normally, it might, but I’ve got you covered.” said Bradbury with confidence. James blinked in surprise. “What? You’d do the same for Hester and I, right?”

“Oh course,” James said, confused. “Should you ever need a defense, and provided you don’t hurt her. Obviously, if she comes to me with complaint against you that would change things.”

“I’d never hurt her,” vowed Bradbury, conviction obvious and unassailable. James couldn’t help but smile to hear Bradbury’s infatuation so clearly. “The least we can do is protect you while you take a few much deserved minutes for yourself.”

“We?” asked James, aghast. “No – no, that’s – Bradbury, Hester is friends with my fiancée!” He raised a trembling hand to run it through his hair, accidentally knocking his momentarily forgotten hat to the dusty ground of the tent. He picked it up and knocked the dust out against his thigh.

Bradbury frowned. “Your sister isn’t a hypocrite, Major. If she can accept that she and I have a…connection…despite my being affianced, I cannot believe she’d not accept the same of you.”

“It’s not at all the same,” James groaned. “Your fiancée is some nameless, faceless woman, far away and unheard of, easy to dismiss. Hester need never know what feelings are hurt or what consequences befall this stranger. Hester is my sister and Anna is her dear friend and ally. They exchange regular letters, they move in the same circles, pursue the same causes. I’ve honestly been surprised that Anna has not appeared at Fort Lyon in a white apron and dimpled hat insisting that there is nothing inappropriate in a woman of her youth and appearance seeing to the care of coarse soldiers. Please, please, Bradbury, do not speak of this to my sister – tell me you haven’t already done so!”

“I’ve not,” conceded Bradbury. “If you don’t want me to, I won’t, but you underestimate her badly. She cares deeply about you, regrets that the two of you are not closer. I think she’d appreciate it if you went to her when you were troubled, confided in her, allowed her to support you while you are working so hard.”

“I’ll think about it,” James lied, vowing in his heart to do nothing of the kind. Admitting what he had to Gabriel had been difficult enough, and he and Gabriel had been close since his boyhood. Though if I spoke to Hester I’d not have to wait a month for a reply, not have to worry about my written words coming back to haunt me, not have to confess all to an unfeeling sheet of paper. No. Hester will tell Anna, I’m sure of it, and Anna must not know. Guilt followed immediately on the heels of the thought. James had violated Anna’s trust. It didn’t matter that Dean was a man, the things James had thought of him, the things James wanted to do with him, the things James had done with him, broke faith with Anna. She thought James as virginal as she was – he had been, until that morning – and now he had pursued passion with another, pursued passion with someone he desired more than he’d ever ached for her.

“If you’re not angry about…that…what had you so worked up?” asked Bradbury, accepting James’ words as an end to the conversation. It was easy to feel guilty after the fact, but when he thought about the following Wednesday, he primarily felt excitement at the prospect of seeing Dean again. The only negative emotion was despair that December 18th seemed a lifetime away.
“Our supply situation,” said James, pushing the thought away. He gestured towards the letter. “I’d hoped Zachariah would be able to aid us, but apparently I’ve entirely mistaken the matter. He has aided us. The winter gear we have now is the much-vaunted quality supplied by his friends, sold by those he has recommended to the War Department, manufactured by those whose contracts he has forwarded and those whose competence and reliability he has praised to the high heavens. He seeks to convince me that these blankets are a cut above – because if he were to acknowledge how completely deficient they are, he’d have to consider his role in their manufacture and would open himself to accusations of corruption every bit as severe as those being leveled against Cameron.”

“I heard that Stevens said the only thing Cameron wouldn’t steal was a red hot stove,” Bradbury said with a grin.

“He and Zachariah share many friends,” James growled. “I knew my brother to be grown more of Washington and less of ethical qualms, but I’ll own I thought better of him, much better of him. I do not know. Perhaps Zachariah is misled. Regardless, he’ll not help us with adequate blankets. Have you any idea how else we might acquire such?”

“Perhaps Fitzgerald?” suggested Bradbury thoughtfully. “His family has interests in wool production, perhaps he might know some who might provide less substandard material?”

“Would you speak with him?” asked James. Bradbury nodded. “Thank you, Lieutenant – for this and for your help with the other matter, as well.”

“Take care of yourself,” Bradbury ordered as a parent would to a child. There was something absurd in the youth fixing James with a steely look, scolding him as if their positions and ranks were reversed, but it was endearing as well. James couldn’t but smile and feel his temper dissipate as Bradbury turned and left the tent.

The week that followed much resembled those that had passed, the usual press of repetitious duty no less arduous but strangely comforting for having grown familiar. A conversation with the Colonel secured James four hours to himself each evening and Winchester’s diligent attention ensured that those hours were as uninterrupted as they ought to be. Discussion with Fitzgerald secured the Captain’s enthusiastic promise to do all he could to garner his family’s aid in acquiring blankets and his optimistic appraisal that such might even be donated, though James could scarce credit that anyone would be so self-sacrificing as to donate hundreds of high quality woolens. The modest amount of sleep James was able to get, near six hours some nights, was still paltry compared to what he’d been accustomed to before the war but was profoundly restful compared to the six weeks preceding. The usual annoyances and issues did not arise less frequently that week, but, well rested, James was better equipped to deal with the unexpected. The time lost to the rest worried him the first couple days until he observed that his workload appeared grew or shrank in accordance with how much time he had. No matter what how much accomplished, there were always went to sleep with the least urgent half dozen items awaiting his attention. The difference now was that the list no longer seemed insurmountable. He actually thought he might be accomplishing more, for he thought more clearly and quickly and was better organized.

No longer being responsible for the supply and governance of the contraband camp helped. Henriksen proved an able administrator, and while the Colonel instantly took to denigrating Henriksen’s work in that regard, he did allow that of course the black lieutenant was the most suited to such a duty of all in the camp.

The days thus passed quickly. It was the nights that felt endless.

Why did I enjoy ordering Dean, controlling him, denying him, rewarding him?
Patrolling provided ample exercise for his body. Some men had light duty and were somehow gaining weight now that the received a steady, consistent supply of food that made up for in quantity what it lacked in quality, James had no such problem. He’d never been a heavy man, but now he was all lean muscle. One evening’s boredom passed in a calculation of how far he walked circling Fort Lyon for eight hours a night. He estimated it to more than 10 miles, enough that he could have walked to Washington, instead spent endlessly circling the same several hundred yards until he knew every divot on the barren ground and had grown familiar with the several raccoons and skunks who’d taken up residence within the bramble of the abatis.

*Was Dean truly comfortable to be treated so?*

Only his occasional, brief conversations with the men on duty provided any relief over the dull hours, only short stops at the scattered picket fires touched the chill that had infused him so deeply that he doubted he’d feel truly warm again before spring. James’ night duty with Company F, G, and H of the 27th New York gave him the opportunity to form the same casual rapport with the rank and file of those companies as he shared with the men formerly under his command in Company B. They were unexceptional men of all walks of life and reflected all the diversity of character and employment that could be expected of a group whose only unifying characteristic was a desire to fight for cause and country. They talked of politics and war news, mused on the probability of war with England, wondered who was to blame for the disaster at Ball’s Bluff, mused on the sketchy reports that the rebel universally referred to as “Stonewall” Jackson was on the march, theorized when battle would be joined once more with the Confederates who had violated Kentucky’s neutrality, and speculated freely on when their own army, recently styled the Army of the Potomac by the newspapers, would march on the Confederate force.

*Is it normal for partners to behave as Dean and I did during times of intimacy? I cannot believe it so, thinking on the conversations more my experienced acquaintance have had. I cannot conceive of either of my parents behaving so, nor my siblings and their spouses.*

As each man with whom James spoke held roughly the same opinions and drew dubious facts from the same limited sources of information, the conversations were repetitious and uninteresting and they were made more so for with the imminent advent of winter. Nothing new had happened in weeks. The same tired ideas were bandied back and forth, back and forth, until every view had been so well canvassed and every man’s true opinion so well known that it was an exercise in sheer futility, only continued because even repeating the same stale arguments was less tedious than having nothing at all of which to speak. Had any of them had any actual interests in common with James, he’d have been better occupied, but he found none in the three companies with whom he could share true friendship. It was for the better, he tried to convince himself, for he could concentrate on his duties. However, he was left with far too much time alone, far too much time to think, with the result that he didn’t concentrate on his duties regardless.

*Would I allow another to treat me as I treated Dean? Perhaps, if I knew them well, if I trusted them not to hurt me. That Dean would trust me so quickly, on so slim an acquaintance, seems impossible, yet his behavior was unmistakable, his words undeniable. There must be something inherent to his personality that, behind that brusque exterior, he is inclined towards meekness and submission. Does that suggest that I have something in my personality that inclines me towards the domineering attitude that I displayed? Perhaps Sam was more apt than he knew when he accused me of paternalism. I do not like to find such in myself. Yet I cannot deny that it felt astonishingly good to surrender to the desire to command, astonishingly good to hear and feel Dean surrender himself to me. If no harm come of it, if we both consent to it freely, is it wrong of us?*

With little to occupy his time, the thoughts repeated endlessly, rehashed the same tired arguments as surely as the conversations about the news did so.
Whatever the reason, Dean appears to trust me already. What does it imply about me that I would not trust him the same were our positions reversed? Perhaps that is my true deficiency. I must find it in myself to trust him – to accept his control if he were to ask me to follow his commands, but, more importantly, I must allow that he knows his own mind, that he speaks it freely, that he would report to me if I do ought that makes him unhappy.

The weather was not as cold as it had been the previous week. Winchester and the other locals swore that this was more akin to their normal weather, that the wintry frigidity of the previous week was an anomaly, and that this was what could be expected of the season to come. James was not optimistic on that count, and believed it the last calm before the inevitable winter storms.

What of this new relationship I am forging as relates to my existing one? I cannot cling to the disingenuousness that would suggest that what I am initiating with Dean is anything but a relationship. Further, I cannot pretend that I do not want a relationship with Dean. If we meet regularly with the intention of growing more intimately acquainted, that is the veritable definition of a relationship, especially in light of my genuine interest in his various parts. Yes, he is a man, and that invalidates it in some respects, for there is no formal relationship might I have with him save friendship. But if in my heart I harbor greater affection for him, it doesn’t matter what the world calls what we have together for I know the truth. Yet, when I search my feelings, I find my sentiments towards Anna largely unaltered. Cooled, perhaps by distance, but essentially the same, though neither binding enough to keep me from feeling for another nor selfless enough that I would spare her the pain that will be occasioned should she learn of this. Another sad reflection on myself, one I shall have to learn to live with. The prospect of hurting her is still painful, the idea of parting from her is unpleasant to contemplate, yet such offers no restraint on my desires.

There was no pretending that Dean being a man made what James did right. There was no pretending that the fact that James and Anna were not yet married made what James did anything but adultery.

I fear I am far more capable of selfishness than I have ever previously conceived. I am not the man I thought I was.

Finally, mercifully, it was Tuesday evening once more and James was making his circuitous way through the night hours, and with the hope of seeing Dean again imminently James for once found his thoughts more pleasantly engaged as his imagination conjured enticing images of the activities in which they might engage. By dawn, those fantasies had assembled into a plan of action, and James felt a warm glow of anticipation as he passed his duties over to the Lieutenant Colonel of the morning pickets of the 5th Maine Volunteers. James’ day promised several solitary hours with none to question where he might be. Someone – James assumed Bradbury – had put about whispers that James knew some hidden hole to which he retired to work uninterrupted. Several been unable to find him while he was engaged in completely ordinary tasks believed the story and spread it widely, and already none questioned it, though many speculated where such privacy could be had in such a confined camp. That easily, he gained the protection he needed to sneak away one morning a week to see Dean.

It was a crisp, clear morning, the sky fading to pale blue as the sun rose to the east and silhouetted the fort against the dazzling horizon. As always happened, when the moment came to actually meet Dean, James’ anxieties quieted, his fears subsided, his conflicted thoughts settled to reveal that, at some deeper level of his psyche than his rational concerns, his subconscious had not the least issue with seeing Dean, communicating for Dean, pleasuring and being pleasured by Dean, or violating Anna’s trust. The small corner of his mind not devoted to anticipation and excitement was horrified by how all restraint fell away, but no amount of moralizing could overcome the rest. James wanted to see Dean more than he wanted anything or anyone else his entire life.
As James walked the leafy path into the dense cover of the thicket, Impala came into view as rays of light scattered long shadows across her black mane and flank. The horse, as usual, showed no interest in James, did not even bat an eye as she drowsed, her large brown eyes half-lidded, her nostrils flaring and blowing steam at every breath. In the stark sunlight, he thought her less magnificent than when he’d first seen her, more worn, her coat less gleaming. She was no less handsome, but she showed the same signs of wear and fatigue as her owner. Rustling leaves presaged that while Impala stood impassively, the other occupant of the clearing was in motion, and James cleared the obscuring trees and to see Dean pacing back and forth, face an anxious, glowering mask.

“Thought you weren’t gonna come,” grumbled Dean as if he wasn’t glad to be proven wrong. Startled and confused, James froze at the head of the path.

“Did I say or do something that led you to think I wouldn’t?” asked James.

“All kinds of things,” said Dean, turning away to face the bare trees.

“Like what?” James transitioned from confused to baffled. Dean shook his head, causing the green neckerchief to shift about his neck. “Won’t you look at me, Dean? I want to understand. I know we were caught up in the moment when we…when we did what we did last week.” The carnal words that had come so easily when he was aroused were impossible to speak aloud now. “If, reflecting after the fact, you found yourself uncomfortable, I understand – but please tell me so. There’s no need to guard yourself so fiercely before me.”

“Especially when you allow those walls to fall so spectacularly the moment we engage in physical pursuits!” “In fact, I wished to talk about that anyway, to ascertain if you were alright with my taking the lead as I did, to confirm that you enjoyed yourself, to see if you were interested in repeating the experience and if so, what might be considered allowable for me to suggest we do, and what you’d prefer we not.” Cheeks flushing, James realized he’d not given Dean a moment to get a word in, pouring out his own concerns.

“You really enjoyed all that?” Dean asked incredulously.

“Dean, why should I ever lie about such a thing? How even could I? Was there something about my climax, about the taste of my release on your lips, that you doubted?” With a flash of temper, his self-restraint fell away and the words fell unhesitatingly from James’ tongue. “I am beyond bewildered that you could, a mere seven days ago, trust me completely with your pleasure and yet today cannot credit my honest statement that I enjoyed myself, took delight in your company, and very much wished to see you again.”

“You don’t know me,” Dean protested, a lame repeat of words he’d spoken more than once before. That Dean refused to turn around and face him was maddening, he longed to see Dean’s face, to read on his expressive face where this doubt was coming from.

“Then let me know you!” snapped James, staring cuttingly at Dean’s tense back. “I wish to, but I can’t when you rarely say more than a few words to me at a time. The only time you’ve said more was to explain how wrong I was to judge your enlistment! The person who spoke those words to me was a person I’d love to get to know better. I’ve let you in, Dean, though perhaps you don’t yet know me well enough to see that – I’ve put aside duty and responsibility because, as young as our acquaintance is, I can’t help but be drawn to you. Based on our conversation last week, I thought you felt the same. I thought, based on your shocking degree of obedience, that you must trust me. Yet you truly believed I’d not be here? I’m risking everything, Dean – my position, my family, even my life – because I want to see you! I neither require nor desire that you risk the same – please, do not, never do – but I’m begging you, either tell me you wish to know me no more and break this off,
or give me the benefit of the doubt and believe in me as I believe in you.”

James was shouting by the time he finished, shaking with anger and hurt. He’d never lost his temper so. Even those who upset him most – Crowley and Zachariah’s friends and similar ilk he’d met throughout his life – he held his peace, kept the irritation to himself, waited until he had calmed to speak his mind rationally. There was no waiting with Dean, there was no restraint, there was nothing but surrendering to the passionate emotions that filled him when they were together. Trembling, he watched Dean’s shoulders creep towards his ears, increasingly strained, only to slump suddenly in defeat. The simple gesture spoke volumes and James’ stomach twisted, his throat choked nauseously.

_We barely know each other. Why did I say all that? How could I push him so? I know him skittish and vulnerable, and instead of allowing him space and time to grow comfortable, I pushed him, demanded of him what should have only been his to give willingly and freely when he would._

In a flash of green and butternut, Dean rounded and crossed the clearing towards Impala, his expression unreadable.

_He’s going to leave now. Unspeakable sadness flooded James’ eyes with tears. His thoughts spun out impossibly quickly. How can I care about him so much, so quickly, when I still know him so barely? It must be illusion, it must be spurred by the fascinating mystery and tantalizing attraction of it all, an eidolon that will fade when we grow better acquainted and reality sets in, when I am forced to the knowledge that in the end he is but a man, as I am but a man, and not an incubus sent to tempt me nor a demon here to lead me astray. It is better he go, better that I never see him again…_  

Hands landed on James’ cheeks, green eyes met James own blue and forced James from his thoughts and into the present as Dean aggressively seized a kiss. Too shocked to reciprocate, James made a muffled sound of protest even as a bemused part of his mind marveled at the discovery that Dean was a little taller than he, that James must turn his face up into the kiss, as if that was the most relevant observation in that moment. When James’ addlepated mind finally caught up to reality, he moved to return the inexplicable show of affection just as Dean drew away, eyes wide and wild, breathing hard.

“Dean—”

“My name is Dean Henry Winchester,” Dean interrupted, dropping his hands from James’ head to gesticulate emphatic accompaniment to his words, speaking in a frantic rush as if he were as afraid of James leaving as James was of Dean leaving. “I was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, on the 24th of January in 1841. My father is Captain John Winchester, West Point class of ‘38; my mother was Mary Campbell, granddaughter of William Campbell, the Revolutionary War commander; you know Sam. We moved to Kansas in 1850 to join my father at his post and we remained there when the fortress became Lawrence. Mama was killed on May 2nd, 1856; Sam left exactly three years later. I decided to join the Confederate army as soon as word of the war reached us in June. My father gave me a letter of introduction to Bobby Singer – they served together in Mexico – and Singer put me on his staff as a scout. I’m not like you. I’m not interesting. I’m no one, but anything you want to know, I’ll tell you. Don’t give up on me, Cas, please don’t give up on me.”

“Everything, Dean,” James growled, pulling Dean into a rough kiss. “I want to know _everything._” The confessions fired James’ blood more than the kiss, more than the realization that Dean wasn’t leaving. It dawned on James that, inexplicably, Dean found it far easier to open himself to James’ sexual advances than to share the casual intimacies of simple friendship. Strange as that was to James, it made Dean’s burst of personal information that much more valued, that much more welcomed. Pressing into another kiss, working his lips hungrily against Dean’s, James prized a surprised whimper from the man. Eager fingers found the buttons up the front of Dean’s uniform,
fumbling to undo them as the wood discs could scarce be forced through too-small holes.

The force of James’ advance pushed Dean step by step back across the clearing. Dean wrapped his arms loosely around James’ shoulders and entered into the kiss, lips moving against lips, noses bumping together. James refused to blink until his eyes burned from staring into Dean’s gaze and Dean surrendered and allowed his to slip shut. James finally conquered the last button as he steered Dean to lean against the familiar tree trunk. Desperate kisses lit fire that trailed in shivering sparks down James’ spine. A whimper built in the back of Dean’s throat until he vocalized faintly with every scant breath he pulled through his nose. James tugged Dean’s shirt free of his pants and slipped his hands beneath, kneading them roughly over the soft dip of Dean’s stomach and the firm muscles of his abdomen, combed through the soft layer of short hair scattered over his chest, flicked over nipples that hardened instantly at his touch. Dean threw his head back against the tree with a thud, ending the string kisses, his body trembling and slumping as if his legs could scarce support him.

“That was a great start,” James growled. “That was wonderful. I think you deserve a reward, Dean. Don’t you?”

“No,” Dean protested weakly. “No, no – shoulda told you all along, shouldn’ta made you shout at me, should trust you, I should trust, I want to trust you…you should punish me.”

For a stunned moment, all James could do was a stare, all he could feel was hot pleasure so encompassing it threatened to drown him, pressed against his skin like he was on the verge of exploding out of his body. A cascade of shocking images tumbled free from some dark corner of his mind so quickly he could scarce interpret one before the next supplanted it.

Dean bound naked to a bed, tied so tightly he could scarce move. Dean denied and denied until he begged for release. Dean on his knees as James took a paddle to his ass, hit him over and over until he wept even as his cock leaked clear drops. Dean on his knees awaiting James’ whim, waiting no matter how long James delayed, waiting no matter how his knees ached and his body stiffened. Dean’s lips wrapped around James’ cock, jaw slack as James held his head still and thrust into the heat and wetness. Dean climbing to Impala’s back hard and frustrated and denied simply because James told him no. Dean screaming ‘Castiel’ as he climaxed.

“Sit,” snarled James.

Holy Hell such thoughts should not make me feel on the verge of release.

“Cas?” Dean blinked at him uncertainly, his voice taking on that lost, hesitant quality that had been so marked the last time they’d sated their arousal together.

“On the ground, Dean, now.” Dean obeyed instantly, dropping to his butt between the thick tree roots. “Legs together, stretched before you.” Following his instructions, Dean’s gorgeous eyes followed James. Dean gaped as James stepped so that he was straddling Dean’s legs and dropped down so that he was half squatting over, half sitting on, Dean’s thighs. Their chests were close but not touching. In this position, it was James who had the advantage of height, and he used it to capture Dean’s gaze, loose himself in intense green and deepest black.

God, do I want to hurt him, want him to suffer? Does he want to be hurt? Does that bring him pleasure? Nobody feels that way. Where did such a thought even come from? If he knew I was thinking it, he would leave. If he knew…it doesn’t matter. I’ll not do that to him nor will I tell him of my interest. He’s wrong anyway, he doesn’t deserve to be punished, not for being afraid to share with me, not for anything. It’s not for him to say what he deserves. He’s given that power to me.

“Show me how you like to be pleasured,” James demanded.
“Huh?” Dean stared at him in blank incomprehension. With trembling fingers, James undid the buttons down the front of his pants and pulled his hard cock out into the cool morning air. His own touch felt pale and inadequate in contrast to what he imagined as he thought of Dean’s hand wrapped around the stiff, blushed length at any moment.

“Demonstrate for me, on my body, how you best enjoy touching your own cock,” ordered James, choosing words for clarity, annunciating each distinctly. Dean turned his lost gaze downwards and all trace of confusion disappeared in obvious desire, Dean’s pupils dilating black, his mouth going slack, his pink tongue flicking out to lick at his lips as if he looked upon something delectable. Want to feel his mouth on me, want it so badly, but not today, not yet. His eyes flicked up to James’ once more, a question writ large on his face, and James nodded once decisively and leaned to capture Dean’s right hand with James’ left, remembering how reassuring Dean had found the grip the previous week, and Dean twisted his wrist to thread their fingers together. Tentatively, Dean reached over with his other hand, gaze returning to James’ cock, and ran a single finger from the base to the tip. The touch spread pleasure that left James shivering, eyes rolling back as his body screamed for more and he forced himself to wait patiently for Dean to grow comfortable, for Dean to be ready. It was better than James had imagined; even hesitant, Dean’s hand was so real, so solid, so enticing.

“You’re big,” breathed Dean, humid air steaming in the chill between them. He licked his lips again and James resisted the urge to kiss him senseless. A short nail flicked over James’ slit and he grunted as the slight contact exploded intensely as heat and desire throughout his body.

“Am I?” James was as breathless as Dean. “I’ve no basis for comparison. Is this truly how you see to your own needs?”

“Yeah,” Dean grinned. “Always start out slow and teasing. Make myself beg for it, just like you made me beg for it last week.” James groaned at the images those words conjured, at the gentle squeeze Dean gave the head of James’ cock. Each touch was unbelievable, pleasure so powerful it was nearly painful, and James knew he wasn’t going to last long. More than a decade of seeing to his own needs as they occasionally arose had in no way prepared him for how incredibly profound the feeling of being touched by another would be. “When I can’t wait no more, I wrap my hand ‘round myself nice and loose and start real slow.” Dean matched the words precisely, cupping his large hand so gently that James could barely feel the touch. Desperate for more contact, James leaned forward, squeezed Dean’s hand, wrapped his free arm around Dean’s back and beneath his shirt to press his fingers into the dip of Dean’s spine, enjoying the smoothness of Dean’s skin, the way he could feel Dean quivering everywhere they touched. Pressing their mouths together, James gave in to his desire to ravish Dean’s chapped, pink lips, kissing them with all the urgency that Dean’s movements lacked, scarce restraining himself from rolling his hips into Dean’s hand.

“My name is James Castiel Novak,” James panted, every breath directly into Dean’s slightly cracked lips. Dean’s eyes had closed, his body eased against the tree. The grip on James’ cock tightened, each finger applying perfect pressure to the ring of sensitive flesh beneath James’ head, and James gave in to the need shrieking through his body, pressed his hips forward in a way that banged his knees against the tree trunk and forced Dean’s hand rapidly to the base of James cock. He groaned at the unspeakable pleasure of it, groaned to see the answering bob of the tent in Dean’s pants, groaned to hear and feel the needy whimper that moved Dean’s lips faintly against James’. James stole another quick kiss as Dean drew his hand up James’ length once more.

“I was born in Wolcott, New York, on November 22nd, 1834.”

Dean’s grip constricted further. He gave a sharp, jerking twist of his wrist down James’ shaft as James rolled forward once more, and James choked on the noise that burst from him, competing with his attempt to give Dean the same basic information that Dean has so obligingly told him. They each
repeated their movements precisely, again, again, again, and James could no longer say how Dean looked, no longer say if Dean’s eyes were open or closed, for his own had ceased to see anything but springtime green.

“I’ve parents and siblings and they can all be damned for all I care right now.”

James locked his lips with Dean’s, followed the instinct that told him to tease at Dean’s lips with his tongue even as Dean maintained his even, firm stroke. The callouses on Dean’s hand rubbed rough and absolutely perfectly over James’ sensitive skin, James thrust into every pass, and Dean groaned directly into James’ open mouth as he accommodated James’ tongue and James tasted Dean’s lips, his saliva, flicked out to brush their tongues together. Further words were impossible. There was only the intensity of this feeling he’d craved for so long, the wonder of Dean touching him, of him touching Dean, and the bliss billowing out from his cock to fill every nook and cranny of his body. Abruptly, his pleasure crested, a pulse rocked him in time to Dean’s strokes, and James could do nothing but moan, “Dean…Dean…” against Dean’s lips and rut through his climax as he spurted white into the space between them.

It might have been seconds or minutes before he returned to himself enough to open his eyes. Dean’s lips worked lightly against his, forming unspoken words James couldn’t begin to interpret. Dean’s chest fluttered with urgent, shallow breaths, and the tent of butternut wool hiding his cock twitched continually.

Shocked at how awkward and ungainly his fingers felt, James struggled to win through the buttons closing Dean’s pants. Dean didn’t try to move, he continued to cup James’ cock, protecting the vulnerable flesh from the December cold, ignoring the thick white streaking his pant leg, pooling and soaking a dark stain into the wool. When James had the fly open, he pulled the fabric back to free Dean’s erection. Curved, flushed pink at the base to a deep red at the head, thin liquid beaded at the tip, made a wet line down the head where it had dripped down. James could swear he could see Dean’s cock throbbing in time to Dean’s heartbeat. Imitating precisely as Dean had done to him, James ran a finger along the velvety skin sheathing the hard length, circled the head, flicked a nail at the tip to tease forth further thin release.

“Oh God, Cas,” Dean whispered as if he couldn’t believe it. “You’re touchin’ me…” James wrapped his hand loosely around Dean’s bulk, the movements he’d done to himself dozens of times strange and unfamiliar when mirrored and done for the pleasure of another. Fearing he was moving awkwardly, James slowly, gently, skimmed along Dean’s flesh. Dean’s eyes flew open, expression near panic, and squeezed James’ hand painfully hard.

“Is this alright, Dean?” James asked, stilling in concern.

“You’re touchin’ me!” gasped Dean, eyes not appearing to see anything. Despite his fear, despite his convulsive grip on James’ hand, the hand clasped around James’ cock remained relaxed and gentle.

“Yes – am I hurting you? Have I done something wrong? I’ve never…”

“Neither have I,” whispered Dean. “Even with…not with a hand, never with a hand, never with a man, never with someone I wanted…no one…” Reassured by the words and the desire evident in his tone, James gave Dean’s cock another loose stroke and Dean moaned, completely lost, rolling his head from side to side against the tree. The feet stretched behind where James knelt kicking at the dirt and leaves, heels scraped at the ground.

“No one has touched you like this?” murmured James. Tenderly, James kissed the corners of Dean’s mouth as Dean’s moan lengthened, the sound deepened, as James stroked again.
“Why would they?” Tears pooled in the corners of Dean’s eyes. “Men don’t want other men. ‘Cept me. I’m the broken one.”

“I want you, Dean,” James couldn’t keep the heat from his voice, the heat of anger, the heat of desire. “I want you.” He remember Sam explaining that Dean formed his opinion of himself based on things his father had said, explaining that their father hated Dean even though Dean loved him and aspired to impress him. He thought of Dean’s wife and son, with whom Dean had apparently shared little enough intimacy that she’d not laid hand on his cock. He thought of the other mysterious men who had been with Dean yet had cared only about themselves, had spared so little effort for this wonderful person that they hadn’t even pleased the most sensitive part of his body, had taken what Dean offered so freely while giving him nothing in return.

This is why he thinks he is worth so little, this is why he believes himself undeserving. He has been surrounded by people who treat him badly for so long that he has come to accept it, has come to expect it. If I ever meet one of the people who did this to him there will be hell to pay…

“Castiel…” James would never have imagined that a single word moaned with that much desire could convey such a depth of skepticism and doubt.

“Do you believe that I want you?” growled James, tightening his grip around Dean’s shaft and stroking him roughly.

“Cas…” groaned Dean, shaking his head in denial.

“Dean, do you believe me?”

“Yes…yes…” Dean’s hips, constrained by their position, pressed up feebly towards James’ hand. “I believe you…you want me, Cas…that’s…” He moaned as James twisted his wrist sharply as he stroke down again. James was growing increasingly comfortable, the movements feeling more natural, Dean’s reactions spurring him on.

“I believe the same of you, Dean,” James mouthed against the sweaty skin of Dean’s cheek, enjoying the feeling of Dean’s hot breath ruffling his hair. Dean was growing tense, arching away from the tree, his body pressing closer to James’ touch. “I believe you desire me as much as I do you, believe that you are as sincere in your willingness to be controlled as I am in mine to control. Is that true?”

“Yes,” Dean nodded fervently. “Oh, Cas, your hand feels so good, so good…please…”

“Not yet, Dean,” James relaxed his pace, eased Dean back from the brink of climax. Dean whimpered and eased back against the tree trunk, accepting James’ denial. Pleasure fired through James’ veins and, to his amazement, he felt the first stirrings of renewed desire. “There are still things you need to learn. Do you believe I will be here next week, that if I’m not here it’s because of circumstances outside of my control?”

“Yes!” There was the sincerity James had been hoping for.

I can’t teach him to believe in himself until he believes in me. Once he trusts me, my actions, my candor, he’ll have no choice but to put faith in me when I tell him he’s deserving, he’s handsome, he’s smart, he’s cared for.

“I believe that you’ll do your best to meet me here, that if you are not here one dawn it won’t be because you didn’t wish to be, nor because you’ve convinced yourself that I do not wish to see you, but because you couldn’t come. Right?” There was no answer and James stilled his hand. “And that
if you reach a point that you no longer wish to have these meetings, you will tell me so. Is that correct?” Dean moaned pitifully and managed an awkward thrust, and James locked their joined hands around Dean’s thigh, leaned his weight forward to prevent Dean’s moving. “Answer me, Dean.”

The moment stretched out until Dean groaned, unable to hold silent. “That’s right…you’re right…” Dean gasped. James toyed with his slit encouragingly, smearing his thumb in hot release. “Not just saying it because you’re…it’s true, sayin’ it cause it’s true…I came today even though I thought you wouldn’t…had to see you, Cas, had to…”

Leaning forward, James gave Dean’s slack mouth a deep kiss as he began to stroke again, twisting his fingers around the sensitive flesh, turning his wrist with each stroke. Inarticulate, grateful noises died in Dean’s throat and James trembled in reflected pleasure. Bringing Dean ecstasy felt better than James would ever have conceived.

“Do you believe that there is no one, no one, I’d rather spend Christmas with than you?”

God, that’s true, that’s not just the heat of the moment, I mean that. What’s happening to me?

“Me too, Cas, me too…” Dean spoke directly against James’ mouth, the words blurred enough that James was scarce sure that he was hearing them correctly. The conviction behind Dean’s words was undeniable and James felt a surge of relief that curled with his arousal to leave him buzzed and half-hard, cock pressed gently by Dean’s enfolding hand. Featherlight kisses followed, Dean flicking his tongue out to taste at James’ mouth. James relaxed his hold on Dean’s hip and with a satisfied sigh Dean bucked up into James’ firm grip as James worked faster, confidently.

“Is there anything you want me to know, Dean?”

“Please…I’m going to…I can’t, I can’t, please Cas, tell me it’s okay, I don’t want to stop, I can’t, can’t—” James interrupted him with a wet kiss, relishing every moment of Dean’s struggle to hold himself back. His hand slowed and he let Dean take the lead, set the pace he wanted. Trailing his tongue along the salt skin of Dean’s cheek, teasing at coarse stubble, James followed a line to Dean’s ear, nipped at the ear lobe as Dean thrust up from the ground into James’ grasp.

“Now, Dean,” James whispered in Dean’s ear, accompanying the word with a decisive downward stroke from tip to base, brown hairs tickling at his hand. “Now.”

With a wordless, deep groan, Dean thrust up hard and sprayed into the air, release falling heavy back atop his cock, spattering on his pants, dripping down James’ hand. James continued to work, semen smoothing the way, as Dean moaned through a smaller second burst, leaked a third.

“Fantastic,” James murmured, leaning back to settle his weight once more over Dean’s legs. Dean blinked at him bemusedly and managed a shy smile that slowly grew into a beaming grin. James’ heart swelled with affection. “I’m proud of you, Dean.”

“Can’t believe you want me, Cas,” mumbled Dean. James quirked an eyebrow and Dean’s freckled cheeks pinked adorably. “I mean, I believe you, I do, it’s just so…”

“It’s incredible,” supplied James. He gazed curiously at the white spattered over his hand. “All those months I dreamed about doing things like this with you until I thought I was losing my mind. I scarce believe it either, but it’s true – we want each other, Dean. But we won’t be able to have that together if you can’t accept it.” Dean’s grin shifted to a faint, considering frown, only to vanish completely as his jaw dropped. Dean stared in astonishment as James casually lifted his hand to his mouth and sucked the semen from his fingers. The flavor wasn’t particularly appealing, more bitter than the
James had previously tasted, more salty, with a gooey texture that reminded him in the worst possible way of shellfish. Despite that, he didn’t stop. This was a part of Dean, a tangible product of Dean’s desire and interest and, James dared hope, shared affections, and for that alone James didn’t want to waste a drop.

The moment James’ hand fell away from his mouth, Dean’s fingers were curled around James’ head, Dean’s strong arms were pulling them together. Dean’s tongue was between James’ lips lapping at the wetness in James’ mouth, tasting James and surely the lingering flavor of himself with astonishing eagerness. The hand that for so long had cradled James’ cock finally tenderly tucked James within his pants, folded the wool over James to block out the cold. Dean’s cock had already softened and retreated within the fabric of his clothing, nestled amidst the curly hairs of his crotch. They kissed and kissed, unable to get enough, both growing more skilled the more they practiced. James’ body hummed warm and blissful in a state of semi-arousal that he was grateful didn’t blossom into full need. He didn’t want the distraction of desperation that would come from arousal, preferred the buzz of pleasure that kept him alert and hot yet satisfied.

“You can’t be real,” murmured Dean in wonder. The young man caught James in a rough embrace and lay his head over James’ heart. Tenderly, James pulled Dean’s hat off and ran his fingers through the Dean’s short, tangled hair. Unlike their first time together, the white streaks of semen James left behind in Dean’s hair were entirely intentional. “Thank you, Cas.”

“Thank you, Dean. I wish we had more time. I want to know you, inside and out.” Dean released a deep breath that ghosted raspily through his lips, eased closer to James. James wrapped his arms around Dean to hold him more closely, share their warmth, and mouthed a kiss against the top of Dean’s head. “I want you to know me. Whatever this is, whatever we’re doing…I want us to have it together. I don’t want us to ever do anything together that we don’t both enter in to fully, don’t both want without reservation.”

Dean made no answer, and despite his temptation to push for reassurance, James didn’t push him further. Dean had already been more open than James had hoped for, James had already forced from Dean more than he would have volunteered otherwise. Further confessions could wait. They held each other for a long time as the air grew warmer, the sun crept higher on the horizon, the birds and wild animals settled for the day. The sound of faint hoof beats and creaking wagon wheels could be heard from the direction of the road, reminding them that no matter how alone they felt, they were not, that they chanced discovery. In the future, they’d have to consider being quieter.

Finally, with utmost reluctance, James pulled away. “I have to go,” he said sadly. “I’ll see you next week, Dean. Whenever a voice of doubt tries to convince you that you cannot have this, please remember that I have said to you unequivocally: I want you, I care for you, and I will see you in seven days.”

“I believe you,” whispered Dean, drawing James down to nuzzle at the side of his face and mouth a rough, dry kiss against James’ cheek. “And Castiel? I feel the same. I’ll try’n do better at tellin’ you. Just in case you have that voice of doubt, too.”

“I do, Dean. I definitely do. Thank you.”

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Dear Anna,                                                                                                       December 20th, 1861

I am sending this letter home with Zachariah, so for once you shall have word from me mere days after I have written! That makes the composition of this letter unusually challenging, as I haven’t a clue which of my previous letters you have received. My most recent from you is dated December
There was a time in November when the mail arrived more promptly but the delays now are worse than ever, I assume because with the holidays upon us, so much more is being sent.

The Company received the care package from the Soldier’s Aid Society yesterday and the contents were most gratefully received by all. There were genuine tears from some, not only because we are to a man cold all of the time, but because of the kind notes included from our loved ones. These messages were especially appreciated by those who have received nothing previously because their mothers, fathers, siblings, wives, children, cannot write. Please communicate to those who served as transcribers the thousand grateful ‘thank yous’ of the Company. You cannot imagine the joy occasioned to the people here when we receive word from home. I do not speak much of the conditions in which we live because they cannot be altered and are therefore not worth dwelling on, but they are nothing akin to the coziness and comfort of even the most modest of homes. It is easy to feel forsaken when we read in the news of the condemnations heaped on the army that we’ve not marched since August (as if we soldiers had any say in that, it is on our generals to order our advance!) and when we are shivering and huddled together to get through the chill of night. Letters from home remind us why we make these sacrifices and what rewards await us when we’ve seen our duty through. Thank you, Anna.

As I’m in no position to wrap gifts, I was hoping you might aid me. Towards that end, here is a list of what I have included to be sent to whom. The fine carven pipe is for father (and was made by Sergeant Ashley, do you recall him? He’s a very fine hand at whittling). The potpourri of local flowers in the embroidered satchel is for mother. For Zachariah and Mr. Seward, I’ve sent cigars that, as far as I can tell, were shipped from Cuba to New Orleans, smuggled through the Confederacy, and somehow found their way to the sutlers outside our camp who charged exorbitantly for them. Hopefully they are worth the expense, I know nothing of such things. The wine-toned bonnet is for Margaret, the pale blue for Rachel. For your parents I’ve sent a book of verse given my by Mr. Balthazar Freeley, who brought it from England, and a fruit cake which, judging by the quantity of honey in which it has been soaked, should keep even if this package doesn’t not arrive for months. Your own gifts are wrapped separately and I’ve given strict instructions to Zachariah to guard them with his life until the appointed time, so do not think to steal a glance at them!

On local events, all is as well as can be expected. We have settled into a rhythm that I suspect will carry us through the winter. Spirits are generally bright with the coming of Christmas. The saddest news is that Dr. Ellicott – the younger – has passed away of illness. Hester tried her best to save him and was heartbroken at her failure. Doctor Benton now has that much less competition in the county – perhaps his offers to you seem more appealing now that his practice is to be larger?

You have been much in my thoughts of late. I miss you dearly, especially with the holiday so close, and wish all the best to you and yours. Sending with this my love as always—

Your, J.C. Novak

James put the final seal on the box containing the presents he’d procured, the same crate in which the mittens and scarves made by the ladies of Wolcott had arrived. Writing affection to Anna felt strange. His words were not insincere but they felt false nonetheless. He’d purchased her the finest lace parasol he’d been able to find in Alexandria and a matching pair of lace gloves trimmed in pale green. The ambrotype taken by the photographer who’d visited the Fort in October was also to be hers, set in a gold embossed frame case lined with velvet.

In all, he’d spent a fair amount of money and the investment felt more absurd than ever it had in the past. The snug, deep blue scarf wrapped about his neck, made for him by Anna and sent with the rest of the woolens made for the Company, had cost far less and was worth far more than all the fine,
fancy presents in the world. He’d gone through the motions, feeling he must, but having packaged everything he felt that the effort was largely wasted. Perhaps he’d not bother with gifts next year. They felt meaninglessly sentimental in the face of everything else going on in the world.

The crate James delivered to Hester, who would be at Zachariah’s that night for a final holiday party. James had been invited as well, but he’d declined. It had been shockingly empowering to do so, and Hester had given him the broadest smile, knowing that he’d never attended such meals for his own enjoyment but had never been able to bring himself to decline the invitations. *I’m proud of you*, she’d said warmly, in a tone that reminded James eerily of his own words to Dean of days before. As he handed over the crate, he also gave Hester the gift he’d gotten her, a pristine nurse’s apron for Hester embroidered in thread of gold with the Rod of Asclepius. She laughed at the absurdity of such a luxury considering the bodily fluids that would surely soak the fabric over the months to come, but she glowed as she donned it and James felt vindicated in the choice despite the unnecessary indulgence. Increasingly, there had been hints in the letters James received from his mother that Hester’s choice of employment was not looked upon kindly in the Novak household. If James was receiving hints, Hester must be receiving letters full. James hoped that his gesture communicated that he, at least, thought her efforts noble and worthwhile and entirely in keeping with her lifelong struggles for equality. For Hannah, James bought the most absurd parasol he’d found while shopping for Anna, a frothy concoction of bows and ribbons and embroidered flowers that she was in raptures over, lamenting that she’d not be able to use it until the spring and delighting that it matched the equally absurd bonnet that General Elkins had somewhere found her.

Each sister had bought something for James. Hannah bought him an utterly useless gilded belt buckle shaped like an eagle and was shocked and disappointed when he pointed out that he’d not be able to wear it for it was not regulation issue. Hester’s gift was more appropriate, a small wooden box that unfolded into a writing desk with a drawer for paper, a slot for pens, two tightly sealed jars for ink and a clasped box for sand to use in hastening the drying of the ink. She’d even promised to reserve a space for it amidst her wagons, as he’d not be able to carry it while on the march.

With Elkins and the others in the army with whom James had grown friendly, only handshakes were exchanged. James would not embarrass his subordinate friends by purchasing them presents when they could not afford to reciprocate. That left only Dean. James debated for days the appropriateness of procuring something for Dean – *for my lover*, he thought with a blush – but in the end he could not resist. James suspected, from what he knew of Dean’s life, he’d had few enough gifts granted to him. However, he also suspected that Dean would be incapable of buying him anything in return. To protect Dean from embarrassment, James kept his selection modest, and hoped that it would be well received.

Despite increasingly dreary weather as Christmas day approached, the camp was more full of frivolity than usual. Each night the camp fire songs were carols, every instrument joining together and many voices raised in “*noel, noel*” and raucously belting out “*ohhhh tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy!*” Boughs of holly and swags of pine appeared over many a tent, though James had scarce seen an evergreen in the area, and the few Dutch soldiers of the regiment found a supply of alcohol and spent all evening the 23rd ringing bells acquired from who-knew-where and singing “*cling-e-ling-e-ling*” and an unfamiliar carol in German at the top of their lungs. No duties were neglected amidst the air of festivity – Colonel Crowley saw to that. Despite a knot of red berries and two prickly holly leaves tucked behind one ear Crowley felt no compunction in telling off anyone who wasn’t applying themselves. However, the oppressive sense of boredom and increasingly uneasy impatience that had increasingly plagued the camp lifted. James hoped the good spirits would last beyond the holiday. He had a feeling cheer would be needed as the winter deepened, would be essential when spring returned and with it, surely, the realities of battle.

James’ usual tasks kept him busy, and the boisterous holiday spirit helped James keep his self-doubt,
recremation, and uncertainty at bay. When his thoughts did tend that way in the still of the night, James remembered his words to Dean and he felt calmer. Knowing that Dean believed in him and trusted him helped James to trust himself, helped him in turn to trust that Dean felt the same as he did. The entire week was more bearable as a result.

After near a week without any mail at all, Christmas Eve brought what must have been a month’s worth of letters, proving the finest gift any of them could have hoped for. James’ were delivered throughout the day, one or two at a time, by the heralding angel of a postman. He had no time for them though he longed to read them immediately and came to his tent for his evening rest to be greeted by a pile that included five from Anna, two from his father, three from his mother, one from the Miltons, a scattered few from acquaintances both in the army and not, and at the bottom of the pile, an unusually thick one that caused his heart to near stop.

The handwriting on the outside of the envelope named the sender instantly as Gabriel, and with his heart lodged somewhere in the vicinity of his tonsils and beating loud enough to call the dead to heaven’s gates, James ripped it open and read the contents as quickly as he could.

Hey, Cassie,  

December 2nd, 1861

I guess it runs in the family. Liking men, I mean, not adultery. It’s not adultery anyway, you’re not married. So, deep breaths, Cassie, before you faint. There’s nothing wrong with you, you’re not different from other people, and yes, I can offer you some advice. I’ll be burning your letter as soon as I finish writing this, by the way. I trust you’ll do the same? It’s a pity we can’t have this conversation in person, someplace private, but as I’ll be in Kentucky until at least February that seems unlikely, and judging by your desperation you’ll end up spilling everything to Alfie if I make you wait that long.

DO NOT SPILL EVERYTHING TO ALFIE. OR THAT BOYLE CHARACTER. OR ANYONE IN THE FAMILY. EXCEPT ME. AND POSSIBLY HESTER.

To address your questions -

“Is this normal?” Yes.

Feeling physical attraction towards other people is normal. Feeling physical attraction towards people whom you are not in a relationship with is normal. Feeling physical attraction towards people whom you are not in a relationship with even though you are in a relationship with someone is also normal. If you’ve never had this happen before, that’s kind of a damned miracle, brother. Congratulations. Your cock has discriminating taste. Anna is quite beautiful, I imagine this fellow must be something to see.

“Have I ever felt the like?” Yes.

I’ve been attracted to, and been with, many people, both male and female. Don’t play the fool, I know even you are not so naïve as to doubt the existence of men who are interested in other men. I went to Union College, too. Professor Ludensky was legendary for seducing students. While I won’t tell secrets that aren’t my own, I suggest you have a conversation with Hester, if you have the opportunity, on the various forms that attraction can take. You might find it enlightening. Beneath her prim, high-necked dresses, she’s more world than you’d think.

“Has there ever been a time when I doubted my affection for Raphael?” No.

I can honestly say that Raphael is the love of my life. She is precisely what I would have wished for in an ideal partner and an ideal wife. I did love several people before we met, and thought myself in
love with someone else when I first found myself developing feelings for Raphael. I don’t think you had the dubious pleasure of meeting Kali. Fortunately, she and I were not so deeply embroiled that I could not break things off when I realized I had developed feelings for another.

“If so, how did I handle it?”

To be perfectly blunt? Our conscious minds are bullshitters. This little voice in our head spews supposed logic and moral directives and the demands of a society that says, ‘this must work like so and that must work like so and never the twain shall meet!’ Our feelings don’t lie, though, Cassie. They don’t know how. When I’ve thought one thing and my feelings have told me another, I’ve trusted my feelings over my mind. God created man and woman in his image, and He granted us the capacity to feel. I can believe that God imbued us with feelings that lead us astray. However, the classic list of cardinal sins is a tool for control: “stop being discontent with what you’ve got and surrender to what surrounds you. Do not long for more, do not long for something else, do not have faith in your abilities to achieve beyond your station.” They’re an invention by great people to keep their lessers docile, not a God-given list of what not to do. You can’t help if you feel lust for someone other than Anna and if you don’t at least consider what that attraction signifies, you’ll never know if a happier future awaits you – and make no mistake, the path you are currently on has nothing to do with destiny or the Lord and everything to do with what our mother thinks will best improve your career as she envisions it and will give her beautiful, brilliant grandsons well placed to be president.

Now, sometimes you’re going to feel lust, and you’re going to consider what you’ve already got and think, “no, a few minutes pleasure would never be worth sacrificing the greater pleasures that are already mine.” But sometimes you will meet someone and they will have features, physical and mental, that attract you, that appeal to you as more than a roll in the hay. That is when you have something more to consider.

In this specific instance, it seems to me that you have clear cut options. Your new feelings are for a man, presumably a man in the army. I know you well enough to make the assumption that what you are feeling is not merely a stirring in your pants, for you’re not the sort to be driven to such an obvious fever of anxiety by such a trifle. Further, I can’t imagine that you would be in such a tizzy if you did not either suspect or know for certain that this fellow feels the same way. As such, it appears you have four choices.

1. Discontinue contact with this individual and devote yourself to Anna, leaving the newly discovered feelings unexplored.

2. Break your engagement with Anna and pursue what you will with this new person, with the understanding that no matter your emotions, there is slim potential for a happy future with any man. However, I can tell you from personal experience it is not an entirely hopeless case, depending on the individuals involved.

3. Maintain your engagement with Anna and pursue what you will with this new person. Since you’ve never met this person prior and you indicate you have known them but four months, I again assume it is not someone in your own unit, and might be someone from very far away. Taking into account the vagaries of war, even assuming you both survive (heaven grant it so!) the chances that you will ever come into contact with this man after the war are extremely low. Further, the initial glow of youthful attachment is mostly lust-driven mania. No matter how attractive this individual may currently appear in body and mind, the chances are high that once you have satisfied the initial craving for contact, the apparent perfection will fall away and you will find yourself sharing intimacy with someone hopelessly ordinary or even genuinely unappealing. Should that happen, you have not ruined all with Anna, you have seen the potential relationship through to its unsatisfactory conclusion, learned a few things about yourself, hopefully had some satisfying sex, and sown your
wild oats. For do not doubt – disappointment is by far the most likely outcome of this infatuation. As you say in your letter, you scarce know this individual. How often in your life have you made some new acquaintance and thought ‘aha I have found my new best friend?’ only for the shine to wear off as you grow to know them better? When lust is added atop that, it is even more impossible to determine whether any actual similarity of character and interests exists. Odds are, you will pursue this man, speak with him, share what physical pursuits you might, and grow bored. If you truly cannot stop thinking about him, this option would be my recommendation – get this out of your system, so to speak, and return home to Anna knowing that you have been tested and proved true.

4. Of course, should you pursue the course I describe in option 3, you risk of falling in love with this person while still attached to Anna. It is unlikely, but sometimes first attractions do develop into something deeper. Such was the case with Raphael and I: what began as lust served as an opening to discover that we had far more in common than merely an interest in each other’s bodies. Should that happen, you can either break the engagement then or you can maintain one relationship in public and the other in private. You would be far from the first to do such a thing, especially when the love is of a forbidden nature. Many a man, even among those otherwise good and true, has fallen afoul of loving two in a world where we are told it is only possible to love one. Should you find yourself in this position, you shall have to judge for yourself what is the best course. I cannot tell you.

Congratulations, Cassie, you’re growing up. If it were me? Well, if it were before I met Raphael, I’d say see it through. Now? Never. If Anna is your Raphael, then stay true to her. However, if you have doubts – as you clearly do, or else you’d not be writing me – imagine your life in five years, in ten. What will it be like if you explore this? What will it be like if you don’t? Which vision appeals to you more? Ignore your conscience: it spews lies about fidelity and eternal love; it whispers our national obsession with the unbreakable bond of first attachments and the weaknesses of second ones; it takes on the voice of our mother to insist that you must put the family first and your own desires last; and it screams that there is something unnatural about a man being with another man. I’ve been with men, Cassie. There nothing unnatural about it. It feels every bit as good as being with a woman – some I know would say better – and if our bodies do not object there is no reason why our minds should do so. I cannot conceive of a God who would grant us the capacity to feel such bliss only to punish us for it. Trust your feelings, they’ll lead you right.

Oh, and Cassie? Regardless of what you pick do try to enjoy yourself. It’s alright to have fun sometimes. Not everything has to be a dire moral struggle with endless inescapable consequences. Drowning in your own guilt will not do the least good. You have never been good at making conclusive decisions for yourself; you have never been given the chance to do so. If there was ever a moment to stand by whatever choice you make, this is it. While I cannot say what the outcome of any of the four choices may be, I can say with certainty that should you vacillate and obsess and constantly question, you will ruin all potential for happiness you might find with either Anna or this man.

When you decided to join the army I was so proud of you, not because you pursued a noble goal – though I think you’ve done that as well – but because I could tell from your letters that you had made this choice despite our parent’s approval, not because of it. It appeared to me that enlisting reflected your honest, sincere beliefs and what you wanted. Based on the complaining notes I’ve received from Naomi and Michael, I can see you have not wavered in that conviction though their support has flagged. As you are steadfast in pursuing your duty in the army, you must be steadfast in whatever path you embark upon. If you choose to leave off this new person, you must not see them more. If you choose to break ties with Anna, you must make all effort to explore this new potential you have found. And, should you choose to maintain yourself with Anna while also getting to know the object of your lust, you must accept that you have made a choice for which society will condemn you, accept that you have in some respects sinned, and accept that you have made that decision, knowing the potential ill outcomes and what it says about yourself that you would behave so, and
that you felt it worth it. If you try to walk some fine line of conscientiousness, you will not succeed. If you are to break faith with Anna, do so whole-heartedly, devote yourself entirely, see this second relationship through with all your heart just as you are seeing through your military service with all your heart. Carry through to whatever the end may be, knowing that whether that end be good or bad, you have chosen it in pursuit of the happiness that you deserve, knowing and accepting the potential consequences.

In joining the army, you have dauntlessly accepted the potential for debilitating injury, capture and torture, horrible death at the hands of the enemy or of illness or simply by ill chance, and the grief you will bring your family should something befall you. As courageously face the consequences of the affection you would pursue – that you may find love and companionship, but that you may find ruin, heart break, might have to end your engagement, might end up the black sheep of the family (thank you for that, I’ve earned a respite), may end up disgraced. You enlisted because you felt that what may be gained by joining the army is worth the risk, for the cause is worthy, the work important, the best outcomes for all justify the worst potential disasters that would only affect you and yours. If you can honestly say the same about this man – that the joy that you might gain in his arms is worth all the potential for downfall and disgrace that accompany the worst possible results of a liaison – then you must try, Cassie.

If you cannot say that, then do not waste your time with him.

I hope awaiting this letter has not left you in too much distress; I didn’t receive yours for near three weeks and have devoted four evenings straight to the writing of this reply, I can do nothing more than hope it comes to you quickly and that you have not driven yourself to distraction in the meantime.

Gabriel Novak

James read the entirety of the letter, written in a tiny neat hand over every available scrap of two sheets of paper, once through, twice, thrice. By the time he was forced to set it aside by the call of trumpets and duty, the hour had grown late. He’d not slept at all but he hadn’t a regret in the world. Writing to Gabriel had caused him a great deal of stress but now that it was done and he had the reply he was exceptionally glad that he’d done so. Events had outpaced Gabriel’s reply, but the core message remained intact, the analysis remained cogent, the advice remained sound. Gabriel was right. The only question was whether Dean was worth the risks.

There was no question at all.

He’d not end his engagement with Anna yet. What he had with Dean might, as Gabriel suggested, be the passing fancy of the moment. The only way to determine that was to see things through. When James envisioned his life in the future, he knew – as Bradbury had suggested, as Gabriel posited – that he’d forever harbor regrets if he didn’t learn what might be.

I choose Dean.

Folding the letter, James placed it in the breast pocket of his shirt and buttoned his vest, jacket and great coat over it. Winchester had come in and quietly gone to sleep as James had read, correctly interpreting that James did not wish interruption. As quietly as James could, he poured out the small collection of personal belongings in his haversack and placed within the gifts he’d procured for Dean. That done, he extinguished the lamp, placed his blanket over Sam, and stepped out into the night to begin his patrols.

Since he’d retreated to his tent hours before, a light snow had begun to fall. As he emerged into a strangely bright overcast night he found near an inch accumulated, making a thin layer over low
tents, swirling around men turning in for the night and those marshalling for patrol, sizzling as large, fluffy flakes landed in dying fires. Over so many years, James had sat at home before a snug fire hoping for a white Christmas to set the trees sparkling under thick layers of fluff and give opportunity for sleigh rides after dinner. Now, he hoped it stopped soon. James could only hypothesize how far Dean rode for their meetings, but it must be miles and miles. Should the snow continue and the countryside be heavily coated, would a meeting even be possible? Keen disappointment left James aching, and guilty at feeling so. His disappointment was nothing compared to the potential discomfort Dean would suffer were he to come. Asking Dean to travel in bad weather was unfair even if the snow remained light. It would be best if Dean didn’t leave the camp at Centreville that night, stayed warm and snug at General Singer’s camp, enjoyed whatever festivities the Confederates had planned and called it an early night.

Gone were James’ concerns about Anna, gone were his worries over whether he was making the right choice. No, not gone, for the whispers were still there, but whenever those thoughts began, he considered Gabriel’s words. This was James’ life, James’ choice to make, and he’d chosen to pursue things with Dean, chosen to potentially destroy his relationship with Anna. He could accept that – he had to accept that – he’d learn to accept that. He could no longer claim a moral high ground. What he was doing was wrong. He’d chosen to proceed anyway, which was his choice to make. He wasn’t content with his decision yet, but with time he would be, even if the feelings he and Dean shared proved transient.

The snow fell steadily all night as the air grew colder and colder, the wind more brisk and biting. Only the endless circular treading along his way kept the path fairly clear. James’ overcoat was thoroughly sodden, his hat reduced to a misshapen lump inadequate to cover his dripping locks of hair, his pants wet to the knees, his feet clammy within his cold, damp boots. The pickets stood and shivered, staring through the thickly falling flakes as if they had any hope of seeing more than twenty feet. Though they were supposed to patrol, most huddled close to the scattered fires that cratered the snow, all holiday spirit gone in wet, cold misery. The snow was even and smooth, a foot deep or more, blown into subtle drifts by the light wind. It was impossible to tell if more fell heavily or if it was merely the wind swirling that which had already fallen, but it hardly mattered. White made the night eerily bright, obscured all around, until James felt as if the fortress stood on an island in instead of atop hill.

The approach of morning was hardly recognizable. The sky kept on dark and gloomy. What little ambient light leaked through to the ground reflected endlessly between the dazzling snow and the lowering clouds. The abatis was particularly beautiful, nigh impenetrable, the snow catching in the tangled branches to make a vast wall of beautiful, delicate, pristine white.

*I hope he doesn’t come. I want him to come, I want to see him, but I hope he doesn’t. My childish desires are nothing compared to his well-being and comfort.*

The trumpets couldn’t be heard, the thick-falling flakes dulling all sound. None on duty knew they were done for the night until their replacements arrived, obviously disgruntled to be rolled out of their snug blankets and chill tents to spend Christmas morning soggy and cold. With the depth of snow upon the ground, sneaking away was impossible, but fortunately James did not need to. His regiment had the morning off to celebrate, the sounds of joy audible as scattered, broken bursts of mirth and song, and with his rank there was none to question if James wished to spend his holiday outside the fort. If Dean were able to come, they would have considerably longer together than normal.

*But I hope he doesn’t come.*

The Alexandria Road was empty, the weather and Christmas keeping people indoors. James trudged through deep snow to the clearing, the trip taking far longer and proving far more fatiguing than he’d
have imagined. Despite his late arrival, the clearing was empty, the trees coated in snow glistening in
the faint light, the ground covered in snow in patches of shallow and deep mirroring the density
branches overhead. Shivering, James curled up at the foot of the usual tree and wrapped his body as
best he could in his damp overcoat, brushing off a half-inch of flakes that accumulated on his
shoulders. Yawning, he wondered how long he should wait before accepting that Dean’s absence
and returning to someplace warm. An hour, he thought, give or take. He’d not risked his watch in the
wet weather, so he’d have to estimate, but an hour seemed fair.

His quiet thoughts kept him company. Minutes stretched out indeterminately and James lingered long
after he thought an hour had passed. He did want to spend part of his free morning with his friends in
the army, but if he learned after the fact that Dean had come, he’d feel terrible. James had vowed to
attend. Further, if James should leave now and Dean should arrive, he would see clear evidence in
the snow that James had given up on him. The damage such might do to their delicate understanding
was inestimable, and James wouldn’t take a chance.

He’s not going to come, thank God, but I’ll give him every opportunity nonetheless. It costs me
nothing to sit patiently, and might cost much if I depart too soon. What if…

Cracking branches drew James’ attention to the far side of the clearing. In a shower of snow knocked
loose from the trees and shrubs, a bedraggled Impala plodded heavily into view, her mane matted
with ice, her head drooping miserably, her steps listless. On her back, Dean made a perfect match,
his shoulders slumped, his clothing dark and soaked and dripping. He wore no more than he had
previous weeks, only his thin wool coat, his increasingly tattered and ruined pants, his shapeless hat,
and the sash around his neck. His skin was pale enough to cause James concern, his lips near white,
his freckles standing out stark brown. James’ heart near broke in sympathy. He’d never seen a more
pathetic, drenched, rundown soul. Dean looked up as they broke into the clear and his face broke
into a wan smile when he saw James, cheeks gaining a flush that looked unhealthy compared to his
pallor, green eyes brightening. Unfolding his legs to make room, James held out his arms in
welcome. Throwing Impala’s reins aside with careless confidence, Dean slid from the saddle,
crossed the clearing and collapsed, shivering, into James’ embrace. His skin was cold, clammy, and
wet, his shaking uncontrollable. Alarmed, James used one hand to hastily undo the buttons of his
great coat and, having done so, wrapped the garment around Dean as best he could, clasping them
both in the captured warmth beneath the thick wool. Icy wetness instantly soaked James’ formerly
protected uniform, but James couldn’t bring himself to care. Dean was so cold, so frighteningly cold.
He shouldn’t have come. Dean shuddered closer to James, wrapped arms around him, lay his head
on James’ shoulder, his hat falling to the ground heavily. Cold lips pressed to James’ neck.

“Oh, Dean,” he murmured into Dean’s ear. Wrapping his arms around Dean’s back, cupping his
waist and the back of his neck, James held him close, wishing that by proximity and sheer force of
will he could imbue Dean’s body with warmth and dryness and comfort. “Why did you come? What
if you grow ill?”

“You promised,” Dean mumbled. “You promised you’d be here.”

“I am here, Dean. I’m here.”

“I know. I believed you. But I had to prove it to myself.”

“Please don’t risk yourself so again. The journey here must have been dreadful, and you’ll still have
a long ride back to Centreville. I wish I could provide accommodations for you so that you might rest
and recover, warm yourself and dry your clothing. If you grow sick…”

“Don’t matter,” Dean shrugged, the movement dissolving into a whimpering spasm. “I’ll just get
cold and wet again.”
They sat quietly, as close as they could be, so much further apart than James might wish, until Dean’s shivers faded, his breathing grew regular, and some of the color returned to his cheeks.

“I got you something,” said James, minimizing the amount he had to shift to get his haversack. “Perhaps they’ll help a little.” Reaching within, he withdrew a thick scarf in undyed gray-black wool, made by the Soldier’s Aid Society but not needed due to the casualties in the unit. As Dean lifted his head to stare at James in shocked awe, James wrapped the coarse garment around Dean’s neck. A matching pair of thick mittens were next, James lifting Dean’s hands one at a time to slip the loose wool over his hands, Dean as unresisting as a child. “I was worried you wouldn’t have anything warm for winter.”

“You didn’t have to—”

“I wanted to,” James interrupted more harshly than he intended. “If the rebel army won’t see to equipping you properly, I will help. If you won’t take care of yourself for your own sake, please do so for mine. If you were to sicken and die, I think my heart might break.”

Tears filled Dean’s eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“No…no, Dean,” James sighed and cupped Dean’s cheeks with his hands. “You don’t owe me an apology. You don’t owe me anything. You owe your own care and consideration. Please?”

“All right,” Dean gave him a shy smile, rubbing against James’ hand. James smiled back.

“One more thing.” James pulled the last gift from his bag. It was a small jar wrapped in green and white gingham fabric, tied in place with a long length of matching ribbon. When he’d seen it, he’d thought of Dean’s shirts and the color of Dean’s eyes and hadn’t been able to resist. Dean took the jar, eying it uncertainly. “It’s honey,” James explained. “I wasn’t sure of the supply situation in your army, but I know we’ve had no frivolities among our supplies. Rumor has it that it’s even worse for you – that you get little, and that you’ve not been paid in months so have no ability to supplement meager rations?”

“That’s true,” Dean nodded slowly, and continued in a whisper, “I love honey.”

“I’m glad! I wasn’t sure if you might not prefer jam…”

“No, this is better. I’ve not had any in years, we couldn’t afford it after we moved to Kansas.” With trembling hands, Dean undid the ribbon carefully and slipped it and the cloth into his pocket before removing the jar of the lid. Within, viscous liquid flowed slowly, a deep amber color, and a sweet smell filled the air. Hesitantly, Dean dipped the tip of his pinky into the honey, coating it, pulling away until the thin streamer that connected his hand to the contents of the jar finally snapped. He tasted it with the tip of his tongue, moaned happily and sucked the entire sample in his mouth. James’ body flooded with heat that was only partially due to arousal. More than that, he was awash with affection and the urge to wrap Dean up snuggly and never let him face the perils of the harsh winter weather, the deprivations of his camp, the dangers of war.

Dean happily dipped another finger in to the knuckle and sucked the sweet liquid down with a blissful expression on his face, eyes slipping shut. Unable to resist, James leaned forward as Dean lowered his hand, brushed his lips against Dean’s, the flavor of wood smoke and honey mixing delightfully. Dean moaned and pressed into the kiss, parting his lips, and James slipped his tongue within, feeling hope and warmth and comfort pulse like a beacon of salvation within his gut. Fumbling hands blindly closed the jar of honey between them, and when it was safely sealed James wrapped Dean in his arms once more and pulled them together once more. The kiss ended with a wet smack and Dean sighed contentedly, shivered, and settled against James. His hands trailed over
James’ sides, one arm encircling James’ waist, the other snaking up around James’ neck. James carefully wrap his overcoat around Dean once more, protecting as much tender flesh as possible the cold and the still-falling snow.

“Thank you,” murmured Dean drowsily. “I didn’t get you anything.”

“Yes, you did,” James said. “You came here today. That’s all the gift I could ever ask of you.”

Tension bound Dean’s shoulders and James kneaded with his fingers to ease it, to try to make clear with touch what he feared Dean would disbelief if James used words: that it was alright, that Dean himself was enough. Slowly, the stiffness faded, and Dean shifted minutely until each curve and plane of their bodies melded together perfectly.

“Cas, will you tell me about New York?”

“Sure,” James replied. He trailed a hand soothingly down Dean’s side from shoulder to waist, loving the way Dean relaxed and warmed against him by slow increments.

Is it possible I love him already?

“I’m from Wolcott. It’s far north, near Rochester and Buffalo. We are scant miles from Lake Ontario, and though our summers are wonderfully mild, our winters are harsh and frigid, and we are continually plagued by storms like this one. A few years ago so much snow fell in a day that when it stopped we could not open the doors and had to climb out through the second floor. Is weather like today common here?” Dean shook his head slightly. “The area is very beautiful, the soil fertile. The hills and valleys are covered in orchards and the entire area smells like apples all fall long. If we were at my home right now, there would be a blazing fire of sweet wood and we’d have all the heated spiced cider we could drink.”

“That would taste great with the honey,” Dean mumbled, words slurring together.

“I wish you could see the Finger Lakes. As if some giant hand tore the land apart, the lakes are long and thin and tremendously deep, and streams and rivers run along the heights surrounding them to tumble down in gullies and waterfalls. I’ve traveled much of the eastern seaboard and done a tour of Europe and I’ve never seen anything so beautiful as the sites within a days’ travel from my home.” Dean’s breathing had evened out and slowed, the hand he had gripped at James’ waist fell limply away. “I’d like to show it to you someday.” He paused, but Dean didn’t reply. “Would you tell me about Kansas, Dean?”

Dean shifted against him but the silence continued, and James smiled, letting his surprisingly profound affection suffuse him. Dean would never see the doting look on his face; he was lost in sleep. James’ brushed a kiss over his temple, used the flap of his overcoat to block the light from Dean’s eyes, and let Dean rest.

I think it might be possible. I think it might be true. I think I might love him.

Interlude

Singer, December 14th, 1861

Would do you do me a favor and read the following to my son, if he’s still with you?

Dean: Merry Christmas. Hope the last year has treated you well. I’ve a man for you to be on the lookout for: A.Z. Blaine. He is a Union general and very “in” Washington circles, often in the
company of Andrea Kormos. If you’re still friends with that good-for-nothing Lafitte, he might like to know that his bitch has moved on. You know how she is involved in Mary’s death; I can only guess how Blaine is involved. If by some miracle you do learn something useful, Singer knows how to get a message to me, but don’t waste my time on bullshit, son.

Have you heard anything about your brother? Have you even tried? I’ve had no word of you these six months. Boy, if I find out you’ve deserted I’ll have your skin for a new suit. If you can’t do me proud even this once, you better pray I never lay hands on your sorry ass again, because I promise you’ll live to regret it.

And Singer? If he’s gone, if you know how to reach him, tell him to not bother coming back. If he can’t even cut it in the army, he’s no use anywhere, just like I’ve always thought.

Your Obedient Servant, Jno Winchester

Chapter End Notes

...and that's 1861!

On to 1862!! *rubs hands together excitedly*
Chapter title: "All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight" is a poem written in late 1861. You can read the poem [here](#); afterwards it was set to music, which you can hear [here](#). It's a sad song that draws attention to the fact that, even early in the war, "All Quiet" ignored the deaths of many innocent men, killed by illness, the cold, or stray encounters with the enemy. (The Potomac is the river that flows by Washington DC and divides Maryland from Virginia, and thus was the border between the loyal and disloyal states - but the North occupied both sides around Washington; Fort Lyon on the Virginia side of the river).

A bit of talk about race:
During the 19th century, the US was predominately composed of white and black people. In the army, this was even more pronounced, as in 1861 it was illegal for a black man to enlist or serve. In reality, no one like Henriksen could have existed. The only black men who joined the army were those with pale enough skin to pass for white.

People of other ethnicities and races did live in the country, though, and some groups we no longer consider minorities were then considered to be. For example, the Irish were seen as undesirable because of a strong backlash against immigrants, because the Irish were considered backwater, because they were Catholic, and for other reasons. Likewise, German immigrants were discriminated against, in part because most were pushed from Germany after participating in a failed liberal revolution there in the 1840s - needless to say, conservatives at the time didn't appreciate that. During the 1840s and 1850s, an entire political party came into existence whose platform was basically "we hate immigrants!" Of course, the Irish and Germans were still white. Many Irish and German soldiers served in the army.

Jews began to immigrate the United States during colonial times and by the 1860s made a noticeable minority both in the north in the south, primarily in cities. They were subject to all the stereotypes you'd expect, carrying over from the anti-semitism of Europe - so they were seen as undesirable, money-grubbing heathens. Around 10,000 Jews fought for the Union, and again, though they were subject to much stereotyping, they were able to serve and even hold rank (there's a famous order from Ulysses Grant ordering the expulsion of all Jews from his camp - his purpose was to deal with corruption among the sutlers and those trading cotton in recaptured Confederate territory, but instead of targeting THEM, he blamed all the problems on Jews and had them removed. He apologized later...)

Native Americans served on both sides of the war, often in the futile hope that helping would turn into a chance for them to reclaim territory stolen by the US Government. The most famous Native to serve in the army was Ely Parker, who achieved the rank of general and served on Ulysses Grant's personal staff; after the war, when Grant was elected president he gave Parker position in his government, and made tentative, useless attempts to improve relations with natives.

Hispanic people also served on both sides, especially people of Mexican descent, who lived in the Confederate territory in Texas and in the Union territory in California. Many
others were "adventurers" or even mercenaries who came from the Caribbean, Central and South America specifically to fight. David Farragut, one of the most famous naval officers of the entire war, is the best known Hispanic hero of the war, but nearly 10,000 people of Spanish descent fought.

A small number of Asians fought as well. Immigration from Asia was still slight then, but many men had come from China to build the railroads; most settled in California. Smaller populations lived in eastern cities, especially New York. Fewer than a hundred people of Asian descent fought for the armies, mostly for the Union, but again, they could have rank (see this picture, of a corporal).

In 1863, the Union began actively recruiting black men. Black regiments were formed, but they were mostly staffed by white officers. A full discussion of black soldiers in the Civil War could fill a book, but by the end of the war 175 regiments of African American troops were recruited - more than 150,000 men, mostly on garrison duty (to "free up" white soldiers, who were perceived as more capable and reliable).

...I hate talking about racism, sigh. But yeah. So, the cast of this story is a bit on the diverse side...but mostly possible. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 11: All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight

Dear Gabriel, December 26th, 1861

I scarce know where to begin drafting my reply. Thank you, Gabe: for taking my letter seriously, for seeing to the heart of the matter, for writing me so lengthy a reply with such honest sincerity. Your hypothesis that I was in an agony of anxiety after sending it was correct; I was afraid what would happen if anyone save you saw it, afraid of what you’d think of me when you read it; afraid I’d find myself estranged from the only family member I truly feel to be a kindred spirit. I never dreamed you’d shared my problem so completely, that we were indeed so much of a kind.

Unsurprisingly, in the five weeks between when I sent my letter and received your reply, events outpaced the post. Mischance meant I did not see D. for three weeks, but we met again two weeks before I received your reply and we reached an understanding. However it was, as you accurately predicted, marred by my guilt and worry. Your letter has entirely set that to rest. Not only did your deeper understanding and wider experience expand my knowledge and help me understand that I am not a monster for what the thoughts and feelings I am experiencing, but even when your words echoed things I had already thought it was nonetheless reassuring to read it set in black and white. Knowing that you will accept me regardless of the outcome helps me to accept myself regardless of the outcome, or so I believe. I know not, but I say again: thank you. I have been much more at peace the last two days.

I will not be breaking my engagement to Anna at this time. Your assumptions about my paramour are quite correct – they are in the army, they are from afar, and my chances of seeing them again once the war ends are non-existent unless we seek each other out. Despite that, they seem as infatuated as I, which is an unceasing source of wonder to me. I can honestly say that the few hours we have contrived to spend together have been among the most glorious, the most splendid, the most gratifying of my life.
I’m happy, Gabe. I’m happy in a way I’d scarce imagined, happy in a way that makes times in the past I’ve thought myself well pleased seem pale and flat by comparison.

Elsewise, things here are as they have been for months. We man Fort Lyon day and night with never the least sign of enemy activity in the territory surrounding us. General Elkins and Hannah seem very happy. Elkins’ replacement, Colonel Crowley, is a challenging man to work with and I live for the day when he achieves the promotion to Brigadier he clearly seeks and troubles us no more. Among your acquaintance here, all are perfectly well save Henriksen, who is troubled only by the same afflictions that have plagued him since he achieved his freedom – an excess of frustration, the judgement of closed minds, the exclusionary principals of those who could do so much to help should they but choose to, and the curse of being an able, intelligent man singled out as different by the inescapable burden of his flesh. The Colonel’s racism knows no bounds, and the only position he has deemed Henriksen fit to hold is that of steward of our local contraband camp. Speaking of which – know you any resources available to our freed colored men and women that might be of use to Henriksen in seeing to their care? And is there any way I might aid you as you engage in similar tasks in Kentucky? Anything I might send you? I’m at your service, Gabriel.

Do tell me how go your efforts and how Raphael does. I love you, brother.

J.C. Novak

Folding and sealing the note to Gabriel, James read the letter he’d received from his brother one last time, immersed itself in Gabriel’s heartening advice and stunning confidence in him, and then consigned it to the flames as he’d been requested to. Managing without the reassurance in every word would be difficult, but the dangers of the letter being found on his person were too great.

“You never answered my question two weeks ago,” James tentatively said as Dean came to sit beside him at the base of the familiar tree, bodies separated by a tree root, each facing different directions as they’d done the first night they sat together, the first night they found pleasure together.

“Which one?” asked Dean.

“You seem quite accepting of the manner in which I have taken the lead when we are intimate,” James explained. “Is that accurate?”

“Yeah...yeah, you could say that, Cas,” Dean smiled wryly, drawling voice muffled by the scarf wrapped snug under his chin. A few days warmth had melted the Christmas snow, but the previous day had brought an ice storm that coated every surface in shimmering crystals, so fragile in appearance James thought he might shatter anything he touched. Dean reached between them and took James’ hand, rough wool mittens abrasive against James cold, bare skin. “I mean, it’s damn embarrassing to say outright…but when we are…together…it, uh, it calms me down? I know you’ve got me, that everything is okay.”

“Marvelous,” murmured James. Dean blushed and looked away. “That is what I would hope for, because I do have you Dean – your enjoyment is of paramount concern to me. However, I cannot be sure that everything will be alright because I don’t know what you are comfortable with and what you aren’t comfortable with. That worries me greatly. Our rapport is built on mutual trust. If I were to accidentally suggest – or, worse, unknowingly initiate – some activity you find upsetting or humiliating or unpleasant, no matter how inadvertent my misstep, that trust would be damaged. Things you’ve said and reactions you’ve had lead me to believe that others have treated you in ways that did not bring you pleasure, and I never wish to replicate experiences the memory of which bring you shame and unhappiness. Thus, though I know I’m asking a lot, I hoped you would be willing to speak with me openly on these matters, so I might ensure I do not evoke a painful past. Do you think
you can do that?”

“Yeah, uh…”

There was an uncomfortably long pause that had James shifting against the hard ground. Trying to determine what was appropriate to say when he could not see Dean’s face made him tense and jittery, and unable to stand it longer, James shifted to sit cross-legged on the ground opposite the other man.

“Um…there was this one time…”

A grimace made Dean’s alluring lips pronounced and pouty, and James resisted the urge to kiss the distress off that handsome face, to do whatever he must to destroy the past injury that clouded over lovely green eyes.

“Honestly, Cas?” Dean said to the ground, chewing at his chapped lower lip. His mittened hand trembled in James’ grip.

“Always, Dean, please,” James said. Gently, James pulled the mitten from Dean’s hand and set it aside, curled his hand around the warm fingers, guided Dean forward to rest their joined grips over James’ heart.

“Don’t think I can, Cas,” whispered Dean. “Don’t think I can say…”

James waited patiently, but no further admissions were forthcoming. “Why not?” he asked gently.

“Because…” Dean trailed off, took a deep breath, huffed it out in a cloud of mist. “I can’t.” Licking his lips, Dean opened his mouth again, shut it again, shuddered. “I just can’t.”

“Hey,” murmured James. Leaving Dean’s hand pressed to his heart, James inched forward, wrapped his arms loosely around Dean’s shoulders, peered at him earnestly with as kindly an expression as he could muster. Dean flinched but didn’t shift away from the touch, and James didn’t move away. “It’s okay. You don’t have to.” Some of the tension drained from Dean, and he flicked his eyes up, met James’ for an instant, looked away again. “But are able to tell me why this is so difficult for you?”

Hesitating, Dean appeared to argue with himself before he finally sighed and met James’ steady gaze.

“I don’t want you to know,” muttered Dean. “I don’t want you to look at me different. You would, if you knew, you wouldn’t think I’m…I mean…” Dean grunted and tried again. “It don’t matter anyway. If it’s you, Cas, it’d be different. You don’t think I’m…you don’t see me like…”

There was a desperate plea in Dean’s hurt expression, impossible to comprehend since Dean couldn’t bring himself to finish a single sentence. Even without understanding the cause, Dean’s pain was unmistakable, shame bringing tears to his eyes.

Regardless of all I do not know, I must find a way to ease him. I cannot press him further without being cruel.

Shifting to bring them still closer together, James dragged an arm down Dean’s back to around his waist, pulled an unresisting Dean against him as Dean’s fingers grasped weakly at the buttons over James’ heart, tucking that hand between their bodies as the space between them closed. With shocking meekness, Dean lay his head on James’ shoulder, accept as James’ tossed his hat aside and
combed fingers through his hair. Shoulders shaking, Dean buried his face against the crook of James’ neck and sniffled.

“Fuck,” muttered Dean. “No, I’m not gonna do this, I’m not...damn it, Cas...”

“Oh, Dean,” James whispered against Dean’s temple, massaging Dean’s back through his uniform. Dean shuddered and bit back a sob. “Who did this to you? How have you been abused?”

“Cas—” Dean tensed against him and tried to pull away.

“No – no, that was a rhetorical question, I should not have spoken.” The soothing reply and James’ gentle touches eased Dean once more. “It’s alright. If you cannot, you cannot. I will not ask you again, though I hope, someday, you will know me well enough to feel you can speak without fearing that your words will alter how I feel about you.”

Trembling as he forcefully repressed his tears, Dean made no reply. Holding him close, offering silent comfort, James turned over what little he knew of Dean, considered the hints he’d observed in Dean’s behavior, especially the little signs of what made Dean uncomfortable while they were engaged sexually, what pleasured him, what surprised him.

Dean thought himself dysfunctional for liking men, believed that is not something other men feel. No man had ever touched him as I had, though his words indicate clearly that he has been with others. Why, wondered Dean in their prior interactions, would anyone wish to acknowledge his masculinity? As if the men he was with in the past had no actual interest in being with their own gender, merely used Dean’s body as his willingness and their opportunity allowed.

The thought made James sick and he swallowed a wave of nausea to think that Dean’s prior liaisons were built on the fundamental premise that Dean’s own feelings were irrelevant, that his needs did not matter. To imagine Dean’s past thus was to suggest that those who had partnered with Dean before considered him virtually invisible as a man, as a person, as a human; that they perceived Dean merely an object to be used for physical gratification and then discarded. Why had Dean ever agreed to such? Could he truly think himself worth so little? Such was always how James had imagined slave owners must perceive their “property” to treat thinking, feeling men and women and children so callously.

Was Dean a prostitute?

James pushed the question away. It could not be asked, and wondering made no difference. Even were he, it would not change James’ feelings one iota.

The implication, surely, is that the men in Dean’s past preferred to think of him as a woman. What use might a man make of another man to maintain such a fantasy? Forbid him to talk, so as not to hear his deep voice. Deny touches to any part of his body that would remind them of the gender of his partner, and thus neglect his cock, his breasts, his lips. Perhaps force him to the appearance of a woman – he is losing his boyishness now but I imagine scarcely a year ago he could have passed for beautiful far more easily than for handsome. They might have asked him to don a dress, to apply rouge. It seems outlandish yet it is possible, right?

James could scarce imagine how else a man might pretend Dean was other than what he was. There must be something to compensate for Dean’s lack of curves and breasts, the impossibility of making love to Dean as a man would make love to a woman. The image of Dean thus bedecked in finery was lovely, but James couldn’t picture Dean thus without imagining his eyes tinged with sadness and mortification. There was nothing about such a vision that James found appealing on a sexual level. He had no desire to see Dean feminized, no matter how accentuated powders and paints might make
his pink lips or wide beautiful eyes. Dean’s masculinity, his strength, his flat chest and powerful legs
and scruffy cheeks and hard cock were the origin of all his physical temptations.

_Supposing I am right, what can I do to ensure his happiness? I’ve no desire to see him clothed in
such a manner. However, there must have been some form of sexual activity associated with this.
The self-same men who didn’t wish to use their hands to pleasure Dean must have had no such
qualms allowing him to touch them. I imagine mouths must also have been involved. I had hoped…I
cannot proceed without knowing if such will be too upsetting for him to contemplate._

“I understand and appreciate that some things are too sensitive and too painful to discuss,” James said
at length. “If I suggest things I would like to try, will you at least be able to indicate if they are alright
with you?”

“For you, Cas…anything you want of me is fine,” said Dean, defeated, slumping against James’
chest. “Anything.”

“Look at me, Dean,” suggested James, taking his hand from the back of Dean’s head. With
reluctance, Dean lifted his head from James’ shoulder and their eyes met. There was fear in Dean’s
eyes, fear James would do anything to quell and sooth. “That’s obviously untrue. It would not be
impossible for you to speak of if there were not experiences you did not wish repeated, if there were
not things you dread me learning of. I’ll not risk replicating the painful relationships of your past. I’m
not asking you to bare your soul, Dean, but I need you to be candid with me.”

There was a long pause during which Dean’s scowl grew more and more pronounced. “I’ll try,” he
grunted with dubious acceptance. “What’s the big deal, Cas? What did you want to try that has you
so nervous?”

James’ heart thumped loudly. _What if he says no? What if my merely asking the questions proves as
damaging as if I’d demanded he do as I request? What if…stop. There is only one way to know._

“I want your lips around my cock,” said James in a rush.

“Oh.” Dean’s scowl fell away. “Oh.” He blinked in surprise, breaking slowly into a smirk. “That’d
be fine. That’d be great.”

With a relieved sigh, all of James’ tension fell away even as his thoughts flooded with all the many
other things he wondered about, all the other things he’d thought of during his long, lonely nights
walking rounds, all the other things he yearned to try.

_Would he let me bind his hands? Would he let me blind fold him? Gag him? Would he permit me to
bite him, to suck bruises into his flesh, to nip his lip bloody? When he speaks ill of himself, would he
let me punish him, spank him, deny him, until he learns to not even think such things? I’ve given up
understanding why I want these things. There is no reason, I simply want. It must be enough that,
with him, from him, these are things I crave though they’ve never once crossed my mind as regards
Anna. It must be enough that I am aware of my desires, and that I will only indulge them if he
consents. So long as we speak of it, so long as he agrees, I must believe that no matter how
irrational and wrong these desires appear, I have done nothing wrong. I will not do myself or him
the injustice of pretending I do not want these things. I cannot deny my feelings._

“I want to hold your head still while I thrust into your mouth,” James clarified. “I want…” Warmth
flooded James’ cheeks, his cock thickened at the mere thought of attempting that which had haunted
his dreams. Pressed close together as they were, there was no way that Dean could be unaware of
James hardness. “I want to feel you, hot and wet, want to know you want me, want to come down
your throat. I want to feel your anticipation grow as I make you wait for gratification until I’m done
and then I want to reward you as you deserve.” Dean made no answer, did not acknowledge James’ erection. Instead, Dean nodded slowly and shifted away, shrugged off James’ embrace. For an instant, James felt a flash of concern and his arousal flagged, but then Dean rolled backwards onto his knees. Settling with his back ramrod straight, he licked his lips and looked an unmistakable challenge at James.

This is a dream.

Shakily, James rose to his feet and stood before Dean. Peering down the smooth plain made by his buttoned up great coat, James took in the sizeable bulge in his pants, the lust darkening Dean’s gaze, the misty clouds that came quick and thick with each of Dean’s rapid breaths.

We were holding each other close, warm and snug. In my fatigue I fell asleep and this is a dream.

Confident hands reached beneath the wool of James’ coat, pushed aside the flaps of his jacket and undid the buttons on his pants. James’ cock sprang free and he cringed involuntarily as the frigid air hit his bared flesh. One of Dean’s hand took a hold of him, warmed him, protected him, and sent a very different, far more welcome shiver through his body, while the other curled around James’ behind and urged him closer to Dean. As James continued to stare, breaths coming quickly, he edged closer to Dean until the flushed tip of James’ cock pressed against Dean’s pink, cold-roughened lips. They froze like that for a moment, James needing all his self-restraint to refrain from pushing forward both to learn what pleasures awaited and to be protected from the aching cold. Dean mouthed gently over the tip of James’ cock and a groan ripped from James at the astonishing feeling. Dean’s lips curled into a smile, his gaze, thick with desire, turned towards James’, and silently Dean dared James to take what he wanted.

Patience is a virtue, patience is a virtue, patience is a virtue...

...not that what we are doing is particularly virtuous.

Drawing back, Dean removed his lips and an unhappy moan was only quelled because Dean’s tongue flicked out and licked up the bead of early release that leaked from James, teasing at his slit, causing rippling pleasure to stutter James’ breathing and warm his blood. A pleased noise purred in Dean’s throat; the hot, wet, spectacular feeling of Dean’s tongue coaxed more liquid from James’ body. Holding James’ cock steady with one hand, dropping the other to his lap, Dean closed his lips over the tip and sucked.

“Oh my God,” groaned James, toes curling his boots. Dean’s hand felt good clasping the base of his cock – it felt very good – but this was amazing, so different than the dry, chill touch, hot and wet, and the pressure placed when Dean lapped at him, sucked him in, was like nothing James had come close to imagining. It was fabulous.

“Don’t touch yourself, Dean,” James panted as Dean slowly leaned forward further and drew the entire head of James’ cock into his mouth. Weak-kneed, James threw his head back, cold air burning his throat with every desperate inhalation. No wonder his friends at Union had happily paid the local loose women five dollars for a go. Dean’s mouth felt unspeakably good. “Put your hands on my hips.” Obediently, Dean placed his hands loosely on James’ sides as he pulled back, exposing wet flesh to the stinging freeze, and then took more of James into his mouth. “I’ll take care of you, I promise.” James dropped his hands to Dean’s head, one clutching at Dean’s scalp through his hair, the other cradling the base of Dean’s skull, tangling in the long strands curled at Dean’s neck. “You shan’t have to wait long.” James breathed, experimentally rolling his hips forward. Dean didn’t give him the least resistance, he sank into Dean’s mouth until the head of his cock bumped something solid and he groaned “Amazing.” Dean swallowed hard and words evaporated from James’ mind, replaced with light as bright as pristine fresh snow and pleasure that destroyed every trace of the
cold. “God, Dean...” Tensing his hands behind Dean’s head, James drew back, sank in again. “Damn, this feels...” There was no word for how it felt, no description for the sensations created by the brush of sensitive flesh over Dean’s tongue, by the bump of his tip against Dean’s cheek, by the pressure as Dean swallowed down the drops that leaked from James.

Pulling his hips back, James withdrew slightly, pushed in again. Friction burned bliss through his cock, through his blood, to the tips of his fingers, reverberated through his body and multiplied as he drew back and thrust in again a more forcefully. Dean stopped trying to help, his jaw going slack, his still-open eyes going vague, desire evident in every feature.

*What if I’m misunderstanding? What if I’m projecting my own desires on to him?*

“Dean, you must tell me if you are unhappy – squeeze my leg, since you cannot speak, understood?”

Gaze focusing once more, Dean nodded, his teeth brushing James’ cock. James hissed at the rough contact and his desire burgeoned, erupted, eroded his self-control. Holding eye contact with Dean, James began to thrust in and out in earnest, delighting in every wonderful feeling, losing himself in the rhythm of withdrawing until only the tip was between Dean’s lips, pushing back in until he bumped the solid back of Dean’s mouth. The challenge remained in Dean’s eyes at first, but as James held him still and seized what he’d fantasized about for weeks, desire and abstraction dissolved the firmness of Dean’s gaze. The combination of physical ecstasy and the emotional satisfaction occasioned by Dean’s willingness drove James wild. He clutched Dean’s head, thrust harder, pushed deeper, groaned as Dean pliantly accepted it all. The world faded away; there was nothing but heat and wetness and pleasure, nothing but the glorious wonder of Dean’s obedience, nothing but a faint sound that won through the blood rushing in James’ ears, a desperate whine in the back of Dean’s throat that grew louder each time James was deepest in Dean’s mouth. The sound excited no concern. Dean’s loose grip on James’ hips spoke louder, the way Dean allowed James to manhandle his head made it clear any distress Dean felt was related to arousal and desire, not unhappiness.

“Dean,” he gasped. Relaxing his grip on Dean’s head, James swayed back, a lingering thread of rational thought suggesting that should he release in Dean’s throat, Dean would choke. He was too close, though. With a moan, rapture so powerful it forced tears from James’ eyes shattered him, semen burst over Dean’s tongue and leaked from the corners of Dean’s mouth as James urgently thrust through his climax. Freed from James’ strong grasp, Dean nonetheless sucked James in, swallowed a renewed spurt of release as James moaned in helpless pleasure. Relentless, Dean coaxed more and more from him until James was gasping, trembling, on the verge of falling. “De...De...an...stop...”

With a disgruntled grunt, Dean obeyed, drew back, and James’ softening cock drooped wetly and smeared saliva and release over the wool of his pants. Even that contact was too intense, and James collapsed to his knees sobbing with pleasure. Instantly, Dean’s arms were around him, supporting him, strengthening him.

“You ‘lright?” Dean’s voice was low, gruff, raspy in James’ ears. Unable to find the words to answer as aftershocks of pleasure continued to rock through him, James pressed his face into the curve of Dean’s neck, dampening his skin and scarf with tears. “Castiel?” Fumbling, James used a limp hand and found the crotch of Dean’s pants, pressing his palm against Dean’s erection through the fabric. Dean mouthed a moan against the side of James’ head.

“Make you feel so good, Dean,” James said brokenly. “Going to...I am...God...I feel good, so amazing, you’re so amazing.” Curling his other hand around Dean’s back, James kneaded hard, earned another groan.
“Cas, was that...” Dean said in wonder, “...was that your first time?”

“You’re my first time, Dean,” James managed. Twisting in Dean’s embrace, James slumped against the tree and dragged Dean with him. “All of this is my first time.” With gentle nudges and shoves, James adjusted them both to the positions he wanted, James leaning back against the tree with his legs spread wide, Dean nestled between, pressed to James’ chest.

“Wait,” stammered Dean. “You mean you’re a virgin?”

“Not anymore.” James gave Dean a wicked grin, slipped his hand into Dean’s pants and wrapped his hand around Dean’s length gently. “Unbutton my coat, will you?” Hands trembling, Dean obeyed as James loosely stroked him. Dean’s breathing grew increasingly uneven. When Dean was done, James wrapped the loose flaps around Dean to keep him warm and tugged the waist of Dean’s pants down, freeing Dean’s cock. “Wrap your arms around my neck.” Dean did so, tucking his face against James’ neck, panting, breath making a damp, clammy place on James’ flesh. “Feel good?”

“ ‘m so hard for you, Cas,” mumbled Dean, relaxing into the embrace even as his hips hitched into James’ hand with each stroke. “You really’d no idea what you do to me, didya? Cause I’m your first...I’m your first...” Dean trailed off with a moan. James tightened his grip, stroked faster.

“Keep talking,” James encouraged. He was still buzzed from his orgasmic high, excited, breathless, hot.

“Everythin’s so good when I’m with you,” Dean continued, pressing closer to James, rubbing their chests together in time to James’ stroke. James’ thoughts filled with half-formed images of things he wanted. Naked flesh on naked flesh, bodies rutting together, cocks brushing, God, yes, that would be fantastic, someday – someday I will get to experience him that way, I will. It won’t always be winter. It won’t always be war. “Close, ‘ready close.” Grinning, James stopped abruptly and drew his hand away. Dean moaned pitifully, his hips lifting to chase James’ grip but finding nothing but air. “What’re you...?!”

“Making you feel fantastic,” said James soothingly. “Can’t make it too easy, right?”

“Son of a bitch,” muttered Dean, annoyed, twitching as he settled back to the ground.

“You haven’t even met my mother yet,” James quipped. Dean snorted. “She can be frustrating at times.”

“Yet? What, you plannin’ to take me to meet the family?” Dean asked incredulously.

“That would be awkward,” acknowledged James. “Don’t worry, you’re missing little. Perhaps you may get to meet my brother, though, if you’d like.”

“Only seems fair,” Dean grinned. “You know mine.”

“Someday, Dean,” James whispered, promising so much more than just a chance for Dean to meet Gabriel. “Someday.”

With a gentle hand, James traced the line of Dean’s face, kissing him softly, waiting for him to calm. Dean fidgeted, his body incrementally calming, his breathing slowed, evened, no longer left James’ skin damp. James could no longer feel Dean’s heart pounding. Satisfied that Dean was no longer on the verge of climax, James rearranged his great coat to ensure they were protected, to create a pocket of warm air between their bodies, and wrapped his hand Dean’s cock again. Loosely, gently, he stroked. Dean slumped against him with a satisfied sigh and didn’t protest as James maintained a slow, steady caress over his length. Minutes passed without James picking up his pace or changing
his stroke, until Dean whimpered into his neck, until once again Dean’s hips strove to urge James’
faster, until Dean’s body trembled.

“Do I need to tell you not to move?” James scolded. Dean moaned softly but stilled. “Eagerness
won’t change my mind. You should know by now that I’ll give you exactly how much I decide.” To
emphasize the point, James released his grip, ran a single finger teasingly up and down Dean’s shaft.
“But I suppose we’re both still learning.”

“Cas...”

“Yes, Dean?”

“More, please,” he implored. Arousal surged through James.

“Will you climax if I do?” countered James.

“Not if you don’t want me to.”

“Perfect, Dean,” James whispered. He shuddered, the words as intoxicating as fine whiskey. “Tell
me when you’re close.” Wrapping his hand around Dean’s cock, he stroked firmly, relishing Dean’s
relieved moan. Dean’s arms tightened around James’ neck, he painted open-mouthed kisses over
James’ neck, but he kept his hips still, allowed James to set the pace and determine how much he
was permitted to have.

It didn’t take long. Gripping Dean tightly, James rubbed top to bottom, bottom to top, over and over
again until Dean gasped vocally and clung to him as to a life raft. Despite James’ injunction that
Dean be still, despite the trembling that had Dean shaking head to toe, he couldn’t entirely restrain
himself; he rutted his butt back against James’ thigh, scooping forward into James’ grip on each
down stroke. It was obvious Dean was doing the best he could, so James refrained from scolding
him, using his off-hand to trail a calming counterpoint down Dean’s spine, stark contrast to the
urgency with which he saw to Dean’s cock.

“Cas, Cas,” panted Dean. “I’m goin’ to...goin’ to...”

“Do you think I should let you?” teased James, not easing his pace.

Dean moaned. “No...no...not yet...”

...and that was easily the most enticing, arousing thing James had ever heard.

“Tell me to stop, then.”

“Stop, Cas!”

James obeyed instantly, snatching his hand away, and Dean groaned, hips bucking up involuntarily.
Settling heavily to the ground, Dean clutched desperately at James, choked back sobs against James’
neck.

“Give me your hand, Dean,” he whispered. Shaking, Dean obeyed, and James guided Dean’s palm
to James’ crotch, where the flap of his pants was yet unbuttoned and his second erection was
thickening. Spasms yet wracked Dean’s body, his cock twitching, his hips trembling with restraint;
he gasped and moaned as James curled their joined hands around his aching flesh. “Maybe, as you
say, I have no idea the effect I have on you, but I want to learn. Do you feel this? This is the effect
you have on me. Your strength, your restraint, your self-denial...I never thought I’d be driven to
distraction by such things, but when I’m with? God, everything is different when I’m with you, it’s
unreal. Every sound you make, the way your body moves against mine, the heat of your breath on my neck, the hardness of your cock against my palm – all of you, Dean, I think every piece of you is wonderful.”

“Nothin’ special,” Dean mumbled, shaking his head in denial.

With a smile, James rolled his eyes. “I was going to let you finish next time, but when you say things like that…”

“But…”

“Do you think I’m special?”

“‘Course,” Dean sounded utterly shocked that James could even ask the question.

“Why should I care for someone ordinary, then?” James mused. “Because don’t doubt - never doubt – that I care about you, Dean.” Before Dean could form a coherent answer, James wrapped his thumb and forefinger around the head of Dean’s cock, made a tight ring, teased up and down, up and down, over soft-yet-hard ridge and the tip. Dean gasped. “You’ve more experience than I, so perhaps you can tell me – how many people would trust me as you do?” Hooking a finger around Dean’s shaft, James lengthened the slight stroke, using his thumb to play with Dean’s leaking slit. “How many people would forestall current pleasure for the promise of greater later?” Ever so lightly, James dragged a single nail from Dean’s tip down to the base of his cock, loosely grasped Dean’s sacks, caressing them. The groan thus elicited surprised him; James had never interacted much with his own balls, but the reaction was enthusiastically positive and James continued, kneading and rubbing the rough, wrinkled flesh. “I’ve never felt this way with anyone but you, never been hard like this for anyone but you. No one else would be this good for me, Dean.” Dean groaned again. James’ cock bucked against Dean’s hand, and the groan shattered into desperate pants.

“Please, Cas,” pleaded Dean.

“Please what, Dean?”

“Touch my cock, Cas. I need you!”

“Even though you know I’m not going to let you climax yet?”

“Yes!”

James groaned, his cock thickened, and he instantly obliged Dean, gripping him firmly and stroking hard and fast. Dean sobbed inarticulate grateful words into James’ neck, palm awkwardly matching James’ pace and stroking against James’ growing erection.

“Tell me when I should stop, Dean,” James reminded him. Dean nodded emphatically, shaking loose the coat covering them, and James stopped long enough to replace it, leaving his arm wrapped snugly around Dean, **perfect** Dean, **gorgeous** Dean, writhing and crying bliss against James’ body.

“Not yet,” gasped Dean, “please don’t stop yet, I love your hand, Cas, love that you touch me, so good, so damn good…”

“I trust you, Dean,” James murmured in his ear. His breathing quickened and he resumed his attentions. His pulse matching the pace he set, the pace Dean mimicked as he rubbed at James. “I trust you to tell me when you’re close,” he continued encouragingly. “Trust you to tell me before you climax.” Trembling fingers clutched at James’ hard length. James swallowed a moan and rewarded Dean by stroking against him more insistently, harder, faster. “Trust you with me, as you trust me
with you.”

“Do...I do,” Dean groaned. “Trust you too. Damn close, Cas...so damn...”

“Should I...?”

“No!” Dean gasped desperately. “I can...I can take more, I want more, please, please...”

The temptation to threaten, to warn Dean of the consequences should he misjudge, whispered through James’ thoughts, but he restrained himself.

“Of course you can, Dean,” he said, switching to a stronger grip, a slower stroke, taking the time to tease the places he was learning were Dean’s most sensitive.

And Dean did, spectacularly, moaning with desperation as he hovered on the edge of release but held himself back, too far gone to do more than paw at James clumsily. Combined the sounds Dean made, the feel of Dean pressing urgently against him, the weight of Dean’s cock in his hand, the wetness of Dean’s early release leaking down his length, even Dean’s feeble touches were enough to edge James close to his own climax. Periodic whispers spurred James on, “don’t stop, feels so good, don’t stop” muffled against his neck with fervent gasps. There was no knowing how long passed; the feelings were too intense, watching Dean too magical, listening to him too arousing.

“Love making you feel good,” James managed. Dean moaned, his hips once more subtly matching James’ ever-changing pace, pressing forward into James’ hand, back against his leg.

“Don’t stop...don’t...no, yes, you have to...I’m going to...stop, Cas, please stop,” gasped Dean. It was a wrench to pull his hand away, left James gasping and moaning nearly as helplessly as Dean, who sobbed and plead brokenly, “no, don’t, no please let me, I’m so close, so close, so...so...” The words gagged to silence in Dean’s throat and his hips stuttered at the air. For a moment James thought Dean might climax even though he was no longer being touched, but with a shuddering gasp Dean forced himself still and collapsed limply against James, spluttering on desperate breaths.

Gentle kisses along Dean’s forehead and tear-streaked cheek offered comfort, support, affection. James slipped his hand beneath Dean’s uniform and curled his fingers around the soft flesh of his lower abdomen, reveling in the way Dean’s muscles quavered and trembled.

“So perfect for me, Dean,” murmured James. Dean shuddered, his hips bucked desperately again. “So strong.” James ran teasing nails over Dean’s skin, earning another shudder, a gasping moan, a broken please. “So handsome.” James’ cock bucked against Dean’s hand; Dean’s grip tightening convulsively. “So deserving.”

Another sob won free, muffled against James’ jacket, there was a choking sound as Dean tried to hold himself back, and suddenly the tears that had been restrained earlier spilled free and Dean broke, clinging to James and crying uncontrollably.

“Damnit, I’m such a...”

Unspeakably moved, James wrapped both arms around Dean and held him close, pet down his back, and wished there was more he could do for the shaking young man. “It’s alright, Dean.” Dean leaked another sob. “This is alright. I said I’d take care of you, and I will – I always will.” He felt guilty, for pushing Dean so hard, for insisting, for complimenting him when he knew Dean found it upsetting. He didn’t feel bad enough to consider changing his approach in the future, though.

“Cas...” Dean’s scant resistance fractured and he went limp in his sorrow, surrendering to the comfort James offered.
“I’ve got you,” James whispered.

Too many people had said hurtful things to Dean, repeated them so often he believed them. How many times had Dean cried before he accepted as truth that he was broken, useless, nothing special, unworthy of care and respect and dignity? How many times had Dean nursed that pain alone with no one to hold him? James couldn’t begin to guess, didn’t want to know, was certain that the answer would be heart breaking.

*His* father, Dean and Sam’s father is the person who said such things, their father hated Dean and put him down. My parents are merely guilty of expecting too much of me, expecting me to move mountains, whereas his condemned him by expecting nothing, believing him capable of nothing. *How could any parent treat their child so?* Oh, Dean.

If James had to break Dean with kindness as Dean had once been broken with cruelty, then James would do so, over and over, as many times as necessary, until Dean believed James as he’d once believed his father; until Dean could believe himself to be worthy, handsome, intelligent, skilled, wonderful, without needing someone else to tell him so; until Dean grew strong enough to not only agree that he was those things, but to insist he was; until Dean was prepared to defend himself against anyone who dared suggest he was otherwise. James had no idea if such was possible, but he had to try. Part of him felt cruel, but he reminded himself that it was not *normal* for Dean to grow so upset simply because he’d been realistically, accurately praised. Most men – most *people* – would not cry because James told them they deserved something so basic and fundamental as physical pleasure. That was the wound; James was merely trying to heal it with the only tools at his command, to strike at moments when the thick armor that had enabled Dean to get through life fell away to reveal the vulnerable, *beautiful* man within.

*This will hurt him in the short term, but dare I hope that in the long term, it will strengthen him? Have I any reason to believe such? That he trusts me – that he continues to come to this clearing each week – that when I first spoke to him in such a fashion, he denied my praises, whereas now he accepts them, albeit struggling against his instinctual protestations.*

At length, Dean’s shoulders stopped shaking, his tears stopped flowing.

“How do you feel, Dean?”

Dean trailed a sloppy kiss over James’ chin, chapped lips rough against James’ morning stubble, found James’ mouth and locked them together. There was no finesse to the kiss, Dean’s tear-streaked cheeks rubbing moisture into James’ skin, their noses bumping – thankfully the mucus seemed mostly soaked into the shoulder of James’ uniform. Dean’s tongue tentatively licked at James’ lips and James parted to allow Dean into his mouth, growled a moan deep in his throat as Dean’s grip on James’ cock tightened and he caressed hardness back into fruition.

Drawing away, Dean rested his forehead on Cas’, brushed another kiss. With his other hand, he wiped the wetness from his face, leaving the red streaks overlaying tanned skin and his smattering of brown freckles as the only evidence of how upset he’d been. “Cas…” he licked his lips nervously.

“Do you really…All that stuff you said…you don’t mean that, do you, Castiel?”

“Every word,” James vowed, channeling every bit of anger that flared in his breast…

…*the things I will say to Mr. Winchester if I ever meet him!…*

…into sincerity, conviction, the need to convey with scant words the absolute honesty underlying his declaration. “As many times as you wish me to say it, I will tell you how worthy, how precious, how special, how unusual, how wonderful I truly think you are.”
“I…” Dean took a stuttering breath and turned his head away, stealing green eyes from James’ sight. “I believe you. I believe you, Cas.” He whooshed the air out again in a billowing cloud. “You know I…’bout you, you know…you’re great…” Dean hugged him close, wrapping his arms around James again, laying his head on James’ shoulder once more.

*Whenever he feels vulnerable, he holds me so. So open, so guileless…please, God, never let me hurt him, never let me do anything to cause him to feel less safe, less comforted, less loved in my arms.*

“Nobody else like you in the world, Castiel…never met anyone like you…”

Trailing a hand down Dean’s body, James wrapped his fingers around Dean’s flagging erection. Gentle strokes took moments to thicken him again; Dean mirrored James’ movements and James murmured encouragingly, “yes, that’s good, so good to me, Dean…” Together, they cupped, gripped, toyed with each other, stroked each other hard. Together, they rose higher and higher, moaned, found no breath for words save to pant each other’s names. There was no question that Dean would be allowed to finish, no doubt that James would join him in ecstasy. Existence was stroking hands and fervent words and bliss so powerful that James thought himself drunk on it, thought himself addicted to it. Pressed to James’ chest, Dean grew more and more tense. The arm he had wrapped around James’ shoulders bound them closer and closer together, his strokes became increasingly ragged. Leaning away from the tree, pressing his weight against Dean’s body, James clutched as desperately at Dean’s waist as Dean did at James’ shoulders. As surely as James could feel his own pleasure ratcheting to greater and great magnitudes, thrumming through every limb, filling his head with wonder and *Dean*, so James thought he could feel Dean soaring, thought he could feel Dean’s bliss as well.

“Dean…”

“Cas,” panted Dean. “*Castiel, God damn* this feels—”

James’ groan interrupted him. James’ embrace tightened convulsively, his hips bucked into Dean’s grip, and he climaxed for the second time, every bit as intensely as he had earlier. Dean’s mouth might offer more immediate gratification than his hand, but what James felt was so much more than the stimulation of touch; it was Dean’s obedience, and Dean’s beauty, and Dean’s strength, and Dean’s own imminent climax, all melding together to bring James off. It was all-encompassing, perfect, pleasure as profoundly intellectual and emotional as it was physical.

“Dean,” he ground out, a harsh growl. As if the mere sound of James’ low, ragged voice was too much for him, Dean gasped something that might have been James’ name and thrust spasmodically through his own release, white semen splashing onto his and James’ pants. Through several bursts Dean held himself frighteningly tense, moaning, rocking into James’ hand, only to collapse limply, gasping, sucking at the skin of James’ neck.

“It’s better…every…time,” Dean managed between breaths drawn harshly down his abused throat.

“Yes, it is,” agreed James, equally awed. *I love you.* The words died, barely, unspoken. Dean shimmied closer to James, brushed lips over James’ chin, and sighed contentedly against him. “Good?”

“Good,” confirmed Dean. “Great.”

“Me too.”

Yet breathing as one, they lay still as the morning brightened, until the afterglow of heat and pleasure had faded from James body and he inevitably became aware of the chill once more.
“I have to go soon,” James said. Dean grunted and pressed closer to him, held him more tightly. James chuckled. “But not yet.”

“Kansas ain’t nothing special,” Dean said abruptly. Startled, James blinked down at him, and Dean looked up and gave him a half smile. The tear stains had faded from his face, and he looked relaxed, at peace, boyish despite the shadow of a beard across his cheeks. A dried film had formed beneath his eyes, along the curve of his chin, and tacky white remained below his lower lip, bringing a blush to James’ cheeks now that the ardor of the moment had faded. Reaching over, James gently used his thumb to flick the crust away and wipe clean the mess. Dean’s smile slipping into a pouty scowl.

“You asked me last time – ‘what’s Kansas like?’ – ain’t nothing special. Rolling hills, lots of grass. Good farmland. Weren’t many trees to begin with and now there are even fewer, the settlers chopped ‘um down to make cabins and have wood to burn. ‘s not like the east, feels newer – specially when we first got there, it felt like you got to a place and found somethin’ there, like a river or an outcrop or a flower or what not, and it was like you looked on a place no man had ever seen before. Crock of crap, ‘course, Indians been there all along and seen those things a million times, but it felt new. I liked it then.”

“What about your wife and child?” James asked, uncertain about bringing it up.

“That’s why I gotta go back,” said Dean unhappily. “Lisa’s not bad – deserves better’n me, really – and Ben is my boy. He’s ‘bout two now, sweet little brat. Been thinkin’, when I go back, that maybe I’d live with her in Lawrence ‘stead of out on the prairies with dad. I could…” Dean trailed off.

“Well, I was thinkin’ I could draw for people.”

“That sounds like a fantastic idea,” James grinned. “People must want art for their homes, even in Kansas...can you paint as well?”

“Yeah,” Dean colored bright pink. “Yeah, I can do pencil, charcoal, watercolors...Grandpa Campbell got me a set of pastels once, those worked great, too. Wanted to try oils but they were expensive and my father said no.” Instantly, the open, earnest look, the excited glimmer in Dean’s eyes, shuttered and faded. There. Right there. There’s the injury. Good God, what can I say to that? “It’s a bad idea, though. Ain’t no money in it. No one out there needs art, and no one who does need art wants to buy it from me. I was actually thinkin’ maps – surveys – drawin’ out people’s property lines for contracts and land sales, that kinda thing.”

“That’s what you’re doing for General Singer,” James realized. Dean’s face went blank. “That’s why you’re always around our lines – your scouting placements and drawing maps for the Confederate army.”

“Cas—”

“Dean, I hope you realize that had I wished to turn you, I could easily have done so any time since October, right?”

“Why haven’t you?” asked Dean suspiciously.

“Because if you’d are captured out of uniform, you’ll be executed, and if you’re captured in uniform, you’ll be sent to Camp Chase, with slim hope for exchange unless some sort of agreement can be made between the rival armies – which everything I’ve read suggests isn’t likely at this time,”
explained James. “In either case, the chances that I’d ever see you again are extremely low.”

“And you wouldn’t like that?”

“Not at all.”

“Didn’t realize I was spendin’ my mornin’s with a crazy man,” muttered Dean, but there was a smile to soften his tone.

“You’ll forgive me if I dismiss your words, what with your arms are wrapped ‘round me and your lips against my skin,” joked James.

“Maybe I’m just that desperate,” Dean countered. James honestly couldn’t say how serious he was, and it troubled him. “But yeah, you caught me, that’s what I’m doin’ – guess you’d say I’m a surveyor?”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“It’s better’n bein’ home,” Dean shrugged.

“I’m glad you’re here, and not in Kansas,” murmured James, tightening his embrace for a moment.

“Ya know, if Sam hadn’t gone and gotten himself shot, we’d never’ve met,” Dean grinned. “Remind me to thank him, let him know that his suffering was not for nothing.” *If not for that, Bradbury probably would not have met Hester, either. Funny how life happens, the vagaries that bring people together – and tear them apart, as well?*

“Woah, you ain’t gonna tell him ‘bout this, are you?” Dean asked, aghast, drawing away from James to stare at him in horror.

“Of course not! It’s not my place to ‘out’ your secrets to your brother,” James gave him a reassuring smile. “Though in the interest of absolute honesty, you should know that I did write to my brother Gabriel of this – nothing specific,” he added hastily as the color drained from Dean’s face. “Only that you existed, not your name or any details about your person. I’ve never been interested in a man before, not like I am in you – I had to find someone in whom I could confide. Do you not have any such?”

“No!”

“Relax, Dean,” James said. “I’ll not betray your secret – any of your secrets – but it is not for your fears to dictate who I choose to share my secrets with. I can speak of my interests without ever revealing your identity. You are free to do the same. Do you mean to tell me you’ve spoken to no one of any of this? Even of your interest in men?” Scowling, his expression frustratingly petulant, Dean looked away. “That’s what I thought. You’ve been with other men, surely you must have spoken of it.” Dean grunted as if James had struck him. “For heaven’s sake, Dean, it doesn’t bother me that you’ve been with others before me. Indeed, I cannot even begrudge you doing so now. You’re married; I assume that should you have opportunity to see your wife, you and she would have relations?”

“Not if I can help it,” muttered Dean. There was a long, awkward pause, varied emotions flitting over Dean’s expressive features. “You know I’ve been with others. Including...a friend...recently. And yeah, he and I talked about stuff. A little. But not anymore. Not about you. I...” Dean took a deep breath and looked up, steely eyed, clear green meeting James’ gaze. “I only want you, Cas.”
Leaning forward, James brushed a light kiss over Dean’s lips. “I feel the same, Dean.” That’s true too. I don’t want Anna, not now, not as compared to how I want Dean. I love and care for her, as a friend, as a sister, as a bosom companion, but as a lover? It grows harder to conceive of her in such a way every week. “I hate to leave at such a moment, but I am afraid have to go. I will see you next week, alright?”

“Yeah,” sighed Dean. “Don’t worry. Just got nervous. It’s gotta be a secret, okay?”

“It is a secret,” agreed James. “My brother will tell no one save his wife, who will tell no one. The only other person to whom I might speak my secret is my sister, and I will speak your secret to none. That is your choice, I would never take it from you.”

“Thanks, Cas.”

Rising, James straightened his uniform, frowned as he wiped a gooey stain from his pants, and started to do up his coat. He lay a gentle hand atop Dean’s head for a moment, then walked past, determined to continue before he was unable to bring himself to leave. “Ride safe, Dean.”

“One week...?” Dean said plaintively to James’ back as he crossed the clearing.

“Come hell or high water,” vowed James, not allowing himself to glance back.

James practically sprinted back to camp, hardly taking care not to be seen. He could only guess the time, his watch with Winchester, but he knew it was later than he should be returning. Crowley had called a morning meeting with his staff and the Captains of each Company. They usually held weekly meetings on Monday mornings, had done so that week, and having a follow up on Wednesday was unprecedented in the two months since Crowley took command. Crowley did actual Regimental work as infrequently as he could get away with.

The most stressful part of James’ return trip was invariably emerging from the cover of the abatis. He waited patiently to see if any pickets would go by. Theoretically, the men were supposed to patrol the perimeter, but in practice, as the weather had grown colder, “patrol” had increasingly meant “standing beside the fire, glancing down the hill from time to time.” James had done his best to keep the night watch on task, but whoever was responsible for monitoring the morning pickets did virtually no actual monitoring, as far as James could tell. While their negligence chafed at his sense of responsibility and duty, of a Wednesday morning he was grateful that they were not more attentive. It made slipping back and taking up a strolling pace around the fort wall as if he’d done nothing wrong that much easier, though his steps did quicken as he grew increasingly nervous about being late.

Stepping into Fort Lyon made it clear he’d been right to be concerned. Trumpets blared the call to roll call and drill, and soldiers bustled in every direction. Moving deliberately through the organized hubbub, James made directly for Crowley’s tent.

“Ah, there you are, Major,” Crowley said with obvious distaste as James entered and took his usual place at the small desk. As Colonel, Crowley had one of the largest tents in the camp, with a ceiling high enough for men to stand straight, two cots, a desk, and a chest to hold clothing and other belongings. The number of people in it dwarfed the size, though, men seated lining each cot, standing along the walls, sitting on the dirt ground. All ten captains of the Regiment were in attendance, accompanied each by a lieutenant. Fitzgerald beamed James a happy grin as if he were oblivious to the scolding subtext of Crowley’s words, but the more James got to know Fitzgerald the more he thought that supposed ignorance a mask. The look he got from Bradbury was more assessing, but then, Bradbury knew, in vague terms, with whom James spent his Wednesday mornings. The thought brought a flush to James’ cheeks and dangerous thoughts to mind.
Dean, hot and moaning in James’ arms. Dean, so choked with desire he sobbed. Dean, ineptly stroking James, too lost in pleasure to maintain an even pace. Dean, begging, trembling as he released, whimpering gratefully, crying his name.

“…all to pay attention.” Sharp words brought James back to the moment, pants growing uncomfortably tight, the paper and pen before him neglected. Embarrassed, he grabbed it, dipped nib to ink, and hastily began writing, trying to sort through his lewd imaginings to remember what he could of what Crowley had said. From what James could piece together, it was nothing important—an abrupt greeting, an allusion to how important their conversations were, a reminder of their relative positions. James was not the only one in the room who started at the harshness of Crowley’s tone. The Captain and Lieutenant for Company H, the unusually timid combination of Charles Shurley and his young Oriental second in command Kevin Tran, both jumped, causing the cot on which they sat together to creak alarmingly; sitting beside them, Captain Wandell rolled his eyes.

“It’s a new year,” Crowley continued. “Thus far, I’ve excused a lot of nonsense from this Regiment, but no longer. Soon, the army will be marching to war. Either we will march as well, following General McClellan on to Richmond, or we’ll be left with the equally important task of garrisoning our capital. Either way, we need to be top notch. I’ll not let you lot embarrass me.” Glad of his transcription task to give him some measure of protection, James scowled. Transcribing their staff meetings was tedious, but at least it ensured he always looked busy. “I see those looks, you worms, so smug, so certain, ‘the Colonel doesn’t mean me, he doesn’t mean my company.’ Well, I do! Company A, despite two months of artillery training, it still takes you three minutes between volleys. Company B,” Crowley paused to sneer at Fitzgerald and Bradbury, “I appreciate that you are not professional soldiers, but you lot of children can still barely reload your muskets. Company C, if I see one more mistake from you in drill I will have every man on short rations for a week. Company D…” Crowley continued down the line, finding fault with every group. James diligently wrote all down, choking back rage. Every condemnation brought shocked, affronted looks, disbelieving glances, shame-faced shaking heads. They all had eyes, they all knew that they were the best drilled, best prepared unit in the Regiment. Most had heard Elkins declare, proudly, that such was true, always adding in an undertone like a confession that it wasn’t because he was playing favorites, that even had they not been his old regiment his opinion would have been the same. “In short, there’s room for improvement in every damn department, and if I do not see that improvement, you’ll all rue the day you thought to join the army.”

“Already do,” someone muttered darkly.

“I heard that,” snarled Crowley. Nearly everyone jumped, looking as guilty as if they were responsible for the interjection.

“Will we have access to additional ammunition for firing drill?” asked Fitzgerald, intimidation dulling his usually bright tone.

“‘Will we have additional ammunition?’” echoed Crowley mockingly. “Absolutely not. I’m doing you a favor – I’ll not draw attention to our deficiencies by requesting supplies whose only function would be to help overcome those deficiencies. If I ask for extra ammunition, what do you think the quartermaster will say? You think the US government has an infinite supply of goods simply waiting for you pathetic louts to squander them in your attempts at training? Well, they don’t, and it will reflect badly on me and on each of you if anyone up the chain of command becomes aware of how deplorably unprepared you all are. You will make do on the same supplies as everyone else.”

“But—”

“I am tired of watching this winter spent in idleness,” Crowley interrupted roughly. “Anyone who
will not do his duty will no longer have a duty to do! Do I make myself clear?” There was a stunned silence. Bradbury caught James eye and mouthed can he do that? exaggeratedly. Helplessly, James shrugged, he wasn’t sure, but unless Elkins stepped in he doubted anyone could stop Crowley from getting rid of an officer he didn’t like, even though he wouldn’t be able to control who got named as a replacement, especially among the lieutenants, who were elected by the men. “I said, do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” came the chorused reply.

“Good. General McClellan himself has asked me to come to Washington DC and consult on our battle plans for the coming campaign.” Crowley paused to give them all a preening smile. “I will be there as long as he requires my services, at least two weeks. In my absence, Lieutenant Colonel Tanner will have command of the Regiment, and Major Novak will bear responsibility for ensuring that you all adhere to our new training regimen.” James grimaced as he wrote Crowley’s words. He estimated it would be less than an hour from the end of the meeting before the first Captain came to him to bemoan the unfairness of it all and expect James to relent where Crowley surely would not. It astonished him that any of the Captains thought James had the least influence, that any thought James was any less under Crowley’s thumb than the rest of them.

So much for getting any sleep.

“The General will be coming to Fort Lyon at the end of the month to review what has been accomplished here.” That made backs straighten and brought determined looks to faces. Whether the Captains had respect for Crowley, everyone had the utmost regard for their Commander-in-Chief (whom few thought of as the president, technicalities aside). “Do not embarrass me.”

Tense looks and taut bodies stood or sat at attention, awaiting wait else Crowley might say. Meeting each pair of eyes in turn, Crowley glared at his subordinates. Few could withstand that intense look, flinching away, looking down, biting lips. Crowley saved James for last, eyes narrowing shrewdly, and though James felt profoundly exposed under that searching gaze, he forced himself to meet Crowley’s dark eyes, to hold steady, to meet challenge with challenge.

He may be my superior but he is not my better. I’ll not kowtow to the likes of him, not for politics nor money nor influence, not for Zachariah nor Richard Roman nor A.Z. Blaine. Whether he grant me my worth or not makes no difference in my actual merit, and I am tired of acting as if he deserves my respect.

“What?” Crowley sneered when he was done. “You’re all still here? Get out of my tent and get to work.”

The resulting scrum was pitiful to watch, more than 20 grown men competing to demonstrate the most alacrity as they hustled towards the one narrow slit in the side of the tent. Writing quickly to complete the meeting minutes, James spared glances for the nonsense and was shocked to see even such men as Wandell looking cowed. Shurley looked positively sick. Only Fitzgerald and Bradbury seemed largely unaffected, Fitzgerald smiling as always, Bradbury’s expression stormy as he scowled. At length, the crowd escaped into the open winter air, trumpets sounded drill, shouts spoke to the impact of Crowley’s words as the Captains got to work immediately. James set the pen down.

“Oh, and Major?” Crowley turned to James, set his hands on the opposite side of the small desk to lean over and stare James down. Normally, James was the taller of the two, but seated, Crowley loomed over him, broad shoulders and stern expression more cowing than James cared to admit. “Don’t think you’re spared because you’ve no company. Company B is the worst of the lot, and the responsibility for that falls largely on your shoulders. Last month you came to me to request more time to rest with the promise it would improve your performance from the substandard doldrums in
which you languished in November. I have seen no such improvement and my patience is wearing thin. I gave you this rank in deference to the influence and respectability for your family. Your brother *promised* that you’d be up to the task. It would be a profound embarrassment to them if I were forced to demote you, or had to place you on special assignment more suited to your...abilities. I am tired of your *dawdling.*”

“Yes, sir,” James ground out with what slight semblance of respectfulness he could muster.

“If I return from the meeting in Washington and this Regiment is not bang up to the mark, I will blame you. Now get out of here.”

Bass was the first Captain who came to him to complain, the commander of Company D finding James as he was reorganizing the drill schedules for the Regiment. Papers were spread all over the tiny workspace in James’ small tent, notes indicating when every other regiment used the parade ground, so that James could work around them to maximize the amount of time the 27th had to practice maneuver, working the guns, or practicing with their rifles.

“We are *not* craven,” said the narrow-faced man, dark hair trimmed into a neat, full beard, kippah hidden beneath his standard issue hat. “He’s only saying that because I’m—”

“I *know,*” snapped James. Bass’ mouth snapped shut and he glared at James. “Look, I *know* you’re not cowards – unlike our esteemed Colonel, I was at Bull Run; Company A broke first and had every right to, they were outnumbered ten to one. I *know* Crowley is a racist. What do you expect *me* to do about it?”

“Your family has influence,” Bass gave as good as he got. “*Use it.*”

“To do *what* exactly?” James fumed, continuing to make notes on the drill schedule, pen tearing the page as he wrote. “Crowley has powerful friends and knows full well that as a West Point graduate, a state politician, and a Democrat, he is nearly untouchable, for the government *needs* to keep the Democrat constituency in New York happy. The way to do that is to see that men like Crowley are lionized despite their actual achievements. He’s untouchable, as are his allies in the army. Even if I could convince my connections to make the attempt to see him moved elsewhere, why should they do so? They are not at my beck and call, to squander their influence where they will.” Bass started to speak, but James pressed on heedless. The idea that James could in any way free them of Crowley’s domineering behavior needed to be quashed before it could take root. “*There is nothing I can do.* If I am insubordinate I will be removed from my post and someone else placed in it. Perhaps it’ll be you, Captain Bass, and you’ll be able to learn firsthand how completely my hands are tied.” Bass’ mouth snapped shut. “If you want to see the situation improve, *help me.* Agitating against him will only lead to dark talk, mutiny and subsequent punishment for every man involved. No matter that he’s an ass, there is a war to fight, a cause to defend, a country to protect. Though his commands are unreasonable, they are not at odds with pursuing success in those purposes. So, we follow his orders as long as we must and if our performance is exemplary, hopefully he’ll get the promotion he so obviously yearns for and he’ll leave us in peace! Until then, I expect you to do your duty and follow his orders as I do. Clear?”

“You should have been our Colonel,” muttered Bass sourly.

“Captain?”

“How can I help, sir?” Bass said more loudly.

James sighed, shoulders slumping with relief. If the Captains turned against him as Crowley had, his position would become untenable. He needed their support. “Would you take this schedule to the
majors of the other regiments and get them to sign off that the proposed drills for the 27th New York do not conflict with their own schedules?” James passed him the sloppily scrawled paper, a bead of wet ink oozing towards the corner.

“Yes, sir.”

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**Dear Anna,**

January 8th, 12th, 14th, 15th, 19th, 21st, 1862

As I anticipated in my previous letter I have scarce had time to write. I hope to finish this today, but if I do not, I will append to it until whenever I am able and send it as soon as I might.

Since I last wrote, every Captain in the Company has come to visit me. Some clearly place no blame on me – Wandell has been telling anyone who will listen about his commander at the Battle of Buena Vista, who repeatedly ignored scout warnings that Santa Anna was showing signs of renewing the attack and died for his incompetence. Though Wandell never explicitly points his finger at Colonel Crowley, his insinuations are clear and many agree. Many appear to understand that though we are driving the troops hard, we are not where the orders originate. However, not all are so reasonable. Many seem determined to lay the blame at my feet even among the Captains and Lieutenants who were present at last week’s meeting. Sometimes I doubt myself, repeat to myself the questions you have asked me time and again – is there more that I might do? Am I the source of this problem? Might I, through flattering words and deferential behavior, accommodate myself to Crowley’s unreasonable expectations? Yet I cannot believe it. I’ve done everything he’s asked of me promptly and competently and Crowley continues to drive me. This morning, I laid the particulars before a friend and he believes I am in the right, which reassures me. I wish I could explain to you in enough detail that you’d understand as well.

The weather has continued uncommonly foul; we’ll have one day bright and gorgeous only to be followed by ice storms that leave the countryside an inch deep in impenetrable slick sheets of white. Needless to say, this is not conducive to our current drill schedule. The men are bitter – in more ways than one – and they complain ceaselessly about our schedule, about the officers, about their rations, about how their canteens freeze and burst open and then cannot be replaced, about our continuing in camp while other armies are on the march, about Cameron’s corruption, about Cameron’s removal, and our continued peace with England and anything else they can think of. For that matter, they complain about me, but I try not to think much of it. The troops are so miserable that they need the outlet. Whenever Tanner overhears their complaints, he tells them off, gives them fatigue duty, which does nothing to endear them to their superiors and does much to increase their levels of unhappiness. It is especially frustrating because this appears to be all that Tanner is doing. If he has had ought to keep his time occupied, I cannot discover it. Perhaps I am too hard on him – I am so busy that I can scarce keep track of what I am doing, much less what anyone else is. At least none seem to have noticed how much harder we are being worked as compared to the other Regiments in the brigade.

Apologies! I began this letter on January 8th; it is now the 12th, and hopefully I will finish today. Last night I had dinner with Elkins and Hannah, and he spent the while trying, with surprising delicacy, to suggest that we were driving the troops too hard. Crowley has not returned from Washington, and there was little I could say to Elkins save that I am following my orders. If Elkins would give commands rescinding what the Colonel has instructed, we could change our approach, but such does not seem likely. I never could have fathomed the extent to which politics impact the soldiers of this army. Such is the only explanation I have for why General Elkins should shy from countermanding Colonel Crowley – is it unfair of me to suppose that Elkins is cowed by Crowley
supposed influence?

Increasingly, the conviction has grown that, under Crowley’s management, this fine force of brave men will be ruined by neglect and disinterest and over-strict discipline and intense work unsuited to the harshness of the season.

January 14th, now. Finally, something good to report! Fitzgerald informs me that we are to have new blankets provided by his family! It reminds me of a story I heard, of one of the wealthier units from New York City marching to war bearing a velvet-lined stool for every man. Wealth of the kind that can outfit a Regiment! I’d hate to see the principal applied in general – like the British military forces, to be neglected or benefitted at the whim and ability and charity of their commander – but on a small scale, to right what wrongs we may? Perhaps it is unfair, to know that we now will have equipment that none of the other regiments in the brigade possess, but I cannot bring myself to lament it. Were it up to me, I’d aid all, but I cannot. I could not even aid my own troops, it was for Fitzgerald to do that, to Fitzgerald comes all the praise, and a more deserving man I cannot think of. Word has already spread, I know not how, and Fitzgerald is sure to be the toast of every one of our camp fires for many a night to come. Through his agency and the benevolence of his family, some are benefited; if we could benefit all that would be fantastic, but better to aid some than none.

I keep thinking I should sign off this letter and mail it, but then I haven’t the time even for that, and today finds me writing once again, now it is the 15th.

Or, rather, the 19th. I’m so sorry, Anna. It’s been near three weeks, I never meant to be this long between letters. Crowley is yet gone, which is both a blessing and a curse. We are free from his constant naysaying, his derisive commentary informing us of how inadequate even our best efforts are. But I’ve no doubt that, as much as his absence is a relief, it ensures it’ll be that much worse when he does return, when he comes to us and observes all our efforts and finds fault in every one. I know you are skeptical of my report of him, Anna, but please, you must believe me – he is the most impossible to please man I have ever met. Do remember Ms. Hurley, always ready to put down even the most perfect efforts of others in an attempt to make herself appear better by contrast? Crowley is just another such. By setting us down he aggrandizes himself, by doing nothing he ensures he has the time to present his skewed version of reality to any who will listen, and he is able to please where he wishes. On our backs, all his achievements will be built, while he does nothing for us in return.

Despite that, I could not be more proud of how our men have performed the past few weeks. They’ve toiled ceaselessly despite terrible weather, epidemic, and a lack of firewood to keep our fires lit. Every man in Company B fires straight and true, Company A can reload the cannon in a minute flat, and all 700 men can execute the entire drill manual flawlessly every single time. Despite that, Crowley will find fault, I know it, and I can only hope that the men do not hear it, for it would dishearten them so much. At least Elkins is lavish in his praise and has seen extra rations sent to us. Only that, and the promise of General McClellan’s visit at the end of the month, is preventing open rebellion. Indeed, the other Regiments of the Brigade have heard about the General’s intended review. The other colonels do not wish to shame themselves and there has been much stiffer competition for use of the parade ground and for time running out the artillery.

What do the people back home think of the news from the front? Even as every order received from army command decries the impossibility of engaging in action during the depths of the Virginia winter, the rebel Jackson has marched and we are every man jealous and bitter that we do not do the same, especially in light of his successes in driving Union forces from the Shenandoah. We want to give back as good as we’ve gotten, but instead we sit and wait. Many whisper on who is to blame for our inactivity, but all is speculation and idleness. Theoretically it must be General McClellan, but he knows us ready. Many blame the president, save that makes no sense either. Several people had
blamed Cameron, but his removal has changed nothing. Of course, Edwin Stanton has been Secretary of War for mere days; even should Stanton prove more able than Cameron, whatever influence he might have on our marching will have to wait until he has settled in to his new office and cleaned up whatever messes Cameron has left behind. On the one hand, I wish we would march and act; on the other, it seems incredible to me that anyone sane would chance the weather. How many broken ankles must have accompanied marching over frozen roads? The other night a man tripped and fell while he was picketing, was buried beneath the ice and froze; in the dark and storm I did not even see him. I might have saved him, had I only known he was in such dire straits.

We are cheered by what we hear from Kentucky, even if the articles written on the topic border into the absurd in their lavish praise. I suppose I should not complain, for it keeps spirits ups in difficult times. To examine a battle in which 4,500 troops defeat 6,000 and declare this a victory on par with the Confederate success at Bull Run, where near 70,000 men were engaged, is patently ridiculous. Yet to read in the papers, the two were indeed equivalent. Does it seem so unreasonable to you, as seen from the home front? Every man speaks with exuberance and glee of Middle Creek and Mill Springs, every man knows now who James Garfield and George Thomas are. We all live vicariously as if we were in Kentucky, even among those who formerly spoke with derision of our western states, even among those who once spoke darkly that states with slaves would ultimately betray us and should not be permitted in the Union. Now, all are convinced that they can aspire to no greater heights than to see the Confederate rebels driven from the still-loyal state of Kentucky.

If we cannot advance ourselves, at least we can enjoy that others do so.

And, finally, January 21st. I will send this today, I promise. Crowley has returned, with the results predicted. General McClellan is set to visit us on the 2nd of February and we are instantly all activity – every bit of weather damage to the fortress is to be repaired, the barracks and powder magazine are to be completed, our equipment is to be brought up to snuff, the entire camp is to be rearranged to flawless, manual of arms precision. Henriksen is in a fury, for we are to move the contraband camp so that the former slaves will not trouble the commander nor provide a blemish to his eye. I fear it will be many days before I have any further time with which to write, so if you do not hear from me, worry not – it is not that I am unwell or hurt, merely that I am so busy that I cannot find five minutes together to scrawl even one sentence.

I hope all is well and look forward to hearing from you.

Your, J.C. Novak

There was so much James couldn’t say in a letter to Anna. James could say nothing of the letter he had received from Balthazar Freeley cheerfully discussing the end of the Trent Affair nor James reply in which he shared their mutual relief that Lincoln had seen reason and released Slidell and Mason before war could begin with Great Britain. Further, James could certainly not mention that enclosed with the letter from Freeley had been several sealed messages to be passed on, unopened, to correspondents within the Union. He could say nothing about his reticence to forward their mail, his eventual decision to do so and his hope against hope that Ms. Cassidy was in truth a Union spy and that what he passed on aided the cause and not the enemy.

There was no admitting how cold and miserable he was, no way she’d understand that he’d wept when he’d first wrapped himself in his new blanket for, beneath its wool, he had finally felt warm for the first time outside of Dean’s arms in near two months. He couldn’t share his profound guilt over the picket who had suffered while James had patrolled past him over and over again. He didn’t even truly feel comfortable discussing his unhappiness with Crowley. He couldn’t bear another response from her suggesting that there was ought he could do to alter Crowley’s unfounded attitudes. He could say nothing of his friends’ best efforts to spare James the fatigues of excessive duty, too
ashamed of his inadequacy, too tired to wish to go into details of all the small kindnesses done for him by Winchester, Bradbury, Henriksen, Fitzgerald, Ms. Moseley and the others. Even with their help, he lost more weight and felt exhausted all the time. Increasingly, he wondered how long he could treat himself with such neglect before he sickened and could do his duty no more. At least he had a warm blanket.

He could say nothing about Dean.

At least he had Dean.

James lived for Wednesday mornings.

For once, the weather wasn’t terrible, mild and sunny, but James had brought his blanket anyway. He was so tired he couldn’t face even the faint chill that filled the air. Dean was there when James arrived, casually sprawled at the foot of the tree, one leg stretched out, the other bent with his arms resting over it. He wore a confident smirk like James hadn’t seen on his face since they’d first met. Calm and peace suffused James to see Dean so obviously happy. Unfolding the blanket, James wrapped it around his shoulders and squeezed in next to Dean between the tree roots. Instantly, Dean put an arm around him, leant his head on James’ shoulders.

“You look like crap,” Dean observed dryly.

*Seeing him makes everything better.*

“Thanks,” murmured James, his eyes slipping shut.

“Oh, is that how things are?” Dean grinned and kissed James’ chin. “Lemme think...well, you’re kind of overbearing, you know, and arrogant. Too smart for your own good, crap at following orders, stubborn as hell. And you have *got* to work on that idealism, you know the world doesn’t really work that way, right?” The words might have been hurtful if not for the kiss that accompanied each, if not for the obvious tenderness in Dean’s voice.

*He’s just worried about me.*

“You say the sweetest things, Johnny Reb.”

Dean turned to face him, straddled James’ lap, kissed him softly on the lips, wrapped his arms around James’ neck. Sighing, slumping tiredly against the tree, James enfolded Dean in his arms, enfolded them both in the blanket.

“Maybe you should take a mornin’ to rest,” suggested Dean. “Don’t get me wrong – it’s *awesome* to see you, but—”

“Please,” James whispered, resting his forehead against Dean’s. “Please don’t suggest I not see you. It’s all that gets me through the week.”

*I love you.*

“You know we won’t be able to do this forever, right? Sooner or later, the armies will march.”

“Please, Dean.”

“Alright, Cas,” Dean leaned in to kiss James again, tender though his lips were chafed and dry, and James struggled to keep his eyes open as light pleasure tingled through his body and eased every worry, lightened every burden, relaxed away every strain. “I’ve got you.”
Collapsing forward, James let Dean hold his body weight. Desperate thoughts tried to rouse him to more alertness. He’d plans for the day, plans for things they could do together. Dean’s birthday was in two days and James had wanted to give him something. With sweet touches and hot lips, James had resolved to ask nothing of Dean, vowed to himself that he would pleasure Dean without teasing or commands, had burned with anticipation at the prospect of wrapping his around Dean’s cock for the first time and feeling as Dean was enveloped in bliss. This, he thought, was a pleasure that James could give Dean that Dean had never experienced before—deducing from what Dean had said, it seemed inconceivable that anyone had done the like for Dean. James had no energy left, though. He was warm and safe with someone who believed in him, trusted him, told him that Crowley was an ass and that James worked too hard. Dean cared about him.

Why was it I can’t tell him how I feel?

He yawned and slumped closer to Dean’s heat, let the other man embrace him closely, rock him gently.

There’s a reason, right?

“It’s okay, Billy Yank,” Dean whispered in his ear, lips brushing his flesh, breath ghosting through his hair. “Don’t need to prove yourself to me, don’t have to be strong for me. I’ve got you. Get some rest.” James couldn’t help but surrender, Dean’s strength around him felt so nice, Dean’s gruff voice speaking tender words was too moving. Fingers combed through James’ hair, and Dean whispered, so softly James didn’t think he was supposed to hear, “God, you’re so beautiful, Castiel...”

“Happy birthday,” mumbled James, words blurring together. “Love you.”

Dean didn’t react, and the world went dark, and when he woke later, snug and cradled and protected, James had no idea if he’d spoke aloud or if he’d dreamed the entire exchange.

Energized by the rest, James pushed Dean to his back on the ground, kissed him to distraction as his hands fumbled to open Dean’s pants. Dean’s confused exclamation shattered into a moan as James had a hand on his cock, stroking him to hardness. Back arching, shoulders straining against the ground, hips urging James on, Dean gasped. “Happy birthday.” James said, shifting down Dean’s body as Dean watched him, wide-eyed and panting.

“Cas—?” Dean choked as James closed his lips over the tip of Dean’s cock and sucked hard, tasting the now-familiar and much-beloved bitter flavor of Dean’s early release. “What are you—?”

The weight was strange on James’ tongue, the flavor of Dean’s cock different than James would have imagined, different than that of Dean’s flesh, his lips, his skin, but not unpleasant. Tentatively, but with increasing confidence, he took more and more of that stiff length in his mouth as Dean moaned and writhed against the ground, fumbling fingers combing frantically through James’ hair. Reaching up, James took one of Dean’s hands in his own, twined their fingers as they so often did when they were together, and Dean calmed into James’ attentions.

Over the following minutes, James took perverse delight in using his tongue and throat and mouth to break that calm down until Dean squirmed and moaned and begged for release. It was a long time before James drove Dean to climax, and he delighted in every moment of it.

God, he’s delicious.

Interlude

“Dispatches from Washington,” Dean said, passing over the letters that Harvelle had given him. As
Singer had ordered, Harvelle had gotten her way, and every night saw Dean passing over the Chain Bridge into the capital, exchanging jokes with the pickets who accepted his passport without question and happily believed Dean’s explanation that he was a courier for the Evening Star. He made sure he never left without giving them the earliest press of the newspaper he could get his hands on.

“Thanks, boy,” Singer said, taking the offered letters.

There was a protracted pause.

“Anything else, sir?”

Usually, Singer dismissed Dean with a joke or an invitation to come drink that evening, but things were far more somber at headquarters of late. After days of going back and forth to Richmond, Singer had returned withdrawn, pale, features sunken, and though he hardly spoke of it, whispers were that he’d lost four children to scarlet fever in the space of a week. None had the courage to ask directly; the possibility that it was true was too likely and too horrifying.

Singer took a deep breath, ran a hand through his short hair, itched his beard, refused to meet Dean’s eye.

“Sir...?”

“Look, Winchester, I had a letter from your daddy after Christmas,” said Singer. Dean flinched. Much to Dean’s embarrassment, Singer had read aloud the contents of the letter that John had sent with Dean when he’d come east. Though he’d only heard the message once, every word was seared into Dean’s memory even half a year later.

Dean’s not good for much.

“He wanted to wish you a nice holiday, expressed his hope that you were doing well.”

Dean’s a dullard.

“He also mentioned that a fellow named A.Z. Blaine was in some way related to the death of your mother, and that a woman named Andrea Kormos was also involved...?” Singer trailed off.

Make Dean a scullery, he’s gotten good at laundry.

“Lafitte’s old fiancée,” Dean explained numbly. “She broke it off, rantin’ about the wrongs of slavery, and joined up with the Free Soil folk in Kansas. Came to warn us when they came for us, when they came to kill Mama, but she mighta done somethin’ to stop it and didn’t.”

If you’ve no use for him, shove a musket in his hands and push him towards the front.

“Your daddy, he’s not the easiest man to get along with, but he didn’t deserve that,” said Singer, shaking his head. “None o’ you did.”

Let him fight and die for his country.

“No sir.”

I’m glad Mary’s not lived to see it.

“He asked that if you found out anything about Blaine or Kormos, or if you heard any word of your brother, you send word his way. There’s a lady, Kate Milligan in New York, who apparently knows
how to get word to him, since God forbid he tell us where the devil he is,” explained Singer.

“All that...that anything like what he really said?” muttered Dean.


“Blaine used to be in Washington, he moved in the same circles as Harvelle.” The only way to reply was to keep his tone utterly neutral, to quell every bit of pain he felt and focus entirely on answering. If word was to be sent to his father, Singer could write down what little Dean knew until Dean could investigate further. “Ain’t heard nothing about Kormos. Sam is fighting for the Union, enlisted in a regiment from New York.” Sam’s free, there ain’t no way I’m dragging him back. “That’s all I know,” he lied. “I’ll ask Harvelle ‘bout Blaine.”

“You’re a good man, Dean,” Singer said with a sad smile. “You’ve done great work for me – best surveyor I’ve worked with, and I’ve served with West Point-trained engineers.”

_Bull._

Even knowing it wasn’t true, it felt good to hear. A whisper of Castiel’s voice echoed it, calling Dean smart, calling him handsome, calling him skilled. Pink flushed Dean’s cheeks as they warmed despite the bite in the air.

“If you want to help find the man that killed your mama, ain’t no one goin’ to blame you for that,” Singer continued. “But you don’t owe your papa nothing. No matter how things go, no matter what the future holds, as long as I’m here, you’ve a place in my service.”

Stunned, Dean blinked, resisted every urge that screamed for him to deny his qualifications for such an honor.

_Cas would punish me if he knew I was even thinkin’ of puttin’ myself down like that. Fool._

Dean had no idea whether he was condemning himself or his lover for stupidity.

_Kinda wish Cas would punish me for something..._

He colored darker. “Thank you,” he stammered.

“And get out of here, idjit, and get some rest.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hastily, Dean retreated from the tent, blinking watery eyes at the brightness of the day without. Men socialized about the camp fire, all posturing so as not to look like they were huddling close to the flames for warmth. Aside from the native Virginians and the Tennesseans, few were used to the icy weather that had afflicted them through the young winter. Hurrying to his tent, Dean crawled within and dug through his belongings, slipping on the mittens Castiel had given him. Wearing the winter gear his lover had gifted him for Christmas always felt distantly like curling up in Cas’ arms, helped him feel safe and warm and worthy on the many occasions he felt nothing of the kind.

“What, not even a hello?” joked Benny.

“Hey, brother,” Dean turned and sighed into his scant blanket. “You good?”

“Yeah,” Benny nodded. “More worried ‘bout you, to be honest.” Blinking, Dean stared at his friend. “What’ve you been gettin’ up to, Dean?”
“I don’t...”

There was a rustle of paper and Benny shoved a tattered piece of newsprint towards Dean. Overlaying the gibberish of small black type was a drawing in thick charcoal lines, the angelic features of James Castiel Novak, dark hair scattered over his forehead, thin lips curled in a smile, cheeks dusted with stubble, eyes clear and piercing. At least there was nothing to the portrait to reveal Cas’ rank and position.

“You been goin’ through my stuff, Ben?” Dean demanded angrily.

“Woah, there, stallion,” Benny rumbled. “You left it out and the draft blew it on to my blankets, I’m just returning it. This the reason you didn’t want to mess around with me any longer?”

“And if he is?” asked Dean, snatching the picture away and smoothing it over his knee. The charcoal smeared, leaving the suggestive lines of Castiel’s hair smudged to a black blur, clouding his cheeks gray, unfocusing his confident gaze.

“He the reason you seemed to happy of late?” insisted Benny. Dean flushed. “Good. You deserve it.” Dean’s cheeks darkened further and he stared down at the page, eyes filling with tears as he looked down into the black eyes on the page and imagined the stunning blue reality, the way Cas’ pupils widened and darkened when he stared at Dean with undisguised desire and pleasure. “If he hurts you...” Benny let the threat trail off.

God, please don’t let me wrong about Cas. Dean’s imagination replaced flat lines on dumb paper with the real living, breathing man. I want to believe him when he says I’m worthy. Three days before they met again. I want to believe him when he says I’m deserving. The last time they’d met, Castiel had said that seeing Dean was all that got him through the week. I want to believe him when he touches me and praises me and brings me off over and over. It was exactly what Dean needed to hear. I want to believe him when he says he cares about me. It was exactly how Dean felt about Castiel. I think...I think I need to believe him. Somehow, Cas always knew exactly what Dean needed to hear.

I need him.

“Dean...” Startled, Dean looked up to see Benny watching him earnestly. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” he muttered vaguely, stupefied by the profundness of the feeling washing over him. “Yeah, I’m great. Gonna get some sleep, ‘kay?”

“Sure thing, brother.”

What will I do when Cas realizes he doesn’t need me?

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter took so long to come out - between a wedding and the death of my car, I lost five entire days of writing. But now I have a new car, and while things are still busy, it shouldn't take me quite this long again. Hope y'all enjoyed! :)
Chapter Notes

Chapter Title:
While I KNOW I've heard specific quotes referring to distant thunder, I can't find any that are entirely appropriate. However, in general, the phrase referred to the rattle of artillery and battle heard in the distance, and everything that portended about coming conflict and danger. There's also some subtext, because throughout the war it was repeatedly observed that the layout of terrain could cause strange effects in sound - battles might be impossible to hear even if they were close, yet be audible from miles and miles away. Thus, no one could ever be sure just how distant that thunder actually was...

Quick Note: So...I goofed. I got it in my head that Benny Lafitte's lost love's name was Andrea KOSS, when in fact her name is Andrea Kormos. As far as I can tell the only placed I put the wrong name in was in Chapter 11. I'm sorry about the mix up, it's fixed now!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 12: The Distant Thunder

January 13th, 1862

Dear Cassie,

Will wonders never cease, I received your letter in a mere two weeks and have hopes that perhaps this one will make the return trip to you with similar “alacrity.” Considering that the distance between Kentucky and Virginia can be covered by rail car in four days, isn’t it absurd that it takes the post weeks? Still, I should as soon complain about the weather or the state of our rations for all the good it will do, so I suppose I should let it go. There are battles that can be won – I’m sure word will reach you of Middle Creek before this letter arrives – and there are those that cannot – there will ever be an endless supply of bed bugs – I must accept what I cannot change and move on.

I am glad to hear that my letter was of use to you, and that you were not paralyzed into non-action in its absence. It sounds as if you and D. are much on the same page. Obligatorily, I must ask that you inform D. that, should he hurt you in any way, I will eviscerate him. We are in the midst of war, I doubt anyone would even notice a mere act of murder. If you find yourself conflicted in the future, do write, and I will be happy to give you another swift kick in the verbal ass.

Raphael and I are fine. The need here amongst the colored populations of the western states is extreme, and we have been getting runaways from Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee, and a few from as far as Mississippi and Alabama. Theoretically, we are to return those from loyal states to their masters, and this has been a source of conflict more than once. At this point, we have a cadre of contraband who...no, let me put this another way.

Theoretically, if runaway slaves were to arrive here from Missouri or Kentucky or any other state still part of the Union, they must be returned to their owners, no matter how against the grain such runs. Raphael and I, of course, can do nothing to protect such a person, nothing to spirit them away, nothing to protect them from fate. If such an individual comes to our attention we are in the very
unfortunate position of returning them. But if – this is all a fantasy, of course – the first to greet incoming arrivals were not under such strictures – if some intelligent, well-prepared welcome committee could intercept such an individual and direct them appropriately – then, I suppose it might be possible that alternative means could be found of freeing the people in question, unofficially, by spiriting them into the usual pre-war channels and sending them north.

Such a thing would of course be illegal and ill-advised, though, and Raphael and I would never condone, let alone aid and abet, such behavior.

In terms of aid you might render, it is a sweet and vacuous offer, as you well know. However, there is one thing that you can do. While I was in Washington, you were serving with Henriksen, correct? Is he still with you? If he is, please pass on the enclosed to him; it is the second letter I have written on a matter that is of personal interest to him. Having received no answer to the first I feared either the post lost it or that I misdirected it.

Take care of yourself, Cassie. The casualty lists from the recent battle remind of the human cost of this war. I will be very put out if you get killed in battle.

Gabriel Novak

Dear Gabriel,                                                                                                       February 2nd, 1862

I’ve scarce a minute to write but fearing to do Henriksen an injustice I dash off a few quick lines. He has written you a reply and asked to append it to my letter – you will find it enclosed. He tells me you have word of his family? That is fantastic! He is hoping to take leave to come out west and investigate himself – so he tells me – though I fear that his request will not be honored, as it will fall to Colonel Crowley to approve such, and unless I’ve much misunderstood the man he’ll not do so. Anything that Crowley believes will give Henriksen ease or satisfaction will be denied him, or else granted in such a way as to negate all pleasure that might have been found, lest Henriksen ever forget the subordinate position that he has deigned to rise above in donning the uniform.

Other than that, little to say. Tremendously busy. General McClellan comes in hours to inspect the camp. Button polish has never been in more demand.

I think myself in love with D. I’ve not yet told them so. Every intelligent impulse screams that I should not do so, that it would be ill-advised and perhaps even dangerous to speak the words aloud, yet in intimate moments of passion they rise unbidden to my thoughts, rest on the tip of my tongue begging for release, and the urge to surrender and speak grows. I both long for and dread the marching of the armies.

J.C. Novak

“I expected no less from you,” said General McClellan to Colonel Crowley as he walked past the 27th New York Infantry. General Elkins and all the Colonels, Lieutenant Colonels, Majors and staff from the Brigade trailed behind McClellan as he paced his horse before the neatly ordered files of soldiers. Visitors and observers made a line to their left, important men and women from Washington. Raising his voice, the very paragon of how James imagined a leader to sound, every bit a match to soldierly appearance and bearing, the General shouted, “I expected no less from the men of New York and Maine!” A huge cheer erupted from the assembled Regiment. “When I see troops as committed, as loyal, as dedicated, as hardworking as you, I am inspired, I am honored to be the
leader of a force composed of such noble men. Your efforts will not go unrewarded! The time approaches when I shall lead you to glorious battle and you will reap your just desserts in the form of victory over our traitorous opponents!” There was another cheer, the loudest James had ever heard the soldiers give on the promise of so little in return. Even should the Army of the Potomac emerge the victor of the next conflict, how many would die to secure triumph? Would such a win herald the end of the war? James didn’t dare hope so.

“I’m very impressed, Colonel,” McClellan continued conversationally as the group proceeded. Unsurprisingly, after all their hard work and additional drill, the entire Regiment’s performance had been exemplary but the 27th New York had outdone themselves. Word had trickled down through the ranks of Crowley’s condemnations and, for better or for worse, the troops were united in hating him and wanting to show that they were none of the things Crowley had accused them of. Whenever they next found themselves in battle, James suspected they’d fight like demons.

“They were a rough bunch, but I’ve whipped them into shape,” said Crowley with false modesty. Disgusted, James repressed a snort at the unsubtle comparison of the soldiers to slaves. “And even I must confess, they’ve worked very hard this past month. They wished to impress you, General.” The Colonel said that last bit loudly enough for the soldiers to hear.

“They have succeeded,” roared McClellan, to the general acclaim of the amassed soldiers. “Who was responsible for their training while you were attending the Council of War in January?”

“Lieutenant Colonel Tanner,” Crowley said, making sure his young second-in-command was pushed forward. The young man looked especially boyish amidst the group of older soldiers, but there was nothing but confidence on his face.

“Excuse me,” General Elkins interjected mildly. “I believe Major Novak has borne primary responsibility for their training this winter; before that it was my responsibility.”

“Yes,” said Crowley with a sneer. “I’m sure your brother-in-law was assiduous in doing his duty, but the Lieutenant Colonel had the command, not a mere Major.”

“Is this the brother of the lovely Hannah?” asked McClellan graciously. It was impossible to tell what he thought of Crowley’s suggestion that Elkins was only bringing up James’ contribution because of their relationship rather than because it was the truth. James resisted the urge to grind his teeth and instead smiled and modestly inclined his head to his commander. This might be the only chance he had to impress himself on McClellan’s memory, he wouldn’t ruin it with his well-earned, long-nursed bitterness against the Colonel.

“Indeed, and he’s a fine officer,” said Elkins, nudging James forward. “Originally the Captain of Company B of the 27th New York – you’ll recall, you noted the promptness of their response to the bugle calls?” McClellan offered a hand and James shook it deferentially. The General gave him a warm smile, his irresistible charisma and the praise bringing a faint flush of embarrassment to James’ cheeks.

I didn’t do much, I could have – should have – done more…

“Keep up the good work, Major,” said McClellan. “Your Colonel is going places – high places – and there will be many opportunities for a young, talented subordinate of his.”

“Thank you, sir,” James replied, trying to repress his natural reticence to own his accomplishments.

They finished passing the 27th and McClellan turned to Colonel Jackson of the 5th Maine and began lavishing praise on his unit. Though McClellan was lavish and effusive in his commendation,
James knew that regardless of his own accomplishments, the 27th New York had earned every word bestowed upon them. Glancing back, he shot a covert thumbs up and smile of approval towards the Captains of his Regiment and received beaming looks in return.

The remainder of the review passed quickly and when it was done, McClellan met with the senior officers and everyone else was dismissed. Left to his own devices, James hurried back to his Regiment so he too could compliment them as they deserved. The troops had been dismissed to an afternoon off, well-earned, and already most were engaged in quiet pastimes, knowing their commander remained on the premises and thus avoiding more raucous pursuits that might otherwise tempt them. The day was mild and sunny and music drifted through the camp, voices raised in upbeat songs, and the crack of wood spoke of a game of stick ball being played on the parade grounds. Most of the officers from the 27th were gathered at a low fire before Crowley’s tent. When James approached, every one save Wandell looked up, expressions ranging from curious to relieved to excited to nervous.

“The General was impressed,” said James. It felt unnecessary to repeat, McClellan had said enough to make that clear, yet broad grins broke out on many faces at his words. They looked like a class of school boys responding to the praise of a favorite teacher. McClellan was very popular among soldiers; his approval meant a lot. “Colonel Crowley sang your praises as well – he is pleased with the improvements you made over the past month.”

“But what did you think, Major?” asked Lieutenant Tran. James flushed red, took his hat off and raked a hand through his hair.

“I thought it went without saying that I think you’ve done phenomenally,” he managed. “You have worked tirelessly for this accomplishment, and if there was anything I could do to reward your diligence, you know I’d do so.”

“You got us blankets,” said Bass.

“Captain Fitzgerald got the Regiment blankets,” James corrected.

“At your instigation,” amended Fitzgerald. James’ cheeks grew even hotter. “We’ve also you to thank for the hospital.”

“That was entirely Hester’s doing.”

“I’m sure she’d have done as much if the Regiment did not include her brother,” said Bradbury, rolling his eyes.

“Major, don’t fight it, you’ve done great,” said Captain Shurley. “We assume Crowley will get the credit but we wanted you to know that we know who deserves the credit.” Henriksen nodded solemn agreement, Bradbury grinning at his side, the others assembled showing him approving looks.

“I just came to say that you all did fantastically,” stammered James.

_I didn’t do anything commendable, all I did was my duty – all I did was enforce the unreasonable orders of an unreasonable man. I’ve done nothing worthy of this praise._

“No,” Wandell looked up from poking at the fire, gave James a steady look. Technically they were all veterans after Bull Run, but often it didn’t feel that way, but Wandell’s greater experience still gave him authority and respect among the other Captains and among the men. “We assembled here to say to you that you did good, Major. You did real good. What you’re dealing with isn’t easy, and we appreciate what you’re doing and how hard you’re working.”
“Thank you,” he whispered. It was all the reply he could muster, his eyes swimming with tears. Mortified, he pulled his hat back on, wiped his hand over his eyes before anyone could notice how effected he was. His ridiculous reaction was just fatigue dragging him down, just stress making him over-sensitive, just their praise going to his head. He knew there was so much more he could have done, so much more he should have done. He’d done well, but he had to do better.

“Well, I’m for a game of cards, if anyone is interested?” Wandell looked around.

The lieutenants and captains recognized the informal dismissal and began to disperse towards their own pursuits. Wandell pulled out a deck of playing cards and shuffled them with practiced expertise. Though several shot James looks and offered invitations to join in whatever activity they intended to spend the afternoon in, James demurred, struggling to contain his emotions, determined to devote his limited hours of freedom to some much-needed sleep.

“Well, Winchester,” James said as he ducked into his tent. He was sure his clerk was working, and he was sure that it would take a direct order to make the boy take his own break. “You should…”

Zachariah, General Blaine, Richard Roman, Ms. Harvelle and Boyle made a crowd in James’ tent. Stunned, he froze. Sam looked up from the desk, a wild, distracted look on his face, and looked down again determinedly.

“James!” said Zachariah with warmth, catching a startled James in an stiff imitation of a brotherly embrace. “It’s been too long!”

“What brings you here?” James struggled to collect himself, still moved by the officers’ declaration of support, rattled after assuming he’d step into the small tent to peace and quiet. “Um, won’t you join me outside? It’s rather crowded in here…” If he couldn’t have serenity he could at least give Winchester privacy. “And Corporal, you’re dismissed, read a book or something.” Surprised, Sam blinked at him, but James gave no one time to reply, stepping out of the tent and into the open air outside. The group around the nearby fire was mostly gone, only Wandell, Shurley, Pike and a Lieutenant whose name James couldn’t recall staring intently at the cards they held, a rock holding down the top of the deck from which they drew so that the wind couldn’t scatter the cards.

“That was well done, Cassie, very well done,” beamed Zachariah. “Did I see you shaking hands with the General? Fantastic – capital. And Colonel Crowley is the very model of an officer: he’s going places and he’ll take you with him!”

“That would be…” James fished for something to say, anything to say, that wouldn’t be a lie.

Blaine spared him having to come up with something adequate to say by nodding and speaking into James’ pause. “I was at General McClellan’s Council of War. Colonel Crowley distinguished himself with his intelligence, insight and knowledge of the strategies of war.”

“I’m a little jealous,” said Boyle, and he did sound it, though James couldn’t guess which aspect of the situation Boyle was jealous of.

Was it the 20 hours days or the all night duty? Or perhaps he envies me the paperwork. No, I cannot believe he wishes the work, he merely wishes the accolades, as Crowley himself does. Boyle wishes he were attached to a superior with prospects, that is the only aspect of my condition he would emulate. I never knew him ambitious. Was he ever thus?

“Nonsense,” said Ms. Harvelle with a doting smile towards Boyle which, as usual, Roman appeared completely oblivious to. “You are in a fine position yourself, Colonel, you have quite the future ahead of you. What was it that General McClellan said when he reviewed your Regiment in
December?"

"‘I have never seen a better display of artillery in my life,’" said Boyle, imitating the General’s rolling, rich voice. "‘If I could replicate your unit man for man I could think of no better defense for our august capital city! I am glad it is you and your troops at this most vulnerable outpost position!’" Boyle beamed smugly.

"I take it your training as heavy artillery has gone well?” asked James, mustering the appearance of interest.

"Excellently,” Boyle said as if such an outcome was a foregone conclusion. “The 14th Massachusetts was rechristened the First Massachusetts Heavy Artillery on January 1st, with our orders from the General himself – written in his hand, no mere clerk left to pen such an important honor!”

“So when we embark on the offensive with the coming of spring, you will not be participating?” James said mildly. Affronted, Boyle stared at him, but James assumed a guileless expression. If his friend wanted to compete for accolades, let him be reminded that he was boasting of outpost duty, that provided the Army of the Potomac performed their duty, there would be no call for the defenses around Washington to act because General Johnston and the Confederate army would be engaged elsewhere. The best chances for promotion and notice would be among those facing the greatest danger, those who actually fought.

“Speaking of which, when will the armies march?” asked Zachariah curiously.

“That is the question on everyone’s lips,” Ms. Harvelle chirped. “Even my dear Mr. Roman is told nothing! Nor the Colonel! Though we came among General McClellan’s party, he is mum on the matter.” The look on her face was all innocence, an image enhanced by the bobbing of a large feather on her hat, the subtlety of the powders which made her appear even more youthful than she actually was. The doting expression on Roman’s face only added to the idea that there could be nothing more innocuous than for her to ask about military affairs. It had been a long time since James had cause to think on all he’d observed at the November dinner for his birthday – only the letters that Freeley and Ms. Cassidy wished forwarded had reminded James of civilian matters all winter – but now all his suspicions returned enhanced. Fortunately, James knew nothing of import, nothing that wasn’t public knowledge, and thus felt no compunction telling what he might.

“Word is that we are to transport down the Rappahannock River to someplace beyond the Confederate flank and from there march on Richmond,” he supplied. “And the president, as Commander and Chief, has issued orders that regardless of where we march – he suggests Centreville and Manassas – we must do so by February 22nd.”

“The General doubts that the army will be prepared to march in a scant few weeks,” said Mr. Roman. Boyle nodded agreement. James looked at them each in turn, wondering what they had seen during the review earlier. For his part, James had seen troops fit as a fiddle and raring to go. Their greatest ailments were the cold and boredom, both of which could be cured by marching south. If it were up to him, they’d have moved in January, as the Confederates had done in the Valley, as Thomas and Garfield had done in Kentucky, as the press suggested General Grant was to do in Tennessee.

“That’s nonsense,” said General Blaine, sparing James from having to find a polite way of saying the same. “While some units are more prepared than others, with scant rearrangement the troops best trained – such as those here – can be sent to the front, and those yet green can man the fortresses. That is not a position that requires a veteran unit.” Boyle glowered, catching the dig even though...
Blaine appeared to ignore him. “This army is ready to fight. I would suggest, based on my experience, that this army needs to fight!”

“What experience is that?” asked Ms. Harvelle curiously.

“My father-in-law led Free Soil troops in Kansas,” Zachariah explained with pride, as if the connection bestowed expertise and authority on him by extension. “He participated in the siege of Lawrence, leading several hundred men against the Missourian agitators.”

What did Dean say? “After mama died, everything was blood and fire and violence.” Was he at Lawrence? Based on Dean’s statements, I must suppose that if he fought at all, it was on the side of the “Missourian agitators.” What does that say about the Free Soil men? What does that say about the death of his mother? What does that say about Dean and Sam and their father? John Brown did murder at Pottawatomie in the name of ‘freedom’ and ‘justice’ for the slaves. What excesses might others on the Free Soil side have engaged in? What cause might they have had to kill a woman, a mother with young sons?

“Cassie?”

“I didn’t know you were involved in the actual battles.” James fished for a way to steer the conversation that might provide answers to his questions. There weren’t so many people in Kansas that’d it be outlandish to think that the Winchesters and Blaine might know each other – perhaps Sam recognized him, perhaps that’s why he looked so out of sorts, perhaps I can ask him about it later – especially if both were living around Lawrence. “Might you have met my clerk while you were there?”

“Your clerk?” asked Blaine blankly.

“The young man who was in my tent with you earlier. He is from Kansas, as is his family. Their last name is Winchester.”

“Samuel Winchester?” Blaine broke into a cold smile that sent a chill down James’ spine. Suddenly, he was possessed by the feeling that he should not have said anything about Sam. “I scarce recognized him, he’s sprouted like a beanstalk. Yes, I knew the Winchesters in Kansas.” There was nothing of excitement at the kindling of old acquaintance; Blaine’s tone was cold, snide, aloof, strangely dangerous. “Their father, Captain John Winchester, was one of the commanders of the Federal troops in the area, and frustratingly sympathetic to the Missouri interlopers. Men like him were a part of the problem there, a big part of it – happy to allow the principals of popular sovereignty to be trampled upon even as they crowed loudly about neutrality and equality. 1,500 men marching on Kansas from Missouri wasn’t neutrality, it was an invasion of those who would see the will of those actually living in Kansas trampled upon.”

Captain John Winchester. That’s what he did after graduating West Point. That’s why the Winchester’s moved to Kansas in 1850, at a point when it was scarce civilized and overrun by Indians. Not only was Winchester somehow capable of hating Dean – sweet, vulnerable, loving Dean – he was also a man who would move his family a thousand miles and more to an untried frontier, with no knowledge of when statehood might come, despite the dangers of Indians, isolation, illness, exposure. Worse than that – considering the things Sam and Dean each have said, the way Sam looks and acts like a veteran though he is but 16, how Dean speaks of violence with detachment, Winchester must have taken his young sons into battle.

It all comes back to their mother, doesn’t it? Whatever happened to Mary Winchester is at the heart of this.
“He’s not spoken of it much,” said James with what detachment he could. “It sounds like it must have been interesting.”

“That’s one word for it,” snorted Blaine. “I see the look on your face, Novak – it’s precisely what you think, both sides did cruel things to the other, it’s true, but whatever ill deeds some zealots on our side did were for the Cause. Brown was a great man – an inspired man – for all that he was extreme by my standards. Too obsessed with the black man, he kept losing sight that it was about the freedom to make the choice, not the actually outcome. Watch out for Mr. Winchester – young though he may be, and younger still when I knew him, he had the devil in him in a fight.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said James faintly. Sam was always gentle, intelligent, hard-working, yet James found Blaine’s words entirely plausible.

It sounds like perhaps he had cause to be vicious in battle. Dean said their mother was murdered in May, 1856, didn’t he? That was when the violence was escalating in Kansas. This must all interrelate, though I don’t yet know enough to see how.

Those poor boys. My poor Dean.

My Dean?

James shuddered.

“Yes, enough of this talk of a bloody past,” said Ms. Harvelle lightly. “I’d far prefer to speak of a bloody future!”

“That’s macabre of you,” Roman said, looping his arm through hers affectionately. She gave him a beaming smile even as she shot Boyle a coy sidelong glance.

“I think the armies will march by the 22nd, I do,” she said. “Despite McClellan’s objections.”

Happy to sound an authority, Boyle chimed in with his theory of what the General intended. Zachariah picked up the thread, ranting that McClellan’s objections were bunk and that if others could march, so could the army encamped about Washington. That led to spirited discussion between the others, their guesses on where the army would march and when, how the Confederates would react. With nothing to contribute, it was easy for James to fade into the background. As a group, they revealed a startling array of knowledge on different aspects of the war. Zachariah reported the opinions of his allies in Congress – Mr. Sumner said this, Mr. Stevens said that. James noted with interest that everyone he named were aligned with the Radical elements of the Republican Party, those who said that the war should be pursued more ruthlessly, that emancipation should be made an explicit war aim, that President Lincoln was vacillating and weak, that McClellan was dilatory and slow. The authorities cited by Mr. Roman were no less august, ranging from the President to Secretary of War Stanton to Horace Greeley; General Blaine joined in the name dropping as well, General Halleck and General Meigs and other high-ranking officers. Blaine was also the only one to have been involved in McClellan’s Council of War, and seemed indifferent about the danger of speaking in front of non-army civilians of unknown allegiance, boastfully reporting what he’d heard of the General’s plan: take transports down the Rappahannock, bypass the Confederate emplacements along the river, march to Urbanna, steal a march on the Confederate army and march on a largely undivided Richmond. Ms. Harvelle listened as silently as James did and far more assiduously. There was an intense look to her eyes that a vapid smile did nothing to hide, whereas James was hard pressed to pay attention, his exhausted thoughts too busy attempting to piece together what little he knew of what must have happened in Kansas.

If I can understand what occurred there, if I can reconstruct the horrors in Dean’s past, I will be
better able to support him, better able to offer words of comfort that are not devoid of meaning, better able to pleasure him. I will be better able to love him as I wish to.

“Are you well, Major Novak?” A gentle hand on his shoulder pulled James from his reverie. The group had fragmented as they’d walked, James too abstracted to notice, and Ms. Harvelle had fallen back and was looking at him with what appeared to be genuine concern.

Of course, entirely genuine. Does she still think to flirt with me? Surely after this conversation she can have no belief that I have any information of interest, certainly nothing to compare to the intelligence possessed by Blaine, my brother, Mr. Roman, and even Colonel Boyle.

“Tired, Ms. Harvelle,” he replied. “It’s been a stressful month, preparing for the General’s review today. Things should calm down now.”

“That is optimistic of you,” she said, smiling. “Colonel Crowley does not seem a man to let up on the reins, and while General Elkins has never struck me as unduly harsh, he is clearly a dutiful general. I’m sure you must be very busy.” He nodded. “Go on – go rest. I’ll let the others know, they will scarce notice the difference, though I suspect your brother will wish to say goodbye.”

“Thank you, Ms. Harvelle.” He could think of no ulterior motive for her kindness. Good God, what am I becoming, that I look at a gesture of goodwill from a woman against whom I harbor only unsubstantiated suspicions, that I assume that everything she does must have an agenda behind it? “You’re too kind.”

“I’m not, really,” she said with a toothy grin.

And then she goes and looks at me like that, says something like that. I scarce know what to think. It is for greater minds than mine, for more assiduous investigators, to suss out the motives of a Miss Joanna Harvelle. Someone call a Pinkerton.

General McClellan’s party clustered near the entrance to the fort, fancifully dressed officers and attaches on horseback, the entourage that advised and aided the General in the execution of his duties. Zachariah and the others drifted towards a group of mounts tied to a hitching post; they stopped and looked back. “Coming!” called Ms. Harvelle brightly, straightening her bodice, hefting her shirts to make what haste she might despite her corset, full skirts, thick coat and dainty slippers. Waving farewell, James returned to his own tent.

When he stepped within, Sam was still bent over the small table, but in place of the ledgers and account books that normally rested open to reveal columns in Sam’s neat handwriting, he instead stared at a single page on which he’d scarce written a word. He jumped in his seat as James brushed entered, the poorly built stool creaking under Sam’s weight.

“Hello, sir,” Sam said weakly, settling back down. He’s grown even more, how did I not notice?

“How are you, Winchester?” James asked, gratefully dropping to the cold ground and wrapping his blanket around his shoulders.

“Fine, I suppose.” Sam’s eyes flickered to his paper, back to James.

“I’m sorry, I have interrupted something private? I promise, I’m far too tired to read letters over your shoulder, even were I inclined to invade your privacy so rudely,” said James. Sam flushed.

“No, I didn’t think you…I mean…it’s nothing,” stammered Sam.

“You’re writing to your brother about A.Z. Blaine,” said James with abrupt insight.
Shut your damn mouth, James! Did I truly say that aloud?

“How did you know that?” Sam demanded shrilly.

James let his eyes slip shut and massaged his temples, wishing that the therapeutic heat and pressure of doing so would fix his fatigue and the apparent negative impact it had on his judgment. “The General mentioned his time in Kansas and I discovered that he had known your family there. I return to find you writing a letter, acting like I’ve caught you filching my rations. It seemed a logical conclusion, that you must be doing something you consider illicit. You know I do not mind if you write to Dean, right?”

God damn it, James, shut up! Maybe he won’t notice, maybe…

“Dean, huh?”

Damn it all!

“Yes,” James said steadily. Perhaps he could yet brazen his way through the egregious error of referring to Winchester by his first name. “He and I have exchanged several letters by way of his friend Lafitte,” he prevaricated hastily. “If you’ll recall, some months ago I mentioned he was concerned about you? Traitor or no, I wished to ease his mind on your health, and we have been in correspondence since.”

“You had no right to go behind my back like that!” said Sam angrily.

“Perhaps I didn’t,” James said. God, he was tired. Better to have this out now, better to have him know that Dean and I are acquainted. It couldn’t stay a secret forever and the shock and anger produced when Sam found out would have been greater the longer the deception was maintained. “But it’s done now. I assure you, Mr. Winchester and I have said nothing concerning you in some time. As it turns out, he and I have a great deal in common. We’re friends.” And we have illicit liaisons once a week. And we’re lovers. And oh, Corporal, I adore him. James flushed bright. “I don’t owe you an explanation about whom I choose to befriend nor whom I write to.”

James’ words had no impact on the fury painting Sam’s face, reddening his cheeks. The young man seemed at a loss for how to reply. Sam looked down at his paper, at James, back to the page. Finally, Sam threw his pen down, splattering ink in black droplets, and stormed out.

“That went well,” muttered James, dropping his head into his hands.

“What a volatile boy,” his brother’s voice was snide as Zachariah stepped into the tent, stooping so as not to brush his head against the canvas top. An ugly sneer twisted his lips. “Your clerk nearly ran me over, Cassie.”

“I’m sorry for his rudeness,” James apologized, though he wasn’t sure why he bothered. As if it was his place to seek forgiveness for Sam’s supposed rudeness!

“Youth is wasted on the young,” Zachariah sniffed, settling onto the stool. “I’m glad we had this opportunity to see you in your natural element. You’ve been too long from the city. Margaret has had enough of your excuses – you must come to dinner.”

“I cannot be spared for even an evening,” said James, repeating the words as he’d done every time his brother and sister-in-law had sent him an invite to their home over the past few months.

“Pish posh,” said Zachariah dismissively, the flippant words incongruous in his slick voice. “The Colonel says you are scarce essential here, and I can see why – with such a competent colonel and
lieutenant colonel, there must be little left for you to do.” Dropping his hands, James stared at his brother, beyond bemusement, beyond wonder, beyond shock. It was so similar to the way he’d been treated since November that he couldn’t even pretend surprise, but that his family members and loved ones so consistently believed it was unbelievable. How could they think that James would be content to laze about, that he wasn’t working his hardest? Between the words of his mother at the wedding in October, those of Anna in her letters, considering Zachariah’s words now, they all accepted that he must be indolent no matter what he said to the contrary. At least Elkins and Hannah know the truth. At least Hester has seen all. I know that Gabriel would take my part were he involved.

Dean believes me.

“If you will not believe me unavailable because I have said so, I scarce know what I can say that will convince you.” Though he started mildly, the longer James spoke the more anger surged through his veins, forcing away his fatigue, quieting the small voice in his mind yet toying with thoughts of the Winchesters and Kansas. “Since I have arrived you have consistently undervalued me, taken the word of virtual strangers over my own, and I have accepted it, understanding that it is a product of my own diffidence, an inevitable result of my unwillingness to draw attention to the failings of others that they might thus be seen for the shirkers they are. I must wonder, though – in this case, regardless of what Colonel Crowley says to you, how little must you think goes into the management of Regiment? You know he spent three weeks in Washington during January, that even before that he was frequently at your table and at other events in Washington. When he was not here, when Tanner left with him, who do you think bore responsibility for the management of the unit? Yet, your words indicate that you think management a substantive job and that Colonel Crowley is commendable for doing it well. You cannot have it both ways, brother.

“If you think this job intensive, you must acknowledge he has been largely absent, in which case you have to see that in his absence I have borne responsibilities that are above my station, and done so admirably to have achieved the results that you commend. Alternatively, if it is not a large job, he has done nothing to earn your regard nor have I to earn your scorn. Regardless of which you are convinced of, you cannot have it both ways. Further, if you will for once listen to me instead of assuming that you know more of my own employment than I do, I will tell you: Crowley does little, Tanner does less. Though I be but Major I have done the duties of all three with only that clerk you scorn to aid me, and I have done it well enough that none can tell the difference. So no, Zachariah, I am not available to come to dinner at your home, I do not have time to spend hours riding back and forth to Washington DC, and I am extremely busy.”

Zachariah was, inexplicably, beaming at him. The saccharine, toothy smile only increased James’ agitation. Throwing off his blanket, he leapt to his feet and agitatedly paced the short length of the tent, his hat brushing the ceiling wherever the canvas sagged. “Furthermore, I have held my peace about our equipage but I’d have you know that the materials we were provided were precisely as substandard as I indicated. I still cannot believe that you took the word of corrupt men over that of the observations of my own eyes, as if I have any cause to lie.” Leaning down, he grabbed his old blanket, moth eaten and filled with holes. He used it now to grant meager protection from the chill of the frozen ground “If we’d not taken matters into our own hands, this garbage is all that we’d have to survive the winter. Only the benevolence of the Fitzgeralds of Binghamton has seen us provided with blankets. To them will go the credit and the praise and the reputation that could have been ours – could have been yours – if instead of tying yourself to such people as Mrs. Talbot and Mr. Roman, you would take a stand in defense of the lives of thousands of your countrymen who are prepared to leave all the comforts of their own homes and risk their lives in defense of the principals that I always believed we as a family and you personally subscribed to.”

“This is it, Cassie!” crowed Zachariah.
“I haven’t the foggiest what you mean by that,” said James hotly, “I am done with you treating my hard work and accomplishments as if they mean nothing, I—”

“Good,” Zachariah interrupted him. James stopped abruptly, tottering, nearly falling onto his blankets. “Excellent. Cassie, I’m not a fool. I’m well aware that Crowley is claiming accomplishments beyond his capabilities. You know why it happens? Because you do not contradict him, you do not crow, you stand quietly aside and allow him to triumph at your expense. If you will not own your worth, if you will not boast of your accomplishments, who will? Modesty is a virtue and I commend you for it, but it has no place in politics.”

“This isn’t politics, this is the army!”

“I’ll not even dignify that with a refutation. I know you know better,” scoffed Zachariah. “Do not lose this fire, brother. If you have any hope of forging ahead, you must learn to be Colonel Crowley, instead of letting him reap the benefits of your accomplishments while you toil in obscurity. As long as you remain so, you will forever be the whipping boy for any officer who realizes that you are a sure-fire bet to make them look good while happily taking none of the credit you richly deserve. Stand up for yourself, Cassie! No one else will do it for you.” Looking well-pleased with himself, Zachariah rose, turned and left the tent, leaving a stunned James staring after him, yet holding a ratty, tattered blanket before him.

...he’s not wrong.

He’s an ass, but he’s not wrong.

Exhausted, James spread the blanket on the ground once more, wrapped himself in his more stout woolens and lay down. He was asleep almost instantly, his dreams haunted by demons roaming the plains of Kansas, the grasses afire, and two boys weeping over their dead mother.

“Leave me,” James groaned as a hand latched onto his side. He was badly injured, laying amidst weeds, and the fires were coming closer.

“Time to wake up, Major.” Sam was rescuing him, young Sam. It seemed fitting, but it also felt wrong.

It should be Dean – where is Dean, is he alright? Sam should be helping his brother, we have to save Dean, he’s in more danger. Nothing is more important than ...

James’ eyes flew open and the dream imagery faded instantly, leaving him with a sense of disquiet, the heat of a lamp falling over his face in the darkened early evening, and a need to be reassured that all was well with Dean.

Damn it, why isn’t it Wednesday yet?

“Sorry, sir,” said Sam. The faint lamp light illuminated his face in stark brightness while leaving some features in deep darkness, giving him an air every bit as demonic as the forms that had haunted James’ sleep.

Sam had the devil in him in a fight.

It was hard to believe as Sam stared down at him with something resembling tenderness, contriteness in his eyes suggesting that the words he lilted out referred to more than waking James up.

“Thank you,” James said, rising and scrubbing grit from his eyes. His hat had fallen free; retrieving it, he placed it on his head, grimacing at how cold the fabric was, how greasy yet brittle his hair had
become. It had grown annoying long as well, curling about his ears. There was a barber for the Regiment but James hadn’t time to visit him. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been able to take a bath, been able to clean his body at all beyond soaking a rag in frigid water and quickly scrubbing himself. “I’d better go.” Straightening his coat, adjusting his pants, he surreptitiously itched his inner thigh.

“I’ll walk with you,” said Sam. Shrugging, James stepped out into the night. The rhythm of the camp was back to normal, perhaps a little bit more boisterous than normal. It was a relief. James hadn’t realized how familiar the sequence of their days had become until the preparation for General McClellan’s review disrupted them. “I was writing to Dean. About Blaine. He was in Kansas when our mother died and it got me thinking…I mean, the armies are going to march soon, right?” Sam paused, awaiting confirmation that James could not give. “Well, regardless, either Dean’ll go to battle, or we will, or both. And he could die. Considering that, it seems petty to stay angry with him. If I got word that he died – you’d hear, maybe, since apparently you’re his friend – how would I feel knowing I hadn’t contacted him because of stupid things we each said years ago?”

“That’s a very mature attitude,” said James approvingly, unsure what to say, what Sam expected of him. Absolution? Approval? Guidance?

“I’m not a child,” huffed Sam, sounding very childish indeed. James chuckled, and after an angry cluck, Sam joined him ruefully. “Do you think he wants to hear from me?”

“I think he’d be delighted,” James replied. Even in the low light he could see Sam flush. They made their way through the camp and out to where the pickets were taking up their positions around the walls of the fortress. The weather, thankfully, held mild. It felt warm in contrast to the weather in December and early January, though clouds on the horizon suggested a shift to come, with rain or snow to presage it. “From what he’s said I believe he cares about you a great deal and is genuinely concerned for your welfare.”

“Or at least, those are the words that Ben Lafitte puts in his mouth,” said Sam, rolling his eyes.

“Have you reason to doubt Dean’s friend?” James asked, surprised.

“I can think of a few,” said Sam darkly. “They’ve been close for a while but I never could trust Lafitte like Dean does.”

“Oh?”

“Always seemed to me like he was using Dean.” Sam shifted uncomfortably. In the darkness, James tried to read the expression on Sam’s face, but it was impossible, the shadows too deep, too shifting, to reveal subtleties. “Then there was Andrea Kormos, his fiancée. Our father always thought Kormos brought those who killed mama, told them stuff about us that wasn’t true. It’s hard to know – the men wore masks and she did come to warn us. By then she and Lafitte weren’t together any longer, but John was always suspicious. He hated when Lafitte was around and did whatever he could to keep him and Dean apart. Might be the only time I know that Dean willfully defied him – he and Lafitte still spent plenty of time together, just not when John could see.”

“I met Kormos,” James said. Sam’s eyes narrowed. “I attended a dinner at my brother’s home. General Blaine was there and Ms. Kormos was his companion. I can’t say she made much of an impression on me.”

“From what I can tell, that makes you an exception to the norm,” said Sam. “Men think her ‘exotic.’ She got attention wherever she went. Then again, there were so few women in Kansas that any woman, young or old, attractive or unattractive, got attention wherever they went. Even men
received unwanted advances sometimes – or at least, I know Dean and I did.” That’s as close to confirmation as I’ll ever get, unless Dean can ever bring himself to speak of it. Sam paused. “Do you know that Lafitte writes all of Dean’s letters?”

Right, I told Sam that I exchange letters with Dean. More lies, even when I try to come clean, I tell lies. How on earth would he react if he knew that Dean and I meet regularly?

“I am aware, yes. Dean is illiterate?”

“Not exactly.” Sam shook his shaggy head. “I’m not sure how to explain it. He’s smart, no matter what our father says, as smart as I am, but I’ve seen him try to write and heard him try to read, he’s got the letters down but he can’t seem to string them into words. Mama always told him not to worry about it, that he’d figure it out eventually, and she got him into other hobbies. Our father was less understanding. Dean took John’s words to heart. Anyway, Lafitte could write anything he wants in those letters, Dean’d never know the difference.”

Not that it matters. I’ve never met Lafitte, and I’ve only had a couple letters from Dean. I don’t have to worry about whatever lies Lafitte might put in Dean’s mouth, I only have to worry about what Dean’s inhibitions prevent him from saying.

“I am grateful for you sharing this with me,” said James sincerely. “Whether Dean be the one I am having trouble understanding, or if it is the lens of Lafitte’s interpretation that makes things challenging, I don’t know – though honestly I doubt Lafitte is much of a factor. However, I find him difficult to fathom – Dean is self-deprecating to the point of incomprehensibility sometimes.”

“If you knew our father it’d be understandable,” grumbled Sam. “Major, if you have been trading letters with Dean, you must have a way of getting word to him?” James nodded. “Might you forward my letter as well?”

“Does it bother you that Lafitte will be the one to read it aloud to him?”

“It’s not ideal,” Sam conceded. “However, there’s little choice. At least Dean trusts Lafitte. At least there is someone with him in whom he places some confidence. I’d worry about him if he were alone, especially during the war. He doesn’t value his life worth a damn.”

Does Dean trust me? How would he feel if I were to write to him? How would he feel if I asked about Lafitte, about Kansas, about Blaine and Andrea Kormos?

“Thank you for this,” said James. “All of it – your family’s personal business is yours and that you’d share it with me is much appreciated.”

“You’re my friend,” Sam said brightly. “And it sounds like you’re Dean’s friend too. While I’m still angry with him, and I was – justifiably! – annoyed to learn that you’d written to him without telling me, the truth is he could use a friend, use a good friend who will tell him the truth and be straight with him. He’s got a bad habit of making friends with people who treat him like garbage, people who treat him like our father treats him, and I know you’ll never do that. The more I thought about while I was trying to cool my head, the more I realized I’m actually glad that you’re his friend. I just want you to understand where he’s coming from. Also I do expect something in return.” There was a wicked grin on Sam’s face, made evil by the faint golden light leaking from his lamp. His eyes glimmered yellow, reflecting the flames. “Tell me about your family!”

“Huh? Why?” asked James, surprised. “Not that I mind – I’m more than willing – but we’re not terribly interesting.”
“I’ve now met three of your siblings,” Sam said skeptically. “Hannah is so cheerful and outgoing she is practically a caricature of herself; Hester is obsessed with women’s liberation and self-sacrificing enough to devote herself to the care of a brigade of strangers; and your brother is every stereotype of the slick politician rolled into one. I can scarce believe the three related. There must be something interesting about the family that would produce the three of them – and you as well!”

James thought about it for a moment before replying slowly, “Zachariah wasn’t always like that. You have to understand, he’s the eldest and…”

He and Sam talked all night as James made his rounds. There were no further great revelations about Dean and James didn’t dare steer their conversation in an attempt to learn more. It was still one of the most enjoyable evenings he’d had in a long time. James learned that Sam wished to be a lawyer, that he’d left home to go to school in Geneva and Sam shared stories of life on the frontier, carefully avoiding talk of the years after his mother died. For his part, James found himself speaking more openly about his family than he was accustomed to, discussing his parents and their expectations, the challenges they faced, his own interest in the law. Their long hours and months together had taught James that he and Sam saw the world and the country and the war similarly, but he’d never realized how closely their interests and their plans for after the war aligned.

_I haven’t thought about what happens after the war in some time._

When he’d first joined the army, when he’d first arrived in Washington DC after the 27th’s months in Elmira, all he could think about was what he would do when the war was over. While he and the men had signed up for two year terms, no one had believed the war would last so long. One battle and it would be over, they’d all be home by fall. Even now, many felt that when the armies marched again that would be the final cataclysm. James had always doubted things would end so quickly. The longer he stayed in the army, the more he believed that the next battle would no less settle things than the first battle had. The skirmishes that had thus far occurred during the winter had all been inconclusive, the armies on both sides were growing, and the Confederate States of America was a fully realized republic with a constitution, a government, a capital, archives, and all the trappings of state. This was not a half-baked opponent on the verge of collapse and there was no reason to believe that they would cease to fight regardless of the results of one battle.

_When I first arrived, I thought we’d all be home to spend Christmas with our families. I thought I’d be wed, happily wed, to Anna by now. I thought this would all be behind me, a brief interlude to burnish my reputation and help build my future in politics. When did I truly last think of going home? No, it is worse than that. Now, I do not wish to go home._

Matriculating at Union College, James had forged acquaintances with many men like Bartholomew Boyle, thought many of them close friends. The passage of a few years and a modest amount of fame and reputation had gone to Boyle’s head, changed his personality, but in the behavior of the man now James saw echoes of the boy he’d gone to school with. Nearly all came from prominent families, nursed high ambitions, and many had already met with successes made possible by their family’s wealth, prominence and connections. James was no different from them save in his lack of desire for the eminence that they sought. The friendships had primarily been intended to help him in the future, to enable him to build a network that would further his career. Contrasting those hollow acquaintances with the close relationships he’d developed with Bradbury, Henriksen, Fitzgerald, the Winchesters, even Reidy and Wandell and Bass, was like comparing the barest touch of sunlight on a chill day with the warm glow of brightest summer. The officers he worked with were bosom companions as well as dear friends with whom he shared common views and interests, men who would risk their lives to save him and whom he would willingly risk his life for. Because they shared a uniform, he would fight and die for Boyle should it prove necessary, but with none of the ardency that would fill him should he see, for example, Charles Bradbury facing mortal danger.
“Reticent” was the best he could describe his current attitude towards his fiancée. While he still cared deeply for her, the contrast between James’ feelings towards Dean and his feelings for her was stark. In all the ways his attachment to Anna was quiet, calm, restrained, his interest in Dean was exuberant, passionate, and uncontainable. Though there was no knowing what would happen with his new-found love, he was sure that even should he and Dean’s relationship prove short-lived and disastrous – even should James fall out of love as easily as he fell into love – he no longer could see himself longing for the quiet comforts of Anna’s companionship as a lover. As a friend, nearly as dear as a sister, she would ever have a place in his heart, but the thought of sharing intimacy with her brought no fire to his blood. Should he choose to stay the course with her, would that quiet love be enough? When he was forty, fifty, sixty, would the loving friendship they shared be of more importance than the relatively brief fire of youth and ardency? There was no way to know, but he suspected that regardless, even if the worst should happen with Dean, James would never be able to look on the insipid love he felt for Anna as a virtue in the way he once had. Some part of him would forever long for the all-consuming desire that enveloped him at the mere thought of Dean Winchester.

I do not want the war to end.

It felt selfish and wrong to long for the continuance of a conflict that brought misery and suffering to so many, yet it was inescapable when he considered what his future likely held. He yet anticipated great things for the United States when they weathered this conflict. The end of the war would signal a time of national unity, would – he had to believe! – mean an end to slavery, and would bring an end to the suffering and illness and death that afflicted even their peaceful winter camp. However, for him personally, he saw little to look forward to when he was drawn inexorably home. The end of the war would mean a return to Anna and the push to start a family of his own, a return to his work in law and the inevitable push towards politics that such employment naturally entailed so far as his family was concerned, a return to the constant pressure from his mother and father to accomplish more, be better, work faster, and a return to the dull familiarity of life in Walcott.

After the war ends, I will never see Dean again.

That such a prospect filled him with dread far more chill than the evening air was absurd, yet he could not put any other name to the creeping horror that goose bumped his flesh. Never seeing Dean again was a terrifying prospect.

It is well I have this realization now. I must learn to resign myself to it.

Dean,

February 2nd, 1861

I don’t know how to begin but I feel compelled to write you. Today, of all people in the world, I have encountered Joanna Harvelle here, in Virginia, in our tent, acting like she’s never seen me before. She’s smarter than that; I am sure she knew me. What brings her from Lawrence? Further, she is in the company of A.Z. Blaine, who either doesn’t recognize me or can’t be troubled to recall my name. Major Novak tells me that he has also met Andrea Kormos and that she is “with” Blaine, which I assume means she’s his mistress. Lafitte – who I assume is reading this – I thought you might like to know that she is residing in Washington. Save for the Major, there’s no one I can talk to about the absurdity of this group of people being assembled in one place at one time so far from where we all met. Though I am torn I felt I should write you and tell you. I’ve no idea why it feels so imperative. Perhaps it is merely an excuse.
I’m sorry, Dean. We both spoke in anger that day. You’ve attempted to communicate with me and I’ve been an ass in return. Even after you likely saved my life at Manassas, I couldn’t see past how angry I was that you refused to come north with me two years ago, that you chose dad and Lafitte over me. Seeing Blaine and Kormos and Harvelle again brought back many memories, of the night mama died, of the hunts dad took us on, of the last time I saw each of them. Seeing them brought back memories of the last time I saw you.

You’re my brother, Dean, and I don’t want to lose you. I think I’ve been so mad because I felt like I did lose you, but that was bull and I see that now. There’s more important things than a childish grudge. Major Novak said he writes you, and that he’d send this your way along with his letter.

All I wanted to say is: I accept your apology, and I hope you’ll accept mine. When the war is over, maybe we can talk sometime?

Sam Winchester

James fell silent, feeling profoundly awkward to be intruding on this moment long-distance intimacy between the estranged brothers. Expression carefully neutral, Dean had stood silent as the grave the entire time James read, not interrupting, not commenting, not even an exclamation leaving his mouth. Folding the letter, James hesitantly offered it to Dean across the space dividing them. It was only a few foot – they faced each other in the familiar clearing – but it felt further due to Dean’s stiff body language and undecipherable look.

Dean reached over and snatched the letter from him so abruptly that James started. The paper crinkled loudly as Dean stuffed it in his pocket, wheeled and stalked across the clearing.

“Dean…?” Concern and curiosity shared equal parts in James’ thoughts, but he couldn’t think how to give voice to his many questions.

“You been talkin’ to my brother about me?” snarled Dean, rounding, his hat shadowing his face such as to make his angry glare dark and ominous.

“Huh?”

“You said you kept my secrets and only told your own – this how you got about it? Told Sam all about yourself and me, huh? Told him – lied to him – that you write me? How in the hell did you justify that to him? Ain’t nothin’ normal or casual about tradin’ letters with a stranger, Cas!” By the time he stopped, Dean was shouting, his face red, his eyes wild and rimmed with tears. The words struck James as the frightened lashing out of a hurt animal but that didn’t make the outburst any less stunning, nor did it reduce the underlying justice of Dean’s accusations. “And you know Blaine and Andrea? You know Harvelle? What’re you playin’ at, Novak?” The use of his last name stung as harshly as the rebuke behind every angry word. “Why’d you really come find me in that clearing? You still expect me to think it was a random coincidence? How stupid do you think I am?”

“I don’t think you’re stupid,” stammered James. “I had no idea that you knew Blaine or Ms. Kormos or Ms. Harvelle, why should I think anything of the kind? Blaine is my brother’s father-in-law, he’s been an acquaintance for years!”

“Your brother is married to Meg?” Dean’s voice went totally flat, his expression closed, and the pain in James’ chest spiked. “How in the hell?”

“They’ve been wed for nearly a decade,” said James helplessly. “Dean, I had no idea any of these people were anything to you. Why should I ever have thought so? I’d heard Blaine speak of Kansas, but it never occurred to that you or Sam might know them.” Until I saw Sam writing, and I had to
ask if it concerned you, had to know if there was any relationship between whatever prompted Sam to finally, finally write and the pain I always see within you that I dare not ask about. “Dean, I only spoke to Sam of you because I had no choice. I told him I’d written you to assure him of his recovery after Bull Run and that we’d maintained correspondence since. It’s a lie, yes – would you rather I told him the truth? I’d not spoken to him of you since autumn, and then it was only to suggest that he write you. I thought you’d like to hear from him personally that he was doing well. At the time, he rebuked me for sticking my nose where it didn’t belong, justifiably told me off, and I hadn’t brought anything of the kind up again. It was officious of me to try to mend fences between you, I see that now. However, when he brought it up now, of course I encouraged him to do so. Unprompted, he spoke of Blaine and some of your past and I…”

I encouraged him to do so because I wanted to know more of you, wanted to learn things I thought you’d not share if I asked – even though you’ve told me that you’ll tell me anything. Why did I push Sam, why did I feel I had to ask about his letter at all?

Dean muttered something under his breath, ran a hand roughly over his stubbled cheeks, turned away.

“Please, Dean, I had no intention of – I have not betrayed your confidence. It was inevitable that Sam would learn of our acquaintance. He and I share a tent, we are forever in each other’s company, isn’t it better he know now that we are friends? He was shocked at it but he wasn’t upset, and now he’s written you——” Dean said something soft James couldn’t make out, and he pressed on. I should be calm, I should be measured, I don’t need to meet his anger with fear. Despite the thought, the words kept spilling from him, desperate and afraid. Please don’t leave, Dean, please don’t be angry with me, please, I need you. “—and he’s apologized! Isn’t that what you wanted, to be reconciled with him?” Seeing you is my source of joy, being with you restores me every week. “I didn’t know the content of this letter. You can’t possibly believe I intended any intentional deception as regards your brother or Blaine or any of them, how could I have known they were anything to you or your family?” You think I’m enough just the way I am, you think I’m adequate in and of myself without requiring the improvement of greater achievement, greater accomplishment – your expectations are met simply by my being here week after week and it’s glorious. I don’t know how I’d do this without you.

“I said——”

I trust you – I trusted you with everything.

“Please, Dean!” Unable to keep away, James crossed the space to him, put a hand on his shoulder.

I just wanted to find a way to fix things – to help you feel less sad – to help you get your brother back!

“Shut up, Novak, just – stop talking,” snarled Dean, rounding on him, throwing James’ hand away with a roll of his shoulder.

Why are you so angry with me?

“But——” There were tears filling Dean’s eyes, obscuring them to black pools, and beneath his veneer of anger James could swear he saw an ocean of anguish.

Why do I feel so broken and defenseless?

“Shut your damned mouth!” Dean’s voice broke on the words and he fled the few steps to Impala, vaulting easily into the saddle.
Because you still don’t trust me – because if you felt anything for me like how I feel for you, you’d never think so poorly of me with so little provocation. Would you?

“Dean!”

So many people have hurt you before that you cannot believe that I do not intend to do the same.

Dean kicked the horse into motion, made for the path he used to enter and leave the clearing. Paralyzed, James watched in horror, his chest agony, his thoughts in complete disarray. A tear slid down his cheek.

Please, Dean, don’t go.

Tree branches mostly obscured Dean when he stopped, looked over his shoulder, and said, “Be seein’ ya, Billy Yank. Hya!” Impala burst into motion with a crackle of dry leaves and the snap of twigs, and Dean was gone, lost beyond the screen of trees.

Let me prove myself to you!

“No,” James whispered, his knees giving out.

As many times as you need me to, however hard I have to work, I will show you that I am here, that I care, that I believe in you even when you cannot bring yourself to believe in me.

It was too late. Dean was gone. James wept his broken heart into his hands, the exhaustion and fatigue and stress of the past few weeks finally more than he could bear without Dean there to support him.

Judging by the stares he got when he returned to camp, James was quite the sight. To his horror, he passed Bradbury, but managed to ignore the young man’s attempt to ask him what was the matter. At least Winchester wasn’t in the tent when he got there. Though it was a busy day and James had his usual array of tasks awaiting him, he folded the blanket over himself, curled up on the floor and feel immediately into a trouble sleep. No one bothered him until evening, which must have been due to the divine influence of the Lord, working through the instruments of Bradbury, Henriksen, Sam, and James’ other friends.

The week that followed was hell. All of the normal frustrations and challenges remained, and on top of that James was forced to spend the week dodging the well-meant concern of his friends and his sisters. He slept poorly, his appetite was as nothing, and no amount of castigating himself for the ridiculousness of his behavior influenced how ill with worry and sadness he felt. Though February was passing quickly, there was no word on whether their Brigade would march, which did nothing to improve James’ mood. At least were the army active he would have a distraction, something to think about beyond the now-familiar routine of winter camp at Fort Lyon. The only silver lining was the fall of Fort Henry along the Cumberland River in Tennessee, thus returning the US Flag to the soil of the rebel state for the first time in nearly a year, and the optimistic predictions from the media that Fort Donelson would fall just as quickly. The news brought James a surface veneer of happiness while doing nothing to assuage his underlying distress. Indeed, in some ways it made things worse, for none could believe him sad when confronted by such glad tidings so he was forced to pretend to raptures of joy he couldn’t have been further from feeling. All in all, James was as low as he could ever recall feeling.

Despite his certainty that he was being a fool, James managed to keep a grip on a thread of optimism, the belief that Dean’s temper would cool and he’d return on Wednesday the 12th and Dean would be there. Of course, his thin hope proved ill-founded. He waited for hours in a steady drizzle until he
was completely soaked, until his skin felt rubbery and cold, until he couldn’t tell if it was rain or tears
dripping down his cheeks and off his chin.

I shouldn’t be surprised by this. I should have expected this. What could possibly have possessed me
to think he’d be here today, after how we left things last week? I thought we’d at least have the war
together. I didn’t really think things would fall apart, not like this, not so soon.

Please come back. Please, trust me, tell me clearly what I did that upset you so badly, let me
apologize and make it up to you. I need you, Dean. I can’t believe how much I already need you. I
can’t do this without you. Please.

James had never felt so alone.

Interlude

“Well, you appear to be back to your usual sunshine self,” said Harvelle sarcastically.

“Shut up,” snapped Dean. “Have you got anything for me?”

She knows Castiel. How? Is Cas actually a spy? Has he given her information? Has she flirted with
him, used him, slept with him? There is no way that she doesn’t know that Cas knows me and Sam.
Considering how often she met me in that copse of trees, it is impossible that it be a coincidence,
impossible that Castiel might have found me there by accident when she came so frequently on
purpose.

“The usual,” she shrugged, pulling out a tidy bundle of letters tied neatly with string. “You look like
hell – Lafitte not treating you right anymore?”

But Castiel said he didn’t know, said it was mischance. Cas said he would never lie to me. He
believes me an infiltrator of some kind; were he feeding information to Harvelle, if he were secretly
sympathetic to the Confederate cause, why wouldn’t he tell me? I can’t believe he’d lie, but what
else can I make of this? I still want to trust him, I still want to see him, I still want to believe in him. It
hurts so much. Why does it hurt, Cas? Please, make it stop hurting. You’re so good at that. Except
apparently you’re a damn liar.

“It’s none of your damn business,” he snarled, his temper as hot as it had been all week despite the
cold rain drenching them both. “Don’t even know what you’re talkin’ about.”

Bullshit, bullshit on all counts. Which one of us is the liar? Quit lyin’ to yourself, Dean, you know
who was really at fault for what happened last Wednesday.

“Of course not,” she said with false primness, batting her eyelashes at him. When they’d been young,
Harvelle had flirted with him constantly, at least until her father had been killed. There’d been a time
when Dean had thought he’d marry Joanna Beth Harvelle. “Well, if that’s all, I’ll be off.”

Didn’t love Jo, not romantically; don’t love Lisa; don’t even love Ben, not like I should. Don’t
matter who I marry, it’s all a lie anyway. Underneath it all, I’m good for nothin’ but keepin’ house
and doin’ the wash and cookin’, just like dad always said. Good for nothin’ but lettin’ men use me.
Don’t need a wife, I’m more like a wife myself. Put me in a dress and no one knows the damn
difference. I was born busted, stupid, useless. Everythin’ about me is a lie.

“Never told me you knew Major Novak,” he said abruptly.

Damn fuckin’ fool, can’t keep my mouth shut.
For once, Harvelle looked startled. Dean couldn’t remember the last time he knew something she didn’t. Wheedling information out of people was her specialty. She’d used that skill to help the pro-slavery faction in Kansas, gathering rumors at her parent’s saloon in Lawrence, and she’d used it to devastating effect since. She was a phenomenal actress, brilliant and erudite yet capable of passing at every level of society. The Confederates were lucky she was on their side; they couldn’t have asked for a better spy.

“Why should I tell you anything about who I know in Washington?” said Harvelle. “It’s none of your business who I cultivate as a contact. Anyway, why are the Novaks be anything to you?”

“Novak is Sam’s commanding officer. Didn’t you think I’d want to know that?”

“Quite the contrary,” she said, meeting his anger with calm that only frustrated him further. “I was sure you’d like to know where Sam is, but he’s finally free of you and John Winchester and there’s no way I’m ruining that for him. If he wanted to talk to you, he’s a smart boy, I’m sure he’d figure out a way to get in touch.”

“He wrote me a letter last week,” said Dean.

“Congratulations, it’s finally been long enough since he last saw you that he’s forgotten what a charming personality you have,” said Harvelle, rolling her eyes.

“Said he saw you in Novak’s tent,” he pressed on.

*Have you seen Cas since then? How’s he doin’?*

“I was among a party that visited Fort Lyon, yes,” she said, increasingly exasperated despite an attempt to appear unflappable. “I was doing my job.”

_Not like it matters, I’m sure Cas is fine. I ain’t nothin’ to him no matter what he said._

“How’d Sam look?”

*Even if Cas is upset, he had it comin’: talkin’ to Sam about me, not tellin’ me he knew Blaine and Andrea and Harvelle._

“Good,” she said. “He’s grown and he needs a haircut. Mary would have had scissors to his head lickety split. I haven’t seen him much but it seems like he has a good thing going. He’s Novak’s clerk. If Novak’s brother Zachariah is anything to go by, Novak is going places, and unless I much miss the mark, he’ll take Sam with him.”

*Why wouldn’t Cas talk to Sam? Why would he tell me he knew them, when he didn’t know I knew them?*_

Try as he might, Dean couldn’t make himself believe that everything Castiel had said was a lie, couldn’t make himself believe that Cas didn’t care about him. Thinking about it twisted agony through Dean’s heart, churned his stomach, clutched his throat until he could scarce breathe. Castiel had made Dean believe him, forced trust from Dean, and then betrayed him and hurt him.

*No. He didn’t hurt me. I hurt him. Useless son of a bitch. I don’t deserve him._

“Them working together, that’d be good,” Dean said. _As long as they don’t both go to a battle grave._

“Is…” He trailed off, licked his lips. “Have you seen…”

*Is Cas okay?*
I’m such a coward. I could have gone and seen him yesterday, I could send him a message, and instead I’m asking Harvelle after him as if she’d know. Fool, craven, idiot…

God, I miss him. The thought struck him with agonizing clarity, bursting to the front of his mind with the conviction of inescapable, absolute truth.

“Hey,” said Harvelle, suddenly all gentleness and kindness. “Dean, what’s the matter?”

I miss him so much.

“Nothin’, Jo,” he said gruffly, turning away, doing his best to surreptitiously wipe away a tear.

Why’d I get so mad at him?

“I haven’t seen you cry since your mama died.” A sympathetic hand came to rest hesitantly on Dean’s cheek. Dean flinched, but though every instinct clamored for him to pull away, he couldn’t bring himself to do so.

He didn’t do anything wrong, not really, but I had to go and be an asshole to one of the only people who’s ever treated me as anyone worth a damn. He’s a fool for believin’ in me, for trustin’ me, for thinkin’ I’m any kind of man. I’m so angry with myself I could burst with it, and instead of takin’ responsibility, I act like an ass to everyone around me.

“Novak’s a friend of mine,” Dean managed, doing his damnedest to repress his tears. His anger drained away, leaving self-condemnation in its wake. “We’ve been exchanging letters.” Harvelle quirked an eyebrow at him but didn’t call him on the half-truth. Hopefully, she assumed that Dean was lying about nothing save who was doing the writing. “I, uh, I said something stupid in my last letter, guess it was only a matter of time, and he hasn’t written back in two weeks.” A thumb flicked under Dean’s eye, wiping away a tear, as Harvelle gave him a look that somehow combined compassion and skepticism.

Maybe…maybe Cas spoke to Sam ’bout me for the same reason I spoke to Harvelle ’bout him. Maybe he missed me. Is that possible?

The suggestion was a plaintive voice in his head, promptly shouted down by reminders that he was a worthless excuse for a son, that Cas must be using him, that he was good for nothing so there was no reason anyone would miss him.

“Have you considered sending him an apology?” she asked.

Don’t need sympathy from her, don’t need anything from her, not after the things she’s done and the things she’s said . Anger bubbled up only to die again as he realized it had flared instantly when she’d suggested that he was in the wrong, that he had screwed up, that he was at fault. Even though he’d already acknowledged as much to himself, hearing another say it raised his hackles defensively.

But he said he cared, he said so many things I can’t believe, but I want to believe him, I want to hear him say those things again. If I went back now…

There was only one way to find out the truth. If he could find it in himself to return to Fort Lyon, he could ask Cas.

…if I went back now, would he be there? Would he welcome me? He shouldn’t do so. I hurt him. I’ll hurt him again.

“Jo…”
Either he’s as angelic as he seems, in which case I don’t deserve him; or everything he’s told me is a lie, in which case I was right to be angry.

“Yeah, Dean?”

The question is, do I believe him? Do I trust him?

“Would you write a letter for me?”

God help me, I do believe him. I do trust him. Oh, Cas, I’m sorry.

“Of course I will, Dean.”

He’ll never take me back now, though, not when he knows how ungrateful and selfish I really am.

“Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

...I'm sorry Dean is busted...blame John Winchester...I'm just the writer... ;)}
Darling James,

February 1st, 1862

I cannot imagine the preparations that must go in to welcoming a man of General McClellan’s stature and eminence. You must be running mad! Though you’ve scarce been able to write, I’ve had several letters each from Hester and Hannah telling me in detail the minutiae involved in their own preparations – though I doubt you’ve spent nearly as much time selecting a new dress as Hannah has done – and they’ve spoken of you as well. I fear perhaps I have given you poor advice. Having raised the possibility that you might do more to impress the Colonel, it sounds as though now you have gone too far to the other extreme. Hester in particularly is worried about your health. She says the weather has been fussy and erratic, cold then warm then cold again, that you do not sleep close to enough, that you have lost more weight than I can credit given how slim you were when you departed, that you are all over the camp at all hours regardless of sun or rain or snow or sleet. While I am sure some is exaggerated sisterly concern, please, do take care of yourself. I never meant to imply you should harry yourself to utmost extremes, merely that you should step up from your earlier, more meager efforts. I hope that, when the General’s Review is done, you will take care of yourself as you properly should, find comfort and rest with your friends, take a break from pushing yourself so hard – though not at the expense of doing your duties, of course.

But the Review is tomorrow! I must know every detail! I know it will be over by the time this letter reaches you, and I hope that means you will have more time to write me than you have in January. In light of all, I understand the deficiency of your correspondence, but I’ll confess I did not realize how greatly I depended on hearing from you near daily until I ceased to receive such dedicated, assiduous, beloved communication. I begin now to understand why your parents grew frustrated to hear from you but once a week – having been subject to the same, it is a grievous deprivation. We sit at home and fret and wonder, “Is he marching? Is he hurt? Is he ill?” If your duties have let up – does your affianced ask too much to request that you try to write her more frequently? Had your last letter been sent piecemeal as but the paragraph you had time for, I’d have had five letters instead of one, and I do not mind if each is short. I do not need essays – I know you have not the time for composition that, alas, I do. But enough of that, I do not mean to be a scold, it’s only that I miss you so.

Tell me of McClellan! What does a General-in-Chief wear? How sits his horse? It must be a fine beast, he has the pick of every mount in the entire nation! What of his staff? The papers say he is accompanied not only by the usual generals and colonels and majors and the like, but also by a
prince and a count! Did you see them? I think one is the son of King Louis Phillippe? They must have been quite a sight! Tell me of the brigade, how did they look as they marched, every button polished and every bayonet gleaming? I can only imagine how noble it must be! I wish you might send me an image, but I’m sure with all the hustle and bustle it would be impossible for a photographer to get an adequate still. Tell me of Hannah: did the General even notice the dress she so agonized over the procurement of? Was he impressed by Hester’s hospital? And darling – tell me of you. Are you well? Did he praise you as I’m sure you have amply earned?

I cannot imagine what I might write in this letter to add to your knowledge of my own affairs, as I have written you near daily. I hope my correspondence has helped you through difficult times, as yours has helped me. Mrs. Carrigan is up to her usual contrariness, arguing with your mother on how best to handle the sending of some small things for the Easter holiday. It is a difficult enough to contemplate, considering that – by all accounts – the army will march before spring, so we’ve no idea where you might be or how we might send you anything come April 20th, but when we considered what comfort such a delivery might be were it to arrive in time for the holiday, we decided we must try. Unsurprisingly, Mrs. Carrigan disagrees, as she does with everything your mother resolves to accomplish. She thinks it is a waste of resources to assemble a care package that we have no means of ensuring the delivery of; that might find itself stored in Washington for weeks or months while the armies are deployed in Virginia. I cannot deny there would be something absurd in you receiving good cheer intended for Easter in July or August or September, but I cannot credit, as she does that the war will last so long as that once you start marching. I cling to the hope that once McClellan sets the Union Army in motion, the Confederate forces will realize the futility of their rebellion and will surrender, though they be 100,000 strong! I cling to the hope that you will return to me this summer and we might be wed.

However, failing that, I still find fallacy with Mrs. Carrigan’s argument. Even supposing the worst case scenario – supposing you are marching when the package arrives, that the soldiers of the 27th New York do not receive their rewards until months later, if you have been on campaign that whole while will that not make the receipt of the package all the sweeter? Even should Easter goodies not be received until Independence Day, does that mean they’d be less welcome for being late? Your mother shares my thinking so I’m sure we will override Mrs. Carrigan’s objections. Of course, once we have decided to send something, there next ensues the even greater dispute over what, precisely, should be sent. The early shots of that battle have already been fired, though the true cacophony of the conflict has yet to fall upon us. Nevertheless, I am sure it will be a Waterloo when all is done. Your mother vanquishes all before her. Were she in General McClellan’s position, I’ve no doubt the war would be over already.

One piece of bad news, which I should have included earlier, for now I am forced to end my letter on a sour note. Mr. Warren, whose arm appeared to be healing so well over the fall, fell ill last month and soon passed. Though Doctor Benton says it could not be helped, that his pneumonia was dire, I cannot but think that his wound played a part – weakened him, left him vulnerable – and further that the malaise that came with the wound, the challenges he faced in finding employment and returning to his life as it was before his injury, also was a factor. When such things happen I fear for you so greatly I can scarce stand it. I wish you’d come home, James. I wish you’d come back to me.

I had meant to write good cheer in a final paragraph, to send you off to your day with something happier to ponder, but I find I am at a loss save for the best of all: I miss you dearly and I love you with all my heart. I know you have written your parents that you will not take leave before your term of service is done in 15 months, but is it too much to hope that I might see you before then? Perhaps us to visit you in camp, after the coming campaigns are over? Or for you to return during a lull? It will not be all fighting from dawn to mid of night every day, surely you can be spared for a week to
James knew he made a pitiful sight as he returned to camp, wet through on a gray morning, hair matted to his neck, unshaven cheeks pale beneath a shimmery skim of rain water, uniform near black and so soaked with water that his cuffs dripped. His exterior could scarce match his misery better. Even as exhausted as he was, he knew he’d not sleep, he was too cold, too wet, and his anxious thoughts were too busy going round and round wondering what he might have done differently, wondering how he could get Dean to tell him what he’d done wrong so he could apologize. The prospect that he might take his blanket and enfold itself in its warmth for once offered no hope for comfort. On the contrary, like a contagion, the cold and depression afflicting him would spread to that beloved article and it would grow sodden and unpleasant, incapable of offering the protection it once did.

Dean could have comforted me. Dean could have held me and warmed me even as I warmed him. How selfish I have become. Even had we not argued I should never have wished his presence on such a miserable day. He should be at Centreville keeping warm, not risking illness and injury riding miles out of his way in such drear and dangerous conditions.

Walking past the pickets through the fortress gate into Fort Lyon, James stopped, at a loss for how he should proceed. The tasks of his day called to him, an insurmountable barrier between him and rest, a welcome distraction from his bleak thoughts. There were requisitions to be done, Henriksen’s report on the state of the Contraband camp to review and comment on, and a dispute to settle between the Regimental color bearer and three drummers that started as an argument over who would take the lead if and when they marched and somehow escalated into a fist fight involving more than a dozen people. Other things would surely occur to distract him in the midst of those tasks, and should he manage to finish them in a timely manner he had been putting off a thorough review of the state of their equipment, especially the Regiment’s rucksacks and bags, which they would need if only they ever got to leave Fort Lyon.

“Major!”

James’ attention snapped to the present. Bradbury stood before him, bright eyed, cheeks beaming with a healthy flush, expression concerned even though he was sopping wet and looked as bedraggled as James felt.

“Good morning, Lieutenant,” said James weakly, wondering how long he’d been standing there oblivious to prompt such consternation.

“What’d she do to you?” Bradbury demanded.

It’s not a woman, it’s not like that, it’s…

His mouth was open to speak before he quelled the words. The feeling of crushing loneliness settled heavily on his shoulders as it had while he’d sat for hours that morning waiting for Dean. There was nothing he could say, no one he could talk to.

I suggest you have a conversation with Hester…you might find it enlightening…

Gabriel’s suggestion returned to him powerfully, as loud and explicit as if his brother had spoken, not merely committed them to paper.

“I have to talk to Hester,” he said abruptly, turning on a heel. His vision swam as if the rain drops
were obscuring his vision. He tried to remember when he’d last eaten, when he’d last had more than a half hours sleep at a time, but he drew a blank. A supportive arm wrapped James’ shoulders – Bradbury was so much shorter than he, how had he never noticed before? – and Bradbury eased James into partially leaning against him.

“Great idea,” Bradbury said, tone grim. “Let’s go.”

James didn’t realize how unsteady he was until he attempted the enormous task of crossing the parade ground to Hester’s large hospital tent. The camp was dreary. Any soldiers who didn’t need to be out kept to their tents, escaping the bad weather as best they could. The 16th New York drilled, their commander Howland shouting out the orders; a group of teamsters unloaded the first of a long line of wagons into the dubious cover of a supply tent; and a company of soldiers worked to put the finishing touches onto the barracks. The Regimental commanders had been arguing for days over who would actually get to sleep in the barracks once it was completed. Turning to look at the progress, he teetered and collapsed against Bradbury, who caught him easily and put his free hand to James’ forehead.

“You’re running a fever, Major,” he said. Somehow, Bradbury got James’ arm over his shoulder and half-walked, half-carried him to the hospital tent. Though Bradbury appeared as wet as James felt, his body was warm. Instead of helping him feel better, Bradbury’s heat and proximity only threw into relief that James was chilled through. His teeth chattered as they walked and despite his best efforts he couldn’t find the any coherent words with which to protest the lieutenant’s aid.

‘I’m not sick, I just miss Dean. It’s not at all the same. Or maybe it is. I can’t even tell any longer. Oh, Dean…”

A tear ran down his cheek and he bit his lip against a sob.

“Come on, we’re almost there,” said Bradbury reassuringly.

The wide, high flap that led into the hospital tent was raised, rolled tight and tied in place with neat bows that spoke of Hester’s competent hand. The warm glow of lamps within was welcoming. About half the beds were occupied, men asleep or sitting quietly, none severely ill enough to be in the throes of fever. In one corner, two cots bore men covered head to toe by blankets, the recently dead yet to be placed in boxes and shipped to their homes for burial. Hester no longer worked alone; she had a staff of five nurses, all older women. Though James hadn’t been formerly introduced to any of them, he knew one to be the mother of a Captain in the 5th Maine, and another he’d heard was wife to a man who had died of sickness earlier in the winter, come in her grief to see if through her efforts she could prevent others from suffering as she and her husband had. Determined not to look a fool, James attempted to disentangle himself from Bradbury’s hold but the boy held James firm and he couldn’t shake free.

“Good morning, Lieutenant,” a nurse greeted them. “Are you here to see Hester?”

Bradbury nodded. “This is her brother, he’s major of the 27th. He’s not well.” Another of the nurses bustled to the far side of the tent. Bradbury unceremoniously dumped James onto a vacant cot and the nurse came over, removed his hat, clucked unhappily as she brushed his limp, wet hair from his forehead.

“Oh, dear,” she said. “Poor thing! You shouldn’t be shivering like that with a fever this high. Mrs. Barnes, will you fetch him something dry to wear? We have to get him out of these wet clothes.”

Hands were on the buttons of his jacket. “I can undress myself!” he protested, swatting the nurse
“I’m sure you can, dear,” she hummed, not stopping. Bradbury laughed.

“Lieutenant!”

“What, she’s old enough to be my grandmother. I’m not arguing with her.”

“Quit fussing,” advised the nurse. “I have grandsons older than you, you don’t have anything I haven’t seen before.”

Being undressed by a stranger in public was as mortifying an experience as James could recall, made worse because he truly didn’t think he could prevent her from doing exactly as she wished. As miserable as he was about Dean, he hadn’t realized how many other symptoms he had. Either he’d been growing ill for days and somehow hadn’t noticed, or his morning spent waiting in the clearing had triggered some sudden and severe plague. At least Bradbury begged off and departed towards where James presumed Hester to be, cheeks pinking, rather than stare at James’ brief nudity. At least the two nurses who helped him – Mrs. Marion was the older nurse and Mrs. Barnes was the widowed wife who brought him a change of clothing, slim and beautiful in a severe way, a veil of black covering her dark hair – acted professionally and didn’t tease him, preferring to give him assessing, judging looks. Mrs. Marion’s eyes lingered disapprovingly on his sunken stomach, hollowed out by not eating enough, and Mrs. Barnes’ gaze lingered lower, making him blush. It took an embarrassingly long time for them to change him, but when he was wearing something dry and wrapped in a blanket, hunched slump-shouldered on a cot, some warmth returned to his body. Periodic shivers wracked him. With a pleasant smile, Mrs. Barnes finished her ministrations by toweling his hair dry with a square of cotton.

“There we go, isn’t that better?” she said, giving him a motherly pat on the cheek.

“Cassie!” exclaimed Hester, hurrying to his side. She pressed a steaming tin cup on him, metal wrapped in cloth to protect his hands. Closing his eyes, he let the soothing smell of herbs envelop him and ease his frayed nerves. “What’s happened? Bradbury says you need to speak with me? And that you’re running a fever?”

“I do,” he said. He took a sip of tea, light flavor of chamomile nearly subsumed by mint. Sweetness lingered pleasantly on his tongue. “It’s private, though.” Am I really going to tell her? “No one else can hear.” I have to. I can’t do this alone any longer. Gabriel is wonderful but he is so far away. He’s not enough.

“Very well,” she nodded. Raising her voice, she called, “Lieutenant!” Bradbury must have been observing from nearby, for he instantly appeared. “I’d like to move my brother to my tent. Whatever ails him is obviously not the flux and as weak as he appears I’d rather not expose him to the sicknesses of the others.” Bradbury gave Hester a wry look, and Hester flicked a glance towards the nurses moving about the room. Nodding, Bradbury came over and easily hefted a James to his feet as Hester took the tin cup from his shaking hands.

Minutes later saw James installed in Hester’s small tent, pitched alongside the hospital tent such that
she needn’t even step outside to go from one to the other. The accommodations were as modest as those used by the soldiers: two blankets, a lamp, a low chest for clothing and a few personal belongings the only decorations.

“Let me know if you need anything,” Bradbury said, giving James a stern look and Hester a doting one.

“Wait,” said James. His voice was hoarse, he’d scarce noticed it before. His lungs ached. Certainly, he’d not felt so ill the night before, it must be his long exposure to the weather. Bradbury paused, half-out the flap. “Lieutenant, if you’re still available…you already know most…if I might impose, perhaps you would listen to the rest as well?”

*Insanity, James, telling either of them! This cannot end well. Best to be vague, to speak in uncertain terms, to speak of the mysterious woman Bradbury already believes exists and leave it at that. No. I cannot bear all alone, not any longer. Dean already believes I’ve betrayed his secret to others. What does it matter now if I share more?*

Wordlessly, Bradbury nodded, stepping back into the tent and untying the ribbons that held the flap open. There was little enough privacy to be found in the Fort but at least, within the close walls of the tent, there was the illusion of intimacy. A steady plop spoke of a drip through the tent canvas landing on the wood of Hester’s trunk. Hester hastily rearranged her blankets around him, pressed the tea back into his hands, and settled back to sit cross-legged and wait patiently. Hesitantly, Bradbury eyed them both and then sat beside Hester, their legs pressed together. Hester placed a reassuring hand on the boy’s knee and James colored to see the hint of their understanding.

*I know their secret. It seems only fair that they know mine, that they actually know mine.*

“You’ve been avoiding me all week,” scolded Hester. James hid embarrassment by taking another sip of tea. If he didn’t start speaking, he never would.

“Has Bradbury told you about my Wednesday mornings?” he asked. Hester shot Bradbury a look, got a sheepish one and a half-shrug in reply, and shook her head. *Damn, that does make things harder, but…*he took a deep breath, another fortifying sip, and said, “Bradbury has known since last November that, occasionally, I leave the Fort to meet someone outside of the fortress walls. Starting in December, those meetings became regular – every Wednesday morning.”

*God, what must Hester be thinking right now? She knows Anna, and now she knows I’ve been unfaithful, she’ll tell Anna all, this is a disaster, it’ll ruin everything…*…*would it be so bad if Anna learned I had feelings for another? I’d be free. But I wouldn’t have Dean back.*

Staring hard into the pale, rippling surface of the tea, James continued, speaking quickly lest he choke on the words. “I haven’t told the Lieutenant all. I allowed him to believe…” He closed his eyes against a rush of blind terror at the prospect of confessing. A cool hand wrapped around his and he opened his eyes to see Hester leaning towards him, pale eyes wide, expression sympathetic and concerned. “You have to understand, I wouldn’t be here at all save that Gabriel thinks you will be able to help me.” *Please, help me!* “What I’ve been doing…it’s not…it’s not right, it’s not fair, I have abused Anna’s trust in me, I… I…” He met her steady gaze, imploring her to understand, and for a wonder he thought perhaps she did, for she shifted to sit beside him, gently took the cup and passed it to Bradbury, placed an arm around James’ shoulder and encouraged him with subtle touches to lean against her. With a shuddering sigh, he melted into the comforting contact. “It’s a man, Hester,” he whispered. “It’s a man, and a Confederate soldier, and I think I love him, and he’s left me.” Closing his eyes against tears, he pressed against her, dread filling him as he expected her to
pull away at any moment.

“Oh, James,” she breathed, faintness rendering it impossible to read if her tone was condemning or angry or disgusted.

“I’m sorry I deceived you,” he said miserably, trying to break free of Hester’s hold on him before she could shove him away on her own. The wrapping of a second arm around him, pulling him closer, hugging him as if he were dear, was shocking and unexpected. “Hester—”

“Have you borne this alone all this time? Even as Crowley has worked you like a dog? No wonder you’ve seemed so out of sorts! Oh, brother, I’m so sorry!” With another shudder, he collapsed against her, tears falling silently, and she combed a hand gently through his drying hair.

“Hester…?” said Bradbury hesitantly. James stiffened instantly. He’d managed to forget the other man was there. Hester refused to loosen her hold, making indistinct soothing noises until James eased again.

“It’s up to you,” Hester said. For an instant, he was baffled until he realized she must be speaking to Bradbury. “He already knows that we are in a relationship. The other is your secret.”

“It’s ours,” objected Bradbury. James turned so he could see the Lieutenant’s face. He’d taken his hat off, his red hair dark with wetness, his expression earnest. “Anything I own is yours as well, and even were it not, I cannot tell of myself without revealing you.”

“He’s my brother. Of course I do not mind him knowing, especially in light of what he has just revealed,” said Hester firmly. “I would tell him immediately save that I cannot do so without betraying your confidence.”

“You know I can hear you, right?” he said hoarsely. Bradbury laughed. “Revealing my most mortifying sins does not require that you do the same. Please say nothing unless you are comfortable doing so.” James couldn’t see Hester’s face, but Bradbury stared long and hard before finally nodding.

“You say you spoke to Gabriel?” Hester asked.

“We exchanged letters on the topic,” James confirmed. “I told him of my interest in—” He barely choked the name back. “—in him, and Gabriel wrote me back a long reply about his own experiences and his advice. Not knowing what confidences he’s shared with you, I’m loathe to reveal his secrets, but he suggested you’d be understanding, and you are, shockingly so. If nothing else I thought you’d condemn me for infidelity, I know you and Anna close.”

“Mistake me not: you must tell Anna, and you must break things off with her,” said Hester with some of the fire he’d expected from her at the start. “She’s young – she’ll recover her spirits in time. I’ve always thought she loved the idea of you more than the actual man anyway, but nonetheless maintaining an engagement to her when your feelings are engaged elsewhere is cruel to her, and to yourself as well.”

“She is still one of my dearest friends…it would feel wrong to end things by letter…”

“Fair enough,” she said. She took a deep breath that shifted James against her, exhaled it slowly. “I cannot imagine that Gabriel wrote you back without revealing some part of his own sexual history. Even if, inconceivably, he didn’t say anything, I know he’d not mind my telling you at such a moment that he has had several dalliances with men that I am aware of, and likely numerous others that I am, thankfully, unaware of. For my part…” Bradbury gave an encouraging nod as Hester
trailed off. “My interests are of an opposite nature. Have you never wondered why I’ve not wed, James? I do not like men – by which I mean specifically they hold no physical attraction for me. My pleasures come from the company of women of similar mindset.” It took a long moment for her words to process, the concept was so alien, though in light of his own interests it should have been obvious that such women would exist. Continuing to watch Bradbury, who looked away and colored uncomfortably, the full meaning of Hester’s words finally struck him.

“Lieutenant…?”

“My fiancée was surprisingly supportive of my decision to enlist,” he – no, she – said with embarrassment. “In truth, I think he felt it spared him the need to do ought himself. He’s a quiet sort, it’s why I was willing to consider marriage to him despite my personal preferences. He’s pleasant, kind, gentle – is it terrible that the most flattering thing I can think of to say about the man I intend to marry is that he is harmless? It seemed the best I could hope for, considering how contrary to my inclinations it is to wed any man. My intention was to pass my time in the army quietly. I didn’t anticipate being elected an officer, and I was even more shocked to meet Hester, to find her intriguing, to find a woman of her stature and beauty and intelligence yet single. That, and her initial rebukes, confirmed my suspicions about her, and so I revealed my secret. Once she knew I was no man her attitude towards my advances warmed considerably.”

“And to think I’ve thought you a mere boy all this time,” he murmured. “I could hardly believe a man near 20 years Hester’s junior could be of interest to her – but of course, you are small and high voiced and clean shaven because…”

“I’m your age, Novak,” she said with a grin. Now that he knew, he could see it: in the delicateness of Bradbury’s features, in her slimness and the turn of her eyes. He found himself tracing the femininity of every line, and she colored and looked away under his scrutiny.

The nerves that had held James silent for so long fell away. In learning their secrets, his need to keep his own fell away. Some part of him scoffed at the sudden feeling of freedom, blamed his sudden sanguineness on the sad truth that now, they reveal his secret he had the power to reveal theirs. That was unfair to himself, though; he knew in his heart it was because they were like him, familiar with keeping secrets, used to having to hide themselves. Hester, further, was his sister, and Bradbury had become an increasingly trusted friend and comrade, now confident. He was scarce surprised to find that his trust in her did not waver though he’d learned she’d been lying to him about her gender for nearly a year. In this tent, with the two of them, he was safe. He could be honest and tell all and know he’d not be blamed, that he’d be understood and comforted.

“You’ve met him,” he mumbled, catching Bradbury’s eye.

“You said he was a Confederate?” she said, baffled. “I’ve not met any—”

“You have, though you didn’t know it.” Dean’s voice echoed through James’ thoughts, furious that James’ might share his secret, but James quelled it. If James was condemned for a thing, let it at least be a thing he had actually done. Licking his lips, James let the words come. “The man who brought Sam Winchester back from Bull Run – the man on the black horse who approached our camp in Washington.” It felt like a lifetime ago. James could scarce believe how profoundly he’d changed from that day to this. He watched Bradbury as she looked askance, trying to remember.

“Good looking, plaid shirt, freckles?” she asked. James nodded, though that description could match many people. Even her simple sketched painted a clear image in James’ mind of Dean’s face, green eyes meeting his, defiant and confident, and James’ heart felt like it compressed agonizingly.

“His name is Dean,” James said. “He’s Sam’s older brother and a member of General Singer’s staff.
Though he’s younger than me, he’s known he’s…like this…for a while, whereas what I feel for him – what I feel for him – is unlike anything I’ve experienced towards anyone previously. I had no idea…not the least idea…God, Hester, I love him – I love him so much – and he’s gone! I cannot even go to him and attempt to reconcile. What am I to do?”

A sob burst from James though he tried to repress it, another, another, and he twisted in Hester’s arms, his hands tangling feebly in the fabric of her dress. Hester held him close, stirring distant memories from his childhood when she’d done the same, when he’d been a child and she a teen, his eldest sister, someone he could go to when he knew his mother would tell him to stop behaving childishly. He’d not remembered that she’d once done that until he felt her familiar warmth, the distinct way she swept her hand down his back and cradled his head.

“Rest,” she murmured gently into his ear. “Recover. Forgive yourself. You’ve made yourself ill with worry, it won’t do. I cannot believe that you could come to care so deeply for someone who does not reciprocate, but while you are so broken down there is naught to be done about it. Things won’t seem so bad when you’ve gotten some rest, had a good meal, and shook off this fever. Heal and give him time to do the same.” Shaking, he allowed her to hold him, to comfort him though he couldn’t believe that things would mend so easily as she suggested. Sing a wordless tune into his ear, Hester held him until he finally fell asleep.

Major James Novak, February 13th, 1862

This letter is being written on behalf of Dean Winchester. He says:

Hey, Cas. A friend said she’d write this out for me. In my last letter I said some stupid things I regret. Want you to know that I’m sorry. I’m an idiot. But if you don’t mind an idiot for a friend, I’d like to go back to writing you regularly, if that’s alright.

Novak, the written word is inadequate to show deep sentiment, especially when dealing with Dean, who struggles to say things like this. Thus, I feel that you should know that these impartial words were spoken while Dean was weeping and trying his best to hide it. I’m sure whatever he wrote you was stupid and aggravating – he has a knack for that – but I hope you’ll consider his current sincerity as you debate whether to give him another chance. He is an idiot, but he’s a good man and he deserves a good friend.

Hands shaking, James lowered the letter and carefully refolded it along crinkles so sharp the cheap paper was already beginning to split. James’ vision splintered then refocused and he tried to get his breathing under control before his hasty gasps could trigger a coughing fit that would scour his aching throat and wrack his pained chest. He’d read the short letter repeatedly since it had arrived on Sunday, brought to him by Sam along with a pile of other correspondence. He wasn’t well enough to hold a pen, but with Hester’s help he’d written a few replies, quick notes to his parents and to Anna updating them, Anna’s including the description of the review she had requested of him so earnestly. It had taken two days with long breaks while James was too unwell to sit up or too tired to keep track from the beginning of a sentence to the end what he intended to say. The letter from Dean went unanswered. There was no point in penning a reply – that had surely never been Dean’s intention. James had to believe that beneath the obfuscation aimed at whoever had written the letter what Dean had been attempting to communicate was that he’d like to see James at their usual Wednesday time. As Tuesday night drifted slowly towards Wednesday morning, James’ anxiety grew. He wasn’t well enough and he risked his influenza growing more serious if he wasn’t careful, but weighed against the possibility of seeing Dean, of apologizing to him, it was a chance he’d have to take. He’d kept Dean’s letter a secret, not because he was ashamed of it or felt he had to, but because he knew if Hester or Bradbury found out, they’d instantly guess his intentions.
The night passed agonizingly slowly. He was desperate to stay up, afraid each time he slept that he’d not wake in time. Despite his best efforts, James dozed off more than once, only to awaken with a start that strained sore muscles and inevitably triggered coughs. Unable to bear the suspense of waiting alone any longer, James rose from his nest of blankets and crouched out of Hester’s tent. To protect him from the pall in the main hospital tent, she had allowed him privacy while she slept in a cot among the patients. It worried him greatly, mortified him more, that she should expose herself in order to spare him, but she’d replied to his protests by saying that he could take his place among the others if he could rise from his sickbed and walk the distance to a cot.

He’d yet to be able to pass that simple test.

*It doesn’t matter how sick I am, how much my body hurts. I must see Dean. If I were to not come to meet him after receiving such a letter, what would he think? He’d assume me bitter and angry, assume me unforgiving, assume me certain that he is in the wrong and I am in the right. None of that is true, nor can I bear that he might think it so. This might be my only chance. For my current peace of mind – for my future hope of happiness – for the chance for our relationship to follow a natural course and live or die as it will with the passage of the years – I must meet him.*

“Get back to bed, Novak.” Bradbury’s light voice broke through James’ thoughts. The Lieutenant sat on a cot not far from the entry to Hester’s tent wrapped in a blanket. James hadn’t even noticed her there. Struggling, doing his best to hide how difficult it was for him, James straightened and turned to her.

“I have to go,” he said. “You know I have to go.”

“I knew you’d want to go,” she agreed. “That’s why I’ve wasted a night guarding you, figured you couldn’t be trusted to behave in your own best interest. I appreciate your situation but the weather is bitter cold, dry and windy. If you expose yourself to it for any amount of time I doubt we’ll see you back in camp again. You’re not well, Major, and there’s no need for you to go anywhere. You know that.”

“I don’t know that.” Reluctantly, James pulled out the letter from Dean and passed it to her. She took it, tired eyes skimming the contents. Wind puckered and sucked at the sides of the tent, and though scarce a draft penetrated the canvas James swore he could feel the wind on him, pushing him to and fro until the room swam sickeningly before his eyes.

“What does the writer mean, that they do not write themselves?”

“My correspondent is illiterate,” said James.

“All this asks is that you write back,” said Bradbury. “Why think it means otherwise?”

“Whoever helped in the writing of this cannot know the truth,” James explained. “There’d be no point in my writing back and scarce means for me to return a letter, given the challenges involved.” His head throbbed from concentrating on forming the thoughts, policing each word. “I’m expected this morning. I’m sure of it.” The last words caught in his throat and he coughed and hacked, his eyes squeezed shut and tears leaking free. The ragged spasms ripped at his already torn throat. By the time the fit passed, he was doubled over, arms crossed over his chest as if that could somehow stop the involuntary convulsion of his lungs. Every breath hurt. “I have to go, Bradbury. I have to.”

“God protect me from men made idiots by love,” muttered Bradbury. “Novak, get back into bed before you fall on your face. A broken nose will only make breathing that much harder.”

“No, I must—” Coughing interrupted him again, tearing at him until he lost all sense of the moment,
and didn’t pass until he came to himself hunched on his knees, weight leaning heavily on an empty cot. “Please, Bradbury, I need—” Coughing interrupted him again. Shame tore at his thoughts as surely as each fit tore at his body, that he was so ill, that after everything this was how weak he truly was.

“Stop troubling yourself,” said Bradbury, her voice soothing and right in his ear. A hand ran along his back as if hoping with a gesture to ease his troubled breathing. “I’m going to help you back into the tent and get you some tea with honey to drink.” Honey. Dean loves honey. I wish I could bring him some honeyed tea. It’s so cold tonight, he’ll be so cold in the clearing alone. I’m so sorry, my love, I can’t go, I can’t. Please forgive me. “Once we’ve eased your throat so you can get a sentence out, you can tell me where to go and I will tell your friend what has happened and why they should not expect you this evening.”

“No!” exclaimed James, horrified at the prospect. With a burst of strength, he shook her off and managed to get his feet under him again. “You mustn’t, he’ll think I’ve betrayed him, he’ll think I’ve told his secrets. I have done, he’d be right, he’ll be furious.” Each word was more broken than the one before, desperately forced out despite further coughs choking and clenching at his throat. “Please – please, help me...” More coughing, more pain. There was no way he could walk to the exit of the hospital tent, much less cover the scant half mile to the copse of trees. Finding enough voice for a whisper, he said, “Charles, I need him.”

“It’s Charlie, and I believe you – which is why you must trust me to go and speak on your behalf, trust me to find the words to mend what has been broken well enough that you will have another chance next week.” She put an arm around him and helped him half walk, half collapse over the short distance to Hester’s tent. “If you go like this, you will die. As stubborn and prone to martyrdom as you are, even you must see that.”

“I do,” he confessed, voice cracking. “God, I feel awful. Please tell him I’d have come if I could – please tell him how sorry I am to not be there – please tell him how much I miss him – but whatever you do, don’t tell him I love him. I’ve not said it to him yet – I want to tell him myself, okay?” Nodding, Bradbury turned to go away. Worried she’d not understood, head aching, James snagged her wrist, pulled her back. “I’ve got to tell him that myself.”

“Easy, Cassie,” she murmured. James flushed, entire face growing so hot he couldn’t believe he didn’t burst out in sweat instantly. She took his hand gently, dislodging his grip as easily as if he were a child, and eased him back to the ground. “You’re going to be fine. I won’t spoil your surprise, okay? I’m just going to get him to understand that you had to tell someone, and that you’d be there if you could be. Are you ready for some tea?” He nodded dumbly. “I’ll be back soon.”

By the time Bradbury returned with his honeyed chamomile, hot enough to sear his tattered throat, James was crying against his knees in frustration. Heart and soul, all he wanted to do was to see Dean, to make Dean understand, to apologize, to have Dean be the one to wrap a blanket around his shoulders and hold the mug for him so he could drink. Bradbury was right, though. There was no way he could go, no way he could even move under his own power. It was maddening to be so trapped by his body, to be so helpless. She comforted him, reassured him, made him drink until his throat was smooth enough for him to explain where she should go to speak with Dean. She tried and failed to convince him to lie down and sleep. His insides were knotted up with worry and anger and self-condemnation. When he finally convinced her that her efforts were futile, she settled for wrapping him snuggly, pressing a fresh mug into his hands, and leaving him to his own miserable devices.

It was one of the longest, slowest, most wrenching nights of James’ life. Every terrible way Dean might react to having a stranger appear in the clearing looped through James’ imagination. Bradbury
said to trust her, to leave it to her, but she hadn’t seen how angry Dean had gotten two weeks before. Would Dean give her a chance to speak or would he turn and ride away immediately? Would Dean listen to her, give her words a chance to sway him? Would Dean forgive James for divulging his secret? Would Dean even show up? Round and round the questions went, keeping James awake despite how wretched he felt, driving him mad.

The tea he’d only partially drunk had gone cold hours before, the sickening sweetness a stark reminder of the last time the flavor of honey had danced on his lips. The blankets wrapped around him could scarce keep out the roaring wind that buckled the sides of the tent. The faint light of lamps danced and bobbed as two nurses worked overnight, flickering flames cast long, dim shadows over the small tent interior. James needed to use the bathroom but couldn’t bring himself to use the pot again. Doing so was a mortifying admission that he wasn’t even strong enough to walk to the privy. Of course he couldn’t, he hadn’t been able to for a week, but he felt such a pathetic wreck that he couldn’t bear that further admission of weakness so instead he sat uncomfortably full.

This isn’t going to work. Dean would have hated me if I hadn’t showed up, but this will be worse. That I might have fixed by writing him or by finding a way to speak with him, but now he’ll know I’ve told another all and he’ll never forgive me. I should have stopped Bradbury. I should have gone myself.

Faint light brightened the sides of the tent fabric before anyone disturbed him, and then it was only Hester. She opened her mouth to speak, took one searching look at James’ face, and said nothing. If he looked anything like how he felt, he could only imagine what a sight he must be. Instead, she took the tin cup from him and left him alone. Laying his head back on his knees, shaking uncontrollably with fatigue and sadness and illness, he squeezed his eyes shut and willed the minutes to pass more quickly.

It’s dawn. They’re meeting now. Assuming Bradbury went. Assuming Bradbury found the clearing. Assuming Dean came. Assuming Dean didn’t turn and ride away on the instant. Assuming they can speak and reach an understanding. Assuming I didn’t misunderstand the letter. Assuming the worst, always assuming the worst, it doesn’t matter if this all works out, Dean and I are doomed anyway. There’s no future in this. I’m such a fool.

I wonder when Bradbury will return?

Thought part of him longed for her to step into the tent to relieve the agony of not knowing, a greater part understood that if she were gone longer it boded better news. Unless it means Dean didn’t appear at all. And with that thought the same loop began, the same thoughts over and over again, the same questions and worries and uncertainties and regrets.

“Wow, you look like death,” marveled Bradbury. James’ head snapped up and he swooned to one side as the world spun agonizingly.

“Bradbury—” The word snagged in his ravaged throat and James could have screamed in frustration if he wasn’t so damn busy coughing himself to pieces.

Strong hands caught him, helped him to sit upright once more. “It’s okay. That’s the most important thing you need to know right now.”

“Okay?” he said weakly, looking up, desperate to meet her eyes and read more in her expression than he could in her words. The only thing he could recognize on her face was concern, her eyes tight, her mouth compressed into a thin frown.

“If I tell you ‘you’ve got nothing to worry about and I’ll tell you all about it when you’ve gotten
some rest,’ you’re going to sit here and make yourself even more ill, aren’t you?” she asked rhetorically.

“Tell me he’s alright,” James begged.

“As far as I can see? He’s a damn sight from being alright – I’ve never seen a man get more tongue-tied or slip so quickly into being angry because he couldn’t find any other way to get out everything he was feeling,” she rolled her eyes. “He’s not going to make your life any easier, that’s for sure, but he’s pretty enough I can see why you’d bother.”

“Don’t call him that,” said James automatically. She blinked at him and he colored and looked away. “Handsome. He’s handsome.” He’s gorgeous, God, I can see every perfect line of his face whenever I close my eyes. He’s going to haunt me forever.

“Basically, he was annoyed that you sent someone in your place but he softened when I got him to actually listen to me. When he found out how sick you are he was quite upset,” she reported. The knot of tension binding James’ chest eased and he drew a shallow breath, the most he could manage without triggering a fit of coughing. “There were a few times I thought he’d storm the camp to come check on you. If you’ve been worried whether he cares about you or not? I think I can set that to rest. He cares. A lot. I’d bet he cares as much for you as you do for him, in his own way.”

Dean loves me? James’ eyes filled with tears. No, that’s far too much to ask, far more than I deserve, far more than Dean, as hurt as he is, can give right now. He took a sip of tea to cover how upset he was, spilling drops down his chin as his hands trembled.

“He wanted you to know that he’s sorry for what he said last time he saw you, and that he’ll be back next week.”

“Thank God,” James whispered. Allowing his eyes to slip shut, relief washed over him and eased every aching muscle, soothed the pain in his head. “Or, more appropriately, thank you, Bradbury.”

“You can call me God if you really want,” she said with a laugh. “Though I do believe that counts as blasphemy.”

With the loss of his anxiety, exhaustion crashed in. Something scalded the skin of his hand – the tea is spilling, he realized, but he was powerless to fix the problem; a moment later the tea was taken from him, a gentle shove at his shoulder easily knocked him on to his back, and he was asleep before his head hit the balled up dress that he was using as a pillow.

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**Dear Anna,**

February 23rd, 1862

I’m pleased to report I am finally well enough to write myself and tell of my condition. My fever broke on Friday, my coughs have largely ceased, leaving an aching throat as a lingering unhappy reminder, and while hard tack is still impossibly rough for me to consume, we fortunately are well supplied with fresher foods. I believe I’ve consumed my body weight in Ms. Moseley’s hearty stew. The fatigue remains, and I spend much of my time asleep, but I am elsewise on the road to recovery and expect to return to duty by Wednesday.

As I’ve scarce stirred from my sick bed in two weeks, I’ve little to say. The army has not moved, obviously, nor do I hear that we intend to. It is only in the past few days that I have been well enough to receive visitors other than Hester and Lieutenant Bradbury. Corporal Winchester came yesterday and read to me extensively from the newspaper, such that I am now well-informed on the cabinet, the president, the machinations of congress, the celebration over the fall of Roanoke, the destruction
of the Confederate fleet at Elizabeth City, and General Burnside’s subsequent advances along the Carolina coast. There is rampant celebration over the fall of Fort Donelson to Ulysses Grant; every single person who has sat with me has quoted verbatim “no terms except unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted!” while chortling and smiling as if we ourselves had won the victory. Alfie informs me that the troops are in agreement that his initials U.S. do not stand for Ulysses Simpson, as they are supposed to, nor for Uncle Sam, as apparently his friends call him, but for Unconditional Surrender. It is a nickname that I suspect will follow him long – at least provided he continue to win battles. Everyone is excited at the prospect that we will imminently march and earn the chance to add our names to the list of those growing famous for their deeds of valor. The feeling is contagious. We have been still for so long – since September, six months now! – that we all itch for action. This stagnation is pointless: if we do not engage the enemy, the war will never end. I hope we march soon, if not our Brigade, at least the army as a whole.

I hope that you are well and have not been too anxious on my behalf. It was merely a flu, I was not in great danger. Your letters have been a comfort, have helped me pass the long days of frustrating inactivity. I’ve missed you these weeks. It saddens me to know that likely only now, as I write, are you first receiving the first letters that speak of my dire situation, and that this reassurance that all danger is passed will not reach you for that much longer. I will see if I can arrange a telegram sent to you so that you do not worry overmuch, since there is no cause for it.

J.C. Novak

Dean froze as James stepped into the clearing, wide-eyed and paralyzed like a wild animal caught unawares. The sight of him was breathtaking, jacket open to show the plaid beneath, green sash untied, hands in his torn pockets. The knees of his pants were out and the thighs looked like they would be next to go; he could scarce have made a shabbier show of being a soldier. James thought him the most handsome, heartening sight he had ever seen. No words came; instead, his feet carried him across the clearing without him consciously forming the thought and James wrapped his arms around Dean. A wounded sound died in Dean’s throat and he continued stock still for an instant before he returned the embrace fiercely, his breathes loud in James’ ear, one hand nestled in the small of James’ back, the other wrapping around James’ head to pull him yet closer. Tears pooled in James’ eyes and his fingers scrambled against Dean’s jacket, seeking to hold him even nearer, seeking to have no barrier between them, slipping his hands underneath so that only the thin flannel of Dean’s shirt separated his hands from Dean’s hot skin.

“You okay, Billy?” Dean murmured in his ear.

“Dean,” James breathed, clutching at him. It felt so nice to have Dean near, to touch him, to feel the matching urgency in Dean’s hold on him. Words of affection had so rarely fallen from Dean’s mouth but his touch betrayed his feelings. After nearly a month with only Dean’s angry words echoing through James’ head, Dean’s embrace spoke as loudly as a declaration would have. “I’m so sorry, Dean. I never meant to behave in a way that led you to think I’d been anything other than forthright. I never meant to deceive you, to cause you to feel betrayed.”

“Damn, Cas…” muttered Dean. “Don’t apologize. Don’t owe me an apology for nothin’. I’m an ass. I don’t deserve you bein’ here, much less sayin’ how sorry you are. I’m sorry I’m such an idiot.”

A flare of anger leant James strengthened, forced a grunt from Dean as James’ arms tightened around him. “Don’t say that.”

“Don’t say ‘I’m sorry?’ ” asked Dean incredulously.

“You’re not an idiot,” said James drawing away. Dean refused to meet his eye. Annoyed, James put
a thumb on Dean’s chin, a hand against his palate, and forced his head up. “You’re not an ass, either. Blaming what happened on supposed fallacies of your nature is no way to apologize, nor does it give me any sense of what upset you or what you truly rue. Something specific caused you to grow angry, to say those things to me, and whatever that was, that’s what you should apologize for.” Dean stared at him, expression unreadable. “Further, I do owe you my apology. I cannot pretend that my discussion of you with Sam was innocuous. I wanted to know more about you and instead of coming to you and asking, I was concerned that you’d not tell me, concerned that I would make you uncomfortable, so instead I pushed him to speak to me of you. That was wrong of me.”

The longer James spoke, the more Dean’s expression grew strained, his eyes fixed anywhere but on James’ face. It worried him, but James pushed his fears away. They had to have this conversation, had to learn to have conversations like this, or else they’d have the same kinds of arguments over and over again until their anger at each other overcame their attraction, until they had nothing left but rancor. If they were to have anything together that might last even the duration of the war, they would have to learn to communicate clearly. “Dean, you told me that I could ask you anything. If I’d trusted you as I ought, I’d have asked you – respected if you said that you did not wish to speak of your affairs – allowed you to tell what you would, as you would. For that, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” said Dean, tone simultaneously belligerent and desperate. “I messed up. I’m sorry.”

“But what do you actually think you did wrong, Dean?” James said

“What didn’t I do wrong, Cas?” Dean snapped, letting James go. The sudden burst of cold air sent a shiver through James, the loss of the support of Dean’s body reminding him of his fatigue and lingering weakness. “I stink at this crap, I don’t know what the heck I’m doin’. I told you, I ain’t smart like you are. If you can’t accept that about me, I don’t know why I’m even here.”

“No,” James said, mustering every ounce of authority he could muster. “Stop, Dean.” Dean froze again, his back to James. “I’m not going to stand here and watch you grow angry with me again because I’ve suggested that you show vulnerability. Considering the extent to which you have exposed yourself to me and demonstrated that you are willing to trust me with your person, it is absurd that you refuse to show me equal vulnerability as concerns your thoughts. I’ll not demand it of you, but if you cannot reveal yourself, at least stop this juvenile show of aggression. Tell me you cannot say, as you did when I asked you why you couldn’t share what makes you uncomfortable sexually, and I will accept that. Do not claim that these problems are due to inherent character flaws, though, because that is not true. There is nothing wrong with your nature, Dean. Regardless of how the people in your life have treated you previously, I cannot believe you’d trust me if you didn’t understand that I am not those people.”

Breathing hard, James wiped across his brow as if he could wipe away the heated flush to his cheeks, the rasp of air over his throat ached at the long speech. Anger seethed in his breast, at those in Dean’s life who had left him so defensive, at Dean for stubbornly refusing to examine his own feelings, at himself for not being able to keep calm.

“I know you’re not them,” said Dean softly, not turning around. James had to strain to hear him. “Why d’ya think I came back?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

The only movement in the clear was the branches swaying in the breeze, the loose fabric of Dean’s clothing matching the movement. Finally, Dean turned around. His eyes were closed; he took a deep breath and released it slowly before opening his eyes. The vulnerability in that gorgeous green-eyed gaze was breath-taking. “Because I am sorry, even if I’m shit at sayin’ why. Because not seein’ you
was like havin’ my heart cut out. ‘Cause I do believe you and I do trust you and if you say you didn’t
know that I knew Harvelle and the others, I’ll take your word for it. I don’t need no other proof.
‘Cause I’ve felt terrible for two weeks yet it eased the instant I saw you. ‘Cause last week, Bradbury
told me that you were sick enough to die of it and I swear I’ve never been more scared in my whole
damn life. I’m glad you’re alright, Cas.”

James had no awareness of crossing the space between them. In one moment, they stood feet apart;
the next he was crushing Dean’s body to his own, kissing Dean as if starving for a taste of musk and
wood smoke, rubbing up and down Dean’s back, rutting against his front. Dean opened to him
without hesitation, green eyes slipping shut, kissing him back fervently. “I haven’t forgiven you yet,”
James breathed, words escaping between kisses, body growing heavy with desire. God, I love you.
“I still consider an apology in which no actual blame is accepted to be empty.” He nipped at Dean’s
lower lip, catching it in his teeth, and Dean whimpered. Emboldened, James caught the lip again, bit
harder, and Dean groaned. The sound flared electric through James’ body, heated him through,
thickened his arousal. “If you cannot claim responsibility for an actual, specific error, than you’ve not
apologized.” Putting space between them, as little as he could get away with, James placed a hand to
Dean’s crotch, palmed his half-hard cock through the rough fabric, pressed hard against the sensitive
flesh. Dean moaned, leaning back against James’ encircling arm, rutting up against James’ hand.

“Don’ understan’,” gasped Dean. “Wha—”

“If you can’t apologize properly, then I will have to extract satisfaction elsewhere,” James growled.
All the ideas he’d that had stirred in his darker fantasies tried to intrude into the front of his thoughts
at once – deny him, hurt him, bind him, tease him, God, I want to hear him beg me for forgiveness –
and his vision flashed white for an instant, his body so aroused he thought a touch might burn him to
a cinder.

“Gonna punish me, Cas?”

The pure, unadulterated desire in Dean’s voice provided the spark to the tinder of James’ desire, and
heat burst through him, strengthened him, pushed away every thought but the need to punish Dean,
the need to dominate him and control him, the need to extract restitution until the wounds to both of
them healed, the need to hold Dean close and reward him afterwards, the need to demonstrate with
affection that all was forgiven. James channeled his aggressive need into catching Dean’s sacks
against the abrasive wool of his pants and kneading them roughly to the accompaniment of Dean’s
whimpers.

“Yes,” James snarled. As abruptly as James had begun his touches, he stopped, stepped away.
Without James to support him, Dean collapsed to his knees, gasping, eyes flashing open to show
green enveloped in deep black pupils. “Get up, Dean.” Dean stared at him, slack-jawed, chest
fluttering with rapid breaths. “I said get up.” Movements ungracefully, Dean tottered to his feet. “Go to
the tree – face the trunk – hands against the bark – I want your back to me, Dean, I want you bent
forward at the waist, I want your ass sticking out. If you’re going to apologize like a child, I’m going
to punish you like a child.”

There was a beat of hesitation, Dean wavering on his feet and staring at James as if he’d never seen
him before, and James felt a flash of terror that threatened to drown his arousal – I’ve pushed too far,
I’ve said too much, he doesn’t actually want this, he thinks I’m out of my mind – and then Dean was
moving, Dean was obeying, and James’ heart raced, his breath came in pants, as Dean positioned
himself precisely as James had described, adding an extra wiggle of his shapely butt before stilling.
Dean’s breath rushed in and out loudly as he waited with a semblance of patience.

The moment stretched out as James struggled to get control of himself, his breathing, his heart rate,
his erection. James suspected he’d hurt himself if he attempted to walk right away, either tangling his erection and sensitive balls between his legs or, more absurdly, tripping and falling on his face when his weakened knees gave way. Between the lingering after-effects of his illness and the shocking intensity of his arousal, it was all he could do to keep himself upright. The longer James waited, the greater tension he saw bunch in Dean’s shoulders, but Dean didn’t turn; he had one arm folded against the tree, his forehead and eyes leaning against the forearm, his other hand braced against the trunk. The only movement in Dean’s taut body was the rise and fall of his back with each breath. The urge to praise Dean’s obedience rose, to ease Dean’s stress by telling him how good he was, how well he was waiting, but James repressed the instinct, reminding himself that this was about punishing Dean. The thought triggered a shiver of anticipation.

What sounds will he make when I strike him? Will he speak? Will he cry? Will he beg me to stop? Will he beg me to continue? I have no idea but I know, whatever it is, I’ll be proud of him. Dean will never let me down.

One careful step at a time brought James alongside Dean. With his eyes buried in his forearm, there was no way Dean could see him, but nonetheless there was a hitch as Dean’s breathing sped up. Gently, James placed one hand flat on the top of Dean’s back, lay it over his spine, and Dean started and choked back a sound.

“As always, Dean, I want to hear you,” James scolded. Dean nodded and shook his shoulders out. Laying his other hand on Dean’s belly so he could feel the flutter of every inhalation and swallow, James brushed down Dean’s spine, ran his hand over the pilled fabric of Dean’s uniform jacket to soothe the tightness beneath. James could feel the folds of Dean’s undershirt, the thicker fabric of Dean’s suspenders; his fingers found the button that attached the suspenders to Dean’s pants and James hitched the jacket up and undid it. Starting at the top of Dean’s back again, James repeated the motion, reveling in how Dean’s breaths grew vocal, each exhale accompanied by a deep note that echoed in Dean’s chest, that James could feel rumble through the hand he had pressed to Dean’s belly.

With the second button undone, Dean’s over-sized pants slid down his ass, revealing the neatly sewn bottom edge of his gingham shirt and several inches of startling pale skin, such a contrast to the deep brown tan of Dean’s face and hands. James’ third caress started at the small of Dean’s back and he pet down the sharp curve of Dean’s lower back, hooked a thumb in the waist band of Dean’s pants and dragged them down to expose the half-moons of Dean’s ass, firm and curved and undefinably alluring. Unable to resist, James cupped each cheek in turn, caressed, felt Dean’s belly flutter in reply, his breath gasp out. Glancing to Dean’s front, James saw him lick his lips, couldn’t help but stare at the tented fabric of Dean’s pants. Relief flooded James, followed immediately by desire, as he continued to pet the swell Dean’s butt.

He does want this, he does find it arousing, oh, thank God, it’s not just me. If I’m strange, if I’m somehow broken, at least he’s strange the same way. So long as we both want this, there is nothing wrong with doing it.

James gave Dean a warning pat over his cheeks and Dean spread his legs wider to brace himself, body tensing again. Raising his hand, James gave Dean a sharp slap on one cheek. There was a crack of skin hitting skin. Dean grunted. James felt the blow as a tingle in his hand, a jerk in his elbow, a twitch in his cock. Alternating cheeks, James hit Dean again, again, raising a rosy hue on Dean’s pale skin.

“Harder,” urged Dean.

Only a bitten lip kept James from groaning at the demand in Dean’s tone. Drawing his hand back, he
obliged, hitting Dean forcefully across his crack. Dean’s knees shook, his breath whooshed out. The thwack of James’ hand over Dean’s skin sounded once more as James tried again, putting even more strength behind the blow, a third, a fourth as hard he could. Dean panted, belly surging beneath James’ hand, an edge of distress audible in every breath, but there was no sign his erection was flagging, no sign he was weakening, nothing to suggest to James he should stop, nothing to say that Dean wasn’t enjoying this despite the pain.

Good, I don’t want to stop, I want to hit him til he crumples to his knees, I want him to sob, I want him to beg me to forgive him for how badly he hurt me.

What the hell is the matter with me?

At the seventh hard spank Dean groaned, trembling. A strange sound caught James’ attention and he looked up to see Dean’s fingernails digging into the bark of the tree. James leaned forward, intentionally offering Dean the reassurance of James’ warmth, intentionally rewarding him with the brush of James’ lips over Dean’s ear as he whispered, “Take my hand, Dean.” A shudder ran through Dean’s whole body as he obeyed, calloused fingers enveloping James’ hand. James gave Dean time to recover, left his other hand gently resting on Dean’s butt so that Dean could be sure that another blow wasn’t about to come. When he thought Dean sufficiently recovered, James drew back, let the tension build, and then hit him his hardest blow yet, the force of it whipping through James’ elbow, resounding up his arm. Dean groaned again, writhed against James’ comforting hand, fingernails digging harshly into James’ flesh. With that faint pain came sudden awareness of James’ own physical state. He’d been so absorbed in assessing Dean’s reaction that he hadn’t realized how quick his breathing had become, how rapid his heartbeat, how flushed his cheeks had grown, how incredibly hard his cock was. As usual, as always, Dean was perfect, and it was utterly spectacular and profoundly arousing.

“You’re doing great,” James said encouragingly. James’ voice had grown so low, so rough, so gravelly, that James hardly recognized it. Dean moaned, the bulge in Dean’s pants bucked, Dean’s palm rubbed against the back of James’ hand, and James drew back for another hard spank.

I wonder if he would come just from my doing this?

I don’t only want to hurt him; I only want to extract enough from him that he feels his sins exculpated, until he feels he has suffered enough to accept my forgiveness. Then I want to hold him, I want to pet him, I want to soothe him, I want to make him feel so damn good.

I suspect nothing is the matter with me. I suspect everyone feels a similar impulse, to punish those who hurt them, to act out a fantasy. The only difference here is that Dean and I are finding a means for channeling that, for acting on it.

God is he gorgeous like this. So good for me, Dean, so strong, so determined to show me how obedient you can be...

One more blow, two more, three more, and then Dean burst out, “I’m sorry!” The words fractured and cracked around held-back sobs and frantic breaths.

“For what, Dean?” James barked, genuine anger behind the words.

I shouldn’t have to punish him, I shouldn’t have to hurt him, if only he could examine himself, if only he could be honest with me.

Before Dean could answer, James slammed into him with another blow. Dean’s whole body swayed, his knees buckled but he locked them to keep his balance.
“I’m sorry…I’m an idiot…” Dean gasped out.


“I’m scared!” Dean cried brokenly. James barely stayed his hand before the next blow landed, he stopped himself, trembling, fingertips brushing Dean’s skin. With a ragged sob, Dean’s legs crumpled from under him, he collapsed to the ground and curled in on himself.

“Oh, Dean!” James was beside him instantly, gathering Dean against him, slipping his hands beneath Dean’s jacket and shirt so that James’ arms rested on Dean’s over-heated flesh. Crying uncontrollably, Dean wrapped his arms around James’ neck, sobbed against his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, meetin’ you is the best thing that’s ever happened to me and I’m so damn scared all the damn time. I can’t lose you, Cas, I can’t, but I know one a’ these days you’re gonna look and see what everyone else sees when they look at me and then you’re gonna leave and I…I can’t, don’t you understand? I can’t do that, I can’t keep sittin’ ‘round and waitin’ for you to see me.”

“I see you,” James murmured steadily in Dean’s ear. Hands scrambled at James’ back, trying to draw them closer together, and James did what he could to adjust himself so that Dean could find solace in the press of hot bodies. “God, I see you so much more clearly than you see yourself.” He carded his fingers through Dean’s hair, rubbed the other hand down the ridges of Dean’s spine. “You’re handsome and strong and brave and brilliant and so much better than you believe yourself to be.” Dean melted against him, shaking and shuddering, armor shorn away to reveal the injured young man beneath. A brush of hardness against James’ leg startled him, Dean’s arousal persistent despite the circumstances, and fired James’ blood and renewed his flagging erection.

“Cas…”

“Listen to me, Dean – I need you to listen,” James directed. When Dean didn’t respond, James traced the curve of Dean’s skull around to his cheek, cupped his face, urged him to look up. Blinking, Dean obeyed, his face streaked red, his eyelashes beaded with tears. “I know others haven’t treated you well, have pushed you into things you did not wish, have abused your trust, have hurt you. I can’t promise I will never do the same, but I can promise I will do my absolute best to do nothing that you don’t wish, to respect you, to remind you of how splendid you are every time you wander down the dark pathways of memory that cause you to forget.” James guided Dean’s face closer, leaned in and brushed their lips together. A shiver coursed through Dean from head to toe and he pressed eagerly into the kiss, licking at James’ lips. James let him, supported him, parted his lips to allow Dean’s tongue into his mouth. Dean’s desperation was palpable, kiss so full of need and fear and desire and affection that it was heart-breaking. They broke apart with a wet smack, both breathing hard.

“I love you, Dean,” James burst out, the words refusing to be restrained any longer. Dean’s eyes went saucer-wide, white surrounding beautiful green and deep black.

“You…you don’t…” stammered Dean.

“I do,” James insisted. “So much I can hardly stand it sometimes, God, so much I think I might explode from it. I love you, Dean!”
James brought their mouths together again, and despite the incredulity in Dean’s protests, Dean made no resistance, kissed James back with even more desperation, even more urgency, hands fumbling over James’ back, his chest, fingers working at the buttons of James’ coat, his vest, seeking access to the skin beneath. “I love you.” James longed to surge forward, to press Dean against the hard ground, to rut their bodies together until both were overcome, but he didn’t want to hurt Dean, didn’t want to abrade the skin James had exposed and beaten bright red. Instead, James lay back, drew Dean with him, over him, encouraged Dean to straddle his hips, traced the contours of Dean’s body with his hands. Dean’s tears subsided completely, his kisses grew increasingly enthusiastic, his hard cock pressed against the soft curve of James’ belly, James’ wool-bound erection slotted against the exposed skin of Dean’s ass. Quick, tantalizing kisses gave way to long, drawn out ones, their lips working together, their eyes slipping shut. Dean arched over James, his hands planted on the ground on either side of James’ body, James’ arms encircling Dean’s back. Dean undulated over him at the same rate as their mouths met and caressed and came apart, Dean’s whole body involved in the kisses, his ass rutting against James’ hardness in a way that drove him crazy.

“Want you,” Dean breathed in a momentary gap before he seized another kiss and rubbed himself over James’ cock once more.

“Anything,” James’ voice was harsh to his own ears; his eyes opened to show him Dean staring at him, gaze dark with lust, cheeks flushed, lips parted against desperate breaths. “Tell me what you want and it’s yours.”

“Want you inside me.” Dean accompanied the words by grinding back against James’ cock and groaning. “Need you to fill me, damn, I want you, want you so badly, please, Castiel…”

Okay,” muttered James distractedly as the pressure against him burst pleasure behind his eyelids, left him breathless. “If that’s what you want…” Nodding, Dean edged down James’ body, tugged his shirt up to expose the skin of James’ belly, leaned down to kiss James’ flesh as his hands awkwardly undid the buttons of James’ pants and freed his leaking cock to the cool air of the morning. It was shocking to James that of all the ways Dean could have chosen for James to pleasure him, this was what Dean wanted most, but James adored the feel of Dean’s lips on him and was not about to protest.

Dean feathered kisses over James’ lower ribs, across the shallow curve of James’ belly, fingers brushing through the release at James’ tip, smearing it down James’ length. Every touch was intoxicating until the only thoughts James could retain were how wonderful Dean was, how obedient, how giving, how delicious, how tempting. Dean started to creep back up James’ body, but James stopped him with both hands on Dean’s hand, tangled his fingers in Dean’s hair, pushed him back towards James’ crotch. Eager, God, so spectacularly eager, Dean’s lips parted to kiss the tip of James’ cock, sucking at the head, licking his slit, and James groaned.

Images of the morning crowded James’ thoughts, Dean’s enthusiasm to be punished, the perseverance with which Dean had sustained every hit, the glorious sound of Dean’s voice when, pained and upset, he’d found the words to tell James what troubled him, the desperate press of Dean’s hands and body and lips as James held him afterwards. Tensing his fingers against Dean’s scalp, James forced Dean’s head down, easing himself deeper and deeper into the wet heat of Dean’s mouth. There was a moment’s resistance and then Dean’s muscles went liquid, his eyes slipped shut and he slipped down until his lips were spread vulgarly wide around the thick base of James’ cock, the dark curly hairs brushing at Dean’s skin. Dean had never taken all of him, James had never felt the tight clench of Dean’s throat against his head, never felt Dean’s lips weakly working at his root, never seen the obscene way Dean’s mouth stretched around him. Eyes rolling back in delirious
pleasure, James couldn’t stop himself rocking against Dean’s face. He nearly climaxed instantly to the feel of Dean’s throat fluttering and gagging around him.

“Oh, Dean,” he groaned. “Oh...” It was a wrench to use his grip to lift Dean’s head up and away. Dean stuttered a cough, suppressed it, and resumed licking and sucking at James’ cock. Dean’s reaction was a relief, confirmation that James hadn’t hurt him unintentionally, that he was onboard with this. With that last constraint removed, James let himself go, let his mind drift in an ocean of bliss. He wasn’t sure if he was moving Dean, if Dean was moving on his own, if they moved together. All he knew was that it felt amazing, better than the other times Dean had sucked James down. They had both been driven to unbelievable heights by James’ confession and by all the tantalizing, alluring, perfect features that added up to Dean. Moans echoed through James’ body, his own and Dean’s mingling together. Dean’s hands worked against James’ sides, squeezing him painfully hard, the pressure a strangely wonderful counterpoint to the working of Dean’s mouth. Up and down, sometimes thrusting hard, sometimes easing his way in slow; sometimes sinking himself all the way in, sometimes whimpering with combined deprivation and euphoria as Dean licked and scattered kisses over his cock as if worshipping him, used his tongue to manipulate James’ foreskin, tug at it, guide it up and down to massage the shaft beneath.

“Dean,” he panted urgently. “Dean, you’re so...” The words wouldn’t come. Nothing exceptional enough sprang to mind. Without any encouragement, Dean took James deep into his throat and swallowed and bliss exploded through James mind. Dean swallowed again, again, and before James could stutter out a warning he was climaxes, releasing a burst of semen down Dean’s throat. “Sorry – I’m so—” James’ broke off with another groan as Dean gagged, swallowed again and James’ pleasure crested a second time and he spurted a second time as Dean’s lips caressed him and Dean’s hands kneaded at the soft dip of his belly. Dean lifted himself up, sucking along James’ length as he pulled himself free, gave one last kiss to his softening cock and collapsed forward atop James. His eyes fluttered open and closed, showing James glimpses of abstracted green. Dean looked so lost that James would have been worried if he wasn’t so sure that Dean was enjoying himself, if Dean hadn’t treated James so tenderly, if Dean weren’t urgently rutting his hardness against James’ thigh.

“Cas...” Dean moaned, lips smearing sloppily against James’ belly. “Castiel, please...”

“I’ve got you, Dean.” It was difficult to force himself through his post-orgasmic haze but James made himself, for Dean’s sake, lifting Dean, pulling Dean up the length of his body. He paused when their faces were lined up, kissed Dean tenderly but hardly got any response, Dean was gone, mumbling Cas over and over, body limp. The taste of himself on Dean’s lips was bitter and a poignant reminder of how much Dean had just done for him. “I’m so proud of you,” James breathed, trying to figure out how best to position the other man for what James intended. “I never thought you’d find it in yourself to apologize like that. I would have forgiven you regardless, but God that was amazing to watch, to hear, to participate in.” As if moving someone asleep, James got Dean’s elbows on the ground, encouraged Dean to get his knees under him to support his weight. Dean accepted the guidance, surrendered to it, until he was raised enough over James that James could shimmy down the length of his body, undo Dean’s pants and free Dean’s cock to James’ waiting lips. His length was flushed crimson and James could swear he saw the flesh pulse in time to Dean’s heart beating.

“Please, Cas,” Dean whimpered. James wrapped his hands around Dean’s buttocks carefully, clutching at each raw cheek, prompting a profound groan that sounded simultaneously pained and pleased. “Please...please...” Dean’s voice cracked into a pathetic mewl as James wrapped his lips around the head of Dean’s cock and sucked. James was still learning how to use his mouth as well as Dean did, but he got better every time. He worked eagerly, determined to pleasure Dean as he deserved, taking Dean as deeply as he could – he didn’t know how to take all of Dean as Dean had done, his throat seized when he tried – drawing away, sucking, kissing, licking, teasing and caressing
with his mouth. At the same time, he kneaded at Dean’s ass gently, petting him, soothing him, using his hands to give the silent praise. Dean’s broken pleas, whimpers, moans, were so beautifully vulnerable, so sweet.

_I love you, Dean._

James couldn’t speak with Dean’s cock thick in his mouth, the sour taste of it stinging his eyes, but he could try to communicate his sentiments with every lap of his tongue, every rub of his fingers, every reassuring sound that died in James’ throat and vibrated through Dean’s sensitive arousal. The longer James worked, the more Dean shook, the more shattered Dean sounded, the more sweet liquid leaked onto James’ tongue.

“Cas…Castiel…I…I…I lo…_I need_ you. Need you…”

Dean’s declaration hit James in the gut, the intent clear even if Dean couldn’t say the words. _He loves me too. Oh, Dean…_ Straining up from the ground, James sucked Dean into him, tilted his head, tried to find a way to take Dean deeper, to give Dean everything that Dean had given James. Every failed attempt hit the head of Dean’s cock against the side of James’ mouth, his cheek, the back of his throat, and each time Dean moaned, his hips rolling. Abruptly, Dean’s knees gave out, his feel heavily onto James’ face, driving so deeply into James’ mouth that pain burst behind James’ eyes and he choked at the thickness. A low cry, almost a scream, ripped from Dean as he released and James tried desperately to hold panic at bay, to keep control of the part of his mind that screamed that he couldn’t breathe, that he needed air, that Dean was going to kill him with the semen clogging the back of James’ throat. It was only James’ instincts on overdrive, James knew it was in his head and that he’d be fine, and the sounds Dean made were too perfect, too clearly indicated the rapturous heights to which Dean had been driven. When James could hold out no longer, he turned his head aside, coughing and spluttering, splattering the ground before his face with flecks of white, releasing Dean to the cold air. As soon as James was out of the way, Dean collapsed, partially resting on the ground, partially on James’ body, squirming and shaking.

Enfolding Dean in his arms, James held him close and skinned his hands over Dean’s skin and murmuring praise in his ear as Dean writhed and moaned through the aftershocks of his orgasm. James skinned. They enjoyed a long, rewarding embrace that soothed every worry that had filled James’ head for the past weeks. The feel of Dean calming against him, his breathing steady, his grip on James tight, his legs twined with James, was wonderfully tangible evidence of Dean’s trust and comfort with James. James had been anxious about trying punishment with Dean but Dean had risen to the occasion beyond James’ wildest dreams, and how Dean eased now was vindication of everything James had wanted and longed for.

“How do you feel, Dean?” James was loathe to break the silence, but they couldn’t stay together forever – Dean was going to have to swallow his pain and mount Impala and ride miles on his sore butt, a thought that made James wince and gave him a spike of guilt accompanied by an unruly surge of arousal and possessiveness.

“Great…_I feel great_...” mumbled Dean vaguely, words steamy against James’ skin. “_But that_…_that wasn’t_ what I meant.”

“Hmm?”

“When I asked you to…to fill me…what you did…I mean, what you did was great…but that wasn’t what I was asking. At first I thought you were punishing me, but then I realized…you genuinely didn’t understand, did you?”

“I love when you’re candid with me. I can honestly say I have no idea what you’re talking about, so
yes, it’s safe to say that I didn’t understand,” James grinned, still euphoric on emotion and release, and Dean blushed irresistibly, prompting James to brush a kiss over his forehead. “I’m sorry that I failed to pleasure you as you wished. My error was entirely unintentional. You took your punishment and are completely forgiven. All I wished was to reward you in the way you most desired. Next week, you’re going to show me exactly what you did mean, and I will rectify my mistake. You’d like that, right?”

“God, yes,” Dean leaned in and kissed him. “I’d…I’d love that.” James colored a shade he suspected matched Dean’s, his grin breaking into a shy smile. Dean reached up, flicked hair from his forehead, and in a single breath-taking moment James saw him, took in every detail in a way he rarely did in the course of their normal interactions. His eyes were bright and gentle and affectionate, his smile boyish, his cheeks delicately pinked and dusted with freckles. The streaks from crying had faded, leaving him fresh-faced, and his tension was gone, replaced with ease, replaced with happiness. Simultaneously, they each leaned in for another kiss.

I wonder what it would be like to be able to hold him like this every day, every night; to wake up to that vision of perfection every morning like my fondest dreams come true.

Impossible. But what is the purpose of dreams if not to wish for the impossible?

“I love you,” James whispered, hoping the forlorn note was only audible to his own ear.

“Next time,” Dean murmured in his ear contentedly. James embraced him tightly, sealing the promise even though he wasn’t sure what he was agreeing to. “Next time.”

Interlude

The night was frigidly cold, the wind cutting through Dean’s thin layers and chilling him to the bone as he rode Impala hard across the frozen Virginia landscape. Normally, he wouldn’t dream of pushing her so hard. She was a great horse but the work he’d subjected her to this past year, and especially this winter, were telling. She’d lost weight, her coat had lost its luster and her hooves were worn despite her shoes. He’d give anything to give her a week or a month in a fine pasture to eat her fill and rest and recover, but there was no time for either of them to rest. Dean worked his mittened fingers against the reins to keep them from freezing and pushed her faster. Counterintuitively, cantering helped keep the cold at bay, her body generating heat that protected both of them, and their rapid pace kept him from surrendering to the voice that flogged him to turn around and return to Centreville.

Castiel won’t come tonight. Even if he got the letter Jo wrote – even if she wrote what I asked her to – he won’t come. He knows what an idiot I am now. He’ll never forgive me. I can’t blame him. I wouldn’t forgive me. I haven’t forgiven myself. This is a waste of time.

A sharp gust whipped Dean’s hat off but he couldn’t be bothered to stop and retrieve it. If he stopped riding, his demons would catch him. They were in close pursuit. Dean was irrationally afraid to look over his shoulder, some part of him convinced that should he glance back he’d actually be able to see his father, hear him speak the flogging words that rattled around in Dean’s mind.

Find yourself a wife, boy. Make sure she’s good ‘n strong. Don’t matter if she’s lousy at her womanly responsibilities, you can do all the things she ought ‘cept spread your legs and bear children. Why are you worried if you like her, what’s that got to do with anything?

‘Course I loved your mother, but I had plenty to offer a worthwhile woman. Not like you.
Don’t you get it, Dean? The more she gets to know you, the less shot you’ve got. You’re pretty, that you should be enough for some bitch to take you without askin’ too many questions, without findin’ out what a stupid sissy you are, ‘specially if she thinks you can protect her from the rougher kinds wanderin’ the plains. If she finds out how useless you are, son, it’s all over.

The miles passed quickly, Impala’s lungs working like a bellows, filling the air with thick clouds of white mist every time she exhaled hot.

That’s not what Cas thinks. He don’t think I’m pretty; he thinks I’m handsome. He thinks I’m skilled, thinks I’m smart, thinks I’m brave, thinks I’m good for something other than cookin’ and cleanin’ and lookin’ after Sammy and doin’ all of mama’s chores. Cas treats me like a man. Even when he orders me around, even when he teases me and taunts me and makes me beg, he always treats me like a man. Not like dad, determined to make me into mama in every way but sharin’ his bed, not like Benny and the others, happy to touch me and screw me as long as they could pretend I had curves and breasts and a cunt. Cas don’t see me that way. Cas calls me Dean, tells me when I screw up and when I do good, wants to touch my cock, acts like he really believes all that shit he spews ‘bout me.

He’s such a fool. Such a gorgeous, wonderful, brilliant fool.

What will I do if he’s not there?

The thicket made a dark clump against the night sky, yet miles away, though he was able to pick it out easily to the right of the high hill topped by the stark, sheer silhouette of the fortress walls. Dawn cast dim shadows, light obscured such that only a lesser darkness heralded the rising of the sun. Dean was early, he knew he was, but he hadn’t been able to wait in Washington any longer, he was so cold, so exhausted, so terrified.

What I don’t get, son, is why you think anyone would care ‘bout you. It’s all that nonsense Mary filled your head with. That was a mother’s job; with her gone, ain’t no one else gonna coddle you and pretend you’re anything better’n what you are. The sooner you let go of those pipedreams she stuffed your head full of and accept yourself as you are, the happier you’ll be.

Oh, you don’t want to? Who gives a damn what you want, boy? I gave you an order! The first woman that’ll have you, gets you. Do you understand? I said – do you understand me, Dean? You answer me when I speak to you, and you say ‘yes sir,’ and you do what I tell you, or you’d better start runnin’ and not stop, cause I will find you, and there’ll be hell to pay.

Fuckin’ stop, dad, stop, when have I ever done anything other than what you’ve told me? Why don’t you trust me? I’ve got so little of my own, so little you haven’t staked a claim to, so little left of what mama tried so hard to give me, why do ya have to take all that I’ve got left?

I’m not losin’ Cas cause of you, dad. I’m not losin’ Cas cause I’m stupid enough to believe all the shit you said to me. You don’t get to take him away from me when you ain’t even here. Cas don’t know all that, Cas still might think I’m worth a damn, if I didn’t screw it all up, if he ever wants to see me again after what I said to him last time.

Dean knew something was wrong as soon as he passed through the outer-most screen of trees. A warm glow of lamp light suffused the clearing. It was already too late to make a clean escape, Impala’s hoofs snapped through twigs and brushed through leaves, betraying his arrival. In all likelihood, it was only a camper. It wasn’t the first time that Dean arrived to find someone using the clearing as a place to spend the night. He wanted desperately to believe that was the explanation this evening, but even the most miserly person would ride to Alexandria on a night like this. Sleeping outside alone in this kind of cold would kill. Nervous, Dean stayed mounted and walked Impala
down the familiar path, considering escape routes should the worst happen.

*Of course the worst will happen. Cas will never forgive me. He knows I’m a surveyor, thinks I’m a spy, he’s sent people to arrest me now that he no longer cares for me, he’s...*

There was a single person in the clearing, a young man in Union blue, a forager cap mostly covering brilliant red hair the gleamed like the sunrise in the lamp light. The man held a lantern aloft with a gloved hand, body enveloped in a great coat that made him look even smaller than he actually was, staring towards the path down which Dean arrived with wide, fear-filled eyes.

Neither moved or spoke, frozen in mutual surprise, and then the boy licked his lips and said, “Are you Dean Winchester?”

Fear, panic and fury simultaneously assaulted Dean. Everything he’d feared was true, after how hard he’d tried to convince himself to trust Cas, to give Cas the benefit of the doubt, to believe in all the things that Cas had said with that charming air of honesty. With a snarl, Dean jerked Impala’s head around to ride for the other path leading from the clearing, but the horse betrayed him just as Castiel had done. Instead of rising to the challenge and riding away, she snorted, shuddered, and refused to lift a foot.

“What the *fuck*?” he snapped, kicking at her flanks ineffectually.

Dean meant the exclamation for the horse, but the stranger replied. “My name is Bradbury – Lieutenant Charles Bradbury, Company B, 27th New York Infantry. James Novak sent me.”

“That son of a *bitch*.” Dean wanted to scream, wanted to cry, but he couldn’t, he never could, so instead he shouted at her and tugged hard on the reins.

“Hey,” roared Bradbury, voice surprisingly rich and strong. With wide strides, he crossed the clearing, took the reins below Impala’s chin and held them still. The horse’s eyes rolled but she didn’t struggle, too tired to push further. “That man was prepared to kill himself to come down here tonight. I thought I was going to have to tie him down to keep him away. So you’re going to calm the *hell* down and listen to what I have to say.”

“No, it’s *not* okay,” Dean seethed with frustration, so choked on his emotions he couldn’t figure out what to say, what to do, but he knew he had to do *something*, had to *move*. Furious, he leapt from the saddle and paced the length of the clearing, kicking leaves at every step. “He told you? About me? About *us*? What gives him the right...” Trailing off, Dean finally registered what Bradbury had said to him. “What do you mean, ‘prepared to kill himself?’ ”

“He’s sick, Winchester.” Bradbury stood calmly, spoke slowly and clearly, projected an impressive air of icy calm. “He’s very, very sick. He ran himself into the ground working for our ass of a Colonel, and then he worked in the cold and rain for hours last week and he nearly did himself in.” *He was waiting for me last Wednesday, in the rain, even after the things I said two weeks back. He really is a fool, throwing away all that loyalty and trust and faith on me. “Even so, he was determined to come this morning, absolutely certain that the letter he’d received meant you’d come, and obviously anxious what you’d think if you arrived and he wasn’t here. The only way to get him to stay put, wrapped up warm and snug as he should be, was to tell him I’d come myself.”*

“Oh, yeah? And what’s all this to you? Who the hell *are* you? Why’d he tell you? He promised me – he *promised* – that he’d only share his part of our secret with his brother and his sister and that he’d say nothin’ of who I am. So why’d he tell you? Why’d he lie to me? Why’d he betray me *again*?” *He’s sick. I did that to him. If I wasn’t such a coward, if I hadn’t lost my temper, if I had come last week instead of havin’ Harvelle send a letter...what if he dies? Dean was breathing. He’d been
shouting, he realized, and Bradbury was still staring at him impassively as if watching the antics of a child. “Damn it, tell me.” Bradbury blinked deliberately and didn’t budge. All the wind went out of Dean’s sails; he raked a mittened hand through his hair and turned away to hide the tears pooled in his eyes. He gave me these mittens, even when he’s not here he looks after me, and I nearly killed him, might yet, damn, I don’t deserve him. Getting angry with Bradbury was pointless, he was only a messenger. Getting angry with Cas was just as pointless, Dean’s concerns were petty when compared to the possibility that Cas might die. “Is he going to be okay?”

“We think he’ll recover,” Bradbury said. There was a smug edge to his high voice, momentarily flaring more anger in Dean’s breast. The words were so clearly sincere, so clearly true, and Dean deserved that hint of derision. He was blustering like a belligerent fool.

I might never see him again, I might never hear his voice again, I might never feel his touch on me again, I...I can’t. I can’t! Let everyone, everyone, know, if that’s what must be, but I cannot lose him. This isn’t like Benny, this isn’t like Lisa, this isn’t even like Sammy or my father. I need Castiel. I need him.

“He’s been running a high fever, his throat is wrecked, and he’s weak – so weak he can hardly stand,” Bradbury said, sympathy growing in his voice. “He whispers your name when he’s delirious with fever, it’s the saddest damn thing I’ve ever heard.” Dean’s shoulders tensed, he could feel Bradbury staring at him, judging him, finding him as guilty as he found himself. “As to your other concerns, when you hurt him, he told his sister and I about you. He was my Captain before his promotion and we’ve gotten to be friends. I’ve known he had a clandestine lover for months and have helped ensure that no one thinks anything of his absence on Wednesday mornings. Perhaps more to the point, he was aware that his sister and I are lovers, and so I presume he thought telling both of us would spare her having to keep his secret from me. That’s why I’m here. Hester – his sister – has been caring for him, but she needed to rest or else I expect she’d have come herself.”

“Can I see him?” Dean implored, spinning on a heal. What if he’s lying, what if Cas said all of that in order to... Bradbury was giving him a sad smile, his eyes gentle. ...in order to what, exactly, Winchester? I’m such an idiot. What possible reason would there be to lie about something like this? We’re not in Kansas anymore, no one here sets traps that deep...do they? If Blaine is around, if Kormos is around...no, but it’s different, Castiel is different, I know he is, but I have to hear it from him, I have to... “It’s still pretty dark...the fort...”

“You’re wearing a Confederate uniform, Winchester,” Bradbury sighed. “You could get both of you killed. I can’t imagine it’s easy to trust in your situation, and I know you don’t know me from Adam, but if you trust Novak at all please trust me as his messenger. He’ll be here next week. I doubt anything could keep him away if he thinks you’ll be here.”

“I will be...” Dean took a deep breath, the cold air burning his lungs and throat. If he’s sick, if he’d come out on this dry, frozen night...thank God he didn’t come... “I’ll be here, but if you’ve lied to me, if he’s lied to me, don’t expect me to take this lyin’ down, ya hear?”

“That’s exactly what I’d expect from you,” said Bradbury with a wry smile. Dean had no damn clue what that meant and didn’t care. Surging back across the clearing, he mounted Impala easily, took the reins once more, and had the horse moving as Bradbury barely skipped out of the way. The young man rolled his eyes. “I’ll tell him you said so – that you’d be here next week, I mean, not that you bluster worse than my ten year old nephew. Be careful yourself – this weather is brutal and if something happens to you I think it’d break Novak. I don’t give much of a damn what happens to you, but the Major is my friend and is dear to the woman I love. I won’t see him hurt if I can prevent it.”
“Good,” Dean said, stopping Impala. “He needs folks to watch after him. He’s not got a lick of sense.” And even if I was there, I couldn’t protect him. I can’t protect anybody I care about. “Tell him...tell him I’ll see him next week.”

“I will. He’ll be relieved to hear it. Thinking that you don’t care for him, that you don’t want to see him again, hurt him as badly as his illness. Fix this, Winchester. You’ve got a good man there. Don’t mess it up.”

Turning Impala from the clearing, Dean rode away in to the gray light of dawn, making no answer even as his thoughts roil.

Of course I will mess this up. I mess up everything I touch. But maybe, if any of this was real, if Cas is real, I can find a way to fix it enough that we have at least a little longer. I can’t lose him, not yet.

I don’t want to lose him ever.

Chapter End Notes

...see, I didn't break their relationship for long! Sorry you all had to wait for this reassurance, the chapter just got so darn wordy it took forever.

By the way, in case you're wondering, Cas had a bad case of strep throat. Poor boy...

So, was the timing on the interlude clear? I knew this was the scene I wanted to show in the interlude, and that I wanted it at the end of the chapter, but I really debated how to make it clear. I'm sorry if it was confusing (the interlude scene actually takes place in, like, the middle of this chapter...). Did it work that I did it this way? Or was it too weird/confusing/disorienting? I have other times in the future I might mess with when exactly the Dean PoV interludes happen in relation to the Cas PoV main chapter, so I'm trying to get a sense of if y'all thought this chapter was okay in this sense...if not I'll handle things differently in the future. Thanks!

...and onward! :) The next chapter contains a scene I have literally been plotting for, like, two and a half months, I'm sooooo excited to finally get to it. :)

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